Member since 2021
JM14947

Multicultural Shakespeare:
Translation, Appropriation and Performance vol. 28 (43), 2023
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-8530.28.14

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Other *Hamlet* in Puppet Theatre: A Contribution to Central European Theatre Diversity of the 1980s-1990s

Abstract: This study aims to address the stigmatization and reductionism of Central European culture by many scholars and to decentralize it. At the *Crossing Borders with Shakespeare Since 1945* conference, the roundtable discussion raised questions about naming and defining "Central Europe" and revealed several discrepancies. However, the discussion lacked cultural, political, and historical context. To address this, the author examines a lesser-known artistic genre, puppet theatre, for answers and comparisons. Zlatko Bourek, a Croatian artist and director, offers a unique perspective on the theatre of the 1980s and serves as an example of the diversity and heterogeneity of Central European cultural expression. Bourek's work draws from the tradition of Central European puppetry and explores connections between the Iron Curtain and Yugoslavia. His artistic style is exemplified in his adaptation of Tom Stoppard's play *Fifteen-Minute Hamlet*, which masterfully condenses the entire plot of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into a fifteen-minute performance. Bourek's concept of combining Shakespearean tragedy with farce, presented through Japanese traditional Bunraku theatre, represents an important experiment of the 1980s. The use of syncretism and the aesthetics of ugliness are notable features of this experiment. It is a breakthrough in the perceived history of puppet theatre for adults and an aesthetic experiment in the era of Central European totalitarianism.

Keywords: Puppet Theatre, Central Europe, Zlatko Bourek, farce, Bunraku, Croatia theatre, aesthetics of ugliness, Shakespeare.

In his book *The Kidnapped West*, the late Czech-French writer Milan Kundera questioned the existence of Central Europe as a distinct cultural entity with its own history. He argued that defining its geographical borders would be a futile exercise since Central Europe is not a state, but rather a culture or a destiny.

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Kundera believed that its borders are imaginary and must be redrawn in each new historical situation (Kundera 46-47).

The definition of Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is a topic of interest not only for political scientists but also for artists, theatre-makers, and filmmakers. The current political situation in Europe suggests a stagnation rather than a progressive development that will eventually reconnect a divided Europe. However, discussions surrounding the spiritual specification of this diverse cultural and political space often lead to more questions than answers, with both questions and answers colored by strong opinions. Since the Second World War, Central Europe has undergone significant political and cultural changes that produced a divided Europe. In the new millennium, the region is now searching for a lost moral and ideological commonality. Therefore, it is important to maintain objectivity and avoid subjective evaluations. The identification of most Central European nations after 1989 was manifested in various ways. Sometimes the identification was strongly nationalistic, resulting in events such as the Yugoslav war. Other times, it was a capitalist, conservative imitation of Western democracies and their values. However, culture and art played an important role in these countries as a participant, progressor or initiator of social change. The Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University in Brno recently held a conference titled *KDS | Conference Crossing Borders with Shakespeare in 1945: Central and Eastern European Roots and Routes*. The conference explored the theme of border crossings since 1945 through Shakespeare's works and theatrical realizations. The conference demonstrated that, despite the Renaissance being a universal movement, totalitarian systems in Central European states imposed certain restrictions, censorships, and prohibitions. One commonly employed—and unjust—criterion for defining Central Europe is the communist past of some of these states. Western Europe and the United States have often oversimplified the naming of post-communist countries as "Eastern Europe," disregarding the differences that fundamentally affected freedom of creation and artistic development even within the former communist countries. Understanding the cultural multiplicity of Central Europe has always been challenging for most of the world's cultures, leading to the schematization and stigmatization of the concept. One division within these states was the Iron Curtain, which separated the two fundamental types of communism in Europe: the Bolshevik one, trapped in the grip of the Soviet Union, and Yugoslav socialism, generally characterized as the middle way or leader of the non-aligned.[1] The Yugoslav model of socialism

