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*“...Standing ovations and arm-aching applause were the only possible responses to a world of theatrical magic created by a brilliant young company... if you missed it you missed a real treat...marvellous box of technical tricks...”*

## **EVENING NEWS**

### **Iago**

#### **Michael Ridings**

To stage a version of Shakespeare's Othello in Russian in a swimming pool, might seem a festival aberration of the most esoteric kind.

And if the venue was mere gimmick, this would be the case. But it isn't.

This innovative company from Kiev uses the unusual setting to explore the play's major theme of jealousy by focusing especially on Iago.

The action takes place on the edge. Lighting, music, and especially the elemental water, create a variety of moods – lyrical, playful, murderous, and suicidal.

But above all, it is the superb action, which makes this reworking of the tragedy stimulating, cathartic and compelling.

## **THE TIMES**

### **Benedict Nightingale sees East beat West in fantasy's league.**

#### **Benedict Nightingale**

Some have said no theatrical event has made much of a splash at the Edinburgh festival this year. They are reckoning without Iago, the adaptation of Othello that a group called Theatre-in-Podol has brought from Kiev. This begins with Desdemona diving into a pool and swimming her length while her husband fondly watches, and ends with the villain and the hero, manacled together, toppling into the water with a tragic splatter. Even the programme is an embossed hand-towel, as it needs to be.

Vitaly Malakhov's production is set round and often in Infirmary Street. Follow the smell of chlorine and the humid air, take a poolside seat, and you are in for an odd, original treat. Anatoly Khostikoev's Iago expresses triumph by hurling a plastic table into the water and celebrates destruction by send half-a-dozen chairs after it. Cassio's drunk-scene culminates in angry horseplay which leaves Roderigo half-drowned. Desdemona frolics like a dolphin while Iago is poisoning her husband's mind on a tiny jetty, and Othello momentarily joins her for a fast dip.

I can imagine casting Paul Raymond as Petruchio, Germaine Greer as Katherina, and setting The Shrew on Concorde, but I'm blessed if I see the purpose of this. Very occasionally a line fits – Roderigo very nearly fulfils this promise incontinently to drown himself – but scarcely enough to justify the approach. What it proves is, I suppose, that Shakespeare can be performed anywhere, in any language, and still exercise a grip, if the actors know their job, as these Ukrainian fish-people emphatically do.

Khostikoev's Iago has a weird, woozy affection for his victims, and Vladimir Kouznetsov's slim, severe and (another twist) white Othello is equally strong, especially in the extremes of grief. That the action mostly occurs at the shallow end is not symbolic.

## **THE OBSERVER**

**Mark Fisher takes a dip in an AQUATIC IAGO, and finds it deeper than expected.**

**Mark Fisher**

If you're on a single-decker bus with a badly improvised assassination taking place behind your head; if you forego a four-hour Anthony and Cleopatra in German in favour of a three-hour reworking of Othello in Russian; if you're watching four performers dancing to the stage-directors of Henrik Ibsen... then it must be August and you must be in Edinburgh.

The less said about the bus the better, but the Russian-language Othello, retitled Iago and performed in a district council swimming pool, is the kind of curiosity that makes the Edinburgh Fringe so special. Desdemona makes her entrance with a graceful dive and an underwater swim; Roderigo keeps his costume in a cubicle; when Othello commits a suicide he pulls a handcuffed Iago into the water behind him. Yet somehow this production by the Ukrainian company Theatre-on-Podol never looks gimmicky.

Director Vitaly Malakhov uses the baths economically: the actors sit at plastic poolside tables, transporting themselves on rubber-ring boats and disappearing into the showers when it's time to exit, but rarely does the location retort the demands of the play. A rugged Iago (Anatoly Khostikoev) and a scrawny, white Othello (Vladimir Kouznetsov), who all but has sand kicked in his face, play the game of deviousness and jealousy with so much Eastern European self-possession that only the whiff of chlorine and the reflected ripples on the ceiling remind you that theatre doesn't normally come like this.

