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Shakespeare at the Napoli Teatro Festival Italia 2011.  
*The Tempest* (dir. Declan Donnellan) and *Richard III*  
(The Bridge Project, dir. Sam Mendes)

Reviewed by **Santa Russo**

Naples, Teatro Mercadante, 30 June 2011.

Declan Donnellan, a British theatre director and writer of international fame, arrives in Italy for the first time with his production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in Russian with surtitles in Italian. Students and scholars of English literature, Shakespearean studies and Russian language, as well as enthusiastic theatregoers, sit among the audience in a hot evening of the *Napoli Teatro Festival Italia*, now in its fourth edition.

The play begins: Prospero, an old man in belt and braces, sits downstage in front of a white, curved wall with three doors. As if to concentrate, he conjures a storm, which is only glimpsed through the partially opened doors. Thunder, lightning, water. The latter element is predominant throughout the play: during the storm scene, real water cascades onto the mariners' heads while waves periodically foam and tumble, through projections, on the white wall; when Miranda and Ferdinand become sexually excited, Prospero douses them with a bucket of water, as if they were copulating dogs; poor Trinculo, in this production an effete dandy interested in fashion and diamonds, is pursued by the several Ariel(s) who continually drench him with a watering can.

When Prospero recounts to Miranda the reasons for their exile, the usurping Antonio and his Neapolitan accomplice emerge like speechless wax statues from two of the three doors, to silently give body and presence to their past treachery and powerfully draw Miranda's attention to the narration. Miranda actually sees them and becomes more interested in her father's story. "Dost thou attend me?", Prospero frequently asks his daughter; his very long narration could have put Miranda off, hence the narrative device of the repeated questions to Miranda throughout the scene in the Shakespearean text.

In Donnellan's production, the appearance of Antonio, Prospero's brother, and Alonso, the king of Naples, becomes a 'multimedial' – and to a certain extent even 'intermedial' – device whereby theatre simulates cinema, to bring to life Prospero's articulate retelling of the past events that brought him and Miranda to the island twelve years earlier. *The Tempest* is a play in which invisibility and visions, magic, music and 'quaint' devices play an important role for the development of the story, yet there are no 'apparitions' at the moment of Prospero's recounting to Miranda in 1.2; it was the director's choice to add those 'apparitions' in his production of the play. Donnellan could have used a video installation, or a projection on the white wall, to show Prospero's past in a more vivid way, but he decided to have the actors on stage, 'embodying' the past as in a *tableau vivant*; perhaps, the choice

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came out of an awareness of the excessive length of the scene and of the fact that this, along with the recitation in Russian, could have been a real cause of distraction not only in Miranda but in the audience too. The *tableau vivant* ‘approach’ combines theatre with the art forms of painting and photography and one could talk of a multimediality of sorts, for this production, as ‘special’ effects are adapted to the theatrical space (as in the case of the apparitions).

The multimedial ‘device’ occurs a second time in the same scene when Ariel, the airy spirit who reluctantly serves Prospero, reports that he has carried out his master’s commands in exact detail and that all the passengers of the vessel leapt overboard, the king’s son Ferdinand having been the first to jump. At this point, the spirit stops his narration and opens one of the three doors. In this case the *tableau* is dreamy, watery, timeless and we see Ferdinand as he drowns in the sea: hanging by one foot, head down, the actor is in a blue and suffused light as he floats in the airy water. The effect is astonishing, and for the first few seconds the audience may well believe this to be a projection and not the actor in the flesh.

The frame of the door behind which Ferdinand appears works as a cinematic frame; this is a dreamlike scene where the borders of the door, four sides of a rectangle, become a metaphor for how a theatre performance can insert some cinematic effects while remaining preponderantly theatrical.

The simulation of multimediality helps the audience visualize what the characters are talking about. In a canonical performance, as they listen to the lines spoken by the other characters, the audience may picture

Antonio, Alonso and Ferdinand in their minds, but in this production the director adds something magic, which in a sense partakes of – and redoubles – Prospero’s art. As Shakespeare’s exiled duke conjured “the direful spectacle of the wreck” “with such provision in [his] art”, thus revealing the shipwreck to be an illusion created by his magic, so Donnellan’s Prospero is able to project – thanks to the same art – the characters onstage and enliven his narration of the story.

