



## *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You* or a “Wondrous Strange” Tale of Contemporary Romanian Shakespeare

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### Prologue

Borrowing the story from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (itself on loan from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*), Alexandru Dabija’s 2009 production at the Odeon Theatre, Bucharest, staged *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You* not once but four times in a one hour and 28 minutes performance. Set on a train platform, with a mock track separating the actors from the spectators (who were seated on the stage throughout), the production, I argue, put forward a close and cross examination of theatre making – self-aware in terms of its method and relation to other media.

Coming out of the station cabin (stage right), a bored Theseus sporting a dressing-gown launched an invitation that functioned as both a mock prologue and a challenge:

Let’s see [...] How shall we beguile  
The lazy time, if not with some delight? [*He examines the place*]  
Let’s see what masques? [*Sits down on the platform bench facing the audience*]  
What dance we can concoct  
To pass three never-ending hours  
Between desert and bed?  
I want to see *this* play.<sup>1</sup>

This Theseus doubled as the cynical theatre man – director, actor, spectator and critic – who’d seen it all, done it all. His invitation, like the production, at once aimed to tease recent Romanian stage endeavours and, more importantly, I believe, to tease out what stage potential a Shakespeare play holds these days. My examination of *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You* re-constructs the local cultural contexts the production played with and against, in an attempt to map out a broader re-assessment of Shakespeare’s cultural currency in (European) Romania – and Europe at large – a research project in its very early days.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation of the playscript quotation.

### Take 1: "new friends and stranger companies" (I.i.219)<sup>2</sup>

Alexandru Dabija's work has always sought "new friends and stranger companies". As he declared in a recent interview with Miruna Runcan, "When one doesn't know what to do, one does Shakespeare."<sup>3</sup> [...] I think I always returned to Shakespeare when in fact I didn't have a clue what to do – I feel at home in Shakespeare".<sup>4</sup> "Plus", Dabija declared in the same interview, he "always longed for a theatrical form that did not exist in Romania – Beckett!".<sup>5</sup> He discovered Beckett's work "in 1970", "approached [it] very timidly" and directed it only in 2004, when he staged a production of *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>6</sup> *Pyramus & Thisbe* 4 *You*, I suggest, was an explicit encounter between these "friends" – Shakespeare and Beckett – and the theatrical palimpsest Dabija's 2009 production offered unpacks this and other "stranger companies".

Take 1 began with Theseus (who later became the narrator linking the four takes) passing the time of day on a dusty rail platform. So did the paying audience, seated on the other side of the rail track. This positioning unsettled the rapport between performers and spectators and called into question the temporal convention, especially because the production worked with different audiences to each of the four takes on the script and multiple levels of spectating. Whilst evoking Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the production's space Dabija constructed with stage-designer Cosmin Ardeleanu offered a "visual platform"<sup>7</sup> which was wider than tall (16x9 metres) and which prescribed the performance in terms of action, using set and props, and most importantly viewing habits (from left to right) more akin to screen watching (whether television, cinema or computer) than to theatre spectating.

As in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, playmaking was not the only trope rehearsed in Take 1. The individual stages of this process – the game of casting, script doctoring, selection of costume and props, performance and reception – were replete with local intertextualities which created comedy and flexed conventions, theatrical and otherwise. The Mechanicals, all female in this take, entered pushing large baskets on wheels; their function, both spectators and reviewers speculated, remained ambiguous and ranged from prams, laundry baskets, wheelie bins and stage kit. As Marina Constantinescu suggested, the "simple language in this slightly archaic translation"<sup>8</sup> alongside the funereal black 1930s costumes and their vociferations to assert their standing were reminiscent of Alexandru Kirițescu's *The Magpies*, a 1932 indigenous play and, more importantly, another repertoire *must* in Romania and very likely a production in which the cast members would have been involved at some point in their careers. But turning the Elizabethan convention on its head was not this production's main priority.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by W.J. Craig, London, Oxford University Press, 1935, and will be referenced henceforth parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Out of his 76-play portfolio to date, Dabija has directed only four other Shakespeare plays, all of which were comedies. *As You Like It* in 1978 for the National Theatre, Cluj, was his sixth ever directed play; *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in 1983 for The Comedy Theatre, Bucharest, was his tenth play; *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1996 for the Youth Theatre, Piatra-Neamt, was his thirtieth play; and *The Comedy of Errors* in 1997 for the Comedy Theatre, Bucharest, was his thirty-fourth play.

