

Why Shakespeare?

In spring 2019 I retreated into the countryside with nothing but Shakespeare's tragedies in my book trunk. I have adapted and staged several Shakespeare plays over the last thirty years. But times change, rapidly and fundamentally. Rereading Shakespeare is always a lesson in humility, I had thought. But after a few days of intensive reading I found it rather heavy going. The standard bearer of Western literature, the grand master of the English language, my mentor, is he a monster after all? An unparalleled psychopath? A misogynistic idiot? A rabid racist? Addicted to violence and sex? Hundreds of murders and suicides. Dozens of bloodbaths, plus cannibalism, incest and child rape.

What is the significance of the extreme violence in *Titus Andronicus*? A mother who asks her two sons to slowly rape a girl with the promise that the one who hurts the victim most will be her favourite son.

Why, in the original credits, are the women always at the bottom of the page? Even when they play a leading part, such as Cleopatra? Portia says to Brutus: "I'm only a woman..."

One of the few black roles, Aaron, says: "A black dog doesn't blush. I curse every day when I did not do evil. Murdered someone, raped a virgin, or accused an innocent person, committed perjury, incited friends to mortal hatred, broke the necks of a poor farmer's cattle, set houses alight and called out to the owners: "douse it with your tears". I often dug up corpses and put them outside their friends' door just as they were beginning to forget their pain. And in their skin I cut the words: "even though I am dead, your sorrow will be undying". I would do far worse things if I had my way. If I have ever done a good deed in my life it grieves me in the depths of my heart".

I felt panic coming on. I had promised the Catalan National Theatre that I would adapt the tragedies into a full-length production. Too big for the stage, yes, that's for sure, I already knew that through my experience with Act 5 of *King Lear* in 2001. Or too perverse for the stage? Is Shakespeare the proof that Western culture has been heading in the wrong direction for hundreds of years? Are they right, those people who burn the books by these old white men of the West?

As a result of Black Lives Matter, the necessity of the Me Too movement, the decline of politics, with Trump and Putin as its figureheads, the shaky position taken by Europe, terror, fundamentalism, climate change and, to cap it all, a pandemic, the arts too are required to be clear and direct. Straight talking. Unambiguous. But also unambiguous interpretations. Art should as it were provide science with solutions. I prefer to put my fate in the hands of single-minded scientists than artist activists. Or does the pointlessness of a life-jacket raised to the level of art by Ai Weiwei have a

poetic power that saves more human lives than a real life-jacket? This last question alone displays a dangerous cynicism against which art remains helpless.

I consulted my son Victor, who himself has also adapted and performed several Shakespeare plays with Kuiperskaai, his theatre company. He suggested starting out from Shakespeare's own inner turmoil. He was made bitter by the death of his young son and a difficult relationship with his wife. (And it was a stormy relationship! All he left her in his meticulously formulated will was a shabby second bed. And the last verses he ever wrote are carved on his gravestone: *'Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear to dig the dust enclosed here. Blessed be the man that spares these stones, and cursed be he that moves my bones.'*) In his book *Will in the World*, the well-known Shakespeare expert Stephen Greenblatt suggests that Shakespeare wrote this so that his grave would never be opened to allow Anne's bones to be laid next to his.) What's more, London's theatres had to close because of the plague epidemic. And there was also a 'Little Ice Age' that resulted in famine.

It's essential to spit in the face of history and never to disregard it. Burning books is cowardly. I asked Victor if he would like to adapt the tragedies. And that's what happened. I feel guilty: a young man in his twenties now has to spend a year wallowing in the darkest literature ever written. Ten tragedies which are in fact a self-portrait of a man who had to take up the struggle against an extremely violent society that suffered from the vulgarity of the ruling class, a drastic change of climate and a worldwide pandemic. The 21st century looks as if it's mirroring the 17th. The big difference is that God still existed then, and could be used as a splendid excuse. One only has to think of the horrific executions in the name of God: Campion, Shakespeare's Catholic mentor, was dragged naked through the streets of London by his Protestant executioners, hanged in front of the Tower, castrated, had his intestines cut out and was set on fire so that he could behold Hell while still living. To the great delight of the crowd. Oh well... these days we see such pictures on the TV news and if they are censored there we can watch them on YouTube. But nowadays we no longer have God as an excuse. That's precisely where the vulgarity of our era lies. We could blame ourselves for the breakdown, but we prefer to pass the buck. We wag a moral finger at the previous generation, other races, the narrow-mindedness of a singular identity, or religions. We burst with self-pity. And that's precisely what Shakespeare was referring to and why he was so much ahead of his time.

When I read the first version of Victor's text I understood immediately that not a single attempt had been made to gloss over, justify or criticise the misogyny, racism and gratuitous violence. In his writing, one can clearly see that the 17th century is in many ways similar to the 21st. By leaving out the historical context, the plays simply become contemporary. Shakespeare was emphatically a globalist. Whether he set his plays in Venice, England or Denmark, whether the characters are Romans or Moroccans, white, black, man or woman, as an artist he rejected any form of restriction. This new adaptation does not set the tragedies against an all-determining historical backdrop or

a geographical boundary, but sweeps everything aside: the tragedies are concentrated into an intense dialogue between a man and a woman. Shakespeare is an artist who converts the truth into his own truth and by his genius transcends all unambiguous interpretations: the truth is what is not said. Art is the invention that accepts being and not being as a question without wishing to provide the answer. And that is why he remains essential 400 years later. He is not a politician, not a scientist, but a poet.

This is why *Billy's Violence* is a play entirely at odds with its period. In this work we seek out the obscure and ambiguous. In art nowadays we have no answers to give; we have to ask better questions. Art may play a part by illustrating the resistance, offering comfort and providing beauty, or else by stirring up trouble. Victor's play makes me agitated: I already know that at the premiere we shall all be convinced once again that Shakespeare's fictions are essential. Because they always go against their period. However much we try to use them for our own purposes.

Jan Lauwers, 12 September 2020