The ongoing process of remediation is a cultural process and describes what happens when Shakespearean texts are transferred from paper to digital platforms: Katherine Rowe and Thomas Cartelli in their book *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (2007) shift the paradigms of Shakespeare on films and make possible new interaction between critical, cultural, textual and media studies, highlighting how the meta-theatrical aspects of Shakespeare’s plays are remediated from stage and books to modern expressive media. (Thus in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000) the

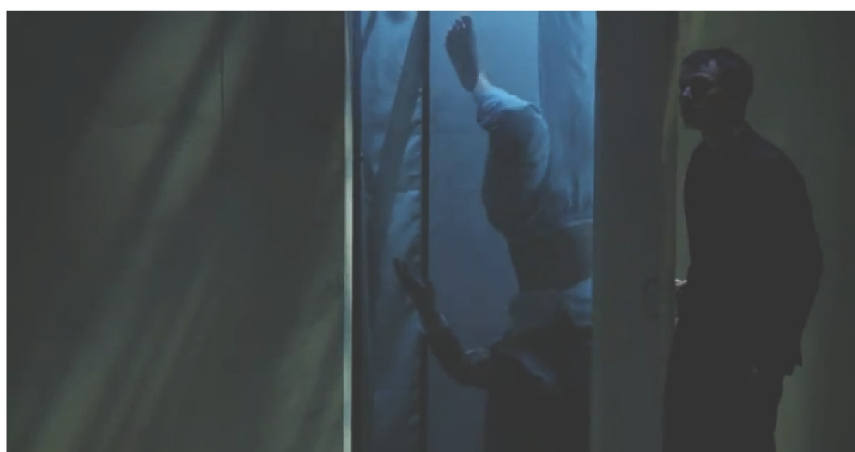


Fig 1: Declan Donnellan, *The Tempest*, 2011, courtesy of NFI Napoli Festival Imagine. Click on the image to watch video.

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mousetrap is not a play within the play but, as the flyer sent by Hamlet to Gertrude and Claudius proclaims, “A Film/Video by Hamlet”). In Donnellan’s production, remediation works differently: in *The Tempest* there are cinematic devices adapted to the theatrical space and cinema is brought back to its rudimentary form, so to speak (in the case of the *tableaux vivants*). Theatre remains the dominant space, as actors in the flesh simulate cinematic projections onstage – not the other way round. As shown by the ‘appearance’ of Ferdinand ‘underwater’, theatre preserves its specificity of having characters played by actors *there* and *then* onstage, but at the same time it welcomes a simulation of re-mediation.

The nature of the play itself invites theatrical invention; most professional productions try to capture the magic and wonder expressed by the play, and many modern directors adapt the text according to their artistic, free interpretations. Donnellan duplicates Ariel, the airy spirit, who here becomes a group of five besuited actors/musicians: one is the leader and actually speaks the lines; the other four are a silent, persistent presence on the stage, playing some musical instruments and executing all of Prospero’s commands. The reinvention of the character is suggested by Ariel’s actual nature – he is a ubiquitous, airy spirit – and it helps achieve a strong visual effect; indeed, nothing is left to imagination in this production. In Shakespeare, at Prospero’s command Ariel performs near-impossible feats and appears in different guises: a flaming light in the storm, a nymph of the sea, a harpy at the banquet, Ceres in the masque; in this production, at some point Ariel acrobatically becomes the log Ferdinand bears while talking with Miranda. Insofar as it is a combination of sounds, images, music, ‘projections’ and words, theatre is always already a multimedial genre. In Donnellan’s *The Tempest*, the limits of what is possible on stage are pushed further, yet at the same time the performance never lets one forget one is watching theatre: it may originally use special effects but it remains elegantly, unashamedly, *theatre*.

Donnellan’s is also a specifically Russian *Tempest*: Ariel’s accusation against the courtly party turns into a Soviet show trial; the marriage masque features cheerful peasants dancing with scythes, as in old propaganda films celebrating the wonders of Soviet agriculture; when Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban raid Prospero’s cell, they discover a department store with fashionable clothes, mobile phones and credit cards, the new emblems of post-Soviet Russia. Through the process of cultural cross-fertilization, Donnellan takes a familiar play and makes us see it – and our present *through* it – in a new light.

A final, brief note on language: as Shakespeare’s text is recited in Russian, the Italian audience who does not speak the language pays a different kind of attention to the words and consequently takes greater notice of all the other aspects of the production, in particular of the actors’ incredible physicality and expressivity. The Italian surtitles on the screen are by necessity shorter than Shakespeare’s text, even if they retain some of the original’s seventeenth-century language and expressions. In the shift of attention away from the language, the experience of watching the play becomes even more intense.

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Donnellan's intensely physical production of the play mixed music, dance, video and 'theatrical' projections, bringing the island setting to life, and highlighted the play's theme of illusion; "we are such stuff as dreams are made of", and the result is that Prospero's project, "which was to please", did not fail at all.

The autumn epilogue of *Napoli Teatro Festival Italia* – 14-15 October 2011 – presented *Richard III*, directed by Sam Mendes, with Kevin Spacey playing the role of the Shakespearean villain. Mendes returns to the stage to direct Spacey: the last time they worked together, in the film *American Beauty* (1999), Spacey won the Academy Award for his performance and Mendes won it as Best Director. An incredible *coup de théâtre* coming directly from London, from the final year of The Bridge Project, a unique three-year series of co-productions by The Old Vic – whose artistic director is Kevin Spacey himself – BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) and Neal Street, Mendes's production company.

