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Framing Polish-Jewish Relations Through Shakespeare in Post-war and Contemporary Polish Theatre

Abstract: The paper aims to analyse how the staging of Shakespeare's texts in post-war and contemporary Poland reflected the indifferent and hostile attitudes of Poles towards Jews, particularly during the Holocaust, and the distortions and gaps in the collective memory regarding the events. In the first part, the author focuses on *Hamlet Study* (dir. Jerzy Grotowski) performed in 1964 by Laboratory Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole, which is symptomatic of silencing the matter during the communist period. The second part draws from the statement of Jan Ciechowicz, a Polish theatre historian, who claimed that "the Holocaust killed Shylock for Polish stage." While verifying it, the author analyses selected aspects of three productions directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski (*The Tempest* (2003), *The Merchant of Venice* (1994) and *The African Tales by Shakespeare* (2011)) and juxtaposes them against the background of the changes in collective memory. He argues that the most cogent productions concerning Polish attitudes towards Jews are those that position the audience as witnesses of the acts of re-enacted violence and thus provoke an affective response.

Keywords: Polish-Jewish relations, Holocaust, antisemitism, Jerzy Grotowski, Krzysztof Warlikowski, *Hamlet* in Poland, *Hamlet Study*, *The Merchant of Venice* in Poland.

Introduction

Describing Shakespeare as "the most national among the playwrights of the Polish stage" (Żurowski 5) might elicit some surprise. Yet the metaphoric hyperbole of that phrase, however, draws attention to the lengthy and intensive processes of the cultural appropriation his works have undergone within the Polish theatrical tradition. The most distinguishable is the phenomenon of

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“thinking with Shakespeare” (a term coined by Andrzej Źurowski), well established on the Polish stage. It manifests, in essence, in treating Shakespeare’s plays as “a curious mirror of the contemporary cultural trends, which changes its picture, a changing mirror of incessantly consecutive contemporary times” (Źurowski 6). Even though one might use this description with reference to a variety of shifts in the reception of Shakespeare, including the literary and the aesthetic aspects, the critic emphasises the peculiar distinctiveness with which the process became noticeable in Polish theatre after the Second World War as it turned into a vehicle for political, historic and identity-focused diagnoses.

In this context, one is instantly reminded of Jan Kott’s famous book, *Szekspir współczesny* (Shakespeare Our Contemporary), published in Poland in 1965. His brilliant essays containing the analyses of selected plays established the Polish method of reading Shakespeare through the lens of twentieth-century realities and significantly marked the theatrical life in Poland. Kott played an equally significant role in this process through his regular theatre reviews. As Wanda Świątkowska (“The Political *Hamlet*” 63) points out (referring in particular to *Hamlet*, directed in Krakow in 1956 by Roman Zawistowski): “it was Kott who added a political dimension to some of Shakespeare’s plays that were staged at that time in Poland. In other words, he saw what he wanted to see.” Kott, then, inspired to the same extent as he described. Therefore, he contributed to the emergence of a specific way of understanding, reading, and performing plays, which involved updating their meanings, a trend labelled later as “Shakespeare in the theatre of allusions.”¹

There was a reason for that. When Kott read Shakespeare through the prism of contemporariness and ascribed significance to *Hamlet*, he followed in the footsteps of Stanisław Wyspiański, playwright, theatre artist, painter and poet, who in 1904 created his own version of *Hamlet*, which had fundamental meaning for Polish appropriations of Shakespeare in the twentieth century. In this hybrid work, commonly called *Studium o „Hamlecie”* (“Hamlet” Study), Wyspiański combines theory with interpretation and artistic practice by offering a theatrical analysis of the play’s structure, its threads and characters. While writing down the thoughts accompanying his reading, he simultaneously “organises the play, builds a performance and reforms the theatre” (Kott 409). However, first and foremost—he inscribes Hamlet in Polish realities, thus making him a character walking across the galleries of the Royal Castle on Wawel, an intellectual who is perceptive of his surroundings, who does not

¹ Zawistowski’s *Hamlet*, mentioned above, became—thanks to the critic to a great extent—the founding performance of the current, even though the glory is due to *Measure for Measure*, staged three years earlier by Krystyna Skuszanka in Opole (Cf. Fik 234).

hesitate and does not desist but is active in his search for truth. Wyspiański turns Hamlet into a Polish prince, whose story is supposed to reflect relevant contemporary issues. It finds expression in the statement, which was often quoted: “In Poland the Hamlet riddle is this: what is there to think about—in Poland” (Wyspiański 93). The vision proposed by the playwright proved to be influential, and so it comes as no surprise that “[f]or the best achievement, the most original artistic representation of Shakespeare in the Polish theatre after the war, has always been marked by striking intellectualism” (Gibińska 184).

