

Sturua at His Creative Best in One-Act 'Tempest'

By [John Freedman](#)

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Olga Kotelnikova plays Miranda, Prospero's daughter, in the Georgian director's version of Shakespeare's classic.

Robert Sturua's production of William Shakespeare's "The Tempest" at the Et Cetera Theater looks to me like a watershed for the director.

I don't ever recall seeing him give such free reign to his whimsical and quirky imagination when working in Russia. The last part of that phrase is the key.

Sturua is one of the finest directors to come out of that theatrical powerhouse that is Georgia. And, when working with his home crew at the Rustaveli Theater in Tbilisi, Sturua is a font of powerful, eccentric creative ideas.

In Russia, where Stanislavskian psychological realism continues to have an enormous influence on everyone — including those fighting against it — Sturua's productions

occasionally can seem to be slightly less than intended, because his large, fanciful, anti-realistic approach is recalibrated to something on a lifelike scale. His best Russian work has been done with Konstantin Raikin's Satirikon Theater, where a strong, physical company is capable of meeting him on his own level.

But "The Tempest" at the Et Cetera just might be Sturua's most "Georgian" Russian production ever.

One feels Sturua's hands all over this one — as well as those of his longtime friends, composer Giya Kancheli and designer Georgy Alexi-Meskhishvili.

This is evident in the quick pacing, the bursts of color (in both the set and the music), the constant attempts to break free of gravity and reality, the use of lyrical, even capricious, humor in the service of tragedy, and, perhaps most of all, the deep warmth and affection that the director feels for all of man's foibles and sins, no matter how awful they are.

Sturua cut Shakespeare's play to a nub that unfolds in one act. Each scene on the uninhabited island somewhere near Naples and Milan is played as if everyone, the audience included, knows in advance what will happen. In bold, clear strokes, Sturua sketches out those eternal companions of the human experience: betrayal, perfidy, revenge, justice, mercy and love.

This gives a sense of inevitability, the sense of a true fairy tale, to everything that happens.

Prospero (Alexander Kalyagin), the deposed Duke of Milan, is reduced to studying magic on this strange island with his young daughter Miranda. He has achieved melancholy wisdom by the first time we encounter him. The only question that remains is how far is he willing to go in attaining true knowledge of himself and the world?

Other characters and situations are even more cut-and-dried.

The love of Miranda (Olga Kotelnikova) for Prince Ferdinand (Vasily Simonov) is a done deal the moment the young man appears on stage. The drunken shipwreck survivors Trinculo and Stephano, played by Andrei Kondakov and Alexei Osipov, respectively, as two bumbling clowns, will clearly get their comeuppance for being arrogant, petty and stupid. Caliban (Vladimir Skvortsov), the island's evil though abused native, seems to be so devious that even the ability to love is not enough to redeem him.

Twirling around everyone is Ariel (Natalya Blagikh), an "airy spirit" as Shakespeare put it, and Prospero's chief aide. Ariel is light afoot, quick to react, sensitive to good and evil alike, and always present when needed. He scales walls and flies into the heavens, and his soaring voice awakens those who are dead asleep, as well as stops those planning to do evil cold in their tracks.

Sturua introduces jarring reminders of how humans, Prospero included, are inclined to ignore their own complicity in sin. A typical example, no less powerful for its brevity, occurs when Prospero swears to his daughter that no one perished on a ship he sent to the bottom with his magic.

The instant he makes that claim the stage floor opens up to reveal a host of terrified sailors drowning in a sea of red light.

Later, when preparing to execute his enemies, Prospero first mounts a dry run of the execution by hanging a series of dolls. This time the shock of seeing the dolls' shadows swinging on the walls is enough to make him reject the idea entirely.

Alexi-Meskhishvili's set is as magical as anything Prospero conjures from his books. It consists of three white walls on which churning skies of clouds and seas of stormy waves are projected cinematically. But, perhaps, color is the element the designer uses most. Deep blues, greens, yellows and reds reflect off the glossy walls and floor to create a space that is as unreal as it is beautiful.

"The Tempest" shows off Robert Sturua at his challenging, idiosyncratic best.

"The Tempest" (Burya) plays Sat. and Sun. at 7 p.m. at the Et Cetera Theater, located at 2 Frolov Pereulok. Metro Turgenevskaya. Tel. 625-2161, www.et-cetera.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 55 minutes.

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