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No Calm After the Storm. A Decade of *The Tempest* in Polish Theatres (2012-2021)

Abstract: The article discusses twelve productions based on *The Tempest* shown in Polish theatres in the years 2012-21, a decade whose challenges included escalation of the migration crisis, increasing climate change, social and political unrest around much of the globe, and the covid pandemic, but which was also marked by important Shakespearean anniversaries. In order to inspect the play's significance for contemporary Polish audiences the productions are scrutinised in relation to four categories of interrelated issues: modification of characters, depiction of suspended reality connected with sleep, dreaming, memory and recollection, references to current social and political challenges, and employment of the play's meta-artistic potential. The productions' interpretative tendencies reveal a number of common denominators which are analysed with an aim of explaining why, in today's Poland, the possibility of reconciliation and return to some form of re-established order that the playwright contemplates is seen as very difficult, if not impossible.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Polish theatre, adaptation, theatre seasons 2012-2021.

Introduction

The intensity of *The Tempest*'s presence on theatre stages, as well as in the literary and critical discourses worldwide, proves the play's unceasing relevance and the richness of its interpretative potential. Some reasons for this popularity can be found in several aspects of this drama—plot looseness, employment of the improbable and the supernatural, variety of form and tone, the open nature of its ending, to name only the most obvious ones—that make it a flexible material for adaptation. As the author of *The Sea and the Mirror* put it

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succinctly, “[I]like other mythopoeic works, *The Tempest* inspired people to go on for themselves” (Auden 297). “Going on for themselves” is evident in the interpretations offered by the twelve productions prepared in Polish theatres in the theatre seasons 2012-21 (there was no new production in 2022). They were directed by: Maja Kleczewska (Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz, 2012), Igor Gorzkowski (Studio Teatralne KOŁO in Warsaw 2012), Piotr Jędrzejak (Teatr im. Jaracza, Olsztyn 2012), Dan Jemmett (Teatr Polski in Warsaw, 2012), Krzysztof Garbaczewski (Teatr Polski in Wrocław, 2015), Agata Duda-Gracz (Teatr Capitol in Wrocław, 2016),¹ Anna Augustynowicz (Teatr Współczesny in Szczecin, 2016), Paweł Passini (neTTheatre in Lublin, 2018), Paweł Miśkiewicz (Teatr Narodowy in Warsaw, 2018), Damian Josef Neć (Jewish Theatre in Warsaw, 2020), Grzegorz Jarzyna (National Academy of Theatre Arts in Cracow, 2019 and TR Warszawa, 2020), Jacek Kaczmarek (Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre, 2021).² These productions share several common features, the most obvious one being a boldly creative approach to Shakespeare’s text. Some of them can be classified as loose adaptations, while the majority are appropriations based on various kinds of rewritings in which fragmented passages from *The Tempest* appear in scripts that heavily modify Shakespeare’s language, plot and characters. While the welcoming openness of the play was utilised in all of these stage adaptations, the discussion presented below reveals other, more specific, reasons for the play’s popularity in Polish theatres.

With almost thirty productions in the last twenty years, *The Tempest* belongs to a group of Shakespeare’s plays that are very frequently staged in Poland, right after *The Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet*. In the ten years I focus on, *The Tempest* was adapted as many as eighteen times—including opera, ballet, radio, pantomime and puppet theatre interpretations, although these lie beyond the scope of my analysis. While such frequency naturally entails a variety of approaches, it also helps to discern certain staging fashions and interpretative tendencies. My aim is to describe the functioning of *The Tempest* in Polish theatre against the background of a period characterised by an escalation of the migration crisis, increasing climate change, social and political

¹ Most of the comments on this production are based on my analysis in: A. Romanowska, “Images of Death in Agata Duda-Gracz’s Version of *The Tempest*,” *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Jagellonicae Cracoviensis* 12.3 (2017): 235-244.

² In the discussion that follows I will refer to particular productions using the surname of the director. The productions represent various theatrical environments, from big stages in major Polish cities (Warsaw, Wrocław, Gdańsk), to local theatres (Lublin, Olsztyn), to small cultural institutions (Studio Teatralne KOŁO, Warsaw Jewish Theatre) and a theatre academy. Some of the productions are discussed more extensively, while others have been treated more selectively, which reflects my effort to include all relevant material without burdening the reader with too much additional information.

unrests in many places of the world, the covid pandemic, but also one marked by milestone Shakespearean anniversaries—the 450th anniversary of his birth in 2014 and the 400th anniversary of his death in 2016. Taking into account this conglomerate of contemporary challenges and the increasingly complex reality we are facing nowadays, I intend, more specifically, to argue that these productions can be seen as an extended examination of the play's themes of forgiveness, reconciliation and possible restoration linked by a decisive negation of any happy ending. The majority of the productions reflect their authors' great scepticism towards the possibility of true forgiveness, lasting peace and the reestablishment of stable and secure relationships. I will try to demonstrate that the play's popularity on Polish stages can be explained not so much by the fact that it depicts an individual's development from revenge to forgiveness and offers a resolution that promises restoration of the right order, but rather by the very fact of its ending's ambiguity. It is the uncertainty of penitence, correction and stability and the unpredictability of reestablished power relations that Polish audiences relate to in *The Tempest*.

