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## Polish *Macbeth* and the Middle East Crisis

Shakespeare was staged for the first time in Polish by Wojciech Bogusławski in 1798. It was *Hamlet* which Bogusławski decided to introduce to the Polish audience, and which became an indispensable element of war for independence, while its hero became a “Polish Prince”, a representative of the Polish nation.<sup>1</sup> In the Polish context, shaped by wars, over two centuries of captivity and struggle for independence, *Hamlet* was usually followed by *Macbeth* as they both proved to be very potent vehicles for social and political commentary. With the political and cultural changes of 1989, the first partly free elections and the end of the fights for the national cause, *Hamlet* became less attractive. However, since the wars continued, the need to comment on fight and struggle, nature of evil, deadly conflicts, hatred and power remained. In spite of a growing interest in Shakespearian comedy in the 1990s,<sup>2</sup> the gloomy tragedies remain the matrix of the present. Since 2004, *Macbeth* has been “triumphantly coming back [...] to the repertoire of many theatres”<sup>3</sup> in Poland (Drewniak),<sup>4</sup> inspiring young and old directors. In the last twenty years of the twentieth century, the play appeared only twelve times on Polish professional stages, and in the season 2004/2005 it dominated Polish theatre with seven premieres, three of which – the productions by Andrzej Wajda (Stary Teatr), Paweł Szkotak (Teatr Biuro Podróży) and Grzegorz Jarzyna (Teatr Rozmaitosci) – approached the play directly from the perspective of the Middle East conflict and continuing war.<sup>5</sup>

The theme of *Macbeth* has been very eagerly exploited in the Polish context, as Jarosław Komorowski enthrallingly presents in his influential study *Piramida zbrodni. Makbet w kulturze polskiej 1870-1989* [Crime Pyramid. Macbeth in Polish Culture 1870-1989] (2002).<sup>6</sup> The play provides effective tools to comment on war and its terror, especially from outside of the war zone. In Poland, under German occupation, *Macbeth* did not appear on an official stage, which practically did not exist. Yet, it did attract attention among many Polish writers-emigrants, who found *Macbeth* – a story about defeating a bloodthirsty tyrant – a great

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<sup>1</sup> See Krystyna Kujawińska-Courtney (1995) and Kujawińska Courtney, K. and K. Kwapisz Williams (2008).

<sup>2</sup> See Krakowska.

<sup>3</sup> If not stated otherwise, all translations from Polish are mine.

<sup>4</sup> In case of the sources available online, only the name of the author is provided in the text. If there is more than one text by the same author, the author's name is followed by the title.

<sup>5</sup> Six premiers of *Macbeth* in 2004/2005 were directed by Andrzej Wajda (Stary Teatr, Cracow, 26 Nov 2004), Maja Kleczewska (Teatr im. Jana Kochanowskiego, Opole, 4 Dec 2004), Tomasz Konina (Teatr Wielki, Lodz, 9 January 2005), Piotr Kruszczyński (Teatr Polski, Warsaw, 14 Jan 2005), Paweł Szkotak (Teatr Biuro Podróży, Poznan, 20 May 2005), Grzegorz Jarzyna (Teatr Rozmaitosci, Warsaw, 24 May 2005), Krzysztof Warlikowski (Staatstheater, Hanover, 14 June 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Komorowski's work is used here as the major source of information on Polish *Macbeth* during and just after the Second World War.

illustration of a situation Poland was in.<sup>7</sup> A Polish prosaist and art historian, Stefania Zahorska, published in 1942 in London's *Wiadomości Polskie* [Polish News] an article "Makbet na emigracji" [Macbeth in Exile], in which she tried to analyze the tragedy looking at it through the experiences of war and the complexities of dictatorship (Komorowski 201-3). Three years later, Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz published in London a pamphlet, *Lady Macbeth myje ręce* [Lady Macbeth washes her hands], in which he accused Great Britain of "a treacherous betray of Poland, which fell a prey to Soviet Russia" (qtd. Komorowski 204). At that time, but in the occupied Poland, Stefan Jaracz – a theatre director and a survivor of Auschwitz, cultivated his desire to stage *Macbeth*, which "every day becomes more and more relevant" (qtd. Komorowski 205).

