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Performance Research Group, salle Dugès, Faculté de
Médecine, Montpellier, 29 June 2013, traverse staging.**

Alban Déléris

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***Macbeth*, mis en scène par Jacquelyn Bessell (dans le cadre du Congrès ESRA
« Shakespeare and Myth », à Montpellier le 29 juin 2013)**

At the beginning of the play, four bodies are lying on the ground, like corpses. All four dressed in black, wearing sportswear clothes, black hoods, black kneepads. Three women, one man.

In this short introduction remains the meaning of the whole performance : acting amounts to an athletic challenge, and 88min (the length of the play) is almost the length of a marathon. In Jacquelyn Bessell's productions, people sweat, people play with guts and tense muscles. And when the play is ending, bodies are back to the ground, lying inert once again, completely exhausted.

The Performance Research Group, based at the Guilford School of Acting at Surrey University, is thus characterized by an approach to Shakespearean text entirely focused on the stage. Dixit Jacquelyn Bessell, « PRG performances incorporate 21st century actor training with verse and text work, and fuse physical theatre with elements of 'original practices' staging, in a approach framed with a strong and abiding punk aesthetic. ».

The principles related to the Performance Research Group were already present in its first production, *Antony and Cleopatra: a cut and a box for two actors and a piano* (2010), which premiered at the 2010 « International Shakespeare Conference », and were at work in this particular reading of *Macbeth*, performed within the International Congress ESRA, « Shakespeare and Myth », organized by the IRCL.

In this very physical and embodied nature of the staging of *Macbeth* lies Bessell's distinguishing feature, giving in this way an invigorating reading of Shakespearean theater. Contemporary in the same time, it goes back to the essential Shakespeare's features and of Elizabethan theater. Minimalist, evocative and, above all, with a great expressive and symbolic power.

It is not surprising that most of the sources claimed by this troupe of actors and English academics are contemporary music sources, including for instance John Cage and the punk movement.

The stage is thus constantly supported by sound experiments based on the use of live music and in particular the use of the so-called « prepared piano » (practice borrowed in part to John Cage). This piano, and also the other instruments or musical elements played during the performance, assure both the coherence of the play and its variety of tones and atmospheres. For instance, a single piano can be used in many ways, and by several musicians, and can suggest different emotional landscapes or narrative frames. It can be played as a drum, to suggest a military scene, or as a punk rock guitar, or even as an harp.

But the most powerful and significant idea, from this point of view, lies in the use of crystal glasses to systematically stress the appearances of Banquo's ghost. Each time the actress playing the character is entering on stage, she and the four other actors, positioned in the corners of the room, clink their crystal glasses. The minimalist aspect of this choice of staging gives a powerful expressivity to this scene, while creating an eerie sound atmosphere, with Hitchcockian accents. At last, we have to notice the presence of the stage director behind the piano : this multiplies the possibilities of action and gives to the performance an improvisation dimension, as in a free-jazz concert.

Another important element of PRG's productions can be found in its particular conception of the relationship between the actor and the audience : it occurs that the spectator is not a passive observer but also an active member of what's happening on stage (this aspect is also stressed by the use of universal lightning). According to that, the performance of *Macbeth* in a small and intimate place (located in the room Dugès of the old Faculty of Medecine), by putting actors and audience in a common space involved such an aesthetic. Similarly, the absence of backstage theater increases the proximity between spectators and actors. These, when they are not playing, stay crouching in the corners of the stage, in front of the audience.

Similarly, the scenic area is characterized by the absence of backstage theater : the actors change, prepare, drink in front of the eyes of the spectator. The gap space between the theatrical action and neutral zone is minimal : in this edge can be measured the risk took by the actors. By the way, an essential component of this representation amounts, as it seems, in the fact that players do not perform in a raised area, but on the same stage plan than the spectators, who become part of the performance not only as passive witnesses. The viewer is thus placed in a « discomfort » area : however, this discomfort is relative because it is not a source of displeasure but just a consequence of the physicality of the staging.

From the beginning of the play, Duncan's character apostrophizes the audience, playing thus with this proximity. Jacquelyn Bessell's staging revives designs of theatrical performance such as those outlined in the scene of the architects in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for it relies less on a mimetic illusion, which would imply a passive public belief, than on a pact of complicity with the spectator. The representation of the plot can then be minimal: a boy is simply designated by a hand gesture of Banquo, but without being played by an actor ; and the baby held in Macbeth's arms is figured (or 'disfigured' to quote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* again) by a sweatshirt, while Macbeth mimics his moans.

In addition, this apparently non-theatrical space is used in all its dramatic potentialities and leads to bold choices : for example, the fight scene between the protagonist and Lady Macbeth on the other side of a door, hiding from the audience what is happening and suggesting the text with actors's loud voices.

Macbeth's role is held here by the comedian Jan Knightley, one of the RPG members since its foundation, and who gives a high contrast to the character's duality. His interpretation alterns moments of calm and moments of terror, during which the character leans toward a grotesque exuberance. By this way, the comedian proposes a new and astonishing interpretation of the character, whose tragic path becomes an infantile regression. The play moving towards its end, Macbeth curls up on himself more and more, sucking his thumb and hiding in Lady Macbeth's skirts.

With its choices of actor playing, the Performance Research Group therefore affirms its commitment to draw links between contemporary practice and a historical restitution of Elizabethan theater practices. As in Elizabethan and Jacobean troupes of actors, the PRG multiplies games of doubling. But far from being a simple effect of reconstitution, this choice involves in enriching the meaning effects produced by Shakespearean text. Jan Knightley thus embodies both Macbeth and one of the murderer character ; and the actress Helena Quinn plays both Lady Macbeth and one of the witches. As in the adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the doubling of roles was extreme, with only two actors interpreting a total of sixteen characters, this process increases the meanings of the play, without losing the audience.

Jacquelyn Bessel's staging is thus based on a high degree of adaptability to the conditions of representation, which are perceived less as constraints than expressive possibilities. In that, she recalls that the principles and the material conditions of performance during the Elizabethan era are transferable today, and may provide staging opportunities for staging that meet the most contemporary proposals.

The performance of *Macbeth* by the Jacquelyn Bessel's Performance Research Group can be considered, by the radicalism of its staging choices, as a bridge between an eminently contemporary theater practice and the numerous attempts to reconstitute the Elizabethan dramatic practices.

The bridges built between those periods are obviously fragile, but however rich in potential.

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