In order to provide evidence for these claims, in the subsequent sections of the article the productions will be examined along four interpretative lines. First, aspects of character modification will be analysed to illustrate that the productions' pessimism is partly related to the weakness of the father-ruler figure of Prospero and the self-destructive, disoriented or suppressed actions of the young generation. To pinpoint the circumstances that determine such presentation of the main characters, two further issues will be examined next. The second section focuses on the significance of sleep, memory and recollection to illustrate how the prevailing sense of entrapment and inertia felt by the characters flows from them being infected by and locked in the traumas of the past. The third part of the article discusses the productions' references to present day challenges of global and local character that shed light on the disheartening context in which the characters are forced to function. Finally, employment of the play's meta-artistic potential will be scrutinised to explain why this aspect is so commonly taken into account by the productions' creators.

“O brave new world”—Character Modifications

Most of the discussed productions highlight or augment the theme of power relationships by changing or modifying the characters' position and agency in a way which gives voice to the dependants and those terrorised into service or obedience. Productions in which Miranda is shown as incapacitated and meekly obedient to her father (like in Gorzkowski or Augustynowicz) are rare. Kleczewska's Miranda, in her wedding dress, opens the performance, but by no means is she a gentle bride to become a submissive wife. She is impudent, even

when silent, ignoring her father's attempts to make her listen to his story while provokingly staring at Ferdinand across the table. Kleczewska interprets *The Tempest* as a story about a father's guilt towards his children and shows Miranda, "infected by her father with the siege mentality syndrome"³ (Cieślak), as a daughter aggressively fighting to free herself from the prison of the toxic family and ready to take revenge on her parent. She is temperamental, vulgar at times, full of repressed anger and frustration. Other productions also show Miranda's readiness to mature by emphasising her mutinous attitude towards parental authority. In Garbaczewski, Miranda is utterly bored with Prospera's past traumas, irritated by her mother retelling the story she feels disconnected from. In Passini, at the beginning we see Miranda with her eyes covered to emphasise her lack of knowledge and innocence, but later she is given a speech about her needs and desires which can be understood as a feminist manifesto of independence. Actually, Passini ends not with a renouncement of magical and artistic powers but with a transfer of these to the next generation, with Miranda becoming empowered by the magic inherited from her retiring parent.

The process of growing independent is underscored by Miranda's yearning for physical love. In Garbaczewski, her relation with Ferdinand is a chance to escape from an overprotective mother, as proved by their frenzied lovemaking which seems to be done to spite her. Kleczewska's Miranda, running around the sandy beach of the island in her bathing suit, is at times a childish young woman playing with Barbie dolls, at times a lascivious siren trying to erotically provoke Caliban. When she meets Ferdinand, she has no inhibitions—her kisses are violent, animalistic, as if desire changed Miranda into a hungry predator. In neither of these two much acclaimed productions, however, does Miranda's rebellious attitude fuel lasting energy that would support her in the future. On the contrary, the strong negative feelings she is experiencing leave her burnt out and exhausted.

The portrayals of Caliban extend the character's potential and complicate his position in the play, which is especially visible in his relation to Prospero. In Garbaczewski, Caliban is often shown throwing mad curses at the hated Prospera, but there is also a scene in which she is holding him close to her body, as if breastfeeding, in an attempt to calm his violent rage. In Augustynowicz, Caliban is moving around in a wheelchair, as many other characters do in this production,⁴ but he is different from the rest by being the

³ Translations of quotations from sources in Polish are mine (A.R.).

⁴ In Augustynowicz's gloomy and pessimistic interpretation, the wheelchairs function as a metaphor of confinement, emotional paralysis and helplessness. A very different foregrounding of disability occurred in Justyna Łagowska's 2020 production based on *The Tempest*. This theatrical workshop, titled *Rozbitkowie* [The Shipwrecks], was realized by the actors of Kraków's Teatr Ludowy with a group of people suffering from blindness and visual impairments, and was aimed at creating a syncretic plane of

only one immune to Prospero's empowering spell. In Neć, Caliban turns into one of the Nazi executioners of Prospero and other characters during their transport to Treblinka. In Duda-Gracz this character is represented by a couple, the Calibans, who are introduced as Prospero's impoverished neighbours. In the past, this ageing hippie and his black spouse used to earn money by cleaning Prospero's house and doing small repairs. The Calibans take revenge on Prospero for his contemptuous treatment, clearly based on racist and social prejudices, when—transformed into the Macbeths—they stab him multiple times on his own sofa. In Miśkiewicz, Caliban and Ariel are depicted as Prospero's alter egos, his inner voices, and those who speak on his behalf. Caliban and Ariel are played by the same actor and he is very similar to the actor playing Prospero. There is the physical similarity of body posture, but also one created by costume, movement, gestures and intonation. Tattered clothes on their hunching backs and the slowness of speech and movements clearly suggest the fatigue and world-weariness which is the result of their prolonged exile and isolation.

