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“...noxiousness of my work:”¹ Miroslav Macháček’s 1971 *Henry V* at the Normalized National Theatre

Abstract: The essay focuses on the 1971 production of William Shakespeare’s rarely staged historical drama *Henry V*, directed by Czech director Miroslav Macháček at the Prague National Theatre in a new translation by Czech literary historian and translator Břetislav Hodek. Macháček staged the play shortly after the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops. The premiere of the play provoked negative reactions from influential Communist officials, including the leading post-1968 politician Vasil Biřak. Macháček’s performance, which, in the director’s words, was intended as a universal anti-war parable, became a political topicality that the newly emerging normalisation authorities understood as a deliberate political, anti-socialist provocation. The essay traces the background of the production, including the translation of the play, and the consequences of the staging for Macháček. At the same time, it attempts to unravel a number of ambiguities and ambivalences associated with the period of normalization (1970s and 1980s) and its research. A special focus is given to the production itself as it disturbed the audience with its ambivalence. In this analytical section, the essay works with Norman Rabkin’s conception of *Henry V*, as presented in his essay “Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*,” which traces Shakespeare’s complex grasp of the historical figure and the events associated with Henry. Macháček, who staged the play several years before this essay by Rabkin, pursued similar intentions with his stage concept. It was this unsettling ambivalence that carried within it the features of both a parable and a political gesture that spoke out against the communist occupation.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Miroslav Macháček, Břetislav Hodek, National Theatre, Vasil Biřak, normalization, Norman Rabkin, production.

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¹ Macháček, *Zápisky* 66.



The production of William Shakespeare's historical drama *Henry V* directed by Miroslav Macháček (premiered 5 February 1971) was the first Czech stage adaptation of the play and "perhaps even the first European one" (Macháček 66). Although there were four available translations of the play at the time, the National Theatre commissioned a new translation from the translator and literary historian Břetislav Hodek. The collaboration may have initiated the director Macháček, whom Hodek had assisted significantly as an expert advisor on the 1954 production of *Hamlet* in České Budějovice. Macháček highly praised this collaboration. Hodek, whose dramaturgical adaptation of E. A. Saudek's translation of *Hamlet* provoked excited reactions, provided the director with valuable insights into the English stage tradition of drama. Hodek's suggestions inspired Macháček to such an extent that he used some of them not only in the South Bohemian production, but also transferred them to his later 1982 production of *Hamlet* at the National Theatre, essentially his last major work as a director of the National Theatre.

Hodek's translation of *Henry V* opened a new level of collaboration with Macháček, which culminated in the aforementioned production of *Hamlet* in 1982. In connection with *Henry V*, it is, however, also worth noting that in 1970 Macháček staged Hodek's 1965 translation of Christopher Fry's witch-hunt comedy *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1948, prem. 14 February), which had not yet been performed on the Czechoslovak stage. The production of the verse play, which mixed "two classic traditions of English drama [...]—poetic drama with playful comedy of manners" (Hodek, 1970), was received with controversy. For some, the "dense imagery" of Fry's play, which "would have been better listened to on the radio" (Tůma, "Jarní komedie") posed obstacles for the director, while others praised the production for its

subtle ironic touch. It is as if a hitherto unknown Shakespearean comedy was being performed, sanctified by contemporary mentality and intellect. (Grym)

Among the surviving responses, however, a short letter sent by a disgruntled spectator to the weekly newspaper for ideology and politics of the Communist Party Central Committee, *Tribuna* (between 1969-1989 a supplement of *Rudé právo*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), is noteworthy. The spectator, whose reaction in many ways foreshadowed the intricate story of Macháček's *Henry V*, was named Bohuslav Vojáček and described himself as a peasant. He formulated his irritation caused by the performance in a letter aptly titled "What and for whom are they playing" as follows:

The play itself shocked me, not so much for the political innuendos but rather for that even some good actors could be tempted by a play like this. (Vojáček)

Mr Vojáček and the other participants in the trip to the National Theatre were particularly bothered by the fact that they did not know “what the play was actually about and what it was supposed to express” and that “nobody could tell where the beginning, middle and end of the play was” (Vojáček). The mention of unspecified political allusions is not insignificant, however, although it is not so much indicative of the intentions of the English playwright as it is of the sensitised contextual environment of post-1968 Czechoslovakia, a country still freshly invaded and occupied by foreign armies whose presence decisively framed and permeated the following two decades known as normalisation. At the same time, we are talking about a country that was occupied, but whose political representation had yet to discursively anchor the abnormal presence of foreign troops on the territory of a sovereign state and subsequently legitimize the “restoration of order” (Šimečka), which in practice meant the gradual consolidation of normalization power. Jiří Maňák eloquently characterized the early post-August situation in his publication *The Purges in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1969-1970*:

With the August military invasion of the “allies,” the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia then found itself in a completely different and very critical situation. It began to adapt to the new conditions and new limits of its activities, which were given the euphemistic name of “normalisation,” in a complex and contradictory way. (Maňák 5)

The way out of this transitional, critical situation was to be a binding interpretation of the events that had just taken place, “the basic programmatic document of the political power installed in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion in 1968” (Havel, “Story and Totalitarianism”), whose narrative was to tame social and ideological divisions. This textbook of normalization was in the making since the spring of 1969 but did not enter circulation until late 1970 under the title *Lessons from the Crisis in the Party and Society after the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia*. Parallel to this search for an adequate ideological language, there was an internal purge in the power centre—party vetting, culminating in massive purges during 1970. In other words, if the post-1968 party establishment spoke of the ideological or even emotional disorientation and destabilisation of society in the pre-August period and its necessary consolidation, it was this period that showed signs of extreme instability.