This historical background, only outlined here, allows us to capture the defining moments that shaped the specificity of “thinking with Shakespeare” in Polish theatre. At the same time, it presents a significant context for the question of how the staging of Shakespeare’s texts in post-war Poland reflected an intricate matter of various attitudes of Poles towards Jews and covered its cultural, social, historical, and political entanglement.

The complexity of this issue requires some introductory reminders as well. The Holocaust occurred predominantly in German-occupied Poland, where the extermination camps and some of the biggest ghettos were located. Thus, it is more than understandable that from the renowned triad Raul Hilberg proposes to describe the actors of the events, it was the position of bystanders that one would usually ascribe to the Poles. They often would also refer to themselves in this regard as the witnesses. Elżbieta Janicka (137, 138) argues, however, that the category of bystander/witness “does not allow for a precise description of the place and role of the Polish majority against the Jewish minority” and, as such, should be replaced with that of “participant-observer.” Should the latter be more accurate, it does not surprise that both the former have often been instrumentalised in Polish discussions of the past to provide the collective with a clear conscience by implying isolation and distance from the events or emphasising the inability to act and helplessness.

Janicka does not focus on the description of individual acts of violence committed by Poles against Jews during the Second World War.² Instead, she draws attention (137) to the fact that “the non-Jewish majority undertook a series of actions—as partial and scattered as they were widespread. These actions were incomparably more frequent than the denunciation and direct murder of Jews.” Their main objective was to prevent the inclusion of the Jews in a community defined by ethnicity and religion. Janicka (138) also points out that “everyone was looking,” which means that the Poles were aware of their involvement, even if only by negligence.

² This matter, particularly in relation to the Polish countryside, has recently received increasing attention from historians (Engelking, Grabowski). However, their findings, which are critical of the Polish majority, in addition to academic debate, have also aroused indignation among the public and even ended in accusing the scholars of “defaming the Polish nation.”

In this light, it becomes clear why after the Second World War, throughout the communist period and even after the transformation, “the Holocaust, everything related to it and anything that caused anxiety was being repressed from collective, national memory” (Forecki 9). Antisemitism also contributed to the state of affairs. In the first decades after the war, it was particularly noticeable in the perpetuated myth of “żydokomuna” (“Judeo-Communism”). The antisemitic rhetoric frequently served political purposes as well. It culminated in 1967 when governmental propaganda started a campaign designed to direct the anger of the working class against “Zionist” enemies of socialism. To extend the picture of “collective forgetting” (Forecki 9), one can only add that the inscription on the monument unveiled in the same year on the site of the former Birkenau camp omitted the Jewish identity of the majority of the victims.

The repression of the memory of Polish attitudes towards Jews stemmed from the desire to avoid confronting the necessity to revise the self-image of innocent victims. Therefore, it was only in the mid-1980s that the first debates concerning this matter arose, beginning with one that ignited over Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*. Shortly afterwards, the far-famed 1987 essay *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* (“The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto”) by Jan Błoński was published.³ The author discussed the shared responsibility of the Poles for what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust, stressing their prevalent indifference and lack of compassion. Despite being convinced that the Poles as a nation did not partake in the atrocities, he concluded that they had a moral duty of “seeking expiation” and “viewing [their] past truthfully” (Błoński 47). Another significant debate broke out in the early 2000s when Jan Tomasz Gross published *Neighbours*. The book described the events of 1941 in Jedwabne, a small town in north-east Poland, where inhabitants carried out a pogrom and burnt around 300 Jewish victims alive in a barn. Unfortunately, the discussion followed the trajectory of the previous ones, which sooner or later ended with a return to the regular polarisation between the representatives of “the moral discourse” and the defenders of “the paradigm of the Polish innocence” (Forecki 235).

