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“The Many Languages of the Avant-Garde”: In conversation with Grzegorz Bral of Teatr Pieśń Kozła (Song of the Goat Theatre)

Abstract: How to theorise and review avant-garde Shakespeare? Which theoretical paradigms should be applied when Shakespearean productions are multicultural and yet come from a specific locale? These and other many questions interrogating the language of performance in global avant-garde Shakespeare productions are put forward to Grzegorz Bral, the director of the Song of the Goat ensemble in the context of their evolving performance of *Macbeth* (2006/2008) and their *Songs of Lear* (2012).

Keywords: avant-garde theatre, intercultural theatre, Jerzy Grotowski, Gardzienice, globalisation, the global versus the local, post-colonialism, Western culture, montage, post-dramatic theatre, utopian primitivism, intertextuality, text, adaptation.

Song of the Goat theatre was founded by Grzegorz Bral and Anna Zubrzycki in 1996. They are an international ensemble company based in Wrocław, Poland who tour extensively around the world. Although both co-founders came from renowned Gardzienice theatre set up by Włodzimierz Staniewski, a close artistic partner of Jerzy Grotowski, they aim to develop their own aesthetic based on musicality of the drama. Bral’s so-called ‘co-ordination method’ is based on integrating text, movement, imagination and emotions. It is a practice that focuses on co-ordinating actors’ energy movement and voice. After two successful shows, which included prizes at Edinburgh Fringe Festival, they turned their attention to Shakespeare and on the invitation of the then artistic director of Royal Shakespeare Company they put together an adaptation of *Macbeth* which opened at the Complete Works of Shakespeare Festival in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2006 as *Macbeth Work in Progress*. In 2013 they came back to Edinburgh with *Songs of Lear* and yet again received many distinguished awards including the Fringe First Award and now are touring the show.

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Bral is actor, director and teacher. He was born in 1961 in Gdańsk, Poland. As a student he moved a lot from a university to university: from Polish philology at the University of Gdansk, the Marie Curie University in Lublin and the University of Wrocław, through psychology at the Catholic University of Lublin to theatre studies at Warsaw Theatre Academy. His theatre practice started when between 1987 and 1992, he was involved with the Centre of Theatre Practice in Gardzienice, Poland. From then on in addition to managing Song of the Goat ensemble he has also become a teacher of acting techniques, leading acting workshops all over the world. In Poland he has worked, for example, at the Jerzy Grotowski Institute, in Wrocław, where he organised conferences dedicated to the Anthropology of Theatre. In addition to *Macbeth* (2006, 2008) and *Songs of Lear* (2012) he also directed a number of non-Shakespearean productions including Euripides' *Goat's Song* in 1997, *Chronicles* in 2001, *Lacrimosa* in 2005, Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* in 2009 and *Cherry Orchard Portraits* in 2014.

In this interview with Bral conducted in March 2014 I was predominantly interested in his Shakespearean adaptations which are performed in English and thus are an interesting instance of intercultural 'Global Shakespeare,' because they are acted by an international ensemble using culturally diverse music, and crucially, often, in the front of Anglophone audiences. I wanted to find out about his approach to adapting Shakespeare's text, how his actors work on interpretation of Shakespeare's characters and learn his view on the concerns expressed by Shakespearean scholars about the notions of intercultural exchange in his theatre, namely 'utopian primitivism.'

We spoke mainly about his *Macbeth*, a performance which I saw in 2010 at the Barbican. It is perhaps a little bit pointless to give an account of any Song of the Goat's performance as all of them are evolving shows, the so-called 'works-in-progress' but for the benefit of the readers who may have not seen their *Macbeth* I include below my brief review of the show, with a caveat that it was the final version of *Macbeth* which crystallised around 2008 with the ensemble comprising: Gabriel Gawin as Macbeth, Anna Zubrzycki as Lady Macbeth, Ian Morgan as Macduff, Faroque Khan as Duncan, Ewan Downie as Malcolm, Kacper Kuszewski as Banquo and Anu Salonen as the Witch.

2010 *Macbeth* in the tiny space of the Barbican's Pit begins with seven actors sitting in a semi-circle in half-darkness, chanting the witches' incantation in perfect unison accompanied by the kayagum, a Korean string instrument played by Rafał Habel, Song of the Goat's principal musician. The truly ritualistic nature of this scene is emphasised by the polyphonic harmonies of the performers' voices. The intensity of singing is captivating and so powerful that one might find himself ignore the words.

The group's approach to Shakespeare's text is not intellectual and instead it seems organic and instinctive. The performers' bodies and voices

speak volumes and you need to participate with all your senses as an audience. Undoubtedly the best scenes were the ones in which Song of the Goat’s actors’ bodies performed a dance of death, especially during the masterful polyphony of ‘Kyrie Eleison’ at the time of Duncan’s death, and the nerve-wrenching ‘Benedictus’ when Macbeth dies.