Although it might be an exaggeration to see Mr Vojáček’s disorientation as evidence of the hyper-sensitized environment of post-1968 Czechoslovakia, it is not appropriate to downplay it, even though the name ‘Vojáček’ was probably a fictitious identity used for the frequent practice of provocations and other similar attacks. In any case, Macháček’s production of Fry’s play lasted less than

two years in the repertoire, with fifty-five performances, and Mr. Vojáček's reaction to it was not serious. Its importance lies rather in the level of analogy, which can help to understand the difficult to grasp, ambiguous, paradoxical or opaque circumstances and decisions that accompany the story of Macháček's *Henry V*. A year later, Shakespeare's play was to repeat a broadly identical situation, except that the leading role would not be played by an ordinary peasant expressing his dissatisfaction with the shocking political harmfulness of Macháček's production, but by one of the highest-ranking representatives of the post-1968 political establishment, a staunch opponent of the Prague Spring and one of the signatories of the letter inviting the occupying Warsaw Pact troops into the country: Vasil Biřak, Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Central Committee for Foreign Policy and Ideology.

Troubles on the Threshold of Normalization

Vasil Biřak, who shared with Mr. Vojáček more than just possible outrage at the performance directed by Miroslav Macháček, but also a rural background, brings us back to Břetislav Hodek's translation. Indeed, it could most likely have been the choice of the translator or translator and director that should have provoked the politician to such an extent that he unleashed the following chain of events, which in effect seriously affected Miroslav Macháček and his future position in the apparatus of the National Theatre.

It should be added that Hodek's translation was never published. One publicly accessible copy is deposited in the National Theatre Archive, the other is available in the library of the Theatre Institute in Prague. The copy in the National Theatre Archive is a dramaturgically edited version with a few manuscript notes. It should be the final text of Macháček's production, probably the prompter's book. The version stored at the Theatre Institute is the same as the one from the National Theatre Archive but contains no notes. However, Miroslav Macháček's daughter, the actress Kateřina Macháčková, discovered the director's book in her father's estate and kindly provided it to me. Although the first twenty-five pages are (as yet) missing, it is an extremely valuable source, not only because it contains Hodek's original translation and its changes, but above all because it represents important material for understanding and analysing Macháček's directorial approach to Shakespeare's drama.

In his posthumously published journals, written during his four-month stay in a psychiatric hospital in the spring of 1975, Macháček mentioned *Henry V* as a "difficult play," and it cannot be assumed that he was referring only to the technical difficulty (60 characters, rapid shifts of locations, opulent war scenes), but above all to the interpretive difficulty. Macháček's understanding supports a number of Shakespeare scholars and artists who have come up with different

and often completely contradictory interpretations of this play about the English occupation of France and its main character—Prince Hal. Peter G. Phialas in his 1965 essay “Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and the Second Tetralogy” summarized the conflicting interpretations of Shakespeare’s play as follows:

For over a century and a half Shakespeare’s characterization of Henry V has been the subject of passionate debate among the critics. The opposing views are so extreme that their division seems unbridgeable: on the one hand are those who see the king as a cold political machine, a hypocrite, a monster, an inhuman beast, and on the other those who find him the embodiment of what is noblest in the English character. (155)

For some, *Henry V* was a celebration of “devoted patriotism and the embodiment in Henry of the heroic and princely virtues” (Munro 1021), others treated the play as “semi-fascist and possessing intellectual poverty,” providing “evidence of Shakespeare’s chauvinistic patriotism” (Munro 1021). For some, king Henry V represented “an exemplary Christian monarch” (Hawkins, qtd. in Rabkin 294), for others ““the perfect Machiavellian prince”” (Goddard 267), “a coarse and brutal highway robber” (Rabkin 294). Importantly, and especially for understanding of Macháček’s interpretation,

most twentieth-century critics have abandoned the prevailing view of earlier critics that Shakespeare’s characterization of Henry V is unequivocally favorable; they believe instead that Henry V is riddled with ironies and ambiguities that undermine the traditional image of Henry as the “Mirror of Christian Kings.” (Shaw 117)

This was perhaps what Martin Štěpánek, at that time an actor at the National Theatre, who was cast in several roles in Macháček’s production of *Henry V*, spoke about more than thirty years later:

[Macháček] mounted a spectacular performance of *Henry V* and one of the top theatrical agents came to see it and saw something in that performance that nobody had ever seen in that play before [...]. (Macháčková 183)

The contradictory nature of literary-historical interpretations in practice confirm two film renditions of Shakespeare’s history. The first is Laurence Olivier’s 1944 “patriotic propaganda film” (Deats 285), in which the English occupier is presented as an idealised warlord leading the English army in a just war, which culminates in the legendary Battle of Agincourt. The second is Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 film adaptation, in which the war theme, and particularly the character of the English king, is portrayed in its polyvalence “as simultaneously compassionate and fierce, pious and ambitious, noble and calculating” (Deats

285). Even though Macháček may have been familiar with the first film, his interpretation tended towards a more complex, difficult approach that favoured ambiguity over instrumentality.

As difficult as *Henry V* is for the director, it is no less difficult for the translator, which brings us back to what was suggested in the introduction to this section, namely that the production of *Henry V* caused a bizarre confluence of coincidences, the basis of which was Hodek's translation. *Henry V* is, among others, a play of languages, a multilingual play, mixing not only English with French but various versions of English, its dialects, idiolects or accents, as well. Important here is what this multilingual cocktail means for translators. An important decision is whether to translate the French lines, especially given that most of the French characters speak fluent English. In this respect, Hodek followed Sládek's 1911 solution, translating the "linguistic" scene between Kathrine and Alice into Czech and leaving the English expressions in English, pronounced with a French accent.² The scenes wherein Pistol and the Boy meet the French soldier and Henry is wooing Kathrine remain for obvious reasons intact with French lines.

