

The World's Great Theatre

Shakespeare has everything, his times and ours, the grandeur of literature and the miracles that art achieves in people's lives.

The theatre is like bullfighting, an extreme art form, in which the work is either very good or very bad but there is no intermediate position. Madrid has had the opportunity for barely 4 days of seeing an extraordinary performance produced by a wonderful Anglo-Irish director, Declan Donnellan, of Shakespeare's tragicomedy, *the Winter's Tale*.

It is some time since I have seen a play that has kept me almost in a trance for the nearly three hours that it lasted. Not even another play from the same director, *Measure for Measure*, by Shakespeare, which was also remarkable and which was put on by a company of Russian actors, gave me that sensation of beauty and originality, of craftsmanship and absolute perfection, which, I am sure, all those who saw the play in the Maria Guerrero theatre will never forget. (I would mention in passing the pleasure it gave me to witness, on the night I went, the large number of young people and adolescents who filled the boxes, stalls and balconies).

In spite of the fact that Donnellan takes a lot of liberties with the original text, I bet the house that if the great English bard had seen what the Anglo-Irish director did with his *Winter's Tale* he would have felt as happy as we the spectators did. This is because the re-creation of this work which Donnellan has devised serves to reveal the hidden potential in its verses and in its melodramatic history, that is, the universal and the contemporary. No sooner had I seen it, reconstructed on stage by the knowledge of the dramaturg, I rushed to read it again and it was a complete revelation to notice that in fact with its dishevelled fantasy and its outrageous coincidences and puns, with its extravagant characters and even its fantasy geography (in which Bohemia has a maritime port), the *Winter's Tale* is absolutely a reflection of our time, our conflicts, a work which denounces the absurdity and the wickedness in which our politicians move, the social upheavals which cause the injustices committed by a more or less stupid potentate, and, in spite of all this, how beautiful life can be at times for all of us, rich and poor, victims and victimisers, when one loves or dances or sings, and a group of friends and young couples meet to escape for a few hours from the daily routine, slavery and misery in the intoxication and enjoyment of a party.

All the actors are so good, they enact their specific role so rigorously, they embody with such efficiency their characters that it seems unjust to single out the formidable performance of Orlando James as the paranoid Leontes, king of Sicily, around whom a large part of the work centres. He does it magnificently, with a versatility that enables him to go from comic to tragic, from sentimental to epic with the same ease as he cries, moans, lets his hair down and roars with laughter. It seems unreal that an actor can change in such a way and so many times in the course of the play. The aggravated jealousy of this lunatic, the King Leontes, sets in train a story, which, with its roots in the red-hot Sicilian earth, will cover half of Europe, provoking multiple upheavals and catastrophes and showing the diversity of humanity; shepherds, swindlers, servants, nobles, gentlemen, comics and travelling minstrels, many of them with names and reminiscences of Greek myths. The spell is such that at any given moment we have the impression of the whole world before our eyes, a little universe in which, just as in *el Aleph* by Borges, the whole of humanity is within our grasp.

And the same praise could be given about the lighting, the music, and the costumes. A few blocks of wood are sufficient for Nick Ormerod, the set designer, to assemble and dismantle scenes, which in spite of the simplicity of the structure, make us visit sumptuous palaces, wastelands, meadows where the sheep graze, country villages, and community festivities.

This year is the 400th anniversary of the deaths of Shakespeare and Cervantes. Would that the author of the *Quijote*, the symbol of our literary culture and language, that simple man, both good and tragic who was ignored and mistreated by his contemporaries, should receive similar homage as that rendered by Declan Donnellan to the author of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and so many other fine works. Because a performance such as the one he has achieved with the *Winter's Tale*, shows us in a vivid and immediate way, appealing directly to our sensibility and fantasy, the incredible richness and variety of the imagination with which that obscure comedian (about whom we know almost nothing, except that he wrote innumerable, veritable works of art, and retired from the theatre and literature when he had earned sufficient money to live as a wealthy landlord) created a world as rich and diverse as the one we live in, except that it is always beautiful, in spite of the violence which pervades it and the tragedies it suffers, ever more beautiful, thanks to the music and the magic of the words that compose it, that miraculous ability to turn sadness into joy, hate to enjoyment, brutality and horror into generosity and majesty. Shakespeare has everything, his times and ours, what is both identical and different in each, the grandeur of the literature and the miracles that art achieves in people's lives, just like the way in which the lives of human beings reveal at the same time good fortune and misfortune, pain and joy, passion, betrayal, heroism and ignominy. All the vast richness of the world dreamed up by Shakespeare shines with blinding splendour in this *Winter's Tale* produced by Declan Donnellan.

A final comment. This work performed by the Cheek by Jowl company, which Donnellan directs, has relied on the collaboration of various European theatre groups in France, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain and has been put on in Madrid, in English, with a Spanish translation for those who could not follow the text in the original language. And this has not proved an obstacle to a fascinated audience enjoying what was happening onstage and showing their appreciation to the actors with a spectacular ovation. What conclusion can one draw from all this? What was always thought to be a major impediment for theatre companies moving in the wider world – different languages – no longer is, not only because modern life has made it an inevitable necessity to learn foreign languages but also, above all, because today there is technology which enables plays to be followed in translation almost as perfectly as in the original language. Let us hope the example of Declan Donnellan and his company Cheek by Jowl is followed by many others and (ah, this will not be easy!) with the same quality.