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## Dramaturgy of *Hamlet(s)* in Czech Theatre between 2000 and 2023

**Abstract:** The paper focuses on five Czech productions of *Hamlet* that attracted the most critical and public attention between 2000 and 2023. Namely, the productions directed by Miroslav Krobot (2006), Jan Mikulášek (2009), Daniela Špinar (2013), Michal Dočekal (2021) and finally the most recent version by Jakub Čermák (2022). All five performances could be seen as contemporary reinterpretations of a classical text using a (post-)modern stylistic approach, as examples of post-millennium *Hamlets*. The paper discusses dramaturgical choices (such as the conceptualisation of the ghost, the mousetrap scene, or the character of Fortinbras) in order to identify and analyse possibilities for interpreting *Hamlet* as a political drama in the context of Czech performance tradition and the current political situation. The results show that performances generally present variations of *Hamlet* as a family drama, foregrounding different issues of memory and body, while the political reading is obsolete.

**Keywords:** *Hamlet*, dramaturgy, directing, post-modern theatre, performance analysis, Czech theatre.

In this paper I will analyse some of the representative productions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Czech theatre in between 2000 and 2023. Performances directed by Miroslav Krobot (2006), Jan Mikulášek (2009), Daniela Špinar (2013), Michal Dočekal (2021) and finally Jakub Čermák (2022) all received strong critical and audience response, so one could assume these productions are more than just singular directorial encounters with the notorious and canonic tragedy, but might also suggest certain trends of in Czech approach to Shakespeare. Marta Gibinska and Jerzy Limon wrote that we are often "test[ing] our contemporary reception of Shakespeare through *Hamlet*." (5) According to Jarka M. Burian, "Czech productions of *Hamlet* have served as a microcosm of the Czech theatre and its relation to the forces that have dominated the life of

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this nation in the heart of Europe.” (195) It is worth testing these notions. The idea of *Hamlet* as a mirror is still tempting.

The time frame of my focus is very pragmatic. Czech theatre saw a wave of productions of *Hamlet* around 2000 and currently, in seasons 2023/24, six new productions of *Hamlet* will be staged on Czech and Moravian stages. With shows already being performed, there will be a total of nine productions of *Hamlet* to be seen at once. So this abundance serves as a logical marker, prompting the question: what was going on in between? That’s why I am focusing on the samples of post-millennium *Hamlets* from the Czech context.

### **Czech *Hamlets*—Tradition and Transition**

It is widely acknowledged that *Hamlet* played a significant role in Czech theatre before 1989. In his book *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (2000), especially in chapter *Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain* (96-135), Zdeněk Stříbrný provides various examples of how the character and play of *Hamlet* became the “judge of his own time and servant of the future,” whilst his personal revenge was but a marginal motivation of his actions. “Denmark” was treated as a totalitarian state, which was unfortunately a natural interpretation at that time. Status of classical work at the same time prevented interventions of censorship: “Even the dyed-in-the-wool apparatchiks did not dare to attack him (William Shakespeare) openly, although they found it personally offensive to hear from Hamlet that something was rotten in the state of Denmark.” (Stříbrný 97) In the Czech context before 1989, according to Stříbrný, *Hamlet* was presented generally as a political tragedy—or tragedy combining political and personal. Jarka M. Burian interprets Czech performance tradition in a similar way. Moreover he claims that till 1989 Czech performances, often political in interpretation, “seemed to rise to the challenge of staging *Hamlet* while still remaining close to its form and substance.” (Burian 209) The text of the canonic Shakespeare’s play was still much respected (only choice of translation might be of an issue).

During the transitional period of the 1990s, this approach was almost entirely disregarded. The most notable performance of *Hamlet* was directed by Jan Nebeský and first premiered in 1994 at Divadlo Komédie, running until 2002. Nebeský had the Ghost speak through Hamlet’s mouth, actually possessing and contorting his body. Adaptation of the play included not only substantial cuts of the translation, but also addition of extra texts—this was totally impossible before 1989. Nebeský transformed the script into a multi-layered palimpsest (resembling T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* rather than Heiner Müller’s *Hamlet Machine*). Reviewer Jitka Sloupová remarked after some years: “*Hamlet* with David Prachař in the lead—still in the repertoire and still maturing—is the loneliest of Hamlets you could imagine, a youth whose tragedy

is not shared even by the ghost of his father, only by some voice from his inner being.” (*Theatre without Respite* 29). Milan Lukeš, a scholar of Shakespeare and translator, deemed Nebeský’s interpretation “disorganized, unstable, and illogical, and it’s obviously psychoanalytic.” Lukeš regarded this version of *Hamlet* as a symptom of social change, with the most critical point being the portrayal of Fortinbras’ ultimate arrival. “Nebeský doesn’t care about the conventional question of who Fortinbras is, which is the usual interpretation issue. This person, who is barely noticed, only speaks a few phrases at the end in a way that nobody—neither on stage nor in the audience—really cares about. There is no interest in the future. No social release occurs, not even a mockery of such a release, which would at least demonstrate a desire for it.” (Lukeš 5) In the mid-90s, this “diminishing” of Fortinbras would have appeared as an inconceivable provocation, especially when confronted with relatively stable performance tradition after 1945, where the interpretation of Fortinbras was always an issue, as Lukeš notes. However, nowadays it is one of the most viable and even desired dramaturgical choices.

