



Multicultural Shakespeare:

TRANSLATION, APPROPRIATION AND PERFORMANCE



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Multicultural Shakespeare:

TRANSLATION, APPROPRIATION AND PERFORMANCE

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Crossing Borders with Shakespeare since 1945:
Central and Eastern European Roots and Routes

Guest editors:

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Ivona Mišterová

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e-mail: ksiegarnia@uni.lodz.pl
phone +48 42 635 55 77

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Contributors

Zsolt Almási is an associate professor in the Institute of English and American Studies, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary. His book, *The Problematics of Custom as Exemplified in Key Texts of the Late English Renaissance* came off the press in 2004. He is the co-editor of journals (*International Journal of Digital Humanities*), *Digitális bölcsészet* (Digital Humanities) and was co-editor of books with Mike Pincombe, *Writing the Other. Humanism versus Barbarism in Tudor England*, (2008) and *New Perspectives on Tudor Cultures* (2012). More recently (2021) he co-edited with Kinga Földváry a special issue “Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity” of *Theatralia*. He serves as the head of the Department of English Literatures and Cultures, the president of the Hungarian Shakespeare Society. His current research projects and publications focus on Shakespeare, Shakespeare in the contemporary Hungarian theatre, digital Shakespeare, and digital and visual culture.

Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk is associate professor of English literature at the University of Warsaw, with a special interest in Renaissance Studies, Literary Translation and Digital Humanities. Her publications include several monographs centred on Shakespeare and translation either in theatrical context or within Polish cultural history and a number of essays on drama analysis and literary translation (CUP, Palgrave, *Shakespeare, Cahiers Élisabéthains*). Since 2009 she has been editing a critical series of new translations of Shakespeare (currently 6 volumes), and since 2016 managing two state-funded projects aimed at digitising Polish 19th-21st century Shakespeare translations (<http://polskiszekspir.uw.edu.pl>). Member of ISA, ESRA, CEESRA and Polish Shakespeare Association.

Nicoleta Cinpoș is professor of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Worcester, UK, where she teaches graduate and postgraduate courses in Shakespeare on the page, the stage, the screen, in festivals and in the digital world. She is particularly interested in reviewing as critical practice, Shakespeare festivalling, Shakespeare as resistance in totalitarian regimes, Shakespeare and national identity, and the promotion of Shakespeare transcreations from the non-English speaking world. Her current research focuses on the socio-cultural role of Shakespeare (in) Festivals in Europe—and she co-edited *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* (Bloomsbury, 2022). Her work has appeared in numerous edited collections and journals, from *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *SEDERI*, *Cahiers Elisabethains*, to *Theatralia*, *NTQ* and *MSA* in English, as well as in Romanian and Polish publications. She has worked with Shakespeare festivals—in Romania and Poland—for almost two decades and convenes the ESRA Shakespeare in Performance Seminar at the International Shakespeare Festival, Craiova since 2010. She is currently advising on the launch of two new SHakespeare Festivals: Ivano Frankivsk, Ukraine, June 2024, and Chisinau, Moldova, September 2024. She sits on the ESRA: European Shakespeare Research Association Board, re-elected in 2021 for her second and final term.

Cynthia J. Cyrus is professor of Musicology and Affiliated Faculty in Gender and Sexuality Studies at Vanderbilt University in the USA. Her scholarly curiosity about historical musical literacy has culminated in significant projects such as *The Scribes for Women's Convents in Late Medieval Germany* (Toronto 2009) and *Received Medievalisms: A Cognitive Geography of Viennese Women's Convents* (Palgrave/Macmillan 2013), which offer insights into the cultural and social contexts of music history. With a keen secondary interest in Shakespearean studies, she also enjoys exploring the intersection of literature and music. In addition to performance reviews and conference reports, she has recently published on signposting in YouTube covers of Nino Rota's theme for *Romeo and Juliet* in *Literature/Film Quarterly* and on Celtic music's appropriations of Shakespeare for popular music.

Kornélia Deres is assistant professor at the Department of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She was awarded the Alexander von Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Institute of Media Culture and Theatre at the University of Cologne, the Junior Core Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study at Central European University, and the Bolyai Research Fellowship by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. She is author of two books: published in 2016, *Képkalapács* [Hammer for Images] focused on contemporary intermedial theatre practices in Europe and elsewhere, while *Besúgó Rómeó, meglékelte Yorick* [Informant Romeo, Leaked Yorick], published in 2022, dealt with the interrelations of archives and performance practices. She is co-editor of five collections of essays. Her articles were published in *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Theatre Research International*, *Global Performance Studies*, and *Theatralia*. She is also a poet, having published three volumes.

Pavel Drábek is professor of Drama and Theatre Practice at the University of Hull, UK. He publishes on theatre theory, early modern theatre history, and drama translation and adaptation. He is also a playwright and translator in spoken drama, radio, and opera. His co-edition (with David Drozd) of Otakar Zich's seminal theatre theory work *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy* (1931), co-translated with Tomáš P. Kačer, is forthcoming with Charles Karolinum UP in 2024, and his and Ondřej Kyas's musical play *Zapeklitě!* (Falstaff Among the Demons) is opening at the Slováké divadlo (Uherské Hradiště, CZ) in June 2024.

David Drozd is head of the Department of Theatre Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. He is a dramaturge, translator and theatre theoretician. His main research fields are performance analysis (with a focus on modern and postmodern Czech theatre culture, especially directing) and structural and semiotic theatre theory (with a special focus on the Prague Linguistic Circle and the history of Czech theatre theory as such). He has edited *The Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings* (2016) and *Otakar Zich: The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* (2024).

Jacek Fabiszak teaches theatre history, drama in English, and Shakespeare at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland. He has published on English Renaissance theatre and drama and their stage, televisual and filmic

transpositions (*Polish Televised Shakespeares*). He also wrote on Christopher Marlowe, both on his plays (focusing on imagery) and their screen versions (especially *Edward II*). He guest co-edited (with Ewa Kęłowska-Ławniczak) a special issue of *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* (Vol. 14, No. 1, 2021). He is head of the Department of Studies in Culture at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

Marta Gibińska, Jagiellonian University Professor Emerita, teaches English literature and translation with particular emphasis on Shakespeare's plays and poetry at Tischner European University. Her academic interests focus on the language of Shakespeare, the reception of Shakespeare in Poland and Shakespearean translation criticism. She has authored around 100 publications, including two monographs: *The Functioning of Language in Shakespeare's Plays* (1989) and *Polish Poets Read Shakespeare* (2000). She co-edited numerous collective volumes, including *Hamlet East-West* (with Jerzy Limon 1998), *Czytanie Shakespeare'a* (Reading Shakespeare, with Ewa Nawrocka and Jacek Fabiszak 2005), *Shakespeare: History and Memory* (with Agnieszka Romanowska 2008). Together with Jacek Fabiszak and Marta Kapera she also published *Shakespeare. Lexicon* (2003). A member of the Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft and the International Shakespeare Association, as well as the European Shakespeare Research Association, she is the co-founder of the Polish Shakespeare Society, and for many years served as its first President.

Coen Heijes teaches Shakespeare, Presentism and Performance at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He wrote/edited/participated (in) books on the abolishment of slavery, multicultural society, blackface and performance, diversity and leadership, cross-cultural communication and performing early modern drama today and published in a variety of journals, including *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, *Policing*, *Sederi Yearbook*, *Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Sustainability*, *TheConversation.com* and *Theatre Journal*. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the British Shakespeare Association, the editorial board of *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* and the advisory board on Shakespeare and Social Justice at Bloomsbury. He has taught in the Netherlands, the UK, Curaçao, Germany, Saint Martin and Latvia. He is currently working on Shakespeare and significance, on Shylock and religion, on adaptations of *Macbeth* and on Shakespeare pedagogy.

Kinga Földváy is associate professor at the Institute of English and American Studies at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary. Her main research interests include problems of genre in film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, twentieth and twenty-first century British literature, and theories of visual and popular culture. She has published widely in journals and essay collections; she is the author of *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos: Shakespeare in Genre Film* (MUP, 2020). Currently she is working on a comprehensive survey of Hungarian Shakespeare film adaptations, supported by the Hungarian National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFI-142603).

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová is associate professor at Masaryk University, Department of Theatre Studies. In her research and lecturing activities, she focuses on the theory of theatre (especially from the perspective of cognitive studies), and the staging of opera (especially Czech stagings of operas by Claudio Monteverdi, Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, and Bedřich Smetana). At present she focuses on the application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Conceptual Blending Theory and Multimodal Metaphor Theory in the field of the analysis of opera production practice and reflections on directing operas.

Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik is assistant professor at the Department of American Studies and Mass Media at the Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Lodz, where she teaches literary and cultural studies and works as Vice-Editor of *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*. Vice-president of Polish Shakespeare Society, she is active in International Shakespeare Association, European Shakespeare Research Association, Shakespeare Association of America and British Shakespeare Association. Her main fields of research are Shakespeare in translation and performance, translation theory and history, history of monstrosity and cultural history of emotions. Her most recent publications include chapters on *The Tempest* published by Bloomsbury and Routledge.

Tomasz Kowalski obtained his doctoral degree from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Poland), where he holds a position as an assistant professor in the Department of Theatre and Media Art. His research concentrates on Shakespearean biofictions and the speculative aspects of academic biographies of the playwright, on which he published a monograph in Polish: *William Shakespeare: fikcja w biografiiach, biografia w fikcjach* (2018). He also investigates the presence of Shakespeare's plays on the contemporary Polish stage, and is interested in their film and literary adaptations. His second book (also in Polish) focused on Shakespearean essays and libretti by W. H. Auden.

Filip Krajník teaches early English literature at the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. Together with a broad team of researchers, he is currently finishing a project on English Restoration theatre as a trans-national and multi-genre phenomenon. Together with Anna Hrdinová, he is also completing an edited volume on late 17th- and early-18th-century English theatre, entitled *Restoration Reshaping: Shifting Forms, Genres and Conventions in English Theatre, 1660-1737* (to be published by Karolinum in 2024). He has published on late medieval English poetry, Renaissance and Restoration theatre and the reception of Shakespeare in Central Europe. His translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Czech premiered in 2022 at South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice, Czech Republic (directed by Jakub Čermák), followed a year later by a premiere of his translation of Marlowe's *Edward II* by "Depresivní děti touží po penězích" in Prague, Czech Republic (also directed by Jakub Čermák).

Krystyna Kujawska Courtney is a full professor at the University of Lodz, Poland. Her research interests focus mainly, but not exclusively, on Shakespeare, theatre, and literary and cultural theories, especially gender, New Historicism, and presentism. She

received grants from the Fulbright Foundation, Folger Shakespeare Library, the Huntington Library, and the Kosciuszko Foundation. She published numerous international and local monographs, articles, and essays on the long-term global authority of Shakespeare, as well as on his dramatic works and early modern and contemporary culture. She authored, contracted, and coordinated several international projects (e.g., TEMPUS, SIME) funded by the European Union Commission and the Australian Government and Polish projects devoted to Shakespeare and Polish culture. She is a member of the WSB (*World Shakespeare Bibliography*) consortium of international correspondents, and she co-edited the journal *Multicultural Shakespeare* for twenty years (2004-2024). Eleven doctoral dissertations in Shakespeare studies on cultural appropriations, borrowings, and adaptations were completed under her supervision.

Monica Matei-Chesnoiu, Ph.D., DLitt, is Professor Emerita of Ovidius University of Constanta (Romania). She is the author of *Geoparsing Early Modern English Drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), *Re-imagining Western European Geography in English Renaissance Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), *Early Modern Drama and the Eastern European Elsewhere: Representations of Liminal Locality in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Associated University Presses, 2009), and *Shakespeare in the Romanian Cultural Memory* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006). Her main interests incorporate geocriticism and spatial literary studies, including representations of space, place, and geography in Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Ivona Mišterová is head of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czechia. Her research interests include Shakespearean adaptations for children and young adults, reception studies, and the cultural impact of British and American theatre (not only) in Czechia. She has published extensively on these topics, exploring Shakespearean translations and adaptations, as well as the performances of British and American works staged in Czech theatres during the 20th and 21st centuries. Notable publications include *Anglo-American Drama on Pilsen Stages* (2013) and *Inter Arma non Silent Musae: English and American Drama on Czech and Moravian Stages during the Great War* (2017), which provide insights into the intersection of literature, culture, and performance history.

Mădălina Nicolaescu is professor at the English Department – University of Bucharest. Her books on early modern theatre include *Meanings of Violence in Shakespeare* (2004), *Ec-centric Mappings of the Renaissance* (1999); she has edited collections of essays such as *(In)hospitable Translations: Fidelities, Betrayals, Rewritings* (2010), *Shakespeare Translations and the European Dimension* (2012), *Shakespeare 400 in Romania* (2016), *Perspectives on Shakespeare in Europe's Borderlands* (2020). Further recent contributions on Shakespeare have also been published in *International Shakespeare Yearbook* (2020), *Cahiers Élisabéthains* (2019, 2020), *SEDERI* (2017) and in volumes like *Proceedings of the Ninth World Shakespeare Congress*, (2014), *Great Shakespeareans* (2012), and *Visions of Shakespeare* (2011).

Natália Pikli is associate professor at the Department of English Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She teaches medieval and early modern culture and literature and is Head of the relevant Doctoral Program. She also teaches contemporary popular culture, as well as theatre history and theatre reviewing for students majoring in Theatre Studies. She published extensively on Shakespeare, early modern popular culture, theatre, iconography, and on the reception of Shakespeare in our days, with a focus on contemporary theatre. Her articles came out, for instance, in *Shakespearean Criticism* (USA), *European Journal of English Studies*, *Journal of Early Modern Studies* (Florence) *Shakespeare Survey* (Cambridge), *Theatralia* (Brno). She (co-)edited five books and is the author of two monographs, *The Prism of Laughter: Shakespeare's 'very tragical mirth'* (VDM Verlag, 2009) and *Shakespeare's Hobby-Horse and Early Modern Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2021). In her free time, she directs amateur student performances and writes theatre reviews.

Martin Pšenička is theatre historian and lecturer at the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, where he teaches the history of world and Czech theatre and conducts methodologically and theoretically oriented courses. Externally, he cooperates with the Department of Authorial Acting of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. He focuses on issues related to performance analysis, the theory of the theatre and post-war alternative theatre. In recent years, his research has addressed post-war Czech theatre, especially the personality of director and actor Miroslav Macháček.

Gabriella Reuss, Ph.D., habil., is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary and Associate Professor at the Catholic University Ružomberok, Slovakia. Several of her publications concern the promptbook of the earliest, 1834 restoration of the tragically ending *King Lear* staged by W. C. Macready. In her first monograph, *Shakespeare Londonban és Pest-Budán. Színházi előadások emlékezte* [Shakespeare in London and Pest-Buda. Remembering Performances] (L'Harmattan, 2017), she studied Macready's and Gábor Egressy's paradigm-changing performances of Lear as represented in their uniquely parallel 1838 playtext manuscripts. Besides researching William Charles Macready's Shakespeare and opera stagings, she has been working on Sándor Hevesi's unique Shakespeare-cycles. Her third main research interest is Shakespeare on the contemporary stage, particularly in the puppet and the puppet-and-live actor theatre.

Agnieszka Romanowska teaches literature in the Institute of English Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. Her research interests include literary and theatrical reception of Shakespeare, drama translation, and adaptation of literature. She published books on the theatrical potential of Shakespeare's dramatic text in translation (*Hamlet po polsku*, 2005), Polish poet-translators (*Za głosem tłumacza*, 2017) and articles on Shakespeare translated and staged in Poland. She is co-editor of *Przekładaniec. A Journal of Literary Translation* and member of the European Shakespeare Research Association.

Veronika Schandl is an associate professor at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Hungary. Her research is centred on Shakespeare in performance, specialising in Socialist, politicised productions of Shakespeare in Eastern-Europe. Her book, *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-Regime Hungary: Shakespeare Behind the Iron Curtain* was published in 2009. Currently she is writing a monograph on Hungarian director, Tamás Major's Shakespeare directions, and is working on Shakespeare burlesques and theatrical nostalgia.

Klára Škrobánková, Ph.D. works at the Arts and Theatre Institute in Prague and at the Department of Theatre Studies, Masaryk University Brno. She is especially interested in music theatre and the German-language theatre in the Czech lands in the 18th and 19th century—the issues of theatre historiography and its documentation are important parts of her research interests. She partakes on the creation of the *Czech Theatre Encyclopedia*, where she focuses on the German theatre in the Moravia and Silesia in the 19th century.

Boika Sokolova teaches at the University of Notre Dame (USA) in England. She has published extensively on European Shakespeare and performance. With Kirilka Stavreva, she has co-authored the second edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare in Performance, Manchester University Press, 2023) and the essay cluster *Operation Shakespeare in Post-Communist Bulgaria* (Toronto Slavic Quarterly, 2017). She has co-authored, with Alexander Shurbanov, *Painting Shakespeare Red, An East-European Perspective* (University of Delaware Press, 2001). She is the author of *Shakespeare's Romances as Interrogative Texts* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1992) and *The Merchant of Venice* (Humanities EBooks, 2008). With Janice Valls-Russell she has co-edited *Shakespeare's Others in 21st-century European Performance, The Merchant of Venice and Othello* (Arden, 2022); with Nicoleta Cinpoes, a cluster of articles on the *Tempest* (*Shakespeare Bulletin* Vol. 29, No. 3, 2011); with Evgenia Pancheva, *Renaissance Refractions, Essays in Honour of Alexander Shurbanov* (Sofia University Press, 2001), and with Michael Hattaway and Derek Roper, *Shakespeare in the New Europe* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). Her articles have appeared in numerous journals and essay collections.

Kirilka Stavreva is professor and chair of the Department of English and Creative Writing at Cornell College, USA, where she co-founded the Foxden Press, a letterpress printing operation using a historic iron hand press. With Boika Sokolova, she has co-authored the second edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare in Performance, Manchester University Press, 2023) and the essay cluster *Operation Shakespeare in Post-Communist Bulgaria* (Toronto Slavic Quarterly, 2017). Stavreva is author of *Words Like Daggers: Violent Female Speech in Early Modern England* (University of Nebraska Press, 2015) and contributing editor of two e-book series on British Literature for the Gale Researcher platform (Cengage, 2017) as well as of the essay cluster *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Teaching Dante's Divine Comedy* (Pedagogy, 2013). Her scholarship on European Shakespeare and performance has appeared in numerous journals and essay collections.



Uroš Trefalt is a theatre and film director, teacher and dramaturge. He holds an M.A. degree in Syncretic Theatre from the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Theatre Studies at the Masaryk University in Brno, where his main research topic is international cultural diversity with a focus on puppet and alternative theatre in Central Europe. His main published works include a theoretical book *the Basis of Puppet Directing*, editorial work on the translation of a comprehensive history of European puppet theatre, and many articles in theatre journals, mainly in Slovenia.

Ema Vyroubalová is assistant professor in the School of English at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland. Her research and teaching interests include English Renaissance drama; Shakespeare's plays in global contexts; theory and practice of literary translation; and travel literature. She has published on multilingual elements in the literature of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and on stage and film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in Europe and the Middle East. Her most recent publication is an edition of the collected writings of the Reverend Jermyn Pratt (1723-1791), an English clergyman from Norfolk, co-edited with James Robert Wood. She has also been contributing to the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings initiative, organizing stage readings of over twenty plays by contemporary Ukrainian dramatists at Trinity College Dublin in June 2022 and June 2023.

Jana Wild is professor of Theatre Studies at the Academy of Performing Arts Bratislava, and head of board of the Ph.D. program for theatre, film and music studies. She teaches English and German theatre, methodology and critical writing. She writes on Slovak theatre and translates literature from German (F. von Schirach, E. Jelinek, C. Balme, R. Schimmelpfennig, C. Hein). Her research focus is on Shakespeare. She authored several monographies in Slovak (*Westward Hoe: Geographies of Slovak Shakespeares*, 2022; *Shakespeare. Zooming*, 2017; *An Enchanted Island: The Tempest Otherwise*, 2003; *Hamlet: the Adventure of a Text*; 1999, et al.), edited international collections, including those in English (*In double trust*, 2014; *Shakespeare in Between*, 2018), and published essays internationally. For the conference *Shakespeare in Changing Cultural Paradigms*, 2018 in Bratislava, she brought together academics from post-Communist countries and launched the initiative to work together on Shakespeare (Visegrád projects, CEESRA).

Oana-Alis Zaharia is lecturer of English at the English Department of the University of Bucharest. She is the author of the monograph *Cultural Reworkings and Translations in/of Shakespeare's Plays* (Bucharest, 2015). Her recent work has been published in prestigious international journals: *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, *SEDERI Yearbook*, *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, etc. She has co-edited and contributed to several volumes on Shakespeare and translation/adaptation: *Perspectives on Shakespeare in Europe's Borderlands* (co-editor, Bucharest 2020), *Shakespeare 400 in Romania. Papers Commemorating the 400th Anniversary of William Shakespeare's Death* (co-editor, Bucharest, 2017); *Shakespeare, Translation and the European Dimension* (co-editor, 2012) and *Inhospitable Translations: Fidelities, Betrayals, Rewritings* (Bucharest, 2010).



Šárka Havlíčková Kysová* 
Ivona Mišterová** 

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

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

* Masaryk University, Czech Republic. sarka.havlickova@phil.muni.cz

** University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic. yvonne@kaj.zcu.cz

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

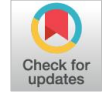
The section is concluded by the written version of Boika Sokolova's concluding speech performed at the Brno Theatralia Conference (7 June 2023). Her contribution is titled "Remembering the Past, Creating the Present." Sokolova explores Shakespeare's influence across cultures, stressing its role in shaping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

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

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

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Kirilka Stavreva* 
Boika Sokolova**
Natália Pikli*** 
Jana Wild**** 

Our Common Home: Eastern Europe / Central Europe / Post-Communist Europe as Signifiers of Cultural-Political Geographies and Identities¹

Abstract: The article discusses the historical mutability and political connotations of the geographical signifiers Eastern and Central Europe, and the chronotope Post-Soviet / Post-Communist Europe. It considers the tensions present in these denominations, arguing for the need to defamiliarize and re-define them. Three major sections survey the circumstances that shaped the referential and connotative values of the terms from the Enlightenment to the era of European integration. The article notes commonalities in the defining experiences of the countries in the east of Europe: their emergence from the ruins of former empires (Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman) and of the Soviet bloc. It considers whether the spatial terms have been developed from within or imposed from the outside, and discusses how they have perpetuated stereotypes of the region under consideration and its people(s) and generated enduring cultural myths. It concludes by proposing terms that recoup the cultural significance of the region—East-Central

* Cornell College, USA. kstavreva@cornellcollege.edu

** University of Notre Dame (USA) in England. bsokolov@nd.edu

*** ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University), Hungary. pikli.natalia@btk.elte.hu

**** VSMU (Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava), Slovakia. jana.wild@vsmu.sk

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Europe, its close correlative East-Centre Europe, the neologism Europeast—and by alerting scholars working on transnational Shakespeare adaptations to the importance of recontextualizing research in individual national traditions as part of a larger investigation of the mutual translatability of shared experiences.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Post-Soviet Europe, East-Central Europe, transnational Shakespeare, intra-European stereotypes, nationalism.

In his pioneering book, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe*, Zdeněk Stříbrný set out to create “a fuller survey of Shakespeare’s impact on the whole of Europe” and to “give Eastern Europe its due” (1). Our theoretical article, part of the multinational project “Crossing Borders with Shakespeare,” grapples with the significance of the geopolitical terminology used. It surveys the historically contingent human constructions of Eastern Europe as a space in which Shakespearean creations, among other cultural products, have circulated, and argues for an informed choice in the application of spatial terms and awareness of their ideological implications.

So what is this space: how has it been named and what can we make of its shifting designations? Stříbrný points to its mutable geographical boundaries, extending “from the Baltic to the Black Sea..., Ukraine and Belarus,” and including Russia, the Balkan states, Hungary (3-4), and Germany (57-76, 126-132). But the spatial terminology is not entirely consistent. While the title of the monograph clearly spells out “Eastern Europe,” the scope of the survey is described on the dust jacket of the hard copy as “the whole of Eastern and East Central Europe.” The discrepancy signals a tension in the geopolitical vocabulary, which this essay analyzes. Aware of the shifting conceptualizations of Eastern Europe, Stříbrný opted for a tight historical-political focus on “Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain” (4), singling out the experience of Communism and post-Communism as common for a number of European countries. In this sense his *apparatus criticus* is consistent with the Cold-War political divide in Europe, which continued to inform the concept of Eastern Europe at the end the 20th century. In the context of European integration and its challenges this approach is due for modification.

Linguistic, cultural, and political differences notwithstanding, we contend that commonalities in the historical experiences of the nations in this part of Europe well precede the Cold War era. To begin with, they were formed in the aftermath of the collapse of empires: Russian, 1917; Austro-Hungarian, 1918; German, 1918; Ottoman, 1820s-1918. Most had been on the borderlands of these empires; consequently, when the new sovereign states were established, their territories and political affiliations were shaped by the strategic games of the victors in imperial conflicts. Their borders were drawn and redrawn (more than once) without consideration for local populations and were often

deliberately created to foster further conflicts (Jalava and Stråth 46). (In this respect, the history of Eastern Europe offers another chapter, along with that of Africa and Asia to the study of the legacy of empires.) Pressed by the interests of “the great powers,” threatened “by the prospect of the destruction of the nation” or its fragmentation (Kiss 113), and yearning for self-preservation, national emancipation and territorial gain, these small states have fought wars in which they have inflicted heinous crimes on their domestic Others and their closest neighbours. Ethnic cleansing and suppression of linguistic and religious identities cast a long shadow on the region and form an indelible part of the post-imperial legacy in Eastern Europe; tensions flare up to this day. This can make the discussion of transnational historical, political, social, or cultural questions particularly fraught. Hence the imperative to conduct such discussions openly, with awareness of the importance of language in shaping history and identity. To put the matter in the words of the 2023 winner of the International Booker Prize, Bulgarian writer and public intellectual Georgi Gospodinov, “If not remembered, our past has the capacity to return, over and over again, disguised as our future” (“Izdavat ‘Vremeubezhishte’”).

In addition to the legacies of the old empires, the countries in this geopolitical area endured a second imperial dependency after the Second World War, and had to dig themselves out of its ruins. Whether, between 1945 and 1989, they were part of the Soviet Union or formally independent, though satellite, states, they have a *double* imperial legacy: the memory of the old empires was overlaid by the common imperial heritage of Soviet communism. Unfortunately, the chapter of imperial history within Europe is still unfinished. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, its successor state, the Russian Federation, has pursued irredentist claims to parts of the former Russian Empire and the former Soviet Union, resorting to military aggression in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine, and systematically seeking to expand its neo-imperial sphere of influence. The common historical trauma experienced by East European nations during the Communist era and doubly encoded in their historical memory has manifested itself in the affective affinity with the Ukrainian effort to counter the Russian invasion.

Soviet-era totalitarianism violently restructured East European societies, closed borders and restricted freedom of settlement within countries, brought about mass impoverishment and environmental disasters, and enforced intellectual and cultural control. At the same time, this experience, as well as its aftermath, were marked by profound ambiguities, which have been milked by nostalgic post-Communist mythmakers. One of these, at the very heart of the Communist system, is the chameleon slippage between ideology and practice: while ideology preached humanist values, its practice plunged society into state-sponsored violence and moral degradation (Todorov, *The Totalitarian Experience* 42). Another ambiguity follows from the way Communism

collapsed. Since it fell without a military defeat but rather, succumbed to the accumulated weight of economic, environmental, and military lies, the Communist *nomenclatura* (the top-echelon Party members and their families) and those whose rights and lives had been trampled by it often found themselves together in the new world, without clear distinction between victims and victimizers. Thus, a fully “equitable social resolution” could not be achieved “because the former Communist leaders, their families and entourage, had... become the richest men in their countries, large landowners and employers” (Todorov, *The Totalitarian Experience* 43). The Communist experiment may have ended, but not without tainting post-Communist societies.

Given these historical contexts, we should exercise care with geopolitical terminology when discussing how Shakespeare has filtered into the cultural consciousness of East European nations. His works have been woven into narratives of national identity as culturally European, a process in which myth-making and cultification have played their part, as Péter Dávidházi reminds us. Performances, translations, adaptations, and tradaptations were the routes through which Shakespeare’s plays rooted themselves in continental European cultures. Local theatre cultures provided the fertile soil for the success of English travelling players (Limon; Drábek and Katritzky) who, together with local companies performing in public spaces and aristocratic theatres, helped disseminate Shakespeare’s work (Drábek).

