Blood ... Sex ... Death ... Birth: Paula de Vasconcelos’s Le Making of de Macbeth: an interview

Denis Salter

The true threat of millennial anxiety, the true apocalypse, is not the fire and brimstone promised in Revelation, the wailing and gnashing of teeth of Judgment Day. It is, instead, the destruction of hope, of faith in ourselves. The Armageddon we face is the elimination of the idea that there is anything we can do to make this world one in which we feel home.

Mark Kingwell, Dreams of Millennium: Report from a Culture on the Brink, 1996.

Paula de Vasconcelos is the co-founder and co-artistic director with her husband, Paul-Antoine Taillefer, of Montréal’s Théâtre Pigeons International. Since its inception in 1987, Pigeons has acquired a reputation for staging complex, multi-layered productions of new and recent texts, including Normand Chaurette’s Fragments d’une lettre d’adieu lus par des géologues (Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists) in 1993, collective creations such as Perdus dans les coquelicots (Lost in the Poppies) (1991-93), and radical conceptualisations of both classical and contemporary texts, including Büchner’s Woyzeck (renamed Le Cri) in 1988, and Sam Shepard and Joseph Chaikin’s Savage/Love which was one of the hot tickets at the Festival de théâtre des Amériques in Montreal in 1995. Their most recent work, Le Making of de Macbeth, is a bilingual production — co-produced with and staged within the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal in April 1996 — of ‘Shakespeare’s’ Macbeth. A kind of postmodern metaperformance, it highlights the ‘making-of-the-play/production’ while staging occasional scenes from Shakespeare’s play before eventually deciding not to stage Shakespeare’s play in its entirety. As a ‘making’, it opens up questions for the end-of-the-millennium about the status of canonical Western texts, the sense of ending, the sense of a new world perhaps being born out of blood and chaos, and about whether contemporary artists can find ways to speak in many languages and performance modes not for Shakespeare but through him in order to assert their own politics of location.

I interviewed Paula de Vasconcelos at her Montreal home on 14 July 1996.
SALTER: Why did you and your company, Pigeons International, decide to do Macbeth during the 1995-96 season? Does it have anything to do with Québec’s troubled political situation?

VASCONCELOS: No, the reasons are entirely personal, artistic. Macbeth has always been a fetish play for me ever since I first read it in college. I was fascinated with the role of the women. I kept saying to myself: ‘Shakespeare, even though a genius, still fell into the pattern of making all the evil go through the women. It’s the same old story: Eve giving Adam the apple!’ Of course, I understood that there were a million reasons that he did it: because he was part of the Western world, because King James I believed fiercely in witches, etc. So that was the one of the windows that I went through to get into this play. But then I eventually discovered all kinds of other things, and ways to subvert Shakespeare’s male/female conventions.

SALTER: Is it still a ‘fetish’ play for you after working on it for so long?

VASCONCELOS: Oh yes – ‘fetish’ for me means that I must always come back to it. Even though we’ve ‘done’ The Making of Macbeth, it’s not over for me. I’m going to carry this play in mind for a long time. And, who knows, I might direct it again, as long as the ‘process’ of the ‘making’ is highlighted as an integral part of what we do. I always need to show both the making and the doing at the same time.

SALTER: Were there any scholars whose ideas influenced you?

VASCONCELOS: People kept telling me to read Jan Kott on the play. But I thought his essay was really bad because he kept talking about ‘the blood the blood the blood’ and I said to myself: ‘How simplistic. Of course there’s bloodshed — it’s so obvious’. But as I worked on the play, I realised that the blood is central: you can’t get around it: bloodshed, bloodlines, blood images, bloody battles — blood is everywhere. So blood — and all its variants — quickly became the visual motif of our production, despite my initial scepticism.

SALTER: But apart from this dominant image, the production was layered with many differing, perhaps conflicting, points of view towards a single subject. In fact, before long, we realised that The Making of Macbeth was much more fascinating that any attempt to mount a straight production could ever be. We could bring more of our own lives, preoccupations, and worries into it, locating it here — in our own real and imaginative space — but stretching widely across time and space.

SALTER: What historical parallels — especially from the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts — did you gradually weave into the making of this new-but-old text?