A greater problem for *Henry V*'s translators seems to be the choice of equivalents for the various English dialects or idiolects. In short, dialects play multiple functions in *Henry V*, including the production of comic, absurd or conflicting situations. At the same time, they perform specific ethnic or national affiliations of which the characters are the bearers and representatives. Simply, the choice of dialect entails not only the individual characterization of the character, but also the assignment or identification of ethnicity or nationality. If this statement may seem somewhat exaggerated, in the case of Hodek's translation it turns out to be quite valid and, in the specific conditions of the emerging normalization, decisive. At this point, Hodek made a radical decision. While he had Welsh Fluellen (using his original Welsh name Llewelyn), like some of his predecessors, speak in Czech-German gibberish, even having him utter some exclamations like "Um Gottes Willen" (Macháček, *Director's Book*) in German, he found another alternative for Macmorris, who in earlier translations had expressed himself either in disfigured lisp-like Czech, or in Czech contaminated with Moravian dialect. For Macmorris, Hodek did not put into his mouth a dialect or any other corrupted version of Czech, but the language closest to Czech – Slovak. One of the critics of the production described Hodek's effort a year later as follows:

² In Josef Čejka's 1858 translation, the incriminated passages follow literally Shakespeare's originals without change, whereas in the translations of Bohumil Štěpánek (manuscript, 1930-1931) and František Nevrla (1963) the French is retained, while the English expressions in the scene between Alice and Katherine are translated into Czech with a French accent transcription.

The new translation by Břetislav Hodek is one of the attempts to translate Shakespeare into modern Czech, although the attempt to translate the various British dialects of the original into Slovak and a kind of Czech-German ‘gibberish’ proved extremely problematic. (Tůma 9)

Another reviewer appreciated Hodek’s translation:

Hodek’s translation gives the possibility of characterization. He uses both Slovak and German-Czech pronunciation and intonation to differentiate the linguistic distinctiveness of the English soldiers (Irish, Welsh). (mlk)

Here returns Vasil Biľak, a politician of Slovak origin, invited to the premiere of an unknown Shakespeare’s play, although the famous playwright is always a guarantee of a high quality cultural experience. He settles comfortably in a box at the Estates Theatre, perhaps reading the premiere invitation flyer, which announces, “It’s going to be an event” (“Premiérový leták”). An event it was indeed.

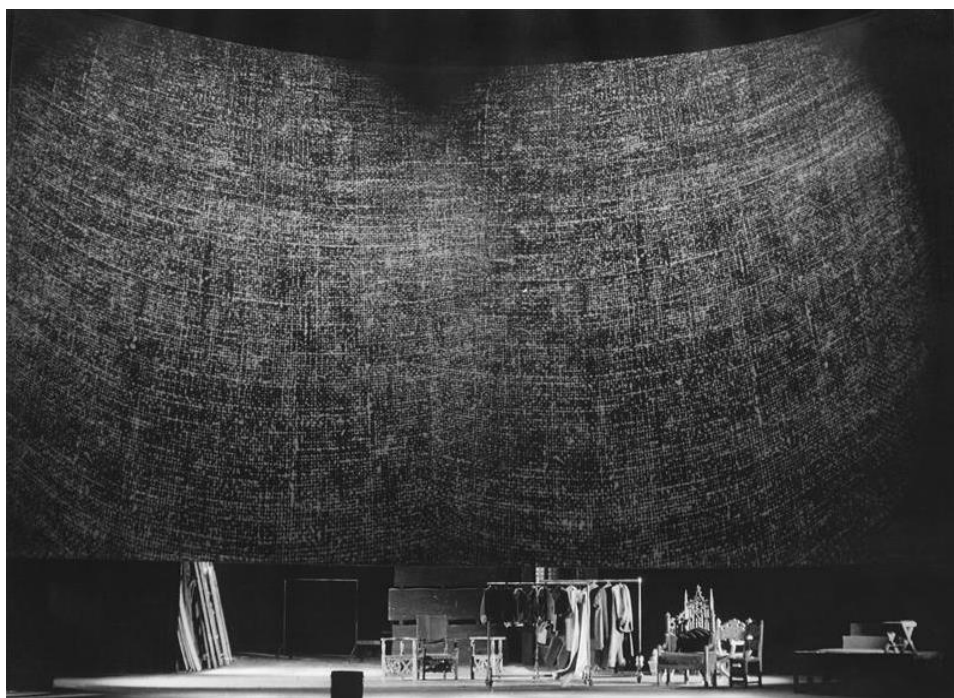


Figure 1: *Henry V*, National (Estates) Theatre, Prague, prem. February 5, 1971, director: Miroslav Macháček, stage design: Josef Svoboda. Photo by Jaromír Svoboda, National Theatre Archive, Prague

Before Biřak's eyes, a performance of epic proportions unfolds, at the beginning of which twenty actors in contemporary everyday clothes enter the stage to sing an opening song and then continually dress up as the various characters of the play in front of the dimly lit audience.

On Josef Svoboda's anti-illusionist stage they perform a "light and whimsical, at times frivolous cabaret" (Stránská) about the ambiguity and grotesque irony of the endlessly repeating history of political manipulations, absurd wars and the tragicomic theatricality of power:

The staging principle unleashes, in comic transformations, the possibility of playing with sarcastic detachment an endlessly repeating historical travesty of patriotic outbursts in which the apparent winners are actually the losers and vice versa, and whose only unmistakable result is piles of dead on both sides. (Stránská)



Figure 2: The opening of *Henry V* with Bohuř Záhorský as Chorus in the centre. National (Estates) Theatre, Prague. Photo by Jaromír Svoboda, National Theatre Archive

At one point, the character of a dumb soldier Macmorris (Vladimír Brabec) appears, speaking in a language familiar to Biřak... Although the auditorium is gently illuminated by the spotlights from the ramp, a dark curtain of rage settles over the politician's eyes. Moreover, the audience is clearly having fun, laughing repeatedly and interrupting the performance with applause, perhaps smuggling their own meanings into the director's adaptation:

We had the best intentions to stage a play with a clearly anti-war theme. However, the audience saw other contexts in the text and situations. (Macháček, *Zápisky* 66)

For a shocked and offended Biřák, this must have seemed a deliberately motivated political provocation directed against the Slovak nation and the socialist establishment as such.