It was the Enlightenment and Romantic movements in Germany, which transformed Shakespeare into a vehicle for national self-expression. German culture and the evolution of the modern German language are considered “unthinkable” without “the Wieland, Schlegel, Tieck and Baudissin version of [Shakespeare’s] plays” (Hamburger 73). Similarly, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries Shakespeare was embedded in processes of political emancipation from the European empires, “drawing attention to [the] predicaments or idiosyncrasies” of national cultures (Kujawińska Courtney 243). The plays were translated into multiple languages; before long they were staged in the new national theatres, themselves important institutions of nation-building. As Shakespeare’s works were “nostrified” or “naturalized” (Minier 180), they began accruing political valency. Along with and sometimes integrated into literatures described by Csaba Kiss as dedicated to the cause of “national liberation and the formulation of the national ideology” (128), they were absorbed into larger cultural processes, helping articulate identities as “autonomous,” “national,” “Western,” “European,” depending on the exigencies of the historical context. Shakespeare’s overwhelmingly positive reception was facilitated by the fact that in Europe the English language was not a vehicle for imposing the cultural and educational dictates of a colonial power; rather, translated into different European languages, his works have been used to bolster *national* cultural and literary stature. If anything, the cultural historiographers of

East European states appear to have engaged in “a latent, unofficial competition ... as to which nation has the first mention of Shakespeare, produced the first translation, the first translation from the ‘original’,” etc. (Minier 180).

During the Communist era, totalitarian governments sought to subjugate national ideologies to the grand international narrative of Marxist ideology. Accordingly, Shakespeare’s established canonicity was embraced by the regimes, and his work “was officially elevated to the heights of the new ideological canon, with the fathers of Marxism at the apex of the pyramid and a number of other authors graded in a descending order beneath them” (Shurbanov and Sokolova 21). A set of policies mandated the manner of recruiting of the plays for such ideological purposes. However, theatre practitioners frequently staged Shakespeare, overtly and more often covertly, for the purposes of political critique, making the plays a double-edged political weapon of Aesopian innuendo. On the one hand, East European Shakespeare was tasked to prop up the system through his much-extolled humanism (the amorphous value supposed to be at the heart of the Communist experiment), on the other—the productions’ Aesopian language often corroded the ideological message and practice of Communism. As during the era of national formation, Shakespeare again was used to shape the political consciousness and political literacy of East Europeans; at the same time, East European theatre professionals gave Shakespeare a political home.

In the post-Communist era, the crudely ideological approach to Shakespeare was cast away. During the strenuous and sometimes dispiriting transition from totalitarianism, which began after 1989, theatre experienced a rapid diversification of approaches, amongst which the political retained its importance. As populism and autocratic governmental policies gained momentum after 2010, a growing number of Shakespeare theatre productions addressed political issues. Along with new translations, new adaptations, tradaptations, and transcreations, the plays cultivated—and sometimes provoked—a civic discourse about pivotal social shifts, moral cowardice and courage, political ethics, national myths and their manipulators, art and consumerism.²

To sum up, during the struggles for national emancipation from declining empires, East European countries followed roughly similar paths in appropriating Shakespeare for their respective nation-building projects. In the totalitarian era these appropriation processes started to converge, inculcating habits of interpreting Shakespeare politically and training audiences to read the plays against the grain of dominant ideology. Political and ethical engagements

² A case study of post-communist productions of *Hamlet* as building *communitas* and questioning political and ethical developments during the transition era is “‘To be/not to be:’ *Hamlet* and the threshold of potentiality in post-communist Bulgaria” by Kirilka Stavreva and Boika Sokolova.

with Shakespeare continued strong in the post-Communist era. Hence, the transcreations with which the research project “Crossing Borders with Shakespeare” engages are products of parallel, overlapping, and common historical circumstances, in which Shakespeare has been used as a vehicle for cultural expression, critique, and reflection.

Naming, Geographies and Identities

While we take it for granted that the production, transmission, and reception of the Shakespeare transcreations at the core of this transnational collaborative research project are products of human agency, we often forget that they originate and circulate in a space, which is itself the product of cognitive habits. As Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi contend in the introduction of their important collection, *European Regions and Boundaries*, the traditionally “multi-ethnic / transnational regions” of Europe are “specific *lieux de mémoire*” (1). The phrase underscores both the constructed quality of spatial categories and the power of memory to “create” and naturalize them. “Becoming aware of the historical contingency of spatial terminology,” Mishkova and Trencsényi caution, “also contributes to questioning the underlying assumptions of national historical cultures based on the purported naturalness of space” (3). Such awareness of the constructed underlying assumptions about space and culture is important in humanistic projects, including those focused on Shakespearean adaptation and transmission. Labelling a specific study as Eastern European, Central European, Post-Soviet, Post-Communist, etc., relies on and solidifies particular ways of thinking about this part of Europe, which may serve individual scholarly aims, but inevitably carries historical biases. Conversely, when we de-naturalize space as a cognitive foundation for articulating national identities, we open up possibilities for reimagining space and allow for the fluid re-articulation of cultural identities, be they national, regional, or European.

The next three sections of this geo-historical survey begin with a discussion of the tenuous geography of the mesoregions (medium-sized transnational regions) in the east of Europe. In each, we bring out the historical mutability of the terms used to map this space. Overlaps, divergences and cognitive tensions between different linguistic and discursive terms are pointed out. As we draw attention to the various re-iterations of the constructed geography of this European meso-region, from the Enlightenment to the present, we note whether the terms have been developed from within or imposed from the outside. We discuss how the use of these terms has perpetuated stereotypes of the regions and their people(s), and ingrained cultural myths. Finally, we assess the cultural-political connotations and effects of associated cultural tropes within discourses of inclusion and exclusion.

Our aim is to foster critical awareness of the affective, rhetorical, and political functions of the binary oppositions between East and West, European centre and its eastern margin, inclusivity and exclusion/fragmentation—oppositions that Roberto Dainotto argues are deeply embedded in “the rhetorical unconscious” (8). What historical narratives associated with the terms Eastern Europe, Central Europe, their multiple subdivisions (“East Central Europe,” “Southeastern Europe,” “The Baltic,” “The Balkans,” “The Western Balkans,” etc.), and “post-Communist Europe” can be useful in discussions of Shakespearean exchanges? Should we give up on some of the most familiar terms, should we modify them, or appropriate by defamiliarizing them and giving them new meanings?

Eastern Europe

Where does Eastern Europe begin and end? What does it lie east of? No fewer than ten geographical points have been claimed as Europe’s centre, presumably demarcating its East from its West (“Geographical midpoint of Europe”). The site first declared to be the midpoint was in Poland (1775), followed by sites in today’s Slovakia (1815), Ukraine (1887), Czech Republic (after the Second World War), Sweden (1988), Lithuania (1989), Hungary (1992), Belarus (2000), and most recently, Estonia (2008). All these places feature official markers, the most impressive of which is a star-crowned column in Lithuania, unveiled in 2004, the year of the country’s accession to the European Union. The markers and monuments of Europe’s geographical centre may demonstrate the development (and problems) of scientific methods of measurement, but they also participate in a larger socio-cultural discourse of European identity. A case in point is provided by the Lithuanian site, the only marker listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It has become a major tourist attraction with an Open-Air Museum of the Centre of Europe and a sculpture park, in addition to the monument. This elaborate arrangement, its commodification, and popularization through an international publication offer a fine example of some of the processes of embedding cultural narratives about geography into the popular unconscious and naturalizing them as “facts.”

The indeterminacy of the geographical centre of Europe is one of the difficulties in defining the continent’s mesoregions. What is particularly interesting in this case is that countries seem eager to locate it east of their own borders, as Frithjof Benjamin Schenk astutely observes. Thus, in contemporary popular German use, *Osteuropa* usually refers to a space “stretching eastwards from the border of the rivers Oder and Neisse and the Bohemian Mountains” (Schenk 189). Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians, however, would disagree with belonging to the European East, and tend to think of themselves as

Central European. Along similar lines, Ukrainians and Belarusians often think of themselves as living *between* Western and Eastern Europe, which implies that for them, Eastern Europe is synonymous with Russia. In Russian self-conceptualization, however, *Vostok* (East) refers to the Far East.

For Russia, it is not the East (*Vostok*), but Europe and the ever-morphing “West” that serve as the other in the process of self-identification. The centuries-long debates among Russian historians and philosophers about the country’s relationship with “the West” notwithstanding, since the 19th century Russia has thought of itself “as its own cultural space,” significantly, when considering the relationship of Russia and Europe (Schenk 189). During Gorbachev’s perestroika and for a few years after 1989, Russia briefly projected a conciliatory and inclusive vision of a unified “European community for the 21st century” of which it was an indelible part (Gorbachev). However, since 2000, under Vladimir Putin’s rule, the notion of Russian exceptionalism implicit in the old binary opposition Russia/Europe (the West) has morphed into an increasingly aggressive neo-imperialist project entitled *Rusky mir* (Russian World).³ By 2008 *Rusky mir* was weaponized as a policy doctrine, which envisaged the unification of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in a “‘sacred’ East Slavic orthodox community ... evoking the old idea of Holy Russia” (Jilge). In this scheme of things, Russia positioned itself as Byzantium’s spiritual successor and sole leader of the Orthodox world. As Mikhail Suslov explains, the most conservative turn of this “confrontational, irredentist and isolationist” project (Suslov, abstract) began implementation in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (Suslov 25). These aggressions were steps toward the project’s goal of creating a transnational union of all Russian-speaking populations, wherever in the world they may be, under the mantle of fundamentalist Russian Orthodoxy. This amounts to expanding Russian influence within and beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, supposedly offering an alternative to the so-called moral decadence of the West—an assimilatory project disguised as isolationist exceptionalism.

Unlike *Rusky mir*, Eastern Europe is a concept developed from the outside. As a cultural notion and mental space for Western fantasies, “Eastern Europe” came into being at the same time as “the Orient” and the rise of the “Hellenistic movement” during the Enlightenment. The designation relies on a model of stages and degrees of civilization, introduced by 18th and 19th-century French, English and German philosophers. In this model, Western Europe consisted of self-identified “civilized” nation states, while Eastern Europe was a generalized space considered to be “on a developmental scale that measured

³ The *Rusky mir* foreign policy project is funded through a host of state and NGO sources, including a government-sponsored foundation of the same name, established in 2007 with a decree by Vladimir Putin.

the distance between civilization and barbarism” (Wolff 13, see also Todorov, *Fear of Barbarians* 28-31). As Schenk points out, there were also ethnic and racial overtones to the regional divisions conjured up by 19th-century authors. Thus, Ernest Charrière posited in his monumental study *The Politics of History* (1841-1842) the existence of two distinct European races, a “*race occidentale*,” and a “*race asiatique*” who inhabited the territory east of the river Oder and the slopes of the Slovenian Alps where “*une autre Europe*,” mostly Slavic, began (qtd. in Schenk 195).

Whether seen as sites of pleasure or as economic adjuncts populated by racial inferiors, the Orient and Eastern Europe became desirable as territories for subordination and colonization. An example of the slippage between the two is the French way of referring to Eastern Europe (used as late as the First World War) as *Europe Orientale* or *l'Orient Européen* (the Orient of Europe) (Wolff 6). The conceptualization of Eastern Europe as part of the colonizing and economic aspirations of competing European empires is evident in the German, French, and Russian designations of various East-European regions, such as the Balkans, South-Eastern Europe, *Südostforschung*. As Diana Mishkova explains, before and during the First World War, *Südostforschung* related to Austro-Hungarian and German interests in an “adjacent area open up for grabs” (144). For Germany, the region was part of a vision of a strong *Mitteuropa*, in which the Balkan Peninsula lay in a German sphere of interest. Anxious about this, the French preferred to designate the territory in ethno-linguistic terms, describing the South Slavs “as the moral, political, and racial opposite to the Germans” (Mishkova 145).

Religious difference is another element in the semantics of the European East/West binary, used to differentiate between Eastern and Central Europe. The opposition goes back to the division of the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE and was conceptually strengthened by the Great Schism of 1054 between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Stefan Berger notes that the “schism produced both self-descriptions and descriptions of ‘the other,’ which operated with notions of space” (18). The Orthodox East projected itself as a stronghold of spirituality and, in turn, associated the Catholic West with the political overreach of the papacy. Conversely, Catholic Europe cast itself as more dynamic, and viewed the East as stuck in mysticism. The Reformation complicated these lines of religious division. Protestantism penetrated deep into Western and Central Europe, and created a new line of division between the Protestant North and the Catholic South (Berger 19). Nonetheless, as governments became increasingly secularized during the 19th century, the terms of the old division between “Oriental/Eastern” (Orthodox) Christianity and “Western” (Catholic and Protestant) Christianity were revamped into an opposition between Eastern despotism on the one hand, and Western liberty and the rule of law on the other. The association of East European countries with

despotism persisted in spite of the fact that during the last three decades of the 19th century constitutionalism and the rule of law became the form of state organization practiced *throughout* Europe (with the exception of the Russian and Ottoman Empires). Yet, French liberal historiographers from this era continued to consider Eastern Europe and Russia as “almost identical” religious, political, and cultural entities (Schenk 194).

The proliferation of the various East/West binaries by influential intellectual, academic, and political circles have infiltrated language, giving birth to pernicious cultural stereotypes of East Europeans. Among these is the image of a student to be instructed by a Western master and of a semi-civilized and volatile Other who is in the process of becoming fully European, a notion which Marje Kuus suggests was “an unspoken premise of EU and NATO enlargement” that began in 1999 (474). During the Communist era, Soviet-modelled ideological propaganda countered such stereotypes and created its own: Eastern Europe (the Soviet Bloc) was presented as a staunch protector of equality and flag bearer in the march toward the end of history. Ironically, Francis Fukuyama also associated East Europeans with the end of history, albeit in a very different context. In his famous 1989 essay, celebrating the end of the Cold War, he defined the end of history and “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final point of human government” (Fukuyama 4).⁴

Needless to say, stereotypes have glaring blind spots. On the opposite end from the imagined *Europe Orientale* with its tentative European-ness stands the idea of Greece as foundational to the Western self-image. Like its East European neighbours, Bulgaria and Serbia, that country was part of the Ottoman Empire up until the 19th century. It is proudly Christian Orthodox. Moreover, it has a 20th-century history of military authoritarianism and brutality in creating a single-nation state. Nonetheless, Greece has never been classified as East European. Since 18th-century Hellenism proclaimed it a cradle of the West (along with Imperial Rome), it has had a different status from its Balkan neighbours on the mental map of the West. Apart from Greece’s undoubtedly strategic position, its mythical standing as a cornerstone of Western civilization informed the post-Second World War division of the continent. At the Yalta conference in February 1945, Winston Churchill traded with Joseph Stalin the fate of millions of East Europeans, consigning them to the Soviet sphere of influence, only to proclaim in his speech in Fulton (1946) that “Athens alone—Greece with its immortal glories—[was] free.” Vaguely Hellenistic thinking underpinned Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s endorsement of the readmission of Greece, in 1981, to the European Economic Community, when he parried

⁴ First published in the summer of 1989, Fukuyama’s controversial essay, “The End of History?” was expanded as the monograph *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

objections that the country was far from ready with the line, “What is Europe without *Plato*?” (MacShane).

As Churchill’s Fulton speech drew the “Iron Curtain” across Europe, it valorized a new meaning of Eastern Europe and of its binary, Western Europe—the latter term, as Berger suggests, only gaining traction during the Cold War (16). The continent’s division and the terminological readjustments were cemented in Andrei Zhdanov’s 1947 Cominform speech, which branded the West as reactionary, aggressive, imperialist, and defined the Eastern Bloc as “democratic, anti-fascist, peace-loving.” Rivalling Churchill’s metaphor, Zhdanov presented a notion of Eastern Europe in lockstep with Soviet foreign policy, as a united front against the “American plan for the enthrallment of Europe” (meaning the Marshall Plan).⁵ The Russian imperial dream of westward expansion had become reality in the Soviet era, maintained through repression and bloodshed. Hundreds of forced labour camps were opened throughout the “Bloc.” Their human-crushing cruelty, along with the violent clampdown on any act of resistance became the *modus operandi* of the system. Such was the suppression of the Bulgarian anti-communist partisan “Goryani” movement (1945-1949; 1950-1956), of the Poznań workers’ protests (1956), the drowning in blood of the Hungarian uprising (1956), and the military invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968). They demonstrated the durability of the Iron Curtain and the subordination of the Communist Bloc countries to the dictate of the Soviet Union.

To sum up, Eastern Europe is not just an elusive geographical designation, but a concept with Orientalist and exclusionary historical connotations, which relate it to the subaltern and/or the ideological Other. This way of thinking has had major consequences and a tragic impact on the lives of millions of people. No wonder that many “Eastern Europeans” consider such identity “little more than a historical and moral stigma” (Bottoni 1).

Is it possible, then, to reclaim the concept of Eastern Europe for the current work on the routes and roots of Shakespearean transcreations originating in this part of Europe? Can we emulate what the field of Disability Studies has done for crip theory, and Sexuality Studies for queer theory? What would it take to do this? One thing is clear: such effort would demand a candid reflection on the existing conceptual tensions among Eastern, Central and Western Europe, and the notion of Europe itself.

⁵ The division of Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War also involved stipulations about the European North and South. However, the East / West stand-off resulted in marginalizing discussions of the geopolitical alignment of Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Finland.

Central Europe (Mitteleuropa, Zwischeneuropa)

The difficulties in defining Eastern Europe geographically persist when attempting to map the space of Central Europe. Not only is Europe's centre constantly shifting, as discussed above, the space itself seems to expand and contract; accordingly, the term "Central Europe" is a floating signifier. To use Mária Ormos's poetic phrasing, "just like the Danube, Central Europe is something that constantly changes" (10). Since the introduction of the term in the early 19th century, its meaning has been affected by politics as embedded in language, as exemplified by the divergent connotations of *Mitteleuropa*, *Zwischeneuropa*, *L'Europe Centrale*,⁶ the Masarykian *New Europe* (1920), and the *Other Europe* of the 1970s and 1980s.

As mentioned earlier, the transnational regions designated as Central Europe seem to work as mutable "lieux de mémoire." One such historically contingent spatial construct conceptualizes Central Europe in opposition to Eastern Europe on the basis of the medieval religious schism between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism (Dvorník 307; Szűcs 72). Later complicated by the Reformation, the understanding of Central Europe as non-Orthodox has had a long historical currency. Another rather restrictive use of the term aligns it with the German sphere of political and cultural influence. Contrasted to views of Central Europe as non-Orthodox or as German in orientation is its conceptualization as distinctively multicultural and multilingual—thus including not only Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, but also the Balkans and Ukraine.

As Trencsényi summarizes, "the geographical frame [of Central Europe] has been radically elastic depending on who is speaking" (181). The external viewpoints of the old imperial powers (German, French, English) risk being too general, the internal (small-state Central European) too narrow. None of the uses of the term can be politically or culturally neutral (Trávníček 243). If we consider its history, we note that problems of inclusion or exclusion persist to the present, with the result that Central Europe or East Central Europe are "conceptual clusters rather than individual concepts," implicated in discourses of "othering and counter-concepts" (Mishkova and Trencsényi 2).

Tracing the history of the term Central Europe helps shed light on the political baggage it carries. When introduced in the early 19th century, it was tied to the pan-Germanic ideas of political and economic theorists like Friedrich List and Constantin Frantz, who disregarded the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region. Rejecting the notion of a German-dominated Central Europe, Czech

⁶ As Ormos clarifies, the idea of *L'Europe Centrale* emerged in French political discourse between 1918 and 1932, aiming to counter German political hegemony (12, 19).

liberals like Karel Havlíček Borovský and František Palacký developed the idea of Austro-Slavism to acknowledge the role of the Slavic nations in the Habsburg monarchy, and, at the same time, oppose the pan-Slavic movement headed by Russia. The German geographer Johann August Zeune coined the term *Mittleuropa*, widely used in political regional studies to this day, which he loosely defined as “third region” dominated by German *and* Slavic populations, and including the multiethnic Carpathian basin (Trencsényi 166).

The concept gained wider political traction before and during the First World War in the writings of the German liberal politician Friedrich Naumann (1915). For him *Mittleuropa* was “a concentric framework pitting the continental German-dominated center against the Eastern and Western peripheries.” Naumann’s contemporary, geographer Albrecht Penck, introduced a different term, *Zwischeneuropa* (1915), imagining Germany as “the spinal column of continental Europe, [which was] to be organized into a state of federation” under its leadership (Trencsényi 167). Both saw Germany’s central place as justification for its controlling role in European economic and political affairs (Neumann 16). Naumann’s term *Mittleuropa* gained negative connotations after Hitler’s seizure of power and the Second World War (Trávníček 261).

A counter-narrative to these pan-Germanic ideas was developed by the politician, philosopher and first president of Czechoslovakia Tomáš Masaryk in his treatise *The New Europe* (1918), which ignited the imagination of Czechs and Slovaks at the dawn of the country’s independence. Rejecting German supremacy, he “offered a common regional narrative for the small nations between Germany and Russia” as a barrier against the expansionism of both powers (Trencsényi 168). Masaryk described Central Europe as “a peculiar zone of small nations extending from the North Cape [in Norway] to Cape Matapan [in Greece]” and including “Laplanders, Swedes, Norwegians and Danes, Finns, Estonians, Letts [Latvians], Lithuanians, Poles, Lusatians [Sorbian, or West-Slavic Germans in the Lusatian Lake District], Czechs and Slovaks, Magyars, Serbo-Croats and Slovenes, Roumanians, Bulgars, Albanians, Turks and Greeks” (272). Yet in spite of his enthusiasm for democratic alliance, he never considered a federalist union of independent Central European states.

In the aftermath of the First World War, then, Central Europe was re-imagined “not only without Germany, but against it.” It was seen as a “pro-Western buffer zone between Soviet Russia and Germany, ... the product of exceptional circumstances: the power vacuum created by the simultaneous World War I collapse of Germany and Russia” (Rupnik 241). Several federalist ideas for Central Europe appeared during the turmoil of the Second World War. In 1942, the exiled Czechoslovak politician Milan Hodža published *Federation in Central Europe*, envisioning a confederation of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Greece (Lukáč 99). Apart from individual projects like Hodža’s, exiled politicians from the area conducted negotiations about a federalist union of their countries after the war.

The failure of such ideas was unsurprising, as “multilateral logic has always succumbed to the superior bilateral logic of power” (Trávníček 268).

The bilateralism imposed by the Great Powers at the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Iron Curtain subsumed Central Europe into Eastern or Communist Europe. When the term was revived in the 1980s, it was used as a cultural, rather than economic or political concept.⁷ Its propagators were mainly dissidents from the Communist countries, as well as expatriate politicians and historians living in the West (Trávníček 276). An important role was played by *Cross Currents, a Yearbook of Central European Culture*, published at the University of Michigan between 1982 and 1993, edited by Ladislav Matejka. The journal offered an international scholarly platform for Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Polish dissidents, like Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Václav Havel, and Stanisław Barańczak. Years later, Matejka summarized its focus: “The theme of Central Europe as an abandoned West or a place where East and West collide ... provided a framework for including not only Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary but also Romania [...], Lithuania [...], the Balto-Slavic Latvia [...], Ukraine [...] and the distinct cultural zones of Yugoslavia” (Matejka).

The general public was introduced to the idea of Central Europe as a shared cultural space by Milan Kundera’s famous essay, “The Tragedy of Central Europe”, published in French under the title “Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragedie de l’Europe centrale” in 1983 and soon after released in London and New York. Kundera, by then living in Paris, argued for a Central Europe as a West kidnapped by the Communist Russian East. He was referring exclusively to Communist Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, emphasizing the role of culture for the survival of these nations wedged between Germany and Russia. Kundera argued for a culturally, not geographically, defined Central Europe, an emanation of “the greatest variety within the smallest space” as opposed to a “Russia founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space [...], uniform, standardizing, centralizing” (33). This view, though criticized as a simplified and rather exclusionary “pop version of the Central Europe concept” (Susan Sontag, qtd. in Trávníček 204), nonetheless put Central Europe on the mental map of the world.

After the collapse of Communism, the ideas championed by dissident intellectuals in the 1980s were embraced by the political leaderships of Poland, Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and Hungary, leading to the establishment of the Visegrád Group (1991) and the countries’ coordinated accession to the European Union in 2004. Cultural institutions supporting the

⁷ European historian Timothy Garton Ash has argued for the usefulness of the term Central Europe in academic discourse as a reminder, especially to Western scholars, “that the academic study of this region could be more than footnotes to Sovietology.”

distinctiveness of this more narrowly defined Central Europe were established. In 1991, Hungarian-born Jewish American businessman George Soros founded the Central European University in Prague; in 1996 it moved to Budapest, and in 2019 (for political reasons) to Vienna. The vicissitudes experienced by this institution demonstrate the increased cultural and political pressures on the alignment of Central Europe with Western liberalism in recent years. Government and legislative actions against gender and sexuality rights in Poland, against immigration in Hungary and Slovakia, as well as government resistance to European Union sanctions of Russia for waging war against Ukraine in Hungary show the erosion of the Visegrád Group's cultural identification with Western liberalism.

A foundational cultural myth of Central European identity is the Romantic metaphor of the centre located between West and East, profiting or suffering from both. This experience of "in-between-ness," of being wedged between a Russia-dominated East and an "advanced" Western Europe (mostly symbolized by Berlin and Paris), may account for the supremacy of culture in self-identification narratives. Living under the rule or in the shadow of empires, the survival of one's own language and culture became a tool for political emancipation. Culture and especially literature took the role of lay religion for Central European identity, creating a "homeland in the sky," in the words of Hungarian poet Gyula Illyés.⁸

Critiquing an exclusionary understanding of Central Europe, Trencsényi shows how the term "was often used as a counter-concept of something else (originally more of the West, later of the East), [serving] at the same time ... the purpose of creating symbolic bonds between national frameworks that seemed to be in permanent conflict" (181). On his part, Timothy Garton Ash uncovers "an interesting semantic division" in the political rhetoric of 1980s dissident public intellectuals, who "use the terms 'Eastern Europe' or 'East European' when the context is neutral or negative; when they write 'Central' or 'East Central,' the statement is invariably positive, affirmative, or downright sentimental."

Unlike Masaryk's broadly inclusive understanding of Central Europe, such distancing from the East comes across as an instance of what Milica Bakić-Hayden has defined as "nesting orientalism," or a gradation of "Orients" reproducing the East/West dichotomy of the Enlightenment. Its extreme manifestation is Balkanism, the presentation of the Balkans as the Other of Central Europe, "sometimes alongside with, sometimes indistinguishable from" Russia (Todorova 160). "In this pattern," Bakić-Hayden writes, "Asia is more 'East' or 'other' than eastern Europe; within eastern Europe itself this gradation

⁸ The first translations of Shakespeare into Hungarian, Czech, Polish and Slovak by the Romantic generation were key to the birth of their respective national literatures, around which national identities grew. On the Romantic cult of Shakespeare in Hungary, see Péter Dávidházi.

is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as the most ‘eastern;’ within the Balkans there are similarly constructed hierarchies” (918). Ironically, the use of Central Europe to lay claim to a desired (West-) European identity and status has resulted not only in the othering of the East of Europe, but also in a multiplication of Eastern Europes (Kuus 484).

As a historically contingent concept, Central Europe raises a similar host of questions for studies of the literatures and cultures of the region as does Eastern Europe. The challenge then is not to endorse a perception of it as an un-East or a “kidnapped West,” thus perpetuating the old binaries. The challenge is to foster an understanding of the complexity of Central Europe not only as a conduit between East and West, but as a site of local intercultural exchanges—precisely the task at the core of this transnational Shakespeare project.

Post-Soviet/Post-Communist Europe

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the Eastern Bloc chronotope was transformed into “post-Soviet/post-Communist Europe,” a space both outside the polity of the European Union and potentially offering opportunities for its expansion. Once again, the boundaries of this space were uncertain and continuously morphing, subject to economic, political and even military pressures. This was very much a transitional space. Countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Bloc or the Soviet sphere of influence (like former Yugoslavia) could ostensibly embrace the values and structures of the European Union or else align themselves with Russian interests and *Rusky mir*. The choice was influenced by geography and the external support or external pressure exercised upon the various countries’ political forces. In the case of former Soviet republics like Georgia and Ukraine, it has been thwarted by Russian military occupation and aggression.

Post-Communist countries which made the choice to join the EU were not without external pressures. No longer Eastern and not yet Western, they were expected to follow and adapt to the model of free-market economy and democratic governance. The lexical in-betweenness signalled by the term evokes the Enlightenment notion of Eastern Europe as not *quite* European. This externally developed definition was now subtly transformed into an understanding of post-Communist Europe “as not *yet* European” (Kuus 473, emphasis added). In fact, given the large-scale destruction in the 1990s of the already underperforming centralized economies, the devastation of almost all social support networks as well as of cultural and educational institutions, and the demographic crisis, the post-Communist countries’ scale of development was downgraded. They were “no longer treated as a second world—antagonistic but capable of industrial innovation—but as a variant of third world—and hence a space under Western tutelage” (Kuus 475; see also Cohen and Wedel).

