

Waiting for... Rambuku

Performance review: National Theatre „Mihai Eminescu” – Timișoara: *Rambuku* by Jon Fosse, translation: Daria Ioan, adaptation: Anca Măniuțiu, stage and artistic director: Mihai Măniuțiu, set design: Adrian Damian, choreography: Andrea Gavrilu, original music: Mihai Dobre, light design: Lucian Moga, photo credits: Teatrul Național „Mihai Eminescu” – Timișoara¹.

There was once an anecdote told by a teacher to his students of an empty jar in which he first put three golf balls until the jar was full. Then he asked the students if anything else fitted in. They said no. Then he poured in little stones that filled the empty spaces between the golf balls. Then he asked the students again if the jar was full. The students said yes. Then he took sand and poured in some, until the jar was completely full. Then he asked the students if there was anything else to fill the jar with. The students said no. The sand in the jar had filled all the possible empty spaces between all those irregular pieces of matter. There was no way the teacher could fit anything else in there other than by taking something out. Then he took the cup of coffee he had sitting on his desk and poured its content inside the jar. Not only had the coffee found its way between all that matter in different shapes but it also had surrounded the sand, the stones and the golf balls, giving it all another shade of dark.

The idea behind this experiment was that no matter what you fill your life with – family, a house, roles played by golf balls, your job, a vacation – signaled by the stones, and the small things we do every day – the sand, there is always room for a cup of coffee with a friend. The attention should fall here on the coffee, more specifically on its liquid state. The way it comprises

¹ *Rambuku* was distinguished with the Award for the Best Performance in Romania, given by the jury of The Romanian Association of Theatre Artists in 2018.

and the way it disseminates. Like music; a superior form of spreading meaning which pierces through your skin and by the octave, it makes even more room under your skin, it takes you places you never know existed inside you. And it fills them with expectation. The way water (or coffee) would fill an already full jar, music flows through the theatre hall, from the speakers directly to your skull filling it. This is what *Rambuku* feels like in its first seconds.

Packed with spectators, props, carpets and chairs, the theatre is swallowed whole by music. It wraps all the souls in the room, the stage expands and it feels like everyone is travelling to a single direction: The Wailing Wall. Music is topographical. The cry is one of hope and detachment from all that is earthly and perishable. Then movement begins with singular shakes at first, which then become ritualistic and extremely convincible in extrapolating dynamics into expression. They sketch the prelude of a world incarcerated by the ability or inability to manifest specific ways of expression. Each movement becomes a statement played on the verses in Hebrew, sang from deep within, an eloquence which accompanies every statement that spreads its shadows onto the Wall.



Musicality and fluidity are used by Jon Fosse in his writing by creating a text which avoids punctuation. The director Mihai Măniuțiu embraces this important aspect and masterly relies on it for the staged version of *Rambuku*. While adapting the original text for the stage, Anca Măniuțiu depicts the artistic vanishing point by passing capital letters or full stops. This unlocks the door to opportunity for the multiplication of body movement, of speech and of countless hermeneutical resonances. The image is that of mirrors facing each other creating the illusion of the same framework which multiplies endlessly. Hence the mystifying swirl of movement unleashed by the main dancer, played wonderfully by choreographer Andrea Gavrilu, who plants the seed of expectation and urges to hermeneutical exercise. With its exquisite equilibrium, this androgynous appearance raises questions and depicts this persona who seems to hold the key to the happiness of the two characters on one hand, and on the other, it dictates the flow of the performance. Like a mystic choir conductor, it spreads the energy on precise channels in order to throw all other dancers to the same rhythm, which articulates its universality. As if music, environment and all other components of this world of colossal implications begin with its very moves.