In retrospect, it can be said that Nebeský’s *Hamlet* created room for radical interpretations of *Hamlet*; it is recognised as the first—in Czech context—deconstructivist and post-modern approach to the play.<sup>1</sup>

The exploration of new ways of performing *Hamlet* continued and resulted in eight different productions around 2000, premiered in one season. Jitka Sloupová’s paper, *Hamletomania in Bohemia*, summarises the variety of approaches taken, ranging from traditional to post-modern, as well as from respecting the text to wild deconstructions. Idea of *Hamlet* as political play was preserved in one case only; Zdeněk Kaloč interpreted *Hamlet* as a political parable demonstrating the never-ending change of totalitarian regime, very similar to Jan Kott’s idea of *grand mechanism*. The other shows explored very subjective ways for reading the play, which included textual extrapolations, diverse performance styles and focused rather on Hamlet as a sensitive intellectual. The abundance of *Hamlets* demonstrates not only the obvious fact that a single interpretation tradition is no longer sufficient, but also scepticism to the genre of tragedy as such (*Hamlet* is becoming often grotesque) and scepticism toward the future (usually nobody arrives to listen to Horatio’s testimony). So around 2000, we could see also in Czech context “the transition from a tradition of ‘political’ Hamlets/Hamlets, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, to post-modern, ‘post-dramatic’ Hamlets with a new ‘part’ and a new location.” (Cinpoes and Guntner 285) Symbolic conclusion of this transition period might be the very last performance of Nebeský’s *Hamlet* in 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed interpretation of *Hamlet* by Nebeský see Martin Procházka: *From Affirmative Culture to the “Condition of Justice:” A Reading of a Czech Post-Communist Hamlet*.

### ...After 2000

If the 1990s in Czech Theatre explored the variety of possibilities prompted by new social and political situations, the post-millennial *Hamlets* represent different cases. This article examines in detail five remarkable productions, through which I will illustrate recent trends in “Czech” performances of *Hamlet*.

The directors come from different generations. Miroslav Krobot, a well-respected director in his late fifties, directed *Hamlet* in 2006. Similarly, Michal Dočekal is now a highly respected artist, artistic director of Prague City Theatres, where he put on his version of the same play in 2021. In contrast, Jan Mikulášek and Daniela Špinar were regarded as promising young talents at the beginning of their careers, both in their early thirties. The most recent director of *Hamlet*, Jakub Čermák, is also considered a young talent. He is already forty, but he has mainly worked in small (independent) theatres. It's only in the past 4-5 years that he has gained recognition from larger, established theatres and made a name for himself in this field. In Spring 2023, he was appointed as the head of the drama department at the regional theatre in České Budějovice. He produced his own version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the theatre a year before that, in 2022.

### 2006—*Hamlet* as Ironic Psychological Drama (Krobot)

Miroslav Krobot (born 1951) started working on *Hamlet* later in his career, when he was already the artistic director of Dejvické divadlo, a small theatre in the suburbs of Prague. He gradually developed a respected ensemble of outstanding actors, with a distinctive style that effectively utilised the small-scale stage for decent, modern, psychological performances with playful moments of irony. This ensemble style was also clearly seen in *Hamlet*, which Krobot directed.

If we observe productions of *Hamlet*, and canonic classics in general, over a prolonged period, we may think they become less stylised and “pathetic,” more “realistic.” But often the old “pathos” is replaced by only the excessiveness of the contemporary grotesque. Krobot's *Hamlet* is quite a different case. The interpretation and style are indeed consistently actual, down-earthed and sober. The production is based on a vigorous adaptation of a translation by Jiří Josek, one of the most current existing Czech translations. Adaptation relies very much on Josek's colloquialism and situationality, using them effectively to create “civilistic,” non-pathetic *Hamlet*. At the end the production presents the well-known plot in a unique light by reimagining the premise.