Gabriel Gawin and Anna Zubrzycki in the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are not your mere villains, and the dream-like narrative is not just a typical spiral of evil and cruelty: all characters remain unjudged and are equal at death. There is absolutely no difference between the murders committed by Macbeth and his own final execution by Macduff. Zubrzycki is a tragic Hecuba, straight from Euripides’s *Trojan Women*: she is matriarchal and mature, powerful and poignant, commanding her beloved husband’s implicit trust. The staging is a visual feast for the eyes as the simplified narrative is a simple but affecting succession of scenes from Shakespeare’s play in a series of tableaux, including a heart-breaking Pieta, in which Lady Macbeth cradles her husband’s lifeless body and laments his death.

Yet some critics, including *The Guardian*’s Michael Billington were frustrated not to see more fidelity to Shakespeare’s text, unimpressed by the essence of the performance contained in the music and the Corsican polyphonic chant. Billington saw an imitation of Peter Brook’s intercultural theatre in the actors’ dance-like movement with the fighting sticks. Another reviewer, Matt Trueman, however, captured well the main point of the adaptation, which is less about Shakespeare’s narrative and more about *Macbeth*’s text’s possible kinetic, and indeed, synesthetic quality: ‘Imagine if you could bathe in Macbeth. Or cut it into lines and snort it. What about painting your house Macbeth?’, he wrote. No doubt, Song of the Goat serve only ‘edited highlights: those passages that have come to represent the play – “Is this a dagger,” “Out, out damn spot,” Banquo’s assassination and visitation etc’ (Trueman), and it is a fleeting event at seventy-five minutes, but, at the same time, it is memorable and extremely moving.

AS: Is Song of the Goat an avant-garde or alternative theatre? Your roots seem to be in the avant-garde because you and Anna Zubrzycki came out of the Gardzienice theatre, not to mention your far reaching links to Jerzy Grotowski. I ask because I think that avant-garde theatre has its own language, or even languages, very different from traditional institutional dramatic theatre.

GB: The simple answer is as follows. I think we do have a language and we work on developing it, but also our own style and our own mission, which is markedly different from mainstream theatre or traditional theatre.

Perhaps I’ll begin by saying a few words about a certain tradition. There is a clearly defined Polish tradition that we are part of. *Dziady* (*The Forefathers*)

by Adam Mickiewicz,¹ Mieczysław Limanowski and Juliusz Osterwa,² the inter-war period, Grotowski and Gardzienice and then us. It's a search for the source of theatricality. What I mean by the 'source of theatricality' is not the origin of theatre, whether it comes from ritual or spectacle or whatever. That's not what I mean. What I mean is that which makes theatre important in a certain socio-political context.

My experience with Grotowski, and here I have to emphasise that he has only ever been a source of inspiration for me, I've never worked with him or studied with him. He's just a source of intellectual inspiration, mainly through the book of Professor Zbigniew Osiński.³ I know him from the literature and from seeing two performances – *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* and 20 or more years later, *Akcja (Action)* from Pontedera.⁴

I think that in Poland the question of belonging to the avant-garde is an interesting question because Polish alternative theatre culture is a movement that has come from student theatre groups, and the in 1970s and 1980s the alternative movement was typically a student movement: Teatr Ósmego Dnia, Węgałty and Teatr Akademia Ruchu. It was a phenomenon that lasted around thirty years and is now dying out, failing completely in its mission. So I think we are definitely avant-garde and we definitely speak our own language and have our own theatrical aesthetic. This is a theatrical aesthetic grounded in the first experiences Anna Zubrzycki and I had in Gardzienice: what Włodek Staniewski called the search for a 'new theatrical territory,' namely the expeditions to small villages in remote rural areas in Eastern Poland and searching for a 'living' context for music. Włodek used to talk about 'expeditions in search of a theatrical environment.' I took this on board, the idea that theatre is a whole environment or habitat, even in the ecological sense. To create theatre you have to be able to become part of a series of natural contexts – political and social – so that it can't be something insular.

So we are definitely avant-garde, and we definitely have our own language while the development of that language is characterised by a refusal to compromise with the idea that the text, or the story, is the most important element of performance. No, the music is the most important, in a very very Nietzschean sense: that tragedy is born of music. That is my starting point and

¹ Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) was a celebrated Polish Romantic poet and playwright and his *Dziady (The Forefathers)* is one of the essential Polish plays in the literary canon.

² Mieczysław Limanowski (1876-1948) and Juliusz Osterwa (1885-1947) were two Polish theatre practitioners and pedagogues who established the renowned Reduta theatre.

³ Zbigniew Osiński (1939-) is a Professor of theatre who has written about the work and life of Jerzy Grotowski. He also co-edited the only book by Grotowski published in Poland: *Texts 1965-1969: A Selection* (1989).

