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## Monsters and Marvels: Shakespeare Across Opera, Ballet, Dance, Puppetry, and Music in Central and Eastern Europe—and Beyond<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This collectively authored position paper discusses “hybrid” Shakespeares in Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on productions that offer formal experimentation and transnational perspectives. While their contexts remain regional, they provide an insight into how Shakespeare has been mobilised regionally. The paper consists of four distinct parts, each considering Shakespeare in a hybrid form: in opera, dance and musical theatre as well as puppetry in the transnational, regional context. The general discussions of Shakespeare’s presence/appropriation in these art forms are followed by case studies that illustrate the significance of hybridity that characterises Shakespeare in the Central and Eastern European transnational context. Our brief analyses and selected case studies suggest a need for a detailed study of Shakespeare and performative

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arts in Central and Eastern Europe that would concentrate on the transgressive impulse these theatrical blends realised through formal experiment and artistic innovation.

**Keywords:** William Shakespeare, dance theatre, opera, ballet, musical, puppetry, transmediality.

## Introduction

From the relatively safe positions of cultural hegemony anything next-to the West seems like a going-beyond into unknown territory: *hic sunt leones*. The liminal position on the fringes of Europe, however Europe is defined, grants an ontologically ambiguous status to the inhabitants of such peripheries. In the field of Shakespeare studies and theatre practice, this means the monsters of adaptation and marvels of formal innovation: transgression may well become a necessity when it comes to recontextualising canonical works and classical authors, at the perennial risk of moving beyond what is expected and proper. The works discussed in this position paper provide insight into the theatrical practices that test the limits of the theatrical form in Central and Eastern Europe.

In 2010, Jerzy Limon and Agnieszka Żukowska authored a significant collective monograph titled *Theatrical Blends: Art in the Theatre, Theatre in the Arts*, which introduced the concept of “theatrical blends.” This concept provides a valuable framework for discussing works characterised by textual, intermedial, and transmedial hybridity. The discourse surrounding productions that traverse boundaries of culture, genre, and language, as well as deliberations on populist transcreations and genre metamorphoses, necessitates a comprehensive examination of “blending” as a foundational tenet underlying much of the creative output within Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, it becomes imperative to emancipate our discussion of such forms from rigid disciplinary confines, if not entirely disengage from them. In the context of analysing performative trends within specific nations—namely Czechia, Slovakia, Romania, Poland, and Hungary—the selection of poignant case studies assumes paramount importance, as they serve as exemplars in their capacity to transcend the confines—of singular national identities, languages, and genres.

Given the formidable task of providing an all-encompassing survey of Shakespeare-related media crossings and translations within the scope of a single position paper, we are compelled to acknowledge, albeit provisionally, that adaptation manifests as both “a product and a process of creation and reception,” as articulated by Hutcheon (xiv). Adaptation signifies the intricate endeavour of reshaping an existing work into a novel form, transcending the confines of genres, languages, and media. Our present undertaking outlines

the diverse ways in which Shakespearean plays have navigated geographical, linguistic, media, and generic boundaries within the Central and Eastern European region. This intricate process mandates the discernment of the elements to retain and those to discard, along with devising strategies for transposing the original work into a distinct medium while preserving its fundamental themes and concepts. From the vantage point of methodology, this assertion may provoke debate; Roman Jakobson, for instance, may classify adaptation as intersemiotic translation, existing on a continuum alongside intra- and interlingual translation. This viewpoint underscores the interconnectedness of translation and adaptation.

A mobile and transnational work transcends boundaries, adapts to diverse contexts, and resonates with people from different walks of life, becoming a dynamic and influential presence on the global stage. This position paper explores Shakespeare's mobility, transnationality, and internationality in theatre. It examines select productions that exemplify these concepts, emphasising their international origin and cross-border reception. Notably, they have been initially produced within a specific country but have undergone international dissemination, traversing geographical boundaries. Our focus extends from traditional theatre performance on the opera, to the musical, ballet, dance, and the puppet stage.

In our pursuit to deliberate upon performances in the context of transnationality and mobility, it becomes essential to delineate these categories to discern their distinct qualities, while acknowledging some inherent overlap. As a concept, mobility places a spotlight on the notion of "physical travelling," which can be influenced by pragmatic factors such as economic considerations. Concurrently, transnationality and inter-nationality manifest as broader phenomena encompassing cultural interactions and exchanges in virtual space. Internationality encompasses phenomena that coexist and evolve, potentially intertwining to foster cultural exchange and catalyse more intricate transnational occurrences and innovations. Traditional mobility encapsulates the movement of both individuals, including ensembles and crew members, and physical objects, e.g. transferring costumes and props. Although we concur that "drama is made of a moving and multifarious language that lends itself to being transposed to the stage in various ways" (Henke and Nicholson 14), we regard the "mobile destiny of all plays" not as a lamentable fate, but rather as an opportunity for novel creation, one that significantly contributes to the ethos of theatre as a whole. This perspective holds particular significance for Central and Eastern European theatre's approach toward drama. Our central objective revolves around transnationality materialised through geographic traversals, cultural intersections, linguistic adaptations, and cross-cultural collaborations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We are not discussing here virtual mobility which we acknowledge as a phenomenon but omit as it needs its own separate study.