<sup>4</sup> Miruna Runcan, *Habarnam în orașul teatrului Universul spectacolelor lui Alexandru Dabija*, Cluj, Editura Limes, 2010, p.35.

<sup>5</sup> Miruna Runcan, *Habarnam...*, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Miruna Runcan, *Habarnam...*, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Marina Constantinescu, "Homo ludens!", *România Literară*, 6 November 2009.

<sup>8</sup> M. Constantinescu, "Homo ludens!".

Instead, the relationship between the all-female cast (as the mechanicals) and the gay couple (as Theseus and Hippolyta who were the audience to their *Pyramus and Thisbe*) launched a debate on positions of authority via political correctness and discrimination. The women, initially ambiguous in status when playing mothers and/or retired housewives who slowly engaged in a cultural community project in their remote village, were – unmistakably for every member of the audience – the star ensemble of the Odeon Theatre, Bucharest, who engaged in a comic and increasingly aggressive game of power. As a result, the casting and rehearsal in Shakespeare's play became the opportunity to display theatrical mannerisms that lived up not only to their characters' names (ingeniously translated for this take) but also to their actorly signature, with more comedy being generated when they made references to past roles while at the same time complaining about being typecast. Conflicts of personalities, stars' egos and expectations were clearly on display: a bully Bottom demanded, in this version, the "bestest part", younger Thisbe made age-ist comments on the actress playing the Moon "lacking a calendar", and forcefully asked for a "ten-by-ten" prologue for shy Snug chosen to play the Lion in order to trump Bottom's prologue, to be "written in eight and eight" (III.i.26-27), and the Wall physically struggled to keep Pyramus and Thisbe off getting at each other's throats during the performance.



Plate 1. Ada Simionică, Dorina Lazăr, Paula Niculiță and Oana Ștefănescu engaging in a stage fight during Take 1 of *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You*, directed by Alexandru Dabija in 2009. (Source: Octavian Tibăr photograph © Odeon Theatre, Bucharest.)

More importantly, Dabija's Take 1 commented on current issues in State-subsidised theatres. Direct references to directors (ab)using Shakespeare and their reputation for sheer experiment, such as Andrei Șerban's all-female stars *Lear* (Bulandra Theatre, Bucharest, 2008) and Cătălina Buzoianu's *Tempest* (Teatrul Mic, Bucharest, 2009), brought into the debate issues of institutional hierarchies, economic censorship, amateur *versus* professional acting, the relationship between directors and actors, and last, but not least, the Shakespeare-translated-for-stage impasse, issues Dabija elaborated on in the subsequent three takes of his production of *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You*.

### Take 2: "an old device" (V.i.50)

Constructed as a teacher – student "devising" session at the Academy of Theatre and Cinema, this take invited the spectators to read *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You* against critics'

"more strange than true" (V.i.2) parlance on "theories of perception and reception" – as the doctored script for this take had it – and against multi-mediality on stage in recent Romanian productions. The meta-discourses it employed engaged both with the textual and the performative as sites of conflict in contemporary staged Shakespeare. The script – as if heavy-handedly adapted by a team of post-modernist theatre critics – played back cliché after cliché in front of a bewildered double audience: the mechanicals from Take 1 dressed in Elizabethan costumes spectated, onstage, Take 2 while recast as the Athenian court and the public spectated both from the other side of the rail track. In so doing it mocked the relationship between practitioners and critics, one that "never did run smooth" (I.i.134), when it comes to staging Shakespeare's plays in Romania – and elsewhere, for that matter.

But there was more than comedic payback to this creative process in reverse chronology: this take used, in place of its script, a text that resembled a critical review rather than the playtext and had an Elizabethan audience watching twenty-first century physical theatre. The "devising" occasioned a close examination of the darker side of this relationship and its side-effects: *Pyramus and Thisbe* became the pretext for Peter Quince, the drama professor, to vent his double frustrations – as theorist and as director – on a group of students via a "concept" piece, whose script he handed out on CDs. Equally, the students' over-eagerness to please displayed double standards. They responded to it in the same lingo *and* mocked it in student jargon, in repartees that widened the gap between words and actions, to the comic delight of the audience. However, like the drama professor, they seemed to be at a creative (as well as linguistic) loss when it came to Shakespeare's plays and as eager to succeed on a job market in which theatre competes with soap operas, sit-coms, television and radio shows, commercials, video-art and human installations.