[1] The split between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia originated from the 1948 Informbyro (The Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties) meeting and persisted until the countries partially reconciled in 1955 with the signing of the Belgrade Declaration. This separation from the Eastern bloc resulted in

was distinguished by the freedom to travel and constant communication with the rest of the world, which facilitated the flow of information and ideas. The lecture and roundtable titled *Eastern Europe/Central Europe/Central Eastern/ Europaeast: Floating Signifier of Cultural and Political Geography* raised many questions. However, it lacked methodological openness in terms of culture, politics, and history. For instance, its conception did not encompass the culture of Austria, which formerly served as a connector of Central European culture, or eastern parts of Italy, such as Trieste, Slovenia, Croatia, and even the area of today's Ukraine, including the city of Lvov (Lemberg) and its cultural context within the framework of Central Europe (Putna 11-17). Thus, the question arises: how can this stigmatization and reductionism of the multiple elements of Central European culture be broken and decentralized? Unfortunately, even after more than 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, many Central European states seem to forget that this region includes independent countries such as Slovenia and Croatia, which have strong historical connections to the rest of Europe and do not need to work as hard to catch up with the years lost behind the Iron Curtain. Perhaps the self-centeredness of some former Eastern bloc states is creating new imaginary borders within Central Europe, hindering the much-needed integration of the entire continent (Rychlík 212-219).

Diversity of Puppet Theatre

While it is a lesser-known artistic genre, puppetry can be used to explore Central Europe's seemingly elusive nature, one primarily defined by culture and destiny. The historic diversity and popularity of puppet theatre in Central Europe is remarkable. Records indicate that puppet companies were already traveling within Austria-Hungary as early as the 18th century. Mathias Unger and Ferdinand Hofmann were among the most renowned directors. In her book *Two Centuries of Czech Puppetry*, Alice Dubská (27) discusses the widespread influence of puppet theatre in Central Europe. She notes that the style and repertoire of puppeteers' performances demonstrate both the universality of theatrical expression during that time as well as the cultural connection of the Central European region. Many puppeteers played a significant role in the popularity and dissemination of puppet theatre. Kundera defines Central Europe as a cultural and fateful space. Therefore, to understand puppet theatre in Central Europe, it is

significant economic challenges for Yugoslavia, which relied heavily on trade with the USSR and its allies. The economic pressures in the country led to reforms that eventually resulted in the introduction of socialist self-government and greater decentralization of the country through constitutional amendments formalizing the reforms.

necessary to comprehend its historical development, political connotations, and aesthetic diversity.

Repertoire theatres in the Eastern Bloc often included Shakespeare as a programming certainty, or offered creators greater political and social engagement, which often drew critical responses from political leaders. That said, during the 1960s in Czechoslovakia's so-called normalization period, performances of many of Shakespeare's plays were banned. The earliest productions to be banned were tragedies such as *Richard III*, *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*. The director Miroslav Macháček's production of *Jindřich V* at the National Theatre in Prague in 1971 served as a response to the repressive policies and censorship of the 1970s following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The invasion led to pro-Russian censorship and twenty years of suppressed freedom. Although Macháček's production remained on the theatre's repertoire for another five years, Macháček did not receive any further directing opportunities at the National Theatre until his death and worked only as an actor. Communist officials and censors criticized Macháček for having *Jindřich V* speak Slovak on the stage of the Czech National Theatre—the language of then Czechoslovak president and Communist Party leader Gustav Husák.[2]