This could have been the story of the premiere, at least according to the words of the then director of the National Theatre Přemysl Kočí, who recalled it in the 2002 revised edition of his memoirs:

I respected Miroslav Macháček’s exploratory directorial style [...] personally, his passionate, vital theatre suited me best because he built on the spontaneity of acting. Mirek conceived Shakespeare’s ‘Henry V’ [...] in an unusually innovative way as theatre within theatre. [...] However, he staged the visit of the ‘ridiculous stranger’—In Slovak! When Vasil Biřák sat in on the performance, we were—rightly—faced with the mockery of the Slovak nation. (Kočí 165)

Henry V was immediately withdrawn from the repertoire for two months, the official reason being an injury to the lead actor. However, we know from documents stored in the National Theatre Archive that Macháček’s production drew the attention of the highest levels of political hierarchy. It reached the table of the Cultural and Educational Committee of the Czech National Council, at whose 21st meeting, held on 26 February 1970, it was included as an item entitled “Report on the causes of disturbing phenomena that occurred during the premiere of *Henry V* at the National Theatre” (“Usnesení”). The Committee heard the reports of director Kočí and the head of the Theatre Department of the Ministry of Culture, Jaroslav Fixa, and in its Resolution No. 4/1971

expressed its full support for all the measures taken by the National Theatre and the Ministry of Culture of the Czechoslovak Republic aimed at increasing the political responsibility of all the artistic components of the National Theatre. (“Usnesení”)

The Committee regarded the case as exemplary and demanded:

[...] guarantees that on our first stage, as well as in all other theatres, the possibility of abusing the classical and contemporary repertoire for any political provocation will be excluded. (“Usnesení”)

The resolution was not sent to the hands of director Kočí until three months later, i.e., almost two months after the first April rehearsal of the production. To illustrate the situation, it should be added that none of this information reached Macháček directly:

There is one more thing I must mention. It was quite painful for me. After the premiere of *Henry V* there were critical voices about my work. [...] Unfortunately, no one spoke to me about it for almost a year. I heard on the side that it had been decided to give me a year's leave of absence, but nobody told me. (Macháčková 185)

Macháček claimed that behind the whole case was a review by Vladimír Hrouda, a prominent normalization theatre critic, published in *Rudé právo*, in which the reviewer was supposed to have stated that the director “staged the play in a deliberately anti-socialist manner.” (Macháčková 182). However, Hrouda's review never appeared in *Rudé právo*.

The complicated context of the premiere performance deepens a request letter from 1977 addressed to the Presidium of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in Prague 1, in which its author, Václav Švorc, the head of the drama company, presented a professional and political profile of Miroslav Macháček. Among other things, Švorc summarised in detail the circumstances and consequences of the *Henry V* incident and clearly articulated the political connotations of the production:

He [Macháček] entered the awareness of the theatre public with the production of *Henry V*, a production that was artistically strong, but ideologically compliant with anti-socialist and anti-Soviet hysteria. [...] He was subsequently expelled from the party on the basis of the production of *Henry V*, the premiere of which became a provocation against the consolidation efforts of the party leadership and against the leadership itself. As the director of the production, he bears full responsibility and was expelled from the party, although he appealed, rightly so. However, the responsibility does not lie solely with himself, because to put a play with occupation themes into the repertoire shortly after the events of August was, to put it mildly, politically short-sighted. (Švorc)

It seems that the scandal that shook the highest political circles in 1971 was not only caused by the Slovak-speaking officer Macmorris, but by the entire production, the management of the drama company, which was dismissed after the premiere, and perhaps even by Shakespeare himself.

It is undoubtedly appropriate to ask how it was possible that such a production, controversially received by the authorities, could have reached its premiere shortly after the occupation of Czechoslovakia. The Slovak language, as well as the themes and motifs present in Shakespeare's play, must have been present during rehearsals as well as at the dress rehearsal, and the premiere must have preceded its final approval. That the production made it to the premiere in such a form that it eventually ended up before a parliamentary committee may indicate that the efforts to restore order accompanied considerable chaos and disorder of the first years after the occupation. After all, it was not until 1972,

with the arrival of the aforementioned Václav Švorc, that consolidation in the position of artistic director, who was responsible to both the National Theatre’s director and the head of the theatre department of the Ministry of Culture, took place in the drama ensemble. Between 1969 and 1972, the drama ensemble was led by six artistic directors, and actors of the company, with the peak being the 1969-1970 season, in which the drama company had five directors, and in the 1970-1971 season two. Jan Kačer, a director whose 1970 production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* I mention below, described the situation in the early 1970s National Theatre with regard to his production as follows:

The management of the National Theatre, busy anxiously obeying instructions from above, did not pay attention and probably did not read the play. (175)

Although the production did make it to the premiere, one would expect that a rejection of such a provocative production by the ruling establishment would have foreshadowed not only its immediate withdrawal from the repertoire but its complete end. The paradox is that *Henry V* remained in the repertoire for the next four years as one of the most popular and most attended productions with 102 performances. As Macháček noted in his *Notes* in 1975, shortly after entering a psychiatric hospital (i.e. at a time when *Henry V* had not yet been officially withdrawn from the repertoire):

The play continues to be performed, and even in a public evaluation the director of the theatre described it as the most important production of the National Theatre. And because normal audiences come to see the performances, there are no provocations.” (Macháčková 182)

The paradox of *Henry V* amplifies the story of a production with the same anti-war theme, which premiered at the National Theatre four months before that of Macháček. It was the aforementioned Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* (prem. Oct. 16, 1970), directed by Jan Kačer, whose scandalous premiere was followed by the censorship interventions of the National Theatre director himself (Kačer 178).

