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Title: Theater Review: *Queen Lear* by Nina's Drag Queens (Alessio Calciolari, Gianluca Di Lauro, Sax Nicosia, Lorenzo Piccolo and Ulisse Romanò)

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 6 (2019)

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Publication date: August 2019

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/?p=4368>

Keywords: Theater Review

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Queen Lear. Directed and interpreted by Nina's Drag Queens (Alessio Calciolari, Gianluca Di Lauro, Sax Nicosia, Lorenzo Piccolo and Ulisse Romanò). Script by Claire Dowie. Translated by Michele Panella and Lorenzo Piccolo. Music by Francesco Mieli. Aparte Soc. Coop, Centro D'Arte Contemporanea Teatro Carcano and Teatro Metastasio Di Prato Co-production. 110 minutes.

Established in Milan in 2007, with Francesco Micheli as artistic director, Nina's Drag Queens is an *en travesti* theatre company that exploits the plasticity and intrinsic theatricality of the drag performer. The stage is reclaimed by the company for the purpose of confronting how we feel about identity and community, with the re-creation of a corporeal aesthetic of excess never being an end in and of itself but rather a thought-provoking ruse for social critique. After successful adaptations of Anton Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard / Il giardino delle ciliegie* (2012), John Gray's *The Beggar's Opera / L'opera del mendicante* (2015) and Jean Cocteau's *The Human Voice / Vedi alla voce Alma* (2016), the theatre company continues to rewrite the "theatre classics." This year it was the turn of Shakespeare's most tragic of tragedies, *King Lear*, which is *queered* by the drag queens into *Queen Lear*. The show premiered on January 10, 2019 at the Carcano Theatre in Milan, where it was extremely well received.

Representing the play's title, Lea R. is an old lady who emigrated to London in the 1970s. Clearly set in more contemporary times, the play begins with a sorrowful Lea taking down the sign of her homonymous doll shop, which is shutting down for good. This ceasing of activity thus becomes the correlative of the woman's physical decay and senility, the *fil rouge* of the narration and starting point around which the actions of the other characters revolve. The heart-breaking conflict between what old age should be like and what it actually is could not create a more tragic image. The woman laments the lack of filial love, as her daughters Gonerilla, Regana and Cordelia (Italian Shakespearian counterparts) are seemingly too busy with their lives to take care of their demented mother.

The division of King Lear's kingdom among his progeny is taken up and masterfully bent to the play's needs. At the hands of the drag queens, that is, Lea's material realm (wealth) is turned into an affective and interpersonal one (need for daughters' love). This is visually conveyed through the thousands of dolls that she would like to move from her shop to her daughters' homes – an idea that Gonerilla and Regana initially and categorically oppose before conceding to keeping just a few of them (as in Shakespeare's drama, Cordelia, the "good" daughter, is absent for most of the play). The dolls are more than just an obsessive detail throughout the performance. They are figurative reminders of the old mother's cumbersome presence that the two women are not willing to fully accept. Treatment of dysfunctional filial love in *Queen Lear* follows a crescendo movement that culminates in Lea's vision, just moments before her death, of the ghosts of her own daughters. The vision amounts to a metaphorical extension of her ties with them, which we perceive, just as she does, to be shattered and beyond repair.

Despite the tragic nature of the narrated events, the show, for the first part at least, is able to provide an adequate measure of comic relief, thanks to the presence of the drag queens on stage and to their exquisite blending of elements and scenes from Shakespeare's original tragedy with gags, cabaret sketches, and obsessive repetitions. These features lighten up the overall mood of the play without falling into the trap of laughter purely for its own sake; it is never laughter of the *ludicrous*, but always of the *ridiculous*.

Visually speaking, *Queen Lear* is a ravishing production where nothing is left to chance, from scenography to choreography, or from stage direction to stage dialogue. The play's appeal stems in

part from the sensual charm it exerts on the audience from the very first scene, which opens with Lea's aesthetically pleasing shop that affords the illusion of being inside an actual pastel-colored dollhouse of a typically British style. Gonerilla, Regana and Cordelia are each given a portrait doll by Lea, who, at times, talks to her daughters through the dolls themselves. In a continual contamination between the animate and the inanimate, the dolls serve a precise semiotic function here by standing in as sign-vehicles for the fondness that the sick and old mother demands of her daughters.