Karel Tománek, the dramaturge, has assembled an extensive collection of meticulously dated working notes in the programme of the production, which demonstrate a comprehensive and protracted exploration of the production's

themes: “Why should Gertrude have an un-conflicting relationship with Hamlet at the beginning?”—“Given that Hamlet and Ophelia have no real ‘love scene,’ it appears that Hamlet is not particularly invested, and Ophelia is merely fantasising about the entire relationship. And then it doesn’t matter if she’s thirteen or forty. Of course: the older she gets, the sadder it gets.”—“What if our story began with Hamlet having no aversion to Claudius or his mother?”—“What if Ophelia was not naive? What if, on the contrary, she impresses Hamlet with her independence?”—“What if the ‘ghost’ was more troubled by his wife’s infidelity than by fratricide?” (programme for the production, 2006) All of these questions constantly deconstruct conventional clichés of *Hamlet* production, exposing the many motivational gaps purely from a psychological perspective. This approach allows for a re-evaluation and deeper understanding of the play’s relational structure and its relevance in a modern context. The original play’s “tragic” fatalism, coincidences, and predetermined revenge are challenged, or more accurately—eliminated. What remains are characters with contemporary sensibilities and hypersensitivities.

Costumes were modern, consisting of black suits, white collars, and sophisticated yet sombre dresses for women—as if we were in a family business or high society gathering. The setting for the first half of the play is in keeping with the theme, with just a few plain wooden tables, chairs, and tin cupboards in which the characters keep their personal belongings (Ophelia has a considerable number of fluffy animal toys and cigarettes). The opening scene of the performance, speech of Claudius to the assembly of lords, in this version looks more like a routine business meeting in a small company that is actually run jointly by two families.

Among Tománek’s comments published in the programme is a telling extract from the secondary literature, namely from Martin Hilský’s introduction to his translation of *Hamlet*: “[In] an Ibsenian living room it is impossible to conduct a poetic dialogue or monologue—the prerequisite of poetic drama is an anti-ilusive mode of staging.” (47) Remarkably, Krobot’s production takes place in a variation of such an Ibsenian parlour. The monologues, though not cut out, are played out as speeches to different stage partners—the theatrical result is fascinating: the intimate confessions are in fact even more cruel and absurd when spoken to a partner who is present but does not respond. And above all these “monologues” do not bring any relief. Claudius’s prayer, the confession of a murderer spoken directly to Hamlet, is overpowering in its frankness. As stated by the dramaturge in the programme: “Paradoxically: the more honest they are, the more isolated they become.”

Central to this production is the issue of dysfunctional family relationships, which the nervous and oversensitive Hamlet (performed by Jaroslav Plesl) finds difficult to bear. In line with this, following a formal family

meeting (in the original Scene I.2), he sighs: “So many family ties? It’s like being imprisoned.”<sup>2</sup> In the end, no character is able to escape from this “prison”—and although they all perish in the end, the story is told in a different but necessary way, as it is determined by the today’s psychological logic. The reviewer Martina Musilová described the end of the production as follows: “The story should have a satisfying conclusion, but the characters lack the fortitude. No emotion is sustained long enough to inspire meaningful action. The excitement immediately dies down and the characters sink into their innermost selves. [...] Society is disintegrated by the impact of its deeds.” (Musilová 105) In this version, Claudius acknowledges that he can never silence his conscience. As a result, he poisons his beloved Gertrude and ultimately drinks the poison himself. The Hamlet in this performance is delicate and nuanced, and his struggle with the blunt, realistic, and pragmatic world is unavoidable. “He has a polite tone, a logical understanding of the situation and a detached intellect that enables him to use sarcasm to mock the incomprehensible and absurd actions of his adversaries.” (Musilová 105) The consistency of the interpretation is evident in the final and significant scene of the play—the duel with Laertes. It does take place on stage at all.

Krobot’s Hamlet finishes his part by saying “the readiness is all.” He undoes his shirt button and walks offstage to meet Laertes, leaving his sword behind. This was one of the simplest, yet most theatrically powerful endings of *Hamlet*, leaving the audience stunned by the impending tragic conclusion. However, it doesn’t need to be shown, and remains only anticipated, as it is entirely unavoidable. In Krobot’s version the original duel scene is in fact impossible, it would not fit into the overall psychological and un-pathetic approach. Logically, this version of *Hamlet* doesn’t include Fortinbras at all.

Krobot turned *Hamlet* into an atmospheric psychological drama, reviewers mention Strindberg or Ibsen to evoke the style. This approach is coherent with other Krobot’s productions. It almost appears to be another modern “Chekhovian” production that draws inspiration from Krobot’s adaptations of Goncharoff’s *Oblomov* or his production of Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* (the two feature productions of Dejvické divadlo). Miroslav Krobot was directing Shakespeare only very occasionally, so in his case it is evident that he is appropriating Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into his own creative universum and acting style of the ensemble based on a combination of understatement and irony.