This highly successful production, which was invited to the Venice Festival in October 1971 to great acclaim, was quietly withdrawn from the repertoire soon after its return, in December of that year, without further justification. The production, which the director Kačer “took as a metaphor [...] against totalitarianism, against filth, against superiority” (Pitterová 4) and which, according to others, was intended to “beat the Bolshevik’s ass! (Pitterová 4), became with its open criticism of power “an urgent warning” (Kačer 177).



Figure 3: Dana Medřická (Mother Courage) in the final scene of the production of *Mother Courage and her Children*. National (Estates) Theatre, Prague, prem. October 16, 1970, director: Jan Kačer, stage design: Josef Svoboda. Photo by Jaromír Svoboda, National Theatre Archive

Its timing, theme and treatment created a specific contextual surrounding that could have played a significant role in the official evaluation of *Henry V* by authorities. Indeed, director Kočí retrospectively understood *Mother Courage and her children* in such a context when, together with *Henry V*, he included it in his memoirs in the list of “troubles in the drama ensemble” from the early days of normalization:

At the very threshold of normalization, Höger improvised dialogues between the Chaplain and Courage with obvious and apparently “transparent” invectives against the occupying power. At the premieres there were always representatives of state and party institutions, and Höger and Dana [Medřická] secured the first two rows at our box office for their friends, admirers and acquaintances, who acted as a “claque” at every allusion, causing laughter and applause in the audience—but also indignant unease. And Höger continued to escalate his politically heightened irony. (Kočí 165).

It should be noted that the dramaturgical ‘care’ (70 cuts; Kačer 178) that director Kočí gave to Brecht’s play suggests that Brecht rather than the actor acted as the subversive element here (“Brecht spoke with diffidence”; Kačer 175), and that what happened was simply an uncontrollable event of theatrical performance that “stuck to the present” (Kačer 175). What is significant and surprising in relation to *Henry V* is that a comparably subversive or potentially

subversive production shortly after this “trouble” escaped the attention of the National Theatre management again, which apparently did not learn the lesson from the *Mother Courage* incident. The irony and paradoxes of the early days of normalization in relation to Kačer’s production are compounded by the fact that Macháček’s *Henry V* was also invited first to Italy (Florence) and then on a three-month tour of Europe. However, this foreign tour was cancelled for fabricated reasons (alleged demonstrations against the oppression of Czechoslovak culture, which were to take place in Florence; Macháčková 183).



Figure 4: Josef Svoboda’s set design for *Mother Courage and Her Children*.
Photo by Jaromír Svoboda, National Theatre Archive, Prague

So, what happened to the anti-socialist, anti-Soviet and anti-communist *Henry V* after its premiere and what measures were taken to meet the demands of the political center so that the production could return to the repertoire, where it remained for the next four years? The answer is difficult to find and is further complicated by the “civilised violence” (Šimečka) to which Macháček was subjected in the following years. It began with his expulsion from the party and the confiscation of his passport and culminated in his stay in a psychiatric hospital in 1975. Without any explanation, Macháček was banned from television, radio and film, his name was struck from the programs of productions,

and his daughter Kateřina had difficulty getting a job. Moreover, the expulsion from the Party could effectively mean the end of his directorial career, as directors had to be nomenclature cadres (Macháček, *Zápisky* 67).

Nonetheless, Macháček did not end up at the National Theatre, which could be explained by the fact that he also worked there as an actor, who was not subject to the nomenclature regulations, but—moreover—he continued to direct. By the time of *Henry V*'s closing performance (17 February 1975) he directed one production per season, and in the 1974/75 season he was assigned to direct two. In the end, it was he himself who, in his critical report delivered in January 1975 in connection with the premiere of Vishnevsky's *The Optimistic Tragedy*, literally asked to be relieved of his directorial duties. He concluded his speech summing up the dismal work ethic of the National Theatre drama ensemble with the following words:

I would like, especially in view of my unsatisfactory state of health, to request a change of contract from director to actor. (Macháčková 196)

The reasons why the director, expelled by the party, extremely unadaptable with his erratic personality and unruly for the operation of an institution like the National Theatre, continued his work may be countless, starting with the simplest and perhaps the closest to the truth—the National Theatre needed a director of Macháček's qualities and from a purely managerial point of view it would be a mistake not to make use of his skills. After all, as archival materials show, it was director Kočí who repeatedly defended Macháček before various evaluation committees that requested his end at the National Theatre.

In the tangle of ambiguities, often stemming from personal animosities or inclinations, fears, careerism or managerial opportunism, which often dissolved into decisions whose only witnesses were the telephone apparatuses, there is only one certainty for the life of *Henry V*'s production: a whole series of uncertainties and contradictions connected with what M. Macháček called in his *Notes* a “cryptocracy,” which he used to describe the Kafkaesque normalization environment characterized by “anonymity of power” (Macháček 38),³ makes it difficult to understand the reasons that led the National Theatre management to keep the production of *Henry V*, directed by a persona non grata, in the repertoire. Although the answers are difficult to find, formulating questions or tracing absences can help in approaching the logic of a sophisticated,

³ Macháček diagnosed the cryptocracy as follows: “Those in charge try to look like others while keeping their distance. [...] Specialists on the Soviet Union are all surprised at how power is lost in the secrecy of the masses, the mysteries that surround every responsibility, the impossibility of knowing ‘who is who’ and ‘who decides what.’ [...] no one can identify the real masters of the country [...]” (Macháček, *Zápisky II*. 38)

“post-totalitarian” (Havel, “Power of Powerless”) system of normalization and its behavior.

