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"Smart Harlequin" in the Avant-garde and Modern Ukrainian Theatre

«Розумний арлекін» в авангардному і сучасному українському театрі

Abstract. The author is focusing on the term "Smart Harlequin" introduced by outstanding Ukrainian theatre director Les Kurbas. By this term Kurbas defined a new type of intellectual, a super-expressive, easy-going, and psychologically flexible actor capable to cope with tasks facing the art of avant-garde. According to Kurbas, only an educated actor-intellectual could be a full-fledged participant to the theatre art and social processes. An active creator of spectacles, Smart Harlequin would transform on stage to become a primary carrier of the intellectual principle, as opposed to underlying the emotionality of the scenic environment. Besides, in the avant-garde Smart Harlequin would often assume the function of drama playwright, author of the text.

Forms of the modern theatre—such as new drama, verbatim and devised theatre—normally combine in one person both an author and a performer, whom any actor-intellectual actually is and whose method of scenic existence was foreseen by Les Kurbas. In front of spectators, Smart Harlequin of the 21st century emerges as a researcher inviting the audience to think over problems the theatre selects for social actualisation through play situations. As a rule, that actor-researcher tries to solve the problem in several ways in an improvisational style, while clearly demonstrating his or her attitude to it. Aside from purely artistic tasks, the avant-garde would assign Smart Harlequin with a good many non-artistic ones, such as being an active creator of the new social environment and catalyst of social processes.

Keywords: Smart Harlequin, theatre, avant-garde, social actualization.

Problem statement. A hundred years ago, when the theatre was at the forefront of avant-garde art, a curious question arose about what an actor of the future should be like. Many avant-garde directors sought to answer this question, and among them there were Antonin Artaud, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Erwin Piscator, Alexander Tairov, Evgeny Vakhtangov all of whom would offer their concepts of acting and vision for the artist's capabilities and tasks. It can be safely asserted now that such theoretical concepts and practical solutions in the field of acting are attracting today a good deal of attention, with hundreds of academic and academic-popular works translated into various languages. Their ideas have been introduced into training courses on acting at numerous educational institutions ranging from those located across the post-Soviet territories and up to those in the U.S.

At the same time, some of the original ideas brought forward on the subject by outstanding avant-garde director Les Kurbas are much less studied. His theoretical texts and practical experiments have been deeply analysed by just a handful of Ukrainian scholars, including Natalia Shevchenko [6], Iryna Volytska [2; 3], Natalia Yermakova [4]. In their works dedicated to Les Kurbas, European, American and Canadian researchers have focused on the general aesthetic and political characteristics of the performances as well as the tragic vicissitudes of his life [8; 9]. It so happens that Les Kurbas' fruitful ideas remain grossly overlooked in the every-day theatrical practice, as with rare exceptions they tend to be used primarily by theatre teachers [1; 7]—and even then, any such references to Kurbas often prove to be a formality.

Nevertheless, the processes that take place in the modern Ukrainian theatre, the emergence of performances where actors aim to create stage characters-metaphors rather than just customarily perform assigned roles suggest that Les Kurbas' ideas must still be in demand even outside of their systemic use on stage. In this regard, the need for a scholarly assessment of Kurbas legacy becomes all the more apparent. It would enable researchers to distill the formation within the avant-garde theatre of a special acting doctrine formulated by Kurbas and, by using concrete examples, demonstrate its implementation in the modern theatre.

That is why as early as at the beginning of his career—just when the Young Theatre he had created passed the first year—Les Kurbas was already writing something on the subject of the new actor in his manifesto "Theatrical Letter"

(1918). After desperate reflections on the routine of the theatre, he proclaimed that a perfect new actor should be a "Smart Harlequin", who will not focus on reaching the fair-like type of audience but will "go searching for himself" [5, p. 43].

Presentation of the main research material. The abstract statement on "actor searching for himself" defined one of the key methods in implementing the Kurbas concept of scenic imagery, better known as "transformation". An impetuous, liberated, psychologically-elastic actor became an obligatory component of theatrical transformation, which was based on metaphorically-associative transformation of reality, into a new realm on stage, rather than imitation of forms of life by artistic means. Smart Harlequin must express on stage as fully as possible his life and worldview positions, his own Self independently formulating artistic and social tasks.