These circumstances have significantly influenced the theatre, which reflected the distortions and gaps in the collective memory. The question of Polish attitudes towards Jews was evoked, albeit rarely and indirectly, in performances based on various texts. The aim of this essay, however, is to examine how Shakespeare’s plays and their adaptations served this purpose, given the long tradition of treating them as the medium of reflection on Polish reality.

³ Forecki (116-131) offers a detailed analysis of the essay, the debate it triggered and its significance in the process of reconstructing the Polish memory of the Holocaust.

Since *Hamlet* holds prominence among them, the first part focuses on *Hamlet Study* performed in 1964 by Laboratory Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole. It is considered “the most enigmatic and provocative of [Jerzy] Grotowski’s spectacles, for decades almost wiped from the history of Polish theatre and the artist’s biography” (Niziołek, *The Polish Theatre* 141). *Hamlet Study* indeed stands out from Grotowski’s theatrical oeuvre as “never before and never again did [he] so directly address the realities of his nation” (Kosiński 179). At the same time, it is a work of symptomatic character. On the one hand, it touches upon the issue of Polish antisemitism most acutely in comparison to other Polish productions of Shakespeare’s plays; on the other hand, the creators behind the performance explicitly wanted to abscond from the social and political matter, as if to conceal the essence of what was happening on stage. It connected strictly with silencing the topic during the communist period.

The second part refers mainly to more recent productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, which seems as evident as it is problematic concerning the subject matter. The reason for that, however, is to verify the statements of Jan Ciechowicz, a Polish theatre historian. In his article about the Polish reception of the play and its pre-war staging, he claims (207) that: “The Jewish Holocaust killed Shylock for the Polish stage. The question remains: is it forever? Poor Poles, and not only, still look at the ghetto.” The intriguing reference to Błoński’s essay included in this statement prompts one to invoke the context of the contemporary transformations of Polish memory of the Holocaust. It also encourages one to consider to what extent it is possible to discuss Polish attitudes towards Jews through *The Merchant of Venice*. More than three decades later, Ciechowicz’s fears seem justified, albeit only to a certain degree.

Hamlet as a Jew: Jerzy Grotowski’s *Hamlet Study*

In his commentary on *Hamlet Study*, Ludwik Flaszen (99) explains: “[W]e do not ‘play’ *Hamlet*—either as a classic Shakespearean version, or in accordance with the staging suggestions included in Wyspiański’s famous essay, “*Hamlet*” *Study*. By using fragments of Shakespeare’s play and Wyspiański’s commentary, we give our own version of the Danish prince’s story: variations on selected Shakespearean motifs. A study of a motif.” Grotowski cut *Hamlet* quite drastically and removed more than half of the characters and the text, and the initial idea of the play script underwent further modifications and expunging.⁴

⁴ Two versions of the *Hamlet Study* script have been preserved. The first comes from the initial stage of working on the performance; it belonged to Andrzej Bielski, who played Guildenstern. The other, changed and abridged, one-third of the first one, was the version handed over for censorship. Wanda Świątkowska (*Hamleci*) discusses the

The scenes which remained were interspersed with Wyspiański's annotations and arranged in a revised order: "Grotowski extracted from Shakespeare's text moments of humiliation, violence, deceitful behaviour, and translated them into radical dramatic scenes" (Niziołek, *The Polish Theatre* 142). These included, among others, meetings with Ophelia, her insanity and death, conversations with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, visit to Gertrude's bedroom, Hamlet's meeting with actors, King's prayer and his conversations with Queen, Polonius's death, cemetery scene, and Hamlet's monologues, in particular the ones from Act III.

According to Wyspiański's suggestion, the story arc of *Hamlet Study* unfolds in the Polish realities. However, Elsinore is not the Krakow castle but the Polish countryside, whose landscape is evoked mainly by sounds made by actors on an empty stage. Equipped only with basic props, their actions and movements to work with—in compliance with Grotowski's concept of "a poor theatre"—the actors use them to mark the change of setting, which includes a tavern, bathhouse and battlefield.

