

# Critical Stages/Scènes critiques

The IATC journal/Revue de l'AICT – December/Décembre 2019: Issue No 20

## ***Macbettu*: Immersing in the “Hollow Crown”**

**Penelope Chatzidimitriou, Dec 09 2019**

Teatro di Sardegna, *Macbettu* by William Shakespeare, dir. Alessandro Serra. Real Magic by Forced Entertainment, dir. Tim Etchells. Seen at the 54th Demetria Festival, October 2019, Thessaloniki, Greece.

*Macbettu*, one of the major international performances featured in the 54th Demetria Festival in Thessaloniki, Greece, does not turn Shakespearean tragedy into an extravaganza. Stripped of all royal garments, crowns left aside, no blood spilled on the stage floor, this Sardinian *Macbeth*, directed by Alessandro Serra, becomes a chiaroscuro study in the human abyss. The merits of this performance, much hailed by international audiences and critics for blending the Shakespearean literary and stage tradition (an all-male cast is used) with the Sardinian prehistoric culture, unfold before our eyes. The precise, martial-like physicality of the actors, the musicality of the Sardinian translation, the sometimes sensually disturbing and always imposing natural soundscape catch our immediate attention and immerse us deeply in an otherworldly state: The originality of Alessandro Serra's reading is instantly felt.

To avoid treating the play as a mere literary text, Serra finds inspiration in the natural landscape of Sardinia, its indigenous culture and the carnivalistic tradition in the Barbaria region. This is a choice that sweeps away all realistic psychological drama, from the acting to the setting. The evil is not illustrated in words but becomes subtly corporeal, visual and sonic.

What is more worthy of remark is that although Serra draws from something as specific as the Ozieri culture (a prehistoric, pre-Nuragic period that flourished on the island from the Paleolithic until the middle Bronze age), he creates a spectacle that is not folkloric: quite the opposite, *Macbettu* is truly modern in its primordial force: A sculpture-like setting turns the sanded stage into an earthwork, making structures out of natural material and elements like rocks, sand, wood, water and iron. Minimal interventions like dragging a body on the sanded surface make an imprint of death, sin and tragedy on the stage floor. This is earth art, an aesthetic that foregrounds the rediscovery of things natural and man-made—of a stone, for example, which can equally be pure matter on stage or become a murder weapon. This is theatrical *arte povera*, a sort of Grotowskian poor theatre that uses common materials of a pre-industrial, pre-modern, pre-technological age to reveal a world that escapes clinical analysis and scientific rationalization.

In such a primordial world, dark and mysterious, Lady Macbeth, as a non-realistic, gender-indefinite impersonation, is central. She/he is the archetypal embodiment of Mother Earth's dark force, both nurturing and deadly. Serra draws inspiration from the Ozieri statue of the Mother Goddess, but to a Western spectator not familiar with the local culture this Lady is abstractly evocative of the iconography of Christian religious art (such as Jan Van Eyck's *The Ghent Altarpiece*, or Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*). The stark nakedness of this androgynous Lady Macbeth in her death scene echoes the shameful nudity of Adam and Eve after the fall. The slim figure of this hermaphrodite with his/her belly slightly protruding can no longer be the road to God and Grace; she/he is the fallen Adam and Eve in one body.

*Macbettu* is similarly truly modern in its primordial force when it comes to the chorus of witches /peasant farmers. Their Dionysiac rite is again not folkloric. One may see in its gross mockery, inspired by the Sardinian carnivalistic rites, a Bakhtinian touch of the carnivalesque, but at its dark moments this is a dance of death in the style of Ingmar Bergman's *danse macabre* in *The Seventh Seal*. With such a chorus, Alessandro Serra presents Shakespeare as a man of the mob and not of the monarchy, exploring "the dark affinity between the sovereign and the beast. . . ." Here, madness is no longer outside but "within the hollow crown" (Wilson 773); and it is in there that we are submerged.