While the back-loaded term “post-Soviet/post-Communist Europe” may capture the historic fall of a totalitarian regime, it is problematic in a number of ways. First, it reduces two centuries of geopolitical, cultural, and intellectual self-identifications by small European nations to the historical experience of the communist era. Next, ironically enough, it recycles the language of Zhdanov’s “Soviet Bloc,” perpetuating stereotypes that reinforce the East/West binary opposition in the era of European integration. During the hard decades of the transition, the semantic privilege of this binary’s Western pole went hand in hand with imposing financial and economic deprivation on the East. Critics of the neo-liberal methods of the post-Communist transition, notably Marcela Kostihová, have pointed out their exploitative nature. These methods included the “structural adjustment” of economies as a prerequisite for international loans, blunt enforcement of “free markets” markedly different from the subsidized agriculture and the regulatory mechanisms of markets in the west of Europe, brutal “shock therapy” and more. “In the aftermath of the West’s official relinquishment of its colonies,” Kostihová writes, “neoliberalism has come to replace (and frequently expand) the frontiers of predominantly Western economic and political exploitation,” peddling “colonialism in far more elegant new clothes” (25-26).

It may appear that the post-Soviet/post-Communist historical experience, exacerbated by the quasi-colonial nature of the neoliberal transition, might call for the application of a postcolonial theoretical framework. However, we suggest that a whole-sale application of postcolonial theory to Shakespeare Studies in the context of Eastern Europe amounts to embracing a problematic vestigial paradigm and should be done with care. Mainstream post-colonial theorists have not shown much interest in the post-imperial post-Soviet experience. Partially, this is because Western audiences are interested in atoning for the atrocities of their own empires as long as these are outside of Europe. Partially, because the ill-defined image of Eastern Europe in Western geopolitical discourse has obscured intra-European imperial pasts. If a postcolonial theoretical framework were to be applied to cultural work in the post-Soviet/post-Communist era specifically, it would need to confront residual admiration for the imperial heritage embedded in national cultural mythmaking.

The Perils of Centrifugal Nationalisms in the East of Europe: Some Considerations for an Informed Use of Spatial Terminology

Already in the 1990s, right-wing politicians started to incite radical nationalist sentiments in the region, in opposition to European transnationalism. Although such views were hard to discern in the exhilaration of accessions to the European Union, the high social price of the transition’s neoliberal methods, among other

factors, facilitated the growth of nationalist-populist movements. By the 2010s, nationalist parties and coalitions were routinely disrupting earlier political discourses of a shared past and present east of the former Iron Curtain, stoking “restorative nostalgia” for a glorious, often medieval, past (Boym 30).⁹ Authoritarianism gained political power across the region, resulting in parliamentary representation and in some cases a majority for far-right parties. The growth of anti-pluralist populism has been enabled by “the betrayal of the intellectuals” and their transformation into extremist ideologues (Applebaum 17),¹⁰ disseminating old fears and hatreds like anti-Semitism, as well as new ones, like anti-migration sentiments. Scapegoating, divisiveness, and “the medium-sized lie” or the cult of post-factuality in a hyperconnected world have become major tools in upholding the power of authoritarian, sometimes Moscow-supported, parties (e.g. FIDESZ in Hungary, Ataka and later Vazrazhdane [Revival] in Bulgaria, Ľudová strana naše Slovensko [People’s Party Our Slovakia] and Smer [Direction] in Slovakia, PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] in Poland).

The rise of authoritarian populism after the end of the Cold War world order is part of a larger, bleaker picture, of which political theorists have warned. Rather than Fukuyama’s final victory of liberalism, Ken Jowitt predicted a “surge of anger” in the wake of the “predictable failure (in most cases) of the market and [of] electoral democracy to produce sovereign, productive, equitable nations in the greater part of Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union.” He cautioned of “a worldwide conflict between liberally oriented ‘civics’ and insular ‘ethnics’,” directly challenging the values of liberal democracy (Jowitt 20). Most disturbingly, Jowitt envisioned the redrawing of borders and forced reshaping of identities in a “time rife with dystopian, mutated and unpredictable regimes,” with Europe as “the epicenter of the world disorder” (Krastev 15).

In the face of such an uncertain future, the language used by intellectual and academic circles ought to be a corrective to the centrifugal forces of populism and nationalism. Furthermore, the spatial terminology and focus that we choose for our interpretative work will doubtlessly inform the development of critical methodologies. While national Shakespeare studies are absolutely essential for developing the field, without awareness of a wider transnational context, they run the risk of being appropriated by nationalistic ideologies. In this context, the transnational project presented in this special issue is a timely effort to recontextualize the research of individual national traditions of adapting Shakespeare as part of a larger investigation of “reciprocal cultural dependencies” (Skrodzka 12) and the mutual translatability of shared experiences.

⁹ Anne Applebaum tracked the road to authoritarianism in Poland and Hungary between 1999 and 2019 in *The Twilight of Democracy* (2020).

¹⁰ Applebaum points out that the notion was introduced in Julien Benda’s *La trahison des clercs*, 1929.

Perhaps we can recoup the cultural weight of *Eastern Europe* as an autonomous mesoregion with a cultural tradition that speaks important truths to the world. Or we can reverse the word order of the term and introduce the neologism *Europeast*, foregrounding the Europeaness of the region. Yet another option might be to choose Jenő Szűcs's term *East-Central Europe*, heeding to Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer's argument that this "is no geographical or political given," rather, it is an *imagined community*, "constructed out of linguistic, religious, and ethnic elements" whose grouping is historically contingent (18). The hope in using this spatial term (or its close correlative *East-Centre Europe*, intended to tip Europe's centre eastward conceptually), is that it will contribute to the continued self-examination and reinvention of the region as "a zone of literary interfaces" (Drace-Francis 363), a generator of creative ideas and collaboration, rather than "an epicenter of disorder."

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Zsolt Almási* 
Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney** 
Mădălina Nicolaescu*** 
Klára Škrobánková**** 
Ema Vyroubalová***** 
Oana-Alis Zaharia***** 

Politics, Shakespeare, East-Central Europe: Theatrical Border Crossings¹

Abstract: This essay discusses how productions of Shakespeare's plays that transcend various geographical, national, and linguistic boundaries have influenced the theatrical-political discourse in East-Central Europe in the twenty-first century. It focuses primarily on the work of four internationally-established directors: Andrei Șerban (Romania), Jan Klata (Poland), David Jařab (Czech Republic), and Matei Vișniec (Romania), whose works have facilitated interregional cultural exchange, promoting artistic innovation and experimentation in the region and beyond. Among the boundary-crossing productions analysed in detail are Vișniec's *Richard III will not Take Place*, Jařab's *Macbeth – Too Much Blood*, Klata's *Measure for Measure*, and Șerban's *Richard III*. The essay also notes that while there has been a relative scarcity of Shakespearean productions in this region engaging closely with gender and race inequalities, productions such as Klata's

* Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Hungary. almasi.zsolt@btk.ppke.hu

** University of Lodz, Poland. krystyna.kujawinska@uni.lodz.pl

*** University of Bucharest, Romania. madalinanicolaescu@gmail.com

**** Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. klara.skrobankova@gmail.com

***** University of Dublin, Ireland. vyroubae@tcd.ie

***** University of Bucharest, Romania. oana-alis.zaharia@lts.unibuc.ro

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African Tales or Vladimír Morávek's *Othello* manage to work with these politically charged topics in subtler but still productive ways. The essay concludes that the region's shared historical experience of totalitarian regimes followed by the struggles of nascent democracies, provides a fertile ground for a diverse and internationally ambitious Shakespearean theatre.

Keywords: race, racism, political theater, William Shakespeare, Jan Kott, adaptation, cultural mobility, cultural transmission, microhistories, translation.

Introduction

From his plays' first performances in Elizabethan England to their adaptations in contemporary theatre, Shakespeare has played a significant role in shaping cultural and political discourses in various societies, and reciprocally his plays have been used for ideological and political purposes. As John J. Joughin aptly reminds us, since Shakespeare's first appearance on the stage of the Theatre to the present day "the playwright has been adopted by almost every faith, political hue and persuasion. Yet paradoxically these attempts to bind Shakespeare to an individual cause [...] only serve to confirm that the plays and poems remain irreducible to a particular context or a uniform party-political position" (Joughin 1). Within this paradoxical realm, our present inquiry endeavours to explore how Shakespeare's plays have assumed a significant role in presenting and exploring politics, reflecting on socialism, totalitarian oppression, present-day social issues, and political debates.

The vastness of this subject, as evidenced by recent scholarship and publications concerning Shakespeare and politics, could easily fill numerous volumes. Consequently, we shall adopt a more targeted approach, forsaking Shakespeare's *oeuvre* in all its mediated manifestations in favour of a focus solely on theatrical productions. Rather than examining productions across the globe, our analysis shall concentrate on a specific region, namely, East-Central Europe. To go beyond the particularity of countries, however problematic the term "countries" may be in the region, and "the topicality and relevance" (Rayner 3), we will pay particular attention to theatrical phenomena that crossed borders, both literally and metaphorically.

Shakespeare's plays have been translated and performed in the region since the 18th century and played a crucial role in presenting and shaping the political and politico-cultural landscapes of the region. In his instructions to the players concerning "the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is" Hamlet claims that "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time" (3:2:21-26). In harmony with these instructions, Shakespeare's plays represented, reflected, and fashioned the cultural public discourse in the

various historical periods, although not necessarily at the same time, nor with the same emphases in the different countries of the region. This paper will explore the political discourse associated with the diverse border crossing modalities of Shakespeare's works within the East-Central European region by identifying a selection of micro-histories of the most relevant productions.

As an illustration of the way Shakespeare fashioned the political discourse, it suffices to refer to the Polish example. It seems important to stress here the repercussions of Shakespeare's positioning in Polish culture initiated by his "proper" entry into Polish theatre on April 4th, 1798, when Wojciech Bogusławski (1757-1827) staged his translation, or more precisely, his adaptation, of *Hamlet*. His adaptation/interpretation followed two closely interrelated themes: *Hamlet*, the play, was wielded as a tool for a bitter social and political commentary, often through metaphor, whereas the character, with all his eschatological and metaphysical discourse, came to be identified with Poland's spiritual, artistic, and intellectual life. The latter, which was sometimes called a Hamlet-like psychology or "hamletizing," functioned as a mirror reflecting the Polish moral paralysis in critical moments of political decision-making which, in 1964, Jan Kott, who analyses *Hamlet* from a Polish perspective, succinctly labelled as "a sponge [...] [which] immediately absorbs all the problems of our time" (Kott 87). Indeed, since that time in the East-Central European region Shakespeare has frequently provided "allusions to such burning issues as public morality, power, cruelty, justice, and attitudes to governments elected with the consent of the people and to governments self-imposed by the usurpers of power" (Csato 3). In other words, the first productions of Shakespeare, in Poland Bogusławski's production played a crucial role in the positioning of Shakespeare in the regional cultures over the centuries. They introduced the tradition of treating Shakespeare's text as a convenient commentary on current political experiences and social dilemmas. Since then, creative and literary responses have contextualised many of Shakespeare's characters, especially Hamlet, as the archetypes of people entangled in patriotic battles, with common aspects of the plays reworked to reflect national mentality, complexes, inhibitions, obsessions, and inclinations (Kujawska Courtney 71-78).

During the 19th century, his plays were instrumental in shaping the emerging national consciousness of many East-Central European nations including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Poland. Translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays appeared. Eminent philosophers, writers, artists, and various other cause célèbre figures published their scholarly and critical approaches, and visual art and creative writing inspired by Shakespeare and his works were circulated in various publications. Yet, as Russell Jackson said "the variety and vitality of the theatrical world, which [...] made Shakespeare an honorary citizen, was crucial for establishing

his reputation as an international star” including the Eastern- European context” (3-4). But this process represented a two-way “business” between Shakespeare and the “wandering stars.”

On the one hand, it was the show business that decisively contributed to the enhancement of Shakespeare’s popularity, since given the high rate of illiteracy in nineteenth-century Europe, the theatres constituted the most accessible means of reaching a lower-class audience. On the other hand, “theatrical stars” obtained their greatest success in performing Shakespearean roles. “[W]ithout regard for the old barriers of language or cultural tradition,” as Marvin Carlson succinctly demonstrates, “these remarkable actors and actresses roamed throughout Europe [...], dazzling the theatre-going public wherever they went” (Carlson 11). In a sense, when in the nineteenth century relevance of ethnicity and culture became important because of their urgent political implications with the emergence of nationalism and imperialism, the international performances of the “travelling theatrical stars” served as a vehicle for the early globalisation, in this context, Europeanization, of Shakespeare and their own theatrical careers. They triggered the production and consumption of his plays without regard for national or cultural boundaries because Shakespeare’s dramas represented a significant part of the cultural capital shared by many East-Central European countries. At that time the repercussions of the travelling performers’ phenomenon, such as Ernesto Rossi, Adelaide Ristori, Tommaso Salvini, Sarah Bernhardt, and Ira Aldridge both upon Shakespeare studies and upon the East-Central European theatrical activities, culture, arts, and frequently politics was more complex than this work can accommodate. Nonetheless, it seems necessary to stress that nowadays, in the twenty-first century, we witness a kind of inverted synergy between the Western and East-Central European approaches to Shakespeare. While in the past, the Western model motivated and inspired the East-Central European cultures, now the East-Central European one seems to impact the Western approach to Shakespeare, especially in theatre.

In line with this 19th-century engagement with politics, the public discourse of the 20th century witnessed similar interests, naturally with the given social-political issues. Shakespeare’s plays thus were often used to express political dissent, presenting political problems first and foremost in relation to the respective countries’ socialist regimes. After the political changes in 1989, Shakespeare could also be seen as a politically charged cultural phenomenon, even if there appeared other channels, e.g., contemporary playwrights to challenge the respective regimes. As the present position paper aims to describe and problematize the engagement with post-socialist Shakespeare theatrical productions in the region, before turning to specific theatrical details, mapping out a few theoretical and terminological cornerstones of the present investigation seems necessary.

By the region we mean the present-day countries, where ethnicities do not necessarily correlate with official state borders. The countries we focus on in this position paper include the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Poland. In the region neither ethnic nor political borders have functioned to disconnect peoples of the region. On the contrary, there has been a vital and inescapable cultural exchange among the countries and the peoples due to being metaphorically united by the Soviet oppression and by its consequences. Shakespeare's influence on East-Central Europe, thus, extends beyond national borders, as adaptations of his plays were carried from one country to another, and directors produced Shakespeare in different countries, exploring the similarities in historical and present-day political issues. Also, more radical adaptations, tradaptations,² and rewritings travelled from one country to another, from one language to another, from one culture to another. In this context, a framework that we find useful and applicable to our project is the one proposed by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer in the General Introduction to the four-volume *The History of Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (2004)[1]—an endeavour that seeks to reshape the perception of the area and construct a narrative specific to the region, encompassing its cultural diversity, while also acknowledging its ethnic and formal inclusiveness. Upon considering the complex and politically influenced identities associated with terms like “Central Europe,” “Mitteleuropa,” and “the Balkans,” the two editors opt for the use of “East-Central Europe” to define the region, arguing that it is a less divisive term, one that “has fewer undesirable historical connotations:”

For our purposes the unifying feature of East-Central Europe is the struggle of its peoples against the German and Russian hegemonic threats. In this sense, the region is a liminal and transitional space between the powers in the west and the east, a long but relatively narrow strip stretching from the Baltic countries in the north to Macedonia in the south. To the west it is clearly bounded by the hegemonic German cultures of Germany and Austria; to the east it is hemmed in by Russia's political and cultural sphere, but the border is, admittedly, less distinct, for the Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldavia were both part of Russia's hegemonic power and suppressed by it. Their literatures developed both in tandem with, and in opposition to the dominant Russian one. (Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, 2004: 6)

² In 1996 the playwright Michel Garneau coined the term “tradaptation” to describe his translation of *Macbeth* into Quebecoise. This translation was a highly particularized hybrid between a translation and an adaptation (Salter 123). The term highlights the fluid border between the two, both being regarded as forms of cultural reworking of the source text.

Other additional forces, such as the Ottoman Empire with its significant contribution to the culture of the Balkans as well as the various internal differences and conflicts among the countries in the region, have also shaped and interrelated the literatures and cultures of these nations. The contributors' aim is to redefine the geographical landscape while also questioning the use of such traditional notions as national literature and writers, national movements, the idea of history as a linear narrative in the representation of the region and its literature—"an approach that not only ignored or suppressed the intra-regional connections and exchanges, but [it] also disregarded the power of the national awakening in neighbouring nations" (7). Instead, the editors propose a transnational approach organised around the concept of "nodes." These nodes can take on different meanings, such as representing significant dates or clusters of dates in political history, providing topographical perspectives on the literary culture of border areas and sub-regions, or examining the emergence and transformations of cultural institutions like theatres, academies, journals, publishers, censorship, and other public organisations during the period of national awakening. This approach offers the advantage of enabling the identification of both the similarities and discontinuities among different national traditions. It also implicitly draws attention to the relationship between these traditions and Western culture, against which they have often defined themselves.

By "politics" we mean both a narrower and a wider concept. In its narrow meaning, politics refers specifically to the activities associated with the governance of a state or other political entity, which ultimately boils down to the "acquisition and maintenance of power" (Filipkowsky 51). This includes the formulation of policies, the establishment of laws, and the administration of government programs. In this sense, politics is often associated with power struggles, as different political groups or individuals compete to control the levers of state power and influence policy decisions. However, the term "politics" can also have a wider, more classical meaning, encompassing a broader range of social and cultural activities, i.e. "everything which relates to the collective life of people limited within a given political community (state)" (Filipkowsky 48). For example, the term can refer to the processes through which people negotiate and make decisions about collective issues and problems. In this sense, politics is not necessarily limited to formal institutions of governance but can encompass a range of social and cultural practices that shape the ways in which people interact with each other and make decisions about their lives. Furthermore, the wider meaning of politics can also include issues related to power, and to inequality in society, such as race/ethnicity. When exploring these, a special attention should be paid to concepts such as exclusion, absence, and dilution. This also includes coming to terms with politics, presenting similarities between the practices of the socialist and the democratic periods. We think that both the narrower and wider meaning of politics should

be explored during the effort of understanding Shakespeare's political role in the region.

As one of the major elements defining the construction of East-Central Europe is the experience of communism, due attention has to be paid to Shakespearean "dramatic transcreations"—forms of radical appropriation (Orlich)—that address the issue of coming to terms with the traumas inflicted by the totalitarian regimes. In what ways has Shakespeare been employed to assist in the process of mourning the communist past (in the sense of the Freudian working through) so as to ensure that present generations can effectively acknowledge past sufferings and complicity with power, and thus restore justice and achieve reconciliation and regeneration? Specifically, how can these reworkings shed light on the failures in the collective memory work that have contributed or could potentially contribute to the resurgence of authoritarian regimes? How could Shakespeare be redeployed in a public resistance to ongoing "forgetfulness," and thus prove once again the existential importance of still playing Shakespeare, albeit in revised, rewritten forms.

Matei Vişniec's *Richard al III-lea se interzice sau Scene din Viaţa lui Meyerhold* / *Richard III Will Not Take Place; or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* is a case in point. It is part of the Romanian playwright's efforts as a public intellectual to undertake an "emotional denunciation" of the communist totalitarian system as an issue that cannot be ignored or forgotten but has to be brought to the awareness of present generations. Vişniec addresses the multiple gaps related to this subject—the temporal gap of a present generation that either does not know much and cannot properly relate to the past and its terror of totalitarian regimes, or who has abandoned the work of memory as too painful and complicated, given the traumas and the mass complicity involved. The other gap refers to the divide between the East and the West, with the latter having a rather hazy view of communist terror, resistant to being associated with or compared to the fascist one (see Todorov—discussed in position paper 1). As a Romanian playwright, who had experienced communism first hand before he left for France in 1987 in a form of self-imposed exile and who publishes in French, therefore very much like the director Andrei Şerban, who belongs to two worlds, he has been trying to bridge these gaps and dramatically represent the East-Central European experience to the West as well as to East-Central Europe. The audience targeted is first and foremost French (the play was first performed at the Festival of Avignon in 2001) who know little about the Stalinist persecution of independent artists. Secondly, he targets the Romanian public, including an older generation who can fully relate to the allusions to the Communist wooden language and repressive rhetorical clichés, as well as to a younger generation, who may well miss these meanings but who are to be initiated into the process of memory and transitional justice in a "visceral" way, as he himself describes it, not via discourse but via powerful dramatic images

and plots. As Vişniec is endeavouring to bridge the divides of past and present and of East and West, his Shakespearean transcreation displays a high degree of adaptability, a potential to be easily recontextualized so as to make it resonate with current problems in various countries. In Italy, for example, the Generalissimo (i.e., Stalin) was shown onstage as Mussolini and the past that was evoked and had not been completely worked through was the fascist one. This example also points to the possibility of a convergence of the two traumatic pasts—fascist and communist—that has been resisted by Western scholars and politicians (see Todorov and Tismaneanu). The play has been a great success in crossing borders, having been translated into ten languages and performed worldwide.

As the play is bent on dramatizing the terror of Stalinism so as to help the audience vicariously experience its abysmal depths, and emotionally understand the generalised fear it produced (a recurrent question in the play is “Why are you afraid Richard?”—Richard being both Shakespeare’s character and the actor who performs it and is not given a name) it abounds in grotesque images—such as Richard’s head on a plate, with Stalin as a cook, feeding the actors. The question arises as to the viability of the employment of the grotesque in today’s approaches to Shakespeare. The grotesque has had a long history in the Communist theatre, starting with Meyerhold and continuing with independent / oppositional theatre people in the cold War period and beyond it—Jan Kott in Poland, and in Romania directors such as David Esrig, Andrei Şerban, and Liviu Purcarete. British materialist Shakespearean scholars and theatre people have been deeply distrustful of the communicative power of the grotesque, favouring more straightforward and less “depressing” strategies than those that are indebted to the Theatre of the Absurd. Furthermore, is the indirectness of the grotesque still necessary? Or is it that the situation of censorship of the theatre dramatized in Vişniec’s play has, in fact, been reintroduced in some countries, which obliges theatre people to resort to strategies of the past, albeit in revised and re-written forms? In the play, Shakespeare, though an icon of the socialist society, widely translated and available in all libraries, is a suspect. The Secret police are working on a file on him, taking him to be a subversive element of the Western culture. Worse are the “pernicious adaptations” of his plays in productions that “betray” the Shakespeare imposed by the State, via its cultural repressive policies. Vişniec’s play, as a revisionist adaptation of Shakespeare, could be placed in the same category. Powerful evidence in this sense is the recent case of rejecting on political grounds the inclusion of the play in Iran’s most important festival Fadjr International Theatre Festival in 2018-2019 (Farinaz Kavianifar). Should we look upon these events as paradoxically “good news”—as they suggest that the theatre, Shakespeare in forms of transcreations, still has the threatening power that the socialist regimes feared?

One is, however, tempted to see the region as a politically and culturally homogeneous entity, but this is far from the truth. Although the post-Soviet East-Central region shares a historical experience, i.e., living under socialist dictatorships, and the fragile nature of democratic institutions after 1989, both these experiences and the reactions, more precisely theatrical reactions may well show differences in practice. These differences are owing to the specific tensions within the given societies, the tension among the countries, tensions regarding and regardless of nationalities, minorities and languages, specific theatrical and cultural traditions, the differences in the relationship between authorities and theatrical life, the differences in the structures that determined the operation of theatres, companies and the dispositions and priorities of the individual theatre makers.

Presenting the heterogeneity of the region's approach to Shakespeare, we should draw attention to the significance of Jan Kott's work *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), which for many decades has influenced and, in a way, consolidated the theatrical treatment of Shakespeare's plays, treating them as the epitomes of incisive national commentaries on the political, social and cultural situations. Owing to his ideas, Shakespeare's texts supplied directors with relatively safe dramaturgical material, allowing for interpreting the immediate reality within the realms of the political allusions and metaphors skilfully incorporated in the theatrical *mise en scene*. With time, as some critics claim, the "mutilation" of Shakespeare became a standard approach in the region's theatre, especially during the Communist regime, though even nowadays, it is still possible to discover Kott's presence in the post-dramatic stagings, which make use of his legacy via the perspectives of our own time such as age, gender, posthumanism, religion, race and other burning contemporary issues which have emerged or re-emerged in times of indeterminacy and contingency of meanings, as well as the awakening of autocratic ideology (Kujawska Courtney, 2023 publication pending).

The complex relationship between homogeneity of the shared political experience and the differences in the everyday realities of the region makes exploring the political Shakespeare's difficult. The methodological difficulties lie in the diversity of data, the complex nature of the sources and the relatively small number of the acts of crossing borders (political, geographical, national and linguistic). By the diversity of data, we mean that acts of crossing borders seem to be driven by mere chance, e.g., arbitrary connections between theatrical stakeholders, financial considerations, political inclinations instead of systematic efforts to enrich each other's cultures and theatres. If, however, there were an enormously large number of even these diverse crossings of borders, patterns may emerge, but a further problem follows from the small number of border crossings. A relatively small number of transgressing geographical, political and linguistic borders cannot result in absolutely reliable conclusions, since the

smaller the amount of data, the more conclusions are prone to distortions and even lack of patterns. Also, the sources need special treatment. First and foremost, theatrical productions, especially of fringe/alternative productions were invisible especially during the socialist era as far as sources, reviews are concerned. Second, due to censorship in the region, the lack of productions, e.g., productions that were self-censored, censored or banned by the authorities should also be part of the exploration, yet these by-and-large have become part of cultural oblivion. Even in the case of productions that came into being form an elusive field as the sources are rather complicated to get hold of and interpret. Some of the sources, especially during the socialist era, were reports written by non-professional theatre-goers for the authorities, or professional reviewers but occasionally with some political agenda, or private interests. Furthermore, the reviews that were published used a language resulting from self-censorship, and the desire to be published, so problematic aspects were shunned or referred to in a shared language of the intellectuals of the time. To find the truth behind this type of silence and doublespeak makes the exploration difficult from the present perspective. The presence of political inclinations also shapes Shakespeare reception nowadays as well, which can be seen in PC language, self-censorship, and media outlets for specific cultural-political sensitivities. Another problem is related to complexities of translations and their adaptations to the given productions.

An effective remedy to these methodological problems may lie in the adoption of micro-histories, wherein influences and interactions within the region are traced and mapped. To circumvent the aforementioned problematic aspects, we shall furnish illustrative instances of transgressing boundaries in diverse manners. First, we shall examine the voyages undertaken by directors within the region, exemplified by Andrei Șerban and Jan Klata, and subsequently, we shall investigate how certain issues manifested in Klata's rendition of *Measure for Measure* reverberate in Péter Rudolf's Hungarian production of the same play. Subsequently, we will shed light on how productions travelled in the region, as seen in Matei Vișniec's *Richard III will not Take Place*. Lastly, we shall delve into the emergence of political themes in the region, exemplified by the derisive portrayal of an administration with *Macbeth* and the exploration of race and ethnicity-related dilemmas.

Directors Travelling in the Region: Andrei Șerban: *Richard III* in Hungary and in Romania

Andrei Șerban emerges as a captivating figure when examining the concept of border crossing. Born and educated in Romania, he later emigrated to the United States, where he established himself as a director, university professor, and

creator of productions spanning various genres across the globe. His life epitomises the essence of border crossing, as he constantly oscillates between the realms of East-Central Europe and West. Throughout his mobile career, Şerban made three trips to Hungary to direct plays, specifically in 2008 and 2010 when Róbert Alföldi held the position of artistic director at the National Theatre in Budapest. Subsequently, he directed a production of Shakespeare's *Richard III* at the Radnóti Theatre in Budapest, with Alföldi portraying the titular role. Notably, this production garnered tremendous acclaim on multiple fronts. Given the nature of the play itself, the political dimension of the production emerged prominently in almost every review, further underscoring its significance.

What distinguishes the reviewers' opinions regarding the political layers of meaning in Şerban's production is their differentiation between two aspects of politics. All the reviewers explicitly discerned between a broader, more general aspect of politics and a more immediate facet that specifically pertained to Hungarian political issues of the time. Şerban himself emphasised in an interview that he did not intend to focus on the immediate layer of politics, stating, "It would be stupid and reductive to make a production about Orbán or Trump. This is far too primitive. We are not going to the theatre to be angry at a prime minister or a president. There have been numerous *Richard III* productions that featured Nazi costumes. This is a grave mistake because this oversimplifies the play, which is more complex, interesting, and fascinating than this." (Csáki) Reviewers seemed to concur with Şerban's interpretation, noting that this level of abstraction was indeed present in the play. They wrote about themes such as "political ambition" (Pikli), "an elongated moment when everything and everybody is unstable" (Jászay), "the nature of tyranny" (Bóta), and how "the director deliberately avoided creating a directly political theatre that would simply present an unscrupulously destructive tyrant's story" (Marik). While the reviewers acknowledged and appreciated the presence of the more general political aspect, they did not neglect to mention the more direct political references, which elicited varied opinions. These direct political references were described as "winks at the audience" (Pikli) and "the presentation of tyranny is sadly topical," while Parák observed that "The circumstances of the election of the king, the booing opponents, the familiar turns of phrase place the plot in the present far beyond subtle metaphor." Fáter goes even further as she finds the direct political allusions "somewhat unsolicited" (Fráter). It is evident, therefore, that reviewers were attuned to both aspects of politics within the production.