The courtiers in *Hamlet Study* are presented as coarse, drunk, and violent peasants, whose crassness "[is] apparent in everything, namely their gestures and the way of speaking" (Wójtowicz 123). Gathered in the tavern and stuck deep in an atmosphere of frowning and stagnation, they occasionally act out particular scenes from Hamlet's story and then indulge in drunkenness again. As Flaszen (101) points out, "[b]esides the Shakespearean motifs, the actual process of their staging becomes the etude's subject. This is a performance about the birth of performance." As a collective body, the peasants are juxtaposed against Hamlet (played by Zygmunt Molik), an intellectual rooting for entirely different values. Grotowski endows him with distinctly Jewish characteristics. Dressed in a white shirt, striped trousers and a black jacket and wearing glasses, he differs from the others through his costume. His manner, slowed-down movements and visible tension also distinguish him. Over and above that, Hamlet "Jewifies," which means that he speaks with a recognizable, heavy accent,⁵ which amuses the peasants, who jeer at and ridicule him.

Flaszen devoted an entire paragraph in the programme for the *Hamlet Study* to the issue of superimposing Jewish traits on the main character. His words clearly show that he was adamant in his attempts to inscribe the axis of conflict as universal in its nature. Thus, a lengthier excerpt from his text is worth quoting here:

matter in her book and argues that the latter is the final version, closest to what happened on stage. However, it does not allow for a complete reconstruction of the performance.

⁵ Polish derogatory term "żydlaczyć," coined to refer to this phenomenon, comes from "Żyd," that is "a Jew."

Jewish issues and anti-Semitism are not the production's key ideas. These are only special, drastically sharpened forms of social superstition, inimical stereotypes of the stranger that are deeply rooted in the collective imagination. Hamlet represents an abstract reflection on life, a noble but impractical impulse towards justice and the world's reform. In the Mob's eyes, he is a bookworm, a 'zaddik' prattling on with smart slogans, a gesticulating little intellectual, a cowardly and cunning casuist, a squeaky-voiced jumped up 'yid'. In Hamlet's eyes, the Mob is a conglomeration of primitive, harsh individuals, powerful in their number and physical strength, a crowd who can only fight, drink and die with grim abandon. This is how Theoretical Reason and Practical Brawn look at each other, detached and hostile. (Flaszen 99)

Eugenio Barba (103), most likely influenced by Flaszen, wrote about the performance in a similar tone when he analysed the construction and meaning of the character of Hamlet and discussed his loneliness and feeling of alienation: "Hamlet is the 'Jew' and others are 'goyim.' [...] There is no chance of contact, no room for tolerance between the 'Jew' and 'the group.' They deem each other dangerous. Hamlet is the 'Jew' of the community, regardless of the meaning we ascribe to this word: the Jew in terms of ideology, religion, society, aesthetics, morality and sexuality."

If we note that both quotations emphasise the metaphoric reading of Hamlet's "Jewishness" as "a clear sign of his 'otherness,'" it seems that Wanda Świątkowska (*Hamleci* 142) was right when she stressed that "in 1964 'Jew' simply meant 'Jew'." In other words, the immediate association with such a figure was not an abstract idea but rather a repressed image of those whose perishing during the Holocaust Poles witnessed or those who survived and lived among an often overtly prejudiced and hostile majority; an image that might bring the Polish attitudes towards Jews to one's attention. The creators must have been aware of this, as the performance was created in a specific political context, at the time when the communist party was using nationalist and antisemitic rhetoric with more frequency and intensity. Before we continue to discuss that matter, I want us to look at selected scenes in which—seemingly against the creators' declarations—the conflict, i.e. the driving force of the performance, gained a more contemporary dimension regarding "the Jewish question."

From the very beginning, Hamlet is observed by the peasants in the tavern with distrust. Sequences of actions that create the atmosphere of intimidation and hostility towards him occur several times—upon hearing his words, the peasants respond with laughter and vulgar gestures, poke him, call him names and provoke him, clearly wanting to fight. The images of his ill-treatment are particularly overt in the scenes with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: they take turns to steal bread from him, peek under his shirt to check whether he is hiding something, or take his book away. At one point, Guildenstern "changes" into a dog—he barks at Hamlet and bites his legs while Rosencrantz

stands in the way of his escape. They also hold him under his arms and drag him to the army.

