SEDERI Yearbook
ISSN: 1135-7789
sederiyearbook@yahoo.es
Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies
España

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Las Alegres Casadas Festival Internacional de Teatro Clásico de Almagro Espacio Miguel Narros, 17 July 2015

SEDERI Yearbook, núm. 26, 2016, pp. 226-238
Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies
Valladolid, España

PERFORMANCE REVIEWS*

Las Alegres Casadas
Festival Internacional de Teatro Clásico de Almagro
Espacio Miguel Narros, 17 July 2015

Isabel Guerrero
Universidad de Murcia, Spain

CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

Director and adaptation: Andrés Lima

Cast: Maite Redín, Patxi Perez, Adriana Olmedo, Natalia Díaz and Fernando Romo

Set design: Beatriz San Juan

Lighting design: Koldo Tainta

Produced by Tdiferencia and La Nave teatro

On the evening of the 17th of July 2015, the Festival International de Teatro Clásico de Almagro presented a performance of *Las Alegres Casadas* by the companies Tdiferencia and La Nave Teatro, directed

* *Sederi Yearbook* collaborates with www.ReviewingShakespeare.com, the first website devoted to scholarly reviews of and writing about worldwide Shakespearean performance (theatre, film, TV) for a general audience. Reviews about Shakespearean performances worldwide submitted for publication to the *Sederi Yearbook* are sent to the team of specialists managing *ReviewingShakespeare*, and they will decide whether the review might also be suitable for publication on their webpage. Inversely, a selection of reviews of Spanish and Portuguese productions of Shakespeare's plays submitted to ReviewingShakespeare are also considered for publication in the *Sederi Yearbook*.

and adapted by Andrés Lima from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The production was staged in the Espacio Miguel Narros, one of the open-air venues of the festival situated at the intersection of two streets surrounded by some of the emblematic sixteenth century buildings of the town. Lima, one of the best-known theatre directors in contemporary Spanish theatre, has regularly staged Shakespeare's plays, including this one, which he directed for Le Comedie Française in 2009. In contrast to his previous production of the play, which was more in the style of the French company with a large cast and which included all the plotlines in Shakespeare's text, this new work is performed by five actors who impersonate ten characters, and focuses on the main plot involving Falstaff and the merry wives.

Little of Shakespeare's only English comedy remains truly English here. Whether or not the action, according to the dialogue, takes place in Windsor, the mention of the locale disappears from the title in order to, if not explicitly re-contextualise the action in present-day Spain, at least bring it closer to the audience. As Lima states: "[It is] Windsor, England, at some point in the early seventeenth century. And, however, it could be Teruel, Spain, at some point in the early twenty-first century. Or Seville, or Pamplona or Amsterdam or London or Madrid: anywhere where there is desire, morality, playfulness and interest."[1] Even though the action could take place anywhere, the character of Falstaff acquires new meanings on the twenty-first century Spanish stage. As someone who tries to enjoy himself at the expense of deceiving others, the character brings to mind the numerous cases of political corruption in the country. Spectators unfamiliar with the character get to know his personality from the very first scene: the production opens with the stage in darkness while sexual moans and laughing is heard and, as the lights progressively come up, Falstaff comes into view in an explicit sexual position with one of the ladies at the Garter Inn, while two other female characters drink and frolic with him. The conversation between Falstaff and the host of the inn, here one of the

[1] "Windsor, Inglaterra, mil seiscientos y pico. Y sin embargo podría ser Teruel, España, dos mil y pico. O Sevilla o Pamplona o Ámsterdam o Londres o Madrid: cualquier lugar donde exista el deseo, la moral, el juego y el interés." Andrés Lima, *Las Alegres Casadas*. Andrés Lima, sinopsis, *Las alegres casadas*. Accessed 02 September 2016. http://tdiferencia.com/archivos/7/LAS_ALEGRES_CASADAS_sinopsis.pdf. My translation.

ladies, reveals that this is a meeting of old friends and, together, they remember that old story of Falstaff and some merry wives of the town that took place years ago. This opening scene serves as an introduction for the adventures of Falstaff and the merry wives.