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<sup>2</sup> The quote is a re-translation of Jiří Josek’s translation from the script. His Czech translation was modified to some extent, so it is impossible to quote original Shakespearean text here.

## 2009—Hamlet from “Normalisation” (Jan Mikulášek)

Jan Mikulášek’s (born 1978) production of *Hamlet* premiered in 2009 at Goose on the String Theatre, an experimental theatre in Brno renowned for its unconventional and frequently subversive methods of interpreting texts and subjects.

The setting is the hall of a once posh villa, where the wallpaper is peeling off the walls, the old-fashioned TV is often grainy and tea is served from a large kettle, which at least part of the audience remembers from school canteens in the communist 1980s. On the walls there are snapshots of the actors when they were children (these are authentic photographs!). Hamlet’s story is set in a current time and place but reminds the audience also of the period of communist “normalisation” in the 1970s and 1980s. The costumes, which are slightly outdated but could still be considered modern, match this setting. The show starts with a “prelude”—a mimed scene that suggests the play’s past and upcoming events, starting with the death of Hamlet’s father. It’s ironically accompanied by Karel Gott’s popular song “Dad, Stay at Least Until Christmas.”<sup>3</sup> These elements all contribute to the ambivalent feeling that political “normalisation” is still ongoing.

Mikulášek and Krobot both emphasised an aspect of the family drama in the text. As a result, the comical element represented by the gravediggers and, above all, the entire Fortinbras line disappear from the story. However, the family in the story is peculiar, often grotesque, and sometimes their actions are accompanied by musical variations of The Addams Family theme. In my own review from 2009 I emphasised the fact that Mikulášek employs impressive visual metaphors in his production:

The most important prop is soil—it first appears at the entrance of the ghost. The Ghost is performed by the whole cast—as if they were a mirror of Hamlet’s overstimulated mind. All the actors perform as the Ghost, reciting lines as chorus and dropping soil from jars onto the floor. The soil, as a sign of the prematurely buried father, is everywhere. Hamlet scatters soil from pots, actors carry it in their trunks, and Claudius even uses it as a deadly poison. The theatre group takes on a more significant role than usual. The actors double (of foreshadow) behaviour of the main characters, anticipating their fates and revealing the roles the characters are given to play. Ultimately, the interpretation results in a fatalistic reading of Hamlet. Once the lead character wields his sword, it’s only a matter of time before he stabs his target. There is no doubt, only passive waiting. (Drozd)

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<sup>3</sup> Karel Gott (1939-2019) was an extremely popular Czech pop singer. His career started in the 60ties and in fact never faded. He is considered one of the symbols of communist normalisation, one of those who provided entertainment during communist rule and helped to “normalise” totalitarian regime.

The way in which Mikulášek presented the revelation of the Ghost is symptomatic—all the actors recite his text together (i.e. de facto the Ghost is speaking through the mouths of all the characters), while sprinkling dirt on the ground. The soil would then get in the way of the characters and would stain the characters' clothes. The Ghost in this case is not just a subjective hallucination of Hamlet, but rather a manifestation of a collective subconscious.

The production was characterised by balanced acting performances that combined—as was typical of Mikulášek—matter-of-factness with expressive and grotesque exaggeration. However, it was dominated by Hamlet played by Jiří Vyorálek—withdrawn, cynical and wounded in self-defence, a bit of a James Dean-like avenger without a cause (he plays a large part of the performance in a shabby jacket). Mikulášek's Hamlet has not many doubts, in the frozen time of “normalisation” you just wait for the ultimate end.

In my own review, I also complained that the creators reduced the political dimension too much. With hindsight, however, I admitted that it was Mikulášek's scenic images that stuck in my mind. “The dilapidated room is gradually flooded with layers of dirt as a ubiquitous memento of mortality and the inevitability of the human end,” aptly wrote Iva Mikulová (7). Mikulášek's production of *Hamlet* portrayed a dysfunctional family in a grotesque and bizarre manner. However, it ultimately highlighted the existential issues of its era, as well as the social and political atmosphere of the time. The play's setting, while unclear, seemed to be trapped in the timelessness of the “normalisation” period. Despite the explicit political dimension of the play being carefully erased, the implicit statement was clear—Czech society (of 2009...) has not got rid of the “normalisation” of our communist past. The show might demonstrate symptomatic tendency: *Hamlet* could not be any more anti-regime play after 2000, but in Mikulášek version it still spoke implicitly about hidden political traumas of actual Czech society.

