

## Performance reviews

Cahiers Élisabéthains: A Journal of  
English Renaissance Studies  
2024, Vol. 113(1) 99–181  
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DOI: [10.1177/01847678241240373](https://doi.org/10.1177/01847678241240373)  
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Shakespeare in the forest of the Ukrainian Steppe: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Yevhen Reznichenko for Teatr Kulisha, Kherson, Ukraine, 2020, 19 June 2021, open seating

**Reviewed by:** Daria Moskvitina, *Zaporizhzhia State Medical University, Ukraine* and Bohdan Korneliuk, *Khortytsia National Academy, Ukraine*

Until recently, Ukraine has remained an almost blank space on the map of open air Shakespeare productions. We regret to admit that our country can hardly boast any remarkable theatrical festival in general, and a Shakespearean one in particular. However, in the last decade, a certain shift in the Ukrainian Shakespeare-related theatrical practices has been observed, which is clearly a tangible sign of the belated genesis of outdoor Shakespearean productions in Ukraine.

Generally, open air theatre is nothing new in our country, given the fact that stagecraft is genetically connected with religious drama, marketplace puppet performances, and *vertep*, which is a specifically Ukrainian version of the nativity play. In addition, Baroque outdoor theatres were frequently featured on the private estates that belonged to Polish and Russian aristocracy. Yet, the development of professional theatres (early nineteenth century) was inextricably tied to the construction of playhouses. Thus, open air productions have had little chance to enter regular theatrical practice in Ukraine of the time and for decades after, being largely pushed away to the realm of amateur performance or employed as an element of public celebrations or civic pageantry.

The situation has been gradually changing since the early 2000s, when a bulk of Ukrainian theatres started rehearsing and performing outdoors. Experiments with the opportunities provided by the open space has resulted in a number of spectacular performances staged throughout Ukraine. It is notable how the location in many ways predetermines the topic and the genre of a certain production. For instance, our native city Zaporizhzhia proudly embraces Khortytsia – one of the biggest river islands in Europe, commonly associated with the heroic deeds and legendary figures of the Zaporizhzhian *cossackdom* (a democratic military community that dwelled on the Dnipro banks in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries). Thus, two outdoor productions – *Taras Bulba* (2007) and *Mamay* (2008) – created by the local Volodymyr Mahar Music and Drama theatre and performed at the facilities of the Cossack History

Museum on Khortytsia, refer to plots based on the history of cossacks as Ukrainian freedom fighters.

The first Shakespearean productions in Ukraine date back to the late 2000s. Lviv spiritual theatre Voskresinnia presented their pioneering show *To Meet Prospero* in 2009. This grand performance was overall more spectacular than thought-provoking: its scenery featured colossal van and gigantic figures made of wire; actors on stilts wore fanciful costumes and chimerical makeup, and a fire show was the pinnacle. Despite the name, alluding to *The Tempest*, the verbal component of the show comprised mainly fragments from *Romeo and Juliet*. The performance barely had a pronounced plot and its genre could be loosely defined as a Shakespeare-related fantasia.

The same approach was used for the 2019 open air production of *Romeo and Juliet for Dummies* by Theatre Vie for the opening ceremony of VieFest in Zaporizhzhia. This show appeared to be a one-off event produced specifically for the festival. Judging by its name, one can easily guess that the director and actors undertook the mission to enlighten the audience about one of the most recognised plots in the history of world drama. The stage emphasis was equally divided between Montague / Capulet feud and the romantic plotline. The neverending fight between ‘two households, both alike in dignity’ was represented by two puppet Chinese dragons – red and green – driven by the actors. Most of the time they were ‘savagely attacking’ each other while Romeo was wooing Juliet, both dressed as life-size puppets. Being totally deprived of the original comic relief scenes, the performance ‘for dummies’ gave quite a one-dimensional view of Shakespeare’s tragedy: the story was reduced to ‘they-fell-in-love-and-then-died’ scheme. Storyline reduction was compensated for by spectacular effects: the performance took place in the evening so the director took full advantage of the darkness and permeated the show with eye-catching fireworks and lights. Generally, while the performance hardly hit its ‘edu-tainment’ target, it did nevertheless register definitively in the history of Ukrainian open air Shakespeare.