## Shakespeare in Musical Theatre

### Crossover Chronicles: the Transnational Nature of Shakespeare Operas in Central and Eastern Europe

While musical theatre in the region was much preoccupied with creating and sustaining its own national traditions, especially when it comes to the opera in the nineteenth century, the interest in operatic Shakespeare came much later than the tradition of importing and working with the Italian, French and German opera itself. The modernist (and nationalist) insistence on the creation of the uniquely Slavic/Hungarian/national musical usage through folk heritage and formal experimentation largely precluded any more sustained interest in Shakespeare in opera well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Rossini's and Verdi's operatic adaptations present everywhere in the region.

There have been 38 Polish operatic Shakespeare productions in the post-war period, with the repertoire limited to 3 composers and 5 titles only. These are Verdi's *Otello* (staged 15 times), *Macbeth* (11 times), and *Falstaff* (8 times). The other two operas were rushed through the Polish stage, both staged only twice: Charles Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* (1979, 2016), and Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1977, 2012). A production linked to Shakespeare solely on account of its title, Vincenzo Bellini's *Capuleti e I Montecchi*, was staged three times (1991, 1999, and 2018). One cannot help but notice the complete and regrettable absence of other operatic masterpieces based on Shakespeare's plays, such as Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*, Ralph Vaughan-Williams's *Sir John in Love*, Aribert Reimann's *King Lear*, Gioacchino Rossini's *Otello*, or Thomas Adès's *The Tempest*. The overall number of productions increased after 2000, and this trend persisted until 2020, when all theatres faced the dire consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Returning to this context, the standout occurrence is the 2014 production of André Tchaikovsky's (1935-1982) opera *The Merchant of Venice*, a rare aesthetic achievement and an interpretive proposal that transcends the usual status of opera works. With a libretto by John O'Brien, the opera was initially staged in 2013 during the Bregenz Festival in Austria and later reproduced in Warsaw in 2014. The British premiere took place in Cardiff in 2016, presented by the Welsh National Opera. In Poland, the mere announcement of the production triggered a flurry of articles, most of which retold Tchaikovsky's biography: a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, a superb pianist, and a composer. Tchaikovsky attained the 8<sup>th</sup> award at the fifth Chopin Competition (1955) and subsequently emigrated to the UK, where he continued his career as a pianist and composer.

However, the production itself too garnered the highest appreciation, both musically and theatrically. The role of Shylock was portrayed by Lester Lynch, a seasoned dramatic baritone of Afro-American descent widely admired for his commanding voice and magnetic performances. Beyond Lynch's soloist charisma, such casting carried significant interpretative consequences, further amplified by the depiction of Ku Klux Klan activists besieging Shylock's house. This added extra pressure on Jessica, whose elopement was further justified by her fear of the city. This somewhat meta-theatrical representation of Jewishness allowed for the reconceptualisation of the issues surrounding racial prejudice and xenophobia. It also liberated the interpretation of the play from the confines of immediate local, national, or continental history (Sokolova).

Given the specificity of the Polish reception of *The Merchant of Venice*, with its strong tendency towards domestication, it was the combination of generic transformations and bold visualizations that finally made it possible to perceive *The Merchant of Venice* as a universal and yet foreign play. This play cannot be fixed solely on elucidating the complexities of local politics and history. In other words, the radical displacement (and perhaps the author's expropriation?) freed the text from the imaginative frame imposed by some early appropriations, endowing the play with a universal appeal.

In Slovakia, the obligatory set of Verdi's operas was also staged. *Otello* was staged 6 times, *Macbeth* 4 times, and *Falstaff* 3 times. There were also productions of Gioacchino Rossini's *Otello* (2019) and Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* (2000). Notably, there were also two operas by Slovakian composers: Ján Cikker's *Coriolanus* (written in 1972), which premiered in Prague in 1974 and was subsequently staged in Mannheim (1974), Weimar (1977), and finally Banská Bystrica (2011). Similarly, Juraj Beneš's *The Players*, based on *Hamlet*, premiered in Cologne (2002) and was soon staged in the National Theatre in Bratislava (2004).

A similar reception pattern can be seen in Romania, with Verdi's masterpieces (*Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*) staged throughout the entire post-war period.<sup>3</sup> In this context, *Hamlet*, completed in 1969 by renowned Romanian composer Pascal Bentoiu, stands out as one of the most notable productions staged in the 1970s and 1980s. As argued by Alina Bottez,

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<sup>3</sup> In Alina Bottez's view, Graham Vick's production of Verdi's *Falstaff* at the Bucharest National Opera House in 2015 "stands out due to its iconoclastic nature, the denaturation of the play's significances, as well as the aggressively vulgar and scatological staging... Considering that Vick's production of *Falstaff* at the ROH Covent Garden in 1999 may well be the most beautiful and respectful production of this opera ever recorded on film, this approach seemed to be an obvious affront—a statement that in a country that had recently entered the international artistic circuit, anything could be sold, accepted, and acclaimed when coming from a Western celebrity," as indicated in an email communication dated 18 June 2023.