The director’s book might offer some clues, as it proves, among other things, that the reviewers could actually hear Macmorris speaking Slovak at the premiere. In fact, the director’s book contains an important change recorded in the extant versions. But if it was this change that was supposed to cool down the enraged and humiliated Vasil Biľak, it must be said that Hodek and Macháček allowed themselves what could be called the ultimate expression of sly civility, i.e., sheer subversive insolence: in the revised version, Macmorris speaks a wonderfully punchy blend of Czechoslovak. This is a remarkable shift, given that we are at the dawn of normalization, the main voice of which will be that of the Secretary General and later President Gustáv Husák, who “delivered his speeches in his specific ‘Czechoslovak’ language, a strange mixture of Czech and Slovak” (Lustigová, “Gustáv Husák pohledem Martiny Lustigové”).

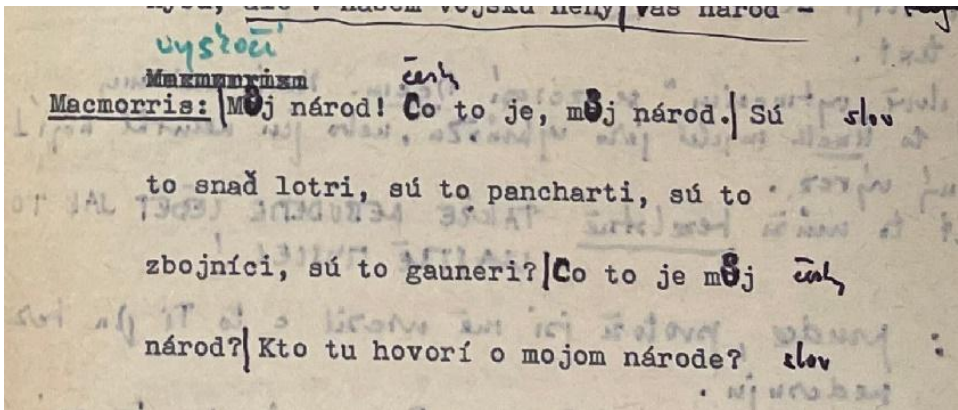


Figure 5: An excerpt from the director’s book, in which Macháček marked segments pronounced in Czech (“česky”) and Slovak (“slov”), while it is clear that the Czech words were subsequently transcribed into Czech, and thus that Macmorris originally spoke only Slovak

Could this strange micro-shift be enough for keeping *Henry V* on the repertoire, especially when the director’s book does not include any other significant cuts or other changes to Macháček’s original intentions? This can be testified, for example, by Burgundy’s unchanged speech at the end of the play, in which Hodek translated the sentence “Which to reduce into our former favour” (Shakespeare 5:2:63)—quite differently from its predecessors and successors and very loosely in relation to the original—as “We want to restore our own face” (Macháček, *Director’s Book*). For Macháček, Burgundy was, as his manuscript notes in the director’s book indicate, “a typical intellectual of the time.” He understood the quoted sentence as:

The leitmotif of the whole speech,” which “must excite the audience. After all, *he pronounces it convincingly even for them!* (Macháček, *Director’s Book*; my italics)

Macháček undoubtedly did not want to turn *Henry V* into a cheap anti-occupation pamphlet; that would have been short-sighted indeed, not only because of the circumstances in which he found himself, but above all regarding Shakespeare’s play, which offered him rich material for exploring the ambiguities of historical events and their subjects. At the same time, Macháček’s dense notes in the director’s book show that he sensed in *Henry V* the potential to speak urgently to the situation in occupied Czechoslovakia, which before August 1968 had tried—in vain—to establish socialism with a human face, only to lose it gradually and completely in its growing inertia. The quoted line emphasising the rediscovery of the lost face remained intact after the changes. In the post-occupation condition, the words calling for the rectification of things had to speak to the audience in their heaviness quite clearly and not only as a leitmotif of Burgundy’s speech but of the whole production.

These and many other moments readable in Hodek’s translation, in Macháček’s director’s notes and undoubtedly in the production raise more and more questions that present considerable challenges not only for the research on normalization in the National Theatre, but normalization as a bizarre, often absurd social system. Did the production remain in the repertoire because there was no one left in the audience to complain? Or had normalization progressed to the point that the “normal audience” (Macháčková 182), as Macháček wrote about in relation to *Henry V* in his diary, no longer expressed their hidden opinions “which they are afraid to express in their workplace but applaud them heroically in the darkness of the auditorium” (Macháčková 182)? In short, it is hard to believe that the change in Macmorris’s speeches, which outraged the Communist leader, was enough. And was it only Macmorris’s lines that led to the conclusion that this was an anti-socialist play? Isn’t that not enough? What was *Henry V* like? The paradox of normalisation in a nutshell?

Risky Edge Options: Ducks, Rabbits and Macháček

Norman Rabkin, in his insightful 1977 essay “Rabbits, Ducks, and Henry V,” based on Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* (1960), likens Shakespeare’s strategy employed in the play to the famous gestalt drawing of the rabbit/duck, which encourages “the perception of reality as irreducibly multiple” (295). For Rabkin, this multifocal “oscillation, magnified and reemphasized” with which “Shakespeare experiments and leaves at a loss” (296), is “the heart of the matter” (296) and as such generates:

“the kind of ambiguity [...] requiring that we hold in balance incompatible and radically opposed views each of which seems exclusively true.” (295)

My argument is that Macháček, six years before Rabkin’s essay, pursued this open, “duck/rabbit” game of ambivalences, contradictions, inconsistencies and lenticular oscillations, which, with its constant transitions, moved on the edge and thus created a space of multivalent perception, as a result of which—as Macháček himself claimed—spectators “saw different contexts in the text and situations” (Macháček, *Zápisky z blázince* 66). Of course, this risky edge play of options and ambiguities could have generated, besides the open possibilities of the spectator’s own production of meaning, a disorientation that could end in misunderstanding, outrage or insult. That is probably how it was on the opening night for some representatives of power.

