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Introduction: East-Central and Central-East Europe as an Imagined Space for Shakespeare¹

The special issue of *Multicultural Shakespeare* grew out of several years of cooperation among Shakespearean, theatre, and film studies scholars based in or attracted to the Visegrad countries. Their activities were supported not only by the universities with which they are affiliated but also, in recent years, by two Visegrad Fund projects. The first of the projects, titled *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity*, examined the canonised oeuvre of William Shakespeare and its reception in the post-Communist countries after 1989. The group of researchers, which became known as CEESRA (Central European Shakespeare Research Association), led enthusiastic discussions about Shakespeare's plays used as a touchstone for social attitudes, historical awareness, and cultural memory in the region. The project aimed to uncover the uniqueness of cultural heritage and historical experiences shared in the region. The results of the project were published in the special issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Theatralia* (2021), titled *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity* (Vol. 24, Special Issue 2021) *Theatralia* (<https://journals.phil.muni.cz/theatralia/issue/view/1824>), with CEESRA guest editors, Kinga Földvály and Zsolt Almási.

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The second project, titled *Crossing Borders with Shakespeare since 1945: Central and Eastern European Roots and Routes* (VF project no. 22210007), emerged as a necessary follow-up. It aimed to map how Shakespeare has transcended cultural, political, and social borders across Central and Eastern Europe and beyond since the division of Europe in 1945. CEESRA researchers were particularly interested in elucidating the complex aesthetic and ideological negotiations that occur when Shakespeare's plays, produced in this region, travel to new or revisited destinations. The group specifically explored questions about the ways in which dialogues between media, genres, formats, culture, and critical discourses are scripted and how these dialogues contribute not only to contemporary theatrical experiences but also to our lives and the construction of our identities. This project has resulted in the volume you are currently reading.

The contributions to this issue of *Multicultural Shakespeare* come from two sources. First, we present four position papers, mostly outlining the theoretical background of the discussions. In these four articles, we address the task of defining the starting points for discussions or illustrating the crossroads at which we stand when approaching Shakespeare – in our countries and times. Second, we publish a set of articles focused on more particular topics outlined in the position papers. Some of these articles were presented at the *Brno Theatralia Conference* (5-7 June, 2023, Brno, Czech Republic), the project's main event. Others were submitted in response to CEESRA activities and recent discussions. Some articles were adjusted based on discussions during BTC conference round tables, coffee break chats, and subsequent conversations with the CEESRA group members or us, the guest editors of the volume.

The position papers discuss theoretical and methodological issues connected to the topic of the recent VF project, i.e. *Crossing Borders with Shakespeare since 1945: Central and Eastern European Roots and Routes*. The first position paper, titled *Our Common Home: Eastern Europe / Central Europe / Post-Communist Europe as Signifiers of Cultural-Political Geographies and Identities*, co-authored by Kirilka Stavreva, Boika Sokolova, Natália Pikli, and Jana Wild, outlines the streams of William Shakespeare's influence on Europe and their various changes over time. In approaching this vast field, the authors focus on the notions of a particular part of Europe, especially on "Central" and "Eastern," or "East-Central," Europe, as not always clear and stable concepts, substantially informed by totalitarian, especially 20th-century communist, regimes. Drawing on Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer's approach, the authors emphasise that the region where we have, for several decades and centuries, shared the concept of Shakespeare is rather an imagined community than a "geographical or political given." The space in which we revisit and recreate Shakespeare's oeuvre to deal with our own topics in our times is more than a geographical space. It is an imagined field that is "constructed out of

linguistic, religious, and ethnic elements” grouped in accordance with historical conditions and their changes.

In the second position paper, titled *Politics, Shakespeare, East-Central Europe*, Zsolt Almási, Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney, Mădălina Nicolaescu, Klára Škrobánková, Ema Vyroubalova, and Oana-Alis Zaharia extend the main topic of the first position paper to the specific area of politics. The authors examine the unique shape of the theatrical-political discourse within the East-Central European region that traverses and crosses geographical and conceptual borders with Shakespeare’s works, including the reshaped and adapted ones. As the authors put it, the East-Central European region shares historical experiences. Therefore, the paper discusses political structures, often co-formed by totalitarian regimes, and the “tenuous paths of nascent democracies” that cultivated a ground for the “enrichment of national-linguistic-cultural communities.” The authors search for unique features of the circumstances in which Shakespeare and politics resonate and propose “transboundarity” as a key process in “advancing the collective theatrical-political discourse of the region” [eds].