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The Covid-19 pandemic paradoxically opened new horizons for the global development of open air productions: given the necessity to observe quarantine measures and social distancing, they literally became the only possible way of scenic expression. Ukrainian theatres immediately took up the global trend, as from 2020–2021 a number of outdoors productions were staged. Moreover, the international theatrical festival Tavria Melpomene that was scheduled for September 2021 in Kherson, will be reformatted as a completely open-air event that will provide the venue for the latest productions to be presented.

As for the pandemic Shakespearean productions in Ukraine, they included *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Persnyi Teatr [the First Theatre], Lviv, dir. Ihor Zadniprianyi), *Midsummer Night’s Dreams* (Teatr Lesi [Lesia’s Theatre], Lviv, dir. Dmytro Zakhochenko), and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Teatr Kulisha [Mykola Kulish Theatre], Kherson, dir. Yevhen Reznichenko). The latter is the object of our close study.

What makes this production particularly interesting in the context of the Ukrainian stage Shakespearean development? First of all, it is remarkable that this performance

was brought to life far away from the notable artistic centres such as Kyiv, Lviv, or Kharkiv, which clearly indicates the emerging cultural equability that might eventually blur the now strikingly clear-cut distinction between the provincial and metropolitan theatres. What is more, the location also matters significantly. Its usual venue is the green tourism hotel Chumatska Krynysia, which has all the facilities to host theatrical productions: a stage space and seating as well as a theatrical glade where spectators can freely mingle with the actors. The venue itself hints at the common theatrical practices of the Elizabethan period when inns often provided open air platforms for touring theatre companies. The hotel is located in Oleshky forest – one of the world’s biggest man-made forest planted between mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries to impede the advance of Oleshky sands, a desert occupying more than 160 square kilometers. Having already had a successful story of the so-called ‘forest plays’ productions (the drama *Forest Song* by Lesia Ukrayinka should be mentioned first in this respect), Mykola Kulish Theatre could have chosen among several Shakespeare’s plays set in the woods, but instead made the only choice possible, given the location specifics: as trees and sands fight for expansion, so elves and people champion for love. This emphasis on love is highlighted in the description published on Mykola Kulish Theatre website and is unambiguously reinforced by the playbill (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Playbill for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2020), Teatr Kulisha. Photo courtesy of Teatr Kulisha.

Set amidst the forest, the show travels between several locations that clearly mark its cyclic structure. It begins on the regular stage where a presenter (actually, Puck) announces the beginning of the show and the exposition is presented. Then, the show moves to an opening in the round with burning fire, marking the gradual immersion into the supernatural elfish world of the woods. Another station is a straw-covered glade with pine trees where the most mysterious and passionate events take place, and the climax is set on a sandy opening. Having visited three different performance sites, the actors and spectators return to the regular stage for the finale. It is certainly the location that guides the show alongside director Reznichenko: a human-planted woodland, rather foreign amidst the steppe, is indeed the place for the faerie to be as they are also foreign to the human world. The sense of magic and mystery is reinforced by natural sounds, smells, and light; proximity to nature somehow unleashes the natural instincts of the characters, and eroticism gradually becomes the *modus operandi* of the show. It is interesting how erotically fuelled episodes never look vulgar or crass: the degree of bawdy sexuality was deliberately taken down by comic scenography, which more readily evoked memories of a *Benny Hill Show* episode rather than a true NC-17 film. In general, this amorous charge as well as other elf-related components, expressed a pronounced carnivalesque nature, complete with cross-gender dressing (an actress playing Puck; topless male fairies dressed as mock ballet dancers) and deliberate casting against type (the fairies are played by strong robust men whose looks are as distant from the traditional idea of elves as could be).