The production relies on the representation of the characters and on references to popular culture to update the comedy and compensate for the loss of most of the puns and linguistic jokes in Shakespeare's text. The names of the characters are altered: Alice and Frank Ford are Barbara and Francis, and the Pages change their surname to Ferrari. All the actors, except the one performing Falstaff, play several roles. The wives are the two ladies at the Garter Inn, which appears as a kind of brothel, Francis Ford is also a drunken costumer at the inn, and the host and George Ferrari are played by the same actress. The performance style of most of the characters is farce, with the exception of Falstaff and the wives, who are played in a more realistic style. Mr Ford is a histrionic jealous husband whose alter ego —here the French-man Maese Cendrier instead of Mr Brook— is even more excessive; and the actress performing Mr Ferrari does not play the character as a man but, rather, as the stereotype of a man performed by a woman. Apart from renaming the Pages as Ferrari, identifying both families with popular car brands, there are other references to popular culture, such as the names of the Fords' servants (Julio César, Marco Antonio, Valentino and Giorgio Armani, names that Mrs Ferrari and Mrs Ford seem to deliberately make up when they call for them to carry the basket where Falstaff is hidden); and the allusion to two of the Ford brothers, John and Henry, guarding the entrance at Falstaff's second visit, as the third, Harrison (Ford) has not arrived.

Fig. 1. Marquee lights, *Las alegres casadas* (2015). © Tdiferencia

Other influences from popular culture can be observed in the set and the soundtrack. The former is composed of three sets of marquee lights, like those in old fashioned movie theatres and cabaret shows, which are used to locate the onstage action. A marquee light with the word "bar" in capital letters places the action at the Garter Inn, Ford's house is

represented with a marquee light in the shape of the sketch of a house, and the last location in the forest is indicated with the word "bosque" [forest]. The marquee lights are movable, and they are brought to the foreground in the transitions between scenes to signal a change in location. The soundtrack, with songs from Paolo Conte, Patty Pravo and the Rolling Stones, among others, not only accompanies the action, but it also comments on it, as happens, for instance, when the wives enthusiastically decide to play their final revenge on Falstaff as the Rolling Stones' song *Satisfaction* "I can't get no (Satisfaction)" plays in the background.

The forest scene is turned into a kind of fancy dress party in which the characters disclose their true selves. The scene begins with a striptease by Mr Ford, changing his suit for a leopard dressing gown, and continues with him and Mr Ferrari —whose ambiguous gender identity is intensified as he enters in high heels— dancing together. The wives join the party wearing child-like fairy costumes, resembling a caricature of the usually more stylised representation of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Once the couples have executed their revenge on Falstaff, Mrs Ford, who seems to have taken a bit more pleasure in Falstaff's visits than might have been expected, waits until everyone has left to bid him goodbye. The melancholy of this farewell vanishes with the return to the situation in the opening scene, with a happy Falstaff who, surrounded by his friends, has been remembering this old story of the merry wives.

Fig. 2. The merry wives and Falstaff
Las alegres casadas (2015). ©Tdiferencia.

If a new title for this production had to be chosen, one mentioning the location of the action as Shakespeare's play does, this *The Merry Wives* would not be of Teruel, Seville, Pamplona, Amsterdam, London or Madrid, as the director suggests. The performance under the stars at the Espacio Miguel Narros, with the presentation of the story as Falstaff's memories, the festive tone of the whole play and the production ending at almost one o'clock at night, plus the inevitable association of the fake fairies with those in Shakespeare's most popular comedy, turn this production, or at least this performance in Almagro, into *The Merry Wives of a Midsummer Night's Dream*.

How to cite this review:
Guerrero, Isabel. Review of *Las Alegres Casadas*. 2015. Festival Internacional de Teatro Clásico de Almagro. *SEDERI* 26 (2016): 227–31.