If theatre during the totalitarian era in Central Europe used Shakespearean language as a tool for expressing social and political criticism, then *puppet theatre* responded to the world around it with a visual language typical of this syncretic art form. The path to modern puppet aesthetics was not without experimentation and new ideas, such as exploring the essence of puppet theatre and puppetry. One reason for seeking a new aesthetic language was the tendency to distinguish puppet theatre from drama. Shakespearean drama played a significant role in this. Throughout its history, puppet theatre has alternated its target audience. The current notion that it is mainly a theatre for children and a miniature version of drama is a stereotype that has persisted since the so-called renaissance of puppet theatre in the mid-19th century. At that time, there was a national awakening in Central Europe and amateur theatres were emerging. Puppet theatre became a promoter of national cultures while also promoting the literary and theatrical genre of fairy tales. A change occurred at the beginning of the 20th century when, due to various artistic movements, experimentation with productions and performances for adults began. This change resulted in the creation of repertory puppet theatres, mostly of the marionette type. Between the two world wars and shortly after World War II, puppet repertoires for children once again prevailed, thanks to the generally favorable cultural

[2] Presentation by Martin Pšenička "*…noxiousness of my work*:" Mirolsav Machaček's *Henry V* at Normalized National Theatre, at *KDS | Konference Crossing Borders with Shakespeare since 1945: Central and Eastern European Roots and Routes*, 6 July 2023, Brno.

developments in the 60s. This revolutionary approach has brought about a liberalization of puppetry in all its forms. Performances are now more frequently aimed at adults, offering a wider range of staging approaches that have also been applied to Shakespeare's plays. From the second half of the 20th century, productions of Shakespeare's puppet plays were not as rare and were more commonly and frequently produced, especially when we talk about situational comedies or texts that contained certain mythical beings, goblins, or other fantastic characters. Puppet theatres occasionally included Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in their repertoire, but less often tragedies or historical dramas. Creators worked with exaggeration, fairy tale elements or meaningful symbolism. There are several reasons for the changes in relation to both the audience and the emergence of new dramaturgical and dramatic interpretations of Shakespeare in the second part of the 20th century. In her study "Shakespeare in the Post-1989 Hungarian Puppet Scene," Gabriella Reuss (159) points out the different approaches to puppet aesthetics in Hungary and Czechoslovakia since the 1980s, especially in productions for adults. Until 2000, the *State Puppet Theatre Bábszínház* in Budapest insisted on its socialist realist approach to puppet theatre, which relied on an illusory puppet aesthetic. However, in Czechoslovakia, groundbreaking productions emerged from the 1960s onwards, in which *live actors* appeared alongside puppets. In 1983, Czech theatre expert Miroslav Česal wrote a study titled *The Live Actor on the Puppet Stage*, which thoroughly analyses the aesthetic and historical role of the *live actor* in puppet theatre. It should be noted that while Czech modern puppetry did not have a progressive influence on, for example, Hungarian puppetry in the 1980s, the opposite was true for Slovenia and Croatia. In both countries, since the creation of post-war Yugoslavia in the 1950s, puppet theatres have collaborated with Czech playwrights, directors, and artists who have exported their modern staging approaches. Reuss cites theatre theorist Henryk Jurkowski in the introduction of her study; he points out that in the 70s and 80s, theatre practitioners in the Central European region began experimenting with a *third genre*, a new form of theatrical expression that combined live actors with puppetry. This discovery is one of the main inspirations for why I considered it important to open up the question of greater openness in research on the Central European theatre space and the diversity of individual nations in Central Europe.

In the chapter *System of symptoms of puppet theatre and adult audience Miroslav Česal* (*Kapitovy* 1984: 14-17) divides the perception of symbols in puppet theatre between adults and children. However, adult audiences often perceive puppet theatre symbols as dominated by the symbols used in live theatre, making it difficult for them to understand all the expressions used in puppet theatre. This seminal theoretical work is also the common denominator for most Central European puppet theatres after 1945, regardless of political or linguistic differences. The DRAK Theatre in Hradec Králové demonstrated the

