European Stages The Tempest: A Magical Ballet Where East Meets West

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The following is the review of a ballet in two acts based on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* by the Dutch National Ballet.

**World Premiere Choreography:** Krzysztof Pastor

**Video:** Shirin Neshat in collaboration with Shoja Azari

**Dramaturgy:** Willem Bruls

**Music:** Henry Purcell, Thomas Tallis, Robert Johnson, Matthew Locke and Michel van der Aa along with the use of traditional Iranian music

**At the Daf:** Abbas Bakhtiari

**World Premiere:** 18 June 2014, the Dutch National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

**Polish Premiere:** 9 April 2016, Teatr Wielki – the Polish National Opera
The Tempest is a collaboration between Krzysztof Pastor and Shirin Neshat. Freely inspired by William Shakespeare’s The Tempest, Pastor, resident choreographer from Poland with its Eastern bloc history, works with the exiled artist from Iran, Shirin Neshat, who is known for her works in visual arts. This magical ballet has a very sturdy emotional affect because each artist has an exclusively distinctive background despite having ended up thriving in the Western culture. It is truly a case of the East meeting the West in spiritual empathy.

**Act I**

Prologue

Old Prospero was on the magical island, thinking about matters that occurred in his life. He once was the Duke of Milan, but along with his daughter Miranda, he was expelled to an island by his rivals. When they arrived, they met Sycorax, an aborigine and her son Caliban, as well as some indigenous beings already living there.

Scene 1

A magical spirit, Ariel, conjures up a storm and Prospero begins reminiscing. He remembers his arrival on the island with a similar storm after a shipwreck. Conveyed by the waves, the young Prospero was tossed on to the shore with Miranda, and was eventually revived by Ariel and Caliban. After landing on the island, Prospero instantly claimed it with the helpful guide of Ariel. Miranda and Caliban became more and more acquainted with each other, in spite of Prospero’s fervent restrictions. Eventually, the young Caliban and Miranda come across as attracted to each other, which significantly irritates Prospero. Subsequently, Miranda is torn between the two men in her life - his father and Caliban - and amid such emotional turmoil, her lover Caliban feels rejected and despairs of losing control over his native island.

Scene 2

For the second time, Prospero brings out a tempest to reestablish his memories. After a few years, another wreck conveys his two rivals Stephano and Trinculo to the island together with Ferdinand, a young ruler from Naples. Ariel, once again, rescues another man who turns out to be none other than Ferdinand. Ferdinand feels miserable because he has lost everything in the tempest. Ariel, however, tries to reassure him. At this point, old Prospero and Miranda discover Ferdinand on the shore, and the young woman is touched by the disastrous fate of the ruler. Unwittingly, Miranda is currently entrapped in the midst of her father, who is torn between releasing her and not, and Ferdinand, who might, in any case, be a more reasonable accomplice for her. The closer Ferdinand and Miranda get to each other, the more resentful Prospero becomes and in the end, even Ariel is unable to quiet him down. Now, more than ever, Prospero’s memories turn out to be meaningfully energetic and prescient for the old man.

**Act II**

Scene 3

Old Prospero evokes a tempest to restore his recollections once more with the help of his magical friend Ariel. He recalls that the same wreck that conveyed Ferdinand to the island also brought his bitter
adversaries Stephano and Trinculo. They were found by Caliban on the shore, and though at first, they both feared Caliban, whom they considered to be an aborigine, steadily they defeated their apprehension to the point of attempting to pound him. Eventually, after an attempt on the duo’s part to edify Caliban and his adherents fizzes out, Caliban realizes that he could utilize these men for his plan against Prospero. Stephano and Trinculo, coordinated by Caliban and with the assistance of his followers, assault their old enemy Prospero. Yet, with his enchantment, Ariel solidifies everybody on the spot to protect Prospero. Despite the fact that Prospero wishes to rebuff and even execute Caliban, Ariel persuades him not to enjoy revenge.