Such interpretations of Miranda, Caliban or Ariel are, necessarily, accompanied by significant modifications in the character of Prospero. Kleczewska and Duda-Gracz think in terms of a family drama in which Prospero is a tyrant whose complexes and frustrations result in authoritarian parenting, home violence or, at the very least, in negligence. Such a Prospero epitomises degeneration and failure as we watch him plodding around the island in dirty pyjamas—unwashed, bored and arrogant—lounging in his unmade bed, solving crosswords or staring into a blank TV screen, while his island has been reduced to a messy room. This is a Prospero degraded, deprived of his nobility, wisdom and power. A parody of a good father and the antithesis of an effective ruler. Definitely not anyone able to create and secure a happy future.

In Miśkiewicz, Prospero is everything but domineering. Feeling guilty and wronged at the same time, he is virtually silenced by exhaustion. In Augustynowicz, his island is a hospital in which he ultimately dies. In Garbaczewski, the tyrannical mother, Prospera, resembles a patient weakened by chemotherapy. Initially, she is too tired to even stand up—we see her sitting or lying on the ground, living only to obsessively repeat the recollections of her traumas. In Jemmett's farcical interpretation, Prospero is a delirium-stricken drunkard, mumbling or shouting his lines towards his similarly alcoholised companions, whose island is a "kingdom of outcasts, clochards, city beggars" (Grzegorzewska 55). Kaczmarek's Prospero, rummaging through the trash washed ashore by the sea, resembles a homeless vagrant looking for food in

communication in which sight was not the dominating sense. The production activated the senses of hearing, touch and smell with the aim of enabling the workshop participants to become co-creators of the staging, but also in order to offer a performance that would be available to blind and visually impaired audiences without audio description.

dustbins. In many productions Prospero is murdered, dies or is left suspended in a death-in-life existence, so the perspective of a peaceful restorative ending is not even an option.

In several of the productions character modifications include shifts in the characters' gender, a development that has been present in Shakespearean stage and screen adaptations for at least three decades, and one that has brought with itself not only female Prosperas and Ariels, but also Mirands, Sebastiannas, Trinkulas, as well as non-binary characters.⁵ In Garbaczewski, this shift works not so much towards relativising the gender of the main character, as to highlight a traumatised toxic mother's destructive influence on her daughter. At the end of the play *Miranda*, "sentenced to a timeless existence" (Katafiasz, *Zabawy w otchłani* 112), is left on the island, embittered and drained of all energy by her mother, the emotional vampire, while Prospera revives and leaves together with her new spouse, Alonza, the queen of Naples.

Sometimes gender shifts are introduced for more specific reasons. Passini's Prospera is shown as an old sorceress, shaking convulsively with every move, trudging with a walking stick, bending to the earth, but still powerful enough to undertake what she sees as her last task—that of reconciling with her enemies. In this production the lean body of the actress on the one hand helps to depict the character's senility and, on the other hand, creates a contrast between the vulnerable body and the power of the magical art. In Jarzyna's post-apocalyptic interpretation, the cast of eight actors and five actresses depict androgynous characters who—wearing white pants, white bandages masking their breasts and white mascara on their hair—are creatures of indeterminate gender and of no personalities, partly avatars, partly human beings. Duda-Gracz's female Ariel is one of the three women, including Prospero's wife, who were abused by the tyrannical husband, father, and master. Having died in a fire which indirectly resulted from Prospero's negligent treatment of his wife, they are now revived to accompany Prospero in his traumatic recollections. Ariel's naked breasts, her thin body covered with ash, and the wounds on her shoulders left by the burnt out wings, highlight the character's vulnerability. At the end she is virtually crushed by Prospero bluntly informing her that there has never been anything supernatural, anything magical, about her, that she is just an ugly naked body. A female body.