However, when Şerban decided to move the production of *Richard III* to Bucharest in 2019, using the same concept and the same design as he had previously employed in Budapest, but with a Romanian cast, he seemed to have changed his mind about political theatre. The Romanian production of *Richard III* was indeed straightforward political theatre. The Hungarian

production had been heavily recontextualized so as to address the most urgent issue in Romanian politics at the time—elections. Șerban decided to have Shakespeare intervene in the ongoing political battle and bring a contribution to the nation's efforts to make the consequential decision whether or not to break with the previous pro-European politics and veer at full blast towards an authoritarian state, looking to Russia for support. A Kottian “Shakespeare-our contemporary” figure was brought on the stage to talk about ways to avoid the repetition of the Grand Mechanism of power in Romania that would take Romania back to the authoritarian system of Ceausescu. The challenging political quality of the Romanian production also came out of the casting decision: Andrei Șerban opted for George Ivascu, a good actor, who had nevertheless “betrayed” the theatre to become minister in the much-maligned leftist government, to play Lord Hastings, soon after Ivascu lost his official position. Andrei Șerban wanted to foreground thereby the problem of co-option and compliance with power in Romanian society and to point to the grim fate of the “enablers” (Ivascu/Hastings) of the tyrant. The public was not particularly happy with the director's overt call for political action. The lukewarm reviews showed that Shakespeare could be made our contemporary” but in the familiar oblique, non-obtrusive way that still warranted the distance of art from politics.

Jan Klata's *Measure for Measure* in the Czech Republic and its Echoes in Hungary

Another director, who has crossed the borders in the East-Central region has been the Polish director Jan Klata. Since the 2000s, he has been receiving praise not only in his native Poland but also in other countries. Abroad, he had first started directing in the German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany), before travelling elsewhere, most notably to the Moscow Art Theatre, where he directed *Macbeth* in 2016. Due to the proximity of Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as the Czech theatre-makers' tendency to closely follow developments in contemporary Polish and German theatre, it did not take long before a Czech theatre invited Klata to direct in Prague. Although Czech theatre had worked with the topic of gender relations and inequalities prior to this point, after the increase of the public awareness of the MeToo movement in 2017, Czech theatre-makers started to engage more intensely with the topics of sexual violence and uneven gender power hierarchies in the society. This has been an ongoing process, with plays commenting on the position of women in Czech society still emerging today. The majority of these plays have been created by contemporary Czech playwrights, be it either a new drama altogether or an adaptation of a canonical play (most often adaptations of classical Greek drama). Shakespeare, despite his obvious connections to the topic of gender, has been

rarely used as an agent of gender-based commentary on the state of Czech society. This however changed in January 2018, when the Prague theatre Pod Palmovkou staged Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. The play has not been particularly popular with Czech audiences, with theatre creators rarely choosing the text for production. The idea to put on this particular play emerged from the Polish director Jan Klata, who has been invited to direct a play in Prague following his infamous departure from the Krakow's Stary Teatr. Klata's work has been previously known to the Czech audience, who generally appreciated his sometimes scandalous, yet certainly progressive directions. Working with a significantly cut script, Klata's production took in the political situation in the centre of Europe, focusing on the power, corruption, and especially sexual relations between men and women. In the production, women have been reduced to mere objects of male sexual desire, without any agency of their own. They navigated their lives in the men's world, which is full of violence, political corruption, and superficiality. Klata provided a commentary on the state of the contemporary society, without specifying whether this society is Czech or Polish. It rather criticised any "western" society that has decided to tolerate a world, where misuse of power by men uncontrollably leads to machismo and mistreatment of women.

The production quickly became popular, with Klata's reputation greatly helping with ushering people into theatre. *Measure for Measure* won the Czech Production of the year 2018 award and travelled to three domestic festivals (Theatre World/Divadelní svět in Brno, Dream Factory in Ostrava, Festival of Theatre Regions in Hradec Králové). It was also invited to two international festivals—Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival in Poland as well as the Csekkold Festival in Budapest, Hungary.

Measure for Measure, as presented in Hungary, has always served as a vehicle for critiquing societal norms, particularly in relation to the status of women. The most recent production of the play, directed by Péter Rudolf at Vígszínház (Comedy Theatre, Budapest) in 2022, is no exception to this in so far as it delves into the pervasive theme of the use and abuse of women. Rather than focusing solely on Hungary, the production, similarly to Jan Klata's version, creates a world where political power is wielded to objectify and exploit. This interpretation is evident from the outset and conclusion of the play, as the characters march in costumes inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, symbolising a twisted reality. The production not only explores the inherent themes of the Shakespearean text but also incorporates powerful additions that criticise those in positions of power and their treatment of women.

Three notable moments from the production exemplify this critique. Firstly, Mistress Overdone, in a moment of despair about the potential closure of her brothel, finds solace in the knowledge that her clients, including politicians and businessmen, would prevent such a shutdown from happening. Secondly,

when the Duke seeks a private meeting with the Friar, a misunderstanding leads to the Friar bringing a prostitute to the encounter, who is swiftly dismissed once the confusion is clarified. These scenes suggest that even those who hold power over matters of the soul are not exempt from moral corruption. However, the most powerful addition occurs during Angelo's attempted seduction of Isabella. In an effort to solidify his dominance and make his power visible, Angelo tries to rape Isabella on the symbolic desk of bureaucratic power and self-identity. The violation is averted only by a premature orgasm, Angelo still dressed, which spares Isabella from further harm. The repercussions of this abuse reverberate in the final scene, following the Duke's proposal to Isabella. In this moment, Isabella realises that in a world plagued by madness and corruption, there is nowhere for her to seek refuge from the powerful. Her being left with no choice or hope is depicted powerfully through her silent and tear-streaked face. Her expression of pain, desperate vulnerability, and profound defencelessness effectively illustrates the oppression of women in a society that is rife with political, financial, and spiritual corruption.

Plays travelling in the region

Matei Vişniec's *"Richard III" Will Not Take Place; or, Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold*

Matei Vişniec's literary journey is a captivating example of border crossing, illustrating the intricate interplay between geographical and cultural boundaries. He started his career as a playwright in Romania, but his works were either censored or denied access to prominent Romanian stages. In 1987, Vişniec relocated to Paris, where he embraced the French language as his medium of expression. This shift from East-Central Europe to the Western cultural realm represents a significant crossing of borders in itself. Since his voluntary exile, he has produced a significant body of work, solidifying his status as a prominent figure in European playwriting (Kompóraly vii). Vişniec's plays have been performed in almost thirty languages on esteemed stages throughout Europe and even in Turkey.

"Richard III" Will Not Take Place was first published in 2005 by Editions Lansman, and it has recently been included in a compilation of Vişniec's plays centred around socialist oppression, bearing the title of one of Vişniec's most successful plays, *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients* (Seagull Books, 2015). Since then, it has been translated into nearly ten languages, including Hungarian, Bulgarian, Italian, Armenian, and Farsi. Vişniec translated the play into Romanian, while Jeremy Lawrence produced the English translation in 2005. The play has been staged multiple

times in various countries, including France, Romania, Hungary, Serbia, Armenia, Israel, Italy, and Iran (Nicolaescu & Zaharia).

“Richard III” Will Not Take Place; or, Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold was first performed under the direction of Christian Auger and the Compagnie PI Urgent at the Avignon Festival OFF in 2001. In Paris, the play was first staged by director David Sztulman in 2008 at Ciné 13, and then revived at Théâtre 13.

In Romania, the play was first performed in Resita (2005), with a mixed Romanian-French theatrical team—the actors were from the Nottara Theatre in Bucharest, whereas the French director Michel Vivier worked closely with Vişniec himself. An important production was staged in Bucharest, at Bulandra Theatre (2006), under the direction of Catalina Buzoianu, who had achieved an important reputation in the Romanian theatre and had been herself subjected to the harassment of censorship. The production renamed the play—*Richard III is Banned*—so as to resonate with the Romanian experiences of banned performances at the Bulandra theatre in the socialist period. The production thus localised the play, introducing recognizable Romanian aspects. The most striking element was the introduction of masks with Stalin’s face worn by all actors, which had the effect of bringing “an army of Stalins” on stage (Modreanu). The most recent Romanian production was mounted at the National Theatre in Cluj (2015) (Nicolaescu & Zaharia).

Upon crossing borders and immersing itself into the Hungarian theatrical realm, Vişniec’s drama underwent a profound metamorphosis, engendering a distinctive Hungarian essence within its play text. This transformative journey unfolded through a series of pivotal stages: translation, textual adaptation, and eventual theatrical production. In 2010, Éva Patkós selected and translated five plays by Vişniec and made them accessible to Hungarian readers in a volume prominently bearing the title of the play under scrutiny (Vişniec). The title of the volume and the play underwent, however, a substantial reconfiguration, transforming from “Richard III will not Take Place” to “Richard III Banned.” While both titles converge in signifying the absence of the production, the Hungarian iteration eschews predictive nuances and asserts a timeless factual reality. Moreover, it alludes to the cause underpinning the non-occurrence of the performance, specifically assuming that a politically potent figure has imposed a ban upon the production, akin, perhaps, to the Romanian rendition at the Bulandra Theatre in 2006.

This transformative trajectory is further propelled by the director of the Hungarian theatrical rendition in 2018. Originally subtitled as “or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold,” the play was to depict and present key moments from the life of the illustrious director. However, the Hungarian production’s subtitle assumed a radical metamorphosis, now designated as “A Free Rewriting according to the Last Nightmare of Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold,” ushering

in an entirely divergent narrative domain. Distanced from any semblance of reality, the production moves away from any traces of reality, as it rewrites a story and does this freely, moreover what is freely rewritten is a nightmare and even this rewriting only approximates but is not equal with the nightmare. This nightmarish quality is deftly sculpted upon the stage through symbolic set designs and the intricacies of role doubling.

To foster a palpable resonance with the Hungarian audience, Szikszai interwove the text with portions of speeches and familiar phrases emanating from contemporary Hungarian politicians affiliated with the Orbán administration and Orbán himself, thus enmeshing the production with the socio-political fabric of the time. The intimacy of the small, independent, fringe theatre, Szkéné Theatre, lent poignant authenticity to the performance, for it underscored that this production catered to the sensibilities of the Hungarian audience, portraying a nightmarish vision of a director ensnared within the oppressive clutches of a totalitarian regime—a vision that conceivably resonates with the audience's political orientation, experiential context, and the past of the theatre.

Political Themes in the Region

David Jařab's *Macbeth* (and Czech Politics)

Besides the post-1989 East-Central European Shakespearean adaptations that process the terror of living in the totalitarian regimes of varying levels of censorship and persecution, many directors after 2000 decided to use Shakespeare's plays for the criticism of politics in general, withdrawing from the heritage of the Eastern Bloc. Such productions would often mock the power structures of local governments, criticise the corrupted politicians and underline the overall change in a society that was suddenly exposed to the consumerism and pop-culture of Western society. In these cases, the universality of many central conflicts of Shakespeare's plays served as a canvas for the individual analysis of what is wrong with the current affairs in particular countries. A noteworthy example of such an approach could be the 2017 Czech production of *Macbeth* staged in the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague. Directed by David Jařab, the story of Macbeth underwent a radical rewriting, premiering under the title *Macbeth – Too Much Blood*. The adaptation keeps the framework and basic plot of the original play but drastically changes the method of communication. Shakespeare's language is all but gone, with the director responsible for the adaptation rewriting the whole play in a very simple English. Aware of the still somehow problematic relationship to English (with the older generation forced to learn Russian in school, English as a second language is generally spoken by

the “younger” generation, i.e., people entering elementary school in the 1990s),³ the theatre addressed the fact that the production is fully in English with a statement on their website claiming that the English knowledge necessary for understanding is only at the elementary school level and that surtitles will be provided. This, however, was not entirely true. In the rare cases when Shakespeare’s text was used, the surtitles did not work. Shakespearean pentameter was therefore reduced to an incomprehensible sound, hinting at the relative distance between the contemporary spectator and the Renaissance playwright. *Macbeth* is in this case deconstructed, containing repetitions of simple phrases and words such as “war,” “power,” or “I am the boss,” never uttering a compound sentence. The English script makes *Macbeth – Too Much Blood* an internationally-oriented production discussing universal political problems. The production’s subtitle, *Make Macbeth Great Again*, is an obvious reference to Donald Trump’s campaign slogan, helping the spectator to understand that Macbeth’s limited vocabulary and primitive lust for power can be representative of any top politician nowadays. This works well with the deconstructed language of the play—in the world where the power is hidden in fitting slogans and empty promises, why should one use poetic language? The depressing image of the political world of Macbeth and his peers is further emphasised by the diminished role of Macduff, who is not seen restoring peace in the country. The novelty of the radical adaptation proved successful. The production was awarded the Best Production of 2017 and was selected for the Hungarian festival Csekkold! (Check it out!).

Jan Klata’s *Titus Andronicus* (2012) on Polish and German Political and Cultural Relations

Klata’s *Titus Andronicus* was an example of a bi-cultural and bi-lingual production produced in collaboration by the Teatre Polski in Wrocław and the Staatschuspel in Dresden. The play was turned into a game of national stereotypes, juggling long-seated animosities and prejudices between Poland and Germany. The German cast played the Romans, representing insolence and haughtiness towards the Goths, played by Polish actors, who demonstrated uncouth barbarians. The production revealed the eternal conflict between these

³ According to the 2017 research conducted by the Czech Statistical Office, 45% of Czechs speak some (minimal or basic) English, with only 22% of Czechs having a good or expert level English. <https://www.statistikaamy.cz/2017/10/17/ctyri-z-peti-cechu-se-domluvi-cizi-reci/#:~:text=Znalost%C3%AD%20angli%C4%8Dtiny%20disponuje%20v%20%C4%8Cesk%C3%A9,%2C%20velmi%20pokro%C4%8Dilou%20pak%207%20%25.>

two nations, taking advantage of the historic tension to enter into a polemic with national stereotypes, treated in a derisive way. Its visual side highlighted the contrast between the opponents fighting for power and revenge. The Romans/Germans were dressed in black pants and white T-shirts with big imprints of photographs of the most atrocious acts committed by the Nazi upon the Polish nation during World War II. The Goths/Poles cheap tracksuits and colourful primitive shirts made them look like Polish immigrants. Klata attempted to show many of the unbridgeable differences between these two nations conditioned by politics and culture. Aron, who was turned into an incarnation of all racist fantasies, with his blackface deliberated exaggerated, horns attached to his head and a huge phallus. In addition, the director melded comic strips formulas and aesthetics with a live theatrical experience, in some cases by a literal use of cartoons, mass-media, and anime images. Feeding on cultural and political conflicts between these two nations, the production also revealed a universal predicament. It does not matter what was or is the reason for these conflicts; religion, history, a thirst for revenge, cultural otherness, or lack of linguistic communication (Kujawińska Courtney 113-123).

Race

It may look like the topics of racial difference and racism have figured less prominently in post-socialist productions of Shakespeare in East-Central Europe than they have throughout the same period in the Anglophone theatre world. It would be more accurate to say that East-Central European theatre-makers and their audiences have engaged with these issues differently—more tentatively and selectively perhaps—than have their Anglophone and Western European counterparts. One of the reasons for this difference may have something to do with the socialist heritage. The socialist political regimes aimed towards the establishment of a uniform societal fabric, an objective that invariably entailed the subordination of ethnic and racial distinctions. Consequently, the discourse surrounding matters of race and ethnicity receded from official, political, and cultural contexts. Illustratively, in Hungary the socialist epoch engendered the outright banning of *The Merchant of Venice*, thereby precluding its staging and relegating it to a state of theatrical dormancy (Imre; Pikli; Almási). On the other hand, productions from the region never ignored the fact that some of Shakespeare's play texts depict non-European characters as well as European prejudices and stereotypes of them. All productions of *Othello* staged at the Czech National Theatre in Prague between 1940 and 2000 used some form of blackface for the main protagonist. The available evidence suggests that in these instances Othello's dark make-up together with various types of historical costumes was intended to help create a kind of historical realism on the stage,

visually underlining the play's geographically and temporally remote setting. At the same time, despite the somewhat different aetiology, racism was well established in East-Central Europe, and so even in these historically oriented productions, the audiences must have been able to make a connection between Othello's blackness, his alienation from the play's Venetian and Cypriot characters, and contemporary manifestations of racism in their own countries. It is because the association of blackface with minstrelsy and racial caricature was not widely known in this region, that the practice of performing Othello in blackface persisted for a relatively long time in East-Central Europe, still being common in the 1990s, when it was already becoming virtually taboo across the Anglophone world.

The East-Central European practice eventually caught up with this trend and in the twenty-first century white Othellos in blackface disappeared from East-Central European stages too. But rather than being replaced with actors of colour, as happened throughout the Anglophone world (and to a lesser extent Western Europe), *Othello* productions in the region now most often feature colour-blind casting with an all-white cast. An example of a notable production of this kind is Suren Shahverdyan's 2016 *Othello* at the Teatrul Tony Bulandra in Târgoviște (Romania), which won a number of awards and toured extensively both in Romania and abroad. When asked about the choice of an all-white cast of Romanian actors, the Armenian director opined: "Since the election of President Obama, the racial question appears outdated for a contemporary adaptation" (Seymour). It is interesting to note that the director reached for a reference from the US political scene to justify his approach to a production at a regional Romanian theatre. Even though subsequent developments proved his words from the 2018 interview wrong, his point serves as a reminder that in today's shared information and cultural spaces, the racial politics of Shakespeare productions in East Central Europe are inevitably impacted by both local and global forces. The main reason for the prevalence of the all-white colour-blind casts in our region is obviously demographic: the number of actors of colour in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Romania is very small when compared with countries in the West. It is both symptomatic and symbolic that the first black Othello on Czech stages is Nari Blair-Mangat, a British actor of Jamaican-Indian ancestry, starring in an English-language production by the anglophone Prague Shakespeare Company (directed by Guy Roberts).

Inverting and Subverting Race in *Othello*

Even though Czech audiences had to wait until 2023 for the first black Othello (and still continue to wait for a Czech-speaking one), black Desdemona appeared in a Czech *Othello* two decades earlier. Eliška Mesfin Boušková

(whose father is Ethiopian and mother Czech) played the role in a production directed by Vladimír Morávek between 2003 and 2005 in Klicpera Theatre in Hradec Králové. The inversion of the traditional racial make-up of the leading couple was just one part of the production's use of black and white dichotomy. Early on in the play Othello smears his face with black paint while all of his soldiers as well as the Duke of Venice do the same with white paint. The gesture can be interpreted in different ways: does Othello do it as a gesture of solidarity with his black wife or is he somehow marking himself out as a villain? And do the Duke with the soldiers put on the white paint because they feel threatened by the couple's blackness or are they trying to remind Othello that he is in fact white like them? The set included an image of a giant black bar code set against a white background, further magnifying the black and white contrast underlying the whole production. Mesfin Boušková alternated in the role with a white actress (Kateřina Holánová) and so it can be said that the production still worked even with a white Desdemona. A review on the popular news website novinky.cz suggested, only half in jest, that Czech theatregoers who might find the production's flipping of Othello's and Desdemona's races too difficult to deal with, should go see the version with Holánová. Mesfin Boušková returned to *Othello* over ten years later in 2013, when she played Bianca in Jakub Špalek's production at Divadlo v Celetné in Prague. Although she was once again the only non-white actor in the whole cast, it is interesting to note that Othello was played by Jan Potměšil, who has been using a wheelchair since a car accident in his early 20s. This set-up creates an interesting power dynamic between race and disability. Othello is othered by his physical handicap rather than racial difference, but one could argue that the presence of a black Bianca provides a kind of additional racial othering by proxy as she too falls victim to Iago's scheming.

Although not quite an adaptation of Shakespeare's work in the traditional sense, *African Tales by Shakespeare* (Opowieści afrykańskie według Szekspira) can nevertheless be described as the most notable recent theatrical event from our region in which both Shakespeare and race figure prominently. This epic five-hour spectacle directed by the renowned Krzysztof Warlikowski and created by Warlikowski and Piotr Gruszczyński was clearly international in its vision and ambition as well as ultimately in its reach. Produced by the Nowy Theatre in Warsaw, it premiered in Liège (Belgium) at Théâtre de la Place in October 2011, as part of the EU-funded Prospero Theatre Project, which sought to build "a common European culture platform disregarding the national borders," in order to facilitate the creation of "significant cultural events and their promotion across entire Europe" (*African Tales*). The production combined scenes from *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *The Merchant of Venice* with material from J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime* and a series of monologues commissioned

especially for the production by the Lebanese-Canadian writer Wajdie Mouwade. Adam Ferency played Lear, Othello, and Shylock, suggesting that the racism, antisemitism, and ageism experienced by the trio of men are different manifestations of the human condition. This amalgamation of the three plays and their protagonists led Olga Śmiechowicz to dub the *African Tales* “trilogy of the excluded” (116). At the same time, the fact that J. M. Coetzee’s 2009 novel *Summertime*, a semi-autobiographical account of life in South Africa in the 1970s, provides a framing narrative of sorts to the whole production, can be used to argue that Warlikowski’s production consciously foregrounds race. International reviews of the production certainly focused on race, specifically on the choice to use black face for Othello. Ferency wears black make-up on his face, shaved head, hands, legs, and feet while his arms and torso (he is dressed only in a pair of white briefs in some of the scenes) are left free from make-up. The contrast between black and white inscribed on the actor’s body enacts a kind of unmasking of the black-face tradition and with it of the absurdity and “banality of evil” that defines political structures reliant on racial discrimination. This engagement with race at the heart of *African Tales* can ultimately be read as complementary to the production’s engagement with other forms of injustice. As Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik argues, “Warlikowski’s ‘trilogy of the excluded’ attacks the issue of race heads-on, critiquing it as one of the many ways, in which we imprison ourselves and others in the cultural confines of whatever we think human nature is” (187).

Conclusion

In conclusion, our position paper has claimed that Shakespeare’s traversing of geographical and conceptual borders has uniquely shaped the theatrical-political discourse within the East-Central European region. By delving into the multifaceted dimensions of politics in Shakespeare productions, encompassing both its thematic and pragmatic manifestations, and by delineating the contours of the region under scrutiny, we have highlighted the significance of directors, plays, and themes that ventured beyond territorial confines, imparting refreshing dimensions to the local theatrical-political discourse, especially by merging the universal with the local and the classical with the modern.

Works of directors, such as Andrei Șerban and Jan Klata and David Jařab, have become emblematic of this interregional exchange, infusing fresh intellectual vigour and divergent perspectives, generating various responses from the given audiences. Furthermore, our examination encompassed a rewriting of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* that traversed the region’s boundaries, namely the suffocatingly painful *Richard III will not Take Place* by Matei Vișniec. Additionally, we have underscored themes resonant with broader political

implications, such as race and ethnicity as exemplified by a number productions of *Othello*, which serve as vital touchstones in broadening the representation of politics within the theatrical realm.

The complexities inherent in border-crossing, particularly concerning politics on the theatrical stage, are apparent even if we have found a scarcity of such instances. Nevertheless, within the East-Central European region, the shared historical experiences, encompassing totalitarian political structures and the tenuous paths of nascent democracies, furnish a fertile ground for the enrichment of national-linguistic-cultural communities. These unique circumstances propel the potentiality of enhancing and amplifying the resonances of Shakespeare and politics, rendering this transboundary endeavour an indispensable opportunity for advancing the collective theatrical-political discourse of the region.

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Nicoleta Cinpoes* 
Kornélia Deres** 
Jacek Fabiszak*** 
Kinga Földváry**** 
Veronika Schandl***** 

Popular and Populist Shakespearean Transcreations in Central and Eastern Europe¹

Abstract: The article discusses the variety of ways in which the terms “popular” or “populist” could be associated with postwar Shakespearean transcreations in the Central and Eastern European region, pointing out how performers and adaptors challenged the canonical, highbrow status of Shakespeare and used his oeuvre as raw material in experimental forms and genres. Following a discussion on the variety of socio-historical contexts which inspired noteworthy popular and/or populist reworkings in several Central and Eastern European countries, the article takes a more in-depth look at a few specific comic genres, particularly the burlesque and the cabaret in a theoretical framework, and concludes by examining post-1989 experimental theatre practices.

Keywords: populism, popular(ity), mainstream, Shakespeare, postwar theatre, cabaret, burlesque, experimental theatre.

* University of Worcester, England. n.cinpoes@worc.ac.uk

** ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary. deres.kornelia@btk.elte.hu

*** Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. fabiszak@amu.edu.pl

**** Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary. foldvary.kinga@btk.ppke.hu

***** Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary. schandl.veronika@btk.ppke.hu

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Introduction

Similarly to many other aspects of Shakespeare production and reception in Central and Eastern Europe, the various forms of popularizing Shakespeare's oeuvre varied from country to country, and also changed considerably from the immediate postwar period through later decades of communist rule, to the post-1989 period and the most recent decades. Whether Shakespeare was considered a popular author also depended on the willingness of political regimes and cultural decision-makers to employ his oeuvre in pursuit of their own agendas, or the creativity of performers and adaptors to use Shakespearean drama to showcase their own, often more subversive and critical messages. While it would be impossible to offer an exhaustive investigation into all possible ways Shakespearean transcreations have been associated with popular culture or made accessible to broader, more mainstream audiences, in what follows, we intend to look briefly at the history of Shakespeare performance, together with some common themes that characterize popular and/or populist manifestations of Shakespeare in the region. By using the concept of "transcreation," we emphasize that the diverse reworkings of Shakespearean source texts discussed in the article all necessarily involve creative forms of translation, not simply on a linguistic level, from the early modern English language to the modern vernaculars of the region, but often in terms of their medium, or the political and ideological message they carried as well. At the same time, the article also shows how performers and adaptors challenged the canonical, highbrow status of Shakespeare and his oeuvre, and instead of the traditional attitude of reverence towards the text and its author, used it as raw material in experimental forms and genres. In some instances, these appropriations altered characters' motivations or actions, or revised the denouements of plays, creating radical departures from the Shakespeare source plots, while also opening up the texts for exploration from new critical angles. Following a discussion on the variety of socio-historical contexts which inspired noteworthy popular and/or populist reworkings in several Central and Eastern European countries, the article takes a more in-depth look at a few specific comic genres, particularly the burlesque and the cabaret in a theoretical framework, and concludes by examining experimental theatre practices.

During the decades of communism, the fundamental irony of existence was tangible in everyday language use, with words like "freedom," "liberation," "friendship" and others meaning the exact opposite of their dictionary meanings. This also resulted in audiences' sensitivity to the power of doublespeak,² and an awareness of how the instability of the meaning of language could easily be used

² For more details on doublespeak in communist Hungary, see Schandl "Doublespeak and Realism."

to explore the comic potential of any text. At the same time, the forced social elevation of the working classes—coupled by a suspicion towards the intelligentsia—in communism also had an impact on what was considered inevitable elements of cultural heritage, erudition, or general knowledge. Shakespeare therefore played a role in upholding the ideas of culture inherited from an earlier era, particularly for the intelligentsia and the middle or upper classes. At the same time, he was also propagated as the epitome of the working-class author whose interest in the whole range of social classes and groups made him appear exemplary in communist eyes – when presented in the right ways, as the next section discusses in more detail.

Shakespeare, for all the potential of his texts to represent subversive meanings, did not disappear from Eastern European theatres even during the Stalinist era—quite the contrary: classical authors were often seen as safe bets for theatremakers. “In Leipzig the most performed authors were Schiller and Shakespeare; in Kraków they were Fredro and Moliere” (Kunakhovich 54). When looking at the functions classical literature was granted in these years, we can observe that Shakespeare, together with other classics, played a dual role during the state socialist era: on the one hand, his oeuvre was used by artists to express dissent, hiding subversive content under the centuries-old dramatic text, while the regime was also using his work in a didactic attempt at providing the masses with closely controlled entertainment and education. In this sense, he was considered a safe author, appreciated both by the regimes and subversive theatremakers, his cultural prestige allowing his work to appear as everything for everyone at the same time, making him the popular author *par excellence* of the age.