However, the making of Smart Harlequin was complicated by many factors, which included the lack of professional training among some members of the troupe in the Young Theatre, as well as a hugely volatile socio-political situation in Ukraine at the time. Accordingly, during the period of 1918–20 Kurbas would resort to an intense search for a ready-made actor-harlequin in the shape of premier or star actresses. He also tries to grow Smart Harlequin in the process of preparing the productions. Therefore, a lot of time was spent on the laboratory work at his theatre: choreographic trainings were conducted under the supervision of Bronislava Nijinska and Mikhail Mordkin, the actors visited museums, participated in artistic discussions, in particular, in the Kyiv bohemian clubs.

Les Kurbas sought to cultivate with members of the Young Theatre a good taste and aesthetic orientations and form an intellectual environment that would enable actors to independently go through the creative "transformation" of reality. Consequently, intellectualism and rationalism of an actor's work, so provoked by the director, became one of the defining moments of the transformation system and distinguished it from other theatrical systems of the early twentieth century.

At the same time, whereas during the Young Theatre period the intellectualism of Smart Harlequin concerned primarily artistic ideas, the following years saw Kurbas-led theatres positioned as active social organisms that respond to modern events. The main principle of the transformation could be found in what was branded as "increased living functionality" and so-called "accentuated influence". The director insists on a socio-formative function of the theatre, its important mission in the life of the society, the very fact that it can reveal, affect and organise certain public moods and aspirations.

This understanding by Les Kurbas of the tasks facing the stage was entirely consistent with the concept of the life-building mission of avant-garde art, something he would go to realise in later years. Therefore, Smart Harlequin is an actor who broadcasts, through an image transformation, his critical vision of the social situation he is immersed into and thus becomes a key figure in the "theatre of accentuated influence".

Quite indicative in this respect are two Kurbas productions of Shakespeare's "Macbeth" in 1920 and 1924. In both cases, thanks to the metaphorical transformation of a Smart Harlequin actor, the audience would register proper associative moments in its imagination, and the essence of the spectacle as a whole would be made clear.

The fact that it was not about the Middle Ages but the present was emphasized by suits that were a mixture of overalls with details of medieval clothes and military uniforms. Macbeth was in a long shirt made of the sack cloth, wearing soldier's trousers, wind-boots and linen helmet. Witches were dressed in grey-blue suits, wide trousers, holding spikes and sporting red bangs. Secondary actors were in working clothes with coloured patches. The witches' suits were electrified producing flashes of light from time to time.

However, Kurbas changed not only the era but also the main character. That character looked similar to Harlequin and was Jester, with light bulbs on his nose, performed by Amvrosii Buchma. Jester played three key interludes. In the first interlude, he was Jester the Gatekeeper, who was doing gymnastic tricks, jumps and making various topical pronouncements from the stage, such as those broadcasting the fact that one actor has shaven and the theatre is given new premises in state-owned public baths, etc. In the second one, which came right after the scenes of numerous assassinations, he was playing a role of Mower-death, which would mow off the rays of light breaking out under his arm movements.

And in the third interlude—the final sarcastic-grotesque stage of the permanent coronation, Jester, after changing just clothes, not his make-up, dressed in the golden tiara and white cape, became a bishop and began to crown all contenders for the throne. Each of those nobles who were present on the stage would take turns to sit on the throne and a warrior standing by it would immediately chop-off their heads. The coronation comedy could last forever.

Jester Smart Harlequin was essentially the only person who not only acted in concrete dramatic situations but was also well aware of the general course of historical events and tried to give this understanding to the public. Having walked through the stage in diagonal, Mower-death "would then approach members of the audience sitting on bleachers in front of him and take a cigarette from them; thus he connected the main plot and the intermedia to reality itself" [8, 101].

Following several expressionist representations of the early 1920s, where the main personality was a self-defeating man-mass, in 1926 Kurbas stages "Golden Guts" by Fernand Crommelynck. Unclear to the Soviet audience, the surrealistic text of this Crommelynck play—which in the end led to its quick removal from the theatre repertoire—had a personal deeply symbolic meaning to Kurbas. First off, the fetishisation of gold by the main character, Pierre-Auguste, was interpreted by the director as the fact that a person becomes a hostage to his own ideas and dreams and eventually dies because of this. Kurbas became such a hostage thanks to his left-wing political views in the mid-1920s. The authorities had forced

him to drift toward propaganda, which he could hardly afford knowing that he would then be condemning himself to artistic death. Secondly, the protagonist Pierre-Auguste was a man with obvious mental disorders, something that, according to his contemporaries, was true for Kurbas himself in those particular years.

