

Beyond Shakespearean Adaptations: Reimagining the Bard's Universe

Alongside productions directly inspired by Shakespeare's works, the festival has consistently included pieces that either re-create, reconstruct, or engage in intertextual dialogue with the Shakespearean universe. Whether through textual collage or the use of new technologies—especially media—to reimagine iconic scenes or representations, these works seek to break free from conventional theatrical dynamics. They propose alternatives that range from avant-garde to postmodern, challenging more traditional interpretations.

One particularly delightful surprise in this vein was *FEAST: a play in one cooking*, produced by the British company Parrabbola, directed by Philip Parr, and based on a text by Olivia Negrean, who also performs as Ophelia. The concept is both original and masterfully executed: six of Shakespeare's most compelling female characters—Ophelia, Lady Macbeth (Marie Rabe), Lady Anne (Charlie Coletta), Imogen (Hannah Lucas), Emilia (Beatrice Bowden), and Isabella (Sara Barison) (one might wonder why Juliet was not included)—come together to cook and converse about their lives and fates.

The setting itself is telling: in a patriarchal world, where else would women gather but the kitchen? Yet, this "girls' night in," centered around communal cooking, creates an intimacy that encourages the characters to open up, share their stories, and reflect on their experiences. As they prepare dishes that the audience is invited to taste at the end—an act of generosity and symbolic openness—they debate, challenge each other, ask questions, and seek solutions together. The dialogue is rich with allusion, irony, and subtle humor, all of which deepen the meaning of the piece.

The characters observe that, in Shakespeare's plays, women invariably die, often relegated to secondary roles or defined by their relationships with men—whether as supporters, lovers, or victims. Despite their differences in age, social status, temperament, and destiny, there is a sense of familiarity that sometimes bridges, sometimes accentuates, their disparities. The strongest element of the performance is the text itself, which weaves intelligent intertextual references from Shakespeare's works and critical texts that analyze or describe these female characters. The women respond to these interpretations, often penned by male scholars, with wit and insight.

Without apology or self-pity, the characters pinpoint the sources of their struggles: the thirst for power among men willing to sacrifice everything, and the social mechanisms that create such situations. They inventory the injustices—from the lack of space for female self-expression in the plays, to the male gaze that defines them, to their frequent relegation to secondary roles. The fundamental question arises: Should these plays be rewritten from a female perspective, or at least corrected for these injustices? The answer, with which I deeply empathize and consider the most intelligent in this context, pushes back against the trend of politically correct rewrites: altering the characters would strip them of their tragic essence and historical consistency, rendering them unmemorable and unable to highlight, by comparison with the present, the immense progress made in modern times toward women's emancipation and equal rights.

The message is feminist, nuanced, and profound, yet also polemical. The text is laced with humor and captures the psychology and temperament of each character, often requiring a deep knowledge of Shakespeare's works to fully appreciate the allusions and intertextuality. *FEAST: a play in one cooking* is a revelatory performance, opening a much-needed dialogue—especially in the Romanian context—about civil rights, equal opportunities, and social representation. It is an intellectual and theatrical feast that should extend far beyond the stage.

Don't Change Shakespeare

That's the conclusion. I'd slanderously suggest someone might try, but I doubt they'd succeed. The only rewrites of Shakespeare that ever seem to work are the comedic ones. Any other genuinely successful idea is hard to come by—or nonexistent.

In *FEAST: a play in one cooking*, directed by Philip Parr, the word “cooking” caught my eye—it seemed exciting. And it really did smell appetizing. But I didn't stay for the meal; I politely declined the warm invitation. I was hungry, yes, but I went to the show on an empty stomach. Not a wise choice: you have to leave quickly at the end, or you'll end up devouring everything in sight. Six women in white aprons, each painted with strawberries, hearts, leaves, crosses—whatever defines them. Six female characters meeting year after year for a sabbath of Shakespeare's patriarchy victims. No doubt, it's good that we're fighting! But the text is the eternal problem. This time, it pulses like a slow EKG: Is the heart still beating?

Sitting down to write with Shakespeare is a bad idea, most of the time. Olivia Negrean's dramatization follows a delicate, eminently feminine structure. Dissatisfied with the roles Shakespeare assigned them, and with how their words have been tossed around by critics and theorists, they've found a calmer world—one where they're no longer tormented or abused, and so they meet each year, happily reunited. Being a woman in the world of the Bard, of great Will, raises countless problems. Survival is optional. They're all leading ladies—except Emilia (Beatrice Bowden), Desdemona's friend.

Where else would women meet but in the kitchen? You can't ignore that we ourselves place them in this space of osmosis between taste, aroma, steam, and... the heat from which we scream we want to escape. Choosing the kitchen, you lose some feminist activism.

These six women were discriminated against—no question. Their voices are gentle. They don't agree with their fates; they're characters who explain themselves. The most accused remains Lady Macbeth (Marie Rabe), the most incomprehensible is Ophelia (Olivia Negrean), the most unimaginable is Lady Anne (Charlie Coletta). Then there's Imogen (Hannah Lucas), whose fate is a little different, more acceptable. Among them, relationships form, mostly friendships. Everything is taken lightly; no one rushes, no notable conflicts arise—except perhaps Isabella (Sara Barison), who has a knack for denying almost anything. They don't seem to love each other, nor do they hate each other, and by the end, they become a community, a kind of accidental sisterhood, united involuntarily by a man's mind, created for a presumed purpose never truly known.

From assumption to assumption, a Shakespearean universe has been built, connected to 400 years of Western history, yet insensitive to soul and delicacy. Philip Parr's direction is simple: each steps forward, introduces herself, then returns to her place. They all join in a circle, a harmless witches' dance around the table—an indispensable support for sacrifice or offerings to some idea, whatever it may be. In the Romanian popular imagination, the table holds a privileged place, whether for joy or sorrow. It's where family or the whole community gathers. Beyond its everyday use, it's the main piece in ceremonies and commemorations.

The table of six—a number of balance, love, and heart—is a table of reconciliation. Each with herself, each with the others, and above all, with Shakespeare. They discover that, once written, they can no longer change. Perceptions differ; the director doubles Shakespeare. They are at the mercy of too many gods. Above them hang too many accusations, sometimes too much compassion. Emilia is her own greatest accuser, the official one, but she knows she can't change Desdemona's story, to which she is bound and subordinate. For centuries to come, she'll have to think about the choices she had—or didn't have—thanks to Shakespeare, but also because she herself couldn't resist. There's a substratum here, a cleverness. I could accuse the director, but I declare him innocent. Bon appétit! Life is a feast. What's written, let it stay written! So be it.

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