A reviewer ideologically in line with the advancing normalization precisely defined this principle, which generated interpretive uncertainty, opening a space of possibilities:

The virtue of Macháček’s production of *Henry V* is its colourful, theatrically eruptive form, using a wide range of distinctive actors. However, given the ideological thematic basis of the original, a serious shortcoming represents the ideologically inconsistent, sometimes even contradictory conception, clueless in its approach to the French, as well as problematic in layering accents, which are often even contradictory, now challenging, now justifying Henry’s expansion. The act of reconciliation between the two warring sides violates the stylistic order of the production, confusing the full-blood characterisation of the setting with a farce. It seems to be in keeping with the utilitarian interpretations of a certain section of the audience, which seizes on singularities because it has not been given a clear staging concept of Shakespeare’s historical play. (Tůma 9)

Macháček’s strategy, which the reviewer considered flawed, was based on his dynamic conception of theatre work, in which—as he wrote in his *Notes*, referring to the theatre works of Peter Brook, with whom he identified his poetics elaborated in *Henry V*—“the pendulum must swing” (*Zápisky* 79). Macháček was convinced that “all theatre artists need a balance between outward and inward movement” (*Zápisky* 79). In practice, it meant a vital instability, a constant, albeit organic, blending of contrasts, a mixing of illusive representation with an anti-illusive disclosure of the inner structure of the stage form and its theatricality, and a contradictory portrayal of characters in which the opposites merged, making the characters “grotesque intersections” (Königsmark 12). Particularly in acting, which was decisive for Macháček’s complex theatrical poetics, this dynamic approach manifested itself in an original combination of the principles associated with Stanislavski’s method and

Brecht's separation of elements and alienation. However, it was not only an alternation of registers identifiable as psychological or realistic acting with Brechtian distanced epic acting, in which the actor steps out of his role in order to present it to the spectator not for identification but for critical assessment, inviting and engaging her/him to participate. Although Macháček worked with these alternations, he unorthodoxly blended both principles—and in the case of *Henry V* in particular—revealing the characters as incoherent, disintegrated, pieced together from fragments, and therefore unstable, often contradictory and ambiguous identities thrown into specific circumstances, which, however, organically justified, concretized and integrated their actions. In line with Rabkin's "duck/rabbit" metaphor, one could speak of the oscillating Stanislavski/Brecht principle.

Unlike Rabkin, though, Macháček's stage interpretation did not work with oscillation in the sense of "either/or" (which is the title of Rabkin's slightly modified "duck/rabbit" essay published in book form, 1981), which latently implies a choice between the two competing opposites. For Macháček, rather the simultaneous "as well as" or "as both" (Altman 3) stage adaptation is more characteristic, in which the duck always steadfastly leaks through the rabbit and vice versa (more precisely not duck/rabbit but duck-rabbit). In this, Macháček traced similar features in *Henry V* as Joel B. Altman twenty years later:

I'm not persuaded that in watching or hearing a play one is confined to a single gestalt; the common experience of listening to a political figure whom we may dislike but to whom we at first grudgingly and then willingly concede points offers an instance of the relative lability of our attitudes. Shakespeare's many-headed multitude may be a caricature, but it is not created *ex nihilo*. (Altman 3)

Altman's "instance of relative lability" may explain why Macháček might have found Shakespeare's play challenging not only from a technical point of view, but above all from an interpretive one.

The director's book proves that Macháček did indeed deliberately follow this juxtaposition method of blending incommensurable opposites into a dynamic whole, which the above-mentioned reviewer Tůma saw as obscure and dubious ("now challenging now justifying"). At the same time, the director's book reveals that *Henry V* in a way offered Macháček the opportunity to complete his theatrical practice, especially his long-standing interest in Stanislavski. The carefully crafted notes, with which the book is replete, are a kind of textbook of organic physical actions under specific circumstances. Moreover, Macháček's rigorous reflection on Stanislavski demonstrates the extent to which two approaches usually considered antithetical converge. One reviewer described this practice on the multifocal, de-centered portrayal of the lead role performed by Luděk Munzar:

Munzar’s performance is excellent, as if he wanted to show in one character what a malleable actor can do with such a large text, in accordance with the director’s concept. Here he is fierce, impetuous, passionate, wise and prudent, brave and glib, he can fight hard and talk manfully in disguise to the soldiers; his final courtship of the French princess Catherine (J. Březinová j.h.) is an example of an overly charming performance. (mlk)