⁴ Pontedera is a town in Italy where famous Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards has been set up and where Grotowski died in 1999.

my research. But by music I mean not only the melody, the sounds or harmony, but a form of structure, as described by Eleazar Mieleciński,⁵ something to which we can compare myth, which tells us what myth looks like; if it's possible to say what a myth looks like, as in Jungian terms it's possible to say what an archetype looks like. Mieleciński said that the structure of myth is closest to the structure of music. That's how I understand it.

When we wield music, it is like looking into an invisible world. In ancient Greece the word was the energy equivalent of the object for which it stood, and Cratylus in the 6th century BC said that if a word stands for an object then music stands for a hidden reality. We can use music to look very deeply into the space of the genetics of culture. Music, sound, song, and remember the past much better than literature and text. Because if it is a text by Shakespeare, for example, it remembers Shakespeare through a series of productions. But the melody of a song will remember thousands of generations, because thousands of generations fed that song. That song is carried through generations and becomes a sort of cultural genotype.

AS: Shakespeare scholars would also probably say that Shakespeare has a genotype, because he was a writer, continually borrowing the finest texts from the vaults of European literature, i.e. Spanish, French, Italian. In literary studies we call it also intertextuality, that's why it's very interesting what you say, namely that you think of your work in terms of layers, mostly musical layers and thus you are building on already existing layers in Shakespeare's texts. Is that why, perhaps, Shakespeare's texts appeal to you?

GB: Perhaps that's why I find Shakespeare interesting. If we were to treat Shakespeare's text linearly then – and of course I'm not an academic and I don't know the intertextual research or its context that you mentioned – but you can feel it. You can feel it in a very fundamental way, which I would call universality. Universality appears when every culture can identify with it and that means an exceptional eclecticism of the form. Exceptional. Despite the logical nature of the form we can see that the Japanese are very comfortable with Shakespeare, and the Chinese, and the Koreans, and the Americans. Everyone can identify with it because it is eclectic. Just as in the sounds of Scottish music, which I have recently been exploring, if they are separated into contexts and influences it turns out that it is comprised of all kinds of European music.

AS: I wanted to turn the focus of our conversation to your Shakespearean adaptations. You've put an immense amount of work in the last eight years into Shakespeare. First, there was *Macbeth: Work in*

⁵ Eleazar Mieleciński, *Poetyka mitu [Poetic of Myth]*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1981.

Progress for the Royal Shakespeare Company. How did that come about? What was it like working in Stratford-upon-Avon?

GB: In October 2004, we were invited to the 40th anniversary of the Odin theatre, in Århus in Denmark, to perform *Kroniki (Chronicles)*, and fragments of *Lacrimosa* which we were working on at the time. Deborah Shaw was invited to the same event, at the time, one of the associate directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company. She saw our work and just came up to me and said she was working on a festival called ‘the Complete Works of Shakespeare’ taking place from 2006 to 2007. She said she wanted to invite thirty six productions and she wanted the majority of Shakespeare’s works to be staged by theatre practitioners from all around the world including such renowned directors as Luc Perceval and Yukio Ninagawa. It was a very controversial event for British academic circles and for British universities but also for the RSC audiences, who want to see the latest interpretation of Shakespeare’s ‘text.’ I was very happy because it was a major challenge for us and a very risky undertaking because we have not been adapting the classics, but it was possible thanks to the RSC who funded the development of that production for us.

AS: How did you proceed with the production of *Macbeth*? Were you involved with the artistic team from the RSC?

GB: No. We worked as artists in residence but we didn’t work with their musicians or actors. It was a very difficult project and I experienced at first hand all the pitfalls of working with text. I approached *Macbeth* three times. I had to change the cast three times, I changed the musical material three times, and I couldn’t finish the production. There were so many barriers in the dynamics of our group and the text in itself. I had a similar experience with a different text, not by Shakespeare, which completely destroyed the stability of my team, namely *The Crucible* by Henry Miller. It is such a major text, so grounded in facts, that after three months of rehearsals my colleagues asked me if we could suspend rehearsals for several years.

Going back to *Macbeth*. When I start work on a Shakespeare text I approach it in a way that people who study theatre don’t understand: I’m not interested in the meaning of the text or what it sounds like. I’m interested in the musicality of the text because I think that Shakespeare was exceptional in how musically he approached the written word. And that’s what interests me. At the same time, as a great lover of the music of Bach and Mozart, I understand that music which is the non-verbal expression of something, can take you on an emotional journey from the first sound and does not let go until the very end. It takes you through a sort of internal, energetic, emotional experience.

