

Theatre Reviews

***Hamlet*. Dir. Bartosz Szydłowski. Juliusz Słowacki Theatre, Kraków, Poland.**

Reviewed by *Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik** 

“The end is exactly this / The hands lie apart”

[...] you lie on the stairs and see no more than a dead ant
nothing but black sun with broken rays
I could never think of your hands without smiling
and now that they lie on the stone like fallen nests
they are as defenceless as before The end is exactly this
The hands lie apart

Zbigniew Herbert, *Elegy of Fortinbras*,
trans. Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott

The most recent Polish production of *Hamlet* is the staging directed by the eminent Krakow-based director Bartosz Szydłowski, known internationally as the director of the Divine Comedy Festival. Designed as part of a larger project, which started in Szydłowski’s Łaźnia Nowa Theatre in Krakow, this *Hamlet*, just like his earlier *Przypadek* [*Coincidence*], *Konformista* [*Conformist*] and “*Waleśa w Kolonos*” [*Waleśa in Kolonos*], reflects on the overwhelming politicisation of life and uses theatre as a vehicle for a deeply troubling inquiry into the nature of politics in its most vulgar, populist mode. Szydłowski’s theatre, however, is not meant to be a mirror of reality, or a witness to its vile wiles; its position is to offer not only an encounter with, but also a counter-proposition to whatever ails the present. Such a theatre, understood as a challenge to the audience, is what Szydłowski has been eloquently defending since the 2015 move of the ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS), against the stage as a site of demoralisation and impudent questioning of authority, with directors sacked and replaced by individuals willing to control the repertoire and the ensembles.

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Heralded as “one of the most important stagings of Shakespeare’s tragedy after 1989” (Cieślak), Szydłowski’s production fails to please, as its purpose is to make the audience think, and do so hard and unapologetically.

The production premiered on 8 November 2019, is still running, and was on also during the consecutive lockdowns, as it went online and was streamed live during the Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival, moved to autumn 2020. The non-virtual site of the premiere is not without a consequence for the tenor of the whole production. The Słowacki Theatre in Krakow is, historically speaking, one of the oldest and most eminent Polish stages, operating continuously since its inception as Krakow’s Municipal Theatre in 1893. Its pediment, decorated with the inscription “Krakow for national art”, speaks volumes of the investment of Polish theatre in general and this venue in particular into the tasks suitable for the national stage: to provide a sense of historical and cultural continuity for the audience, to cultivate national identity through the arts, and to inspire desire for political independence. This political mission was perhaps most acutely felt and most provocatively undertaken by the Krakow visionary, artist and playwright Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907), whose lifelong professional and emotional connection with socially engaged theatre became one of the organisational pivots of Szydłowski’s *Hamlet*.

The production, which I saw on four different occasions, including the live streamed digital theatre experience in 2020, starts with a poetic *crescendo*: from the upper-gallery balcony Horatio (Krzysztof Piątkowski) booms at the audience, quoting an oblique, but ominously prophetic passage from an unfinished poem by Wyspiański. “Requiem” heralds the ruin and decay of the world as we know it: “in the old church [...] ruins of figures, remains of the altars [...] internal echoes, bodies rotting, skeletons drying up [...] the temple’s falling down, it will collapse—the horror” (Wyspiański, *Wiersze* 199, my translation). The end of things to come, the impending doom, but also the rise and fall of populist regimes are the leitmotifs of Szydłowski’s *Hamlet*, and these larger issues are contrasted from the very outset with the very intimate portrayal of Hamlet and Ophelia’s relationship as the only authentic connection worth fighting for. Horatio’s prophecy sounds out in the auditorium while the audience is looking at a video installation in lieu of the curtain, where the elaborate background is partly covered by a live stream close-up of Hamlet (Marcin Kalisz) and Ophelia (Agnieszka Judycka) hanging out together, with a copy of *Hamlet* tossed in the background and then perused by Ophelia. This initial video installation seems almost like a creed or a manifesto: to be private in the totalitarian world is to be political, as to be private together means rubbing that sense of togetherness in the face of the all-seeing state. The larger-than-life close-up reveals, however, the illusory nature of such a manifesto, as what resides within is also a horror. It is the *horror vacui* of the everyday, a fear of