Bentoiu's *Hamlet* is remarkable both through its score and its libretto. Hamlet and the Ghost are interpreted by the same tenor voice—Hamlet on stage, the Ghost on pre-recorded magnetic tape. This suggests both their kinship and Hamlet's possible psychiatric condition. The magnetic tape was quite modern at the time (the opera was composed in 1969). So was the fact that the Ghost was not performed by an actor/singer, but was represented only through a light effect, as indicated by the composer/librettist. The Ghost is associated with the organ, therefore with a typically sacred sonority. The introductory and concluding choruses remind the listener of Romanian church music, and the ethnic demarcation—"Dane"—is eliminated. These touches render this Hamlet universal, and Romanian too.<sup>4</sup>

In Hungary, operatic traditions ensure a consistent array of operas being staged throughout the country. Verdi's *Otello* has been on the repertoire of the Hungarian State Opera since 2022, while *Macbeth* was staged in 2011, and *Falstaff* in 2021. The highlights of this comic opera were streamed in June 2021 on Facebook and Origo.hu, demonstrating the increasing virtual mobility of contemporary theatre. Thomas Adès's *The Tempest* was staged twice in Budapest, first in 2012 and then again in 2016. Aribert Reimann's *Lear* was also staged in Budapest, in 2016, representing the curiosity of the Budapest audience towards Ludger Engels and Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's recent work with Shakespeare. The magnificent Budapest Festival Orchestra adds a particular colour to the Hungarian opera scene: their 2018 Verdi *Falstaff* became perhaps the most widely toured Hungarian opera production. Directed by Iván Fischer and Marco Gandini in collaboration, the production's musically and theatrically impressive effect was due to its mingling of the orchestra and the singers. It was performed at the Palace of Arts in Budapest (MÜPA), then toured the world, receiving lavish praise in reviews.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Transnational Journey of a Shakespeare Musical: the Czech Rock Opera *Hamlet* (1999/2003)**

At least since the 1922 dream sequence in *Hamlet* with Buster Keaton, Shakespeare has been a source of inspiration and rewriting in filmic and scenic musical frames, to such an extent that the eminent film critic, Tadeusz Nyczek, points to Shakespeare as "for decades the most popular provider of themes in the literary musical" (Nyczek online, qtd. in Pitak-Piaskowska 422) first and

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<sup>4</sup> The data supplied by Dr. Alina Bottez, email correspondence as of 18 June 2023. See, for example, Orsolya Gyárfás' review in BachTrack, 08 March 2018: <https://bachtrack.com/review-falstaff-ivan-fischer-budapest-festival-orchestra-mupa-march-2018>. Accessed 18 June 2023.

foremost in the US, with Cole Porter (*Kiss Me Kate*, 1948), Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart (*The Boys from Syracuse*, 1938) as well as Leonard Bernstein (*West Side Story*, 1957) working to provide musical Shakespeare for America (Teague).

Such attempts at using Shakespeare as a way of elevating musical as a genre, as in *Swingin' the Dream* (1939), adapted from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Gilbert Seldes and Erik Charell (Pitak-Piaskowska 434), are rarer in Eastern and Central Europe owing to a distinctly different musical theatre heritage and landscape shaped by the European traditions of opera, opera buffa, operetta, singspiel and musical comedy on the one hand, and cabaret and acting song on the other. Unlike in the US or the UK, where the music scenes were concentrated in the large metropolitan areas (Broadway and West End, respectively), the musical landscape in the CEE region was relatively decentralised and diversified. As Jacek Mikołajczyk proves in his extensive history of musical theatre in Poland and Marek Golonka underlines in his recent study of Wojciech Kościelniak's megamusicals, this lack of centralisation is tied in the first place to the musical heritage of the European stages, and secondly, to difficulties within the post-war reality, the scarcity of singing and dancing actors as well as musical theatre directors, and, last but not least, to the East and Central European theatres' openness to innovation and experimentation.

The post-1945 repertoire of musical theatres in the Central and Eastern European region was decidedly mixed: initially oriented towards local and Soviet plays on the one hand, and offering the classics with no copyright to them on the other. Solidifying in the 1950s, the American musical challenged this repertoire. Socialist authorities saw the musical as a pro-West art form, yet it was acknowledged as non-elitist. This ambiguous perception was either advantageous or detrimental to musical theatre's popularity depending on the national political circumstances at the time. While there were attempts at transplanting the Broadway musical onto the Central European stages (e.g. the Polish premiere of Cole Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate* in the Warsaw Komedia Theatre already in 1957), the more sustained interest in full musicals can only be observed from the 1970s, especially with the emergence of megamusicals which established themselves in continental Europe after their initial triumphs on Broadway and the West End. Notably, after 1989, musical as a genre became "re-established" as an attractive, highly popular, typical business product. When the first megamusicals were created in France and Germany, theatre directors in East and Central Europe also started displaying a more sustained interest in the musical forms. West End, Broadway or European theatre musical hits/franchises were recipes for success, and thus original, new CEE productions, especially ones based on Shakespeare-related librettos have become a rare and relatively recent phenomenon. Composer Leszek Możdżer and theatre director Wojciech Kościelniak's adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Sen nocy letniej* (2001) in Poland, and Zdenek Troška and Janek Ledecký's *Hamlet* (1999) in Czechia

are perhaps the most important examples. Remarkably, both productions avoided the genre definition of musical, as “the label [was] associated with trivial plots [;] and they wanted to draw on the genre of rock-opera” (Romanowska 210).