Performatively, Take 2 commented directly on the impact of multi-media technology on directing and acting. Multiple digital narratives, such as projections of the universe evolving, planets moving, close-ups of the Moon, elaborate digital soundtrack, overloaded the "devised" piece and further displaced words and bodies. While the teacher and the students' means differed, their effect on language was similar. Professor Peter Quince's bouts of verbal incontinence halted communication, a reference to both the practice in the old regime and to the "new wooden language" that mars the press, the media, and academia. His peroration —

When the seduction of the spectacle disappears at the level of visual interception, the sensorial filters become, how shall I put it, bright like a summer's day. The imperceptible *body*, which escapes capturing in a tangible representation, activates the modality of perception and self-perception.

— left both his students and the onstage Elizabethan audience literally unable to follow him. All they picked up on from his speech was the word "body", which the students interpreted as excess of physicality:

BOTTOM: "Yes, Prof, we'll do it big! The spectators will be in tears at curtain down! If need be, I'll throw myself about, we'll do it with noise, cries, screams, the lot".

Moon (Gabriel Pintilie) delivered his lines as humming meditation against psychedelic video projections, holding a lit ball in his right hand. In a literal enactment of Bottom's advice to "rehearse more obscenely and courageously" (I.ii.111-112), the (female) Wall was heavily sexualised, lying on the stage floor opening her legs to show "the chink"; Thisbe wore black lace and shades, and touched herself liberally; and Pyramus was always on

display in his underwear. The two lovers killed themselves by overdose, from which they bleed profusely – another opportunity for stage effect that didn't go amiss.



Plate 2. Rodica Mandache (Thisbe), Marius Damian (Pyramus), Gabriel Pintilei (Moon) and Ionel Mihăilescu (drama Professor) "devising" a "concept" piece in Take 2 of *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You*, directed by Alexandru Dabija in 2009. (Source: Octavian Tibăr photograph © Odeon Theatre, Bucharest.)

Within the production, the entire scene became "the device" that prised open "the direct relationship between language-theatre-society"<sup>9</sup> in what resembled a survey of theoretical trends, acting styles, directing methods and theatre reviewing idioms. While Take 1 (and the script itself) made references to Andrei Șerban's *Lear* (2009), Take 2 clearly cited two Romanian productions running during the same theatre season: Dragoș Galgoțiu's eclectic aesthetic experiment *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Metropolis Theatre, 2008)<sup>10</sup> and Cătălina Buzoianu's "hi-tech storm in a cup half full" *The Tempest* (Teatrul Mic, 2009).<sup>11</sup> Dabija's focus on the gap between the concept director and the struggling actors signalled that stage practice may strive (perhaps a step too far?) to respond to a generation of digitally native spectators. On the other hand, like Buzoianu's and Galgoțiu's productions (which did so unwittingly), Dabija's Take 2 brought to the fore this director's concerns: that actors no longer train specifically for the stage (an aspect evident in contrast with Take 1, which cast a different generation of actors) and that when it comes to Shakespeare's plays, there is a pressing need for new translations *for* stage, the

<sup>9</sup> M. Constantinescu, "Homo ludens!".

<sup>10</sup> Dragoș Galgoțiu's script had characters mixing Romanian and English and his production's stage design dwarfed the actors with excessive video projections, mirrors, furniture, and elaborate costumes.

<sup>11</sup> On Buzoianu's use of digital technology, see my article: "(Ship)wrecked Shakespeare in Romanian *Tempests*", *Shakespeare Bulletin* 29.3 (2011), p. 313-26.<sup>12</sup> Alexandru Duțu, *Shakespeare in Rumania*, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House, 1964, p. 155.

latter remaining Dabija's main qualm with Shakespeare in Romania and the root to all the issues with staged Shakespeare these days.