### **2013—Hamlet as Nordic Noir with a Royal Twist... (Daniela Špinar)**

Still running is the production of *Hamlet* directed by Daniela Špinar (born 1979) in Švandovo divadlo in Prague. In this instance, the director aims to present a contemporary interpretation by casting relatively young Patrik Děrgel as the protagonist. This portrayal shows a vulnerable and highly sensitive, yet beautiful boy who is affected by the world around him, without the traditional heroics of an avenger.

Again, the story happens inside—this time it's in an opulent, slightly austere and detached modern royal house, where historical displays of family history (including the armour of late King Hamlet) are showcased in large cabinets. The outfits are current but respect the fact that we are in a royal court,



so Claudius wears a uniform for most of the action, and Queen Gertrude's gown is truly luxurious. In fact, with a little bit of leeway, this could be a modern-day "Danish" royal court. This upper class is accustomed to showing themselves to the media: Claudius's official speech in scene I.2 is acted out by Špinar as a press conference for journalists. The only problem is the oversensitive Hamlet, who doesn't fit into the polished media image.

Patrik Děrgel as Hamlet enters the stage wearing a black suit which is both expensive and elegant. However, as he becomes increasingly frustrated, he peels away the formal dress and spends most of the performance in white underpants, sometimes even completely naked. The hypersensitive portrayal of Hamlet is particularly powerful during the scene with the Ghost, where he recites Ghost's lines himself in a drug-induced trance as he stares at the vacant armour of his deceased father. He appears lonely, fragile, and brimming with ambiguous premonitions. In Špinar's version of *Hamlet* the phrase "Oh, my foresighted soul!" is emphasised. (This line is also foregrounded in Krobot's and Mikulášek's interpretation.) The scene, resembling a royal museum, becomes a museum of Hamlet's memories, materialising his inner world. Hamlet remains on the stage all the time. Even when he is being taken to England, he merely withdraws to one of the compartments, as if he is locked up in a mental hospital, and he is writing neurotically on the walls of his glass prison.

The radical and consistent subjectivity of Špinar's interpretation is evident in the conception of the final image: all the characters, living and dead, are squeezed into one of the display cases. They exchange the last few lines, but in the end the dialogue from the duel scene plays out only as a recording—perhaps it is Hamlet's memory, perhaps his imagination. And this is the image Hamlet faces, naked, sword in hand. Again, no Fortinbras arrives; Hamlet's last words in this case are "The rest is silence."

Špinar often conveys the emotion of the stage picture using popular songs, much like Mikulášek. In the final scene, the recurring refrain of Mr. Lonely (by Bobby Winton) reflects the basic feeling of Špinar's Hamlet: "Now I'm a soldier, a lonely soldier / Away from home through no wish of my own / That's why I'm lonely, I'm Mr. Lonely / I wish that I could go back home." The song stands in the show as a trendy cultural reference and an emotional emblem, inviting the audience to empathise with the hypersensitive hero. At the same time, it replaces many original verses, which have been cut out, providing new emotional and poetic impact.

Špinar's version of *Hamlet* has received critical and audience acclaim for 10 years (and it is still running). It provides a subjective interpretation infused with trendy and cosmopolitan pop-culture elements. In contrast, Mikulášek's version focuses on the local political and emotional history. Špinar's production has a universal, global appeal.

## Jakub Čermák (2022) Contra Michal Dočekal (2021)

It seems from the provided analysis that the prevailing tendency in Czech theatre is to see *Hamlet* as a family drama. The two most recent productions of *Hamlet* partly confirm this preliminary observation, but also bring more subtle variants to it. Directors came from very different backgrounds and generations, which of course results in very different conceptualisation of *Hamlet* as such.

Jakub Čermák (born 1980) staged *Hamlet* on the chamber stage of the regional theatre in České Budějovice, a venue usually reserved for contemporary drama or provocative productions of “classics”. Čermák again reads the play with focus on family issues. He emphasises Hamlet’s perspective on the situation. The production opens with a very visually striking sequence of a funeral mourning, followed by a wedding (and a segue into a monologue by the new king, Claudius). Čermák’s Hamlet, seated in the front row of the audience, disrupts this impressive ritual by stubbornly repeating a single line: “But my daddy is dead!” Čermák has a very cinematic stage language and the visuals of his production are striking. The spectacularity of the production is even enriched by pop culture references: two horror-like clowns instead of gravediggers remove the dead characters from the stage, Rosencranz and Guildenstern are presented as Japanese-style Lolitas. Čermák also plays around with gender issues. He presents Rosencranz and Guildenstern as teen-age girls, which gives all their dialogues with Hamlet an uncanny erotic vibe. Also, there is quite evident homoerotic tension between Laertes and Hamlet. This evident, but unspoken sympathy drives Laertes maybe more than the urge to avenge the murder of his father. The final duel thus becomes a scene of erotic seduction.