The rock opera as Ledecký calls it on his website, was directed by Zdeněk Troška. It features music, lyrics, and libretto by Janek Ledecký and premiered at Kalich Theatre, Prague. The idea of a musical *Hamlet* came from Martin Kumzák, and Ledecký (1962), a well-known Czech rock and pop singer, soon became obsessed. “When no producer would touch this project” he “built his own theatre in Prague and produced it himself. He’d used his last dime, even sold his motorcycle.” (<https://icemusic-ledecky.com/hamlet/>). With 700 performances and three CDs, including greatest hits, complete recordings, and a symphonic recording, the musical and its American version emerged as one of the most successful Czech productions. Subsequent reprisals at the Nová Scéna Theatre in Bratislava, Slovakia, added to its success, and the following season, the significant ticket sales solidified its impact. Remarkably, the musical expanded its reach to Broadway, USA, in September 2003, with notable cast members. Renowned theatre director Robert Johanson’s (US) involvement led to an adaptation that incorporated “more of the plot elements back into the story that people are familiar with” (Mikule) and also unique elements like a rapping duo for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The English language adaptation premiered in Prague in 2005, featuring an English cast. The production then toured to Seoul, South Korea, in October 2007, quickly becoming a hit and gaining recognition in the Korean musical industry. The musical extended its success to Japan in 2012, receiving acclaim and sold-out shows.

The reception of the rock opera varied among theatre critics, with some expressing reservations, while from audiences, it was met with enthusiastic support, receiving praise for its uniqueness and compelling adaptation. Its transnational and mobile appeal can be seen as a result of five key factors. First and foremost, Shakespeare’s tragedy tackles universal themes such as love, betrayal, revenge, and existential dilemmas. Secondly, it utilises English as the medium, making *Hamlet* more accessible and relatable outside the confines of the Czech language. American Czech poet George Havrilla translated the Czech libretto into English. The challenge of linguistic adaptability was manifold: his predecessors, the Czech translators of *Hamlet* were all “top poets and top writers” (Ledecký, qtd in Mikule) and, as he pointed out, Ledecký’s music was in fact “modern poetry set to music” (Havrilla qtd in Mikule). Furthermore, Havrilla had to make the lyrics singable in English, too. Each main character has their own aria that directly links their personal issues to spectators, fostering a sense of transnational empathy. Thirdly, *Hamlet* stands as an integration of various musical styles, dance forms, and visual aesthetics from diverse cultures, resulting in a fusion that captivates audiences irrespective of national borders. This amalgamation includes elements like “tough rock and romantic pop”



combined with flamenco and Slav gypsy music (see Bottez). The merging of these cultural elements creates a tapestry that resonates with individuals across geographical boundaries. Fourthly, what further enriches its transnational character besides touring worldwide, is the collaborations with American producers and performers: the eclectic rock *Hamlet* embodies cross-cultural exchange, showcasing its ability to transcend linguistic and cultural divides. Lastly, its captivating visuality has significantly contributed to the show's transportability.

## Shakespeare in Dance Theatre

### Ballet & Dance Journeys: Crossing Borders from Central and East Europe

Dragan Klaić notes, “Despite a long tradition and accumulated prestige, dance remains a vulnerable part of the performing arts spectrum, with a rather limited audience and thus a noticeable reluctance on the part of programmers to feature it in programmed venues” (68). Classical ballet with its insistence on large-scale ensembles vies for the audience's attention with modern ballet and contemporary dance movement but these latter art forms are considered much more connoisseur-oriented and abstract. Therefore, the repertoire of Shakespeare-related works seems to be largely constricted by the tastes of the dance-theatre audiences who remain conservative in their choices. Additionally, the economic and political circumstances in the region prevented large-scale undertakings and multinational cooperation well beyond the end of communism. The contemporary dance scene in Eastern and Central Europe started shaping in the period post-thaw but its true development came in the years following the fall of the Iron Curtain (Grabowska and Szymajda).

In Poland only one ballet, *Romeo and Juliet*, was repeatedly staged across decades. Prokofiev's take on *Romeo i Julia* was directed by Jerzy Gogół (1954, 1963) and Witold Borkowski (1963, 1994) as well as Brigit Cullberg (1994, 1998). Not only in Poland, but also in other regions, Prokofiev's ballet stood out with a remarkable track record, having been repeatedly staged over the decades, both in Socialist and Post-Socialist times, totalling six productions (further details provided below). The ballet was equally popular in Slovakian theatres and was staged at the National Theatre in Bratislava (six times), in Košice (four times), and once in Banská Bystrica. The same trend holds true in the Czech Republic, where Prokofiev's ballet has garnered considerable popularity. It was showcased at the National Theatre in Prague on the stage of the State Opera in 2022, with choreography by John Cranko. Cranko's rendition maintained the original costume and set design by the globally acclaimed set designer Jürgen Rose, rendering the production an exclusive spectacle. The

ballet received personal oversight from Jürgen Rose (born in 1937). The ballet's popularity is underscored by twenty productions in Czech theatres since 1990, including cities such as Ústí nad Labem, Brno, Liberec, Plzeň, Olomouc, České Budějovice, Ostrava, and others. While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been performed eight times between 1988 and 2019, *The Taming of the Shrew* has graced the stage six times since 1965. The most recent rendition, presented in Pilsen in 2018, earned accolades as a "triumph of dance" (Truksová). The ballet has so far only ventured onto the "home" stage of the National Theatre in Prague but the prospect of international performances remains plausible.