## **THE GUARDIAN**

**The Bard in trunks**

**Claire Armitstead**

One of Theatre-on Podol's biggest assets is an actor who looks like a cross between Arnie Schwarzeneger and Alan Bates. In Iago this Ukrainian swimming company's swimming pool reworking of Othello, Arnie dominates. Anatoly Khostikoev moulds the play around his vision of Iago, a hulk of sexuality and smouldering resentment who nearly rapes a pubescent Desdemona as she dries herself after a swim, and who later lifts a puny, white Othello by his braces and carries him to the pool to cool him off. Water, in this radical reworking, represents powerlessness and sexuality. Othello and Desdemona splash around in it, the warring factions

fight in it. Only Iago remains dry until the final scene, when he is dragged under the Othello's corpse. Whereas there is a sense, in Iago, of a good idea that has not yet been worked through, there are no such problems with the company's *Dream*, which again majors on sexuality. Strap-on breastplates, moulded in exaggerated sexual contours, become emblems of the erotic fixation released by the scattering of scarlet flowers. It's funny and accomplished work. When the mechanicals transform their performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* into a parody of Titania's dream, the outraged reaction of the court makes a shrewd point about the subversiveness of the imagination and the limits of artistic freedom.

## **INDEPENDENT**

### **For Better or for Worse Clare Bayley**

...Theatre-on-Podol's Iago is a more sophisticated enterprise, from a mature company which has been performing Shakespeare for more than a decade. It was an actor, Anatoly Khostikoev, who conceived the idea after playing Othello at the National Theatre in Kiev. The production was not a success and Khostikoev felt more affinity for Iago than his own character, as the director Vitaly Malakhov explains. "What we are presenting is principally the play of Othello, with some pieces cut and some new situations added. We wanted to look at it from Iago's point of view, to find out what is happening what we don't normally see. It's a way of changing the perspective."

The most striking departure from the Shakespeare is the casting: Khostikoev as Iago is a huge, handsome, charismatic bear of a man, while Vladimir Kouznetsov as Othello is a little, trim bureaucrat. The sympathies of the audience switch palpably to Iago, and from the outset the bias of the play is changed. Add to this a blithe disregard of the racial theme, and the fact that the production takes place in and around the Infirmary street swimming pool, and Shakespeare's play is almost unrecognizable.

It's relatively easy for Theatre-on-Podol to reclaim Iago as a tragic hero, but is it more than a textual experiment? "None of us wants to be bad," Malakhov explains. "But it happens that characters like Iago come from somewhere. Shakespeare wrote that Cassio is a bad officer that he's never been at war; he's a drunkard and a womanizer. Yet he is promoted, Iago is not. It seems to me that God is not being fair. Iago tries to make things fair, that's all. There are a lot of reasons why people kill each other, as we know – envy, different religions, love. Perhaps we will never understand each other. But we can try."

## **THE SCOTSMAN**

**Iago**  
**Collin Donald**

Disappointment awaits anyone expecting the definitive underwater Othello, or the Moor's sea battles represented by dazzling feats of synchronized swimming. Instead the Kiev company Theatre-on-Podol brings a radically re-interpreted but formally conventional modern-dress Shakespeare into the strange late night ambience of an old-fashioned swimming pool.

It would take a genius of a director and huge resources to possess this space entirely. The Ukrainians sometimes seem to be struggling to incorporate the setting into the reading of the play. The swimming pool itself has its big moments, for example as the swamp in which Othello rages, chest deep in jealousy and foreboding, but more generally it works as an ambiguous connecting symbol, as a source of innocence (through which Desdemona swims on her wedding day) and of oblivion, into which people and objects are constantly thrown.

This is bold and gut-felt Shakespeare that emphasizes the sad, competitive machismo of the play's world but fails to convey the physiological sore-spots.

## **SCOTLAND ON SUNDAY**

**Post-Soviet anarchy brings passion to the poolside.**  
**Joyce McMillan**

The trouble with transgressions is that if people commit them all the time, they soon cease to be transgressive. There may have been a time, in Fringe theatre, when the sight of a man climbing into a woman's underskirt and smearing on lipstick was enough to provoke gasps of fascinated excitement; now it's a cue to curl up for a quick snooze until the company thinks of something more original to say. In other words, the theatrical rhetoric of men-finding-the-feminine-in-themselves is becoming exhausted; which is maybe why the most exciting piece of theatre I've seen on the Fringe all week is a blazing Ukrainian assault on the text of Shakespeare's Othello, which arrives at Infirmary Street Baths absolutely unencumbered with western reservations about machismo and its implications.