The scenes following Polonius's death unfold in the bathhouse, where Hamlet drags his corpse. The setting, again, is only marked, mainly by steam puffs rising in the air and the fact that all the characters are almost naked, except for Hamlet who retains his costume and sits in the corner. The atmosphere is tense: the peasants observe him mistrustfully; during the interrogation, after Polonius's body has been found, Rosencrantz touches his clothes and examines them suspiciously, and King starts to beat Hamlet up only to have him thrown out of the bathhouse shortly after. In yet another scene, Laertes puts on a beret as if it were a kippa and pretends to be "an old, funny Jew" while imitating "the Jewish" way of speaking.

The contrast between Hamlet and the ruthless, animalistic crowd can also be noted in the deeply sadistic and cruel scene of battle. While the peasants are throwing themselves against imaginary enemies, Hamlet is standing on the side and reciting the "To be or not to be" soliloquy in an attempt to avoid being dragged into the collective insanity, even though he is eventually forced to beat up one of the victims. The scene is shockingly literal; however, the image shown at the end of the performance was probably even more shocking for the Polish audience at that time: "Grotowski showed the marches of desperados, a theatrical summary of the history of [...] national uprisings and defeats" (Świątkowska, *Hamleci* 133). Hamlet, an idealist who abhors bloodshed, tries to stop the soldiers—who in turn sing a song from the 1944 Warsaw uprising, spit at and step on him, but it is not his fate that horrifies the audience. It is as if history was also obviously divided into ours and theirs.

This exemplification enables us to return to the crucial issue of the political significance of Grotowski's *Hamlet Study*. After many years, Flaszen (253) remembered that "the production became a sort of vision of the phenomenon of communist populism and its deep (not to say native, indigenous) sources" while referring to the antisemitic atmosphere of the 1960s. This context was undoubtedly pivotal and most likely had an impact on the surprisingly short life of the production, which was performed only twenty-one times in total: "It was too much of a risk, and the troupe might want to cancel it for safety reasons." (Świątkowska, *Hamleci* 107). Grotowski's performance also seems "prophetic" (Świątkowska, "The Political *Hamlet*" 67) in the context of the events of 1967-1968, when more than a dozen thousand Jews were deprived of Polish citizenship and expelled from the country.

Considering the "deep" or "indigenous" sources of communist populism mentioned by Flaszen⁶ however, another point is worth noting. Without going

⁶ It is striking and thought-provoking that Flaszen (himself born into a Jewish family) wrote somewhat euphemistically about the sources of "communist populism" even

into details, the work on the performance consisted of a “collective excavation of hidden aspects of the psyche which can be expressively useful” (Flaszen 99), which resulted in the creation of a phantasmatic, archetypal image of the Polish nation. This aspect is of great significance, given that the scenes just recalled irresistibly bring to mind images associated with the Holocaust. Grzegorz Niziołek interprets *Hamlet Study* in this key, using primarily Freudian categories. He asserts (*The Polish Theatre* 146) that the source of the extreme reactions to the play was the evocation of the “exceptionally obscene” image of the violence perpetrated on Jews by Polish peasants; the violence that after the Holocaust “was absolutely censored (morally, politically, ideologically and linguistically)” (*The Polish Theatre* 146). This image depicted “an indifferent, aggressive and ominously jubilant community, reviving the atmosphere of the pogroms, and drawing from it both material and psychological profit” (*The Polish Theatre* 153). Therefore, such an image “released a wave of fury and violent repudiation” (*The Polish Theatre* 153) whenever it would reappear. According to the scholar, the central motif in Grotowski’s performance is the parallel between Hamlet’s stereotypical passivity and the stereotypical belief regarding “[the] Jewish passivity, readiness to accept humiliation, lack of warlike spirit,” which was what allowed for ascribing the guilt to the victims and “resisted the inclusion of Jews in the fighting community” (*The Polish Theatre* 148).