When I read Shakespeare, the words are on the surface somewhere, and beneath that there is a melting pot of emotions. What I experience is not the textual layer but that emotional melting pot. One of the people who really inspired me to stage *Macbeth* was a friend who was a genuine witch and shaman

who, when she heard that I was working on *Macbeth*, asked me if I knew what the source of the cauldron scene is in *Macbeth*. I replied that I didn't know, that I was treating it as a text. She said that her grandmother was one of the most powerful shamans in Scotland and that the cauldron is not a fantasy but was used by real witches, who assembled the energy attributes of different areas of nature such as an acorn from an oak tree, which signifies the oak. So they were collecting the symbols of an area of natural energy and, then, they were turning it into a mixture. Of course in those days knowledge of herbal mixtures was vast, much greater than today. What was the purpose of the cauldron, then? They were used to create a type of narcotic substance and if a man or woman wanted to know their future they were brought to a meeting with a cauldron, they would inhale the vapours from the brew and fall asleep. And in their dreams they saw their future.

Macbeth was exactly that type of scenario, where Macbeth dreams his own future. In my production Macbeth was put to sleep by the witches and dreams his future up to the very end. The question for the audience is: what will happen if he chooses the path of murder and betrayal. In my production, at the end, Lady Macbeth is still alive and she drags the body of the fallen Macbeth because it is a dream. In looking at that play I also understood that everything in it takes place at night. Darkness is the dominant tone. Darkness is a normal symbol of the night which confirmed to me that it all happens at night and it is all a dream.

Of course when you approach *Macbeth* historically then Scottish conflicts, the clans, all that took place. If two warriors were racing to win territory for their kingdoms then their ambition was so great that the rule was whoever's body was first across the line will claim the land. There are stories that a warrior, running and seeing that he is about to lose by a horse's head, would cut off his hand and throw it past the finish line so that he would win. So *Macbeth* also contains this form of monstrous cruelty linked to the battle for the territories of Scotland.

This all greatly interested Deborah Shaw so we went down that route. We first spent a month at the RSC, with, what was a very initial stage of our work. As I mentioned the cast changed three times, because in trying to focus on the music, I had to change it three times. We started with ideas about shamanism, particularly Korean shamanism, Kut or Gut. Then we moved towards Siberian shamanism and I was only able to finish it once Jean Claude Aquaviva came from Corsica and whose polyphony created the right space for me, and this is at this point that the actors held together and we weren't troubled by conflict anymore. It was a very difficult process.

AS: *Macbeth*, like most of Shakespeare's plays, is a play that conflates genres. It is not a tragedy in the ways the Ancient Greek drama is. It does not strive to observe the three unities. Indeed even most tragic plays

possess comedic scenes. You took out all of the comedic elements but I also feel that your production was more of a tragedy because it strives for the unity of time and space, and thus you drew the Ancient tragedy out of *Macbeth* removing all the Elizabethan experimentation.

GB: Yes.

AS: Was it a conscious decision?

GB: Yes, very conscious. Especially, when you work like we do, when the rehearsal is a form of “energy process.” During a rehearsal, my actors show me a certain process that they are going through. What I call a process is a type of energetic continuity: something develops, deepens, opens up and finally explodes or frees itself. In that process doing things like the scene with the Porter or the scene with the King disrupts that energy. I think Shakespeare had the ability to communicate to different energetic areas within us. He disrupts the process and induces information. I wanted to return to a theatre where there is a process where *Macbeth* is a form of ritual but it is not purely about the induction of information. That’s a characteristic of my theatre – I’m not interested in the induction of information but in the energetic experience of the viewer. That’s my main focus.

AS: Do you make your own additions to Shakespeare’s text or do you adapt it by cutting it, moving, removing scenes etc as is the usual practice? For example, in post-dramatic theatre⁶ there is a trend of rewriting Shakespeare’s text, often by mixing it with other classical or modern texts. In a nutshell, what’s your approach to Shakespeare’s text?

GB: First of all, the trend you mentioned does not affect only Shakespeare. It is to do with contemporary drama and contemporary work on drama. It is done with everything, it’s done with Chekhov, it’s done with Strindberg, it’s done with everyone. Today’s reality is that direction or adaptation completely rejects faithfulness to the text. I think this is something that the British audience will eventually have to deal with. It is not possible today to write Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, or to adapt it for the stage. It isn’t possible, we don’t write like that today. We don’t write descriptions of nature, we don’t write gigantic scenes, for some reason we just don’t do that anymore. This is the age of ‘internet structures’: on Facebook, communication is in short, single sentences, more relevant. I also think that our minds work differently in the theatre. Towards the end of the nineteenth century in Poland there was no talk of the theatre ‘spectators’ but rather an ‘audience.’ There were no viewers, just listeners. We went to the theatre to listen to a performed text. The staging itself had less relevance. Only later Konstantin Stanislavski and others started to

⁶ Post-dramatic practices have been explained by Hans Thies Lehmann in his *Post-dramatic Theatre* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006). In Poland and elsewhere in Europe, especially in Germany and Belgium, post-dramatic practices entered Shakespearean adaptation, visible in the work of Ivo van Hove or Thomas Ostermeier, for example.

introduce staging at the start of the 20th century. Cinema appeared soon afterwards, montage, Sergei Eisenstein. This brought profound changes to theatre. Cinematic montage started to influence theatrical montage. Eisenstein’s ‘montage of attraction’ influenced the likes of Vsevolod Meyerhold in theatre. I think that that expression ‘montage of attraction’ is dominant in theatre today too.