VASCONCELOS: That’s something that, frankly, we didn’t achieve as well as we had wanted. Maybe we’ll do it better next time, if we have an opportunity to remount the show, especially in the kind of theatre festival setting in which its experimental nature could be really understood. I was hoping to install within this ‘fictional’ troupe mounting Macbeth a feeling of the Renaissance; as though they were in reality Renaissance people mounting this play. But of course this gives rise to an interesting contradiction: there’s nothing more in opposition than a Renaissance-man like Shakespeare living in England writing about Macbeth during the medieval period in Scotland! So our troupe became a little 1960s-oriented, a period that we decided was a Renaissance in a way — a rebirth of thinking and believing. But we didn’t push this sixties connection, nor the Renaissance connection, too far. They became part of all kinds of other overlapping historical moments and figures.

SALTER: But there are still significant parallels, aren’t there, between your troupe and the Renaissance worldview they take on?

VASCONCELOS: Of course, certain characters in the troupe were directly inspired by figures from the Elizabethan court. The director, Elizabeth, for example, reflects Elizabeth I: a powerful woman, who must have been, in some ways, scared shitless of life, who never married, who never had children — or who rejected family life for good reasons — and who had terrific charisma but who succeeded, in part, by procrastinating, waiting for crises to blow over. We transferred this fear of life from ‘Elizabeth I’ to ‘our Elizabeth’ by giving her a phobia: a fear of blood. At one point in the show, her lover, Robert, says to
her: ‘Well, how can you mount Macbeth if you’re scared of blood. This is definitely not the play for you’.

Marie-France Marcotte as Elizabeth and Paul-Antoine Taillefer as Robert in Le Making of de Macbeth (Photo: Louis Taillefer).

SALTER: But isn’t it important that she learns how to confront and eventually conquer her phobia?

VASCONCELOS: Yes, it is indeed the play for her, so she can in fact purge herself of these deep fears. Her fear of blood, her refusal to have a child, even though her lover wants them to have a child – all these things torment her. It’s as if her mind is telling her inner female psyche to ‘abort’ all these things. But the mind is in effect killing her. So she goes through a tremendous crisis, and falls into a deep sleep, as though she has died. If we had to be realistic, we would say she is in a coma; but, in poetic terms, she’s in a deep sleep.

SALTER: And during that sleep she makes significant personal discoveries, ones that in fact come out of her involvement in her very personal (re)making of Shakespeare’s Macbeth.

VASCONCELOS: The pain she experiences is a preparation, in a sense, for her discoveries, and it’s so intense that she folds herself into the fetal position. At one point, her lover, Robert, helps her to stand, and then to walk, moving each leg in turn, as if she’s an inanimate puppet into whom he’s trying to breathe life. He’s literally trying to save her from death by unfolding her. And, of course, he, too, has an historical source: he’s partly inspired by Robert, Elizabeth I’s lover, the first of the two Robert lovers in her life.

SALTER: But even in her deep sleep, she can’t escape the horrors of blood and all its associations.

VASCONCELOS: Of course not. For example, she has a terrible dream of organising a choreography – what in English is called blocking – for the production during which she starts to haemorrhage. All the horrible images she’s been repressing converge and make her go through the worst nightmare she could have imagined. She has this nightmare while she’s lying on her white bed of death situated upstage; and it continues during ‘her’ own choreography – again in concert with Robert – when she slowly gets up from her bed and pulls out a long, seemingly never-ending string of blood from between her thighs. Robert cuts what we can imagine being her stream of blood or the umbilical cord from a child-to-come. During that dream, as a kind of visual overlay or juxtaposition, we also see the massacre of Lady Macduff and Macbeth slaying the King: all the worst forms of ambition and pure bloodshed. In other words, in that dream, ‘our’ Elizabeth goes to the absolute limit of her fears and eventually awakes, but purged, we hope.

SALTER: It’s the scene at the end of the first half of the production in which all the actors in the troupe cover themselves in blood that causes her collapse into a deep sleep as Christophe, the costumier, gently picks her up and carries her away. The scene creates a powerful example of imagistic theatre, reminiscent of the work of Robert Lepage and Gilles Maheu.

VASCONCELOS: The actors are experimenting with red paint and are literally frolicking in it, rolling over and over in it, painting each other, smearing it across their bodies, over their faces, and onto their rehearsal clothes. It’s obviously meant to be ‘fake’ blood – a kind of poeticisation of the main visual motif of our production – but it nevertheless makes her faint for she imagines it as being ‘real’. It becomes her entire world at that point, and there’s no escaping it.