loss coming with the realisation not voiced yet in 2019, but felt much more profoundly in 2020 and 2021, that we are the sum of our encounters with our significant others, those that are not afraid to breathe the same air we do. What happens when they are gone? Is it only a question of time before the unified front of two vulnerable individuals crumbles against the state violence masked as authority? Is the belief in *amor vincit omnia* the most tragic flaw of all? The answers to these questions loom heavily over the audience; when Marcin Kalisz delicately touches Agnieszka Judycka's belly, we begin to realise that the stakes in this game might indeed be high.

The subtle promise of the private bliss is marred by the occurrence of Hamlet's ghost outside the castle *a la* contemporary glass-walled condo, with Hamlet and Ophelia residing upstairs and Claudius (Wojciech Skibiński) and Gertrude (Hanna Bieluszko) staying downstairs. Hamlet meets the ghost in front of a gigantic hand, an open palm, positioned amidst pebbles in the foreground, as if it were a reminder of a more glorious past. The ghost is to be found on that open palm, an unexpected gift; he comes in the form of a young boy with a lisp (Tytus Grochal), dressed in a cowboy suit and with a sheriff's badge, a walking and talking topical allusion to the first free post-communist elections "Solidarity" poster, entitled "W samo południe 4 czerwca 1989" [High Noon 4 June 1989] (See Fig. 1). The boy ventriloquizes Hamlet as if the sweet prince were his puppet, teaching him to repeat his highly stylised words and gestures taken straight out of the western, the revenge narrative of the 20th century. As long as Ophelia is around, the ghost's allure is only temporary, but once she is gone, Hamlet becomes mesmerised, fully absorbed into the rebellion against the system, even though he, rather ironically, does not have a ready-made plan on how to proceed with his revolution. Hamlet's increasing readiness to give himself up to fulfilling the ghost's desire for vengeance (or is it justice?) is the Derridean impossible gift: "death [...] is the very circumstance that makes it possible to act ethically at all [...]. This readiness to die alone guarantees the ultimate disinterest of his [the ethical agent's] ethical gesture, since it would seem that a good one is prepared to die for cannot be the secret vehicle of one's own power or (presently enjoyed) glory. In this sense, readiness to die precludes the will to power" (Milbank 33). The acute realisation that to act ethically one needs to give up power turns out to be the Polish Hamlet's undoing.

From that strong prelude we move right into the ironic buffo of the courtroom process, where Claudius and Gertrude are presented to the entertainment of Polonius (Andrzej Grabowski) in a dancing row of courtiers, as puppets in the service of the master puppeteer. Polonius the tyrant is the one whose ring is kissed by the king and the queen at the start of the performance. Clad in his velvet pseudo-cardinal vestments, he assumes the chilling airs of a Machiavellian rhetorician; this ecclesiastical monarch rules his subjects

ruthlessly, and his cruelty is cloaked very thinly by outward gentleness. His unhealthy obsession with Ophelia is measured only by the contemptuous grandeur of his regal demeanour and the slavish loyalty of his son-in-law, as Laertes (Tomasz Augustynowicz) is another priest, following his principal unscrupulously and to the dot. The sole patron of Claudius and Gertrude's illicit love, he mortifies, humiliates and shames them, calling upon the royal couple unannounced, catching them in a private moment, only to use their toilet at his leisure, leaving them no illusion that they are to serve and obey. From the initial scene, in which he starts his (very cool) blues-like admonition, till the moment he delivers his cynical last monologue, he commands the stage, meeting a worthy adversary only in Ophelia and her protest songs. When in the closet scene he finally ends up eavesdropping on Gertrude and Hamlet, she mouths a silent cry for help, hands the gun over to her son and points to the target. Polonius's fall is again imbued with political significance that goes way beyond the purely aesthetic and existential reflection on the mechanisms of power. The cardinal's psychedelic speech in an intermedial infinity illusion close-up preceding the closet scene was taken straight from the sermon delivered a couple of months earlier by the Krakow Archbishop, Marek Jędraszewski, who, in his homily, shown on the Polish television channel TVN24, characterised the LGBTQ+ community as the "rainbow plague".¹ This dehumanising metaphor is repeated verbatim by Polonius, triumphant in this scene, but dead in another.

