

'Makbet': A ritualization of 'Macbeth' in AXS.com 2015

New York City is regaled as a hotspot for unique and innovative theater so Sure We Can, the city's only licensed, homeless-friendly can redemption center in Bushwick, is the perfect alternative venue for a play like "Makbet." Produced by the cutting edge Dziezi Theatre Company, "Makbet" is an experimental piece that fuses Shakespeare's classic tale with an original spin. According to the official press release:

This is a "Macbeth" with a challenging twist: all actors must know all the lines in the play since their parts are chosen at random, scene by scene, during the performance. The production is set around mountains of metal, industrial machinery and campfires – and accompanied by live Eastern European folk music. The show is a lively and haunting retelling of Shakespeare's play -- perfect for the launch of the Halloween season!

This play is site specific. Dzieci's "Old World" clan greets the audience with song and dance, drinks and divination and then embarks on their wild, whirlwind of a ritual. Their gypsy take on Shakespeare's ageless tale of greed, corruption, omens and foul deeds, comes alive through the unflinching performance of a handful of actors who take turns spontaneously trading off parts at the drop of a hat (literally!), creating an inescapable level of immediacy and danger. Employing haunting folk songs and chants from Eastern Europe, Dzieci explores (and explodes!) the very essence of theatre and storytelling in their exuberant rendition of "Macbeth."

"Makbet" is the brainchild of Dziezi Theatre Company founder Matt Mitler, a man who was initially trained in Humanistic and Existential Psychology, before discovering the healing potential of theatre. Combining these two pursuits, he began to lead workshops in a variety of settings. To date, Matt has designed and directed over 70 theatrical productions and has staged the works of dozens of solo artists and ensembles at a variety of NYC venues. Recently, Matt Mitler spoke to AXS about his experiences working in the theater:

AXS: What inspired you to become a theater-maker?

Matt Mitler (M.M.): I started off in Fine Arts, and creativity is basically the same to me regardless of the medium. That said, the visceral power of theatre, as I experienced it in my youth, was absolutely transporting and I began to sense that the effort of relating directly to people, rather than through a painting or sculpture, was a healthier path for me to take.

AXS: How did you go about getting your first play produced?

M.M.: I was a young upstart in a small ensemble company and somehow convinced our producer to go out on a limb with me.

AXS: You write plays that are inspired by past works. Have you also produced original work?

M.M.: Most of my works have been original adaptations, and I'm fond of using collage (cutting and pasting found texts, preferably of an esoteric nature), but I've also written a number of original plays, screenplays, essays, and fiction. I'm not particularly interested in producing someone else's play; following the process from inception is what most intrigues me.

AXS: "Makbet" is described as a gypsy version of "Macbeth"? How does this production differ from Shakespeare's classic?

M.M.: We've cut about two-thirds of the text, but haven't altered anything that remains. We've also added songs and chants, and tried to stage the entire piece as a ritual, but the main thing that distinguishes it, I believe, is that we all know the text, but no one knows who will be playing what role from scene to scene. So, on the one hand it's still Shakespeare, but on the other it's completely unpredictable.

AXS: So far, which of your plays is your favorite and why?

M.M.: Oh, that's a hard one. I think each is my favorite while I'm working on it, and they all inform each other in surprising ways. Makbet is the most challenging piece to act in by far; the demand is enormous and unrelenting. Fools Mass, which we've been performing for almost 17 years now, has a life of its own.

AXS: How did you come up with the idea to fuse theater with mental health?

M.M.: My original field of interest was fine art, which led me to art therapy, which in turn led to studies in psychology and psychotherapy, ritual and spirituality. One of my first jobs as an actor was in a mime troop, which was involved in programs in a variety of institutions for adults and children with disabilities. I'd already had experience with art therapy involving underserved communities, but theatre as a vehicle for such interactions was a revelation to me. From there, it was a long, winding path towards integration of interests and methodologies. I have found that service work can be a profound instrument in guiding the actor from self-gratification towards something more generous. Work on service in Dzieci is essentially work on self-development.

AXS: You started your own theater company called Dzieci Theatre. What was that process like and why was that name chosen?

M.M.: The process was brutal for the first few years, but there was always evidence of evolution, and that, plus a few stalwarts, primarily Yvonne Brecht, Bob Strock, and Rebecca Sokoll, kept me going. I proposed a Polish name because I'd studied in Poland with Jerzy Grotowski and the Polish Theatre Laboratory. Dzieci seemed fitting (the word means "children"), and I liked the associations it evoked. Plus no one suggested a better name.

AXS: Does the Dziezi Theater Company actively seek plays, performers, or set/costume designers? How many plays do you perform each year?

M.M.: We have four plays currently in repertory - Makbet, Fools Mass, A Passion, and Cirkus Luna! (our totally absurd family show), and works remain in repertory indefinitely, circling around with the seasons. We sometimes absorb actors into the company, on a trial basis, who demonstrate a certain interest in the process. We also have some larger scale performances, such as Ragnarok, which will be re-mounted at some point in the future, and works-in-progress (though everything is always a work-in-process) that may take years of development before a full presentation. The next one of those is probably Moby Dick. We are always interested in cultivating the company, but the basic system we follow is that there are no auditions and no one is ever asked to leave.

AXS: How did you come to produce work with Sure We Can?

M.M.: A friend of mine was conducting an interview with Ana Martinez De Luco (the founding director) about Sure We Can, and learned that she was interested in hosting arts groups there. He sent me the article and said, "This is perfect for Dzieci." And he was so right. We first did Makbet in the shipping container, then we brought Fools Mass for Christmas, and A Passion for Easter. In this setting, each show became the best it's ever been. Our heritage is The Poor Theatre, and Sure We Can represents such a sense of humility, of communion, that we feel more at home there than anywhere else we've ever performed. This is why we're staging Makbet there for three weeks, and why our Sunday shows are out in the open for the resident community to enjoy for free.

AXS: To date, what has been the most rewarding part of working in the theater?

M.M.: We receive so many blessings in Dzieci. They often come out of the blue and we are just as often moved to tears. I step back and look at something we accomplish and I am speechless. Audience reactions, both in theatres and in hospitals have been profound. This work is difficult, and nearly impossible to do

alone; that Dzieci continues to evolve and to attract extraordinary new members who share in this endeavor is an eternal reward.

AXS: If you could work on any kind of play, what would be your “dream project”?

M.M.: I really like all kinds of plays, but I need to find particular vehicles that have a high demand, that are almost out of reach, so that I have no choice but to grow in order to pursue them. And then they have to have such unlimited depth of meaning that I can continue to learn from the process year after year after year. The right play is one that I can be married to as long as I live.

AXS: Career wise, where do you hope to be in ten years?

M.M.: Exactly where I am today, but with more money, less aches and pains, and some stellar reviews.

AXS: What advice would you give to someone who is striving to become a playwright?

M.M.: Find a young theatre company to work with. And stick with them.

* * * * *

For more information, visit the official Dziezi Theatre website. To learn more about Matt Mitler visit his Twitter and Facebook. You can also follow him on Instagram via *dziecitheatre*.

<https://twitter.com/dzecieatre><https://twitter.com/dzecieatre>

<https://www.facebook.com/dzecieatre>

<http://dzecieatre.org/><http://dzecieatre.org/>