The performance is only about an hour and a half long, which means considerable textual cuts. Having decided to concentrate only on love affairs and to maintain a



**Figure 2.** Titania and Oberon (centre), and the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Teatr Kulisha. Photo courtesy of Teatr Kulisha.

quick tempo, the director mercilessly removed all the scenes with the Mechanicals and the production of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Thus, he had not only to change Shakespeare's plot (it is Egeus rather than Nick Bottom who falls victim to elfish tricks and obtains a donkey head), but to invent other strategies to preserve the comic modus or otherwise the whole show (save the Titania and donkey-headed Egeus episode) would have transformed into a melodrama.

Notably, comic effect is outsourced to the well-known and commonly recognised stage conventions remarkably employed by the Ukrainian provincial theatres while staging comedies by the native playwrights. Classical Ukrainian canon is rich in nineteenth-century comedies where elements of folk humour make the whole show. These plays – *The Muscovite-Sorcerer* (1819) by Ivan Kotliarevskiy, *The Marriage Engagement in Goncharivka* (1836) by G. Kvitka-Osnovianenko, *Chasing Two Hares* (1883) by Mykhailo Starytskyi, to mention a few – make up the core of any Ukrainian repertory theatre. The majority of their productions today bear the traces of the original stage versions that combine grotesque and emphatic *joie de vivre* in acting, extensively employ music, elaborate a range of comic-looking gestures and movements, and prefer flamboyance to psychologism. Actually, these aspects can be clearly seen in this *Midsummer Night's Dream* with Titania represented as a typical seductress, Oberon as her hapless, macho husband, and Theseus as a brutal yet jocular authority figure.



**Figure 3.** The company of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Teatr Kulisha. Photo courtesy of Teatr Kulisha.

It is interesting how traditional acting is combined with elements of modernisation implemented primarily through the love rectangle of Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius whose plotline, due to the cuts, takes the lead, overshadowing Titania/Oberon and Theseus/Hippolyta stories. Their preferences, similarities, and differences are at once clearly marked with their looks – church choir girl Helena unresponsively woos an indifferent fashionista and smartphone addict Demetrius, while Hermia and Lysander demonstrate their unity with shared socks patterns and hipster looks, later changed to wedding attires.

The show is proclaimed immersive, but its immersivity is questionable. Although the audience stands close to the actors most of the time, a certain distance is always apparent and the spectators remain observers who never fully belong to the show. Certainly, shortening of distance between the cast and the spectators changes the perception angle and creates intimate atmosphere, but true immersivity in which the audience becomes an integral part of the show without recognition of it, is never achieved.

In trying to characterise the show in a few words, we have coined the phrase ‘non-avant-garde experiment’. Indeed, this performance does not answer any vexed questions of the time, nor does it consider any profound implications on the local or global political context, nor hint toward the pandemic or in any other way mention the current agenda. Its main focus is light-hearted and youthful infatuation and how mysterious natural forces can ignite, alter, or support romantic feelings. Having deprived the play of arguably its most comic part (the Mechanicals’ rehearsal and performance), Yevhen Reznichenko did not actually outstretch it to new horizons, but rather expanded it broad-wise, demonstrating different facets of romance – tender, mocking, cruel, and harmonious – and glorifying Shakespeare as an all-time poet of love. Though far from being



**Figure 4.** The company of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Teatr Kulisha. Photo courtesy of Teatr Kulisha.



**Figure 5.** The company of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Teatr Kulisha. Photo courtesy of Teatr Kulisha.

groundbreaking, this production manages to break fresh ground, finding its way to audiences' hearts and paving the way for the array of open air Shakespearean shows to come. Hopefully, they will be a breath of fresh air, both literally and figuratively.

### Author biographies

**Daria Moskvitina** holds a PhD in English Literature. She publishes on Shakespeare in translation, onstage and onscreen.

**Bohdan Korneliuk** holds a PhD in English Literature. He publishes on literary theory and Shakespeare's histories onstage and onscreen.

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*The Tempest*, directed by Elizabeth Freestone for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK, 1 March 2023, centre stalls. (Integrated BSL interpreted performance)

**Reviewed by:** Kath Bradley, *independent scholar*

As the show's programme pointed out, this was a production inspired by concerns for swift action to ameliorate the damage caused by the current climate emergency. To