I would go further. In my theatrical work I am not so much interested in adding to the text, because I’m not sure how to do it, but I am interested in showing the process of building a performance during the performance. So I’m interested in self-reference, something that isn’t done very much. For example we’re now working on ‘Return to the Voice’ based on Scottish music which has nothing to do with text. *Macbeth* was different. *Macbeth* had very few improvised elements. *Macbeth* was strictly defined and it represented the structure of the ‘montage of attraction.’ But for instance in *Songs of Lear* I decided to delve into something that always troubled me a lot when I see a perfect American film with perfect actors, with a structure and story line, filmed and framed that we are not aware we are watching a film because it is done that well. Then some days later you read an interview with a director who reveals that actors were in conflict during filming, that they hate each other, that the bounds of reason and manners have been breached to such an extent that it’s impossible for them even to meet face to face. I don’t believe in images in which hatred does not penetrate through the frame. That’s what interests me, because we can make hatred palpable in our theatre.

So I don’t add text to Shakespeare but I try to include what goes on between us in the ensemble into the drama, while we’re working on it, when we’re not working on it, when it’s going well, when it’s not going so well. So the structure of *Macbeth* was a structure strongly permeated by our three failed approaches to the play. And the ultimate content was not only a return to the ancient Greek form of dramaturgy but the dramaturgy of my ensemble. What was most interesting was for the dramaturgy of the ensemble to permeate the performance. Then, when we were preparing to perform and people were coming in, they would already be experiencing the play. This was the case of the performance in Sopot,⁷ when we were staging the production, people who came into the auditorium would stiffen because there was something already in the air, but they didn’t know what. It was the energetic structure between the people in my ensemble, the things that went on, the conflicts, the tensions, who hated who and why and all of that went into the play.

So it wasn’t about adding to the play. Sometimes it was about reducing that text to a minimum but not changing it, and most of all, it was about adding the past of the team that was creating it.

⁷ Bral is referring to the performance of their *Macbeth* in 2012 at the International Shakespeare Festival in Gdansk, Poland.

AS: Can you tell me a bit more about how you create Shakespeare in rehearsals? Do you see a difference between working on the classics and other texts? Do you select actors differently? How does your international ensemble approach interpretation of English text?

GB: I don't choose actors for roles. I choose people for the ensemble. That's the first thing. I don't do casting according to some affiliation or whether they fit the part or not. I think that what I do, and what fascinates me most in Shakespeare, is realising that during training and while working on a text, Shakespeare has to be spoken without interpretation because he interprets himself. What do I mean by interpretation? For me interpretation is tensing some muscle groups to achieve the effect desired by the text. Interpretation is something that is clearly observed in Indian theatre, in Kathakali, where an awareness of which muscle groups accompany a given emotion is so advanced that it has evolved into technique. If my face has this expression then that means one thing, if it has this expression then it means another. So when an actor begins to speak the text it is through a photographic way, to signal which emotion we are talking about.

Every time I saw Shakespeare that had additions and interpretation, forcibly transformed, freed from his own rhythm, and supplemented with internet ideas, each time I felt like throwing up. Shakespeare sounds best when he is not interpreted, when he is spoken with an exceptional innocence and openness. For me Shakespeare's text is a text spoken by a shaman or witch, someone who is aware that it is a form of conjuration. I'm interested in Shakespeare in the sense that he is a conjuror. That he is a guy who could contain a form of energy in the word so that you don't really need to do anything, as long as you don't get in its way. Shakespeare's characters are more intelligent than any actor who I have known. It is also interesting that actors or directors think that they can be more intelligent than Shakespeare. Excuse this banality. It's not that he's the world's greatest poet and playwright, it's not that others can be more intelligent than him, it's just not possible, he's like Mozart or Bach. There are no more intelligent composers. The more I see an actor relax and allow the text to flow through him the stronger the text becomes. The more you resist interpreting, but instead allow what is said to be felt, it is then as if you are dealing with living people. It is as if you were working with living characters. Shakespeare has so much charisma in his words as if you were dealing with living characters so it requires great modesty to speak the text of Iago or Othello in a way that does not deform it.

Janusz Majcherek, a leading specialist in Polish drama said that the genius of drama is that it can be interpreted in thousands of ways and you will not exhaust the possible interpretations. That's also the definition of a genuine work of art, that its interpretations cannot be exhausted. So that the more it is allowed to speak for itself, the more you can capture the nature of the vibration

which the text carries. For me, Shakespeare is a vibration and the best tool to capture and transmit that vibration is music.