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Recreating Shakespeare: *You are my destiny* (*Lo stupro di Lucrezcia*) 12th World Theatre Festival Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, 26 September 2014

Remedios Perni
Universidad Isabel I / Universidad de Murcia, Spain

CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

Director and adaptation: Angélica Liddell

Cast: Joele Anastasi, Ugo Giacomazzi, Fabián Augusto Gómez Bohórquez, Julian Isenia, Lola Jiménez, Andrea Lanciotti, Angélica Liddell, Antonio L. Pedraza, Borja López, Emilio Marchese, Antonio Pauletta, Isaac Torres, Roberto de Sarno, Antonio Veneziano. Chœur ukrainien, Free Voice: Anatolii Landar, Oleksii Ievdokimov, Mykhailo Lytvynenko.

Set design: Angélica Liddell

Music: the Ukrainian Choir Free Voice, Händel

Produced by: Atra Bilis

You are my destiny (Lo stupro di Lucrezia) is the title of Angélica Liddell's theatrical take on Shakespeare's poem *The Rape of Lucrece*. The Spanish playwright and her theatre company, Atra Bilis, premiered this production on the 26th of September 2014 at the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb as part of the 12th World Theatre Festival, where the production was widely applauded. After this success, Atra Bilis toured the play throughout Europe: Venice, Modena, Valencia, Paris and Berlin were just some of the cities where it was staged. What might have attracted the theatre-goers to Liddell's recreation of the Lucrece myth is its quite innovative and even provocative point of departure: instead of victimising Lucrece,

Liddell turns her into the only protagonist of the play, while Tarquin becomes a mute character, almost an object of study exemplifying the consequences of desire.

Angélica Liddell's interest in Shakespeare is well known. She has adapted and directed three of his plays, namely *Hamlet* (*La falsa suicida*, 2000), *King Lear* (*Hysterica Passio*, 2003), and *Richard III* (*El año de Ricardo*, 2005), and the long narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (*You are my destiny*, 2014). In *You are my destiny*, as on the previous occasions, Liddell presents a radically free version of the Shakespearean text. Her aesthetics being a hybrid of baroque and contemporary aesthetics and anachronistic twists, Liddell manages to combine Shakespeare's words with her own lyrical monologue, and also with scenes extending to fifteen or twenty minutes where all the spectators can hear is noise (objects falling, screams), music (Händel or the Ukrainian Choir) or silence.

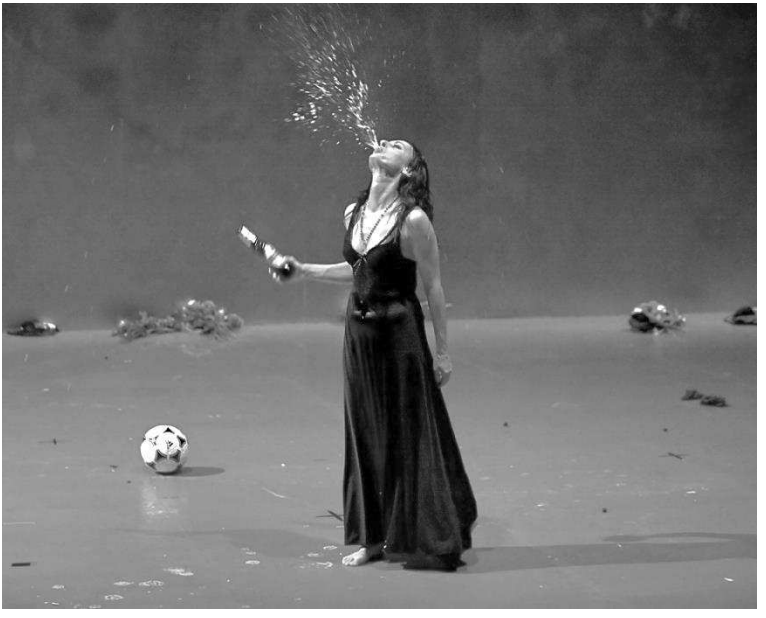
For about two hours and twenty minutes, Liddell provides her audience with a series of performance events, rather than a conventional play, in which only ten lines from Shakespeare's poem are quoted (in Italian in this specific production):