Komorowski observes that, just after the war, Polish thinking through *Macbeth* and about *Macbeth* was very much connected with the political situation, and though "the tragedy could have described the reality of war," it could have described "probably even better, a post-war reality of Poland under the next Soviet occupation (204, 206). For the first time after the Second World War, *Macbeth* was staged during the Polish Thaw, i.e. during the period of significant changes in the Polish politics and social life caused by the deaths of the Joseph Stalin and Polish communist leader Bolesław Bierut, and as a consequence, by liberalisation and destalinization of Poland. The production was made in 1958 by Zygmunt Hübner (Teatr Wyrbrzeże, Gdańsk), who in a playbill commented on the current political situation, saying that the play is all about "maintaining power", that is, about greed, demagoguery and ruthlessness (Komorowski 215-225).

In the 1980s *Macbeth* was used to debunk war crimes and Soviet hypocrisy. Identified with the forest growing over the mass grave of Polish military officers murdered in 1940 in Katyń<sup>8</sup> by the Soviet secret police NKVD, Birnam Wood acquired a powerful political and tragic meaning. In 1981, after the monument for the Katyń Massacre victims had been removed on the communist government's order from the Powiązki cemetery in Warsaw (the night after it was mounted), Włodzimierz Odojewski wrote a story about the Soviet crime "Ku Dunzynańskiemu wzgórzu idzie las" [Towards the Dunsinane's Hill a Wood Approaches] (published in 1984 in Paris). In 1989, another article about the crimes in Katyń was published by Jacek Trznadel under a concise but edifying title: "Katyn Wood – Birnam Wood...", in which the author warned that the wood "does not stand still, it grows, becomes immense and approaches" (Komorowski 269), as if envisioning the Soviet secret police being officially held responsible for the massacre.

The iconography of war and evil changes: after the Nazi and Soviets, now evil is identified with terrorism and war in the Middle East. The war in Iraq proved to be an interesting theme for the theatre, even for the Polish audience. Thus, apart from political drama that entered Polish stage at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century (e.g. *Stuff Happens* by David Hare, 2008, or *Niech żyje wojna!!!* by Paweł Demirski, 2009), Shakespeare again was chosen to comment on the most contemporary issues. The idea of mixing *Macbeth* and the war in Iraq or Afghanistan proved attractive for both the acclaimed masters, such as Andrzej Wajda, and the leaders of younger generation, such as Paweł Szkotak and Grzegorz Jarzyna. Paweł Szkotak (b.1965), the director, actor, and stage director at the Travel Bureau Theatre in Poznań, believes that, in the twenty first century, *Macbeth* had to appear in Polish repertoire, "because for the first time after 1945 we waged a war – no matter what you call Poland's presence in Iraq. And *Macbeth* is all about war: it starts with the vision of war, it shows that a just war also burdens and infects". Szkotak, whose *Macbeth* is

<sup>7</sup> In 1942 Adam Bunsch, a playwright and a Polish soldier in exile, wrote a farce, *Poprawki do "Makbeta"* [Amendments to "Macbeth"], about a Polish lieutenant seducing Lady Macbeth. This light play did not really fit into the reality of war: it was published much later, in 1974, and never staged.

<sup>8</sup> The Katyn massacre, also known as the Katyn Forest massacre, was based on Lavrentiy Beria's proposal to execute all members of the Polish Officer Corps.

titled *Kim jest ten człowiek cały we krwi?* [Macbeth: Who Is This Bloodied Man?], believes that

in any society only the third generation after the war deals with the problem of war in art [...]. For the generation of fathers war is too fresh, traumatic experience, sons are protected against it, isolated from the memory of it, only the grandchildren of the children of war can look at it objectively, can measure themselves against it, what is inherited. And a new conflict is always an impulse for such dealings. A war in a smaller scale, mediated through television and reduced by geographical distance. That is why Macbeth can be about Iraq. About war with terrorism. (Drewniak)

Grzegorz Jarzyna (b. 1968), theatre and opera director, head and artistic director of TR Warszawa (Teatr Rozmaitości, Warsaw), observes that it cannot be a coincident that “Wajda reaches for *Macbeth* [...] Wajda, who always excellently senses the time.” He himself was thinking about his adaptation of *Macbeth* for a few years. He came up with a concept for a production *2007: Macbeth* (2005)<sup>9</sup> when the invasion on Iraq started: “I quickly realized some similarities, some parallel with the text of Shakespeare and with this war.” His image of war and its cruelties was to be modern and universal: a war in Iraq, but also in the Balkans and in Chechnya. Duncan’s army was wearing American uniforms and fought with Islamic terrorists, but there was also a quote from Putin who, after pacifying Chechnya, said: “there is a lot of work still to do”. The idea was, as Jarzyna explains, to focus on “the culture of war” (Ryzik).