AS: Talking of the universality of the great works of art, and Shakespeare, perhaps unfortunately, the concept of universality is often equated with globalisation. Globalisation is considered a detrimental process and an empty pejorative term. If we’re talking about ‘Global Shakespeares’ we, as academics, are dealing with the problem of globalisation as such an empty signifier. If something is universal it may mean it does not say anything unique but offers only generalised ideas. We try to look more at the local processes now, and especially the clash of the global and the local in ‘Global Shakespeares.’ In your performances this can be seen very clearly because you use other cultures in your Shakespearean adaptations. The most important questions academics ask, in this context, is whether performances that use other cultures do it to highlight differences or blend them all together arriving at generalised cultural views. In the past, especially, post-colonial scholars such as Rustom Bharucha, but also theatre scholars such as Marvin Carlson, have expressed their doubts about genuineness of intercultural performances. It is a very old accusation, which was levelled at Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine, which claims that they, as representatives of Western culture, appropriate other cultures by using them in their performances without showing the authentic culture. How would you respond to that accusation?

GB: Can you formulate the accusation again?

AS: The accusation is that intercultural Shakespeare trend, which you are a part of, is seen by postcolonial academics as an appropriating act because Western culture likes to use elements of other cultures but do so out of context, as an aesthetic, shunning cultural authenticity.

GB: By way of an answer I wanted to ask where there is post-colonialism in Poland?

AS: Maybe there isn’t in Poland, but you are an international ensemble working on Western classics and perform for Anglophone audiences, often in English?

GB: Yes, but the productions are created in Poland with a Polish approach to culture and tradition and not a British one. Of course I understand this British complex which is, at the same time, the strength of Britishness and its weakness.

A few days ago, in Edinburgh, I talked to a British woman who wanted to create a project with Australian Aboriginals and she was constantly coming up against the problem that she felt like an imperialist raider. I fully understand it but it’s something completely alien to me. I think that in Anglo-Saxon culture the interculturality of projects is the result of complexes and phobias and comes from a desire for restitution for certain oppressions which that culture imposed

for centuries. In Poland I don't have that problem. In Poland I would tour the villages with Gardzienice theatre learning local melodies. I would go to Ukraine and in the Carpathians we would learn Hutsuls' songs⁸ and even if we use them for our performances it does not have anything to do with post-imperialism or post-colonialism. That way of thinking is completely foreign to me. Every accusation from anyone that I practice that kind of multiculturalism because of post-colonial complexes is nonsense because in Central European countries there is no such thing as post-colonialism because we never colonised anybody. We were subject to colonisation ourselves but that's a different story.

That's one thing. But there is a more important aspect of our work connected to this. Traditional culture is a very coherent structure. The spectacle in traditional culture is not created for show or to resolve anyone's complexes, it is in a sense an organic product which belongs to an entire ecosystem, the genetics of an entire system. In rural areas people do not sing music as a source of income, to show off or to put on a show. Singing has a completely different purpose. Of course Western European culture uses traditional materials, whether it be dance or music, to make money; not to cultivate that tradition. In Poland, if you're creating theatre based on traditional culture it is to support that culture, to propagate it and theatre becomes the continuation of traditional culture. In pre-war Poland there were 10,000 amateur theatres in villages and small towns which were theatres but they were rooted in folk traditions. It was natural. In Western Europe, where multiculturalism is exploited something else is done: it is another niche which can be exploited for profit. Europe is an organism whose basic priority is innovation. All the grant applications that we have to write must contain innovation, tolerance, acceptance etc. It is a problem in the whole of Europe.

But there is another more serious problem in Europe. Europe has fallen asleep in its dynamic. For many years Europe was very dynamic in economic terms and now it has entered a time of satiation and comfort and this will soon end very badly. Cultures which are starved, such as Russia, China or Arabic Countries, have a thirst for power, and they will invade the home of this sleeping Europe. Europe is asleep. Europe has allowed itself a form of luxury, the luxury of mixing multicultural projects. It is a luxury which does not care about those cultures. Nobody cares about those cultures. But there is something else, which has come to my attention through my Brave Festival.⁹ I get the same accusations levelled at my Brave festival that I exploit traditional cultures. No. I do not

⁸ To learn more about Hutsul music, see, for example, *"Because It's Ours": Constructing Identity in the Ukrainian Diaspora Through Hutsul Music and Dance* by Daria Lassowsky Nebesh (Baltimore: University of Maryland Baltimore County, 1998).

⁹ Brave Festival has been organised by Song of the Goat in Wrocław since 2005. See the festival website for further details <http://2013.bravefestival.pl/#pages/idea> accessed 15 March 2014.

exploit them for one basic reason. I want traditional cultures to learn to survive. If they do not become the ambassadors of their own survival then they will simply be robbed of that by everyone else. If I have someone like Sona Jobarteh¹⁰ at my festival who comes from Griot from Africa and lives in London; if I have at the festival someone like Houria *Aïchi* who comes from Algeria who studied traditional music throughout her youth – they all come to Europe and say ‘we’re bringing you this,’ which becomes a different multicultural project because she brings her culture to me and in this way we can meet as partners.