third genre in its most famous production, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1984,[3] proving that adult puppet theatre is not a diminished form of drama, but a unique artistic expression. Although the presence of Shakespearean plays in Czechoslovak professional puppet theatre was modest in the 1980s, three remarkable productions were created: *Comedy of Errors* at Naive Theatre Liberec, *King Llyr (Lear)* at Alfa Theatre in Pilsen, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at DRAK Theatre.[4] Czech puppetry expert Nína Malíkova (100-104) considers Krofta's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to be a milestone for modern Czech puppet theatre. This is not only because Shakespeare's production left a greater artistic impression on puppet theatre, but also because it was an experience for both the audience and the critic, who forgot that they should be critical and became a mesmerized, amused, laughing, and astonished spectator. It was the quintessence of excellent collaboration between the ensemble and the creative team, and one of the crucial productions of the peak period of the DRAK's style. At the same time, the Croatian theatre ITD's *Hamlet* was created, which followed the principle of the third genre but used a different artistic aesthetic for the adult audience within the context of Central European Yugoslav socialism.

Aesthetics of Ugliness in Puppet Theatre as a Peculiar Social Revolt

Zlatko Bourek, who was born in 1919 and died in 2018, was a Croatian artist and a sculptor, painter, director, set designer, costume designer, puppet designer, and author of animated and live-action films. Bourek's multi-genre approach made him a unique figure in both Croatian and global contexts. Bourek was a counterpart of the Czech puppet school and an experimenter of the third genre and possessed a radical perspective on the aesthetics of European puppetry. Like his drama colleagues, he staged Shakespeare's drama as a critique of contemporary society. He preferred a strong visual aesthetic of ugliness over verbal communication. Bourek's 1983 production of *Hamlet* is a unique interpretation of Shakespeare's classic drama. It employs farce, caricature, and disfigured puppets to create a distorted mirror of society. While it may not be an unambiguous critique of socialist society in Central Europe, it does offer a broader critique of the modern world of the 1980s. Bourek's unique sense of the artistic, the grotesque, comedy, satire, and farce has been applied to a variety

[3] DRAK Theatre's 1984 production of W. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Josef Krofta, was a breakthrough, opening up stage space for the *actor alongside* the puppet.

[4] Theatre Institute Prague. *Theatre Productions* [online]. [cit. 2024-02-06]. Accessed on: https://vis.idu.cz/Productions.aspx?lang=en

of artistic media, including film, visual art, and theatre, and his work appeared in numerous group exhibitions in Croatia and abroad. He has also had solo exhibitions in Duisburg in 1969 (at Nos Gallery) and in New York in 1969/70 (at the Museum of Modern Art, Film Department). In 1977, he directed Salih Isaac's puppet farce *Orlando Maleroso* for the Dubrovnik Summer Festival.[5] This play was inspired by Dubrovnik tradition and the *Japanese Bunraku theatre*, and marked the beginning of the revival of puppet theatre in Croatia. In 1982, the ITD theatre from Zagreb performed Bourek's *Hamlet* (Shakespeare-Stoppard) to great success. The play was later performed at some of the world's biggest theatre festivals. Bourek's artistic style is characterized by rough and naturalized comedy that borders on the grotesque and the laconic.[6] The humor is derived from the characterization of the heroes, their various vices, and physical flaws. The focus regularly shifts to the material, instinctive, bestial, and sexual side of human nature. The productions of Bourek and farce coincide in their grotesqueness, loud humor, cheekiness, folly, and profanity. Though situated overall within historical Central European and its culture, as part of formerly socialist Yugoslavia, Croatia did not experience the same level of repressive cultural censorship as did states behind the Iron Curtain. This partial freedom allowed Croatian artists a wider range of creativity that encompassed political as well as cultural and social criticism. This artistic freedom represented a significant turning point in Yugoslavia's gradual disintegration and collapse during the 1980s. Zlatko Bourek discovered an ideal model for his authentic artistic style in Tom Stoppard's play *Fifteen-Minute Hamlet*,[7] which premiered in 1976 on the terraces of the National Theatre in London. Following his previous success with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1967, Stoppard continued exploring the *Hamlet* theme by condensing the most famous and popular lines from Shakespeare's play. *Fifteen-Minute Hamlet* offers a breathtaking abridgement of Shakespeare's original, including all key scenes and lines, condensed into just fifteen minutes. The abridgement is grotesque, but it captures the essence of Shakespeare's longest tragedy and the anxious Prince of Denmark. Though Stoppard did not write the text for puppet theatre, his play's structure, exaggeration, and characterization are reminiscent of puppet theatre and puppetry. Bourek utilized a strong visual element in combination