Pawel Szkotak also justifies his choice of Shakespeare’s play, referring to enduring wars; he admits that “in each country, for the public it’s about a different war” (qtd. Fisher). He makes it clear saying that

The Iraq war started to be very important to people. But there is also the war in Afghanistan and World War II still exists in our memory. So I couldn’t say this is a play about the Iraq war as much as it is a performance about people who have blood on their hands, like Macbeth – and like other soldiers” (qtd. Dekel).

Indeed, Szkotak’s *Macbeth* is open for various interpretations, as long as they try to vaguely embrace horrors and terrors of the modern world – “the horrors of a world at war” (Dekel). Macbeth’s costume suggests “both SS uniform, a khaki sort of servant uniform that could represent the US or the leathers of Balkan warlords” (Kirwan). And though “he doesn’t make exact parallels (Macbeth is neither George Bush nor Saddam Hussein), [...] there is imagery enough – from an Abu Ghraib-style naked prisoner in a cage to stiltwalking witches in white burqas – to make us sense the contemporary relevance.” (Dekel).

The main question, thus, is how to present the modern war-torn world to make the image relevant, convincing and meaningful. Jarzyna’s production, staged in Poland and the United States, was a quasi-cinematic spectacle, a free adaptation of the play, with new translation and new lines. It was influenced by the images of Al Qaeda, it featured violent fighting and death. It was a battlefield with the sounds of military choppers, high-tech equipment, running squads and bloodshed. The production used pyrotechnical effects, video projections, numerous screens and sound played through the headphones. Most importantly, it was staged in a huge industrial space that seemed to be symbolic both for the Polish and American production. In Poland, it was staged in an old factory in Warsaw, used by Bumar, the only company from Poland that made weapon for the Iraq War, while in New York the production was presented in a Tobacco Warehouse, facing the place where the American war

<sup>9</sup> The performance was prepared in co-production with the Art Bureau w Munich.

with terrorism has started, i.e. the World Trade Centre site. The space in the old factory had four stages at two levels so that a couple of scenes could be presented simultaneously.

Unlike Jarzyna, Szkotak decided to shock the audience with the images of violence by bringing it as close to the audience as possible, and so “the excruciating horror is within the audience’s reach, as if one could jump in and put an end to it” (Collett). It is an open-air show staged at dusk, in various temporarily arranged locations, with the audience standing quite close at three sides of the provisional stage. It focuses on impression rather than details, on powerful images and spectacular effects, backed by operatic singing (by mezzo-soprano Magdalena Wilczyńska Goś), dramatic music (by Krzysztof “Wiki” Nowikow and Lukasz Jata) and light, rather than Shakespeare’s text. There is actually very little of Shakespeare in the production: dialogues are shortened to a few phrases and the scenes are reshuffled. There are only five of the major characters (Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, Banquo's Son and Duncan), which makes the narrative even simpler. Showing gory action, men in dark trench coats, soldiers on motorcycles, guns, shooting, flaming firebrands, witches on stilts, Szkotak presents a nightmare, the world of crime and bloodshed.

Wajda’s *Macbeth* (Teatr Stary, Cracow, 2004) is set in a traditional theatrical space and it is the most faithful to the original text out of all most recent Polish *Macbeths*, as only one scene is removed (Banquo’s murder). Wajda, who belongs to the older generation of directors, seems to be reluctant to challenge the original and does not want his plays to carry obvious political allusions. Yet, he cannot avoid them. When, in December 1981, martial law was introduced in Poland, audience needed a subversive tool and immediately found allusions to this new situation in his *Hamlet*, staged in Cracow a month earlier, though Wajda officially denied that there were any references to contemporary politics. Similarly now; the reviewers seem to be particularly interested in seeing the production as a comment on American war on terrorism, though Wajda openly stated that his *Macbeth* was focused on universal themes of crime and punishment to which war provided only a useful background. Thus, the production focuses on the effects of war rather than the war itself; it prefers understatements rather than clear allusion, universalisms rather than a specific political context.

However, the disturbing image of war and crime is continuously present in Wajda’s production. He starts his production with an image of a battlefield – a black stage covered with dead bodies in black plastic bags. The witches, with pale faces and bandaged heads, wearing military boots and black plastic coats, are presented as war victims. Standing motionless among the bodies, they foretold the future and disappeared, lying down among the dead. Soldiers dressed in black commando uniforms pushed the bodies aside and placed a red carpet for the victorious Duncan. Then, they attached a red string to each plastic bag and pulled up the bodies, which were hanging above the stage throughout the whole performance, reminding the audience about the crime.