> But will is deaf, and hears no heedful friends;
> Only he hath an eye to gaze on beauty,
> And dotes on what he looks, 'gainst law or duty.
>
> 'I have debated even in my soul,
> What wrong, what shame, what sorrow I shall breed;
> But nothing can affection's course control,
> Or stop the headlong fury of his speed.
> I know repentant tears ensue the deed,
> Reproach, disdain and deadly enmity
> Yet strive I to embrace mine infamy. (Proudfoot *et al*. 2014, 495–504)

By selecting these lines, Liddell focuses on Tarquin's convulsions of the mind. As Liddell herself has written for the programme notes, what interests her is the power of desire over will, the ways in which Tarquin convinces himself that he needs to obey his sex drive, even if he is destined to lose everything afterwards. More traditional interpretations of *The Rape of Lucrece* emphasize either the woman's act of self-destruction to regain dignity or the political consequences of the rape, which leads to the people's uprising, the dethronement of the Tarquins, and the founding of the Roman Republic. Therefore,

the average spectator feels completely astonished when facing the fact that this new Lucrece is mainly fascinated with her rapist's possible motivations and ready to assume what has happened, and go on living and loving her abuser.

Nevertheless, Liddell's version is much more complex than this. Even though Tarquin is said to play a relevant role here, it is Lucrece —played by Liddell herself— who draws most attention to herself, as she is on stage throughout and speaks most of the text. Whereas we hear Tarquin's voice all through the first half of Shakespeare's poem, we only hear Lucrece in Liddell's recreation. But, instead of acquiring the voice of a victim who can articulate her thoughts only in terms of patriarchal ideology, as she does in the poem (lamenting the consequences of men's power but feeling incapable of questioning such power), this new Lucrece speaks about her own observations and experiences (a stay in Venice, a dream, her encounter with Tarquin in Hell) and, furthermore, she dares to deconstruct and decode her own language, yelling, spitting and filling her mouth with beer.



As pointed out by Coppelia Kahn, before being raped Lucrece is a paradigm of the importance of female chastity for the patriarchy; after her suicide, she constitutes a political symbol for the government of men (1997, 34). In Liddell's hands, Lucrece revolts against decency, becoming a sort of punk icon in her leather jacket, a fallen woman drinking alcohol, and a prostitute in a black satin nightgown who offers relief to a group of soldiers after the battle. Thus Lucrece does not provide the patriarchal order with a dead female body to avenge. In that sense, Liddell's work reminds us of *King Kong Theory* (2007) by Virginie Despentes, who has challenged sexism and patriarchy since she survived a rape when she was young.

The staging of the rape of Lucrece itself is challenging due to its iconoclastic nature. It is evoked by a band of drummers playing with increasing speed and intensity while Lucrece is screaming, bawling and shaking violently on the stage. In the meanwhile, Tarquin walks in and stands still. He looks apathetic, insensitive. For more than fifteen minutes, the spectators are confronted with Lucrece's suffering and the abominable idea of her rape at the hands of this man and the ten drummers, who embody Tarquin's violence symbolically through sound. Later in the production these same

drummers appear onstage again. This time they look exhausted; they lean against the wall and cry. They are soldiers and Lucrece is now a nurse who assists them.