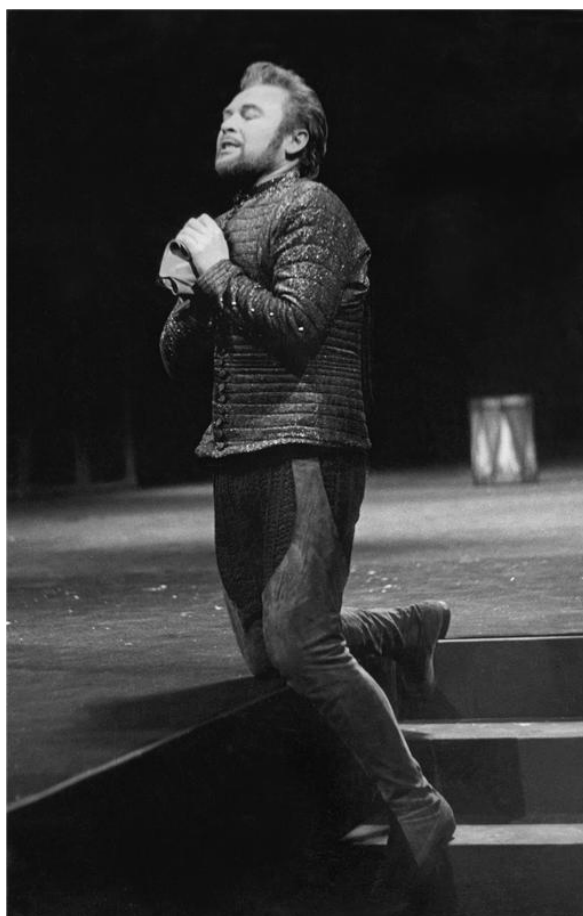


Figure 6: Luděk Munzar as Henry V. Photo by Jaromír Svoboda, National Theatre Archive, Prague

Munzar himself described his dynamic approach to Henry, that manifests itself in a certain conflicting simultaneity, in an interview, which incidentally helps us to identify the introductory scene of the play, which is missing from the director’s book, i.e. the opening of the war conflict as a backstage political manipulation, of which the English king is both the object and the subject:

He came to the throne and had no warlike intentions at all. [...] he was 19 years old when he became the king, a foolish boy without the necessary life experience. He was actually manipulated into war by those who surrounded him and who advised him, whether they were bishop, archbishop or court dignitaries. They all convinced him that it was a just war. The fact that he started the war was decided, for example, by a prank of the French king who sent Henry tennis balls in response to his territorial demands. How many times in human history have tragic turns and important events depended on ridiculous trifles. Then he threw himself into the war out of a kind of boyish romance, out of a desire for adventure. [...] Henry V is, in the words of the play, 'his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man'. That is why he sometimes distrusts himself, why he is desperate, why he is a demagogue who proves himself right. He is desperate, he is alone and he feels responsible for his actions. On the eve of battle, he is afraid (of course, everyone is afraid, I don't believe in heroes who rush headlong into war) and he would like to cry and run away to his mother like a little boy. He sees that he is alone—the more he wants to get close to ordinary soldiers, the more they escape him. Time and circumstance have an effect on a man and somehow shape him, change him. (Pojarová)

Munzar's Henry was a certain distillation of Macháček's conception of the figure conceived as tectonics of energetic fractures and folds, ambivalences and transitions of incommensurable positions. The Protean composition of the main character, however, permeated not only the other individual characters, but the entire concept of the production, at all its levels. Macháček was aware, for example, and this is crucial for a play about a war between two rival sides, that to maintain the richness and dynamics that reveals the ambiguity of the subjects and events, the forces between the English and the French must be balanced:

We must by no means allow the French to appear caricatured despite a certain levity and softness. They must not be morons or faggots. On the contrary. They must exude such confidence and vitality that from the first to the last moment we will consider them winners. They have the perfect relaxed and casual demeanor full of French refinement. They're funny. [...] MORE THAN A MATCH FOR THE ENGLISH! (Macháček, *Director's Book*)

Macháček's remark seems to implicitly respond to Laurence Olivier's film treatment of *Henry V*, in which the French are portrayed as a chorus of demoralized, defeatist and effeminate aristocrats. It is no coincidence that Macháček's Burgundy may have been—as an elegant and cultivated intellectual of his time—the bearer of *Henry V*'s key message, and as such was Henry V's chief counterpart.

Moreover, Macháček accompanied the accentuated multiplicity of characters by interrupting or fragmenting the linear unity of the stage action

by intersecting the context of the stage with the context of the auditorium, by repeatedly breaking the imaginary fourth wall and reinstalling it, by enhancing the participation of the audience and their anonymous distance. This vibrant, multi-level fragmentation, not drastic but rather subtly interwoven, allowed Macháček to elaborate on the themes offered by Shakespeare’s text. In the case of *Henry V*, which is written as an epic theatre within theatre with the character of Chorus as a guide to the action, this is both the ambiguity and mutability of the characters as subjects and objects of endlessly recurring historical events, and the exposure of the theatricality of power games.



Figure 7: Henry (Luděk Munzar) courts Katherine (Jana Březinová) with the assistance of Alice (Eva Klenová). Photo by Jaromír Svoboda National Theatre Archive

Macháček’s *Henry V* was undoubtedly intended to be a penetrating report on the state of the world, a grotesque portrayal of war that leaves in its wake “the ruins of humanity! A memento of horror to all the losers and winners!” (Macháček, *Director’s Book*). These ruins were effectively made visible by the human-sized rag dolls strewn about the stage: “the flip side of victory! Man always suffers!” (Macháček, *Director’s Book*). This may undoubtedly have been Macháček’s intention, to rehabilitate the play as a metaphor for the disasters of war. Nevertheless, a play about the occupation, in which one of the occupiers speaks Slovak and then Czechoslovak, in which there

is a resonant call for the restoration of the face of the occupied, and which culminates in the ironic and clumsily affectionate courtship of the leader of the occupiers and a more or less forced marriage with the highest representative of the occupied, could hardly have been perceived in the early 1970s as merely “a play with a clearly anti-war theme” (Macháček, *Zápisky* 66). It could have been, but not quite. It could have been like the lenticular image of the duck and the rabbit constantly shifting and oscillating so that in it one does not exclude the other, where one is simultaneously the other. A play of paradoxes, a testimony to the emerging normalization cryptocracy, in which the open space for the play with precarious spectator (duck-rabbit) perception and interpretive uncertainty ends up as a harmful, anti-state provocation. It ends, though not entirely: the risky edge options.



Figure 8: Courting of Henry. Photo by Jaromír Svoboda, National Theatre Archive, Prague

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