SALTER: Why are you at pains to set up Elizabeth – both Queen Elizabeth and the director Elizabeth – in contrast to your added character of Mary Queen of Scots?

VASCONCELOS: For the simple reason that, as a director, I’m always drawn to marked contrasts in characters, images, patterns, and so on, both historical and contemporary. Mary, played by Leni Parker, is in fact loosely based on
Mary Stuart, in the spirit of poetic licence that governs our whole production. She’s seductive, mystical, charming, promiscuous, laid-back, and beautiful; she’s at ease with herself and her body; and she has many poetical passages in which she meditates, without fear, on blood — for she, quite unlike Elizabeth, has fully accepted the natural cycles of life. In history, of course, Mary and Elizabeth were complete opposites. Theoretically, too, this principle of contrast allows the audience to have a better understanding of both characters — especially of Elizabeth.

SALTER: Was the Catherine character meant to be inspired from Elizabeth I’s lady-in-waiting, Catherine, well-known for her lifelong loyalty to the Queen?

VASCONCELOS: Yes, but it became even more complicated than this, as I layered the past and the present, again through the principle of contrast. Catherine, played by Sylvie Moreau, is down-to-earth, matter-of-fact, calm and so on. But I also cast her as Lady Macbeth. As Lady Macbeth, however, she is the wildest character you could ever imagine! In this way, Catherine and Lady Macbeth are intertwined and both characters, through a kind of aura, inform our understanding of both Elizabeth I and, of course, ‘our’ Elizabeth the director. Similarly, Leni Parker played not only Mary Stuart but also Lady Macduff — the mother, the saint; a contrast that again heightens each character. Generally speaking, the characters in our acting troupe and their collective story, centred around Elizabeth the director and her crisis, always played their exact opposites in the excerpts from Shakespeare’s Macbeth that we staged — the second story, in a sense, that we were ‘borrowing’ from Shakespeare, just as he was always borrowing from other sources and authors.

SALTER: Do you have other reasons for casting against type?

VASCONCELOS: It’s simple: I just can’t stand type-casting! It’s so boring. I want to give actors a chance to go beyond their normal limits. And, since Pigeons International is made up of an ensemble of actors, it’s no fun for them if they have to play the same type of character show after show, year after year. When you go against casting, you often discover two things: aspects of the character that would otherwise remain unexplored and aspects of the actor that would otherwise remain undeveloped. Casting against the grain also upsets audience expectations and sometimes allows new insights and readings of Shakespeare. This is very important, since there are so many Shakespearean traditions that tend to stifle perceptions.

SALTER: Does it bother you that your audiences might not make all the historical connections that you have so carefully worked out?

VASCONCELOS: No. These historical resonances are, in the first case, meant to be inspiring to the actors, the designers, everybody involved in the show. They acquire a broader, textured understanding of the circumstances and influences in which Shakespeare’s play was first created. Our Elizabeth, played

by Marie-France Marcotte, could take delight in knowing that her character is partly based on the life of Queen Elizabeth I. These historical associations became like secrets that we all shared, creating a natural intimacy, a bond between us.

SALTER: Does it also influence your approach to the mise-en-scène which seemed to be deliberately ahistorical in its use of eclectic styles and sources?

VASCONCELOS: Certainly. When we learned, for example, that Elizabeth I had a certain favoured motif in her dresses, we felt free to incorporate that into the super-contemporary pantsuit that our Elizabeth wears. The layers continued into the choices of not only costumes but also objects, furnishings, spatial relations, and so on. They all created the feeling of an eternal present emerging from an eternal past. All of our shows are atemporal but we are sure to mix elements together with extraordinary precision. For me, this creates a kind of unity that isn’t the least bit distracting.

SALTER: A perhaps impossible question to answer, but why do you feel drawn to the atemporal, the ahistorical? Has it got something to do with the politics of location, here in Quebec, to return to my first question in the interview? A need to be here, but to be elsewhere at the same time? This double impulse is certainly present in much of Lepage’s work.

VASCONCELOS: We are a bilingual company, which is in itself a political position. At first we were scorned for being bilingual but we are now respected for remaining this way. We are basically trying to say that we, as Quebecois, belong to the Western world. We are still part of the East: we’ve inherited all that luggage, all that bagage, as we say in French. We’re not trying to dissociate ourselves from that bagage; we’re trying to understand it by travelling through it. We have to acknowledge the influence of the past in making us who we are... and who we might become.