For instance, within the context of East Germany, this recognition of the potential power of stage productions resulted in an extraordinarily active theatrical life, with a dense network of theatres. As David Ashley Hughes states, “The reason for this lay in the tension between a state that was eager to invest in theatre for ideological reasons (using socialist realism to promote its communist goals) and playwrights who, paradoxically, increasingly used the stage as a place to criticize the regime” (134). Within this context, Shakespeare’s work and his position as a canonical playwright were equally recognisable and made use of by ideologues and contemporary authors. In this way, a critical, rather than comic, satire was staged only a few days after the June 17, 1953 revolt in East Berlin. Heinar Kipphardt’s *Shakespeare dringend gesucht* (*Shakespeare where are you?* or in other translations, *Urgently seeking Shakespeare*) was “a clever satirisation of GDR bureaucracy and officialdom in the form of a plot about a provincial theatre’s attempt to find, and then put on, a decent play on a contemporary theme. It proved a great success and Kipphardt was awarded a National Prize for it in the same year” (Childs 205). Such attitudes to Shakespeare as a universally acknowledged author whose prestige elevates his work above all, and who is

able to offer the best kind of entertainment, with the most immersive dramatic experience, can be found in productions in other countries as well. The 1966 Hungarian television comedy *Othello in Gyulaháza*³ offers a similar example of a combination of a general belief in Shakespeare's cultural status, contrasted with the backward nature of the old style of provincial theatrical entertainment, and a more progressive desire for an ideologically acceptable cultural programme, which nonetheless founders on the rural backwaters.

Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare as a safe bet survived even the considerable cultural restructuring that was necessitated in most countries within the region after 1990. In Germany, for instance, the collapse of communism also resulted in a theatrical crisis, brought about by the convergence of "macro-economic, political, and social crises" (Hughes 133), as Hughes writes in his "Notes on the German Theatre Crisis," and "state subsidies to German theatres were cut back significantly, setting in motion a process of 'structural transformation' in the theatre world that became synonymous with theatre closures, the reduction of personnel, and financial consolidation at all levels" (133). In this atmosphere, the American-style profit-oriented business model became dominant, theatres' survival suddenly dependent on box-office sales. As a result, most German "theatres began planning their repertoires around entertainment, scheduling comedies and popular classics in order to fill seats"—and drama was "dominated by Shakespeare and Lessing, Goethe and Schiller, Kleist and Buchner, not to mention classic modernists such as Brecht/Weill and Durrenmatt" (Hughes 134). For an in-depth discussion of similar phenomena in post-communist theatre practices placed against the backdrop of the post-millennial socio-historical changes in Bulgaria see Sokolova and Stavreva (esp. 13-17), and in Romania, see Cinpoș (esp. 187-198) and Modreanu (esp. 1-25).

Shakespeare has also remained a staple on the stages of other countries in the Central and Eastern European region, as it has been explored by authors of the 2021 *Theatralia* special issue on "Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity" (eds. Almási and Földváy), with articles by Müller, Pikli, Deres, Kowalcze-Pawlik, Reuss, Mišterová, Wild, and Földváy in particular addressing broader trends in the way Shakespeare was and has been employed by theatre-makers in the region. Beside local productions, Cinpoș's article in the same issue discusses the role Shakespeare festivals have played since the 1990s—and the founding of the European Shakespeare Festivals Network, in 2010—in enabling mobility and exchange across the borders of countries from this part of Europe and beyond.⁴ The controversial ways Shakespeare could be used for comic purposes are also exemplified by Konstantin Bogomolov's Russian adaptation entitled *Lear*:

³ For a more detailed description, see Földváy, *Othello Gyulaházán*.

⁴ For more on festivals in the region, see Cinpoș "'Shakestivalling' in the New Europe."

Comedy (2011), a production Maria Shevtsova describes as “political theatre through and through” (149), although without the counter-cultural intentions of an earlier generation of theatre-makers.

As this brief overview has made it clear, Shakespeare was associated with popularisation and populism in various ways, with some local variations, but we can also observe clear common trends across the region, mostly following the changing political climate in the communist and post-communist eras. The following section will discuss in more detail the dual and often contradictory functions Shakespeare played, at once popularized as a mainstream author, and employed by oppositional artists for expressing their subversive messages.

Mainstream Shakespeare and Its Double

While “the absence of solid study of ‘Populist Shakespeare’ as an early modern playwright” (Doty 9) continues to be bemoaned by critics, east of Berlin, this argument also needs articulating both in terms of its meaning in Central and Eastern Europe and in opposition to how popular / populist Shakespeare(s) have been defined in Anglo-American Shakespeare Studies. Post-1945, in a Europe divided, populist Shakespeare also made division of itself. On the one hand, the man and his work were recruited for the socialist project, a process which refashioned Shakespeare into the voice of the oppressed masses, socialist realist style. On the other hand, and in direct reaction, doublespeak and theatrically innovative Shakespeare claimed the “space” between the lines, at the fringes of public life, away from the spotlight and strict scrutiny of the communist regimes. In Central and Eastern Europe, mainstream Shakespeare and its subversive double co-existed, not always amicably.

That “Shakespeare’s theater was a place where common people practiced political thinking” (Doty 9) was advocated in Central and Eastern Europe too, but with a difference. Officially, it was a critical stance commandeered by the states of the socialist Bloc with a double purpose: firstly, to claim Shakespeare, his work and legacy for the People’s (socialist then communist) Party and secondly, to liberate these from the bourgeois, imperialist, dominating (capitalist) views of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. The “[b]y opposing, end them” method literally meant replacing, censoring, banning, or completely erasing previous national Shakespeare (hi)stories when they did not toe the line of the (Soviet) fashioned Bard. As Chris Fritter argues, “the discovery by major Left critics in the 1960s and 1980s of a populist Shakespeare, radical in critiques of power, effected curiously little impact” upon the “conservative construal of Shakespeare’s politics.” This remained the governing paradigm launched in the nineteenth century and re-asserted by New-Historicism and post-structuralism in the West (420). In the

East, however, the only accepted form of Marxist criticism had a Leninist hue: riding high on Marxism's anti-capitalist stance, its Leninist offspring was as populist as it gets in the way it claimed to promote *vox populi* and freedom; in practice, it imposed democratic centralism and instated its sinister dictatorship of the proletariat (through single party rule). This model of the "new man" and "new world" was "borrowed" from the Soviet Union and put into practice across the Bloc. Like the "buy-in," the model's continuity was also enforced from the Kremlin, courtesy of the Warsaw Pact (1955-1991).⁵

When socialist realist regimes advocated for a popular Shakespeare (one *for* the people, *about* the people), they in fact recruited—what Walter Cohen calls—Shakespeare's "artisanal structure"⁶ for their own ideological pursuit and worked hard to monopolize Shakespeare interpretation and dissemination. They also appropriated the loci for debates—stage, page and classroom. This type of appropriation took a wide range of forms. On the one hand, it consisted of commissioned translation projects, which in some countries ran parallel to existing translations while in other countries, they, perforce, replaced previous editions.⁷ On the other hand, it comprised of theatre productions scrutinized and

⁵ Not only did communist regimes remain in power after Stalin's death (in 1953), but they grew increasingly extreme/ist despite their national colour: the Kádár regime (in Hungary), Ceaușescu's communist dictatorship (in Romania), the Czechoslovak Republic under Gustáv Husák, Zhivkov's communist rule (in Bulgaria), PZPR's Republic (in Poland), to name but a few, competed in communist zeal. For more on this topic, see Almási et al. "Shakespeare, Politics, East-Central Europe: theatrical border crossings" in the present volume.

⁶ "Walter Cohen, whilst recognizing that the playing of kings by plebeians, strutting about a public stage, may produce 'the subversion of aristocratic and clerical superstructure by artisanal substructure,' nonetheless recuperates conservatism's philomonic bard." Chris Fitter, "Mock not Flesh and Blood / With Solemn Reverence:" Recovering Radical Shakespeare, *Literature Compass* 9/6 (2012): 420-430, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2012.00894.x>, p. 422.

⁷ These practices, however, were not uniform throughout the region. A new, ideologically approved translation of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* was state-commissioned in Romania (1956-1964) at the cost of excluding from the public domain previous translations especially by intellectuals who inconvenienced the regime. One such case was Dragoș Protopopescu's, founder of English Studies in Romania. His single-handed effort to offer Shakespeare plays in stage-friendly translations (1920s-1940s) was cut short: the last batch of manuscripts he submitted to the press before WWII disappeared, he was fired from his academic post at the University of Bucharest, and he eventually died in suspect circumstances. Poet Ion Vinea's translation of *Hamlet*, on the other hand, appeared in print in 1956 but signed by Petru Dumitriu, a name accepted by the regime; Vinea's authorship was restored as late as the 1970s. In Hungary, however, several of the canonical nineteenth-century translations (notably *Hamlet* as translated by János Arany) and some of the early- or mid-twentieth-century renditions were not replaced until practically the new

approved for performance, and of curtailing mobility (like teachers who were centrally assigned to schools, theatre and film graduates were contractually tied to theatres). Shakespeare in the classroom was also subjected to the compulsory Marxist-Leninist treatment.

This was a climate in which theatres, the press and the education systems went through enforced nationalisation, and thus entirely depended on state subsidy, and in which cultural expression was straightjacketed by increased censorship and imposed focus on “indigenous” production.⁸ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Central and Eastern European Shakespeare(s) migrated to the margins of the all-controlling centre set on the cultural reproduction of its own ideology.

To appear in the mainstream press and theatres, Shakespeare had to be on its best behaviour, though even there it retreated from “words, words, words,” into less censorable languages. When staged, his plays used doublespeak and practised the “retheatricalization of theatre,”⁹ metaphorical realism (which explored the visual, the musical, the physical, in its mission to evade/counter socialist realism), and “action design,” i.e., “physical and psychologically functional” stage design and scenography that interacts with the actors in complex ways (as conceptualized and developed by Joseph Ciller in Czechoslovakia in the decade following the country’s invasion in 1968).¹⁰ What they all had in common was an active exploration of irony, seen as the (unspoken) contract between artistic expression and spectatorial reception. In a sense, all these theatrical modes were postdramatic Shakespeare *avant la lettre*. (These experimental modes of theatrical expression will be discussed in more detail in the final section of the article.)

millennium. When new translations were commissioned, these were motivated by aesthetic or theatrical purposes, rather than ideological reasons. In Poland, perhaps paradoxically, new translations were not so much politically sensitive; rather, writers, poets, and intellectuals, translated single plays, until the “Jerzy S. Sito” era, who translated eight plays and the sonnets, and whose translations were critically acclaimed, together with the magnificent (but disputed) work of Maciej Słomczyński, who translated all Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets.

⁸ Repertories were churning productions of approved national playwrights and occasionally of accepted foreign dramatists. By the mid-1970s even productions of Shakespeare were no longer immune to banning. Nonetheless, there were considerable differences between individual countries within the region, similarly to the way translations were controlled in certain countries but not in others.

⁹ “[I]n the art of spectacle, the desire to show everything in fact limits the spectator’s possibility of using his imagination. The mastery of the theatre practitioner consists in [...] suggesting a part, not disclosing the whole, thus leaving it up to the spectator’s power of completion.” (Ciulei, 1956: 55).

¹⁰ See more in Dennis Christilles and Delbert Unruh, “The Semiotics of Theatre Design,” *Theatre Topics*, 6.2 (1996): 121-41.

Shakespeare's double did its undercover work elsewhere. Subversive stage productions took place away from the capital cities (in provincial towns), away from the main stages, in studio spaces, in Theatre Institutes' final exam productions, and other unconventional venues and settings. Touring companies and theatre collectives deliberately traded (or were these scrutiny-avoidance tactics?) ample spaces and excellent facilities for mobility in order to popularize *their* Shakespeare and theatre in general. Teatr Ziemi Mazowieckiej, for example, covered around 100 locations in the Polish region whose name it bore, with 123 productions between 1955 and 1976—5 of which were Shakespeare plays, all staged before 1970.¹¹

Regular touring schedules, regional festivals, heavily scrutinized cultural exchanges within the Bloc, such as large-scale conferences and training opportunities in Russia (in the '60s), Bulgaria and Romania (in the early '70s), Poland (in the '80s), were also means of popularizing Shakespeare. They were big attractions, Don Rubin recalls, "not so much because of the official events [...] but because of their hidden *samizdat* work."¹² Some "artists [...] connived with tyranny"—as Ian McKellen recalls while touring the Bloc with Peter Brook's *Dream* in 1972. Others worked hard to subvert it, whether with big gestures or small, daily acts of chipping away at the Wall. Repercussions for defying the ideological norm ranged from banned productions, disciplinary moves to small town theatres, demotion from managerial roles and diminished professional responsibilities (directors only allowed to work on scenography or costumes), to outright denial of the right to practice. The latter led sometimes to clandestine work, as was the case of Pavel Kohout's "Livingroom theatre" that took *Macbeth* to living rooms in Prague; at other times, to expulsion/self-exile, the ultimate solution in a system in which it was illegal to be unemployed. This was the case of many directors and writers from the Bloc, among whom were Liviu Ciulei, Jan Kott, Vlad Mugur, Yuri Lyubimov, Andrei Șerban. The more relaxed periods (which varied in time and title, from "thaw," to "normalisation" and "glasnost," depending on the country), tolerated "'official' confronters—artists who were "allowed" to do their experimental and/or confrontational work right out in the open without apparent state approval, and sometimes even with state support."¹³ This was the case of Taganka Theatre and the Gardzienice

¹¹ *Much Ado* (1956-57), *Cymbeline* (1960-61), *As You Like It* (1962-63), *Romeo and Juliet* (1967-68), and *Othello* (1969-70). Incidentally, Shakespeare ceased to be staged after Wanda Wróblewska, co-founder of this theatre—following her departure from the Warsaw NT—and director or co-director of all five productions was dismissed.

¹² See more in Don Rubin, "Staging Postcommunism: Alternative Theatre in Eastern and Central Europe After 1989 – Review." *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques* 21 (2022). 18 Dec. 2023. <https://www.critical-stages.org/21/staging-postcommunism-alternative-theatre-in-eastern-and-central-europe-after-1989/>.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

collective; of influential Polish auteurs such as Jerzy Grotowski and his Laboratory Theatre in Opole and then in Wrocław, or Tadeusz Kantor and the Cricot 2 Theatre in Kraków; of theatre collectives in Hungary such as Apartment Theatre at Dohány Street or Kovács István Studio in Budapest; of Theatre on the Balustrade and the Semafor Theatre in Prague, Goose on a String Theatre in Brno, and the On Korzo Theatre in Bratislava, in the former Czechoslovakia.

Similar subversive modes were employed in writing, whether in critical studies that went interdisciplinary (Shakespeare and computers, Shakespeare and psychology) when not staying firmly grounded in the early modern milieu for safety. Neither red nor dead, original work—which was mired by censorship when not banned altogether—acknowledged Shakespeare as its creative springboard. Such transcreations offered, from their titles, a nod to Shakespeare’s subversive role in the Bloc—as in the case of Eugene Ionesco’s *Macbett* (1972), Heiner Müller’s *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977) and *Anatomie Titus Fall of Rome Ein Shakespearekommentar* (1984), or Marin Sorescu’s *Cousin Shakespeare* (written before 1989, but published in 1992), whose character muses on how “we’re all stumbling, caught up in the same play we’re striving, again and again, to rewrite.”¹⁴ This practice continued in the post-1989 New Europe but grew doubly explicit. It has been engaging in dialogue both with the communist period and with the Shakespeare(s) of that period. The resulting meta-contextual and meta-theatrical layering is readily evident in the work of established playwrights, such as Alina Mungiu Pippidi,¹⁵ Matei Vișniec,¹⁶ András Visky¹⁷ and Radu F. Alexandru,¹⁸ but less so in the work of younger writers-practitioners, such as Jakub Snochowski,¹⁹ whose transcreations are more attuned to global identity, and ecological and neo-liberal concerns.

While there was relatively little physical mobility for theatre-making within and across the national physical borders for countries in the region before 1989, forms of mobility and border-crossing that circumvented ideological constraints and institutional restrictions thrived. Broader tendencies include Shakespeare transcreations on Central and Eastern European stages that repositioned characters, adapted the endings of plays, and departed from the known Shakespeare plot, etc., offering new critical angles of exploration and theatrical modes and genres—as the following two sections in the present article showcase. Post-1989, there is marked migration from previously staged Shakespeare plays (either heavily censored or subversively politicized) to the

¹⁴ Marin Sorescu, *Vărul Shakespeare* [*Cousin Shakespeare*] (translated by Nicoleta Cinpoș).

¹⁵ See her *Emancipation of Prince Hamlet* and *The Death of Ariel* (1997).

¹⁶ See his *Richard III Will Not Take Place* (2001).

¹⁷ See his *Juliet* (2002).

¹⁸ See his *Gertrude* (2012, with its world premiere in 2023).

¹⁹ See his “In the cauldron boil and bake an owlet’s wing” (2022).

margins of the Shakespearean canon, where less or never performed plays provided an interpretive clean slate, and increased theatrical mobility, both in an institutional and a geographical sense, which opened up Shakespeare for exploration and experimentation. These ranged from trying new technologies, starting independent or collaborative ventures, free-lancing, to establishing regular exchanges and Shakespeare festivals that sped up the process of catching up with the world and sharing own practices—as the final section argues.

Burlesqued Shakespeare

When discussing modes in which Shakespeare in performance becomes the tool of subversion, the Shakespeare burlesque (as well as cabaret, this article argues) is a genre that cannot be left out, especially since it has always been a genre of the popular kind. The Shakespeare burlesque was created in response to the Licensing Act of 1737, which forbade illegal theatres from performing spoken drama, in nineteenth-century London. Since most of the English dramatic repertoire fell under that category, London theatres exploited the loophole by turning classical plays into operettas and burlesques, or sung drama. The burlesque, invented out of necessity, quickly became a popular artform that appropriated Shakespeare's plays, too.

A burlesque is, by definition, the absurd impersonation of a serious work of art that contains several puns and contemporary allusions. As such, it shares some affinities with cabaret, especially topicality. It features visual jokes, cross-dressing, and is performed in ostentatious clothes among lavish stage machinery. Shakespeare burlesques used a condensed version of the plays' plots, converted iambic pentameter into rhyming couplets, and turned soliloquies into popular songs. As a transgressive theatrical practice (like cabaret, to an extent), it railed against the extremely realistic contemporary theatrical approach to Shakespeare, attacked scenic illusionism, and overall, it wished to overthrow authentic productions' claim of authority (Schoch 4).

According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is distinct from burlesque and travesty in that parody excludes mocking whereas travesty and burlesque embrace it (40). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that travesties and burlesque were rare in Stalinist theatres, where satire was expected to celebrate successes, criticize from the inside, but refrain from mocking the new Socialist state and its achievements in art. Humour is an antagonistic genre that cannot flourish when needed to be pro-power, therefore the first satires, travesties and burlesques appeared on Eastern Bloc stages only after the Khrushchevian turn, post-1953. Shakespeare's works were no exception from this rule.

All public satirical discourses were strictly regulated under Socialism because they were seen as both a danger to accepted public discourse and

a powerful tool for propaganda. Christie Davies provides three insightful categories for how humour manifests in Socialist states. First, the elite frequently humiliates state foes with brutal scorn. Secondly, professional humorists use “centrally controlled, tendentious, sometimes aggressive, sometimes admonitory, published” or staged ridicule to further official propaganda. Finally, “massive spontaneous ridicule of [the] rulers” can be found in jokes, anecdotes, and subversive performances (Davies 2). What follows is a retrospective look at how burlesque (and, to a lesser extent, cabaret) appeared in both centrally controlled and spontaneous or decidedly subversive forms on the stages of the Eastern Bloc before 1989, also emerging in ways that would engage with or challenged the accepted norms of doublespeak.

Several productions adopted the technique of burlesquing a Shakespearean play. Returning to the original premise of 19th-century burlesques, they regularly called Shakespeare’s authority as well as the authority of mainstream theatrical performances into question.²⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s, comedies, particularly problem plays, became popular targets for burlesque tendencies. David Esrig’s 1965 Romanian *Troilus and Cressida* was a burlesqued take on official propaganda, while János Sándor’s *Measure for Measure* in Debrecen, Hungary, in 1976 contrasted the dark tones of the court with a “boisterous outspoken atmosphere of jocularity, burlesque and slapstick comedy” (Cs. Nagy 10), to convey a political message about the impossibility of change in immoral societies on and offstage. The burlesque form, however, was also used for opposite purposes—that is to distance a play from political undertones and render it a commentary on modes of theatricality and performability. For example, Péter Valló’s 1976 *The Taming of the Shrew* in Szolnok, Hungary, set the action in the historical heydays of Hungarian travelling companies, and used clown antics and lengthy burlesque sequences to mimic the theatrical modes of the time. The production avoided remarking on the political problems raised by the play, instead directing it as a love story about two people who had to learn to let go of their pride and be open to each other. Valló went directly against the norms of contemporary Shakespeare performances by choosing the genre of 19th-century burlesque and folk play and refusing to take an ironic stance on the plot.

Shakespeare also provided a rich source for artistic inspiration, and burlesque rewritings appeared all over Eastern Europe. In Poland, the Warsaw-based STS²¹ theatre group in 1954 premiered a program entitled *The Simpletons* that featured burlesqued fragments from the artisan scenes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. As Cioffi comments, “[b]y identifying themselves with Shakespeare’s simple craftsmen, the members of STS were trying to identify

²⁰ Challenging and undermining authority is, too, the effect of cabaret shows.

²¹ Studencki Teatr Satyryków, a cabaret show.

themselves with common sense, as opposed to the elaborate rationalizations, rhetoric, and absurdities of the Stalinist system.” (28) In the late 1940s, Konstanty Idelfons Gałczyński ridiculed contemporary politics in his theatrical miniature *Hamlet and a Waitress*²² while also questioning the legitimacy of the Hamletian example. *Hamlet* was also an inspiration felt apt to depict Yugoslavian Socialism in Ivo Brešan’s *A Performance of Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja*, a play in which burlesqued, chastushka-style rewritings of the play cast a critical shadow on Socialist realist literature and the idea of “new culture.” In Czechoslovakia Ivan Vyskočil’s *Hapdráns* in 1980 condensed the action of *Hamlet* into 20 minutes to be presented by kitchen utensils, while in Bulgaria, admittedly, with more sombre tones, Yordan Radichkov’s *Image and Likeness* (1986) transformed *Richard III* into a satirical mirror image of contemporary Bulgarian politics.

In Hungary, the state-supported political cabaret theatre, Mikroszkóp Színpad opened its gates in October 1967 with a burlesqued *King Lear*, entitled: *Lear or the Youth*. The play exhibits all traits of the state-controlled political humour propaganda, since it features characters reminiscent of “old apparatchicks” (Gloucester), who need strict guidelines to be able to function, of contemporary politicians (Lear), who cannot make up their mind whether to centralize or decentralize, and of beatnik youth (Cordelia, Regan, Goneril and Edmund), who wish to take the reins from their fathers and are visibly disgusted by the world they live in. Never questioning the legitimacy of a Socialist regime, the production criticized only the execution of the grand idea, a tactic Kádár-regime Hungarian political satire often resorted to. Highly metatheatrical both in text and in cast (e.g., Lear was played by the former manager of the National Theatre of Budapest, Tamás Major), the play also commented on diminishing standards of literary and theatre criticism, as well as on Shakespeare’s weakening status as a cultural icon among the younger generations.

With the change of the regime, the satirical tone of the Shakespeare-burlesque (and cabaret, as this article posits) did not disappear from Eastern Europe. Often mistaken for postdramatic productions, these burlesques make heavy use of nostalgia, the importance of which Richard Schoch summarized thusly: “(h)owever much it attacks dominant cultural practices, the Shakespeare burlesque always implies—indeed, sustains—a nostalgia for a culture which would no longer need to be attacked if only it were properly performed. Yet [...] it is the burlesque’s bitter irony never to bring into being the culture which it can only imagine.” (19) It is this nostalgia that sets the burlesque aside from other Shakespeare adaptations and makes the burlesque all the more topical. In 2004, Hungarian director Sándor Zsótér transformed *Hamlet* into a burlesque to

²² First printed on 11 April 1948 in the weekly magazine *Przekrój* (No. 157 (15/1948)).

comment on the inadequacy of contemporary theatres to perform the play.²³ Zsolt Győrei and Csaba Schlachtovszky, two Hungarian literary scholars turned playwrights, call upon the nineteenth-century genres of melodrama and tragicomedy to jab at Shakespeare, contemporary theatre practices, Hungarian literature and everything in between in their two plays: *Bem, the Galician of Debrecen* (2002), an *Othello* burlesque in the style of a melodramatic Trauenspiel, and their *Hamlear* (2021), a burlesqued spin on both *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Although both plays camouflage themselves as nineteenth-century melodramatic tragedies, they are voices of cultural plurality, healthy self-reflexivity and subversion, and as its historical antecedents, a norm to which transgressive theatrical practices can revert to.

In Ukraine, Les Podervianskyi, the “enfant terrible” of the literary scene, mocks the Soviet appropriation of Shakespeare’s image and his characters in two Shakespeare-based burlesques—*King Liter* and *Hamlet, or the Phenomenon of the Danish Katsapism*. According to Moskvitina,

In Podervianskyi’s versions, licentious homosexual Claudius is smashed by a constantly drunk Hamlet, and incestuous promiscuous King Liter is involved into political intrigues against Yorick, who turns from a joker into a political leader of the English nation. (...) The Ukrainian playwright refers to the Bard’s dramatic canon not for the sake of pure entertainment, but in order to flag the most painful points of the Soviet society and to overcome this traumatizing experience with the help of rough but effective tools—pornography, brutality, lavatorial humour, and foul language which proved to be powerful underminers of the official totalitarian narrative. (137, 141)

This subchapter, through a few select examples, wished to highlight how Shakespeare burlesques under Socialism utilized the duality of Shakespeare’s popular status, both by taking advantage of the popularity of the plays and by questioning their authority. Furthermore, it also wished to show that the popularity of the Shakespeare-burlesque did not fade after 1989, since, by emphasizing the nostalgic hues imminent in the burlesque, it remains a strong choice when theatre practitioners aim to comment on the past and the present.

Cabaret Shakespeare

As observed in the discussion of burlesque Shakespeare, the genre is quite similar to cabaret, though the latter has its own distinctive features. Modern cabaret began in France and flourished in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, but has not been acknowledged as a distinctive genre until more

²³ See more in Schandl “So Berattle the Common Stages.”

recently. Patrice Pavis, in his *Dictionary of the Theatre* (English translation: 1998) does not provide a separate entry for the cabaret; instead, he prefers to call it “café theatre,” thus treating it as fully-fledged theatre rather than its offshoot. His definition does not differ much from how other scholars, theoreticians, and historians alike, describe cabaret:

Café theatre is not a new dramatic genre, nor does it utilize an original kind of stagecraft or space (drinks are not necessarily consumed during the show). But it is the result of a series of economic constraints that impose a rather uniform style—the stage is too small, limiting the number of actors to three or four and establishing a very close relationship with a house holding fifty to one hundred spectators. The two or three shows a night are necessarily short (fifty to sixty minutes) and depend largely on the (often comic) performance of the actors, who are “tragically” invited to take the financial risk of sharing the takings with the owner of the theatre. The scripts are often satirical (one-(wo)man shows) or poetic (montage of text, poems or songs). (Pavis 42)

Lisa Appignanesi (6) emphasizes the special nature of the close relationship between the actors and spectators which, “in the ambience of talk and smoke”²⁴ is “one of both intimacy and hostility, the nodal points of participation and provocation.” She further highlights one of the key features of cabaret which she terms “dissent—whether of the kind that champions formal ruptures with artistic tradition,²⁵ or the kind that urges social or sexual rebellion.” Finally, another crucial aspect of the cabaret is the liminal status of the actor/character: “the performer remains a performer” engaged in a “lively, witty repartee... [with the] audience” (Appignanesi 6).

Likewise, Fleischer (212-213) in his unique theoretical model of the cabaret treats the performer as a liminal construct between the empirical person and quasi-fictional actor/character in the event which makes the performance self-reflexive and avoiding illusion. He augments Appignanesi’s political engagement of the cabaret by observing that the aim of manipulation is the spectator and their ways of thinking (Fleischer 303), which makes it akin to the burlesque. Cabaret aims at shattering stale cognitive patterns of the audience; it does not affirm, its message is ultimately disavowing, negating and questioning.

Such manipulation can be (best) achieved when the relationship between the performer and spectator is direct and unmediated, when both parties are actively engaged in the event (naturally, it is the performer who initiates,

²⁴ Or what Piotr Skrzynecki, the founder and leader of the Polish legendary cabaret Pod Baranami (Under the Rams) called in this context the bar, or access to alcohol (Kiec, 2014: 12-17).