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[5] *Zlatko Bourek* [online]. [cit. 2023-06-23]. Accessed on: https://zlatkobourek.com

[6] A subgenre of comedy that is often identified with farce for its crude and lascivious humor. Simple plots, primarily intended for entertainment and lacking the necessary satirical charge, were popular in the 19th and 20th centuries, although the name is also used for pieces of earlier, medieval and Renaissance origin. Accessed on http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=35183.

[7] The play is an excerpt from another play by Tom Stoppard called *Dogg's Hamlet*, which was published 1979.

with words. Stoppard quotes Shakespeare and employs commonly known catchphrases as a point of reference to enhance the audience's understanding of the plot. The play begins with Stoppard's use of Shakespeare's famous lines from Hamlet, such as "To be, or not to be, that is the question, There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Though this be madness, yet there is method in it, I must be cruel, only to be kind…" (Stoppard 1). This technique immediately engages the audience and sets the stage for the story to come.

Livija Kroflin, a Croatian theatre theorist, highlights in her research on the significance of his work Zlatko Bourek's exceptional relationship to the text. Despite being primarily a visual artist, Bourek reads Stoppard's *Hamlet* as a transparently clear story. The characters enter with their mouths agape, make a lot of noise, and introduce themselves (or have their names written on their backs). The actors reach the highest level of skill and demonstrate their abilities through combat, without any intention of causing harm. The play demonstrates the beauty and ability of theatre to compress and condense profound messages. The performance seeks close contact with the audience and does not involve psychological nuances due to the wooden facial expressions. As Kroflin writes, "That's the beauty of theatre—it doesn't run 2,000 metres, but 250 metres" (64).

Bourek utilized large, open-mouthed puppets and a special technique called *guzovoz*,[8] based on the Japanese *kuruma ningyo* technique. Although the traditional Japanese puppet theatre of Bunraku served as inspiration, Bourek's production was not a direct adaptation. The set design was minimalistic, featuring white sheets in the background to facilitate quick entrances and exits for the puppeteers. The actors sat on small crates on wheels, manipulating the puppet heads with one hand and gesturing with the other. The puppet's legs are operated by the actor, enabling swift movement on stage as required by Stoppard's text. According to Henryk Jurkowski (A History Volume II. 445-446), this rapid movement contrasts with the dignified puppet movements, resulting in a grotesque and bizarre impression. He notes that borrowing technology from other cultures is not unusual, though it can compromise originality if not done carefully. Bourek successfully combined the ancient Japanese puppet tradition with a modern interpretation of Shakespeare's text. Additionally, Bourek's idea of using dynamic technology to present a minute-long *Hamlet* is noteworthy. In Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic*

[8] *Guzovoz* – an original technique that comes from the Japanese kuruma ningyo, literally "puppet on wheels." In the traditional Japanese version, the puppeteer sits on a box with three wheels and holds the whole puppet in front of him. With his left hand, he holds the puppet's body and head, and with his right hand, he animates the right arm while animating the puppet's legs with his feet. The animator is dressed in black with a hood on his head and moves the puppet while the narrator speaks the text. (Kroflin 68).