It is not really surprising that any explicit political motives including Fortinbras story are omitted. More interesting is the marginalisation of Horatio, who is often considered an important Hamlet’s counterpart or the only surviving witness of his drama. Čermák reduces his role to a minimum, but at the end it is Horatio who takes the royal crown for himself. The idea of Horatio as hidden spiritus is definitely not new nor original, in this case comes as quite unmotivated surprise.

Čermák’s interpretation is not really coherent: he evidently aims to make *Hamlet* our contemporary again through pop-culture aesthetic or usage of multimedia—e.g. one dialogue of Ophelia and Laertes is performed as a video call. The concept works in detail, but it is difficult to interpret the overall message. In the centre of the show, there is actor and rap-singer Daniel Kranich. He is using his craft especially in monologues, which are turned to proper musical pieces. If we follow the main hero, the concept seems to be very simple—Čermák’s Hamlet is an angry, oversensitive, and aggressive teenager in an intact posh society. The visual design is brand new, but the message is really not that different from Špinar’s reading. Čermák takes further the concept of

Hamlet as a current young man with all his inner issues—in this case much more focusing on erotic (and gender) aspect.

In October 2021 *Hamlet*, directed by Michal Dočekal (born 1965), premiered at the Prague City Theatres. In my overview, Dočekal represents a mature generation of directors (in 2002-2017 he was also the artistic director of the drama department of the National Theatre in Prague). Dočekal's style is highly post-modern and anti-illusionist.

Dočekal directs *Hamlet* on a stage that resembles a fragment of an abandoned living room or a photographic studio, constantly emphasising the theatricality of all the action. Actors often deliver speeches through microphones, changes of the set are presented openly as part of stage action and live cinema often doubles real-action of actors. Unlike the previous productions mentioned above, Dočekal wants to retell Hamlet's story in an epic way. The text has been radically altered, notably by adding fragments of Müller's *Hamlet Machine* to Hamlet's monologues. These fragments increase Hamlet's scepticism: his disgust and revulsion are not just disgust at the perverse family relationships, but disgust at society as a whole. The Müllerian fragments, of course, no longer bring any historical political connotations into the production, but become a critique of today's globalised society. The world of this *Hamlet* is cold, cruel, and arrogant.

The most notable change is the extension of the role of the travelling actors: after a very abbreviated version of the mousetrap scene, a short variation on Müller is inserted. In the moment of poisoning the king in the theatre-within-a-theatre, the main actor says: "After the death of the rightful king comes the revolution" and continues with Müller's famous monologue, starting with "The revolution begins as a stroll..." The description of the uprising unleashes a rather obscene action on the part of the actors, illustrating the revolution. For Claudius in the particular production is outrageous—even more than his personal guilt—the idea of public scandal and eventual revolt. While the Hamlet in Dočekal's production would probably be able to provoke such an uprising, at the same time, unlike previous Hamlets, he is plagued by a real identity crisis (that's why he often speaks in Müller's words again: "I was Hamlet...", "My play is cancelled...", etc.)

In this version, however, Fortinbras once again has the last word. He is only briefly mentioned at the beginning, and not a word is said about him throughout Hamlet's story. But he eventually arrives with the familiar sound of today's invading armies that we know from war films and documentaries. He speaks to us, probably in Danish, but in his words we hear the familiar slang of today's international politics: "humanitarian intervention" or "destabilised internal situation". It is also significant that Horatio is once again witnessing Hamlet's story in this production. At the beginning, we see him writing Hamlet's (or Müller's?) words on a typewriter, and likewise, with the typewriter on his knees,

he watches the final battle in which Hamlet dies. But even though he later demands to speak, Fortinbras does not allow him to give his testimony.

Obviously, Dočekal does not want to reduce *Hamlet* to a subjective family drama, so he retains the character of Fortinbras (and also Horatio) as a framework, giving Hamlet's inner dilemma a wider social relevance. Dočekal's approach differs from the perspective taken by other (mainly younger) directors before. For Dočekal again *Hamlet* is explicitly a political and social drama with a very sceptical message: Hamlet's political action is finally totally futile in the world of global politics, where the internal political crisis of a state might be solved by invasion of global power.

This production is not the first encounter of Dočekal with Shakespeare. So even though it seems an exception in the context of above-mentioned productions, at the same time it is pretty coherent with Dočekal's approach to Shakespeare. Dočekal still keeps the concept of Shakespeare as an epic storyteller, but as a director of post-modern sensitivity, he employs all possible means of theatre expression to create his anti-illusory, multi-media and multi-style version of Shakespeare.