Jarzyna’s production is less symbolic and starts more like a clip from a mainstream movie with a scene (taking place in one top part of the multipartite, double storey stage) in which American officers were scrutinizing data on six computer screens, managing war in an Arab country. The screens showed digitally processed images from the battlefields. Suddenly, Major Macbeth located an enemy on one of the screens. He left the headquarters to complete the mission, i.e. to invade what seemed to resemble a mosque, and massacre bodies wearing keffiyeh. One of the soldiers slid on the rope to the terrorists’ hiding place (the stage’s bottom level), then shooting began, followed by a bomb explosion and a big fire. Macbeth murdered the leader of the terrorists at the entrance to the mosque, cutting his head off. After listening to the prophecy of the first Witch, he came back to the military base in a helicopter.

Szkotak also starts his production by immediately immersing the audience in the modern war-torn world, where violence is the only way to solve conflicts, where human life is worthless, and where a cruel tyrant vents his anger and takes revenge on his own people. The opening is quite powerful:

Seven poles, six arranged in a circle around the last, stood tall and upright in the centre of the courtyard area, and a masked figure on stilts entered with a burning brand to light their tops, the poles symbolising those who were to die in the course of Macbeth's ascent [...]. The King [...] sat at on a dais at the far end of the courtyard, messengers roared up to him on motorbikes with reports on enemy munitions, which he received by casually beating them, or in one case even shooting the man in the head. [...] Shortly after, the Defeated King (Cawdor) was brought in, naked and trapped in a wooden cage dragged behind a motorbike. The victorious King clambered on top of the cage to taunt his prisoner and then cut his throat. (Kirwan)

Jarzyna's *Macbeth* presents the image of war known from a modern action movie, with shooting, explosions, smoke, fire, blood and terror, or perhaps from the news programs, broadcasting chaotic information on the events in the Middle East. This seems to be the point of the production. According to Susan Feldman, the Artistic Director of St. Ann's Warehouse (the theatre producing Jarzyna's performance in New York), the audience "should feel like on a war action movie," which perhaps means that they should feel, as Jarzyna adds, "scared, just like during a well made movie" (Anon., "Szekspir pod mostem"). Hence, his *Macbeth* is realistic and brutal "so that the audience could feel this smell of blood, experience, touch the war, enter this hell" (Wyżyńska).

Jarzyna's *Macbeth* does not contemplate the past, but comments on the present and refers to the future, what the title *2007: Macbeth* suggested in 2005. It may seem to be an anti-American protest or, generally, a forceful antiwar stance. It shows war as it is: chaotic, violent, unstoppable, destructive for everybody and potent in transforming a hero into a murderer or a victim. Some critics, however, disagree with such an interpretation, claiming that Jarzyna is far from philosophizing about war or criticizing Polish alliance with America; that he is not really worried about Polish presence in Iraq; that his work "is not an antiwar performance. It is a TV-computer war" and the director himself, just like a little boy, "is playing a war game" (Mościcki). Even without resorting to sarcasm, many critics and reviewers found the production, its context, theme and design inappropriate. Since the times known in Poland as the "little stabilization,"<sup>10</sup> *Macbeth* was usually used for universal messages, often referring to Jan Kott's concept of the Great Mechanism of history (Komorowski 224). Therefore, focusing on one, allegedly simple contemporary "story" – the war America waged on terrorism may seem limiting if not harmful for Shakespeare. Among the voices of indignation are those claiming that

Obviously, Mr. Jarzyna is putting Shakespeare to his own uses [...]. "Macbeth" really isn't a war play, as many of Shakespeare's histories are, and Mr. Jarzyna's bullet-riddled staging does little to illuminate the drama as a study in the metastasizing toxin of ambition or the susceptibility of a morally corrupted psyche. (Isherwood)

Susan Feldman observed, on the other hand, that "[e]ver since Iraq war, there have been so many Macbeths [...] Macbeth is a war play – it's about power, the corruption of power, and leaders who are out of control" (qtd. Taylor).