The productions also employ interesting modifications in the characters' age. Kaczmarek's Prospero is about forty. He is still full of energy, but aware

⁵ A well-known case is Helen Mirren's Prospera in Julie Taymor's 2010 film adaptation, a role that has gained much critical acclaim. So has Alex Kingston for her role in the 2023 Royal Shakespeare Company production. Among Polish productions of *The Tempest*, memorable roles were created by Magdalena Cielecka as Ariel and Stanisława Celińska as Trinkulo in Krzysztof Warlikowski's 2003 Warsaw adaptation.

that this may be the last moment in his life to do what he desires most, that is to enact his revenge, and this awareness erases in him any pity or human kindness. The approaching mid-life crisis makes him egocentric, full of suppressed regret and anger. This Prospero is dangerous and violent. He may be a representative of civilization, but we are not deluded as to his intentions: he is interested neither in forgiveness nor in reconciliation. Instead, he is methodically planning his vengeance. In Neć's Jewish Theatre production, Miranda is an old woman. Or rather a girl and, at the same time, an old woman, as if trapped in a time loop. She is both a child who had no chance to grow up because of the Shoah and a young bride who grew old because her lover disappeared in the storm of the Holocaust.

The last decade's Polish theatre adaptations of *The Tempest*, with their insistence on toxic parents who infect their children with fear, hatred, and apathy are consistent with the popular reading of this play as one depicting bleak consequences of defective parenting, egocentrism and psychological violence in family relationships. The discussed modifications, being, naturally, the most obvious expression of the adaptive and appropriating strategies employed by the directors, at the same time very precisely reveal their interpretative choices. No return to the old world is possible because of the weaknesses and vices of Prospero and the inability or unwillingness of his successors, and there are very few indications that any new reliable order can be hoped for in future. The analysis of the productions suggests two sorts of explanations for this.

“Thou art inclin'd to sleep”—Suspended Reality of Sleep and Recollection

The first is that all the characters are shown as, directly or indirectly, trapped by the spell that forces them to relive their past. Prospero's magic, which creates the framework of suspended reality, is in the productions rendered by a variety of means, but—quite in line with Shakespeare's text—the two dominating channels suggesting unreality are sleep and, in the case of suspended time, memory and recollection. *The Tempest* thematizes the dream state, “deliberately and directly exploring the poles of sleeping and waking, vision and reality, art and the human condition” (Garber 187). Miranda is totally powerless against Prospero's sleep-inducing spell (“Thou art inclin'd to sleep; 'tis a good dullness/ And give it way: I know thou canst not choose” 1:2:185-186) and, as the innocent and unknowing, she is granted a deep restorative sleep, even if magically induced. The guilty, on the contrary, are punished with sleeplessness, nightmares or tempting visions of unreal happiness. While sleep may be described as a period of suspended wakefulness and limited consciousness, Prospero's design results also in a specific suspension of time. The crew of the saved ship are magically

put to sleep, while in the meantime the shipwrecks go through their time of purgatory which involves sleep and daydreaming. Finally, sleep and dreaming are the figures used in Prospero's assessment of the human condition in the speech that closes the masque: "We are such stuff/ As dreams are made on; and our little life/ is rounded with a sleep" (4:1:156-158).

While Shakespeare's Miranda does not oppose the "good dullness" she believes was caused by Prospero's sad story and has, at least in her father's assessment, "slept well," this cannot be said about the characters in the discussed productions. Kleczewska creates "an inferno of daydreaming and dreams. The reality melts into some dream visions, oftentimes into nightmares. Identities of characters become blurred. The viewer is disoriented" (Nowak). In the opening, we listen to Miranda's recitation of a chaotic train of words, uttered monotonously, as if she was learning to speak, or as if in a trance. Listening to this catalogue of dissociated words which do not create any coherent whole is initially rather intriguing, but soon turns confusing and/or soporific. The stage is dark, except for a single spot of dim pale violet light where she is standing. The pace of this scene is very slow, and even more so is the pace of the next one, of the wedding party (here shifted to the beginning of the play), which is acted out in the same deathly pale light, suggestive of a nightmarish dream. Dreams dreamt by the audience and shared with the authors of the performance, are part of Kleczewska's psychological experiment as in the initial stages of her work she asked inhabitants of the city of Bydgoszcz to report their dreams and recollections she later collected and partly used in the staging.

Darkness dominates Garbaczewski's stage design with its black cloth and black shiny, as if wet, panels of the stage, while the films projected on the surrounding walls and the skilfully operated lights create a feeling of dreamy hallucinations. Gorzkowski creates with subtle poetic tools a magical world with its atmosphere of uncanniness and mystery, "as if in a dream" (Czajkowska). For Jemmett, sleep is a delirium nightmare dreamt by the whiskey-addicted Prospero who is "saved from insanity by creating a spectacle of the shipwreck" (Pawlicka). In Augustynowicz, Miranda appears on stage always with her bed, as if never fully awake, indifferently reciting her lines. As all other characters, apart from Prospero, she utters her words in an emotionless dead voice that reminds one of day-dreaming. This helps to create an aura of unreality, in which the characters function under a spell—obedient puppets in the powerful magician's hands, never fully aware of their own existence and never entirely free.