The image of the animal-cage society that was surrounding Pierre-Auguste became the main one in the play, so the vast majority of characters, while externally preserving human traits, would degrade in their behaviour to the extent of resembling animals. For this to be depicted, Kurbas encouraged the actors to find characteristic transformations and use cartoon grunge. Some characters had their heads deformed and were making all kinds of strange movements as if they were insane. The Notary resembled a monkey, the Mayor a rabbit, the hairdresser a donkey—and to show that the latter was brainless the actor put on a straw wig on his head, while funny maid under the name of Froumence was a fox. The group of women, village dwellers who are lured to chase Pierre-Auguste's inheritance, resembled noisy hens. The type and nature of the characters were underlined by their coloured wigs, their movements and gestures, and even the intonations were sharp, hyperbolic, and grotesque.

Almost all of the action was taking place at the stage in highly naturalistic settings of a huge room (painter Vadym Meller). The look-alike reality was amplified by the sound landscape: the barking of a dog, the screech of a windmill, the grunting of pigs, the noises coming from a port, the rumble of a thunder storm and so on. However, the sense of reality will be broken by the fact that the naturalistic interior, behind which the Flemish landscape with windmills would emerge, was tucked over by a huge web, the symbol of greed.

The surrealistic impression was also due to the last act containing scenes of shield-like posters being raised all over the place to cause associations with pressing political problems of the day, through such images as a prison or a squadron of war ships. The new owner of this strange estate, Pierre-Auguste, who appears in the final act dressed in a theatrical royal costume and eats the dreamed gold, serves a metaphor alter-ego for Les Kurbas, who had found himself trapped politically and was to die from his own insatiable social dreams.

Attempts to metaphorically reveal, through the Smart Harlequin, the conceptual idea of a play is evident in the works of several contemporary Ukrainian directors. When staging a number of performances, the directors carry out a similarly creative and research work and consistently lead the actors beyond the scope of their traditional role performance. Thus, the whole performance and, as a rule, the central stage character becomes an indicative metaphor for some actual message addressed to the viewer. The social significance of theatrical activity, in this case, increases considerably. In such a performance, the actor is not so much a performer of the will of the author-playwright bur rather a creator and carrier of additional meanings. It is important that with this approach the status of the acting profession changes—it acquires the quality of the socially significant activity.

Quite indicative in this regard is for example the production of "Hamlet" by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyy. The performance has a genre definition of "neo-opera horror", which fully corresponds to a location where it is performed—a concrete cellar under the stage of the theatre with constant music accompaniment. The text is abbreviated to the abstract, separate storylines are removed from it, and the cemetery is the only place of action. The cemetery, as the location where the whole tragedy—rather than its individual scenes—takes place, is thereby a metaphorical solution for the director to realise his concept.

The acting characters, the dead slowly rise from their gravestones and join our living world. Also emerging from his gravestone is Hamlet who immediately realises that his homeland has been captured by the dark forces. He is not bothered by questions of the weak-hearted like "to be or not to be…", he is vigorously struggling to bring back to his land the forces of good. No one knows how to do it, not even Hamlet of the resistance, so fully aware of his goals and tasks.

The suggested metaphors that appear to be based on the Shakespeare text are quite clear to a contemporary viewer. The endless cemetery is a country devastated by those in power, whereas the role of a mighty and ready-for-all Hamlet, played by Oleksii Hnatkovsky, presents a war volunteer who was among the first to go out and defend Ukraine from the Russian aggression.

The idea for such a metaphorical understanding of Hamlet as a hero belongs to the performer of his role, Oleksii Hnatkovsky, who is also a co-producer of the play. To a large extent, he used a suggestion initially made by Kurbas, who had opposed the idea of his actor in the Hamlet role going back to this historic character and, on the contrary, had wanted him to implant the character into circumstances of a given present day.

Such Hamlet is a man of resistance who is fully aware of his goals and does everything to bring back to the country the forces of good. As he fails to do so at this point, in the immediate vicinity of the spectators he arranges for a funeral feast involving frying and eating meat, before the final act sees the appearance of Fortinbras, someone resembling a member of parliament of all convocations and an official at one and the same time.

The links of evil that bring Hamlet to the state of despair and paralysis are presented by the director both in concrete realistic and excessive baroque forms as if all human sins were poured out of the horn. The brutality, a kind of crime defile in this performance, is the main compositional quality of "neo-opera horror". Accordingly, the interaction of the main components of the play is also brutal: there are no subtle transitions, the episodes are framed very roughly, the light is blinding the audience and the spooky sounds are scary. That way, the intended effect is fully achieved with a viewer sometimes becoming frightened in earnest.