Scene 4

In a last endeavor to resuscitate his memory, old Prospero evokes another tempest. He visualizes Miranda and Ferdinand in their endeavor to lift a major tree, a hindrance he had once installed to keep them separated. Nevertheless, with their impressive attempt, the two figure out how to lift the tree and overthrow Prospero's control over their lives.

Epilogue

Old Prospero faces his past completely and meets his rivals. In a last compromise, Prospero, Miranda, Stephano, Trinculo and Ferdinand agree to reconcile. Yet, by completely acknowledging what has happened during his lifetime, Prospero now comprehends that he has lost his most valuable belongings which were his youth, his daughter and his confidence. Furthermore, he understands how unjust he was with Caliban and thus, he ends up surrendering everything.

Pastor and Neshat Collaboration

One of Shakespeare's most unpredictable works is The Tempest - it has numerous layers and also supports a wide range of interpretations. In this manner, it is an unlimited wellspring of motivation, as well as a major test for choreographers. Pastor, as the choreographer of this ballet, utilizes subjects and characters from the play, while concentrating, for the most part, on displaying the enchantment that is left implicit in the text: “It has no unequivocal consummation, or conclusion,” he accepts. “Maybe Shakespeare intentionally left a ton for us to decipher for ourselves. In this sense, the play is exceptionally contemporary, it does not limit the audience to passive participation – it requires involvement, it is an intellectual challenge1.”

The Tempest is one of Shakespeare’s most complex works. It is difficult to encapsulate the story in one sentence, as it has such a variety of meanings. “On a political level – as one theme is the loss of power. From an emotional point of view – as Prospero has a lot to cope with emotionally. In the contrast between reason and instinct – portrayed by Ariel and Caliban, respectively. And on a sexual level – in view of the erotic tension created when one woman lives on an island with several men2.”

Pastor’s creation is not an exact representation of Shakespeare's unique play. The title alludes to a tempest brought on by Prospero - the usurped duke of Milan - who was exiled to an island by his sibling Antonio, and Alonso, the ruler of Naples. He utilizes the tempest to get revenge on them. But, over the course of the twelve years he spends on the island with his daughter Miranda, the spirit Ariel and the aborigine Caliban, he undergoes an internal transformation that eventually makes him more astute and
Pastor evokes the topics of forgiveness, force, and especially, the path toward maturity in his production. These themes are shown in all four storms. The ballet opens with a wonderful poetic scene that demonstrates the old Prospero (Abbas Bakhtiari) gazing into the distance on an island that is almost deserted. The stage design comprises of a tree that matures over the span of the performance, which is complemented by video projections of the ocean (Neshat’s visual arts) in the background. Aided by the faint light design as well as the charming music of Tomas Tallis, the audience experiences a mystical and melancholic representation of the well-known text.

The old Prospero is glancing back toward his life, and the audience is participating in the ballet by going through Prospero’s memories. He shows each storm by playing the Persian daf (drum), which creates rhythmic sounds that harmonize in tandem with the corporal movements of the ballerinas. Like the waves of the ocean, the dancers twirl their long skirts this way and that as they try to hold on to the figures of a young Prospero and his daughter. Next, Caliban comes and greets the two strangers. During this moment, the choreographer chose to symbolize the predominance of instinct and desire instead of base primitivity in the character of the young native. Nevertheless, Prospero tries to assert his supremacy by pushing Caliban out of a significantly marked red circle on the stage. One can easily detect themes of power and colonialism in this moment. They arise once again with the arrival of Prospero’s rivals arrive on the island. Caliban greets the men who seem to be completely lost. But in spite of that, their unfolding gestures suggest the implicit inferiority of Caliban’s position with regard to the two newcomers. Nevertheless, Caliban succeeds in exploiting the two by setting them up against Prospero in a bid to regain control over his island.