²⁵ Like the burlesque of the 18th and 19th centuries.

controls and executes to the highest degree the exchange).²⁶ This kind of relationship is impossible to establish when it comes to television shows which the viewer watches from a spatial and often temporal distance. This does not mean that television cabaret is not possible as, on the one hand, television is often characterized as an intimate medium (Newcomb 615), watched at home by a small number of people (an equivalent of a café?). On the other hand, cabaret shows may be televised with a live audience watching them in the studio or a café or another location. Writing about television cabaret in Poland, Izolda Kiec manages to identify some sort of intimacy and direct contact with the audience in the case of Olga Lipińska's TV show called *Właśnie leci kabarecik* [The little cabaret is on air now]:

Olga Lipińska in her cabaret shows transforms the television set into a private, indeed intimate space.²⁷ The convention of theatre within theatre (modified as cabaret within cabaret), already deployed and tested by the Elderly Gentlemen's Cabaret, makes the relationship between those on the stage and those on the other side of the television screen very close. Mr Wojteczek (Pokora) [a character in the cabaret played by the actor Wojciech Pokora], who in one season of the show is a homebody who spends time in front of the TV set, in another season becomes the director of the cabaret. This is a classic cabaret trading of roles: the spectators with the artists (and the other way round since the only audience in this weird theatre are the artists themselves watching the performance of their fellow artists with astonishment, disapprovingly, seldom admiringly). By doubling the stage and auditorium, Lipińska did not forget about the wings, dressing rooms and ... the bar, a constitutive element of any real cabaret! (194-195; translation from Polish: JF)

What strikes one in this passage is how close this description of Lipińska's cabaret comes to the nature of television theatre, a hybrid genre which focuses on providing space for the dialogue, or the verbal plane (Limon, 2004: 88; 2008: 21), thus emphasizing the psychology of the characters, often framed in

²⁶ As Jana Wild observes, "This directness of exchange, as well as verbal sophistication were the main features of the legendary Slovak cabaret duo Lasica + Satinský, who, in their dialogue *Hamlet* (1968), presented the mocked and travestied version of the tragedy otherwise being taken all too seriously in Slovak theatre. While breaking the highbrow by the lowbrow, they joined the seeming naivety with cultural/political criticism. In 1978, after nine years being banned from the theatre for political reasons, the duo was cast as Nathaniel and Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*; allowed to rewrite Shakespeare completely, they presented their own Dadaistic dialogue and became the ultimate stars of the whole rather weak production." (Personal communication, 13 June 2023)

²⁷ Kiec rightly emphasizes that what occurs here is a theatricalization of the set, hence her conscious use of the term "stage."

close-ups. Consequently, the space is non-definite, amorphous, and intimate. Furthermore, Kiec confirms the metatheatrical, or “metcabaret,” dimension of the production, which is in tune not only with television theatre, but television Shakespeare as well (cf. Huertas-Martín 81). Lipińska’s television cabaret promotes “dissent” with, on the one hand, the form of television theatre (and it can be generically classified as one), challenging its limits and tradition; on the other, with the political and social conditions of the drab social realism of the turn of the 1970s. This aspect of the cabaret’s subversive nature was one of the reasons why the show was so popular, especially in the 1980s. It is also the reason why it was tolerated by the communist authority and regularly shown on public television, thus performing a cathartic function for the sentiments of widespread dissatisfaction. One is not surprised, then, by Lipińska’s television adaptation of Ivo Brešan’s blatantly anticommunist *A Performance of Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja*, in 1985, at the height of the popularity of the cabaret. The production, with performers from the cabaret, is a biting comment making Shakespeare populist.

Conclusion: Popular Culture and Experimental Theatre Practices

As both burlesque and cabaret can be examined as potentially subversive genres of theatre, in the conclusion it is worth looking at how experimental theatre performances inspired by Shakespeare’s works (Bennett 13-27) are connected to popular culture after 1989 in Eastern and Central Europe. We can identify two major approaches, the first of which can be described as a conscious reflection on, and a playing with, the traditions of popular theatre forms. From an aesthetic point of view, this category—following Tom Gunning’s well-known term *cinema of attractions* (381-388)—embraces examples of the theatre of attractions with an unambiguous focus on visuality and physicality. The second category is characterized by using new media tools, genres, and environments, including film, video, smart phone, VR, or augmented reality. These examples usually cover multi- and intermedial theatre forms (Mancewicz). Before examining these two groups, we will briefly consider the historical context of experimental theatre in the region after 1945.

During the decades of state socialist times, controlled and supported theatre institutions, representing (socialist) realist aesthetics, were parts of the so-called first public domain “held together by an ideological project, the creation of a socialist consciousness” (Cseh-Varga and Czirák 2). Parallel to this, the second public sphere included those actors who, either willingly or unwillingly, for a long or a short time, were excluded from the first controlled sphere. Experimental aesthetics were in most cases to be found in the second public realm, including youth clubs, university theatres, culture and community

houses, and semi-private spaces such as apartments (Fürst). These venues served as places of dissent, where new politics of perception were often intertwined with aesthetic and structural criticism of institutional and professional theatre practices (see Havasréti; Szkárosi).

Artists of the second public sphere challenged the conventions of realism, offering non-linear dramaturgy, body-based performances, and audience-actor interactions—as the earlier section on “Mainstream Shakespeare and Its Double” illustrates. However, after 1989 new possibilities arose in the region in terms of aesthetic innovation, both in established institutions (or so-called stone theatres) and by independent collectives or amateur groups. In this era, popular culture manifested itself increasingly through the dynamics of a rising media society, however, various remains of state-controlled mass media influenced how artists handled the new social experience. Emerging forms and genres of mass media also played relevant roles in apprehending reality as a network of fragmented, non-linear, and non-transparent perspectives. Within this context, popular culture often connected to new technological and medial networks, which influenced the dramaturgy, visuality, and even the topics of theatre productions.

Many innovative pieces in the region were based on the idea of staging multi- or intermedial relations by applying the various aesthetics, conventions and technologies of media forms, predominantly different genres of popular film. These productions often made use of spectacular or well-known elements and scenes from genre films on Shakespearean dramas (Földváry, 2020), or they integrated media technology into the performance. In Hungary Viktor Bodó’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with Sputnik Shipping Company in 2008, Daniel D. Kovács’s *As You Like It* in 2016 with Katona Theatre, or Attila Vidnyánszky Jr.’s *Twelfth Night* with Sztalker Group in 2019 are recent examples of this category. In addition, the rise of audio media seems to also be at the forefront currently, as indicated by a 2017 production by Polish director Grzegorz Bral with A Song of the Goat Company entitled the *Songs of Lear*.

Furthermore, experimental Shakespeare productions in the region have shown another distinct feature, a denarrativized form of theatrical thinking, going back to the long tradition of popular theatre genres. Various historical forms, such as vaudeville shows, music halls, circus performances, spectacles or entertainments at fairs shared an important dramaturgical characteristic, a series of attraction-based scenes. This also characterized early cinema which, according to film historian Tom Gunning, can be described as a form marked by a “harnessing of visibility” and an “act of showing and exhibition” (Gunning 381). Based on Gunning’s terminology, we can identify the (re)emergence of the theatre of attractions. Within this category, the dominance of visual dramaturgy as well as exhibited attractions gave rise to a non-linear, image-based theatrical language and an acting style of new virtuosity (Brandl-Risi). This embraced

examples such as choreographer and director Sonja Vukicevic's 1999 *Midsummer Night's Darkness* or 2006 *Circus of Histories* in Serbia, director László Hudi's 1996 *Romeo and Juliet* with the Moving House Company in Hungary, or Polish director Maja Kleczewska's 2012 *Macbeth* at the Globe Festival.

It is also worth noting that the above-mentioned examples and categories share common features with Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theatre aesthetics (16–28), where the role of the text begins to morph from a basis or origin of a future theatre production into a material open to subjective interpretations, or to instances of free dialogue with other textual and medial forms. As a result, Shakespeare's oeuvre in connection with popular culture is increasingly interpreted and staged as a reaction to the everyday experience of living in an immersive multimedial environment, which results in the negation, or at least dissipation, of linear and teleological modes of storytelling, perception, and representation.






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Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk* 
Šárka Havlíčková Kysová** 
Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik*** 
Ivona Mišterová**** 
Gabriella Reuss***** 

Monsters and Marvels: Shakespeare Across Opera, Ballet, Dance, Puppetry, and Music in Central and Eastern Europe—and Beyond¹

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

* University of Warsaw, Poland. a.cetera@uw.edu.pl

** Masaryk University, Czech Republic. sarka.havlickova@phil.muni.cz

*** University of Lodz, Poland. anna.kowalcze@uni.lodz.pl

**** University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic. yvonne@kaj.zcu.cz

***** Péter Pázmány Catholic University, Hungary. reuss.gabriella@btk.ppke.hu

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shakespeare in Musical Theatre

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shakespeare in Dance Theatre

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shakespeare on the Puppet Stage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The case that most powerfully demonstrates the temporal and regional border-crossings within the puppet medium is that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which Josef Krofta⁶ (CZ), a most influential puppeteer of DRAK Puppet Theatre, first staged in Hradec Králové in 1984 and then directed it in Friderikstad (1998, Norway), in Wrocław (2003, Poland), in Budapest (2006, Hungary) and for young audiences (2013, DRAK and Edinburgh Fringe Festival). "The basic principles of the structure of the DRAK production remained the same, but each new production [...] emphasised another aspect of Shakespeare's comedy" (Balogh 29). The pioneer before Krofta's original take in 1984 may have been Jirí Trnka's animated puppet film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1959). Even if there were remarkable productions of the *Dream* (Hungary, 1964, Poland, 1965) in the prior decades, Krofta's *Dream* "was widely held as an important milestone in the renewal of puppet theatre dramaturgy" (Reuss 155) within the region. It was seen by many in the Socialist bloc, at the International Puppet Festival in Dresden; or, when Hungarian "puppeteers made a pilgrimage to see" it (Reuss 156).

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Pavel Drábek* 

“You have served me well:” The Shakespeare Empire in Central Europe¹

Abstract: Shakespeare has often served as an instrument of cultural colonialism. In this essay I argue that the current practice of Shakespeare studies in many ways replicates this pattern. By priming the discourse through Shakespeare, it perpetuates logocentric regimes of knowledge that tend to impose reductive perspectives—such as the binaries of Shakespeare’s original–adaptation and that of the author–adapter, but also scripture–exegesis, London–province or London–Continent, centre–periphery and empire–colonial subjects. Drawing on case studies from five centuries—of sixteenth- and seventeenth-

* University of Hull, United Kingdom. p.drabek@hull.ac.uk

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Give me thy hand.

Thou hast been rightly honest. – So hast thou. –

Thou, and thou, and thou: you have served me well,

And kings have been your fellows. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4:2:13-16)

His is the patronising, self-gratifying voice of the empire.



century travelling performers, through eighteenth-century German theatre, to twentieth- and twenty-first-century writing and performance, I argue for a need to revisit the logocentric and colonial epistemology. I call for breaking away from the critical heritage of the “Shakespeare Empire,” for reconceptualising how we use Shakespeare, and for refocusing our critical attentions to the thick descriptions of cultures and crafts that make and host Shakespeare.

Keywords: Shakespeare in Europe, travelling actors, Shakespeare in performance, Shakespeare in translation, adaptation, historiography, logocentrism, decolonisation, recrafting.

Introduction

In his inspiring book on the history of black music in Britain since 1945, Jeffrey Boakye reflects on the uses of music:

Music can be a *celebration*.
Music can be a way of talking about *oppression*.
Music can be a type of *resistance*. (Boakye 6)

In tracing the various uses, Boakye manages to write an incisive critical history of multiracial British culture by drawing on and critiquing the colonial binaries of Black and British. He offers a powerful polemic with the mainstream accounts. He does so by showing how music has served to embody the aspirations, tensions and contentions, clashes and achievements of Black peoples, who—despite the officially sanctioned whitewashing—have for millenia shaped Britain.²

Boakye’s work is part of an important movement of decolonising and diversifying histories—an intellectual current that is fortunately also having an impact on Shakespeare studies.³ The decolonisation of Shakespeare is a project perhaps most visible in connection with Critical Race Theory, but it extends far beyond and far deeper. A number of outstanding scholars and writers have shown the systemic links between colonial racism, imperialism and the European Enlightenment.⁴ The Enlightenment construction of Shakespeare as

² For more on black history of Britain, see David Olusoga’s *Black and British* (2016) and Kehinde Andrews’s *The New Age of Empire* (2021).

³ See the work of Patricia Akhimie, Dennis Britton, Kim F. Hall, Sujata Iyengar, Farah Karim-Cooper, Noémie Ndiaye and Ayanna Thompson, to name a few, and the work of the RaceB4Race initiative (<https://acmrs.asu.edu/RaceB4Race>).

⁴ Apart from discussions with colleagues, the writers who have influenced me the most are the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, the writer and thinker Amitav Ghosh, and the historian Jürgen Osterhammel.

a secular classic—or rather, a crypto-Protestant one, irrespective of historical evidence—has left its mark not only on the colonised lands, cultures and bodies of the British Empire, but also on a greater part of the world affected by the spread of English and the associated cultural colonisation. Boakye’s aforementioned uses of music can easily be reworded: by substituting “Shakespeare” for “music” we get a formulation of the agenda that has come to shape the majority of Shakespeare studies in English written by scholars from outside the Anglosphere. In many ways, this agenda is part and parcel of the Enlightenment project, from the emancipation of nation states to the Cold War (cf. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 137).

In this essay I will focus more specifically on Shakespeare in Central Europe, though many of the observations and theoretical implications could be extended to other parts of the global Shakespeare Empire. While I acknowledge and respect the importance of studies that document “the Enlightenment Shakespeare” (and I have myself contributed to that agenda), there comes a point where one needs a breath of new air—especially more than three decades after the much-proclaimed and hubristic declaration of the “End of History” and the end of the Cold War. How many conference papers and journal articles can one read and enjoy of “Shakespeare as a space of freedom in tyranny,” of “Shakespeare misused and abused by oppressive regimes” or of “Shakespeare as the secret ally and champion against Communism”? Inasmuch as these studies are valuable in themselves and serve an important role of crossing borders and making oneself understandable to colleagues abroad, they are necessarily telling only one part of the history. Within international Shakespeare studies, this discourse effectively reinforces cultural colonialism. I would argue that it belittles the autonomy of the individual case studies—the translations, adaptations or productions: in short, the creative acts in their own right. There are several casualties in that agenda. By foregrounding Shakespeare—the global classic from England with his powers of spreading humanist, enlightened or democratic values—other values move to the background:

the *cultures* and *practices* that engendered them;
the *crafts* necessary to create the work (the translation, the adaptation or the production); and,
the *complexity* and *interpretive openness* of the historic moment *here and now*.

How could we decolonise Shakespeare and move beyond this restrictive agenda? And more heretically: What use is Shakespeare? Why should we continue to talk about it internationally? What can we say to one another about “our Shakespeares”?

In what follows, I react to the oppressive hubris and tedium of the inherited agenda and call for a radical break from its prescriptive categories of what uses Shakespeare can serve—or indeed *what* that “Shakespeare” can and

should be. I draw on several Shakespearean examples from the last 450 years to show how the inherited epistemology has restricted our perspective and obliterated the cultures that created those examples. I argue for a need to move beyond the logocentric and Enlightenment legacy in order to recognise the autonomy of the creative acts that work with Shakespeare. By extension, I ask to reconsider how we conceptualise Shakespeare and the surrounding cultural heritage.

The Logocentric Hubris

Four hundred years ago, the 1623 publication of *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* laid the groundwork for a logocentric study of Shakespeare. The gradual establishment of this monumental work as a literary canon in the Enlightenment century—a hundred years after his death—and the “making of the national poet” (to use Michael Dobson’s phrase) has been the subject of many important critical studies.⁵ That process, however, has gone hand in hand with the increasing logocentrism of our Western epistemology. Serious knowledge in the West has become language-based and written to such an extent that in his contribution to the volume *Crisis in the Humanities*, published in 1964—coincidentally the year of a great Shakespeare anniversary—the British-Czech philosopher Ernest Gellner provocatively observed that:

Language [...] is culture. [...] The humanist intellectual is, essentially, an expert on the written word. [...] A literate society possesses a firmer backbone through time than does an illiterate one. (Gellner cited in Gare 21)

Sure enough, most Shakespeare scholars are well aware that the plays were written for performance and have gained their global cultural prominence in performance, not only as literary works, but the *study* has been essentially rooted in its written form.⁶ The written form offers a firmer grip on the knowledge.

⁵ The bibliography would be too long to list here. Emma Smith’s *Shakespeare’s First Folio* (2015, 2023), her edited volume *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s First Folio* (2016), Peter Kirwan’s *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Apocrypha* (2015) and Emma Depledge and Peter Kirwan’s edited volume *Canonising Shakespeare: Stationers and the Book Trade, 1640-1740* (2017) are as good a starting point as any in regards to the establishment of the Shakespearean canon. The construction of Shakespeare as a national figure is the subject of Michael Dobson’s classical *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (1992) or Gary Taylor’s *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1991).

⁶ Lukas Erne’s argument on the formation of the play scripts *as we know them from print* is also relevant in this context. See his two books *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (2003) and *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (2013).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to go deeper into our logocentric epistemology. Words—scriptures, literary formulation, as well as the rigorous regimes of textual production and publication—have become the primary medium of Western knowledge, often at the expense of the organic complexity of life and culture. I have analysed some of the issues elsewhere⁷ and have taken issue with the widely accepted logocentric theory of performatives as developed by J. L. Austin’s and John Searle’s Speech Act Theory. Their theory of performatives acknowledges but methodologically marginalises the situation—i.e., the external conditions, the context, and the political and sociocultural circumstances. In brief, performatives do *not* do things in their own name and by themselves, but only as the ostensive, published manifestations of the predicament. It is that *predicament*—i.e., the interaction and its setup—that deserves the methodological first place and prominence. Reducing a theory of action to an action of words pronounced under felicitous conditions, as Speech Act Theory does, is a hubristic trick inherited from European Enlightenment. It *divides* the complexity of things into controllable and legible parts, and *rules* over them with a set of a priori protocols. Or, as Amitav Ghosh writes on account of the “European Enlightenment’s predatory hubris” and the men who built colonial cities like Mumbai, New York, Boston or Kolkata:

[T]hey were trained to break problems into smaller and smaller puzzles until a solution presented itself. This is a way of thinking that deliberately excludes things and forces (“externalities”) that lie beyond the horizon of the matter at hand. (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 56)

In a similar way, no matter how much some Shakespeareans have stressed the need to build on the “authority of performance” (Worthen), old habits die hard: “the logocentrism of the Abrahamic religions in general, and the Protestant Reformation in particular” (Ghosh 84) has continued to firmly hold sway. Studying Shakespeare is crucially tied with textual exegesis. In an uncanny way, the Shakespearean canon has become a secular “scripture” (the scare quotes signal irony, not endorsement): with a “divinely inspired creator,” often referred to as the “Bard.” “His” birth—and it is certainly “he,” a white male—was

⁷ So far, I have dedicated four separate studies to the subject. For a historiography of non-textual performance, see my essay “Modelling the World Through Play” (2020). For a critique of Speech Act Theory and its colonial hubris, see “Heterotelic Models as Performatives” (2021). For the historiographic consequences of our logocentric history-writing and a methodological suggestion, see “Transnationality: Intercultural Dialogues, Encounters and the Theatres of Curiosity” (2023). And for a critical account of my practical exploration that goes beyond logocentrism, see “Performative Models and Physical Fictions” (2023). For a criticism of and an attack on Linguistic Philosophy, see Gellner.

established to coincide with the feast of the national patron saint (23 April), irrespective of verifiable historic truth, and although his roots lay in a town “in the heart of England” (to quote from the Royal Shakespeare Company website), his creative life was firmly rooted in London, the bustling centre of an aspiring nation state and a burgeoning empire. It comes as no surprise then that Shakespeare studies has more often than not operated along the imperial routes: the canonical scripture and its exegesis; the master playwright “for all time” and his disciples; and London as the centre that reaches out to its global peripheries. Many studies as well as works have been dedicated to the colonial uses of Shakespeare: the Shakespearean canon has served as a tool for spreading Enlightenment in its positive and negative aspects. As such Shakespeare became a global classic in the sense of an ‘entrance ticket to modernity:’ a scripture used to codify civil ways of speaking and behaving, as well as to shape individuals’ intellectual horizons, interiority and feeling (in the sense of Harold Bloom’s *invention of humanity*). Knowing, admiring, having, reading, thinking though, performing—in short, keeping company with—Shakespeare has become a certain sign of being modern.⁸

This is to state the obvious, but those habitual epistemological patterns have persistently crept in and continue to determine how we study, think and write about Shakespeare.

An Interlude on Crafting and Recrafting

Picture a scene in early modern London, perhaps a tavern, maybe a playhouse run by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men or the King’s Men. The key players are present, many of them are shareholders in the company, among them William Shakespeare:

Shakespeare: I have a new play.

Someone: What is it?

Shakespeare: What I told you some time ago. It’s *Romeo and Juliet* [or *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or pretty much any other play].

Someone: Good. A remake. “Money is in keeping old ideas fresh.” Good.⁹

Shakespeare: You see, “all my best is dressing old words new.” [Sonnet 76: 11]¹⁰

⁸ The notion of being modern has also come under serious criticism. See Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), and its postcolonial critical use in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021).

⁹ By way of acknowledgement I would like to thank TV director and producer Tom Atkinson for alerting me to this truism of the TV industry.

¹⁰ All quotations of Shakespeare and line numberings are from *The RSC Shakespeare* edition.

Someone: Who is in it?

Shakespeare: I have written it with you in mind. Everyone is in it with what they can do.

Shakespeare—alone, or together with others—used his theatre crafts of a producer (to use the modern word), player (to use the old one), poet and playwright to create a play on the basis of older works, that would give him, his colleagues and their company an opportunity to play to their strengths, appeal to audiences and venture (or “test”) their collaborative powers of performance.¹¹ That meant taking into account what individuals actors could offer; what the affordance of the staging was; what the unseen labour of theatre making was (the “labours lost,” to cite Natasha Korda); and of course the fine, ineffable tissue of what would “surprise” and land well with the audience.¹² It would be unthinkable to reduce the company’s interaction to Shakespeare as the “solitary genius” who creates new dramatic texts, and the actors as reproductive artists that give their bodies to the creation.¹³ Apart from being one of the acting company, Shakespeare was a self-proclaimed adapter who reworked older plays and stories, so to inscribe an aura of originality would be hubristic. The originality was in the *craft*—or rather, in the *recrafting*—of the plays. Also, many of the plays were published without his name given—not necessarily a sign of flawed acknowledgement, neglect or misappropriation, but perhaps a sign of modesty and an indirect signal that the plays are reworking old material with the help of the company and their craft—which tends to get acknowledged on the title pages of early prints in such formulations as: “As it hath been often (with great applause) plaid publicquely, by the right Honourable the L. of *Hunsdon* his Seruants” (the 1597 Quarto of *Romeo and Juliet*) or “As it was Plaide by the Right Honourable the Earle of *Darbie*, Earle of *Pembrooke*, and Early of *Sussex* their Seruants” (the 1594 Quarto of *Titus Andronicus*).

I would argue that the logocentric foisting of authorship upon Shakespeare, with the accompanying properties of originality, singularity and godlike creation, should be replaced by a focus on the crafts involved, on the

¹¹ Adam Railton, currently working on his doctoral project at the University of Hull, under my and Lisa Hopkins’s supervision, focuses on the collaborative nature of early modern theatre making. He has alerted me to the word *test*, used by actor Joseph Taylor in his prefatory verses to Philip Massinger’s *The Roman Actor* (published 1629). As Adam argues, Taylor uses the noun *test* to highlight the tentative, “what if” nature of the venture of performing plays.

¹² For the unseen and mostly women’s labour in the Elizabethan playhouse, see Natasha Korda’s *Labors Lost* (2011).

¹³ I am using the expression *solitary genius* in the sense of Jack Stillinger (1991). For a more recent treatment of the Romantic cult of the creator, see Maarten Doorman’s *De romantische orde* (The Romantic Order, 2004).

relationality of the sources and Shakespeare's *recrafting*, and on the interactive cooperation of the company and the entire environment.¹⁴ To approach his plays as *recrafting* would offer perspectives that are more organic and that wouldn't "deliberately exclude[] things and forces ('externalities')" (Ghosh) and continue to conceal the "labours lost" (Korda) that are integral to the creative process.

Shakespeare in Central Europe

In his cultural history of *Hamlet* in Germany from the 1770s onwards, Peter Marx documents how, over a period of almost three centuries, Shakespeare's tragedy has served German intellectuals as the matrix of questions that probed into the political, cultural and personal spheres and offered a poetic, literary and theatrical, as well as public space for self-reflection. "Deutschland ist Hamlet," declared Ferdinand Freilingrath famously in his 1844 poem, and the ghost of *Hamlet* the play (no pun intended) has continued to haunt Germany in its path to self-understanding. No wonder then that finding evidence of *Hamlet* in Germany before the reception in the Enlightenment age—in the wake of David Garrick's revival of the "national poet"—became an occupation for generations of German theatre historians. When did *Hamlet* first "arrive" on the Continent? When did Shakespeare's plays spread across the Channel? When did the English actors first cross the Channel and how did they shape Continental culture, and specifically the culture of Germany? The hunt is still on.

It won't come as a surprise that much of the search has been text-based and literary, even if the claims made extend far beyond the literary realm. So, for instance, Ralf Haekel, in his 2004 book *Die Englischen Komödianten in Deutschland*, argues for the English actors as key players in the establishment of German professional theatre. While Haekel's work with sources is exemplary, his focus is logocentric: even though he is making an argument for *the theatrical profession*, his study does not reflect on theatrical practice. Similarly, June Schlueter's meticulous studies of surviving play scripts (see Schlueter, "New Light" and Schlueter, "Across the Narrow Sea") infer far-reaching conclusions for early modern theatre practice, but without involving the theatrical and interactive aspects of the craft or the broader transnational contexts. On account of the 1620 anthology of *Englische Comedien und Tragedien*, which Schlueter tacitly takes for performance scripts that could have been written by the actors themselves, she suggests that the English actors "would have known what pleased their German audiences" (Schlueter, "Across the Narrow Sea" 237; see also Drábek, "Why, sir" 143).

¹⁴ I am using the notion of *craft* and *cooperation* in the sense of Richard Sennett and his Homo Faber trilogy.

As David Mann says in his book on the Elizabethan player, “Too much attention to the text [...] can distort our view of its place in the performance” (Mann 1). The bias implicit in looking for English actors—or more specifically, the potential cultural diplomats of Shakespeare’s dramatic literature in early modern German-speaking Europe—distorts our view even more. It tends to bypass the study of the live theatrical culture that was able and open to receive any such transnational influence. And in so doing, such studies ignore the fact that the existing theatre probably already contained what the researcher focused on the English actors identifies as the English actors’ novel import. Much of it could well have been there already—if only we abandon Shakespeare and see what there is before the ‘first encounter.’ If the record says that a company of English actors performed “a play about the Jew,” after a few iterations of logocentric mulling-over this record becomes a possible reference to a performance of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. One wonders though: Were there no other English plays about Jews that the English actors could perform, or were the other, non-Shakespearean plays a goods too common and not worthy of cultural importation? And also: Had there been no other non-English plays on the subject that were already in circulation? Why should Shakespeare’s *Merchant* be so prominent? How likely is it that an early modern audience would, by default, share the modern researcher’s enthusiasm for Shakespeare, or that the early modern actors would assume that Shakespeare’s plays were what audiences in Dresden, Graz, Danzig (Gdańsk) or Laibach (Ljubljana) were hungry for? Let us point out that even among the English playwrights Shakespeare wasn’t the prime export article. The plays of Thomas Kyd, Thomas Dekker, William Rowley and James Shirley left a much more significant mark on seventeenth-century German theatre.¹⁵

I would argue that this wishful search for Shakespeare and for London plays in Germany—as mediated by English actors—is flawed, and that in a colonial sense. Ignoring what there is and not starting with a thick description of the receiving culture is a blindness of a colonial kind. It goes with a tacit, but very violent assumption that ‘what we have to offer to you is better.’ The long and blood-soaked history of Western colonisation has ridden on such wilful, arrogant blindness that imposed on the colonised an allegedly superior religion, culture, literature or art. And it is shocking that this blindness still persists nowadays in academic studies, with questions such as: Had there been “genuine” religion or “genuine” culture in the Americas, in the Far East, or in Africa? How “genuine” or “valid” they were is to be judged on European Enlightenment terms—no doubt about that. A similar affair—without the violence and

¹⁵ For Kyd abroad, see Nicoleta Cinpoș’s edited volume *Doing Kyd*. For Dekker, Rowley and Shirley, see Bärbel Rudin’s “Die Textbibliothek.”

bloodshed—is apparent in the study of English actors on the Continent. The approach is flawed for other reasons too:

(1) *National*. What does “English” mean in this context? Let us leave aside the complex problem of the formation of nation states that may appear as a given now but were far from such before the late seventeenth century. If, for instance, in June 1588, three actors asked for permission to perform (jump, dance and make a play with a wooden horse) at the festivities in Strasburg, what nationality can we assume? The record lists them as “Hanns Brosem von Eystett, Martin Brenner und Lienhart Nollus von Hull aus Engelland” (Brand and Rudin 23). Does it mean then that Hanns Brosem was German (for he was from Eichstätt in Bavaria), and that Martin Brenner and Lienhart Nollus were English (as they were from Hull)? Or is it that they had passports from the two cities? Can we conclude that Brenner and Nollus were “English actors”? Let us not forget that claiming to be foreign and exotic is a marketable commodity in performance—irrespective of whether it is true or not. If the English actor Robert Browne’s daughter Jane spent most of her life in Germany, the Netherlands and, after the death of her husband Robert Reynolds, in Warsaw with the King’s allowance, is she to be viewed as an “English” person? Is Thomas Dekker, whose parents were probably Dutch and he himself may have been born in London, but also anywhere else, to be seen as “English”? What nationality is the late-seventeenth century musician and composer Geoffrey Finger (c1660-1730)? He was born Gottfried Finger in Olmütz (Olomouc; parents’ ethnicity unknown), before coming to London in around 1687 he had a career in Germany, and died in Mannheim. He would probably introduce himself as “of Munich,” and a decade later as “of London.” So what is he in our logocentric history? German? Czech? Moravian? English? or whatever nationality his parents happened to be?