In Romania, the usual choice of Prokofiev was supplemented by several adaptations, including *The Taming of the Shrew*, staged in 1977 as a duet by the Bucharest National Opera House, in 1988 by the same company, and in 1997 by the Romanian Opera House in Timisoara.

In Hungary, among the most enduring pieces of the ballet repertoire were the three Shakespeare productions choreographed by László Seregi (1929-2012). The trilogy consists of *Romeo and Juliet* (1985, most recent revival in 2022) set to Prokofiev's music, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (set to Mendelssohn's music, 1989, last revival in 2017), and *The Taming of the Shrew* (set to K. Goldmark's music in 1994, last revived in 2022). The most recent and most unconventional dance production that is worth international attention is that of the Szeged Contemporary Dance Company's April 2023 *Lear* (not *King Lear*!) in which Lear's wife appears, dead in the first scene, haunting in the last. Choreographer Tamás Juronics justifies Lear's choleric behaviour by the acute pain the loss of his wife causes. Not only the fully state-funded and controlled Hungarian Opera but also the Central European Dance Company has a trilogy of Shakespeares. The last piece of their trilogy, *Shakespeare Tales* (2011), is significantly more than a Shakespeare play's intersemiotic translation into the language of contemporary dance: it is a unique pastiche of Shakespearean characters, motifs, plot-turns and relations, a true representative of the theatrical blend whose organising principle is textual hybridity. The creators deconstructed several Shakespeare plays, e.g. *Othello*, *the Shrew*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the histories, then from these Shakespearean bits, they re-constructed their own Shakespearean world within the framework of contemporary dance. The rich pastiche characteristically targeted young adult audiences and enriched the dance choreography with object-, shadow and puppet theatre devices. Its creative team was truly international; it consisted of the Hungarian choreographer Krisztián Gergye, the Hungarian puppet master, Marica Tárnok, and the Czech director Vladka Malá.

From the Polish perspective, two ballet productions clearly transcend the national framework of reception, signalling a new concept of the target audience. These are *The Taming of the Shrew* staged in Warsaw in 2015 and choreographed by John Cranko with music by Kurt-Heinz Stolze after Domenico

Scarlatti, and *The Tempest*, choreographed by Krzysztof Pastor. *The Tempest* was first staged in 2014 by Het Nationale Ballet in Amsterdam and then in Warsaw in 2016. In *The Tempest*, the presence of the text is limited to a few citations, and the prevailing themes revolve around maturing, aging, colonialism, and forgiveness. Despite the limited emphasis on magic, this performance becomes a captivating philosophical treatise about mankind, time, and the nature of memory. Resonating with the music of the European Renaissance, the production also features masterful use of the daf drum played by Abbas Bakhtiari, which becomes Prospero's voice—an autonomous and unnerving narrative layer that guides the audience through the reenactment of his past life. While the visual appeal of the performance evokes Jacobean masques, the overall tone remains solemn, with a keenly articulated sense of loss. The production both celebrates and transcends European aesthetics, imbuing the story with a renewed sense of universality. This is emphasized by the music, which includes Tallis's *Spem in alium*, compositions by Henry Purcell, Matthew Locke, Robert Jonson, contemporary music by Michel van der Aa, the daf drum played by Bakhtiari, and some Iranian traditional music.

### **Transversing Borders, Genres and Gender Norms: *Romeos and Juliets. Unplugged, Traumstadt* (PL, 2021)**

A noteworthy exemplar of contemporary dance production fusing acting elements within the dancer's artistry is *Romeos and Juliets. Unplugged, Traumstadt*, which debuted in Poznań, Poland in 2021. This production, significantly influenced by German expressionist dance traditions, emerged from a collaboration between the Polish Dance Theatre and the Münster-based body talk collective. The conceptual design and choreography were orchestrated by Yoshiko Waki, with dramaturgy by Rolf Baumgart, scenography, and costumes by Nanako Oizumi, and musical composition by Damian Pielka.

By challenging abstraction within the realm of dance, *Romeos and Juliets. Unplugged, Traumstadt* adroitly forges a dance narrative steeped in collective mourning and frustration, ultimately expressed through synchronized movement. The conceptual mooring of the production lies in reimagining the Veronese love saga against the backdrop of the pandemic. This shared contextual framework captures audience engagement, facilitating an emotional resonance with the exploration of the "Traumstadt:" Poznań/Verona/the city of sorrow and dreams. The dancers themselves subvert conventional notions of the balletic form, employing burlesque and an array of contemporary dance genres. Their "naked" bodies are stripped of objectification, navigating the trauma of isolation to ultimately reclaim connection and physical proximity. Through this lens, the contemporary dance choreography becomes a poignant vehicle for the

reconciliation process faced by the youthful “Romeos” and “Julias,” grappling with the pandemic-induced realities that affect the young and elderly alike.