Prospero's island can be seen as "a place where memory—private and communal, mythical and imaginary, traumatic and tender—can be replayed, repaired, or revenged" (Palfrey 138). To replay the memories the magician needs to conjure a storm, but before an opportunity offers itself they need to be shared with the so far unaware offspring who is thus shocked into maturity while becoming traumatized by her parent's past. The repairing process starts when the

wrongdoers, who live their lives apparently free from remorse, are forcefully reminded about their forgotten atrocities and confronted with their past crimes. What can these recollections lead to? Can the re-enacted past become a better future? Or is it bound to turn into revenge and repay? In Duda-Gracz, Prospero's island is a prison created by memory, in which the compulsively recollected past proves oppressive to those remembered who, by the power of Prospero's *theatrum mentis*, are forcefully revived to rehearse their past lives. The effect is supported by the production's loose structure in which day-time episodes brought back from the past mingle with surreal dreams and visions of alternative existences. In Miśkiewicz, similarly, we are presented with a world which is surreal, resembling a dream vision, or some ritualized cycles of recollections that produce ghost-characters such as Miranda—more of a spirit than a real young woman.

The workings of memory are at the very core of the Warsaw Jewish Theatre's production which puts *The Tempest* to a specific test of time and memory, with "the reality of the island [...] designated by the past and eternally condemned to commemoration" (Bryś). The authors were inspired by *The Tempest* translated into Yiddish and staged in 1938 at Folks Un Jugnt Theater in Łódź as a cooperation of Polish and Jewish actors. Several months before the outbreak of the second world war this production was shown in Warsaw, where it was still received as a sign of hope for a peaceful future in spite of the fascists growing in power and the escalation of anti-Semitic violence. The play's message was idealistically interpreted to be that "the secret of the righteous ruling of the world is mercy that does not come from weakness but from the feeling of panhuman unity"⁶ and the actor playing Prospero expressed his belief in the restorative power of art and artistic creation which could help the Jewish people survive the tempests of enmity and violence. Eighty two years later, Neć created an adaptation which he wanted to be universal and timeless. Its characters are set against the background of the ruined Warsaw Jewish district, a post-catastrophic picture as if suspended in time. Although the storm of war could happen everywhere, with Yiddish being the language of the performance, "a meta-warning against the returning demons of the past,"⁷ and with Jewish songs and lamentations, as well as fragments of documents from the Ringelblum's Archive included in the script, it is impossible to forget about the context of the second world war. Simple, yet powerful, scenography and actors moving in a "ghostly danse macabre" contribute to a disturbing sense of desolation in a world annihilated during the war and forgotten (Spiechowicz 3). The central force is Ariel, not Prospero's servant, but rather a kind of emanation of the Old

⁶ Quoted after the theatre's webpage, <https://www.teatr-zydowski.art.pl/en/productions/der-szturem-cwiszyn-burza-pomiedzy-tempest-between>, accessed 2 September 2023.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

Testament's Yahweh (Domagała). His time of trial, the Shoah, is a storm more cruel and a trauma more lasting than any of the plights of dethroned rulers or children rebelling against their toxic parents. With the story of the Holocaust turned into a threatening vision of potential consequences of any discrimination, the Jewish Theatre's production proved, again, that "Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a universal warning" (Feliksik 5) and resonated very strongly in the nowadays dramatically polarised Polish society.

The past dominates the minds of the productions' Prosperos and has a thwarting influence on the younger generation. Although much of this is shown in terms of family drama, Prospero's situation can also be perceived in political terms. If we see him as an allegory of the state, it is clear that these productions say something more general about the place where they originated. Polish people, as other nations with the history of political subjugation to foreign states and weakened by endless internal conflicts, have the tendency to feel so overwhelmed by the memory of their difficult past that it never allows them to feel fully secure, blocking their activity and belief in the prospect of an optimistic future. Polish literature, especially of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, abounds in images of passivity, inaction and impotence that frustrate any attempts to regain independence and security. This explains why Shakespeare's depiction of the magician's powers that limit agency of other characters is so readily explored and exploited in the discussed stage adaptations created after two post-communist decades that have brought their own internal problems coupled with global challenges.