(2) *National-Cultural*. Does it mean that English actors play English plays—i.e., plays from the London stage? What does “Englishness” mean in the theatre? I have discussed both questions in an earlier essay (Drábek, “Why, sir”) and have argued that, just like “Italian comedy,” the “English comedy” was a style, not an assignation of origin, let alone of the language. What is remarkable about the repertoire of “English actors” in Germany, many of whom were born in continental Europe (such as Johann Schilling or Johann Georg Gettner), is how many of the plays had their antecedents in the area. The *Faustus* play, popular among central European puppeteers ever since, had been a German story before Marlowe’s stage adaptation. There had also been numerous plays about a magician selling his soul to the devil (Drábek, “English Comedy” 186). Dekker’s and Massinger’s *The Virgin Martyr* about the martyr St Dorothea had been a popular subject of vernal festivities before the English actors brought their version—which immediately got adapted to suit local theatrical practices (see Neuhuber 131-140). There are numerous examples (see Drábek and

Katritzky, and Drábek, “Transnationality” 642-643), and to ignore the existing culture in favour of a narrative of “English plays on the Continent” would be missing the basic principles of theatre.

(3) *Professional*. To be a “player” did not automatically mean to be a theatre actor, let alone a theatre actor of spoken drama. The English word also referred to musicians, as did the German expressions of *Spieler*, *Lustmacher* or *Instrumentist*—the latter of which was also used to stage actors (Spohr). Bärbel Rudin has convincingly shown that the travelling actors throughout the early modern era were far from one-dimensional and specialised in their activities, but combined different performative activities—not only spoken and sung drama, but also dance, acrobatics and mechanical displays with puppets and automata (Rudin). Our anachronistic assumptions that to be called an “actor” (or “player”) came with a specific profession and craft is another example of logocentric blindness. When I asked one of the general editors of the REED project (Records of Early English Drama) about the taxonomies and the assumed divisions of labour, they admitted that the inclusion or exclusion of “puppeteers” and other “non-dramatic” (their word) performers was in principle at the discretion of the editors of the individual volume. The consequences for our understanding of the theatrical cultures are far-reaching. In an unpublished lecture “The Challenge of Simultaneity: Writing Theatre History beyond the Grand Récit” delivered at the University of Hull (29 April 2015), Peter Marx—probably responding to my own myopic vision of English actors—laid out the theatrical and performance scene in Cologne in the 1620s. By switching off the historiographic filter of searching for English actors, the early modern city sprung to life with unexpected performative activity at least as worthy of historical study, only without the colonial ghost of Shakespeare and English theatre haunting it. Without the filter, even the activities of the English players become much more diverse and vivid—as M.A. Katritzky has documented in a number of publications.

Despite the apparent methodological problems with searching for Shakespeare in early modern Europe, the efforts are unceasing. Arden Shakespeare has launched a much needed series, in collaboration with a research project (<https://www.unige.ch/emgs/>) led by Lukas Erne at the University of Geneva. The Arden series is named after the project, Early Modern German Shakespeare. To date, two volumes have come out, with meticulously translated, edited and annotated scripts of four anonymous early modern German plays that have a link to Shakespeare:

Volume 1: *Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet: Der Bestrafte Brudermord and Romio und Julieta in Translation* (ed. Lukas Erne and Kareen Seidler, 2020) containing the eighteenth-century text of *Der bestrafte Brudermord* (Fratricide Punished) and the 1680s south Bohemian play *Romio und Julietta*.

Volume 2: *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew*: *Tito Andronico and Kunst über alle Künste, ein böß Weib gut zu machen in Translation* (ed. Lukas Erne, Florence Hazrat and Maria Shmygol) with the 1620 version of *Titus Andronicus* from the anthology of *Engelische Comedien und Tragedien*, and the 1672 German play translated as *An Art Beyond All Arts, to Make a Bad Wife Good*.

The researchers and volume editors are very aware of the contexts in which the German adaptations of Shakespeare's plays were created and they cannot be faulted for a lack of attention to detail, or awareness of the contentions:

While little is known about the identity of Shakespeare's early modern German translators and adaptors, the plays published in this and its companion volume bear witness to the ingenuity of their dramatic engagement with Shakespeare's drama. (Erne, Hazrat and Shmygol xix)

It is welcome that these little known German plays, clearly related to Shakespeare's, have received such critical attention and are now available in English.¹⁶ It is not their critical diligence, but rather the epistemological setup—and the priming through inherited concepts—that is the problem. Locating the autonomous identity of the German plays within a Shakespearean pedigree skews the portrait of the cultures that engendered them.¹⁷ While the editors very carefully study how Shakespeare's plays were adapted to their German versions and acknowledge the contexts in which they emerged, the casualties are evident. The editors foreground:

As scholars have come to realize, many of Shakespeare's English texts embed within themselves the contributions of actors, revisers and adapters. They are socialized products, in keeping with the eminently socialized art form that is theatre. We have been used to thinking of Shakespeare's socialized early modern texts as purely English, but such monolingualism imposes upon them a restriction that simply does not square with the international traffic of early modern theatre companies and their plays. From the late sixteenth century, plays that were performed in commercial theatres in London also had an existence elsewhere, not only in the provinces but also on the Continent, and in particular its German-speaking parts. (xvi)

The editors carefully establish everything there is to discretely know about the context—i.e., everything for which there is relevant factual evidence. Yet,

¹⁶ The second volume, *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, is also fully available in Open Access.

¹⁷ See also my review of the first volume in *Early Theatre* (2022) (Drábek, "Lukas Erne").

the primary angle is Shakespeare and the diaspora of his plays. In the following sentence, which draws on a topical reference to Brexit, the editors stress that:

it seems a good moment to remember that Shakespeare’s plays have always also been European, and that we have much to gain from recovering the life they led on the Continent. (xvi)

I thoroughly agree that there is much to gain, but the Shakespearean lens is unfortunate and—as I have shown—reductive in understanding the complex cultural organisms of the region and the time. The *crafts* that enabled those plays—the live theatrical culture without which none of them would have come to be—are labours lost and excluded from the project’s purview. From a theoretical point of view—taking the word *theory* in its original sense of *observing* and *viewing*—Shakespeare on the Continent (or rather our logocentric construction of Shakespeare) has helped scorch the cultural landscape that actually hosted “Shakespeare” and gave his plays a new life.

Shakespeare among the Actors

In her remarkable book, *Shakespeare in the Theatre: The King’s Men*, Lucy Munro not only goes a long way to make up for the critical neglect of the period between Shakespeare’s supposed retirement from the stage in 1613 and the 1660 reopening of the London theatres after the Civil War. Her book also very carefully documents the process in which Shakespeare’s plays came to shape his acting company’s repertoire for decades after his departure. Munro has a keen eye to the theatrical detail—the acting crafts, the physical bodies of the actors, as well as the social and collective dynamics within the company. What emerges from her discussion is not only Shakespeare as the playwright (a literary figure), but rather Shakespeare the actor and sharer, and after his departure also, very importantly, Shakespeare “the theatrical commodity” (Munro 7): an asset in a venture that contributes to the successful life of the theatrical company. Munro reaches beyond the year 1660 and her observations have implications for an understanding of the Restoration companies and their cultivation of the Shakespearean heritage.

It is this culture that engendered not only the obvious adaptations—such as Nahum Tate’s *King Lear*—but also the more theatrical *recraftings* of the plays. The theatrical Shakespeare that Munro presents came to shape the repertoire in multiple ways. I would argue that the heritage engendered whole playwrights. The prematurely deceased Thomas Otway (1652-1685) wrote plays that mined Shakespeare’s theatrical craft for the dramatic situations and interactions perhaps more than anyone else. In his prologue (spoken by

Mr. Betterton) to his *The History and Fall of Caius Marius* (1680), he hints at that fecundity:

Our *Shakespear* wrote too in an Age as blest,
 The happiest Poet of his time and best. [...]
 And from the Crop of his luxuriant Pen
 E're since succeeding Poets humbly glean. (Prologue: 20-21, 26-27)

However, only the subplot of *Caius Marius* is a direct—i.e. textual—adaptation of Shakespeare and Otway acknowledges as much apologetically:

Though much the most unworthy of the Throng,
 Our this-day's Poet fears h' has done him wrong.
 Like greedy Beggars that steal Sheaves away,
 You'll find h' has rifled him of half a Play.
 Amidst the baser Dross you'll see it shine
 Most beautifull, amazing, and Divine. (Prologue: 28-33)

The subplot is gleaned from *Romeo and Juliet* and Otway's "adaptation" has been much mocked. There are seemingly preposterous moments, such as Lavinia's line "*O Marius, Marius! wherefore art thou Marius?*" (2:2:267), but to be sure they are ridiculous only to the literary reader. From a dramatic point of view, while Otway borrows lines from Shakespeare's play, he is original in his treatment of the action and the storyline—and, what is more, he has an exquisite sense for the dramatic situation and the personas' interaction. Where Nahum Tate merely retouches the lines and redirects the conclusion of the play, Otway is genuinely thorough in his recrafting of the material. Even more importantly, the main plot—which hardly gets mentioned by scholars of Shakespeare in adaptation—is what carries the play. There are no textual (verbal) echoes of Shakespeare but Otway "humbly gleans" from Shakespeare's "luxuriant Pen" and reworks dramatic (not ideational) motifs from *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *As You Like It* and, perhaps most surprisingly, *King Lear*.¹⁸ Compared to the theatrical effectiveness of individual scenes in Otway's tragedy and the craft with which he built on Shakespeare's dramaturgy, the textual borrowings are a superficial trap of little significance, apart from giving the literary critic tangible evidence to confirm what Otway already admitted.

We could say similar things about Otway's other plays—*Don Carlos*, *Prince of Spain* (1676), *The Orphan* (1680), *The Soldier's Fortune* (1681) or his

¹⁸ It was David Drozd who pointed out the echo of *King Lear* in Otway's second scene of Act IV. This was during a reading of my Czech translation with actors from the National Theatre in Brno (Czech Republic) at Masaryk University on 10 September 2022. I am thankful to everyone who participated and made the reading possible.

best known play *Venice Preserv'd* (1682). We could say it also about a number of the early plays of Aphra Behn (1640-1689) and John Dryden (1631-1700), before the two playwrights fell for the fashionable French style, and by Dryden's rival and later collaborator Nathaniel Lee (1653-1692), especially his *Lucius Junius Brutus* (1681). If we were to abstract from the plays' ideational level—their politics, their period sensibilities and affective tastes—the dramatic bones that build them are Shakespearean.¹⁹ In this way the Restoration playwrights would take the Shakespearean dramatic heritage and “keep invention in a noted weed” (Sonnet 76:6)—by dressing their own creations in the familiar habits, fashions, sensibilities, expressions as well as themes of their age.

From this perspective of *theatrical recrafting*, shouldn't we do much more of the fact that Friedrich Schiller reworked Otway's *Don Carlos*? Or even more interestingly that a German play *Das gerettete Venedig* was performed in Brünn (Brno) at Easter 1763? This was very likely a version of Otway's play, probably influenced by French dramaturgy (judging from the play's Polish reception), and it was performed by the company of the theatre and opera impresario, actor, rope-dancer, dancer and puppeteer Johann Joseph Brunian (Scherl 80-84; Havlíčková 221, 227; Żurowski 71). Or do we only restrict ourselves to the fact that Brunian also produced *Macbeth*, *Kaufmann von Venedig*, *Richard II* and probably also *Timon von Athens* in F.J. Fischer's versions (published in Prague in 1777)? Was Brunian's repertoire of the early 1760s (including *Das gerettete Venedig*) more in the wake of the actors' cultivation of the Shakespearean heritage, while that of the late 1770s (including *Macbeth*, *Kaufmann*, *Richard II* and *Timon*) was already responding to the pre-Romantic fashion introduced by David Garrick? And—importantly for the historian of Shakespeare in Central Europe—which of the two repertoires should receive more attention?

If we recall that the earliest German version of *Hamlet*—*Der bestrafte Brudermord*—was actually printed in 1781, allegedly based on a now-lost manuscript of 1710, what context should we view the text in? Wouldn't we ignore the theatrical culture of the time if we were to assume that the 1781 text was a time capsule from 1710, which was itself in turn a time capsule from a hundred years before? True, manuscripts and texts could do that: they are time capsules of sorts. But theatrical commodities are always homeostatic, *here and now*, and evolve organically because that is how they stay alive. And I would argue that shifting the critical perspective from the logocentric histories of

¹⁹ Of course, this is not to say that identifying Shakespeare's influence in Otway's plays means getting to the ultimate source and only begetter. Shakespeare's plays rely on craft inspired by the art of Thomas Kyd or Christopher Marlowe and “beautified by the feathers” of the likes of Robert Greene, Henry Chettle, John Lyly—and of course George Peele.

Shakespeare to the “drama-centric” focus on the action (*drama*) here and now—on the practices and crafts involved—leads to more rounded, diverse as well as inclusive portrayals.

Komedye and Šilok as a Case Study

How much does it matter that a play has Shakespeare somewhere in its dramatic “DNA”? How important was the provenance of Shakespeare’s plays and their properties—that which Shakespeare studies too often essentialise in its common denominator: their origin with Shakespeare the English-language writer *par excellence* in a London company of the early stages of the British Empire? I have offered a number of historic instances where Shakespeare’s dramaturgy—as well as the theatrical craft of other English players—inspired and shaped the practices of others; these were instances where “our lofty scene [would] be acted over | In states unborn and accents yet unknown” (*Julius Caesar* 3:1:122-123). The majority of those plays made no reference to Shakespeare or the sources of their inspiration—so to speak, “where they did proceed” (Sonnet 76:8). All the evidence of versions of *King Lear* or *Romeo and Juliet*—the two plays for which certain evidence exists in seventeenth-century German-speaking Europe and which surely related to Shakespeare’s London plays—occurs without his name.

The case of *King Lear* is relatively straightforward, although there are no extant scripts of the early modern German versions (for evidence of *King Lear* in early modern Germany, see Rudin, “Die Textbibliothek”). These plays could have been based equally on Shakespeare’s versions and/or on the anonymous *The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella* (printed in London in 1605). While there is general consensus on the superior quality of Shakespeare’s play, travelling players would probably be more attuned to the anonymous *King Leir*: it is comedic; its situations are recognisable scenarios (*theatergrams*); and it is much less dependent on language. Just like other travelling plays—such as the anonymous and superpopular *Mucedorus*, Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* or the little studied dramaturgy of Robert Wilson (active 1572-1600)²⁰—it allows actors to apply their art “on the fly” and the scripts “play” straightaway. In contrast, while infinitely more rewarding in the long run, both intellectually and emotionally, Shakespeare’s plays require disproportionately more rehearsal, focused attention from both actors and audiences, and linguistic competency. In other words, Shakespeare’s plays take much more effort to recraft and produce outside of its original habitat.

²⁰ I am grateful to Adam Railton for drawing my attention to Robert Wilson.

The case of *Romeo and Juliet* is more complex. Shakespeare’s tragedy in the two extant versions—Quarto 1 of 1597 and the longer, almost identical versions that follow Quarto 2 of 1599—is not the only dramatic variant available. Bandello’s novella and its many variants had been popular throughout early modern Europe and served several dramatists as sources for their versions—Lope de Vega’s tragicomedy *Castelvines y Monteses* (c. 1615) or Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla’s *Los bandos de Verona* (1640) (see Drábek, “Dramaturgy” 780-781), not to mention the various operatic versions and the dramatic lookalikes with which any such play would be grouped: the versions of Pyramus and Thisbe, the many iterations in the Italian Comedy (*commedia dell’arte*) and other fated lovers. We would fall for the availability bias (a sign of the Shakespeare filter?) if we assumed that Lope de Vega’s or Rojas Zorrilla’s versions were not as prominent as Shakespeare’s. The Spanish Empire, through the Habsburg dynasty, played a decisive political role in early modern Central and Western Europe (not to mention the Americas or the networks of Jesuit school drama and festivities) and the Siglo de Oro plays circulated perhaps even more than the English.²¹ Shakespeare’s play, even if used directly in performance, would never arrive in an uncharted territory. Most ingredients of any recrafting of that story would already be in place.

Early nineteenth-century Czech folk drama offers a remarkable example of the use of Shakespeare without the dependence on words, on his structure of the play script, and also without any acknowledgement of his authorship—at a time when Shakespeare’s name became well known and established in the theatrical and intellectual circles. The anonymous *Komedye o dvouch kupcích a o Židovi Šilokoj* (The Comedy of two merchants and Šilok the Jew) dates most likely from the late 1810s or the 1820s (Sochorová, “SDDNO” 108).²² The anonymous Czech playwright apparently did not work with Shakespeare’s play but with a popular chapbook (*Volksbuch*) called *Kupec z Venedyku, nebo Láska a Přátelstvo* (The Merchant of Venice, or Love and Friendship). This prose adaptation of F.J. Fischer’s German version came out first in Jindřichův Hradec in 1782,²³ but went through several reeditions (Litomyšl 1809, 1822). The preface to the chapbook announces the reason for its publication:

²¹ For an account of the reach of Rojas Zorrilla’s play, see Gonzáles Cañal. See also my discussion of Jiří Antonín Benda’s and Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter’s singspiel *Romeo und Julie* (1779) in Drábek, “Dramaturgy” 792-796.

²² The manuscript is deposited at the Strahovská knihovna (sig. DV IV 35). Its front page can be viewed at <https://www.amaterskedivadlo.cz/main.php?data=multimedia&id=59160>. The text is published in Sochorová, “SDČO” 349-390. All quotations from the *Komedye*—with the exception of the title page—are taken from Sochorová’s edition.

²³ An edition of the chapbook is included in my “České pokusy” 309-323.

Bylo již mnoho Čtení v českém Jazyku vydaných, které Chválu zasloužili; i pročež se také doufá, že tento vydaný Kus (který z německé Komedy z nova v Češtinu přesazen, pro jeho rozličných Osob Představování) Čtení hoden, a za to uznán bude. Jsem tehdy té Náděje, že české Řeči Milovnícy toto Čtení mile přečtou, a s ním sobě zbytečný Čas tak ukrátějí, jakoby sami při té Komedy (která ve velkých Městách s tím největším Zalíbením představovaná, a jak od Vyššího tak Nižšího Stavů oblíbená byla) přítomni byli.—Přitom ale se dobrotivým Česko=Čtenářům oznamuje: že v brzkém Čase z této Kněho=Tiskárny více ještě tomuto nápodobných Kusů vydaných bude. (cited from Drábek, “*České pokusy*” 310)

[There has been much reading published in the Czech language, deserving of praise; whereupon it is hoped that the present published piece (which from a German *Komedy* newly in Czech is set forth, for its performance of diverse personas) is worthy of reading, and will be deemed as such. I am therefore of a great hope that lovers of the Czech tongue will be pleased to read this and pass their leftover time with it, as if they were themselves present at the comedy (which is performed in large cities with the greatest following, beloved of both the upper and the lower sort).—At the same time, let it be known to all Czecho-readers: that in a short time this book press will publish more such pieces.]

There is no mention of Shakespeare in the preface, only of the enthusiastic reception and popularity of the play in the theatres of larger cities. The chapbook wishes to simulate the sensation of being at a performance. This is echoed in the next publication, *Makbet vůdce šotského wogska* (Makbet the Leader of the Scottish Army, Jindřichův Hradec: Ignác Vojtěch Hilgartner, 1782), where the preface observes:

To všecko jest z německé Komedy vytaženo, a v Češtinu obráceno. Poněvadž ale všykni Lide takové Komedy přítomni býti nemohou (neb se nejvíce jen v Hlavních Městách představuje;) tak se to milým Česko=Čtenářům tuto představuje a podává. (cited from Drábek, “*České pokusy*” 326)

[All this is pulled out of a German comedy and turned into Czech. But since not all people can be present at such a comedy (as they are performed mostly in capital cities), therefore this is introduced and presented to the kind “Czecho-readers.”]

It is the play’s theatrical popularity that sells the print—and it clearly found its Czecho-readers, judging by the reeditions.

The anonymous playwright from a rural area in East Bohemia clearly took inspiration in that exhortation. The early decades of the nineteenth century saw a remarkable theatrical activity in several close-knit communities of East Bohemia. The culture, known as *selské divadlo* (rural or farmers’ theatre) or as *sousedské divadlo* (neighbourhood or community theatre), produced a number of remarkable artefacts, among them several surviving play scripts, mostly in

rhyming verse, some of biblical drama, others stemming from the popular baroque culture (chivalric plays and romances, the patient Griselda, Genoveva etc.). The plays include songs and comical interludes, sometimes as afterpieces to the main acts. The *Komedye o dvouch kupcích a Židovi Šilokoj*, a verse play in rhyming couplets, is no outlier in the genre of *sousedské divadlo*. It employs a set of unnuanced personas that draw on clichés and stereotypes—Šilok, Jesyka and Jakob the Jew are unapologetically anti-Jewish racist caricatures. The title page of *Komedye* lists the personas:

persony tyto	
Opovidnik, 1.	Messenger [i.e. Narrator]
Kníže, 2.	Prince [Porcia's father]
Antonyo, 3.	
Basanyo, 4.	
Šilok, 5.	
Jakob žid, 6.	Jakob the Jew
Jesyka, 7.	
Rolenc [Lorenc], 8.	
Čert, 9.	Devil [a conventionally comic role]
Graciano, 10.	
Morochius Mouřenin, 12.	Morochius the Moor
Akaron [Arakon] princ, 14.	
Kapitan 15.	
Advokat 16.	
Servus s policajtem 17,18.	Servant with the Policeman
Nercisa, 19,	
Kovař, 20	Blacksmith
Káča 21.	Káča [i.e. Kate]
Vašíček 22.	Vašíček [i.e. Young Wenceslas]
Doktor 23	

The list is clearly incomplete, missing No. 11 (probably Porcia), No. 13 (probably Kuba, i.e., an equivalent of Gobbo) and possibly No. 24 (the *Blazen*, i.e., the Fool).

The play opens with a song for the entire company (*zpěv pro všechny*), followed by the *Opovědník's* (Messenger's) summary or argument of the plot with a moralism about earthly vanity. The *Opovědník* clarifies that the two merchants of the title refer to Basanyo and Antonyo, outlines Porcia's situation with her late father the *Kníže* (Prince), but makes no mention of Šilok or the pound of flesh bond.

The next scene shows *Kníže* and his daughter Porcia: the prince is about to die and takes leave of his daughter Porcia with the three caskets and a dying wish. The scene is remarkably reminiscent of other baroque dying scenes, such

as those of Admetus (in baroque versions of Euripides's *Alcestis*), of Ahasverus (in versions of the biblical story of *Esther*), or the death of Everyman (in the numerous versions of *Everyman*, *Elckerlijck*, *Jedermann*, *Kdožkolvěk* or the Latin *Mercator* plays). This clearly is the Czech playwright's addition to the dramatic plot, if not to the storyline. The scene concludes with a two-part song sung by Porcia and *Kníže* about the art of dying well.

Basanyo meets Antonyo and goes straight to the point: he has consulted the stars (*nechal jsem si planetu čísti*; I had the planet read for me) and he is hopeful, albeit moneyless for now. Antonyo offers to borrow money from Šilok. Before they depart, the comic plotting tempter *Čert* (Devil) offers to lend them money himself. Šilok enters—speaking in broken Czech grammar, mispronouncing Czech consonants, as well as rhyming irregularly—and suggests to Antonyo that they strike a deal at a feast they are both invited to. He then calls his servant Kuba (which is a common Czech diminutive of Jakub) and asks him to watch over the house.

Lorenzo enters, sends Kuba away and calls for Jesyka, who is ready to elope. Before her elopement to Belmont with Lorenzo and before turning Christian, she also speaks in the cliché stage caricature of Jewish Czech. Later, when she is baptised, she not only adopts the Christian name of Nercisa and becomes a servant to Porcia, but also drops all the linguistic caricature.

Antonyo tells Basanyo of the heated debate with Šilok at the feast which concluded with a jest: committing a pound of flesh in exchange for the three thousand ducats. Nonetheless, he sends Basanyo on his way to Belmont. The Devil enters and threatens to make their lives difficult by taking sides with Šilok and becoming his advisor.

Jakob and Šilok rejoice in the news of Antonyo's losses, but Šilok suffers when hearing from Graciano of Jesyka being baptised as Nercisa and of the fact that it was Šilok's loan that enabled his daughter to elope. The Devil cheers Šilok up and tells him to get a good sharp knife ahead of his revenge.

The *Opovědník* announces the shift of location to Belmont and explains the trick with the three caskets. He says that the first suitor is Morochius the Moor and that Porcia is very anxious, should he guess the answer and become her lord—*neb se ní velmi nelíbil* (for she very much did not like him). In the scene with Morochius, there is no racial caricature at play, and when he fails in the test, Morochius sings a heartfelt song. The next suitor is Arabon, an English lord, who also departs with a song. Basanyo's selecting is underscored by music. Porcia at first doesn't recognise him but on Nercisa's reminder remembers how much she loved him. She asks him not to hasten the choice, but Basanyo doesn't want to delay it. He succeeds and a double wedding is held. The Devil enters, wishing to disrupt, but Lorenzo beats him away. A messenger enters with a letter from *Fenedych* (Venice). Porcia and Nercisa give their husbands rings and send

Basanyo and Lorenzo to go and help Antonyo. The scene concludes with two songs, from Basanyo and Lorenzo, and from Porcia and Nercisa. When the men leave, Porcia tells Nercisa that they will follow them disguised as men:

Já se postavím za advokáta
a ty za mého služebníka.

I'll stand for an advocate
and you for my servant.

The scene shifts to Venice: Šilok talks to *Kapitan* (the Governor) and tells him he wants his satisfaction of Antonyo's pound of flesh—a detail everyone refers to as a joke or a prank. Antonyo enters, is captured by a Servant and a Policeman, whereupon Basanyo enters and asks for his release. Šilok is adamant and refuses all sums of money offered to him. When Antonyo has taken leave of Basanyo, the *Advokat* enters and starts a disputation with Šilok, which follows the basic contours of the court scene in Shakespeare's play.

When Šilok relents and offers to accept money, the *Advokat* retorts:

Žádné, žide, nedostaneš,
ale o tvé doma přijdeš,
tys měl dělat jako lidi,
tebe ale čert uklidí.

None, Jew, will you get,
but will also lose your [money] at home,
you should have done like people do,
but the devil will sort you now.

At this point the play takes a shocking turn and the greatest departure from its source:

Šilok:

Tak dyž mi mé zboží i peníze berete,
tak mi také můj život vemte.

Advokat: Co nám je po tvém životu,

ty nemilosrdný židouchu,
když se mrzíš, tu máš provaz,
třeba si s ním hrdlo uvaž.

Tu se oběsí.

Šilok:

If you are taking away my goods and my money,
take my life as well.

Advokat:

What do we care for your life,
 you merciless Jewish shyster,²⁴
 if you are cross, here is a rope,
 with it you can tie your throat.

Here he hangs himself.

The comic figure of the Devil gives praise to his chthonic master, Lord Luciper, and rejoices that he will be able to bring his lord *pečeně* (a roast) from this comedy. The scene then immediately progresses to the reward. The *Advokat* takes a liking to the ring, but Basanyo says that it is a ring *od své nejmilejší* (from my most beloved), but when the *Advokat* insists, Basanyo gives it away. Lorenzo admits that the servant also got his ring as a recompense. The *Advokat* thanks kindly for the rings and they depart. Basanyo thanks again (in a couplet) and Porcia speaks, as if arriving. (There are no stage directions in the manuscript at this point, so it is unclear how this should be realised on stage.) The dialogue between Porcia, Basanyo, Lorenzo and Nercisa concludes the play, followed by a song.