According to Niziołek, Grotowski was fully aware that by breaking the taboo of Polish antisemitism, he used an image with phantasmatic force, more powerful than the one of Jews dying in the gas chambers, which in the collective imagination was perceived as “someone else’s trauma” (Cf. *The Polish Theatre* 154). Nevertheless, he argues (*The Polish Theatre* 157) that the director’s aim was neither “a historical settling of accounts or formulating accusations against Polish society” nor the reintroduction of the suppressed contents into the collective consciousness. It was to work on the level of the affective domain which would allow the spectators, “in their ability to experience shock, [to] gain pleasure and absolution” (*The Polish Theatre* 160) while keeping quiet about the performed violence they witness. As such, Niziołek is deeply convinced that Grotowski showed that “Hamlet is what in Poland is *unthinkable*” (*The Polish Theatre* 151).

after many years, although he was referring to the deep-seated layers of popular antisemitism. His use of apophysis might suggest the ongoing tabooization of this matter in Polish society.

In Search of Affective Response: Krzysztof Warlikowski's Shakespearean Productions

When Ciechowicz was putting forward his thesis about the killing of Shylock for the Polish stage, there was still little change in the Polish theatre with regard to addressing the question of the attitudes of Poles towards Jews during the Second World War. Only later, when the topic would reappear in public discourse and be discussed repeatedly, specifically through the Jedwabne debate, were they referred to more frequently. A crucial role in this context fell to Krzysztof Warlikowski, one of the most eminent Polish directors, who has repeatedly returned to this issue with Shakespeare's plays.

Before moving on to his productions based on *The Merchant of Venice*, it is worth looking at his staging of *The Tempest* (2003), which takes up the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation. It also reflects the fierce disputes over the traumatic events in Jedwabne and their influence on the subsequent generations, thus creating a significant background. These references, however, are not direct but based on hard-to-grasp post-memorial traces that build "the texture and tension (rather than scenery, props and colour)" (Niziołek, *Warlikowski* 125) of the production. For example, the wooden wall enclosing the stage space resonates with the barn at Jedwabne. Warlikowski abandons the idea of presenting the maritime disaster (which he replaces with a plane crash) at the beginning of the play so the spectators can only see its effects: a row of seats, pilots' commands audible now and then and the sounds made by a plane. The actual moment of the catastrophe returns much later. The director juxtaposes it with the scene of the banquet: its grotesque re-enactment "structurally repeat[s] an almost somaticized reaction to a traumatic memory" (Kowalcze-Pawlik, "Meaningless Acts" 128). It is crucial, as the final scene in which Prospero, Gonzalo and Antonio sit at the same table, but rather as a courtesy than a result of true reconciliation, echoes the commemorating ceremony in Jedwabne in 2001, during which the Polish authorities asked for forgiveness for the pogrom. The director's scepticism was not a provisional political statement; it stemmed from numerous questions concerning the possibility of breaking the inter-generational transfer of trauma and his conviction that there was a need to return the suppressed to the confines of the social memory.⁷

⁷ One of the most recent productions of *The Tempest* in Poland is *Der Szturum: Cwizyn/Burza. Pomiędzy* (2020): an adaptation of the play in Yiddish translation by Yosef Goldberg, staged by Damian Josef Neć at Żydowski Theatre in Warsaw. It also addresses the issue of antisemitism and the possibility of forgiveness. The use of Yiddish, which forces the audience to follow the Polish surtitles, "is one of the ways in which the production critically engages with the eugenic legacy of the Polish language appropriated by the nationalist discourse as a source of difference and discrimination" (Kowalcze-Pawlik, "Baroque Staring" [forthcoming, courtesy of the Author]).

When he staged *The Tempest*, the eighth Shakespearean performance in his oeuvre, Warlikowski was already renowned as a creator, who was able to touch upon key contemporary problems and fears with his use of Shakespeare's plays. However, it was the very production in which a different kind of relationship with the audience was established with such strength. Kowalcze-Pawlik ("Meaningless Acts" 134) wrote that the performance "seem[ed] to reach out to viewers, fashioning them into witnesses of the violence and its aftermath." As Warlikowski stated—with actors' help, it was possible to create "such theatre life which runs away from storytelling, and strives to bring out relationships between people [...] giving the spectators the ability to taste them, not just telling the audience to look at them" (*Szekspir i uzurpator* 79).