The third position paper, titled *Popular and Populist Shakespearean Transcreations in Central and Eastern Europe*, by Nicoleta Cinpoș, Kornélia Deres, Jacek Fabiszak, Kinga Földváry, and Veronika Schandl, focuses on various forms of popularising Shakespeare’s oeuvre in the region defined in the first position paper. The authors discuss, for example, the potential of Shakespeare’s works to represent subversive meanings and the dynamics that change according to several factors, especially the political milieu. The article concentrates on specific genres of popular theatre (e.g., burlesque, cabaret, TV genres) that recreate Shakespeare’s works in a specific way. The authors often observe connections of popular genres to new technological and medial networks and their influences on dramaturgy, visuality, and, in connection with this, also on the topics of theatre productions. Furthermore, they introduce the notion of denarrativisation of the form of theatrical thinking, which they find specifically in Hungary and traceable in the long tradition of popular theatre genres. It is worth noting that the authors comment on the dominance of visual dramaturgy based on the exhibited attractions, giving rise to a non-linear, image-based theatrical language and an acting style of new virtuosity.

The last position paper, titled *Monsters and Marvels: Shakespeare Across Opera, Ballet, Dance, Puppetry, and Music in Central and Eastern Europe – and Beyond*, co-authored by Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik, Ivona Mišterová, Gabriella Reuss, and Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk, is focused mostly on the adaptations of Shakespearean works in different genres, such as opera, musicals, puppet theatre, that originated in the VF region and were, in some cases temporally, settled abroad, even on other continents. The paper offers case studies of such “transboundary” events, emphasising re-conceptualisations of the Shakespearean “material” that went hand in hand with

the cross-genre adaptation process(es). The authors again discuss region-specific features to outline the position(s) the creators occupied and their movements within the imagined space for Shakespeare in East-Central/Central-East Europe.

The following set of articles approaches most of the questions mentioned above and topics in particular case studies. Some of them were originally composed as keynote speeches held at the Brno Theatralia Conference in June 2023 (Drábek and Gibińska), some were presented as individual papers at the BTC (Pšenička, Drozd), some originated as a response or contribution to the crossing-borders with Shakespeare actual discourse (Kowalski, Romanowska, Mišterová and Krajník, Almási, and Trefalt), and the last article was meant to serve as a concluding or even procluding remark.

Pavel Drábek's article titled "'You have served me well: The Shakespeare Empire in Central Europe'" is based on his keynote speech delivered at the Brno Theatralia Conference on 6 June 2023. Drábek develops a re-conceptualisation of Shakespeare as a concept. In doing so, he addresses several crucial topics that resonate beyond the geographical and linguistic boundaries of Shakespeare's country. He focuses on the notion of "global Shakespeare" in the context of cultural colonialism. Drábek discusses our abilities to "decolonise" Shakespeare and move beyond this restrictive agenda. This includes addressing other constraints, such as those imposed by a logocentric approach to the matter and the tendency of Shakespeare studies to operate "along the imperial routes." He encourages readers to reconsider how we conceptualise Shakespeare and the surrounding cultural heritage. Drábek insightfully touches upon the problem of treating Shakespeare's works as a canonical scripture approached exegetically. According to Drábek, in Central Europe, "we have much to gain from recovering the crafts and knowledge that formed what we know as Shakespeare, as well as giving new homes to host Shakespeare's own crafts." In his article, Drábek understands the "empire" or concept of Shakespeare as a "community of artists, scholars, intellectuals, and publics that occasionally draw on Shakespeare's craft in their own practice."

