

New and Joyful Encounters with Macbeth in the Turkish Theatre



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ith Macbeth in the Turkish Theatre By Eylem Ejder

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New texts, acting techniques, and production approaches are being revealed in the experimental work by recently founded theatre collectives in Istanbul. In every theatre season, audiences may attend a rich sampling of these experimental offerings. Some are a combination of storytelling form, adaptation of classical text, and physical theatre techniques. Maybe the first full-blown examples of this approach could be seen in two recent *Macbeth* adaptations: *Macbeth / A Nightmare for Two* (*Macbeth/ ?ki Ki?ilik Kâbus*) by Theatre BeReZe and *Under the Castle* (*?atonun Alt?nda*) by Physical Theatre Researches. Here I will present a brief overview of *A Nightmare for Two*, then will focus on the production *Under the Castle*.

Macbeth / A Nightmare for Two

Founded in 2006, Theatre BeReZe makes theatre for adults and young audiences. BeReZe is known for works combining object theatre, physical storytelling performances, and buffoon performances. *Macbeth / A Nightmare for Two* is a product of such an approach. At the center of the stage is a bed surrounded with many night lamps, hanging objects, and to the left is a bobbling coffee machine. A clownish couple,

Macbeth (Erkan Uyan?ksoy) and Lady Macbeth (Elif Temuçin), lying on the bed, cannot fall asleep. Their bedroom is occupied with a sense of uneasiness and sleeplessness since “Macbeth has murdered sleep.” From the first moment to the end, everything happening on stage intertwines with an idea that might be called an “insomniac aesthetic.”^[1] Adapted by Erkan Uyan?ksoy and Elif Temuçin, directed by Do?u Akal, *Macbeth: A Nightmare for Two* premiered on 12 February 2016 in Istanbul, was staged in many theatre festivals in Europe, and is still being staged during this theatre season. Performance brings *Macbeth*'s story on stage through the eyes of a clownish Macbeth-based couple who seem to belong to every age, not only that of Shakespeare.



Macbeth /A Nightmare for Two staged by Theatre BeReZe. Photo: Theatre BeReZe.

This couple seems in-between things like the hanging objects above them, as well as being in-between dream and nightmare, telling and performing, role and self, life and death, sleeping and waking. Throughout the performance, they are repeatedly turning on and off the lamps and drinking cups of coffee. At every turn they are using new and different ways to tell Macbeth's story. Uyan?ksoy, for example, may present Macbeth's encounter with witches as though he is something in-between a traditional storyteller (called “meddah” in Turkish theatre) and a clown storyteller, or he may tell a scene as if he is on the toilet.

Elif Temuçin as Lady Macbeth is preparing a tomato sauce for the scene where they will kill the king. They describe yet another scene where they are giving a free party to the people. They present these in

different ways, sometimes suggesting cartoons or manga movies, popular TV series and musicals, sometimes making fun of today's political leaders and so on. Uyan?ksoy and Temuçin are really the masters of their domain in using the different objects –lamps, flowers, slippers, coffee, toilet rolls, cosmetics, in a highly creative way to suggest the theatrical universe of *Macbeth* to the audience. In doing so, they manage to seem like an ordinary couple rather than an elevated, noble man and wife. Many things on stage, and the way they are utilizing them, seem very simple. Although the performers present themselves as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, in many scenes it is possible to regard them as “Erkan” and “Elif,” who present the story of Macbeth as it touches their own daily lives. *A Nightmare for Two* becomes a shared experience for several sets of two: Macbeth and performer Uyan?ksoy, Lady Macbeth and performer Temuçin, the actors and the audience.

The performance ends in a vicious circle between sleep and sleeplessness where the performers return to the beginning of the play. This makes us feel as if this happens every night, as the couple vainly seek to find peace both in their minds and in the world. Considering the clown-like smiles on their faces at the beginning and end of the performance, when they meet each other like life and death, sleeping and awaking, there remains one question: Is life a short smile which twinkles on our faces during a nightmare?



Left to right: Macbeth (Erkan Uyan?ksoy) and Lady Macbeth (Elif Temuçin). Photo: Theatre BeReZe.

Under the Castle of Macbeth: A Bloody but Lively Macbeth

Written and performed by Pınar Akkuzu, Gülden Arsal and directed by Güray Dinçol, *Under the Castle* premiered in May 2016 and was still being presented in this fall season. It is the first play by Physical Theatre Researches/Fiziksel Tiyatro Araştırmalar? (FTA for short hereafter), a theatre collective researching the possibilities of a new storytelling and acting style involving acting in masks and utilizing grotesque, buffoon, and clown work based on Jacques Lecoq's pedagogy.