Theatre on Podol's Iago – for this is a back-to-front version of the play – is one of those only-in-Edinburgh events whose improbability fairly blows the mind; the ingredients in this case being the district councillor who fell in love with On Podol on a city-twinning visit to Kiev, the company itself, which was penniless, bold and game for anything, and an old Victorian pool off South Bridge that becomes a rippling, magical world apart under the influence of a bold sound and lighting design.

But the striking thing about the production, apart from its inspired use of water as a Mediterranean landscape, and immersion in it as a symbol of sensuality and vulnerability, is the way in which it wrenches a piece free of its mortal moorings and converts it from a good man destroyed by an evil one into a fierce Darwinian drama about a weak man destroyed by a strong and cunning one. Heaven knows what anarchic ugliness in post-Soviet society has generated this passionate, reactionary hymn to the survival of its fittest, but there's a furious force behind it; the piece is dominated by the huge figure of Anatoly Khostikoev's Iago, who radiates ruthless animal energy like a furnace. I don't know how well Khostikoev acts; the long dialogue sections of the play, without translation, certainly drag a little. But like Dolly Parton – of whose attempt at Shakespeare's Juliet it was said that she sure could lean over a balcony – the mighty Khostikoev sure could pick up a tiny Desdemona like a piece of thistledown, generate erotic energy around her like static lighting, and make a bigger splash than any actor in Edinburgh when he finally tumbles like a great oak into the water, dragged there by the dying Othello. Theatre on Podol is also performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Pleasance, of which more next week. But from its Iago, expect no moral comfort; just a stunning reminder of an energy that we ignore at our peril.

## **FINANCIAL TIMES**

### **A day in the life of a festival groupie**

4.30 pm. Pleasance. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Fringe.) I have also been told on no account to miss the Ukrainian company Theatre-on-Podol. In the queue to see its 100-minute version of Shakespeare's comedy, I meet two Canadians whom I told the good word about Podol last night. They tell me that they're glad I'm here because if it's no good they'll lynch me. Oh dear. Well, it is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but the further it departs from Shakespeare the more enthralling it becomes. (An odd touch comes when the rustics switch from Ukrainian into Shakespearean English for Pyramus and Thisbe: e.g.: "I zank zou, Moon, for zy glittering beams," etc...) Theseus is sick; he and his court dream the story of erotic magic and fairies in the wood. Later, when Bottom & Co. play *Pyramus and Thisbe* at court, Theseus suddenly takes cruel revenge on Bottom for having made it (even if in ass's form) with Hippolyta-Titania; he stops the play and hands Bottom-Pyramus a real sword to kill himself with. So Bottom-Pyramus dies the noble Athenian way, and Flute-Thisbe follows suit; Hippolyta is aghast but powerless. Suddenly, however, Bottom and Flute spring back to life; they were good enough actors to fake death; and the joke, or dream, was on the nobles. All which turns the play into a Marivaux-type play about heart and heartlessness. The lights go up. Oh dear.

**La NACION**  
14 march 1998

Photo caption: Theatre within theatre - where we, the audience, finish by being part of the fantasy presented by Theatre on Podol

**WHITE MAGIC**

**Victor Flury**

Theatre on Podol took part in the 1989 International Theatre Festival, presenting on that occasion "The Popular Mystery" - which more than a Jew (?can't read it) remember today.

The irreverent version of MSND now rounds off the first impression we had of the group: the twelve Ukraine actors don't miss a theatrical trick. On the contrary - and perhaps because of their ownership of "The theatre of (la strada ??) -the main ingredient for them consists of mixing and molding together all the possibilities of each role.

In this way they augment the classical approach with a transcendent spirit which is determined by the dialogue for its insertion into the comedy, shaping the action and leaving out what doesn't fit. This quality allowed numerous audience members in Mexico to follow the story without problem - helped by a preliminary explanation and the opportune use of some Spanish words during the course of the piece. However, that doesn't justify the regrettable fact that they did not distribute a programme - an essential item, whatever its intended function.