SALTER: How overtly political is Pigeons International? The name has political connotations: sending messages abroad by old-fashioned means; keeping a focus on the global; working together as a collectivity — a flock... flying high but without being a glamorous bird!

VASCONCELOS: We never ever talk about politics. Never. It just never happens. Some of us of course have very strong political opinions but we never bring them to the table when we are working. Never.

SALTER: Are politics there, however, in the subtext of how you work? In the choices you make? In the kinds of plays you do? In your fascination with mixing languages and creating a collocation of images?

VASCONCELOS: Well, only in the sense that we all tend to work towards a vision of the world that’s, as you say, very global. If I say to an actor, ‘I see your character in a 1970s pant-suit’, she’s likely to say, ‘Yeah, that’s great’; even though her partner might be in a 1920s costume from a different culture.
There are no obstacles. We don’t want any. All that matters is how we see things across time and space. We aren’t historians, after all, we’re artists, first and foremost, living now.

SALTER: But you can’t escape politics. You are doing Shakespeare, after all, here in Québec. Some people might say that he’s a symbol of British imperialism, of anglophone culture, and the best way to resist him is not to do him at all.

VASCONCELOS: We’re not that inflexible, not that resistant; except in the way we choose to do our work. In Pigeons, for example, all of our shows have been bilingual, if not trilingual or multilingual. This is a real commitment for all of us. In one of our first shows, a law had just been passed that prevented signs in anything other than French, and we had just printed up all our bilingual posters. So we put them up anyway, in defiance of the law, and of course to save money and time! But this decision caused a lot of dissension in the company. Some of the Québec nationalist actors felt as though their ‘country/nation’ of Québec was betrayed because there was English in the show and in the advertising. But for me this position was just nonsense. Most of those actors I’ve never worked with again. But just a few years later, I met my current group of actors, with whom I’ve been working for about six years, who, like me, are fascinated with the linguistic and cultural plurality of the world. Some of them are very proud Québécois but they love meeting people, travelling, learning new things. They are confident about who they are.

SALTER: You yourself strike me as a kind of citizen-of-the-world, politically, artistically, linguistically. You mix languages with ease; you draw themes, images, and subjects from all kinds of Western historical periods and cultures; you actively resisted the laws of the language cops here in Québec.

VASCONCELOS: I was born in Lisbon and I have dual Canadian and Portuguese citizenship. If I agreed with staunch Québécois nationalists, I would have to consider myself an inferior being. Moreover, am I less than what I should have been because I had to abandon some of my Portuguese heritage in order to get something else from Québec and from Canada? Although I came to Québec when I was four, I had a Portuguese upbringing. But my parents were very open. Right away, I went to French school and we lived in an English neighbourhood. Actually, I wouldn’t say that I am a citizen-of-the-world because I’ve not been, for example, to the Orient. I say I am a citizen of the West! That’s the heritage I am trying to understand through performance.

SALTER: So is this why you’re not the least bit reluctant to mount the plays of a canonical playwright like Shakespeare?

VASCONCELOS: I’m not reluctant, but that is not the issue that really concerns me. I don’t want to produce the traditional repertoire just for the sake of doing it, just because it’s there. I think the only reason to mount ‘good old used plays’, as I call them, is because you’re going to try to give your own personal point of view towards them.

SALTER: So how do you avoid an overtly political perspective?

VASCONCELOS: First and foremost, I am interested in the artistic dimensions and values of the work. I dislike productions in which directors take a play from four or five hundred years ago and then give it ‘contemporary relevance’ by pointing out that the social problems in the play are still with us.

SALTER: Why are you suspicious of this approach?

VASCONCELOS: Mostly because it’s simply not true. It creates the illusion that throughout history, nothing has changed. Of course there’s ambition today: we could make some silly parallel by showing, for example, that Macbeth is a greedy American capitalist ready to do absolutely anything to get what he wants. That’s not a very deep analysis. I can figure out those connections myself — and so can audiences. What I want to know from the director and the ensemble is this: what’s your point of view? what do you think? Whatever you do, don’t give me some reductive or glib political parallel that talks down to me.

SALTER: Have big institutional theatres invited you to guest-direct shows because they think you have expertise in handling the classics?