Directorial intention catches fire when speech emerges. Still there remains the question whether we attend a theatre of sensorial exaggeration to achieve the peaks of expression or we stand to acknowledge the senses that come to submerge the craters left when speech and all other senses fail. But do they fail? If you judge by the tone the female character takes, we can almost see the edges of lamentation: a constant cry that seemingly fails to impress the male character, asking him boldly to follow. In fact, both Him (played by Ion Rizea) and Her (Claudia Ieremia) are designed in contrast with the dancing group which, in total synchronized shifts, and wearing the same make up, assure the non-verbal side of the story which we later learn it is anything but silent through its solidity. Statically, the main characters start communicating which comes more as a need for communication that seems to be the only thing they share. They address each other, She fluidly, He in syncopes, expressing wishes, convinced of their dreadful condition and stating resolutions for their near future at present tense. Yet they speak of a beautiful place, a place like no other, the place at the end of their journey. Still, her tone is the opposite of vivacious and his reaction somber.



Actually, the more you focus on them, the more you realize that both Him and Her act the exact opposite of how they appear; He is the silent one, lacking expression or energy to invest in the outside world, absent-minded and introvert. Yet he is fully dressed, umbrella in hand, ready to give a reaction to the external stimuli, stately looking in the eyes of what awaits them, almost looking afraid. She on the other hand, the extrovert, seems to know all the details of their journey, acknowledges there *is* a journey to go through, yet she utters her conviction on the verge of madness, undisturbed and to herself, half naked, out of a bath tub where she sits still with her hair wet and her running mascara. She seems to be reiterating the same sentences and urges her male partner to utter the same words, over and over again, as if she held the only key to enunciation Elysium. She acts like a nervous teacher that is too eager to get her answers that she fails in waiting for her student to discover the key at his own pace. She asks her counterpart to

repeat after her, words at first, then a whole sentence, yet she is always the one finishing the utterance for him. She gives opportunities only to take them back by avoiding the thinking. Her precarious state contrasts also with what she says about the place where their journey leads them, however, her strong inducement keeps her going towards the answer of all questions, the ideal state of pleasure, love and all that is good – Rambuku. She is sure to know how to handle Rambuku. At this state of the play, She even tells Him how they are to act once they reach their destination. She is even looking for palpable arguments to convince Him of her beliefs... out of a giant yellow globe where you guess She has been contained, book in hand, by her own eloquence. They don't seem to be reaching the same Rambuku. He would be reaching the one that is imposed by the image she creates, should he choose to accept her version of it. We do not find out in the end who had accepted whose Rambuku. But it did have the same effect on their bodies, i.e. corpses.





The appearance is grim. It calls for stiffness and stringency. But body movement speaks volumes. We can literally refer to the dancing characters as human props. Him and Her get to watch this hypnotizing dance without understanding how it's done but taking it as a pattern to try and follow on their way to their dear Rambuku. Not sure if out of her bold belief, the fact that she repeats its name approximately 345 times or she is delusional, but at a certain moment when silence masters the scene, Rambuku personifies.

What follows is what is expected; she paces the same steps the Vision makes with no trace or sound, and, without asking questions they transcend. The wait to get to Rambuku is over. But Godot never arrived either. As the water drips on stage the lights grow dim and the questions arise. There are no palm trees, nor flowers growing from the grey walls. Their presence induces the diminishing scale one assumes in prayer. The equality against the wall is fierce. Still, the walls are mobile; in fact the walls are the most versatile of all the objects in the set design, including the main characters.

The walls are moving on stage not as a coincidence but as a promise to protect and keep crib to those who need safety but stand tall for those who lean upon it. Also, intentional are the lights that come almost thoroughly from above the walls, they shift focus and playfully light the wait to absolution. Imposing and minimalist, the lights are sprayed enough to tower the stage – blackened by the grim – grey ground and stiff – scooped silence.

Which is better: to stand your ground, be a silent observer and face reality or act like a loud speaker which, through reiteration, hopes to give extra significance to her own imagination? Which one is waiting in awe and which one is frightened? Which one is right? Or better yet, who is delusional? What does it take to fill an already full jar? Is there anything after Rambuku?... there were no more students to say yes.

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