But if I travel and use music from other regions and spend years behaving like a pirate, stealing arranging and performing that music then we’re dealing with a post-colonialism. Although it’s not taking place with the help of machine guns and swords, it’s happening with the aid of arts funding, cloaked in white gloves. But I wanted to emphasise once again that in Poland we do not have a problem with post-colonialism. I don’t work with traditional culture in order to exploit it but because it energises me with its unity. Traditional culture has a unity. A ritual is performed in a traditional culture because it is necessary and it is linked to all other aspects of daily life.

I want to create a theatre where, in my productions there is not only drama but also the energy of all my people, a kind of self-reference. I am learning how to do this from traditional culture without exploiting it, and not trying to dictate how it should change, because I don’t think that culture should change.

AS: I think that it’s interesting why English audiences, the academics and theatre critics such as Michael Billington, and particularly Emily Linnemann, a Shakespearean scholar, who wrote recently about your *Macbeth* in *Shakespeare Survey*,¹¹ very firmly place you in ‘intercultural theatre’ category. Linnemann says that what *Song of the Goat* does is a form of ‘utopian primitivism’, namely that you do a primitive reading of the other and otherness. I wonder if her interpretation of *Macbeth* isn’t linked to the fact that you use interculturalism in Shakespeare and you do it in English, so naturally the reception of an English speaking audience will be caged in more traditional thought about performances of this type.

GB: I think that if a group of British actors were to come to Poland to perform *Dziady (Forefathers)*, I would have the same feelings of primitivism, superficiality. I would also think they were pretending to speak Polish when they didn’t know the language well. I think I would have the same feelings and

¹⁰ *Sona Jobarteh* is the first female Kora virtuoso to come from a West African Griot family.

¹¹ Emily Linnemann ‘Shakespeare as Cultural Intercultural Catalyst’ in *Shakespeare Survey*, ed. by Peter Holland, Vol. 64, 2011, pp. 13-24.

I agree completely with these opinions. My work isn't a staging of Shakespeare for a British audience. It is just one of our theatre's quests for inspiration. Here Shakespeare is our inspiration and we don't pretend to do a canonical staging of Shakespeare. So I can only agree with Michael Billington's criticism. I don't aspire to show how Shakespeare should look. I think that, in the same way that British directors approach Chekhov, or British drama schools claim to teach Stanislavsky without knowing everything about Stanislavsky. It's the same problem. In British drama schools the fundamental method is either Michael Chekhov or Konstantin Stanislavsky and of course if you talk to any Russian director brought up on Stanislavsky, then it quickly turns out that the British do not have Russian understanding of Stanislavsky, it is a British version of Stanislavsky. And this is Bral's version of Shakespeare. We all have the right to reach for inspiration.

AS: I wasn't thinking so much of your relation to the canon as the ascription of interculturalism, a Western type of interculturalism, thoughtlessly borrowing.

GB: I think that Peter Brook is a director and I think that he is also a painter. If a painter is faced with a landscape and paints that landscape is that a bad thing? Is he that landscape? Does he have the right to do it? These are completely nonsensical criticisms from my point of view.

AS: I think that avant-garde theatre has its own language which cannot and should not be easily classified but because of the methodological responsibility and the desire to create categories, the academic approach involves looking for distinct terminology such as interculturalism, post-colonialism and other paradigms. Personally I'm not sure if that works in the case of avant-garde productions. It definitely didn't work in the case of The Wooster Group who staged recently *Troilus and Cressida* (2012) and they were brutally criticised for parodying Native American Indians. Many theatre critics were convinced that Elizabeth LeCompte is ridiculing American culture. I viewed that performance differently because I know that The Wooster Group make avant-garde theatre and their performance, first and foremost, is about an artistic approach to staging Shakespeare. It was done, perhaps, 'art for art's sake,' but this is one of the functions of theatre too, not just the recreation of a text. When I was thinking about this interview I was thinking about the notion of 'languages of the avant-garde.' What do you think of that? Do we, academics, have the right to mould avant-garde theatre into recognizable academic categories or should we live you in peace?

GB: No, I think you have that right. It's the same right as that of academics who say that the Polish language is changing, and that it should not be changing, because it is losing its purity, it is losing its poetry, it is losing its

colour; neologisms and borrowed terms are starting to appear etc. The role of academics is to take charge of how things should be. But academics always lose this battle, and they also have to lose their battle against avant-garde theatre, because this theatre will develop in its own way. Nobody is going to listen to what a professor has to say about how to do theatre because if they did, we would be in a completely absurd situation. As I understand it the role of academics is to show the wider context, create taxonomies, verification, teaching, it's a role that I really understand but that role is not capable of holding anything back. That's one thing.