The painfully presentist connection between the theatrical and the political was further strengthened in the consecutive runs of the production, running parallel to the nationalist agenda of the Law and Justice government that used the pandemic to deal with the issues, institutions and groups that were deemed problematic for their project of "non-liberal democracy". Claudius's modelling on the person of the current Polish President, Andrzej Duda, started out as a rather subtle suggestion in 2019, but became a straightforward topical allusion in the performance I watched in 2020. Once Claudius is freed from Polonius's oppressive influence, he confronts Hamlet right after the "mousetrap" scene, and orchestrates a "TV Elsinore" first-rate, fully controlled reality show, in which Hamlet spectacularly fails in his mission and is publicly unmasked as a masturbating madman. When Claudius leaves his antagonist defeated on the stage, he crosses over his immobile body with contempt. In 2020, this victorious exit was accompanied by the phrase borrowed from the anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric of the Polish President, who, in the thick of the 2020 presidential campaign, addressed the LGBTQ+ community saying that "it's not people, it's ideology."

¹ On the situation of the LGBTQ+ community at the beginning of the 21st century, see Chowanec, Mazierska and Mol; Bill and Stanley.

The ideological warfare on the Krakow stage did not fail to register also the mass anti-government protests in the Polish streets. The live streamed performance came in the thick of the protests against the abortion ban in Poland: Ophelia's black clothes acquired a new significance, as black was the colour of choice of the protesting women; the windows of Hamlet and Ophelia's apartment were adorned not only with a quote from Wyspiański, but also with red thunderbolts, a symbol of Polish women on strike, visible in the Polish streets throughout the mass protests in autumn and winter 2020. Ophelia's decision not to partake in the world anymore turned then into a political manifesto of a woman refusing to be implicated in a regime that condemns her and her unborn, expressed in the "to be, or not to be" speech delivered in a moving dialogue with Hamlet; an unrecognizable, but hauntingly beautiful version of Yoko Ono and John Lennon's "Imagine"; and, finally, through Wyspiański's final poem, "The Death of Ophelia". This Ophelia is never the pliable lady, a "poor Pole" from the earliest Polish translations; she is the ironic and vengeful Ophelia Furiosa, whose emergence was to be wished for and only expected, as the only force strong enough to break the patterns of violence in the increasingly totalitarian system. Without this Ophelia, defiant even after her death, Hamlet is lost, caught up into another of Wyspiański's intertexts, in which the Krakow playwright expressed his hypercriticism of the national dreams of freedom. Against the background of the monstrous hand, now erect and pointing to the skies, Kalisz ends up, Polish saber in hand, delivering a speech from Wyspiański's play *Wyzwolenie* [*Liberation*], whose action takes place on the stage of a Krakow—or, rather, *the* Krakow—theatre:

Alone on a great, empty stage.
 My thoughts are dust. [...]
 A slave of one great thought,
 in it my impotence and my strength.
 [...] I entered the dark Temple,
 was striving, but don't know whereto.
 I am alone—the shame burns my forehead:
 the only force, the arcane power.
 Tears, blood; curse tears! blood burns the temples—
 curse tears!—blood! (Wyspiański, *Wyzwolenie* 189-190, my translation)

Just as in the case of Wyspiański's *Liberation*, it is the overwhelming task of the audience to decide what that call really, awe-fully, means.

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Figure 1: "Solidarity" poster. File:PilsPlac51 DSC0844.JPG – Wikimedia Commons



Figure 2: Courtesy of the Słowacki Theatre



Figure 3: Courtesy of the Słowacki Theatre