### Take 3: "satire keen and critical" (V.i.54)

What appeared to be local innocent banter on regional stereo-typing (namely Moldavian regional accents and Hungarian language) became, through the casting game in Shakespeare's play, a heated debate on ethnic discrimination – in the theatre and outside it. To begin with, the set, costumes and mannerisms, situated Take 3 (at least for spectators of my generation!) in the enforced protochronist enculturation of the 1960s Romania. At first sight, the Peter Quince of this take was the reluctant local Party leader tasked, by the Centre, with the mission to ensure that "theatre penetrates into the masses",<sup>12</sup> as Alexandru Duțu put it in 1964, when reviewing Shakespeare's role in Romania.

As I have argued elsewhere, this is the kind of work Shakespeare was recruited to do in Romania in the decades of socialist Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>13</sup> According to Radu Beligan, who was commenting on 'the privileges of theatre', the Bard's work "stimulated spectators into participation and urged them into action".<sup>14</sup> Like him, Duțu argued that "in Rumania, Shakespeare's theatre represente[d] a heritage of patriotic education".<sup>15</sup> In the remote provincial community in Dabija's *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You*, its role was, as Mihnea Gheorghiu put it in his 1964 anniversary survey of the Bard's success in Romania, "to reach the large masses of the people, educate the vast and immense reserves of playgoers, the same 'great public', such as the theatregoing audience of Shakespeare in the Elizabethan age has been".<sup>16</sup>

But the slow-paced life and speech of this northern community onstage (another stereotype!) and the offstage lethargy derived from the comfort that *this* past was well behind (and this subversive exercise in adaptation was too familiar) were about to be short-circuited. Bottom's arrival as a "hyper-energetic and ambitious Hungarian"<sup>17</sup> – dressed in national colour and hat – at once confused everybody not least because he spoke Hungarian.<sup>18</sup> Suspicious of one another and already exercised by the demands of Peter Quince's community project, the Moldavians rallied together as Quince's authority was being threatened. The onstage Elizabethan audience got confused further by the speaking in tongues and the escalating tempers. Gradually seeing through the comedy of linguistic miscommunication, the spectators anticipated that the violence about to ensue was one of national(ist) colour. The concluding scene functioned, undoubtedly, as shock-therapy: Pyramus, lying dead in jest, was not only critiqued for his excess of theatricality

<sup>13</sup> For more on protochronist enculturation and socialist-realism in staged Shakespeare, see my chapter 3: "Workers' Hamlet", in *Shakespeare's Hamlet in Romania: 1778 and 2008. A Study in Translation, Performance and Cultural Adaptation*, Lewiston N.Y., Mellen Press, 2010, p. 89-136.

<sup>14</sup> Radu Beligan, "Teatrul azi: privilegiile teatrului", in *Momente ale revoluției culturale din România*, eds. Ștefan Bălan and Ilie Murgulescu, București, Editura Științifică, 1964, p. 187.

<sup>15</sup> A. Duțu, *Shakespeare in Rumania* p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> Mihnea Gheorghiu, "Shakespeare în România", *Secolul 20*, 4 (1964), p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Alice Georgescu, "Meșterii. Un coșmar – *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You*", *Dilema veche*, October 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Dabija's was not the first experiment of its kind: a 1998 production at the National Theatre, Cluj, had a Hungarian Puck in an all-Romanian cast with a Romanian script, while a semi-professional production of *Romeo and Juliet* in 2002, staged by Fundația Scena, Tîrgu Mureș, read the ancient grudge as one between Romanians and Hungarians in Transylvania by having the Capulets and the Montagues divided linguistically throughout the entire performance.



by Hippolyta, Hermia and Theseus, but vigorously kicked by the same three – a gloomy reminder of the 1991 ethnic street violence in Tîrgu Mureș, Romania.



Plate 3. Paula Niculiță, Mihai Smarandache, Gabriel Pintilei, Rodica Mandache, Marius Damian and Oana Ștefănescu kicking Pavel Bartoș (Hungarian Fennek/Pyramus) in Take 3 of *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You*, directed by Alexandru Dabija in 2009. (Source: Octavian Tibăr photograph © Odeon Theatre, Bucharest.)