Theatre, the chapters "Image-Time" and "The Aesthetics of Speed" explain the influence of media, aesthetics of speed and quotation on modern theatre in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to the principle of slowing down, stopping, and repeating, some post-dramatic theatre forms attempt to embrace the speed of media time and even exceed it. For instance, the video clip aesthetic, which incorporates media quotations, the combination of live presence and footage, as well as the segmentation of theatrical time in the style of television series, is particularly prominent in the works of younger theatre makers from the 1990s. These younger artists are not put off by their proximity to multimedia spectacles or by co-writing and appreciate the media schema as material to be used more or less satirically and subversively in a fast-paced way (Lehmann 224).

Traditional European puppet theatre includes marionettes, which are puppets controlled by strings. These puppets are characterized by their melancholic demeanor, elegant gestures, and fluid movements. Additionally, there are hand puppets such as Pulcinella, Petrushka, Kasperl and Guignol, which are controlled directly by the animator. These hand puppets allow for dynamic reactions, direct and mutual contact, and natural conflict among characters, which can lead to grotesque and exaggerated performances. According to Bourek, the puppets were too small to express his aesthetic of ugliness effectively, while the marionettes were too slow and elegant. In puppet theatre, technology can undermine dramaturgy, and dramaturgy can determine technology. Bourek found it challenging to reconcile these demands with traditional European puppet technology that prevented him from realizing a production that was farcical, fast-paced, and bound together by an aesthetic of the ugliness. Kroflin (69-70) describes Bourek's production's unique aesthetic style. While some may find the puppets ugly, others appreciate the beauty in their ugliness. Either way, it is indisputable that Bourek's style is distinct and easily recognizable as his own. It was observed that due to the strong visual style, the puppets in Bourek's play appeared quite similar, making it challenging to differentiate among characters.

Bourek's *Hamlet* production utilized a unique approach that featured prominent actors from the Zagreb drama studio ITD who had little experience with puppets. This approach was a challenge for Bourek who wished to break from traditional puppetry mannerisms and present new perspectives on theatre, tradition, and puppets. At first glance, his decision to collaborate with theatre actors may seem at odds with the inclinations of puppet theatre's transformation in the second half of the 20th century. During this time, puppet theatre sought a unique aesthetic and specificity that did not imitate drama, establishing itself as an independent artistic genre. However, according to Kroflin, Zlatko Bourek played a crucial role in the evolution of Croatian puppetry from the traditional model to post-dramatic theatre. He gained more attention from audiences and

critics than probably all other Croatian puppet shows for adults combined, even though he created plays for traditional dramatic theatre and not puppet theatre. In fact, his work gained international popularity.

Conclusion

The example of puppet theatre sheds light on the issue of Central European diversity and its cultural message. Puppet theatre demonstrates that the tradition of travelling theatres since the 18th century has historically and spiritually connected the culture of Central Europe. Nonetheless, due to political events and experiences, puppet theatre has also included diverse creative approaches. Common features characterizing Central European puppet theatre after 1945 include an interest in adult dramaturgy, experimentation with a third genre as well as the staging of Shakespeare's plays, which were considered universal Renaissance material. The aesthetics used by creators to express their relationship to society in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Croatia differed. The division of Central Europe by the Iron Curtain into market economy countries, communist states, and Yugoslav socialism has led to different production approaches in puppet theatre. However, the theoretical foundations remained the same across the two "socialist camps" and the third genre. In the 1980s, the DRAK theatre represented the Czechoslovak puppet school and drew on its own historical and theoretical experience. Croatian Zlatko Bourek drew on the rich tradition of Central European puppetry. However, due to the greater political openness under Yugoslav socialism, he was also inspired by global trends such as the aesthetics of ugliness and a greater connection with Asian culture. Both the Czechoslovak and Bourek's aesthetics stem from the same theatrical culture and historical context and its spiritual culture, but are fundamentally influenced by different political contexts.

Using puppetry as an example, this text emphasizes that defining Central Europe solely based on the states behind the Iron Curtain is a mistake. Instead, we should consider the diverse and varied cultural expressions in the context of political and social specificities.

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