The other thing is that, for me, academics have lost touch with reality. I've studied at five different universities and the reason that I quit was that there was an insurmountable chasm between the theoretical examination of problems and the possibility of experiencing them. Most academics don't realise that if I use Albanian songs in my production *Kroniki* I will actually travel to an Albanian village, sing those songs to those people, and ask them if it's alright for me to use those songs. These people are proud. But, then, when I send them a video recording of their songs then they're proud even more and they say 'look how far our tradition has travelled, all the way to the Barbican and the Edinburgh Festival.' This is an aspect that doesn't tend to get any mention. So that we are not concerned with whether or not we maintain a strict verity but with being honest in the way I practice my avant-garde practice. I pay a kind of homage to people, asking them for permission to use songs.

Furthermore, for example, *Macbeth* has not used traditional music. This has to be said and I don't think that any academics have mentioned it. It is composed music. My adaptation of *King Lear* comprises contemporary, composed music that had nothing to do with any ethnic traditions either, nothing to do with any villages. The last production in which I used traditional music was *Kroniki* in which I used Albanian music. *Lacrimosa* was based on Mozart's *Requiem*, *Macbeth* was based on songs composed by a contemporary Corsican composer within a specific cultural musical canon, but that's about it. Of course I can be filed under ethnic or utopian primitivism and that means absolutely nothing to me because it won't put an end to my theatrical explorations. What does it give academics? That is something I don't understand. I have no idea what is the point of these categories. It means that there is someone who is better and someone who is worse. It means that someone sets the norm. So tell me, who sets the norm? Who has set the norm for performing Shakespeare? Nobody, because there are no such directors. Does the Royal Shakespeare Company set the norm? Only when they preserve the entire text. Whether a performance is good or bad, that is of no importance to anyone. The text is preserved. If these are categories then we are living in a deep confusion because I'm just avant-garde, I'm looking for something else, I'm a free, utopian living person and in

that sense I've learned not to rob people of their material or immaterial possessions but to compose music, in the same vein, to cultivate a certain theatrical form, the musical drama, without robbing anyone, without interculturalism but using contemporary composers. I have three composers. One is British, he wrote a number of compositions for me for *The Cherry Orchard*. One is Polish, he wrote an 'imitation' of Coptic music. The third is from Corsica. In the canon of Gregorian chant he writes polyphonic music for my productions.¹²

AS: Tell me about your meetings with the British public. How have the people you've met and spoken to felt about your Shakespeare productions in England?

GB: I think that with *Macbeth*, the audience was really rather divided because *Macbeth* was an attempt at using the text, and this wasn't entirely successful because we didn't get the music so perfect that it felt tonally just right. On the other hand, it was a departure from how a Shakespeare text is interpreted. It was a production that remained in its exploratory phase and one that, speaking personally, really exhausted me. We stopped performing it around two years ago because it just tired me out. But opinion was very divided. What was interesting was that among those who accepted the production I found many students, people who want to learn about how we work. For me this is the most interesting part. I haven't really had any contact with those that didn't like it. I think I just don't like the sort of work they like. In Wroclaw it's the same thing. When we perform our work we have our own audience. In Poland, if you clearly define what kind of theatre you're doing then you develop your own audience, and besides there is no such thing as a theatre for everyone. There is no such thing as a book for everyone or a painting for everyone. No such thing exists. There is no criterion that would define something as being good for everyone. There is nobody who has only friends and no enemies. So I make theatre for a certain group of people who, perhaps, share my way of looking at the world and thinking about the world.

With *Songs of Lear* it's been different. In Great Britain we only performed *Songs of Lear* in Edinburgh and in our fourteen performances we had fourteen standing ovations, which is a rare event for Great Britain. Of course Edinburgh is in Scotland but it was an incredible experience. There I didn't hear any criticisms of the way we handled Shakespeare because the form was so clear that nobody could be said to be pretending to be doing Shakespeare. Shakespeare was only the inspiration. It wasn't an attempt at staging *King Lear*. Shakespeare's play was just the initial landscape and that was it, which I think is why it got a good reception because we didn't pretend that we were doing

¹² Bral refers here to Guy Pearson, Maciej Rychly and Jean-Claude Acquaviva.

Shakespeare but we said *King Lear* is the fertiliser of this production, this is not a staging of *King Lear*. I think that when I work Shakespeare next, probably on the Sonnets or *Othello*, it will be the same, a sort of fertilisation and not an attempt to stage Shakespeare. Because I’m not really an expert on this. I know that there are people who are experts in this and they can speak Shakespeare beautifully, but that’s not something I know how to do.

AS: Thank you very much for the interview.

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PRODUCTION IMAGES



Song of the Goat, *Macbeth*, 2012, International Shakespeare Festival in Gdansk
(Greg Veit Photography)



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(Greg Veit Photography)



Song of the Goat, *Macbeth*, 2012, International Shakespeare Festival in Gdansk (Greg Veit Photography). In red shirt Gabriel Gavin as Macbeth