

## **Redesigning Multiculturalism or Japanese Encounters in Sibiu, Romani, *The Scarlet Princess*, written and directed by Silviu Purc?rete, inspired by Tsuruya Namboku IV's *Sakura Hime Azuma Bunshô***



*The Scarlet Princess* is the newest production of Silviu Purc?rete at Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, Romania. It is the hot winner in three categories of the Romanian theatre awards (UNITER): for best production, best actress in a leading role (Ofelia Popii for interpreting Seigen and Shinnobu Sota), and best set design (Drago? Buhagiar). As strange as it may seem, these awards come as a *national* confirmation of the *international* prestige of a unique cultural phenomenon: the Sibiu International Theatre Festival.

Among all the great artists the Festival has brought to Sibiu, Silviu Purc?rete is the Romanian theatre director that has made, without any doubt, the most important contribution to the stunning transformation of the city and to the adaptation of the local venues to the contemporary realities and needs of performing arts. He has done so in close collaboration with the outstanding visionary in cultural and theatre management, as well as great actor, Constantin Chiriac, the general manager of Radu Stanca National Theatre and the president of Sibiu International Theatre Festival (since 1993).

Purc?rete has a unique directorial method and style. In the first place, he has a predilection for (pre)texts in the classical area of world literature and theatre. Then, after identifying and extracting a nucleus (or several of them) from a certain work, he conducts a series of improvisations together with the cast that later get polished and fastened into a narrative thread, congruous with the (pre)text itself. All this procedure is meant to create memorable images on stage that have the tendency of rapidly becoming production's trademarks. This was how he created his *Pilafs and Mule Scents*, *Pantagruel's Sister-in-Law*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Lulu*, *Metamorphoses*, *Carnival Stuff*, and *Oidip*. This signature style of his has turned many of his shows into landmarks of European theatre, one of them indisputably being

Goethe's *Faust* (2007). He placed the production in an old building of an ex-communist factory, using a monumental set design and a huge cast of almost 100 actors, a live rock band and larger-than-live sound and visual effects. The show has received important awards and performed throughout the continent – in Brussels, Bochum, Budapest, etc, as well as at the Edinburgh International Festival.

Ultimately, Purcărete's work technique seems to be an outcome of pure postmodernism, with all its implications in culture (at large) and in the performing arts (in particular). He chooses well-known texts that, paradoxically, are barely read today. More than that, his special and strong focus on the actors' improvisations has created a specific horizon in the expectations both on the part of the audiences and the critics. To such an extent that, when Silviu Purcărete has a production that is a 100% truthful to the author's text, the audience is not necessarily perplexed, but they find themselves in a quite 'uncomfortable' position. This was the case for at least two of his productions: *Waiting for Godot* and *Carnival Stuff* (and partially, for *Lulu*). It is debatable but it seems that in these cases the effect might be in the loss of the fluidity in assimilating what is happening on the stage. The text doesn't set itself up as a setback but emerges as an alternate sphere of meaning, requiring the viewer's constant attention.

It is crucial to note that Purcărete's directorial strategy works best at Radu Stanca National Theatre due to two reasons. Firstly, the director enjoys an absolute freedom of creation: he can 'unleash' all his specific creative energies since there is a strong two-way channel of trust between him and Mr. Chiriac. Secondly, Purcărete now has an ideal relationship with the actors as each party knows very well what to expect from the other, how to channel their talent and manage the risks on the stage.

In this particular theatre landscape, so unique for the European stages, it was normal that *The Scarlet Princess* would be a long-awaited event. Kabuki is a world away from Western theatre and two worlds away from Eastern Europe. There have been tremendous expectations exactly because Kabuki is so very special and difficult to blend with European feelings and emotions, not to mention with Purcărete's spectacular artistic vision. Contrary to all the expectations, *The Scarlet Princess* turned out to NOT be a Kabuki type of play and production. Yet it has the advantage of a stage that is designed with all the requirements of this genre, together with the long platform used for entries and exits, the *hanamichi*. The men play the female roles and vice versa, as the travesty becomes one of the most important pillars of the show, with the director's intention (completely assumed by the cast) to insist on the grotesque elements in the spiritual universe of the characters.

The story is relatively simple: Seigen (a priest) is in love with his young disciple, Shiragiku. As they are overwhelmed by their cruel and sad destiny, the two of them decide to commit suicide. Shiragiku throws himself from a cliff into the huge waves of the stormy sea but Seigen doesn't have the willpower and the strength of character to follow him into death. Seventeen years later, a young princess Sakura arrives at the temple, searching refuge and peace. Seigen is surprised and astounded to discover in her the reincarnation of his long-lost love Shiragiku. The recognition is bitter-sweet: the princess Sakura was raped by Shinnobu Sota, a bandit, and has an unwanted child that she deeply cares for. From this point on the situation gets more and more complicated as the story becomes very 'byzantine' and arborescent: there is a set of adventures connected with a certain seal in the princess' family that has been stolen by Shinnobu Sota; the baby also has a mixed-up trace in the play. The world on stage transforms into a very baroque-like multitude of ramifications, each with its specific set of Japanese significations.



*The Scarlet Princess*. Photo Credit: TNRS, Dragos Dumitru.