VASCONCELOS: Yes. Le Théâtre de Nouveau Monde, for example, has extended this kind of invitation, but so far I have turned them down. They seem to think of me as someone who directs classical plays. But I explain to them: ‘That’s not what I do. Why don’t you hire me for what I do? What I and our whole company try to do is to experience the play — elaborate it, if necessary, as in The Making of Macbeth — from who we are at any given time in history. We don’t “do” plays, we “(re)make” them’. I don’t know why that’s so difficult to understand. There seems to be a pervasive idea that doing a classical play is somehow more important than getting the point of view of today’s artist. Chekhov, for example, is thought to weigh more heavily in the balance than the artist’s point of view. Why?

SALTER: So when you hire actors to join your ensemble, are you the least bit concerned with their politics, particularly their commitment to ‘speak’ from where they are?

VASCONCELOS: Again, it’s simple: I hire actors whose work I like, no matter what language they speak. If an actor speaks Spanish or Chinese, I would figure out a way to make him or her an integral part of the show. I do this out of curiosity, out of a love of language, out of a need to explore the conditions of possibility. Critics and audiences will often interpret this approach as first and foremost political choices. But they aren’t; not at all.

SALTER: But as a woman director, in a profession that’s still dominated by men, you can’t escape the political implications of your work.
VASCONCELOS: Now that I’m just over thirty, I’m getting very stifled by the male vision of the world that we see in the arts: in films, in institutional structures, in administrative organisations. Everything. We’ve seen their stories so many times; ’Ahh, I’ve had enough. Please. Now when I go to see a woman’s film, for example, ten minutes into it I am weeping, and I am keenly aware of how seldom I get to see this side of the story. I just saw the Dutch film, Antionia’s Line, and it touched chords in me that men’s work, no matter how brilliant, simply can’t. Male art is not necessarily bad art; and it can be done by both men and women. But it’s so invasive and pervasive; 95% of the work we see in our theatres is told from that perspective. It suffocates me.

SALTER: Why did it take you until your thirties to realise that you had been telling stories, directing shows, from a feminine/feminist perspective?

VASCONCELOS: I was doing it without noticing it because it was so much a part of my artistic self. The critics were trying to tell me about the kind of work I was doing but I guess I wasn’t paying much attention. They would say, ’Vasconcelos is the feminine counterpart to Gilles Maheu of Carbone 14’. It’s true: the work we do at Pigeons is more feminine — as well as being highly physical and imagistic like Maheu’s work — and not just because of me, but because of the interests and attitudes of the entire company, men and women.

SALTER: So how did this feminine perspective influence your production of The Making of Macbeth?

VASCONCELOS: The lead character, Elizabeth, is of course not Shakespeare’s Macbeth but a woman — and so the whole production is about her struggle, not a man’s struggle, to get somewhere in her career. She doesn’t want to get more power, more money. Instead, she wants to discover her womanhood. Like Macbeth, she of course hurts and steps on people; but whereas the outcome of his journey is negative, hers is positive.

SALTER: Positive in what sense?

VASCONCELOS: Freed, after her crisis, of the fear of blood and therefore of life, she becomes pregnant: at the end, we see her in the centre of the stage, in a shaft of light, dressed in white, stroking her womb, realising, with quiet joy, that she’s filling up with a child. Whereas Macbeth has the witches, symbols of evil, Elizabeth has her male guardian — Monsieur Angelo, played by Marcel Pomerlo — an old, scruffy guy, who appears now and again, who shows up with the lights when everything goes dark, and who never tells her what to do, but who guides her a little bit towards a positive resolution. The production is not resolutely opposed, however, to men. Robert, Elizabeth’s lover, is a very ‘feminine’ kind of man, who wants their child. Monsieur Angelo, as the name so obviously suggests, is a source of ‘divine’ light in a hellish world of evil spirits and characters.
powerful and the nourishing; and the sense of promise that always exists, even in a time of destruction or danger.

SALTER: Why did you decide to start the second half of the production with a similar, yet significantly different, image?

VASCONCELOS: The music is exactly the same, but this time, it’s Macbeth—a different perspective—where we do get the counterbalancing of the macabre imagery, but second in order! In contrast to Lady Macbeth, he’s wearing very heavy chain-mail armour—so heavy it makes him sweat, like a male athlete. When we made our research trip to Scotland to do on-location film shooting, we discovered all kinds of stone castles built on the edge of the sea, right where the wind is devastatingly strong, and where nobody—one of the most intrepid tourists—ever seems to go. So we realised just how protected these Scots men had to be—not only to fight but just to survive. We made the chain-mail ourselves: it weighs sixty pounds! Then we added a ten-pound sword. Then we added heavy furs to give him warmth and to show his wild strength. In choreographing Macbeth’s performance—and those of all the men—I ensured that they made big deep lunges to the ground; that they were often on their knees, crawling; and that there was lots of stomping on the hard wooden floor. All the men had to be very earth-bound creatures, not the least bit aerial.

