

Will ' s Way at the Shakespeare International Festival Craiova 2022

by Alina Epîngeac

In Romania we have a word that is supposed to be untranslatable; its meaning has a correspondent in the Portuguese *saudade* and covers the feelings implied by the English longing, the French *désir* and the Spanish nostalgia. We say *dor* when we both miss and long for something or someone. It is at once a wish, a need, an emptiness and affection with just a hint of melancholia.

We all felt this Romanian *dor* in the past hard years of solitude and disconnection. We missed the gatherings and the excitement of sharing experiences together at theatre festivals; face to face, shoulder by shoulder, clapping together, laughing together, crying together.

This year, in Romania, the first big important theatre festival after the prolonged period of uncertainty, fear and sickness was the Shakespeare International Festival in Craiova, which took place from the 19th to the 29th of May. Its motto “ There Is a Will, So There Is a Way ” clearly expressed the hard times in which we all had found ourselves and the hope and endurance through which we overcame such out-of-joint times.

2022 was also a year of change for the Shakespeare International Festival in Craiova - one of the most renowned theatre festivals in Europe. Its mark has always been that of prestige and high quality, and exceptional international productions. Its founder Emil Boroghin , who recently retired as manager of the festival, always strived to achieve the impossible and gather only top performances throughout the world in the program. His idea of an elite squad of directors, all together in one week in Craiova was a dream that became true throughout the years. Edition after edition, the grand names of worldwide theatre directing were to be found, night after night, in the festival ' s showcase. The Shakespeare International Festival in Craiova indeed obtained its well-deserved place on the map of European theatre festivals.

This year, after postponing the 13th edition, which was supposed to take place in 2020, the new managers of the festival, Vlad Dr ă gulescu and Ilarian ă tef ă nescu, turned over a new page and began a new chapter for the Festival. The focus of this edition meant building bridges to the local community - a well-balanced mix between the top-quality international guests and much-needed attention to Craiova ' s citizens – their needs, their wishes, and their tastes.



Shakespeare's *Ladies* directed by Alexandru Boureanu with the students of the Theatre Department of Craiova's university. Photo: Teatrul Național Craiova.

Several performances took place right in the middle of the city – on the streets, in parks, in front of malls, and in city markets. A vivid and friendly side of the high-brow cultural event unfolded and gave a warm sense of togetherness. As a theatre critic, you might have travelled to Craiova from another continent to see Robert Lepage and Silviu Purcurete, and right afterwards you could find yourself laughing casually in the parking lot of Craiova's mall, surrounded by spectators who stood still on their Sunday evening stroll gazing at the itinerant performance of Shakespeare's *Ladies* directed by Alexandru Boureanu with the students of the Theatre Department of Craiova's university. In the sunset light, with the buzzing sounds of a market all around, with children running here and there, with a melting ice cream in your hand, perhaps, it was such a joy to be able to relax and watch young women and men in their first steps of becoming professional actors. Their energy, their hopes on their sleeves, their ambition, their faults, and their happiness just to be part of this phenomenon – to act live in front of their townsmen, all this celebration that a festival should always be, happened while the character Shakespeare struggled to find the best monologue to present in front of the Queen herself. An audition of female characters took place on a stage made from the inside of a truck, and Lady

Macbeth, Cleopatra, Kate, Ophelia, even The Dark Lady herself took their chance at glory. And the next day, the same truck opened its side and presented all these wonderful stories in a market, or a square, or a neighborhood park, and other citizens of Craiova would enjoy, probably, their first encounter with the art of theatre.

Another sensitive and delicate experience that also took place under the bright spring skies this last May was the Swedish *Much Ado and All That Jazz*, the concert-performance presented by the “Romeo and Julia Kören” from Stockholm. An elegant couple sang their love story with soul tunes, accompanied only by the strings of a lute, and with interludes of love scenes from Shakespeare’s plays. In the botanical garden or in the shades of Romanescu Park, a moustached man in a tuxedo and a stylish lady wearing a green nightgown enchanted audiences who forgot that they were, perhaps, underdressed for such an extravagant meeting with jazz and Elizabethan verse. Their dialogue, their communication, and the way they listened to one another completed each other, their silences, their flirting and their partnership were mesmerizing and transformed this particular performance into the most pleasant surprise of the festival. A romantic evening in a blossoming park, listening to *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and the *Romeo and Juliet* balcony scene was a time to remember.



Vertical Romeo and Mercutio , by eVenti Verticali. Photo: Teatrul-Na ional-Craiova

And there was Vertical Romeo and Mercutio from Italy's eVenti Verticali – an acrobatic show that took place 10 meters high on a tight rope and made us all gasp in front of The National Theatre, at William Shakespeare Square. And there were two funny, clowning Shakespeares who improvised and made fun of one another and danced with a random passer-by and pulled a trick on someone and shared a fair laugh. They were called On the Move, also from Italy's Street Theatre Band. "Masca" Theatre from Bucharest brought to Craiova's street its vivid statues – a collaboration with "Marin Sorescu" National Theatre, called Shakespeare tryptic, that embodied the skills of stillness and elegance in Shakespearean characters. And many other events, dance performances, movie screenings and music happenings, all in the name of Shakespeare, took place all around Craiova.