Between the socio-political lines of this take, the audience also read theatre politics in contemporary Romania, on whose stages there still is next to no multi-ethnic casting (unless segregated or interpretively dictated) and dialectal speech, when employed, is used for comic effect.

#### Take 4: a “palpable-gross play” (V.i.376)

Constructed as a “cold” reading-*cum*-improvisation performed by the technical crew – this production’s mechanicals, the last take aimed to strip acting of previous pressures – training school, direction, method, fashion, peer pressure. Like *Pyramus and Thisbe* within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the mechanicals’ performance of the story in front of the layers of audience (Theseus-the-narrator, the all-female cast, the students, the gender and national minorities now integrated) functions as a typical recognition scene in terms of actorly practices and of spectating un-mediated theatre.



Plate 4. Mihai Smarandache, Gabriel Pintilei, Rodica Mandache, Pavel Bartoș watching Victor Cociorbă improvising Pyramus’ death in Take 4 of *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You*, directed by Alexandru Dabija in 2009. (Source: Cosmin Ardeleanu photograph © Odeon Theatre, Bucharest.)

Amateur acting, Dabija argued before, offers refreshing interpretive insights in its “unschooled”, “unlearned” and uncluttered directness. To this particular production it also offered the opportunity to sum up its main concerns: firstly, the role of language (*versus* media) and of Shakespeare in theatre, who the director believes, “should be a natural presence in a national repertoire (like Bach and Mozart for a philharmonic orchestra, not necessarily revolutionary or new, kids must see it, everybody should see it)”;<sup>19</sup> secondly, the issue of Romanian translations of Shakespeare, which is the cause, in Dabija’s opinion, for directors’ hesitation to stage Shakespeare until “good, sensational, contemporary” translations are out: “we have a mega-International Shakespeare Festival [at its 8<sup>th</sup> edition] and no decent Shakespeare Complete Works edition”;<sup>20</sup> thirdly, that theatre reviewing should be “a companion to the production, not an act of demolition”<sup>21</sup> – a view the director conveyed via the (four times) adapted script and the responses of the onstage audiences; and finally, that “each spectator deserves his/her own show”,<sup>22</sup> which should not be dictated by the director, the actors or the reviewers.

## Epilogue

What I argued in my “tedious brief” *account* of this production is that Dabija’s *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You* engaged with the local context and mores, and suggested that beyond these, the production *accounts for* current issues in Shakespeare studies.

This production paid no dues to the sequence of recycling from Ovid to Shakespeare, but this, I would suggest, was not an instance of literary ignorance (one review mentioned Ovid and two others referred to the same story being recycled in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*). Instead, Dabija’s production capitalised on a familiar practice of Shakespeare cultural recycling that is politically alert and aesthetically self-referential – one that has been a survival practice during decades of isolationism in the communist ghetto and has become a productive method of presentist enquiry after the 1989 Romanian Revolution. While the practice is no novelty, what makes Dabija’s four-fold recycling one “with a difference”, however, is that it played with familiarity and defamiliarisation in equal measure. The interaction between the two stifled laughter and collapsed political correctness, forcing the spectators to ask anew questions on translation, directing, acting, viewing and reviewing. What *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You* ultimately proposed – through parody and self-parody – was an assessment of theatre, and of Shakespeare’s plays in particular, as “a complex encounter with aesthetic, sociological and entertainment value”.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding its aggressive, defiant, at times iconoclastic intertextual and contextual references, and risking being dismissed as a moralising exercise, *Pyramus & Thisbe 4 You* put out a tall order, one Dabija rehearsed in numerous previous productions since 1974, when he had been labelled by a critic “a well-behaved and young director, minding his place”, namely that theatre making is “a therapeutic act of social and artistic hygiene-isation”.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> M. Runcan, *Habarnam în oraşul...*, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> M. Runcan, *Habarnam în oraşul...*, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Gabriela Lupu, “Din fericire, teatrul românesc nu e atât de prost pe cât şi-ar dori unii”, *Artact Magazine*, 24 March 2010.

<sup>22</sup> G. Lupu, “Din fericire, teatrul...”.

<sup>23</sup> Mihaela Michailov, “Parodie, numele tău este Dabija”, *Artact Magazine*, 7 October 2009.

<sup>24</sup> M. Runcan, *Habarnam în oraşul...*, p. 204.



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