SALTER: The blood images—are the choreography and the Gorécki music—create a through-line but with significant variations in every case.

VASCONCELOS: I paid a lot of attention to this blood image as theme and variation. I created, for example, a recurrent visual motif of Macbeth, holding up his blood-stained hands at key moments, staring at them in horror, and so on. This fixation was meant to connect with the image of our Elizabeth pulling the red umbilical cord from between her legs—the cord that Robert/Macbeth cuts, as well as with the image of all the actors awash in ‘fake’ or poetic blood at the end of the first half. This poetic blood provides a visual transition into the image of Macbeth, standing at the centre of the stage, at the start of the second half.

SALTER: And what were you trying to suggest in the final moment, which reveals, not Lady Macbeth but, in a sense, her counterpart—Elizabeth the director—now standing at the centre of the stage?

VASCONCELOS: People don’t necessarily see all the details of the image but I’m sure they nevertheless intuit much of its significance. We see Elizabeth holding her little pregnancy test-tube which she’s often held. But now, even though most of the audience can’t quite see it, it’s last turning blue so she realises that she’s pregnant. She then puts her hands on her womb, within the shaft of light/life that had been there for Lady Macbeth at the very start: Lady Macbeth’s ‘impotence’ in the medieval period and Elizabeth I’s inability or decision not to have children in the Renaissance have been supplanted by fertility in the present.

SALTER: Why is the costume designer, Christophe, near her at that moment? In fact, I was puzzled at times about his purpose throughout the production.

VASCONCELOS: He’s male, he’s an observer, and he’s the only mute character throughout: though I’m not trying to say something about the need to silence the male voice! He keeps showing Elizabeth his drawings—his ‘conception’—of the production, and she’s scared of the blood that, for him, should be the dominant image for the entire mise-en-scène. He’s going where Elizabeth’s too frightened to go. He’s mute but he speaks through his eyes—the way he sees things, for he’s always compulsively sketching. But he’s a character who goes too far into his creative world until it swallows him up. For example, he starts wearing the materials and clothes that he has been placing on the mannequin in preparation for the show, as he asks himself: ‘How would I like in this kind of red, or what would I look like in this kind of dress; what does it feel like to be inside the mannequin?’ Meanwhile we hear the haunting music of the violin and the slow chords of the piano underneath: the music isolates him, and suggests the sadness of his condition. In one sequence, the mannequin, with its hoop wire frame, is placed on a small trolley, and Christophe climbs inside the frame, crouching on the trolley, like a man imprisoned inside his art, and pulled along by forces greater than himself—the three witches. Remember, too, that Christophe also contains his own opposite: the same actor, Marcel Pomerlo, plays Monsieur Angelo, ‘our’ Elizabeth’s divine guardian or guide on her spiritual quest; a man who knows himself and the limits of what he can be.

SALTER: Why do the director/Elizabeth I/Lady Macbeth seem to occupy interchangeable positions at the very end?

VASCONCELOS: Elizabeth the director, dressed in white, looking at her womb, stands in the centre—where Lady Macbeth had been, and, later, where Macbeth had been—and then Christophe appears in Lady Macbeth’s full Elizabethan dress, all red, with the daggers, speaking her famous lines: ‘Come, you spirits! That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe topful of direst cruelty!’ and so on. Birth, life, death, terror, the transgression of certain boundaries in art, politics, identity, and gender, the unknown and the unknowable: all these themes come together in this key moment, showing us the kind of craziness to which artists are particularly vulnerable; craziness which is course perfectly understandable, given the risks that art entails.

SALTER: This interchangeability of roles also shows up in your unusual approach to the witches.