Overall, the play seems to have a zone for domination of a kind of monster characters, which is what proves rigidly established thanks to Lord Polonius (Dmytro Rybalevsky), who acts in the performance as a true Hamlet antagonist.

For Hamlet, as performed by Oleksii Hnatkovsky, he is not an accidental victim, but a creature capable of formalising and legitimately spreading the evil. The steely will of Dmytro Rybalevsky-Polonii transforms this character from being a secondary character to the key one. Similar substantive shifts are made possible by actor Ivan Blindar (Laertes), a true childhood friend and Hamlet's sworn brother from the very beginning. Blindar-Laertes' lyricism and allure are conceptualised by Hamlet's statement about "forty thousand brothers, with all their quantity of love" in that Hamlet is forced to kill at the duel not a brother of his own bridegroom but the loved sworn brother.

Thereby, by staging his version of "Hamlet" in 2017, Rostyslav Derzhypilskyy aimed to present the realities of modern Ukraine in the form of a theatrical metaphor. In fact, the director followed here the path taken by Les Kurbas, who in his own time had created a metaphor of the "Macbeth" text by making Jester the main character of the performance.

Otherwise, when it comes to verbatim plays, "an actor's search for himself" enables such actor to mentally bring a character closer to himself. Perhaps the best illustration of this can be found in the play "Bad Roads" by Natalia Vorozhbyt, which was first staged in Ukraine in the spring of 2018. Several months earlier, it was presented at the London Royal Court Theatre (November 2017). The play is based on documentary stories of people who were in Donbas, near or on the front-line and sometimes even in captivity, became volunteers or just lived there. For actors living in the peaceful capital Kyiv and therefore not personally exposed to every-day horrors of war, it has not been easy to find a rational explanation for all the extremes told in such war stories.

Because of the horrifying content of the depicted front-line events and the extreme nature of many of directorial and set-design decisions by Yury Larionov, the premiere of "Bad Roads" caused debate from the start. Despite the controversial nature of most characters in the play, the success behind the creative collaboration between the director and the set-designer is obvious: the artist came up with a framework-type material construction of the performance, while the director filled this framework emotionally and visually through the actor's mediation.

The main element in Larionov's simple and efficient set-design is a lattice that extends across the entire tablet and divides the stage space into two worlds: in the foreground there is the normal Ukrainian everyday life, and in the depths is the so-called grey area, the territory behind the frontline, the occupied Donetsk. Several important details are added to the picture: a grating in the lattice, through which people come through time after time, a childlike iron slide resting on a loft-room decorated in the spirit of the Soviet kitsch, and piles of various objects, among which stands a bulky cast-iron bath. Thus, through the latticed world with remnants from the Soviet past emerges a wholesome visual image of the Donbas war unleashed by Russia and its proxy forces in an attempt to bring Ukraine back to the USSR.

However, it was important for Tamara Trunova not only to stress again and again whose war it was and proclaim its invasive origins. She also sought to find and show those points of the shift in the human psyche and experience that allowed a supposedly normal person to kill, neglect the elementary ethical standards, be cynical, arrogant and ultimately false. This search results in Trunova staging a performance that is about fear rather than courage, irresponsibility rather than desperation, meanness rather than sincerity. Together with the actors, she outlines how the instinct of self-preservation can make many small and some courageous.

The director's exploration of these breakdowns becomes the key one in "Bad Roads", and for most actors the role-playing transforms into an emotional sensitive self-test. Perhaps the most telling in this sense is the play's main character (Oksana Cherkashina), whose story about her trip to the Donbas kicks off the play. Her silent voice and relaxed body language cause an utmost trust. The actress' demonstrated ability to reproduce a state of constant anxiety, abrasiveness of thoughts, sexual tension is amplified by the director's choice to engage a kind of chorus. A small group of girls and boys seems to carry the hero in their embrace on stage and various songs they are singing acoustically accentuate her psychological vulnerability and imbalance.

Undoubtedly, the most challenging aspect of the performance was to achieve the right balance between a realistic role-playing and the symbolisation of their assigned characters by a collective of performers that the director had gathered from different theatres across Ukraine. The director gave the actors the task that had little to do with the usual "living into the role" of someone. It was about bringing that someone closer to oneself, which was achieved through natural sensuality and a corresponding precise elastic pattern.