Marta Gibińska explores in her article, titled "*Henry V: A Report on the Condition of the World*" the historical context of Shakespeare's plays in Poland, centring on the reception of *Henry V*. It outlines the limited popularity of Shakespeare's histories in Poland and provides statistics on productions of various history plays. The critical analysis of *Henry V* in Poland is explored by scholars and critics, highlighting its nationalist character and the intricate dynamics of power, morality, and language in the play. The article then focuses on a groundbreaking 2020 production at the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival, reinterpreting *Henry V* as a *Report on the Condition of the World* due to the pandemic. This innovative reading explores language's dual nature as both creative force and a tool for manipulation. The production examines Henry's character, patriotism, and the consequences of war, revealing the complexity of

political leadership. The article concludes by recognising the production's contemporary relevance to issues of war and power struggles.

Martin Pšenička's article, "'...noxiousness of my work:' Miroslav Macháček's 1971 Production of *Henry V* at the Prague National Theatre," discusses Macháček's groundbreaking adaptation, possibly the European premiere. Despite available translations, a new one by Břetislav Hodek was commissioned, extending to their collaboration on *Hamlet* in 1982. The production faced political controversy, notably from such politicians as Vasil Biřák. Hodek's unpublished translation, obtained by the National Theatre and Normalization research project, revealed unique choices, including dialects and language shifts. The anti-illusionist approach of the production, set against the politically charged post-1968 atmosphere, navigated challenges and remained in the repertoire despite political scrutiny, reflecting the complexities of the normalization period.

David Drozd's article discusses recent Czech productions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, focusing on interpretations by directors such as Miroslav Krobot (2006), Jan Mikulášek (2009), Daniela Špinar (2013), Michal Dočekal (2021), and Jakub Čermák (2022). It notes a trend in portraying Hamlet as hyper-sensitive, lonely, and introspective, emphasising family drama and incorporating media, such as photos and video. The memory haunting these Hamlets is described as more individual and personal compared to international productions. The author suggests that recent Czech productions lean towards a subjective, individualistic approach, possibly reflecting the contemporary societal context of post-millennial Czechia. The text also contrasts the Czech approach to *Hamlet* with neighbouring countries, where *Macbeth* and *Richard III* are more politically charged. Drozd concludes by noting upcoming productions and anticipates the emergence of new interpretations that might reshape the understanding of *Hamlet* in the Czech context.

Tomasz Kowalski examines in his article Polish cultural appropriation of Shakespeare, specifically the concept of "thinking with Shakespeare." Notably influenced by Jan Kott and Stanisław Wyspiański, the Polish approach to Shakespearean plays is explored, with a focus on the post-World War II era. Kowalski discusses the impact of Jerzy Grotowski's *Hamlet Study* in 1964, a production that provocatively addressed Polish antisemitism. The portrayal of Hamlet as a Jew in the socio-political context of the 1960s Poland stirred controversy. The exploration extends to Krzysztof Warlikowski's innovative Shakespearean productions, particularly *The Tempest* (2003) and *The African Tales by Shakespeare* (2011), which integrate Shakespeare's texts with contemporary works, addressing complex themes such as forgiveness and Polish attitudes towards Jews during the Holocaust. Kowalski concludes by comparing Grotowski's and Warlikowski's unique contributions to the intersection of

Shakespearean drama and the exploration of historical traumas, notably antisemitism and the Holocaust in Poland.

Agnieszka Romanowska's article examines the ongoing significance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Polish theatre from 2012 to 2021, focusing on twelve diverse productions directed by different directors, including notable examples. The play's adaptability, attributed to its flexible plot and supernatural elements, is explored through interpretative lines such as character modifications, meta-artistic potential, and the theme of suspended reality. Directors creatively approach the text, modifying language and emphasising meta-theatricality. Romanowska mentions that the productions reflect contemporary issues, such as the migration crisis and climate change. Character modifications often highlight power dynamics, with the article noting variations in portraying Miranda from rebellious to empowered. The productions interpret Prospero's storm as a metaphor for ecological catastrophes and political conflicts. Overall, the article observes a prevailing scepticism among directors regarding lasting forgiveness and reconciliation in the interpretation of *The Tempest*.