VASCONCELOS: Again, I wanted to go, as much as I could, against what Shakespeare did. I didn’t want evil witches. Instead, I wanted them to be what they really would have been in the medieval period: wise people, midwives,
herbalists, astrologers — pagan women who knew things that no one else knew. They didn’t go to meet Macbeth, he just crossed their path, and so they told him exactly what they knew. I also tried to deify them a bit — make them into semi-goddesses in the spirit of Diana/Artemis — rather than mere embodiments of ugliness. In our minds, one of them represents death; another — life, lust; another — innocence: three parts of a total personality and the various directions to which each personality might be disposed. Remember, too, that Sylvie Moreau, who plays Lady Macbeth, also plays one of the witches; this crossover suggests that Lady Macbeth is witchlike, but definitely not in the stereotypical sense of being evil incarnate.

SALTER: Although you regularly overturn staging and interpretive conventions, the production is strongly unified without being forced.

VASCONCELOS: Absolutely. In our work, everything has to be coherent for us, even if the coherence is not always obvious to the audience. If one thing doesn’t make sense, we feel compelled to fix it right away.

SALTER: In the process of ‘making’, you have some scenes in which microphones come down and the actors, such as Leni Parker and Mario Saint-Armand, come forward, to talk — as in a radio play — about their impressions of how the ‘making’ has gone, where it’s going, what it has revealed, and so on. I had the impression that you were using these voices as an occasion for metacommentary, but mostly through the ear rather than the eye. Is this part of your interest in expressing ‘your’ Shakespeare not just from differing perspectives but also through differing modes, each with its own expressive possibilities?

VASCONCELOS: Yes, this is meant to give a documentary feel to the process of making. Mario has natural physical charisma and he has no sense of rules — he’s an anarchist. He’ll say a text in ways that it can’t really be said. He’ll make grammatical errors — but they are interesting, and they change from one night to the next. He gives us, finally, a new way — but in French only — of listening to the text. Because he has no sense of conventions, of rules, he’s entirely free, a kind of involuntary anarchist. He says that the production has been chaos, that it’s been like going down to hell; whereas Leni Parker, as Mary, says: ‘Oh, I can feel the bloodline, I can hear the witches calling, and so on.’ As you know, the company decides, in the end, not to do Macbeth; but Mary explains, almost paradoxically: ‘It’s not because we didn’t do it that it didn’t happen and how do you know that what you are seeing now is really happening anyway?’ She’s deep into the old philosophical questions, raised by Shakespeare’s play and other sources, of what’s real, and what isn’t, and whether it’s possible to distinguish between the two. Then Catherine says: ‘It was very positive that we decided not to do the play. That was the courageous decision to make’. So, from the same event, we have three totally different points of view: the microphones make them like voices in a kind of public debate, for an audience of listeners who are, in a sense, outside the space of the theatre itself.

SALTER: So why don’t you do Macbeth the end? Is it because the ‘process of making’ has been enough, that it supersedes Shakespeare’s text?

VASCONCELOS: Most of the reasons are practical and personal, not really political or part of our gentle attempts at subverting Shakespeare, or just the pleasure of playing with him. Elizabeth decides that she needs to take time off to have her child. But she also says to the actors: ‘But you can do Macbeth’. And then there’s a debate; some members of the company don’t want to do it; others are pissed off with this decision and want to go ahead anyway. But, in the end, they take the collective decision not to do it. For me, this is the kind of position women tend to take. How often do women say: ‘OK, I won’t go out tonight, my kid is sick. OK, I could take this step in my career, but I won’t’. So to say the show won’t go on for personal reasons is enough: it doesn’t need any defending.

SALTER: Why do you include the puppet show, in which François Papineau as Pierre — wearing a red fool’s cap — retells or reshows, in miniature, the main story of the play?

VASCONCELOS: For many reasons. First, we wanted to have a story from a male character whose wife died in childbirth and who’s raising his daughter by himself. His whole point of view, in contrast to Christophe the designer, is that theatre is theatre, life is life, and the two should never be conflated. He decides that he will make a puppet show for his child so that she will know what he’s doing when he goes off to work. He appears three separate times throughout the whole show, ‘rehearsing’ Macbeth with puppets. He appears twice in the first half, to the point where you see Macbeth being crowned. And he appears once in the second half where you see Macbeth’s encounter with Macduff and his fall.

SALTER: How did the audiences respond to this puppet show? Do they think it enhanced the tragedy through the paradox of doing it in miniature?