What becomes a common theme for all episodes of "Bad Roads" as directed by Tamara Trunova is love in its various forms. Love leads a woman to follow a military man to the war-torn Donbas, makes her transport the corpse of a lover through the front-line, while a female journalist has to remain in occupied Donetsk and a schoolgirl goes to a soldier's dungeon. These horrible, often ugly stories are presented by actresses as the history of various manifestations of love, which is what transforms the text into a metaphor for love confessions. Such a director-suggested sentimental "transformation" of the cruel play makes all female characters in "Bad Roads" essentially appear as brides—irrespective of their age, looks and personal situation—who can be perceived, taken together, as a metaphor for anti-death.

The director's injection of sentimentalism into a brutal play about the war has turned into brides almost all women depicted in "Bad Roads", regardless of their age, appearance and situation. All in white, with their fists clenched and holding crimson-red carnations, the flowers of the official Soviet holidays, a handful of women and girls appear for the first time to the audience. They do not talk about the war but only whisper passionately, because they are the Death itself, which comes in the form of the Bride. This eloquent, archaic

metaphor that is presented on stage through the elastic human portraits was not envisaged by Natalia Vorozhbyt's verbatim text. The metaphors' emergence and persuasiveness owe much to the theatre itself, which can both conceptualize and sentimentalise events.

Conclusions. The metaphorical presentation, through the discussed transformations, of controversial social and political issues facing modern Ukraine in "Bad Roads" and "Hamlet" is a good indication of how far its theatre has gone today to employ the Smart Harlequin method proposed by Les Kurbas one hundred years ago. That way, arising from the displayed intellectualism is a unique theatricality that provokes numerous associations to allow for proper communication with viewers, without falsity.

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Веселовська Г.

«Розумний арлекін» в авангардному і сучасному українському театрі

Анотація. Розглянуто поняття «розумний арлекін», запропоноване 1918 року видатним українським режисером Лесем Курбасом. Цим словосполученням Курбас визначив новий тип інтелектуального, надвиразного, розкутого, психологічно гнучкого актора, здатного впоратися із завданнями мистецтва авангарду. За Курбасом, тільки такий освічений актор-інтелектуал може бути повноцінним учасником театральної творчості і суспільних процесів. Активний творець спектаклю, «розумний арлекін», перетворюючись на сцені, ставав головним носієм інтелектуального начала, на противагу емоційності сценічного середовища. До того ж, «розумний арлекін» у театрі авангарду часто перебирав на себе функції драматурга-сценариста, автора тексту. Форми сучасного театру, такі як нова драма, вербатім, нерідко поєднують в одній особі автора і виконавця, яким є актор-інтелектуал, чий спосіб сценічного існування був передбачений Лесем Курбасом. Перед глядачем «розумний арлекін» XXI сторіччя постає дослідником, який пропонує осмислити проблеми, обрані театром для суспільної актуалізації. Зазвичай актор-дослідник неначе пробує різні способи розв'язання проблеми в імпровізаційному ключі, при цьому демонструючи своє ставлення до неї. Окрім творчих, авангард покладав на «розумного арлекіна» і чимало позахудожніх завдань: бути активним творцем суспільного середовища, каталізатором соціальних процесів.

Ключові слова: розумний арлекін, театр, авангард, суспільна актуалізація.

Веселовская А.

«Умный арлекин» в авангардном и современном украинском театре

Аннотация. Рассматривается понятие «умный арлекин», предложенное в 1918 году выдающимся украинским режиссером Лесем Курбасом. Этим словосочетанием Курбас определил новый тип интеллектуального, сверхвыразительного, раскованного, психологически гибкого актера, способного справится с задачами искусства авангарда. Согласно Курбасу только такой образованный актер-интеллектуал может быть полноценным участником театрального творчества и общественных процессов. Активный творец спектакля, «умный арлекин», преображаясь на сцене, становился главным носителем интеллектуального начала, в противовес эмоциональности сценической среды. К тому же, «умный арлекин» в театре авангарда зачастую брал на себя функции драматурга-сценариста, автора текста.

Формы современного театра, такие как новая драма, вербатим нередко объединяют в одном лице автора и исполнителя, каковым является актер-интеллектуал, чей способ сценического существования был предугадан Лесем Курбасом. Перед зрителем «умный арлекин» XXI века предстает исследователем, предлагающим осмыслить проблемы, избранные театром для общественной актуализации. Как правило, актер-исследователь словно пробует различные способы решения проблемы в импровизационном ключе, при этом демонстрируя свое отношение к ней. Кроме творческих, на «умного арлекина» авангард возлагал и немало внехудожественных задач: активного создателя новой общественной среды, катализатора социальных процессов.

Ключевые слова: умный арлекин, театр, авангард, общественная актуализация.