"You do assist the storm"—Local and Global Disasters

The second reason for the general disempowerment of the characters in the discussed interpretations seems to be the fact that, in addition to the burden of the past, the present is not quite optimistic, either. Prospero's magically created storm and the ensuing shipwreck—one of Shakespeare's favourite manifestations of an unforeseen catastrophe (Greenblatt 85)—can be viewed from two different perspectives. One is that of the shipwrecks, "little knowing that their plight is part of a master plan" (Habermann 69), and oblivious to any possible links between the deadly misfortune and their own past. The other is that of Prospero and his activities, "where chance is resignified as design and destiny" (70). But as this design includes a mental and narrative recreation of his and Miranda's suffering, the two perspectives are, in fact, more blended than we usually tend to notice. Many of the discussed productions underscore this aspect of the recreated, or never-ending, suffering as they blur the boundaries between the wrongdoers and the victims and present their forced coexistence on the island as self-induced punishment. In doing this, the productions oscillate

between post-apocalyptic visions of a dystopian reality resulting from a global ecological catastrophe,⁸ and more limited, though not less violent, catastrophes of a local—oftentimes personal—character.

Kleczewska's island is both a tropical beach and Prospero's room. In the first scenes we learn that the characters are survivors of a disaster that annihilated human civilization and transformed the globe into a pile of corpses. When the rain comes, it changes the sand of the beach into mud and puddles, and the storm (here shifted to the final minutes of the play) becomes a sand (and sound) tempest that virtually sweeps the characters off the stage. While the director demands from her actors extreme emotions and physical endurance, the exhaustion this involves is underscored by their plodding through sand and mud, dirty, in soaked clothes. In Jarzyna's futuristic adaptations, the characters find themselves in an unspecified isolated place as a result of a spacecraft failure. They are survivors of an ecological catastrophe or refugees from a dying planet. This production blends visions of a post-ecological reality after some kind of global catastrophe with glimpses of current politics and local traumas. There are allusions to the crash of the Polish government plane in April 2010 and to the protests against the ban on abortion that were organized in several cities at the turn of 2020 and 2021. An aircraft disaster is also suggestively alluded to in the opening of Augustynowicz, in which Juno, Ceres and Iris instruct the audience about the safety measures on the plane and how to put on life vests. Dressed in black gowns, with their heads covered, they look like mourners, but may also raise associations with Islamic terrorists (Liskowacki 52).⁹

If the productions do not refer to the ecological issues or political conflicts, they allude to the migration crisis. In Duda-Gracz, the storm scene is the central episode of the production. The shipwrecks are a group of strangers forced to participate in a kind of social experiment. On the island, they are tormented not only by disorientation and fear, but also by recurrent memories of themselves dying. The scenes of shipwreck and drowning, bodies and pieces of belongings on the front stage, as if washed ashore, are bound to remind the audience about refugees' deadly sea journeys and their capsized boats. In

⁸ Unsurprisingly, the enduring popularity of post-apocalyptic themes finds its reflection in Shakespearean adaptations and rewritings. A telling case might be Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 post-epidemic novel *Station Eleven* that interacts with the Shakespearean canon on various levels, and which was adapted for television in 2021. A recent theatrical example is the 2023 RSC production of *Macbeth* which is set in a Scotland wasted by a climate catastrophe.

⁹ Staging Shakespeare's shipwreck as an aircraft disaster is by no means a new idea—the most successful Polish production of *The Tempest* to do so was Warlikowski's adaptation (see note 2 above). When it premiered in 2003 such staging resonated with the audiences' traumas after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York that had occurred but two years earlier.

Kaczmarek, the stage is dominated by big containers sticking out of the sand, while useless remnants of the long lost civilised life lie around—a tape-recorder, pieces of jewellery, books. In Passini, there is a huge wooden cage-like fence constructed on stage which may signify Prospera's attempts to separate her civilised world from the world of the savage others. Jemmett's characters—worn, dirty, in shabby clothes—seem not to belong to the neglected and deserted place they inhabit. "They resemble migrants who, uprooted from their native land, have not adapted to new circumstances" (Lebiedzińska), or the homeless that can be seen in any big city sleeping on park benches or on the streets.

Interestingly, the other production that alludes to the second world war, the one by Passini, in which Prospero's wrongdoers are wearing uniforms of the nazi German navy, is, unlike the other productions discussed here, more optimistic about the future. The world which is inherited by Miranda is not free from grave problems, but at least Prospero opts for forgiveness and decides not to transmit the traumas of the past to the next generation together with the transfer of rule. This being an exception that proves the rule, the productions in general show the characters' entanglement in the topical problems and challenges of the modern day.