Vitaly Malakhov profited very well from his special talents - going from place to place with complete freedom on the avenues and corridors of Shakespeare's text - jumping from frenetic activity to wild clowning - from slapstick (the "gag" belonging to silent films) to modern dance; from a refined farce of sentiments to the theatre of the absurd. (A small example: Hippolyta seduces a donkey, to the strains of "Nature Boy"),

This re-reading of Shakespeare by Malakhov works in the midst of such variety, under one major premise in the turning of everything into its opposite, beginning with the basic conversion of night into day and vice versa.

The midsummer night suggests an entrancing atmosphere in which nothing is impossible. The shadows and the moon enhance the longings of repressed love - and the same? is suffered by the? Puppets - unfaithful and fickle, inconsequential and always moving.

First white magic: two plus two can equal five. The music, and the light, which constantly falls on the figures, affirms this.

But the day has its laws. There will be a wedding, and a group of actors must entertain their sweethearts and their competitors. The actors carry it out in front of group of nobles in a rigid atmosphere underlined by an equally rigid tradition - something that they tried out earlier in the freedom of the woods.

As in Hamlet, the actors become spectators of the fiction which we are watching. Theatre within theatre.

In this way, they usurp our role, putting themselves in our place. And it is here that we must ask ourselves - what do we become?



The answer is almost obvious, but completely unusual. If they become spectators, we, the audience, end up by being fictitious.

This is the second magic of A Midsummer Nights Dream -according to the magnificent proposal of El Podol - and no doubt also according to William Shakespeare.

### **Richmond & Twickenham Times**

March 23, 1990

#### **Hampton Court Theatre**

Standing ovations

#### **John Thaxter**

IN THE twenty years since Peter Brook's disturbing Stratford version of A Midsummer Night's Dream, no English audience has seen a more enthralling production of Shakespeare's most familiar comedy than the extraordinary Soviet one last week unfolding on the stage of Hampton Court Theatre.

Standing ovations and arm-aching applause were the only possible responses to a world of theatrical magic created by a brilliant young company. Once word got around they played to packed houses every night; if you missed it» you missed a real treat.

In exchange for Youth Action's production of Blood Brothers, taken to Kiev last August, the Ukrainians sent us their professional Theatre on the Podol company's staging of a translation by Boris Pasternak, This is a production that all London should see (LIFT organizers please note), and with all due respect to YAT and Eric Yardley, we got the best of the bargain.

There were no language barriers: the story, familiar to every school-leaver, was performed with such delightful invention and mimetic precision that words were seldom necessary, and our guest actors essayed lines in English for the comedy scenes.

Like Brook, artistic director Vitaly Malakhov eschews romanticism, placing his 12 actors in a gymnasium quadrangle hung with ropes; but his is a darker enclosure, a landscape of love shadowed by lust, jealousy and revenge.

For the opening scene, rigid court conventions encase the three stunningly beautiful actresses in stainless steel corsage and touch-me-not hooped skirts. But suddenly, to the liberating strains of Take Five, the scene flies away to an echoing Athenian forest of swamps where a swarthy Robin Goodfellow complete with Pan pipes enjoys extra-curricular privileges with a balletic Titania.

Squabbling lovers, confused by Oberon's spells, settle their differences with spiteful venom (at Saturday's evening performance tall, blonde Helena re-appeared with an elbow bandage after the furious fight) or pursue their sexual inclinations with the fervour of rapists, waving priapic red roses.

Pasternak has cut the fairy attendants, and in his version Titania falls in love with a four-legged centaur - the hee-hawing Bottom., plus Snout as the back half of a pantomime donkey. Comic routines and dumb shows are brilliantly staged, with Peter Quince played by Podol star Igor Krirkunov, affectionately caricaturing the company's own dynamic director.

A valuable change is to move the Mechanicals' burgomask (a spirited Kiev hoe-down) to bridge the interval, allowing the 'tedious brief scene of Pyramus and Thisbe, to end the performance on a note of mirthless, suicidal tragedy, with Titania/Hyppolita keening over Bottom's lifeless corpse,

The Podol set was recreated at Hampton Court by TTC's Jean Goodwin, with lighting by Chris Davies: Podol's young stage manager Dmitri Filin pronounced herself delighted with the theatre's marvelous box of technical tricks.