While Jarzyna's *Macbeth* is criticized for being too much focused on warfare and fighting, neglecting universal themes of the play, Wajda's *Macbeth* may seem to be too abstract to comment on the contemporary world, even though certain details of the production make it impossible to avoid associations with the war in Iraq. Yet, in the general approach to the play warning against war as unstoppable, atrocious machine, it is similar to Jarzyna's

<sup>10</sup> The years 1957-1963 in Poland was the period of comparative stability under the government of Władysław Gomułka.

production. Presenting the witches as war victims helps to situate *Macbeth* in the context of blame and punishment for genocide, which was Wajda's major goal.<sup>11</sup> The prophecy of the witches, repeated at the end of the performance, implies that the war would never end and the history would repeat itself. Nothing could change with Malcolm on the throne; he would become a politician and leader acting according to the same old pragmatic laws. Szkotak's witches with white veils on their faces, walking on stilts high above mere mortals, and the falling polls representing Macbeth's victims also encourage similar associations of disaster, inevitability, and fatalism. Yet, also similarly to other productions, Szkotak's *Macbeth* is easily demoted to a mere game, or an inappropriate joke. Although in the program to his *Macbeth* Szkotak clarified that the performance was "an attempt to see Shakespeare's drama as a crime myth" (qtd. Kirwan), to many reviewers it rather resembled a sporting event: "This is sixty minutes of spectator sport. The audience watches standing on low bleachers and behind crowd barriers, like a football" (Collett). Perhaps for the audience who have forgotten about their own war and who are reminded about war crimes through TV news channels, any attempt to interpret and deliberate on the concept of war will be necessarily viewed through the prism of a movie, game or sport, especially in theatre, where the presentation of war can be unbearably disturbing with its directness and closeness.

The allusions and associations, recurring in these three productions, seem to find their conclusion in Szkotak's work, where they are supplemented with the lines from T.S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*,<sup>12</sup> here sung by a mezzo-soprano Hecate. Referring to Eliot's poem, known as a "conversion poem", Szkotak shifts attention away from the hopelessness of a modern, war-driven world. The poem reminds of human sinfulness and frailness, but it predominantly deals with mourning and repentance, regaining faith and hope for human salvation. Such an approach suggests that, perhaps, Polish directors staging *Macbeth* in the first decade of the twentieth-first century still hope people can learn from war and its atrocities, can respond to the witches' prophecy, can change what appears inevitable. If this is the case, their *Macbeth* can be described in a way Patrick Comerford described Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*, as "a song of death and hoped-for rebirth, a song of hope while doubting hope, of faith while seeking faith" ("Poems for Lent").

Komorowski explains that this current desire to make use of *Macbeth*, putting it in a broader perspective:

Theatre always reaches for Shakespeare when modern drama lacks the means to describe the most recent complications and grim histories of our world. When we cannot name something very bad, but we feel that it is in the air, suffocates us, is inside and around us.

In 2004/2005 *Macbeth* became the play most often chosen to comment on the recent global concerns and tensions. The image of a Poland's "national war," where Hamlet struggles with dictatorships and oppressors, has been thus replaced with a global war, where Macbeth examines the mechanism of the twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, and participates in the battle of good and evil. It is interesting, in the Polish social and cultural contexts, that it is *Macbeth* that seems most relevant, after all these centuries of *Hamlet* dealing with human crime, depravity and moral dilemma. Some reviewers believe that 2004/2005 *Macbeth*

<sup>11</sup> See Miłkowski.

<sup>12</sup> Szkotak uses the last stanza of the second part of Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*:

"Under a juniper tree the bones sang, scattered and shining  
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other,  
Under a tree in the cool of the day, with the blessing of sand,  
Forgetting themselves and each other, united  
In the quiet of the desert." (Eliot 87)

productions were inspired by Komorowski's renowned study. Others suggest that it is rather a globally experienced upset balance between good and evil in the modern world that encourages interest in the play.

Jarzyna and Szkotak have proved that *Macbeth* is suitable for contemporary productions that horrify with scenes of excessive violence and can easily complement everyday TV news bulletins, which are often the main sources of knowledge about the world, war, and evil. Wajda, on the other hand, through his ascetic, cold interpretation, adherence to the original text of the play, rather than visual embellishments distracting the audience, showed that *Macbeth* is still a psychological drama understood through the experiences and emotions of its protagonists. Yet, this difference in the approach to contemporary Polish interpretation of *Macbeth* is perhaps only superficial. After all, it is Wajda who stubbornly focuses on mass murders, leaving the audience with the distressing image of war victims in plastic bags for the whole performance. Besides, his 2004 *Macbeth* came back in 2010 as a television version, taking advantage of digital technology used for special effects. Maja Kleczewska, another director of 2005 *Macbeth*, claims that *Macbeth* must be shown to the society to cure it, "because our acceptance of evil exceeded a critical point, norms have been broken" (Drewniak). This might be a new role for Shakespeare in Poland and in the modern world.

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