"By my so potent art"—Sorcery of Artistic Creation

From what has been written so far it can be seen that the frequency of *The Tempest's* Polish adaptations in the last decade is connected with the space this play allows for accommodating our frustrations and fears grounded in the past, as well as our disappointments and pessimism with relation to the present and future. The other factor responsible for the play's popularity in Polish theatres is its meta-artistic character which, in the context of adapting foreign classics, and especially Shakespeare, presents itself as a very tempting field of artistic expression. Although it is a truism to perceive *The Tempest* as the playwright's farewell to his art, it would hardly be possible to ignore the play's meta-artistic qualities in any interpretation. It reveals, as do many other texts written by Shakespeare, the author's fascination with the power of poetry and theatre. In fact, "Prospero is, to some extent, an imaginative paradigm of Shakespeare himself in his function as poet" (Murry 391), and Prospero's monologues are meta-artistic pieces contemplating imagination, art, and the limits of artistic creation. No other play by Shakespeare, perhaps with the exception of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is more open for creativity and inventiveness on the part of its interpreters in exploring the essence of theatre in their own ways. These ways are most obviously manifested on the verbal level because, dealing with translations, the adaptors feel much less restricted by the original

text than their English-speaking colleagues and are more likely to produce their own scripts. On the non-verbal level, the artistic freedom of the adaptors may sometimes lead them to quite risky experiments, like the one by Jędrzejak who substituted theatre with cinema, transforming his Prospero into a film director and the island into a film production company specializing in film noir. Most of the interpreters, however, take advantage of the setting that is naturally there, that of the theatre.

Kleczewska's production emphasizes the meta-artistic quality of the play by foregrounding the very act of creating theatre. If Prospero's "princely power is precisely the playwright's power to determine the fate of his creations, and his magical power is precisely the playwright's power to alter space and time, create vivid illusions, cast a spell" (Greenblatt 372), Kleczewska seems to be testing not only the physical and emotional limits of her actors, the psychological endurance and patience of her audiences, but also the means and boundaries of theatre itself. Kleczewska's work is founded on her "conviction about Shakespeare's plays offering his adaptors freedom to talk about their own world" (Katafiasz, *On nas wymyślił* 13), and it must be admitted that she is quite uncompromising in the way she uses this freedom. Her retelling resembles a patchwork, rather than a palimpsest, a mosaic of associations, and the few traces of Shakespeare's romance which she retains can be used only as vaguely visible points of reference, or "a compass" (Wakar, *Niezidentyfikowane obiekty...* 47), to help the audience through the deliberate chaos of the production's collage of sounds, images and special effects.

Meta-theatricality is fundamental also in other productions. Gorzkowski presented Ariel as an actor in Prospero's theatre. Undertaking new tasks demanded from his master-director, he changes his costume and make-up. In Garbaczewski, the stage space is divided into the upper part, where on the screen we see glimpses of the off-stage life—actors talking about trivial things, commenting on each other's work, arguing—and the lower part which is Prospero's island, where the director, "playing with unbridled theatricality" (Mrozek), employs colour, light and sound to overwhelm the spectators with the eeriness of the place and its inhabitants. Miśkiewicz highlights meta-theatricality by creating a performance that is at the same time spectacular and intimate. A relatively small auditorium is constructed on part of the stage which brings the spectators closer not only to the actors (who often address the audience), but also to the stage machinery, with its cables, lifts and turntables, which is deliberately displayed to create an association with a ship engine room. The director merges an openly intellectual approach—incorporating fragments of Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, Dagerman's *Island of the Doomed* and allusions to Grzegorzewski, Jarocki and Nekrošius—with theatrical illusion and spectacle, employing special effects and depending on physical fitness of the actors. In this case, again, creative freedom and critical distance of the adaptation's authors

is demonstrated, and the result is a production that can be described as a “deliberately introvertive essay” (Wakar, *Próba eseju...*), an auto-thematic commentary on theatre as a space of intellectual and artistic exploration of and contemplation on the human condition.

In Augustynowicz, the theatrical space is arranged in a way that may be seen as “a murky reflection of the Elizabethan theatre” (Liskowacki 53), with the stage extending to the auditorium and the onstage gallery which, on the one hand, can be perceived as a visual allusion to the sixteenth century public theatre’s balcony and, on the other, to the tiers of galleries with seats for spectators. This, combined with the opening life vest pantomime—suggesting that the storm and its consequences may at any time afflict the viewers as much as the characters—produces an effect of uneasiness by blurring the boundaries between the performance and its spectators who can see themselves reflected in the unresisting, paralyzed and disillusioned characters on stage. In this way, theatricality works even stronger towards foregrounding the creative independence of the production’s authors led by the director—a demiurge who depicts “her own independent, autonomous worlds which are not an interpretation or reinterpretation of the literary meanings” (Ostrowska).