Under the Castle, built upon these techniques, tells the story of Macbeth and his ancestors through the eyes of two laundry women, Mei (performed by Gülden Arsal Yavuz) and Po (performed by Pınar Akkuzu) living under Macbeth's castle. It has a simple set (designed by FTA), with plain pinned up sheets, a washtub and two strange women in the same clothes. Here is the bottom, the depths of the castle where they have been washing and will wash the bloody bed sheets of those in power for many years.

We don't know much about these women. How long have they been living there? How old are they? Do they have a story of their own? Are they wise or ignorant? Are they a kind of Shakespearean jester who dares to say everything in their mind, wisely and subtly? They seem timeless and their bodies are strange. Perhaps they got stuck in this place and the best thing they can do is to struggle to survive by telling stories. Mei and Poe seem to be buffoon creatures whose bodies and voices are formless, monstrosities living outside any values or norms. They can criticize, ridicule, make fun of, and unmask everything limitlessly ranging from politics, gender, death, sex, will for power, royalty, reputation and the human condition, to the genres of tragedy and comedy, Shakespeare and even the audience. Seen from buffoon's point of view, Shakespeare oscillates between the fields of tragedy and comedy, becoming destructive, uncanny, strange, monstrous, as well as extremely funny, amusing, provocative and irritating. We audiences may have witnessed Macbeth's story many times in different theatrical forms and adaptations, but this was the first time we have seen it through the eyes of such grotesque underground figures.

The performance takes place after Macbeth's death. The two buffoon laundry women have come to the stage without saying anything. They watch the audience for a while and then try to say something. Like their comic, strange, amorphic bodies, their voices were also strange and comic, which make us laugh. They look both familiar and strange. So, from the first moment they appeared on stage, they captured the audience's attention. Then, they began to tell Macbeth's tragic life with direct address to the audience. They sometimes asked questions about this well-known story to the audience while telling and performing it. This was the first dimension of the performance. It was in storytelling form, a narrative theatre where these buffoons performed the characters Lady Macbeth, Banquo, Macduff, Macbeth, Duncan. Having witnessed many wars, bloody attacks, killed kings and babies for many years, now is the time to tell the story they witnessed, to the audience, but in a highly funny and thought-provoking way.



Mei (Gülden Arsal) in *Under the Castle*. Photo: Murat Dürüm.

Under the Castle followed the same chronology as *Macbeth*, beginning with his bravery, first crime, becoming a king, and ending with his being killed. Throughout the performance, Gülden Arsal and P?nar Akkuzu presented highly creative, amazing scenes while utilizing only two old sheets and a few clothes- pegs.

I was struck by almost every scene, which made us both laugh and be horrified in the same moment. But one of them captured everyone’s heart, when, slobbering, they ate dark red beets which they spattered around while recounting the horrible bloody murders. This had the audience rolling in the aisles. I still remember what an audience sitting beside me told me just after the performance: “After this, I cannot stand any classic interpretation of Shakespeare.” *Under the Castle* is an uncanny spectating experience as well as being extremely funny and enjoyable. It is true that all the audience had great pleasure in seeing Macbeth’s story from a point of view which has perhaps never been seen.

But what does it mean to have such a spectating experience? How does it feel to laugh while watching *Macbeth* both performances *A Nightmare for Two* and *Under the Castle*? I can’t help thinking how and why we audience were filled with joy in this relentless, wild, out of joint world. Is it only because the laundry buffoons seemed highly comic with their strange bodies and voices or because the clownish Macbeth couple manages to present every scene so admirably? Might it be because they are making fun, talking about things what we do not dare talk about even today? Perhaps they managed to present how this masculine, authoritarian world, which the audience can see reflected in Turkey’s current situation, is

doomed to fall and be re-built in a vicious circle. I think physical theatre techniques from buffoon to clown in storytelling form give both performers and audience an opportunity, a shared experience: perhaps by exposing all the repressed “under the castles” we have and the “nightmares” we experience, these evenings seek to fill these dark spaces with a bit of joy and laughter.

[1] I would like to draw attention to many solo performances in this theatre season in Turkey which are based on a “dramaturgy of insomnia.” This means the action takes place during a night when the character is imprisoned by sleeplessness. The only thing s/he can do to deal with this situation is to tell his/her own story until he/she falls asleep. Examples include: *Tehlikeli Oyunlar (Dangerous Games)*, performed by Erdem ?enocak and staged by Seyyar Sahne; *Dirmit* performed by Nezaket Erden and staged by Theatre Hemhâl; a Shakespeare collage, *?izo?eyks*, performed by Yi?it Sertdemir and staged by Alt?dan Sonra Tiyatro.

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