887, by Robert Lepage. Photo: Albert Dobrin.

Emil Boroghin's legacy was also honored and the main stage of the festival welcomed elite performances, well appreciated by audiences, critics, and scholars. The main event, right in the opening night of the festival, was Robert Lepage's performance 887. His renowned monologue about Canadian history, intricate with self-history of childhood memories about an old block of flats in Quebec in the 60s and a loving father who drove his cab every night, made a big impression and got a few minutes of standing ovation. The technical perfection of video mapping and simplicity of miniatures, handled so as to create an inner universe, combined with the authenticity of the sincere performer in front of us who casually took us by hand and invited us all into the palace of his memory. All this convinced the spectators that they had been attending one of the great theatrical meetings of their lives. After the performance, Robert Lepage was awarded the Excellency Prize of The Shakespeare Foundation and the next day he received the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of The National University of Theatre and Film "I.L.

Caragiale ” of Bucharest.



Othello, by Oskaras Korshunovas. Photo: D. Matvejeno.

A few days later Oskaras Korshunovas brought his Othello from OKT in Vilnius: another much-anticipated event. With a powerful woman actor in the leading role and a very elusive, charismatic Iago, the production centred around the images created with huge wooden reels upon which the characters had to maintain a frail balance. It was a visually enchanting performance, full of body expressions, music, and symbols, in which gender was only a matter of stereotypes. The most beautiful image remained the love scene between Othello and Desdemona, both under an immense sheet of plastic, up on the crushing reel. And from that moment on, the gigantic plastic foil became the much-dreaded handkerchief; such an overwhelming statement of an ordinary object transformed into a metaphor by the power of art.



Macbett, by Eugène Ionesco. Photo: Teatrul Național Craiova.

The most awaited Romanian performance of the festival was Silviu Purcărete's 'Macbett' by Eugène Ionesco, a production of The Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj-Napoca. The performance was nominated for the UNITER prize, for The Best Performance of 2021. The ironically twisted plot of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' reconverted in the theatre of absurd manner was a creativity playground for one of the most imaginative Romanian directors. With his wit and acid humor, he transformed the English court into a mundane world of slaughter, in which war is only a hunting game for the rich who change power between themselves. This hopeless world is nothing but an asylum of lunatics who go mad in their search of glory over small causes. The final scene in which an old exhausted Malcom comes casually to claim his throne and starts a never-ending monologue of false and cruel promises, while the stage is being dismantled, strikes us as a superb metaphor of the uncaring world of lies in which we have grown accustomed to living.



The Tiger Lillies Perform Hamlet, directed by the late Martin Tulinius at the Republique Theatre in Copenhagen. Photo: ALIGULER.

The last night was reserved for The Tiger Lillies Perform Hamlet, directed by the late Martin Tulinius at the Republique Theatre in Copenhagen. The world-celebrated musical group “ The Tiger Lillies ” join forces with the theatre to create a dream-like performance of the most well-known play ever written. In his personal fingerprint falsetto manner, Martin Jacques sings verses inspired by the tragedy of the Danish prince, accompanied by cabaret interbelic sonorities, and describes each major scene. The reduction of characters only keeps in focus Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius, Polonius and Laertes in a puppet-like motion, who act as animated only by the music. Ophelia ’ s love dream in which Hamlet enters floating above the scene to embrace her and starts a swimming-like ballet in thin air is both sensitive and powerful as it describes two fragile kind-hearted people who become victims of a vicious world. The performance was a tender and entreating finale of the festival.

And there were discussions and scholarly meetings, and book releases, and conferences, and workshops, and many additional events each morning. For example, a new cultural space was retrieved from its industrial purpose – “ The Valetta Towers, ” which used to serve as an industrial hall, became now the club of the festival where concerts and impro shows took place and it also provided two stages for guest performances, both indoor and outdoor. The preview of Richard III, directed by Laszlo Bocsardi for the “ Marin Sorescu ” National Theatre in Craiova, took place there and became the promise for an important theatrical event this autumn.

The Shakespeare International Festival in Craiova proved to us all that a great will can indeed make miracles happen. Emil Boroghin , as a Craiovean Prospero, welcomed us all in his dream of a major European event. In 2022 we found out what can happen when more dreams come together and have a whole city as their fantastic island. For ten days in May, Craiova became a celebration safe space - a gathering spot for those who had no idea how much they ' d missed being together. This feeling of belonging, of humanity and sharing common values - the most wonderful gift Shakespeare himself keeps offering us through the centuries.

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