*Richard III* has some of Shakespeare's best known lines – "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York", "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse", among the others – and has been played by great stage actors, Lawrence Olivier being the most famous one. About his *Richard III*, Mendes stated in an interview: "In a sense this is one of the first great portraits of a modern dictator. It is astonishing living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that there are still figures today on the front page of every newspaper, Gaddafi, for example, or Mubarak, who are exactly what Shakespeare described and anatomised 400 years ago. Staging *Richard III* with an international company allows you to loosen the ties that make it purely English and, in doing so, perhaps it becomes a little more global, a study of dictatorship".

As a matter of fact, Sam Mendes has produced a modern-dress production in which the protagonist becomes an autocratic archetype, so the audience can easily find contemporary resonances in it. It is not the first time that a production of *Richard III* uses modern costumes: in the film directed by Richard Eyre, with Ian McKellen playing the role of the malevolent, deformed usurper, the costumes suggest that the setting is a fictional fascist England of the 1930s. As the *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington writes in his review, in Mendes' production "contemporary clothes remind us how today's dictators seek spurious constitutional legitimacy and become skilful media manipulators".

What is interesting in this production is the use of multimediality, which is not just hinted, or simulated, as in the case of Donnellan's *The Tempest*. At the very beginning of the play, Spacey



Fig. 2: Sam Mendes, *Richard III*, 2011. Click on the image to see video.

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sits irritably slumped in a chair watching an old TV footage of his brother's regal triumph; he then angrily stops the video with a remote control, before speaking the famous lines of his first monologue (fig. 2). On the back wall of the stage, for the audience, there is a projection of what he is watching on TV. This is the first incursion of other media – television, video projections – in the theatrical space and more will come later. Even before that, a big “Now”, the very first word of the play, appears, projected on the wall when the lights in the auditorium are still switched on. The word dominates the scene before the beginning of the performance, being at the same time a reminder of the literal start of the play, the indication for the audience to put *Richard III* in a modern context, and the first occurrence introducing the multimedial dimension of the play. More titles like the opening “Now” projected on the walls appear throughout the production, mainly to introduce the characters: the audience read “Clarence”, “The Citizens”, “Buckingham”, and so forth, all written in capital letters. The titles are projected on the walls of the scenography between one scene and the next, when the stage is dark and the setting is being changed by the technical staff; the impression the audience get is that of chapters in a running DVD. Just like novels, most DVDs are divided into chapters or scenes, each with a title, allowing the user to jump from one to the other and quickly access any chosen part of the film. Cinema enters the theatrical space, in this case as home cinema, cinema enjoyed at home. This multimedial device is used throughout the play, the last title being “Bosworth Field” projected on the wall among moving clouds.

Clouds. They are not a casual element in the multimedial component of the play: in the chapter/scene labelled “The Citizens”, in the third scene of the second act, the men are presented as chattering commuters, wearing black suits, with bowlers on their heads, reading newspapers and discussing the political situation; front stage, all in a line as if they were travelling in the Tube, the citizens hold on to an imaginary handrail and make small talk. While they are on stage, some clouds appear, projected on the wall: this is clearly a reproduction of Magritte's famous surrealist paintings, with men wearing black suits and bowlers, clouds on the background. The multimediality at this point is multilayered: the projections of the clouds and the title are what one may consider the ‘proper’ multimediality of a theatrical performance; on the other hand, the reproduction of the French artist's paintings is a *tableau vivant*: an incursion from another art, painting, and a simulation of multimediality.

Photography is also present in this production of *Richard III*. In the first scene of the second act, when the sick King Edward IV wants to “set [his] friends at peace on earth”, a photographer is onstage to take pictures of the other characters while they shake hands. And, when Richard is finally crowned king, upstage there is a huge close-up photograph of Spacey's face in black and white. The photograph is a duplication of Richard III himself, a visual metaphor of the villain's ‘looming large’ on the political scene.

The most genuinely multimedial moment of the play and the most elaborate scene is when Richard, faking reluctance, accepts the crown; in Shakespeare's text,

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the stage direction reads “Enter Gloucester aloft, between two bishops” and in Shakespearean times, at the Globe theatre, it was certainly played from the balcony, which usually housed the musicians and could be used for scenes requiring an upper space. In this production the scene is completely reimagined and Richard talks to Buckingham and the citizens from a big screen: he is praying with a pair of phoney monks and he seems really surprised by the intrusiveness of a spying camera. The effect is that of a video screen press conference, or a video call on Skype; the camera frames Spacey’s face and the audience can enjoy his facial expressions – which is not always possible during a theatre performance because of the different positions of the seats. In this production, multimediality and theatre are intertwined; in the case of the titles or the presence of a video onstage, the spectator’s point of view is not constrained by her or his seat: everyone sees everything, as at the cinema.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, theatre directors and stage designers prove Shakespeare to be our contemporary. If the Shakespearean word is what they work with, the language of Shakespeare’s texts lends itself to experimenting with new forms. Whether it is just hinted and simulated or actually integrated into theatre performances through the use of digital technologies, multimediality is the present form of staging Shakespeare.