Duda-Gracz utilizes the meta-artistic potential of the play by introducing an autobiographical key to her reading of the themes of fatherhood and father-daughter relationship that become enriched and complicated by references to the artistic legacy of Jerzy Duda-Gracz (1941-2004). Rewriting *The Tempest* as a daughter of this very original twentieth-century Polish painter, the director is quite open about her father’s impact on her private and artistic development, as well as on her interpretation of this particular play. “In his bitterness and loneliness he resembled Prospero” (Kowalska, *Jestem irytująca...* 16), she says in an interview about Jerzy Duda-Gracz’s last years. Creating the character of Prospero, the director paid tribute to her father and, at the same time, contested him, acknowledged his influence, but also—like Ariel—released herself in order to independently contemplate the meanings and consequences of being an artist. As a stage designer, she “quotes,” in a number of visual metaphors, two of her father’s paintings. In the opening and the closing scenes of the production, the audience faces an elderly man in a dirty undershirt and pyjamas, sitting on an old sofa and staring at his own face reflected on the blank television screen. These scenes create a stage reproduction of the last self-portrait of Jerzy Duda-Gracz. The other painting referred to is “Hamlet Polny” [Field Hamlet]. This Hamlet—an old alcoholic, his body hardly covered by a stretched soiled undershirt—is sitting on a worn out sofa in an unharvested cabbage field. His eyes, hardly open, express dullness and fatigue. Among the cabbage heads there lies a skull. The production’s characterization of Prospero is based on this image, and other characters bear many resemblances to the grotesquely ugly, neglected, and marginalized people of the kind Jerzy Duda-Gracz frequently pictured in his

paintings. In spite of these quotations and allusions, it is not her father's art but the father-artist figure that Agata Duda-Gracz focuses on, as much as she focuses on the daughter-artist who tries to reconcile with her parent by manifesting artistic independence in her Shakespearean scenario. "She is the real Prospero, her theatre is the island and Prospero's wand is held by the narrator whose voice introduces the subsequent episodes" (Kowalska, *Smutek kapuścianych głów* 58).

While drawing on the meta-theatrical quality of *The Tempest* is by no means innovative, theatre practice of the past decade in Poland strengthened the tendency to treat Shakespeare's play merely as an artistic reference and to use Shakespeare's text only fragmentarily in scripts that combine it with the scriptwriter's text and, frequently, with other texts quoted in the productions. Thus, *The Tempest's* rich cultural legacy and, more generally, Shakespeare as a cultural icon are alluded to, employed and exploited, but this is done not in order to pay homage to the playwright (even though Shakespearean anniversaries would justify such gestures), but to create an intertextual auditorium for one's own artistic voice to sound loud and bold.

Conclusion

Polish theatrical readings of *The Tempest* created in the last ten years confirm interpretative tendencies widespread nowadays in English-speaking, as well as other non-English-speaking productions. They give voice to the originally minoritized characters, and make the play more diverse by modifying the characters' gender. Almost all of the discussed productions highlight the family drama, most of them augmenting the toxicity of the parent-child relationship, frequently featuring a powerless, disillusioned or vengeful Prospero. All of the discussed productions take advantage of the meta-artistic potential of the play, drawing the audiences' attention to the act of artistic creation, problematising the position of an artist and manifesting the creative powers of the adaptors. While only one of the productions blatantly alludes to the current social or political problems, most of them set the events against a background of increasingly topical issues, like the migration crisis, the prospect of an ecological disaster, or war. After all, as testified by the 2022 film, *The Hamlet Syndrome*, Shakespeare remains a globally functioning cultural channel through which people of various backgrounds are willing to communicate their individual and collective traumas, and one may easily predict that in the next few years we are going to see Polish productions of *The Tempest* relating to the war in Ukraine.

Indeed, the new war waged by the Russian aggressor against Ukraine provides one with a more acutely topical perspective on the last ten years of *The Tempest* in neighbouring Poland. The discussed productions' great scepticism

toward lasting forgiveness and reconciliation is manifested either through underscoring the vengefulness, cruelty or weakness of Prospero, highlighting his family's and his servants' hatred towards him, or by devising an ending which shows all characters broken and petrified in a state of disillusionment and pessimism. As I have demonstrated, the frequency and the pessimism of Polish productions of this play, although confirming many of the interpretative paths popular elsewhere, can be explained by the specificity of the local context: our entanglement with the past, insecurity of the present and pessimism about the future.

As testified by the discussion of the productions' use of *The Tempest's* meta-artistic content, Shakespeare's play continues to be a functional and resonating cultural artifact through which, albeit with much reinvention, we are willing to address our current problems. *The Tempest's* heterogenous nature, ambiguity, ambivalent tone, and bitter-sweet resolution offer a range of interpretative possibilities from which today's adaptors choose the aspects that best resonate with their reality: pessimism, disorientation, lack of trust in political authority and in human relations. Thus Shakespeare is not so much rewritten to fit our times, but rather creatively explored. Evidently, *The Tempest*, for all its fantastic elements, airy spirits, and mythological deities, has been never far away from the world we live in, and today, in an epoch of social disillusionment, political strife and perspectives of precarious future, it seems to be closer than ever before.

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