The Western viewers are not accustomed to comprehending such a wide area of story elements, nor are they trained to do so. Nevertheless, surprise! This might well be serving Silviu Purc?rete's directorial strategy, since searching for the essential story line may well be the main stake of the production. The very smooth, elegant and well-refined European-like irony is flooding the stage and melting into the internal mechanisms of the show.

The challenging set design of Drago? Buhagiar is yet another transformation of an old ex-communist factory hall into a typical Kabuki space. One of the most important set-design details has to be especially singled out: the stage is configured in such a way that it decomposes the theatrical and dramatical conventions. On the left, there are small make-up tables and tools, together with the usual mirrors and lights. These elements are a special path to the 'bowels' of the Western-like theatre production machinery: the conventions are presented in a very subtle and discrete way, yet the effect on the audience is strong. It is an excellent option to expose the artificiality of a specific cultural environment, together with its general rules. The procedure is Western but the world it creates and depicts is Japanese. This makes the distances melt and the rules' limitations fluctuate and be malleable.



*The Scarlet Princess*. Photo Credit: TNRS, Dragos Dumitru.

The show's music subsumes the same obvious principle of gradually divulging the conventions. On the other side of the stage, right across from the make-up tables, there is a pit for the small orchestra where the actors create the sound effects: starting with the sound of the swords, to the lisp of the leaves, the silk, or even the dogs' barking. Again, everything is created and unfolds in plain sight.

Then, very importantly, the acting and the show's multicultural meanings are closely interrelated. Ofelia Popii and Iustinian Turcu have the leading roles, in travesty. The European audience knows Popii best from Purc?rete's *Faust*, where she created an amazing Mephistopheles. This particular production propelled her to a very high level of artistic visibility, due to her true, complex and meticulous stage interpretation. In *The Scarlet Princess* she plays Seigen, the priest, and Shinnobu Sota. The first is very much aware of the smallness of his human condition. It is quite possible that this line in performing Seigen comes from the character's inability to end his life. At the same time, Shinnobu Sota, the villain, is just as small and mean, considering his evil nature. His great power comes from the character's focus and attention: in order to pursue his aims Shinnobu Sota needs to be quick and all over the place; he has a bright, mean type of intelligence. The audience is permanently aware that he is strong not because of the greatness and force of his intentions, but thanks to his derisory ambition. Iustinian Turcu, who has just graduated from the Theatre school in Sibiu, plays Shiragiku (the young apprentice) and also Sakura, the princess who is disorientated, lost and fragile. As much as Shinnobu Sota, the only reference point of Sakura, is monumental through his small and evil intentions, so is Seigen in his position as a victim who cannot sink any lower, as there is no more space to descend, literally speaking. Turcu understood very

well the essence of this character and did an excellent job playing him.



*The Scarlet Princess*. Photo Credit: TNRS, Dragos Dumitru.

As already mentioned, Purcărete's productions create images on stage that are pure 'blessing' for the marketing of the shows. This comes from his directorial talent and vision, as he knows very well how to coordinate large casts. The case of *The Scarlet Princess* is even more challenging. Importantly, the large group of the supporting-role actors works as a homogenous cluster, emphasizing the irony on the stage.

Multiculturalism is most visible from the following point of view: Kabuki-like techniques melt together with European elements including some that are localized closer to the Romanian viewer – e.g. at some point a group of actors wear typical traditional Romanian shepherd costumes made out of sheep fur. This particular segment, intertwined with the references from the Asian culture, make everything happening on stage flow into a great river of meanings. The European and Asian audiences will both feel represented. Thus, the distance between the traditional world of old Romania and that of Japan is getting smaller and approachable. The question that arises in the viewer's mind is '*How much is this representing me? Am I a part of the universe that is created on stage?*' One possible personal answer would be '*Yes, the production's two separate worlds are far away from each other, geographically speaking. Nevertheless, the characters suffer, love, laugh, cry and sing just the same as we do.*' Consequently, multiculturalism doesn't need to be a simplistic result of prosaic and trivial association of cultural motives and themes emerging from different environments. The situation needs to be analyzed on a more profound level: in



Purc?rete's production multiculturalism is an output of a process that essentializes and radicalizes emotions. *The Scarlet Princess* doesn't have the purpose of creating emotions in the audience, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Nonetheless, the show is asking universal questions, it is suggesting subjects and situations encased in music, sound, color and light. My own personal question after seeing the play was 'Which is my cultural essence? What makes me a Romanian?' After seeing the production twice, I am still working on the answer and it wouldn't have been that great to have it already. And I have to underline that my question was inspired by the group of supporting-role actors and their wonderful energy rather than by the lead actors. This strange equilibrium in the energies on stage is just another virtue belonging to Silviu Purc?rete.



*The Scarlet Princess*. Photo Credit: TNRS, Dragos Dumitru.

In view of all this, I dare say *The Scarlet Princess* is a major event for the European theatre. It is also crucial to emphasize the importance of the new theatre venue where the production is performed: as was the case of *Faust*, in 2007, Radu Stanca National Theatre managed to transform an old factory. Not only is it now adapted for the specific rules of Kabuki but it is also part of the cultural environment of Sibiu and the Festival. This is a vital detail, as the local community is the main recipient of the artistic effervescence surrounding the production. Now, the people in Sibiu have a huge and monumental bridge across cultures (European and Japanese), a bridge that includes the local and regional communities.

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