The article "Passion and Politics in Diego de Brea and Jakub Čermák's *Edward II*: Marlowe's Controversial History on Czech Stages" by Ivona Mišterová and Filip Krajník explores two productions of Marlowe's *Edward II* on Czech stages. It refrains from making definitive judgments about the significance of the play in the region or outlining prevailing directorial strategies, acknowledging that these productions are more anomalies than a general trend. Despite the general lower appeal of Elizabethan plays about English history in Central Europe, Marlowe's *Edward II* has resonated with Czech audiences, particularly in the 21st century, as it allows exploration of contemporary themes such as LGBT rights. Ivona Mišterová and Filip Krajník argue that the Slovenian and Czech productions, directed by de Brea and Čermák, emphasise the universality of King Edward II's story, focusing on his non-normative sexuality and its impact on his environment. Both productions contribute significantly to the reception of Marlowe in Central Europe and offer unique perspectives on the play's societal and cultural relevance, prompting further exploration of historical plays and their intersection with contemporary social issues in Central European theatre and beyond.

In the article titled "‘This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king!’: Political Dynamics of Four Hungarian Translations of *Hamlet*," Zsolt Almási discusses Hamlet's commentary on the *Murder of Gonzago* play-within-the-play, examining its disruption of the intended experiment and its transformation into a veiled threat across the court. The focus then shifts to four Hungarian translations spanning different centuries. The 18th and 19th-century renditions by Ferenc Kazinczy and János Arany are viewed as deliberate acts of cultural assertion, emphasising an authentically Hungarian cultural milieu within changing socio-political landscapes. In contrast, late 20th and early 21st-century translations

by István Eörsi and Ádám Nádasdy prioritise scholarly engagement and philological precision, serving as bridges between national and international scholarship. Zsolt Almási's analysis highlights translations as active agents in the historical tapestry. They weave linguistic threads and reflect the perpetual dialectic between temporal nuances and the timeless resonance of Shakespeare's works.

Uroš Trefalt's article, "Other *Hamlet* in Puppet Theatre: A Contribution to Central European Theatre Diversity of the 1980s-1990s," explores the post-Berlin Wall era's challenges in defining Central Europe, discussing the complexities of its geographical and cultural delineation. Critiquing the oversimplification of Central Europe based on a shared communist past, Trefalt advocates for acknowledging the historical and cultural diversity among its states. He contends that self-centredness among former Eastern bloc states hampers Central Europe's integration into the broader European context. He proposes breaking the stigmatisation within Central European states and decentralising the concept. Shifting the focus to puppet theatre, the article uses Zlatko Bourek's innovative approach to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an illustration of artistic freedom during the totalitarian era. Using Bourek's work as an example, Trefalt concludes by urging a more open, equal, and humble approach to understanding the cultural significance of individual Central European countries.

The section is concluded by the written version of Boika Sokolova's concluding speech performed at the Brno Theatralia Conference (7 June 2023). Her contribution is titled "Remembering the Past, Creating the Present." Sokolova explores Shakespeare's influence across cultures, stressing its role in shaping national identity in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. She highlights translations and stage traditions in various languages. Shifting to the present, Sokolova addresses Russia's aggression against Ukraine, drawing parallels to historical support provided by Czech intellectuals in Bulgaria. These Czechs played a vital role in Bulgaria's nation-building, contributing to education, archaeology, and theatre. Sokolova argues that historical examples underscore the positive impact intellectuals can have on history, emphasising the need for empathy and support during crises. She urges solidarity with Ukrainians in their struggle for language, culture, and identity, citing Czechs in Bulgaria as a reminder of positive contributions. Sokolova concludes by stressing collective responsibility in shaping the narrative and memory of the region.

The special issue of *Multicultural Shakespeare* addresses, in the position papers and individual articles, various topics primarily related to adapting William Shakespeare's works. The CEESRA group continues to engage with Shakespeare as a part of the cultural heritage of East-Central and Central-East Europe. As part of our current VF project, a CEESRA database was created (see CEESRA website) to support our research in the field. It includes information about Shakespearean adaptations originating mostly in VF or adjacent

(geographically or mentally) countries that crossed borders. It is an honour for CEESRA to present, in the issue of the *Multicultural Shakespeare* journal, our “roots and routes” of understanding Shakespeare and his canonical oeuvre as a concept and an imagined space where we can live and talk four hundred years later.

WORKS CITED

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