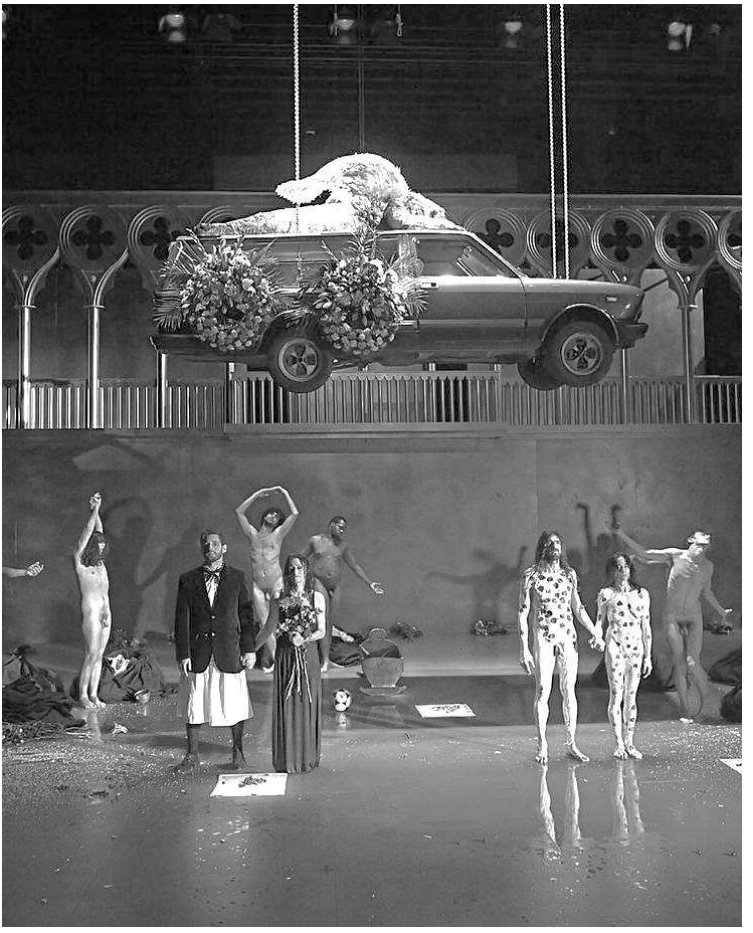
In Liddell's version, Lucrece does not commit suicide but undergoes a series of painful scenes showing both her decadence and rebellious will. Towards the end of the play, she addresses herself to the audience as if summarising the whole series of events:

> And this is how a rapist came and turned me into his lover. Because, among all the men who surrounded me, father, husband and friend, fans of my virtue, slaves of their ambitions, with my blood still warm on the knife, the only one who spoke of love, the only one who did not speak of his fatherland, the only one who did not speak of war, the only one who did not speak of politics, the only one who preferred to lose everything and gain an instant of love was the rapist, Tarquin. (Liddell 2015, 53–54)[2]

Then, instead of stabbing herself and dying publically to restore her chastity, as the patriarchal society seems to demand, this Lucrece celebrates her passionate love with a beer shower. She challenges and subverts social order, and in this way she emancipates herself from what a victim is expected to do as a victim.

But, of course, Angélica Liddell is not so naïve as to conclude her performance here. She ultimately shows a Lucrece who, regardless of her subversive love revelation, is still rooted in our cultural codes and structures. The last scene presents an intriguingly ambiguous "happy" ending. The actors on stage (mainly the drummers, travestied and forming couples) dance to the sound of *You are my destiny*, by Paul Anka. Lucrece is happy at first but then, as the song progresses, her face becomes more and more frightened, whereas Tarquin remains apathetic and uninterested. Finally, a hearse descends from the theatre ceiling, half-covered in flowers, very slowly. This is Lucrece's ironic end.

[2] My translation from the original text in Spanish.



In contrast with other productions based on *The Rape of Lucrece*, Angélica Liddell's recreation of the myth defies the audience's expectations from beginning to end. She substitutes the image of rape with the sound and noise of rape; and she questions the social demands regarding rape through both the exploration of the abuser's drives and the suggestion of a subversive behaviour on the part of the survivor. Finally, when Liddell seems to signal that a new life is possible after the trauma she disarms the spectators with an ultimate ironic twist: Lucrece's destiny is not a socially reintegrated Tarquin; Lucrece's destiny is death. Equally moved and devastated

after more than two hours of beauty and darkness, the spectators cannot but applaud in tears.

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How to cite this review:
Perni, Remedios. "Recreating Shakespeare." Review of *You are my destiny (Lo stupro di Lucrezcia).* 2014. 12th World Theatre Festival, Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb. *SEDERI* 26 (2016): 232–38.

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