### **Faces of "Subjectivity"**

It seems from my overview that almost all featured Czech performances of *Hamlet* opt for rather subjective reading of the play from the perspective of Hamlet, interpreting the canonical play mainly as a drama of a family. But in detail there are many subtle nuances which allow deeper analysis of directorial approaches. The brief comparative analysis will focus on the dramaturgical choices made by production teams. The aim is to demonstrate how these productions negotiate the image of *Hamlet*, both as a play and as a character, in relation to local tradition and the global context.

It seems obvious that the most prominent productions of *Hamlet* in the last two decades have read the play as a family, intimate drama. In many versions, the political aspect of the play is more or less suppressed, and often the Fortinbras line is removed altogether. As mentioned above, the first significantly problematised political reading of *Hamlet* in the Czech context was presented by Jan Nebeský in 1994. Later significant *Hamlets* are studies of dysfunctional family relationships and personal or relational "hells." Hand in hand with this goes a transformation of the concept of the Ghost—often no longer a mysterious apparition that sets *Hamlet* a fatal task, but rather the Ghost is a materialisation of Hamlet's premonitions and fears, a projection of his distraught soul. *Hamlet* thus becomes not only a play about family, but also about memory and childhood—more precisely, about a lost, unattainable innocent childhood. The Ghost comes because Hamlet will not and cannot forget.

The theme of memory was very strong, especially in Mikulášek's, Špinar's and Čermák's versions. In the first case, for example, it materialised in the real childhood photographs of the actors that hung in the stage area (the only photograph we never saw was that of the old Hamlet). In fact, the motif of the photograph, as a metaphor of nostalgia and at the same time of memory, ran through the whole production: Horacio, as a witness, occasionally took photos of key scenes, and finally he took a photo of the final scene with all the family members dead. In the case of Špinar's production, the performance space was actually a royal family museum with exhibits and faded paintings on the walls. In this museum, the exhibits become the characters themselves. Hamlet by Čermák lives in a world dominated by big images of Claudius, Gertrude and deceased king Hamlet. In this version Hamlet is confronted with media images of new King and Queen, new simulacra which threaten to erase his own personal memory of the father.

In this respect, David Prachař's performance as Hamlet in Jan Nebeský's production in 1994, which for the first time in Czechia showed Hamlet as a painful and twisted, stuttering and stammering body, cannot be overestimated. This was Hamlet no longer as a great tragic hero, but as a neurotic being, an ironic commentator and a gender ambivalent figure. There is a clear connection to concepts of Špinar and Čermák. In the first case Špinar presents Hamlet, who spends most of his time on stage in his underpants and ends up naked facing literally materialisation of all his anxious fantasies, the latter version by Čermák plays around with gender issues, using rap as very expressive, personal, and bodily way of performing Hamlet.

There is an interesting nuance between concepts of Mikulášek, Špinar and Čermák: all three performances are very much about the body and memory. But in Mikulášek's case, the memory that haunts Hamlet is also political, it is a memory of local history, of "normalisation"—so even though it looks like a family drama, the performance has a very strong implicit political meaning. 20 years of so-called normalisation are still for many people a traumatic part of their memory, but Czech society after the Velvet revolution in 1989 never really properly addressed this trauma. So, it is crucial that Mikulášek shows how suppressed or ignored political "normalisation" still forms bases of our everyday politics.

In the case of Špinar or Čermák, we really see "our" current society being reflected on stage. What we get is a very general, relatively vague image of an estranged, cosmopolitan, and global society. I believe that Mikulášek's *Hamlet* is the most political *Hamlet* of all analysed here. In this production compulsively emerging family memory is also a collective memory, an evocation of a suspended traumatic history. In Špinar's or Čermák's case, I would say that the trauma is only personal, and the same goes for Krobot's version, which also reads the whole story as very private.

Paradigmatic shift from political to more private or personal readings of *Hamlet* could be demonstrated also on conceptualisation of travelling actors and the mousetrap scene. In pre-1989 productions, these scenes were a statement about the meaning and power of theatre, theatre as a true mirror of truth or even theatre as the subversive art. After 1989, and even more so today, this meaning of the scene is significantly diminished: In Krobot's version, the actor's scene is very short, reduced to the minimum which the story requires. Making scenes with actors theatrical in any way would disrupt the style of the show based on understatement. In the version by Mikulášek actors represented a kind of timeless destiny that predetermines the fate of the play's heroes, so they were providing a universal frame to personal story. Špinar's solution was the most radical—the actors simply did not appear, and so Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Polonius all acted out Hamlet's scenario directly as a kind of family psychodrama. The shift to family drama was the most explicit here.