Music is another crucial element in this play, particularly with regard to the drag queens' performances. Borrowing from Shakespeare's own amalgamation of high and low culture, *Queen Lear* gains strength from combining different genres at once. This fusion of genres occurs not just in terms of theatrical variety (from tragedy to comedy to pantomime) but also in terms of disparate music styles. The latter creates a hybrid form wherein pop, rap, electronic music and opera coexist. Dialogues are a collage of excerpts from well-known Italian pop songs from the 1980s and 1990s and other international hits, TV shows and cult movies (Franco Battiato's *La cura / The Cure*, 1996; Lucio Dalla's *Attenti al lupo / Beware of the Wolf*, 1990; Gianna Nannini's *Meravigliosa creatura / Amazing Creature*, 1995; *Francamente me ne infischio / Frankly, I don't give a damn*, 1999; Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*, 1978; Paul Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence*, 1964; *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, to name but a few). The drag queens also lip-sync, adapting their verses to those of other artists in a chain of allusions and inter-textual references. It is remarkable the way in which they are able to do this, eschewing what could easily become Babelic confusion by way of attentively selecting the right excerpts so as to create a coherent internal narrative.

In queer (performative) art, recourse to "drag" – notably, a male performer passing as a woman – generally serves as an anti-essentializing ruse that challenges normative, heterosexual assumptions about the world and our place(s) in it. This draws special attention to the imitative nature lying at the heart of our daily gender performances, that is to say the enactment of our masculinity and femininity in ways that are deemed socially proper. In the case of Nina's *Queen Lear*, however, and as confirmed during the course of a private conversation with the performers, what is at stake is not so much deconstructing static definitions and binary identifications (though also, inevitably, achieving this effect), but rather experimenting with the plasticity and privileged point of view of queerness. The *in-betweenness* of drag allows for multiple perspectives, making us question the veracity of what is being said and inevitably prompting us to participate emotionally in it. In Nina's play, drag thus becomes the modern-day version of the Shakespearean fool (as opposed to the clown), which can speak from behind its mask – of queerness/madness, that is – whilst also playfully reversing the Elizabethan theatrical custom of having male actors interpreting female roles.

Queen Lear draws situations and characters from the Shakespearian tragedy, though always adapting them to the present day, with moorlands becoming nursing homes and madness turning into senile dementia. But *Queen Lear* also acquires a topical dimension by integrating the adapted elements into pressing issues of our time, such as the already mentioned old age and illness, but also the controversial matter of im/migration. The character of Edmund, for example, retains his status of 'otherness' from Shakespeare's play, becoming an Italian immigrant in a post-Brexit Great Britain. His words appear all too familiar to today's viewers, in light of recent appalling comments made by British politicians about Europeans: "Perché ci marchiano come feccia? Come infami?/ Migranti illegali, stranieri criminali,/ bastardi, terroristi, invasori, mercenari, ladri di lavoro" [Why do they treat us as dregs of society? As villains? / Illegal migrants, criminal foreigners,/ bastards, terrorists, invaders, mercenaries, job stealers]. On the other hand, with a twist of irony that is characteristic of the drag queens' dramaturgy, the British situation is transposed into the populist views of modern Italian politics. Oswald, here a surprisingly sprightly patient who is at the same hospice as Lea, provides us with a memorable and highly irreverent rant, paraphrasing slogans used in anti-immigrant political rallies in Italy, which s/he does in a most racist language

in strada ormai son tutti stranieri, sti negri, perché son sempre negri anche se sembran bianchi, son negri travestiti, ci vengono a prendere il lavoro, arrivano sui containers, con le barche, con le barche, a me piaceva molto prendere il sole in spiaggia, pensa che bello, fossi più giovane e fossi in spiaggia e arrivassero sti negri, non c'è lavoro, l'ho visto nei films, il paese è rovinato, ti sembra l'Inghilterra questa?

[In the streets they are all foreigners, these blacks, for they are always black even if they seem they're white, they're blacks in disguise. They come here to steal our jobs, they come in containers, on boats. I used to like sunbathing on the beach, if only I were younger how nice it'd be, to be on the beach and see them coming, these blacks. There are no jobs. I saw it in the movies, the country is shattered: does this look like England to you?]

The parody here is not of the demented character but rather of the social and racial prejudices in relation to which we recognize ourselves and those around us.

The drag queens take up the various Shakespearian roles in their bold rewriting of *King Lear*, stepping in and out of them such that their own personal experience as (queer) drag performers is incorporated therein: “Di rimorsi/di rimpianti/tempo più non è/ Per guardare ancora avanti” [Of regrets/ and repentances/ it is no longer time/ To look at the future]; “L'avventura di una vita/spiegare non si può/ Nelle cose che hai lasciato” [The adventure of one's life/ one cannot explain/ in the things you left behind]. They might choose attention-grabbing costumes and exaggerated makeup and hairstyles, but such choices are never an end in themselves. In the same way as the Shakespearian fool, the drag queens, too, are able to stimulate debates on, and engagement with, what is being represented – which, perhaps, works best among an educated audience familiar with the current state of affairs and aware of the inherently disrupting and desecrating nature of “the queer.”

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