Romance and ageing, as reflected on by Miranda, are the two most interesting subjects presented during this performance. The pas de deux danced by Miranda and Caliban is energetic and full of fun. Though Prospero, at first, has trouble believing that his beloved daughter is attracted to Caliban, her second romance with Ferdinand makes him realize that his daughter is growing up, and he himself is getting older and may be even wiser. And all the while, Ariel, who is a mysterious cross between a spirit and a human, strives to maintain peace on the isolated island.

Dark seascapes and undulating oceanic flora are a few of the wonderful projections executed by Shirin Neshat and his partner Shoja Azari. All the magical moments during the ballet occur with minimal decor inside a shining red circle where a single, large tree sways gracefully. In a violently rendered dance, young Prospero tries to keep Caliban and the other aborigines outside the circle, thereby endowing it with the symbolism of white colonialism. The costumes are minimalistic yet imaginative and colorful comprising mostly of long trouser skirts and loose shirts for the men and a bronze dress for Miranda. Ariel wears a bronze and golden pair of long trousers with feathers adorning his neck and head. The Chorus comprises of two groups of men in blue and red skirts who represent either Ariel’s followers trying to conjure a storm, or Caliban’s islanders who want to get Prospero out of their land. We can also observe the theme of colonialism from the eyes of the islanders, whom Neshat projects on the beach or in the water in black robes.
The music score is characterized mostly by various Renaissance, contemporary and folk flavors along with some unremarkable display on the daf (Iranian drum) by Abbas Bakhtiari, who plays the old Prospero. The daf demands physical involvement and he uses this instrument as a theatrical element, thereby turning it into another personage who somehow resembles a narrator by heralding the beginning of each new tempest. Bakhtiari’s presence forms the connection amongst all the four scenes. Shaking and beating on to his daf to make an amazingly resonant sound, he opens each of the four parts before presiding over the vast majority of the action as a shadowy presence.

Instead of presenting a linear narration, Pastor structures the ballet by starting every section with a tempest engineered by the old Prospero. In each section, ballerinas rise from the water in the forms of Miranda and a young Prospero, followed by Ferdinand, Stephano and Trinculo. And each time these characters encounter Ariel and Caliban.

The Tempest ballet utilizes different themes derived from the Shakespearean text, including the colonial angle. Pastor omits most characters and many of the castaways leaving just Trinculo, Ferdinand and Stephano. In the opening scene, all is peaceful till the music changes and the short-lived peace is replaced by myriad disturbing images like the seascape, an eye in close up, and a woman leaning against a big tree. Prospero’s revenge, another political element in the play, is reduced to emphasize the challenges he faces against Caliban, Trinculo and Stephano. Most consideration was given to the emotional clashes between Prospero and Miranda. For Prospero, controlling his jealousy toward Miranda’s lovers was often too hard as a result of which Ariel had to calm him down. Toward the end of the narrative, Prospero understands that his daughter’s marriage implied that he should plan for death. It is indeed difficult to implement all these themes in the production, yet Pastor and his group tried to display an organized creation that is rich both in choreography and content. Shirin Neshat’s video projections prove to be instrumental in providing the different atmospheric requirements for The Tempest. Together with creative costumes, minimal stage design, and impeccably professional dancers, The Tempest of Dutch National Ballet is, no doubt, a special production- one which captivates audiences by presenting a multicultural ballet where the East meets the West.

Sepideh Shokri Poori is a Ph.D. candidate in Theatre Studies and Performing Arts at Laval University (Quebec, Canada). Since January, 2015, she has been preparing her thesis under the guidance of Dr. Liviu Dospinescu, Associate Professor at Laval University. Her dissertation is titled as “Iranian Theatre as Means of Intervention in Post-Revolutionary Years.” She has published critical articles in the field (“Elsewhere Theatre: Dialogue of Exiles”) and translated theoretical books and plays, including Reading Theatre by Anne Ubersfeld (2012), S/Z by Roland Barthes and Situation Vacant by Michel Vinaver. Shokri Poori has artistic experience (director and author) which is often inspired by her research interests.
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