The performance is conspicuously marked by its dissent from power dynamics and hierarchies laid bare by the pandemic. Choreographed routines encompassing diverse styles underscore the subversive potency of movement, notably in the sequence where dancers relinquish cubicles, symbolizing their entrance into an Arcadian realm of untainted love. This holds particular significance in contrast to the ceremonial, pandemic-driven Covid-testing rituals and the politically charged balcony scene. This production encapsulates an engaged form of theatre, as delineated by Sherry Badger Shapiro, employing foreignizing strategies to “imagine the unimaginable” through dance—a transformative act with the potential to spotlight power dynamics. These dynamics are contested through the deconstruction of cisnormative gender norms (Shapiro 13-15).

The choreography critically engages, transforms, and deconstructs the quotidian rituals of Covid-testing and quarantine, simultaneously addressing the political schisms evident in Poland during lockdown, notably the Black Protests of Polish society against the abortion ban (Banaś). The incisive social commentary transmutes the narrative of *Romeo and Juliet* into the lived experiences of the “Romeos” and “Julias”—young performers who seize the stage to recount dreams disrupted by politics and the pandemic alike. This presentist approach effectively captivates audiences, articulating the pandemic’s poignant quotidian experience through the fluidity of the contemporary dancer’s body (Dempster 229), thus cultivating an inclusive theatrical sphere wherein empathy-driven community thrives. The production’s merits were recognized with the Golden Yorick award during the 26<sup>th</sup> International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk. The accolade was conferred by an esteemed international committee including Jacek Kopciński (PL), Aneta Szyłak (PL), John Stanisci (US), Tamara Trunova (UKR), and Gianina Carbuariu (RO).

## **Shakespeare on the Puppet Stage**

### **Shakespeare’s Appropriation in the Central and East European Puppet Medium**

Puppetry is a very unique and highly technical medium that has long been the breeding ground for the theatrical blends—the theatrical, textual, and transmedial hybrids—that Limon and Żukowska mention. Despite the long history of puppet art in the region since early modern times (Billing and Drábek; Malíková) and the shared and often forced historical-political-cultural heritage (e.g. the impact of the Soviet Moscow-based Obraztsov’s rod puppet theatre and

art-revue propositions in the 1950s), the development of the puppet medium has been quite diverse in the Czech, Polish and Hungarian speaking parts of the region (Waszkiel). As a result, the intensity of interaction and influence within the region—further exacerbated by the language barrier between the Slavic countries and the Hungarians—has been rather uneven. Uniquely however, the present Central Eastern European puppet scene is dense with international festivals and touring creators, co-operating puppetry training institutions and collaborating artists and ensembles who, for one reason or another, keep choosing to perform Shakespeare.

Producing Shakespeare in the puppet medium for adults could have been a platform of political commentary upon current issues (Billing and Drábek), that is, a cunning chance to double-speak in a way that was (more) tolerated by the Polish and Czechoslovak Communist regimes (Tomaszewska 89). Meanwhile, Hungary's single professional puppet theatre was forced to focus nearly entirely on an audience that was not older than kindergarten age. Adult productions were few and rare, with only two Shakespeares (1964, 1988) during the four Socialist decades; in short, the Hungarian puppet theatre in Socialist times was anything but a "platform of political commentary." However, the removal of dissident artists and intellectuals from the dramatic stage to the less visible puppet theatres was a common and general practice of oppressive regimes throughout the region. Fortunately, the fall of the Iron Curtain liberated the cross-pollination of ideas and techniques (Billing and Drábek) that the translation of Shakespeare's plays into the adult and young adult puppet medium both requires and inspires. The post-1989 era brought significant changes in Hungarian puppetry training and puppet aesthetics, and the process of catching up with the rest of the region began. Puppeteers were allowed to use multiple techniques and appear on stage. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* have been the region's most popular Shakespeares to be "puppeted" and to cross borders; hence, these dramas' puppet stage histories are the most influential and prototypical.

A powerful recent production was the Radost Theater's (Brno, CZ) *Hamlet on the Road* (2022),<sup>5</sup> which did not only perform Shakespeare but also reflected on the early modern history of Shakespeare on the Central and Eastern European puppet stage. *Hamlet on the Road* was "a funeral musical inspired by the poetics of the fair's itinerant puppeteers" that incorporated parts from *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, too, which won, among other prizes, the 2022 Shakespeare Festival's Audience Award as well as the Polish Shakespeare's Society's Award, "Prospero's Book" at the 26<sup>th</sup> International Shakespeare

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<sup>5</sup> Text by Pavel Trtílek, production homepage, <https://divadlo-radost.cz/projekt/hamlet-on-the-road/>. Accessed 28 November 2023.

Festival in Gdańsk (PL). Pavel Trtílek's contemporary piece was staged as street theatre, with a wagon of players, making a reference to the early modern English and European players who toured with their *Hamlet* across Europe. There was a distinct use of wordplay at the surtitles level, where the word "Danemark/Dania" appeared in the surtitles while the actors pronounced it as "Dańsk," signifying a linguistic and cultural connection to Denmark/Gdańsk. Furthermore, the play featured signals of a metaphysical/meta-theatrical journey, and the Gravedigger character acted as a medieval morality figure of Death crossing out the names of characters/"actors" as they perished. In 2023, the production made a return to Gdańsk to celebrate Shakespeare's Birthday and is presently embarked on a world tour.