In many of the productions that I leave aside in my analysis, the fact that the actors represent a stylistically different, "old-fashioned" layer in the context of the original play, becomes an excuse for a parodic conception of the mousetrap scene. This approach, however, fundamentally undermines the possibility of the scene having any effect on the conscience of Claudius and works only as a self-content meta-theatrical joke. This is also the case of Čermák's production where the scene is a grotesque parody of Elizabethan theatre. It fits into his tendency to enrich production with intertextual references, but it is very doubtful how much it helps to grasp the core of the situation.

Significantly, Michal Dočekal is the only one who expands the scene with actors. First—Hamlet's speech to actors can be used as meta-theatrical and anti-illusory commentary, second—extrapolation of the scene to description of revolution, borrowed from Müller's *Hamlet Machine*, explicitly actualises political impact of the play, rendering Hamlet not only as frustrated or traumatised persona, but again as critical intellectual. In fact, another instructive comparison could be posed here between dramaturgical approaches in productions by Jan Mikulášek and Michal Dočekal. Dočekal is re-accessing explicit political reading of *Hamlet*, while for Mikulášek personal memory implicitly becomes political.

## Conclusions

I could say, referring especially to the *Hamlets* staged by Krobot, Mikulášek, Špinar and Čermák, that Czech post-millennial Hamlets are (hyper)sensitive, lonely, introspective. In all these productions Hamlet's "O my prophetic soul!" is foregrounded. *Hamlet* is generally performed first as a family drama, then of course the Ghost takes the form of a collective or individual hallucination.

Issues of the body and memory are at the centre. Interesting nuances lie in the very nature of the memory that haunts each of these Hamlets—it may be very personal, it may be collective, it may be historical. In all cases, Hamlet's "too solid flesh" is exposed on stage as a suffering body full of extreme emotions. These emotions speak for themselves, but sometimes they lack words—instead of Shakespeare's text, there might be a quotation from an iconic, universally known popular song, rap or striking visual image.

Such a subjective, individualistic approach to *Hamlet* is not really surprising or new. But it probably inevitably reflects the "age and body of the time" in post-millennial Czechia, where it seems that there is no real possibility of essential political action and society is only becoming more global, neoliberal and self-satisfied. What strikes me is that the memory that haunts these "Czech" Hamlets is rather individual, personal, private, compared to *Hamlet* by Krzysztof Warlikowski (1999), Thomas Ostermeier (2008) or Jan Klata's *H.* (2004). In these productions, we could also see that the Hamlets were neurotic and oversensitive, but their personal story was always part of the history. Czech Hamlets seem to be mostly untouched by historical contexts, with particular exception of the version by Jan Mikulášek. I am tempted to conclude by saying that the most recent "interesting" Czech attempts at *Hamlet* are more concerned with Hamlet's subjectivity, his body and flesh, while lacking a metaphysical/social perspective (Dočekal's version being an obvious exception).

My exploration of selected Czech post-millennial *Hamlets* confirm with the conclusion of Cinpoes and Gunther that "Shakespeare's play is no longer simply a vehicle for recovering, or creating, a national cultural memory" (284). But still *Hamlet* is part of the canon and every performance is highly expected as an artistic challenge—cultural relevance of the play is eminent. It seems that the dramaturgical approach to individual plays of Shakespearean canon is what makes Czech theatre different from Germany or Poland. When it comes to performing politics through Shakespeare, *Macbeth* or *Richard III* are—speaking already from a statistical point of view—the obvious choice.

In 2000, Shakespeareologist Zdeněk Stříbrný wrote: "In the West, the shift of interest from *Hamlet* to *King Lear* as Shakespeare's central play, seen no more as a tragedy of redemption but as one of despair, has been noticed since 1960. In the East, the position of *Hamlet* has been so strong that fully resonant productions of *King Lear* have been much slower in asserting themselves." (143) More than twenty years later, we can say that the development in the Czech milieu has been different—it is quite difficult to say what is the key Shakespearean tragedy in terms of dramaturgy, but *King Lear* has not become it. The three plays mentioned above dominate—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*—*Hamlet* is interpreted predominantly as an individual and family drama, while the other two function as studies of the pathological lust for power. So if there is

anything specific about the Czech theatre concerning Shakespeare performances, it is not the complete lack of politics in Shakespeare, but it is this attribution of the individual plays to particular topics.

### Information About Mentioned Performances

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 Mikulášek, Jan (director). *Hamlet*. Husa na provázku. Premiere 17.01.2009.  
 Špinar, Daniel (director). *Hamlet*. Švandovo divadlo. Premiere 7.12.2013.  
 Dočekal, Michal (director). *Hamlet*. Městská divadla pražská. Premiere 30.10.2021.  
 Čermák, Jakub (director) *Hamlet*. Jihočeské divadlo. Premiere 24.04.2022.  
 (detailed information, including photos, on particular performances is available in database of Theatre Institute <https://vis.idu.cz/Productions.aspx>)

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