VASCONCELOS: It proved useful in all kinds of ways. Our audience was mostly francophone, so if they couldn’t understand the Shakespearean scenes — all of which we staged in English — they could at least understand them when we staged them in French during the puppet show. The puppet show also created the theatre in the theatre — with its own little traditional baize curtain — and it provided a comic treatment of a tragic story. It was great: it almost felt like blaspheming Shakespeare, ridiculing Macbeth; it was almost sacrilegious: ‘How can you do this to one of the best tragedies in the whole world?’ Macbeth became this mediocre little man who just listened to what his wife told him to do: Macbeth ‘seen’ through the eyes of a child, young or old; Macbeth scaled
down to size, humanised in a way. For this reason, when Macbeth falls, you see the puppet master’s daughter on the large screen behind, and he explains to Elizabeth that he’s been doing all this for his daughter. He’s making it clear to Elizabeth that theatre is just theatre — a game, a jeu. This is a very healthy thing for her to hear, since she, like Christophe, is in danger of losing herself inside the theatre.

SALTER: So it’s Macbeth, not as a great tragic hero, but as a diminished funny man, controlled not by destiny but by his wife — as in a Punch and Judy show — and providing an entertainment for a child, who brings Elizabeth the kind of healthy insights that she needs if she’s going to heal herself.

VASCONCELOS: Exactly. So the blasphemy of Shakespeare is not really blasphemy, it’s an inversion that brings a kind of freedom.

SALTER: You use a lot of film in the production. I got the feeling that, here, as with the microphones, you were trying to document your own process at the same time you were creating it. Was this double point of view part of your initial plan?

VASCONCELOS: Yes. We were inspired by behind-the-scenes documentaries that are often done to show how great films and great theatre productions have been put together. Here, as in everything in the show, we were fascinated by one medium layered upon another, layered upon another, and so on. It was in fact the first time that we’ve explored ways of incorporating film into performance, but without just creating a glitzy multi-media event. But, in fact, we eventually used the film for poetical rather than documentary purposes.

SALTER: Why did you decide to commission Jean-Frédéric Messier to write the additional contemporary script for you? As way of helping to organise all these potentially disparate elements: film, Scotland, the puppet show, the radio show, the conflation of different historical periods and cultures, the double casting, the layering of the present onto the past, the past onto the present, and the complex interaction of Shakespeare’s ‘old’ story and your ‘new’ story?

VASCONCELOS: Yes, I very much wanted an author to take care of the text. I also like Jean-Frédéric’s work because he knows how to write in a very poetical way. He’s also totally at ease in putting things together from diverse sources: actors’ suggestions, the director’s ideas, historical documents, whatever. He’s not an author who thinks of himself as God. But, like everyone in the company, he has his own point of view.

SALTER: Did the contemporary storyline come from him?

VASCONCELOS: I had already worked out a basic storyline. For any show, I distribute the roles to the actors even before we really know who the characters are. Everything might change during the rehearsal; but at least we are ready to get going. My outline is just roughed in but it’s always clear. For example, tableau one: Lady Macbeth gets measured; tableau two: such and such; tableau three: such and such. And then through improvs, discussions, and writing and rewriting with Jean-Frédéric, everything changed — as it needed to, as we discovered things together.

SALTER: What about the audience? What do you think that it discovered from your way of (re)making Macbeth?

VASCONCELOS: We never know what to expect of our shows; we are always surprised. People have a very weird relationship with Shakespeare. Francophone audiences reacted negatively to the fact that the French actors spoke Shakespeare with a French accent! And the anglophone audiences were also pissed off because the actors weren’t speaking English properly — not that they necessarily wanted a British accent; but they sure didn’t want what we were giving them. The presence of many different languages means that you don’t know what to expect so you are much more alert than when, say, the Shakespearean text is only in English. But many people get ticked off by that. I am not sure just how far I can take linguistic mix with Shakespeare; I will have to think hard about this the next time I do him. In our 1993 show, Perdus dans les coquelicots, one of the actors played an uncle who had to teach his nephew the history of humanity from the big bang to the present day in eight minutes. At one point he named all the great artists, including, of course, Shakespeare. Then he said: ‘To be or not to be’ — he paused and then he added: ‘That is the ... most stupid question I’ve ever heard in my entire life’. I love this kind of irreverence towards Shakespeare, but out of respect for him. I, personally, think he is the greatest playwright who ever wrote. But we have to recreate him in the here and now, for contemporary audiences, and we can’t succeed in this if we are too tradition-bound and reverential. We want to play with Shakespeare. That’s reason enough to do him, again and again and again.