### **The Border-Crossing Ideas of a Puppet Director: Josef Krofta's Shakespeares**

The case that most powerfully demonstrates the temporal and regional border-crossings within the puppet medium is that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which Josef Krofta<sup>6</sup> (CZ), a most influential puppeteer of DRAK Puppet Theatre, first staged in Hradec Králové in 1984 and then directed it in Friderikstad (1998, Norway), in Wrocław (2003, Poland), in Budapest (2006, Hungary) and for young audiences (2013, DRAK and Edinburgh Fringe Festival). "The basic principles of the structure of the DRAK production remained the same, but each new production [...] emphasised another aspect of Shakespeare's comedy" (Balogh 29). The pioneer before Krofta's original take in 1984 may have been Jirí Trnka's animated puppet film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1959). Even if there were remarkable productions of the *Dream* (Hungary, 1964, Poland, 1965) in the prior decades, Krofta's *Dream* "was widely held as an important milestone in the renewal of puppet theatre dramaturgy" (Reuss 155) within the region. It was seen by many in the Socialist bloc, at the International Puppet Festival in Dresden; or, when Hungarian "puppeteers made a pilgrimage to see" it (Reuss 156).

Krofta's oeuvre and his Shakespeares connect the Socialist and the post-Socialist eras: in 2003 the Wrocław Puppet Theatre invited Krofta, who had been collaborating with Polish puppet artists from the 1970s (Tomaszewska 96), where the Czech director proposed again directing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Krofta's spectacle resembled a dream or a hallucinogenic vision, in which the colourful and radiant world of the fairies stood in stark contrast to the

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<sup>6</sup> Josef Krofta, Czech director, puppeteer, pedagogue (1943-2015), director of DRAK Theater in Hradec Králové from 1971, head of the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre at the Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU) in Prague from 1990.

plain and dull human world. Despite the initial loud success, its dense concrete references to the hippie era made the production age fast then caused it to fade out from the Wrocław repertoire altogether.

Even if the impression Krofta's 2003 *Dream* left on Polish audiences did not last long, his Budapest *Dream* remains influential (Reuss 158-162). The first (and only) Hungarian *Dream* in 1964 was performed entirely with rod puppets, forcedly followed Obraztsov's ideas, shyly confessed the shortening of the text, and emphasised the magically comic and caricaturistic, dreamlike aspect of Shakespeare's work which live actor theatre was unable to fully convey (booklet 1964, n.p.). As a result, Krofta needed to find new points of attack: he relied on live acting and resorted to the sparing and fully functional (non-illustrative) use of puppets, i.e. puppet avatars for the lovers only whilst under Puck's spell. Krofta's editing of the play with DAMU-alumnus dramaturg Géza Balogh proved successful, so much so that Balogh published studies on it and set it as an example: despite being shortened significantly, the text managed to remain playful, lively, erotic, poetic. "What Krofta and Balogh managed to achieve with their 2006 production in the long run [in Hungary] was to spark a creative impetus towards further mixed, live-actor and puppet productions in which what activates the spectators' mind originates from a commingling of both Shakespeare and the relationship between the live actor and the puppet" (Reuss 161-162).

In a broader sense, Krofta's work has helped to reveal, teach and reinforce the underlying principles regarding both directorial and textual work particular for the puppet medium, and also testified that with good dramaturgical work even the verbose Shakespeare text can be made suitable for the adult puppet stage. Puppet dramaturgy significantly avoids monologues, while implying an action-packed plot, a playscript full of "the onomatopoeias, the exclamations, the short lines, the rhymed texts" (Poletti et al. 2009/2012), and a clear justification as to why the production employs puppets in a performance. Due to, among others, Krofta's illuminating artistic legacy in the region, when Hungarian students were forced to leave the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts (SzFE), Budapest for political reasons, they could continue their tertiary education at Prague (CZ) as well as Wrocław (PL) and Białystok (PL). Along the principles above, several important Hungarian productions were born: a Shakespeare-series for young adults at Harlekin Theatre, Eger (*Othello*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. Tamás Somogyi), and a deeply engaging hit of *The Tempest* at the Budapest Puppet Theatre (dir. Rémusz Szikszai).