The difference between the two orders is also clearly visible when we compare Warlikowski's two other performances, which make for quite an intriguing frame in terms of his productions of Shakespeare. The first one was *The Merchant of Venice* (1994), which was still conventional and, to some extent, unsuccessful. Nonetheless, one should note that even at the beginning of his career, the director was searching for a way of giving thought to the relationship between an oppressive majority and a minority, which in Shylock's thread, is always doomed to be defeated. His protagonist fought for his dignity and a sense of self-worth. He tried to "start a different kind of dialogue with the society, in which he feels like an unwanted person" and, despite his wealth, he remains "a man outside the caste" (*Szekspir i uzurpator* 63), who is repeatedly shown where he belongs and is humiliated in numerous ways. What is more, the ostentatious theatricality of the Venetian setting, with its melancholy marked by the atmosphere of loss and absence, was to serve as a sort of update of the accusation against the society in this play of Shakespeare's.

The African Tales by Shakespeare (2011) was a production in which Warlikowski returned to Shakespeare's plays after a long break. It was created according to entirely different principles when compared to *The Merchant of Venice*, both regarding positioning the spectators as witnesses to provoke an affective response (a method tried and tested in *The Tempest*) and fashioning the text. One should note that since (*A*)*pollonia* (2009)—a production which, curiously, also addressed the theme of the Holocaust—Warlikowski has been using authorial montages of fragments of various literary works. In *The African Tales*, he compiles fragments of *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*, which were juxtaposed with J. M. Coetzee's works, in particular *Summertime* and *In the Heart of the Country*, as well as Wajdi Mouawad's monologues and many others. They become the "'trilogy of the excluded', which extracts the otherness of three male characters of the plays: old man, Jew and Black man" (Gruszczyński 7), all played by one actor, Adam Ferency (who also played Prospero in *The Tempest*). However, this is only the core of his concept, as female characters have significance too, especially daughters—

threads of this over-four-hour-long production are so numerous that they would require a separate analysis (Figzał-Janikowska).

Two of the scenes based on *The Merchant of Venice* are of paramount importance here. The first one comes after Antonio shakes Shylock's hand and subsequently spits in his direction. Bassanio leaves the stage while repeating 'oy vey, oy vey' with a sneer. The Jew, wrapped in tallit and with a mouse mask on his face, enters the stage, followed by two characters wearing pig masks. Quotation from Art Spiegelman's *Maus. A Survivor's Tale* gives the scene a notion of mediated post-memorial trace, which becomes more tangible when an animation displayed on the back wall shows other Mice forming a line. Warlikowski combines here several fragments of the play: Shylock, still on stage, is talking to Antonio (who is already aware he has gone bankrupt), the Mouse speaks Tubal's words, whereas the Pigs use some of Solanio's and some of Salerio's lines. The Pigs bring vodka, tell antisemitic jokes, and simultaneously try to comfort Antonio. The Mouse hides under a table and starts to pray as soon as the Pigs leave. We can hear the Kaddish, the lighting on the stage slowly goes out, and we can only see the Mice on the back wall.

The second scene depicts the trial unfolding in a setting reminiscent of a contemporary courtroom and following its rules. As contended by the director, it takes away the fairy-tale-like character of the events and "starts to shock us—we are confronted with something which indeed exists" (Warlikowski. Interview with Fazan 10). In his court speech, Antonio argues that "the stupidest sentence in the Bible is 'they hate me without a cause'" as he feels that his hatred towards Shylock is entirely justified. An irrational fear pervades him, a fear of growing old, of looking himself in the eyes in the mirror, of failure, among others, for which he blames the Jew(s). Warlikowski (Interview with Fazan 10) wonders whether Antonio only "pretends that his attitude is not what one calls antisemitism" or if he is indeed not aware of the fact that Shylock might seek revenge for becoming his scapegoat.

The questions posed by the director are political and refer to the mechanisms still vivid in contemporary society. In addition, they address the issue of the character's motives, especially regarding the fact that "perhaps the Jew does not let go because the accused is an antisemite and by doing so Shylock wages war on the world" (Warlikowski. Interview with Fazan 10).⁸

⁸ It must be noted—even though the issue is outside the scope of this essay—that Warlikowski expressly distances himself from unambiguous interpretation of Shylock's motives. His revenge in *The African Tales* seems imbued with unclear desire towards Antonio: "I was dead but now I live for you again." What is more, regardless of his being Jewish, Shylock, like every other human being, might be a villain, which seems to intrigue the director greatly, as he said (Interview with Fazan 9) that after the Holocaust, the image "of a massacred Jew, dripping with blood, who wants a piece of his enemy's flesh" is a question one cannot resolve and is taboo.

Conclusions

Does all of this mean that the Holocaust did not kill Shylock for the Polish stage? Ciechowicz (207) claimed that “no ‘thinking with Shakespeare’ based on *The Merchant of Venice* is possible in the post-war Polish theatre.” Given the contemporary productions of the play, it is difficult to confirm or refute this thesis, as it depends on what to emphasise.

On the one hand, if we consider this issue in the context of “looking at the ghetto,” i.e. confronting Polish indifference to the Holocaust and the crimes committed against Jews by Poles at that time, which have been repressed from the collective memory, Warlikowski's production seems to be the only one to address these themes. However, it is not insignificant that the performance is not constrained by the structure of a single play. Therefore, it is less prone to simplification and falling into didacticism, as it might have been the case if solely *The Merchant of Venice* was to be translated into contemporaneity. The scarcity of such attempts, nevertheless, might stem from a failing to internalise the memory: “Nowadays the only thing the imagination of the audience in Poland prompts when hearing the word ‘the Holocaust’ is ‘the camp,’ as the event fails to incorporate the elements of the wartime everyday reality seen by Poles” (Sendyka. Interview with Bryś, 57). This makes “not looking at the ghetto” through the prism of *The Merchant of Venice* symptomatic.

On the other hand, it is difficult not to notice a more common tendency in several contemporary productions, which involves updating a play through the prism of political and social categories. More often than not, Shylock becomes the Other, frequently read as a synecdoche of different types of exclusion, and serves to present the dynamics of stereotyping and social oppression. The latest staging of *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Szymon Kaczmarek (2019), seems to be a curious example; Shylock, who at the beginning blends into the society perfectly—yet is still treated with disdain—appears before court in a Jewish orthodox attire. His radicalization and that gesture of severing ties with society is the effect of the majority's actions—he comes to be “the Jew” they have always seen him as.

As a result, it appears that the Venetian merchant will never become Polish in the same manner as Hamlet turned into a Polish prince. It does not change the fact that Polish creators followed the footprint of the age-old tradition established by Wyspiański at the beginning of the twentieth century and reinforced by Kott's texts as they chose to use Shakespeare's plays to address the complex subject matter connected with antisemitism and Polish attitudes towards Jews during the Holocaust. In terms of quantity, the phenomenon is relatively limited, which stems from the complicated social and political dynamics of the formation of the collective memory and the fact that the performances recall repressed traumas. Indubitably, the most powerful are those

productions that position the audience as witnesses of the acts of re-enacted violence and thus provoke an affective response.

The above template has been used by Jerzy Grotowski and Krzysztof Warlikowski, albeit under different circumstances and in different ways. The former did not care for the settling of the past, whereas the latter—according to Niziołek (*Polski teatr* 501)—“wants to establish the zero point for the Polish debate on the Holocaust: the moment of transition from non-memory to memory, from non-consciousness to consciousness.”⁹ It is in Warlikowski’s theatre that Shakespeare, whom he treated like a contemporary author, and the Holocaust, which he deems the most significant event in the history of Poland, were brought together. The task the director set for himself and the audience goes beyond “what is there to think about—in Poland” (Wyspiański 93). By moving from the text to the world that becomes “present, not represented” (Gruszczyński 10), he calls “to ‘attend’ to the untold, repressed, or dissociated postmemory of what still hurts” (Kowalcze-Pawlik, “Meaningless Acts” 134). Therefore, it requires action.

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⁹ This quotation comes from a chapter that was not included in the English version of the book.

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