## Conclusion

In the light of the multifaceted dynamics explored throughout this discourse, we can state that Shakespeare is still widely and frequently used as genre- and media-crossing raw material in the countries of the Central and East European region. Shakespeare's plays either serve as creative-intellectual-artistic challenge in genres or mediums that Shakespeare did not originally write for (opera/musical, ballet/dance, and puppet theatre), and/or provide occasion to powerfully reflect on contemporary issues, or entices the young adults, the future generation of spectators to the theatre. As Dragan Klaić writes:

Directing is also a transcultural operation that seeks to make the dramatic situation and the issues of the play comprehensible to a contemporary audience, and at the same time challenging and confrontational, beyond cultural or geographical differences. Creating a theatre production inspired by a play by Euripides, Shakespeare, Goldoni, Musset or Ostrovsky can engage an audience only if it is driven by an elaborate concept of thematisation, localisation, and some language updating." (58)

The transnational character of Shakespeare in East-Central Europe is almost invariably a given, considering the fact that his works are usually analysed, interpreted and produced in translation, especially if meant for the regional market only. Nonetheless, with the emergence of transnational networks of theatrical exchange such as collaborations between theatres as well as international theatre festivals, the international character of Shakespeare-based productions has become more pronounced. Even before the end of communism directors and actors existed in networks, and with 1989 the process of internationalising theatrical productions, festivals and in some cases, also ensembles, accelerated.

In *Of Borders and Thresholds* Michal Kobialka writes that "a border can be defined as a line, a space, a value, a location, a place, a wound, or a field of struggle" (3). When thought of in such a way, theatre-makers' mobilising efforts to cross the border and go beyond it may be read in political and psychological ways: as a way of dealing with the traumatic past and the haunting present. At the same time, the nature of the networks created before 1989 and in the transformation era differed significantly from those in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: there was much more reliance on the individual charisma and contacts of directors and actors. Those social patterns of networking have remained but are solidified by the organisational and institution support which has emerged after accession into the EU.

While we are acutely aware that our survey was highly selective owing to the space constraints, in the writing of this position paper we noted significant



similarities in the way new trends and genres emerge, and also in the way productions seen as possibly translocal or transnational are received: they seem to take a somewhat different approach to the way the needs of international audiences are tackled. For instance, a recent trend in Central and Eastern European countries is to adapt for teenagers and young adults and thus raise new audiences. Our examples were Poland and Hungary, where puppetry is increasingly used, just like in Czechia, either in blended, live-actor and puppet productions or as a complementary method featuring in dance. All the productions described in the paper contain a strong and often eclectic visual component that makes them attractive for young adults and international audiences. The greater the non-verbal component, the greater the potential for international success of the production. It increases the chances of international audiences engaging with the production and points to the significance of accessibility in producing Shakespeare transnationally. Productions that travel across borders perform an important social function as well, transforming the receiving culture: both the audiences reacting affectively and performers responding to the new exciting conventions act as conductors through whom ideas travel. The fact that e.g. Ledecký's *Hamlet* was able to tour and perform in various international locations is a testament to the potential cultural significance and appeal of the production.

What is specific for musical and dance is the incorporation of new traditions and often radical re-signification of the pre-existing cultural practices: the emergence of the new ballet forms and contemporary dance, the integration of the Broadway musical structure into a more continental European format of a megamusical concerned with the past; the experiments with representation of Europe's "Others" within such classical genres as the opera all seem to herald an emergence of a new CEE transnational/translocal dramatic imagination. To better understand the developments happening within Central and Eastern European theatre, it is crucial to examine the "transcultural operations" performed on Shakespeare translocally. The abovementioned productions exhibit a compelling visual allure, positioning them as captivating entities for global audiences. A heightened emphasis on non-verbal elements correspondingly augments the prospects of international success. This amplification of the non-verbal dimension augments the potential for international resonance and underscores the pivotal role of accessibility in the cross-border dissemination of Shakespearean works. Beyond the aesthetics, cross-border productions fulfil a substantive societal role by contributing to the transformation of host cultures. The emotive reactions of audiences and the assimilation of new and exhilarating artistic conventions by performers establish a symbiotic conduit, facilitating the circulation of ideas across cultural frontiers. Within the aforementioned considerations, the notions of mobility, transnationality, and internationality acquire multifaceted significance. The contemporary inclination observed in

Central and Eastern European countries, particularly Hungary, towards adapting Shakespearean works for teenagers and young adults underscores a progressive strategy. Emanating from a backdrop of fiscal difficulties, theatres in Hungary have initiated such adaptations as a pragmatic means to cultivate new audiences. This strategic alignment with younger demographics is also discernible in Poland, reflecting the broader regional shift towards engaging younger generations in theatrical experiences. This trend assumes a role beyond artistic innovation, strategically channelling the essence of Shakespearean narratives to an audience poised to shape the cultural landscape of the future.

What speaks to younger generations is the hybrid and highly “trans-” character of Shakespearean adaptation that presents Shakespearean themes and tropes in a “mashup” mode, using some of Shakespeare’s texts in translation powerfully connecting them with elements of contemporary popular and “high” culture. Such monstrous/marvellous “theatrical blends” seem to anchor Shakespeare in the region but speak to the cultural mobility of Shakespeare even when his works function in a cultural sphere radically different from the original circumstances of their production. What emerged in our analysis is the question of communist and post-communist approaches to Shakespeare in a rapidly changing political landscape; the specificity of the region is reflected in the pace of the adaptations and the rapid growth of transregional production particularly in the last two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The sudden establishment of private enterprises and changes in the functioning of the theatres meant new initiatives, and new ways of thinking about audiences, their needs and expectations as well of theatrical practice as such: in the core of cores, the formal innovation, the penchant for entertainment and the new ways of approaching Shakespeare are the outcome of larger metamorphoses described in more detail in other position papers in this volume.

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