The *Opovědník* announces an interlude about a blacksmith and his unfaithful wife, who is punished when her beloved is shot from a rifle by the blacksmith. While there is no apparent thematic link between the merchants' comedy and the afterpiece, Ludmila Sochorová has pointed out a similarity with the comic interlude of the punished adultery from the 1608 play of Samson, its folk variants known as *Salička*, as well as Pergolesi's opera *La serva padrona* (Sochorová, "ODDNO" 97). I have observed elsewhere on the transnational circulation of this Boccaccian farce and its links to Shakespeare's (or more specifically, Will Kemp's) theatre (Drábek, "Samson" 222-227). This is not to say that we should assume that both the merchant comedy and its afterpiece have a *deliberately* common ancestry, but rather note how deeply English comedy was connected with and ingrained in the transnational European theatre culture.

The epilogue of the *Komedye* rounds up the show and recalls both parts. The manuscript ends with nine passages to be delivered by *Blázen* (the Fool) as running commentaries throughout the show. The text doesn't indicate where these passages belong but it is probable that they would have helped in the otherwise abrupt transitions—such as the moment when the *Advokat* and

²⁴ The word *židouch* is not a common one, but it was formed using a common suffix *-ouch* that associates derogatory meaning. Czech speakers would associate such words as *padouch* (scoundrel), *zloduch* (villain) or *melouch*, a word for underhand, illicit jobs, borrowed from Yiddish *meloche*, which refers to jobs, professions and work that Jews were banned from practising (*Slovník spisovného jazyka českého*, <https://ssjc.ujc.cas.cz/search.php?heslo=melouch&sti=36750&where=hesla>).

his servant—Porcia and Nercisa in disguise—depart, and when they re-enter as themselves.

What does the *Komedye* represent in the history of Shakespeare in Central Europe? It certainly has a relation to Shakespeare’s play, but to call it an *adaptation* in the broader sense of the word would be unduly stretching the already elastic term. To use *adaptation* to describe how *Komedye o dvouch kupcích* relates to *The Merchant of Venice* would not say anything else but that there is a relation of sorts. To push it further would only nourish the logocentric perspectives of origin–iteration.

More importantly, such a categorisation would completely skew the perspective of what *sousedské divadlo*, its community shows and its performative practices were—with all their raw and baroque comedy, clichés, narrow-minded moralisms as well as ignorant racial stereotyping and xenophobia. The *Komedye* was feeding off the popular chapbooks, their mimetic desire for the theatre in the greater cities, but never at the expense of their own values and community practices. Analogical processes occur with every theatrical creation—even if to a less obvious degree than with the *Komedye*.

How then could one conceptualise Shakespearean *recrafting* without incurring the availability bias and the colonial blindness I have pointed out in the historic examples above? The notion of Shakespeare comes with a regime of knowledge: it has its own epistemology that primes what we see. If that is so, how can we decolonise the “Shakespeare Empire of Knowledge” and change our epistemology towards a more inclusive and diverse one—and to a less one-directional perspective that keeps returning to the textual canon?

Conclusion: Adaptation, Translation and Performance as Recrafting

The logocentric realm is a self-sustaining matrix. Words engender more words and enclose themselves in a world of their own. However, when it comes to adaptation, translation and performance, the logocentric realm cannot remain intact: there are other, non-verbal and non-rational forces at play.

Roman Jakobson, in his seminal essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (published in 1959), discusses translation in the broadest sense and its three basic varieties—*interlingual* (generally referred to as translation proper), *intralingual* (rewordings and paraphrases into sociolects and other forms of the same language) and *intersemiotic* (which entails adaptation into other sign systems or media). Ever since it was published, Jakobson’s essay has served as a very fruitful ground for translation and adaptation studies—within the logocentric realm. As I have argued in an essay on metalinguistic theory (Drábek, “Functional Reformulations”), Jakobson’s essay is well aware of the limits of linguistic and textual communication. In an oblique admission of

the limits of the logocentric system, Jakobson makes a remarkable observation. Towards the end of the essay, he refers to Dionysius the Areopagite (also known as Pseudo-Dionysius), one of the philosophers of the *via negativa* (knowing God indirectly, by what cannot be named). Jakobson observes on the unspeakability of things and refers to Dionysius's "call[] for chief attention to the cognitive values [...] and not to the words themselves" (Jakobson 238). In other words—and very importantly for my argument in this essay—Jakobson writes in his essay on the *linguistic* aspects of translation, but acknowledges also the other autonomous non-linguistic, semiotic systems. His theory of translation is far from being enclosed and fully contained within the logocentric pattern—although it has been often used as such by other theorists of adaptation and translation. In his other writing Jakobson gave ample evidence of external, non-linguistic realities that language can only "negatively" speak about, but not *nominalistically* contain. Omitting the essential qualifier in the study of translation and adaptation—namely, the *linguistic* aspects—would amount to what Ghosh has called (as quoted above) "deliberately exclud[ing] things and forces ("externalities") that lie beyond the horizon of the matter at hand."

I argue that the study of adaptations, translations and performances of Shakespeare should be brought back to those "externalities." A study of these individual autonomous creative works need to include all the "things and forces" that produced them. The fact that they are interlingual, intralingual or intersemiotic *translations* of Shakespeare is, in real terms, nothing more than a recognition of their *relation* to Shakespeare—and that relation is never a unilinear relation of ancestry. On the basic level, each such creative work brings together first and foremost the practice and craft that created it; and only secondarily Shakespeare. Revising this epistemological hierarchy is crucial for a more evenhanded, inclusive and unprejudiced—or if you will, decolonised—knowledge of the work.

Let me offer three examples from the three modes involved—performance, translation and adaptation:

(1) *Performance*. In a plenary at a global theatre studies conference in the UK, a leading Shakespeare scholar spoke about their experience from the Globe to Globe Shakespeare Festival of 2012. As part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, the much-written-about festival held at Shakespeare's Globe brought 37 productions of 37 Shakespeare plays in 37 different languages from all over the world. Perhaps caught off guard, the scholar admitted to their frustration with the experience, feeling often as an "embarrassed spectator of foreign Shakespeare." While their following rationalisation tried to mollify the dissonance, there was a clear sensation of being part of shows that were alien to the here and now. Landing well perhaps only with ethnic communities of London, the Shakespearean's gaze was alienated. A great proportion of theatre is made for specific, local audiences, not for the illusory audiences composed of citizens of the world.

A similar phenomenon occurs at Shakespeare conferences. Presenting about (say) a Czech production, translation or adaptation always poses a major problem to anyone who doesn't share the relevant cultural knowledge. To what extent can Shakespeare genuinely serve as a common denominator—a cultural *lingua franca* of sorts? What can we actually say to one another that would not be remoulded by this intercultural diplomatic protocol? Do we do justice to our painstaking research into performance histories if we try to share them in the Shakespeare Empire? I admit to my great scepticism: How can I expect that even a close colleague of mine from a neighbouring country can not just respect, but also appreciate and understand the refinement and nuance of the cultural work that my case studies present. Isn't it inevitable that such a discourse has to break away from the Shakespearean bounds towards other disciplines—such as theatre history, theory and practice of acting or stage directing, scenography or media? This often seems to be the inevitable methodological path. In this sense for instance, David Drozd in his essay “Enter Fortinbras?” in the present volume, starts with the obligatory map of “Shakespeare in the Czech lands” before proceeding to the crafts in evidence: he expounds the artistic trajectories of individual directors and the relevant theatre companies, and only then illustrates their craft on token scenes from *Hamlet*. To be sure, the import of the study is not about Shakespeare, but rather about the theatrical art that created the productions.

(2) *Translation*. Recently, I was asked to translate Katherine's final monologue from *The Taming of the Shrew* as I had translated some Shakespeare before. This monologue wasn't for a performance but for a practical manual for secondary school students about the different ways in which theatre could be part of our lives. The assignment, given to me by the project lead Kateřina Jebavá (a professional actor and academic), came with a request: the workshop activity around Katherine's monologue relates to questions of interpretation, of relationships and of empathy; the translation should focus on the dialectic between *what* we say and *how* we say it, as well as what we intend by it, and how all this relates to our public self-presentation.²⁵ (Some of the workshop activities that precede in the manual are on social, professional and gender roles.) I completed the translation and sent it off to Kateřina for comments, asking her to read it *as an actor* to make sure that *the translation plays well*.

²⁵ The project, led by Dr Kateřina Jebavá, with the full title of “Divadelní umění, postupy a techniky jako trenažér komunikačních dovedností a občanských, sociálních a personálních kompetencí” (Theatrical arts, practices and techniques as a trainer of communication skills and civic, social and personal competencies; <https://www.jamuni.cz/>), is realised in a collaboration of the Theatre Faculty of the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno and the Theatre Studies Department at Masaryk University (Brno, Czech Republic).

The translation was to her satisfaction—with one detail: the halfline “Confounds thy fame” in the passage “dart not scornful glances from those eyes [... It] Confounds thy fame as whirlwinds shake fair buds” (*The Taming of the Shrew* 5:1:149, 152). Kateřina’s misgivings were not about the meaning but about the social, interactional space that the Czech words opened for the actor playing Katherine in relation to the others on stage, in the audience and beyond. There is no point trying to replicate in English the eight or so successive variants we came up with; they would translate almost the same and would totally fail to convey the social dynamics and the embodied and embedded “give” that they offered to the actor. As a matter of fact, the time we spent on those three words exceeded the time I needed to translate the entire monologue. In both her case and mine, we brought our various skills and expertises to the table to recraft this tiny moment. I would argue that capturing the collective and individual craft that joins on drama translation is a challenge that Shakespeare studies needs to grow up to; otherwise it will continue to add to the many labours lost of the Shakespeare Empire.

(3) *Adaptation*. Václav Havel’s final play *Odcházení* (Leaving, 2007) is an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and openly works as an intertextual mosaic that incorporates passages from Martin Hilský’s Czech translation of the play. The semi-autobiographical story of the retiring politician Rieger who is losing his power, influence and worldly means acknowledges the borrowings. But that would only be a part of the story. In an equal measure *Odcházení* is also an adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* with explicit intertextual references to that play (see also Drábek, “Shakespeare’s Myriad-Minded Stage” 44-45). Nevertheless, by far the most important, vital feature of the play is Havel’s own predicament as a playwright of a certain classical status, who also has a prominent political persona that exists at some distance from and tension with the artistic one. The autobiographical aspect was reinforced by Havel’s own film version of his play (2011), which featured the actor Dagmar Havlová, his second wife, in the role of Rieger’s female friend and partner. The protagonist ex-prime minister Rieger, however, was far from a straightforward self-projection. He is equally a critical and perhaps even parodic portrait of Havel’s successor, Václav Klaus. The play crucially captures the bitter aftertaste of the once hopeful politician who, on retiring, finds himself a profoundly flawed, compromised and spineless ruin of a personality. That sentiment resonated with the deadlock in Czech politics of the early 2000s. The sociopolitical context of Havel’s *Odcházení* plays a more significant role than its relation to *King Lear* and *The Cherry Orchard*. What is more: the play is Havel’s return to playwriting after a hiatus of several decades, and the difference from his earlier, absurdist style, is remarkable. Studying Havel’s play merely as a Shakespearean adaptation—as has been done—would be harmful to the contexts, culture and crafts that produced the play.

A similar case is that of Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997), an acknowledged adaptation of *Othello*. If we remove the Shakespeare filter, *Harlem Duet* is by equal measure an adaptation of Euripides’s *Medea*—a point that has escaped all critics of the play (as far as I am aware). But the play is, first and foremost, a creation that originated in the theatrical craft of Djanet Sears, as well as of Nightwood Theatre, Toronto, the company that gave the play its theatrical life, and crucially in the racial and racist injustices and legacies that America’s black people live in.

What these three examples share—as well as all the others I have offered in this essay—is that their true identity and the crafts that made them emerge only once we take them out of the shadow cast by the Shakespearean filter. I would argue this is the case with the majority of recent publications on Shakespeare in Europe. For instance, Zsolt Almási and Kinga Földváy’s *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity* (2021), a special issue of *Theatralia*, or Boika Sokolova and Janice Valls-Russell’s edited volume *Shakespeare’s Others in 21st-Century European Performance: The Merchant of Venice and Othello* (2021) offer numerous remarkable examples where Shakespeare is no more than a *pretext*—a springboard to analyses of social, political, cultural and theatrical phenomena that are completely independent of Shakespeare. Their deployment of the Shakespearean heritage is more or less accidental. Among such instances are Gabriella Reuss’s study of the post-1989 Hungarian puppet scene (Almási and Földváy 151-170), Šárka Havlíčková Kysová’s cognitivist analysis of modern Czech opera scenography (189-208), or Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik’s essay on Polish stage dystopias that reflect on the recent migration crisis (121-138). In Sokolova’s and Valls-Russell’s volume, one could highlight two essays that strip *Othello* of its themes of race and post-colonialism and turn it into a play focusing on major sociocultural problems: domestic violence and abuse in Bulgaria (in Boika Sokolova and Kirilka Stavreva’s essay) and in Portugal (in Francesca Rayner’s).

How should we as scholars conceive of Shakespeare in such instances, when our close colleagues present on phenomena that exist behind a cultural border? It would be socially and intellectually inept and untactful to debate them: we don’t share the material. To assume that we share Shakespeare and that entitles us to enter the discourse would be—I argue—to impose and indulge in precisely that quasi-colonial practice I have critiqued in this essay. In such thorough and rigorous studies of the problems, contentions, cultures and crafts that happen to draw on the Shakespearean cultural heritage, Shakespeare is more or less an accidental friend: more of a hook to start the discourse proper than the main subject. Perhaps in such instances, to highlight the Shakespearean aspect would be “a custom | More honoured in the breach than the observance” (*Hamlet* 1:4:17-18). I would argue that in such a case we should focus on these

performances, adaptations and translations as instances of *recrafting*, creative and cultural acts that build on specific practices and crafts, rather than as iterations of a shared cultural asset. Performances, adaptations and translations are not textual traffic. They rest upon realities—crafts, habits and practices—that exist well outside the logocentric realm and cannot be contained within the mere sphere of language. We should abandon the logocentric impulse of bringing these culturally specific creative acts into the colonial discourse of the global Shakespeare Empire. That perspective, by virtue of its epistemology, casts the works' own culture into the shadow and in so doing erases the essential part of their way of living.

In the case of Central Europe—a region that continues to solicit the post-colonial associations of its Soviet past—this is specifically true. Since 1945, Shakespeare has often been used as the one more-or-less allowed voice of freedom, humanism and modernity *vis-à-vis* the oppressor. In that discourse, the Anglosphere has played the role of the liberator—and by association, Shakespeare would become its mediator and cultural diplomat. I believe it is time to move on and abandon that triumphalist, imperial narrative. In this respect I wouldn't agree with Erne, Hazrat and Shmygol that "Shakespeare's plays have always been European, and that we have much to gain from recovering the life they led on the Continent" (xvi). Given the incessant *recrafting* that takes place in all arts practice, it is perhaps high time to start with those and see how Europe with its cultures has made Shakespeare. We have much to gain from recovering the crafts and knowledges that formed what we know as Shakespeare, as well as offered new homes to host Shakespeare's own crafts. Shakespeare is not an empire on which the sun never sets. It is a community of artists, scholars, intellectuals and publics that occasionally draw on Shakespeare's craft in their own practice.

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Marta Gibińska*

Henry V: A Report on the Condition of the World

Abstract: The central interest of the paper is concentrated on an online production of *Henry V* in 2020. The project is based on a new Polish translation by Piotr Kamiński and produced by Dariusz Rosiak, a journalist, as one of his regular Reports on the Condition of the World published on YouTube. Realised as a reading performance by three actors in front of an empty row of chairs, the production brings an innovative and revealing interpretation of the play, breaking new ground in the Polish reception of Shakespeare's histories.

The paper offers a brief review of the presence of history plays in Polish reception and introductory information on Rosiak's YouTube channel and Kamiński's translation as a background to a critical analysis of the production and its relevance to the here and now of our world

Keywords: *Henry V*, *Henry V* reception, Shakespeare in Polish Translation, Piotr Kamiński, Dariusz Rosiak.

Polish Reception of Shakespeare's Histories

Shakespeare's histories have never been very popular in Poland. Although all have been translated, some many times, their appearance in theatres was rare, with two exceptions: *Richard III*, according to the sources I have been able to consult (Michalik et al; Kujawińska Courtney et al; www.encyklopediateatru.pl), was produced 18 times, the first time in 1864, the last time in 2017. Similarly, ten translations of *Henry IV* seem to attest to the play's popularity, which had been produced 13 times since 1882. To compare: *Henry VI*, with five translations, appeared on the stage only once (1964); *Henry V*, with three translations, was shown three times (1979, 1984, and 1997; the last was a diploma production by the Polish Academy of Theatre Arts students). With five translations, *King John* was produced three times (1869, 1872, 1961). *Richard II* was translated six

* Tischner European University, Poland. gibinska@wp.pl

times and produced in 1871, 1962, twice in 1964, and 2004. In his excellent monograph *Polish Televised Shakespeares* (2005) Jacek Fabiszak draws on elements of theatrical and televisual semiotics and offers a vast panorama of a cultural phenomenon: the exceptionally vivid presence of Shakespeare's plays in what was termed in Polish "television theatre" (1959-2004). He, too, notices the absence of the histories. In his account, we find a discussion of a *Henry IV* production directed by Maciej Zenon Bordowicz (1975), which is "a rare attempt" (Fabiszak 116). He mentions only one earlier version of *Henry IV* taken over from a theatre stage (1969) and *Henry V* (1970), directed for television by the same director, Maciej Bordowicz, apart from *Richard III* (1968) and *Richard II* (1989).

The two history plays seem to get more attention and a livelier Polish reception for different reasons: *Richard III*'s attraction is located in the main character and the allure of the figure of Vice; the attraction of *Henry IV* is centred on Falstaff mainly because he reminds Polish readers and spectators of the figure of Zagłoba, one of the main characters of the 19th-century trilogy of historical novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz. Otherwise, the interest in the intricacies of the dynastic wars of 15th-century England is definitely limited. The struggle for power and its political dimension, which could find reverberations in the Polish reception of the 19th and 20th centuries, was located in tragedies, in *Hamlet*, above all (cf. *Polska bibliografia szekspirowska 1980-2020*).

Critical reception of Shakespeare's histories explains to a certain extent the theatrical neglect of these plays. The earliest Polish scholars mainly commented on the relevance of the plays to British history, trying to explain to the readers the intricacies of the English dynastic relations and the history of the War of the Roses, as this was little known and indeed did not form part of the school curriculum of the country divided between three empires: the effort was directed at keeping Polish identity alive under the pressures of Russia, Prussia and Austria. Later commentaries and essays on Shakespeare's histories, particularly those of Polish literary historians Przemysław Mroczkowski (189-219) and Henryk Zbierski (256-353) concentrated on the literary qualities of the plays and on the transmission of (mostly) British and American scholarly interpretations to which access was difficult and limited by the iron curtain. Explanations of the dynastic complications and historical developments were also attached. This in no way encouraged wide readership, or was conducive to heightened theatrical interest in the histories with the exception of *Richard III* and *Richard II*. In *Richard III* Mroczkowski underlined a fascination with the mechanism of the game carried out by an evil man as well as the attraction of the role for an accomplished actor. In *Richard II* he stressed a series of painful episodes around the English throne. At the same time, the attraction of the story line, according to Mroczkowski, was located in the way Richard's dethronement and Henry Bolingbroke's accession to the throne were presented ironically in

terms of “a silly sheep who helps the tiger to triumph” (Mroczkowski, 1966: 201). Zbierski agrees with the opinion that *Richard III* is more of a psychological study of the mechanism of a drive for power rather than a presentation of historical facts, while the author locates the popularity of the play in theatres in the dramatic potential of Richard as an opportunity to shine for an actor. In *Richard II* Zbierski notes the importance of historiosophic underpinnings and political reverberations of the play in Shakespeare’s time. Jan Kott, the revolutionary Shakespearean critic, had chapters on tragedies and comedies, but not on histories. He does pay attention to what he calls historical tragedies in his “Introduction” (20-26), seeing in them a cyclical pattern of fighting for power, gaining and losing it. Such general patterns serve Kott as a necessary prelude to introducing the concept of the Great Mechanism. However, Kott then analysed the dramatic potential of the Great Mechanism in Shakespeare’s tragedies.

How did *Henry V* fare in Polish critical reception? Mroczkowski stresses its aspect of glorious national history in distinction to other histories, as well as the epic character of the play. King Henry in his eyes is presented in a sequence of episodes as seeking pious advice, relentless in the punishment of traitors, upright and noble towards the enemy, yet proud and clear in his contempt for the French King and Dauphin, able to keep balance between the responsibility for his decisions and his prerogative to take decisions, and finally, brave and charismatic in leading his army against the overwhelming numbers of the French army (Mroczkowski, 1966: 198-201). Zbierski finds the most characteristic feature of *Henry V* in its nationalist character, in the praise of an aggressive war which has always been negatively evaluated from the historical point of view (Zbierski, 1998: 335). But dramatic art need not present historical truth; therefore, as Zbierski concludes, *Henry V* will in the English eyes, stay a heroic king, while for Poles, “it does not constitute a sanctity which must not be slandered” (336) and, therefore, Zbierski concludes it is a mediocre play exactly because it contains too much of the zealous patriotic notes and chauvinistic aggressive feelings against the French. Nevertheless, Zbierski stresses the unique dynamism and heroic tone of poetry in this play, particularly in the opening lines of the Chorus that give the whole play a theatrical appeal. As is evident, the scholar does not like the play but can appreciate the power of the word. However, he does not elaborate on what he calls ‘theatrical appeal’. Juliusz Kydryński, a drama critic, translator, and lifelong admirer of Shakespeare’s dramatic and poetic output, published a book titled *Footnotes on Shakespeare* (*Przypisy do Szekspira* 1993) with a chapter on *Henry V* (149-156). He, too, begins with the idea of the patriotic and heroic aspect of *Henry V*, this, however, he refers to Olivier’s film version of 1944 and the way the play was adapted to the context of World War II. However, referring to the opinions of M. C. Bradbrook and J. O. Hardison, he is careful to underline the anti-war aspect of the play. The chapter’s core contains information about dynastic

complications since the time of Henry IV and about the 100-year war. As for the artistic merits of the play, Kydryński finds it in “the study of the king’s soul” (155) and the structure of two parallel actions: internal, taking place in the king’s conscience, and external in which he proves himself to be an ambitious and victorious military leader.

This brief account of the critical reception of the play demonstrates that its primary interest seems located in the English past; comments on patriotism, chauvinism, pro- and anti-war aspects are connected with the past rather than with the application of the play to the here and now of the critics’ or scholars’ experience. The only exception here is Kydryński’s reference to Olivier’s film; this however narrows down the play’s applicability to one particular historical context.

Three years ago, in the confusion of the coronavirus pandemic, a production of *Henry V* at Gdańsk Festival (available on YouTube with a plethora of enthusiastic comments and opinions of the viewers) made a real breakthrough in appreciating Shakespeare’s histories as plays for all time.

About the Production

The Production of *Henry V* premiered in June 2020 and was shown at the 24th International Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival in November of the same year. Both occasions were highly unusual. The premiere took place on the YouTube channel of Dariusz Rosiak, a journalist who regularly publishes his “Report on the condition of the world” (online). *Henry V* was his idea of reporting on the condition of the world through poetry. The 24th Gdansk Festival took place in November instead of early August, all in streaming because of the pandemic. But the most outstanding and striking parameter was the production itself.

Before the production will be discussed, The “Report on the Condition of the World” must be introduced in a few words. In this regular programme, Dariusz Rosiak looks at various aspects of current issues and events worldwide. Being a genuine radio-journalist, Rosiak relies on words and sounds; sometimes he comments himself, often talks to artists, academics, journalists, politicians, and uses musical illustrations always connected with places and people who are at the centre of the report whether political, cultural, scientific, medical, etc. Literature is also a frequent subject of the Report. However, *Henry V* is a novelty: the Report is not **about** *Henry V*. It is the play which **is** the Report on the Condition of the World. Or, to be more precise, it is Piotr Kamiński’s new Polish translation and his selection of particular incidents which constitutes this unique Report.

The journalist and the translator talk about their friendship and project in an online interview (Rosiak and Kamiński). The first idea was of a radio-like

programme. Rosiak with an acute ear for sounds was enchanted by Kamiński's translation (indeed an outstanding work) and had an idea of recording a reading of selected passages from the play. The humble beginning developed into a much more ambitious, nevertheless, limited production engaging only three actors, standing in front of empty rows of chairs in a small auditorium, reading texts spread on pulpits. That reading, however, did not imprison them in any way: the actors expertly used their voices, body language, and specifically their eyes, to enter into relation with each other, with each incident a different one, to build suspense, create emotions, and, importantly, to construct a report on the condition of the world. One might ask which world, of course. Well, certainly the world of Henry and of Agincourt, but, as Rosiak pointedly said in the interview, "It's a play about power, a play about growing up to power, about loyalty, about politics, about everything that we live here, about everything no matter what time." (Rosiak and Kamiński, *it-is-a-play-about-modern-politics*). "Especially now, at the time of growing doubts, confusion and weakening hopes, great literature is needed, literature that knows everything about the human condition. And there is no better guide than Shakespeare:" this is how Kamiński (*premiera-henryka-v*) represents the aim of their project.

Kamiński, in the interview (*it-is-a-play-about-modern-politics*), stresses the power of the word of Shakespeare's art, which opens up broad vistas of meaning and never imprisons or limits the actors, readers, or translators. So this minimal, confined presentation of the play did not limit the actors in any way; just the opposite, it created opportunities for the actors to fly—which they did on the wings of poetry. In this they were supported by the excellent direction of Vita Maria Drygas and expert work of the cameramen. Three men standing and reading—what might seem an extremely static proposition—was turned into an intense presentation of the turns of emotions and tensions by catching the simplest movements of feet, hands, heads, or exchange of looks which accompanied the words. Moments of silence, used with discretion, pointedly transmitted fear or fearful expectation of the "bloody execution" of war (e.g. scene 3).

The script for the production was the work of the translator. It is really a specific interpretation of the play built on the idea of a series of encounters of Henry with various characters punctuated by the Chorus. The information attached to the production on YouTube informs the viewers of the sequence of scenes and time duration including the preliminary shots.

Contents

00:00 Preliminaries

01:20 Chorus: O for a muse of fire...

04:30 Scene 1: Henry and Canterbury: God and his angels guard your sacred throne...

09:58 Chorus: Now all the youth of England are on fire...

- 12:32 Scene 2: Henry: Once more onto the breach, dear friends, once more...
- 14:20 Scene 3: Hand the Governor of Harfleur: How yet resolves the Governor of the town?
- 18:09 Scene 4: Henry and herald Montjoy: you know me by my habit...
- 22:37 Chorus: Now entertain conjecture of a time...
- 25:16 Scene 5: Henry and an English soldier: Who goes there?
- 33:42 Scene 6: Henry and Westmoreland: Of fighting men they have full threescore thousand...
- 36:47 Scene 7: Henry and Montjoy: Once more I come to know of thee, King Harry...
- 39:24 Scene 8: French Lord: O Seigneur! Le jour est perdu, tout est perdu!...
- 41:30 Scene 9: Henry and Montjoy: If they will fight with us, bid them come down...
- 44:10 Scene 10: Henry and Exeter: Here is the number of the slaughtered French...
- 46:58 Chorus: Vouchsafe to those that have not read the story...
- 49:11 Scene 11: King Henry and King Charles: Peace to this meeting...
- 52:52 Chorus: Thus far with rough and all-unable pen...

The beginning covers “the title page,” the presentation of the space in which the spectacle is presented, including empty chairs in the small auditorium and an incidental mask dropped on the floor: the pandemic situation. The actors move around the pulpits, adjusting the sheets from which they will read; a glass of water is placed on the floor.

The play proper begins as in Shakespeare’s text with Chorus. Piotr Fronczewski’s reading draws attention to “the wooden o, the unworthy cockpit” which we have just seen, and persuades us that it can hold vasty fields of France by the very force of the word: “Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them” (Prologue, 13-15; 27).¹ The positioning of emphasis in the actor’s voice harmonises with the idea of a radio play which has been turned into a reading performance. In what follows, the spoken word is the most important and most effective source of emerging meanings, while the visual side of the production is used to achieve a particularly effective representation of the people involved in the action: Henry is played by Grzegorz Damiński, while his interlocutors are all played by Marcin Rogacewicz: Archbishop of Canterbury (Scene 1), Governor of Harfleur (Scene 3), the French Herald Montjoy (Scene 4, 7 and 9), an anonymous soldier of Henry’s army (Scene 5), Earl of Westmorland (Scene 6), a French commander/Orleans (Scene 8), Exeter (Scene 10), Charles VI, (Scene 11). The Chorus intervenes between scenes 1 and 2, 4 and 5, 10 and 11, and closes the whole production with the epilogue.

¹ All quotations from *Henry V* from <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/henry-v>

What Do We Learn from the Report on the Condition of the World?

The scenario cuts the Pistol-Nym-Bardolph scenes, the story of traitors, the killing of the boys and French prisoners, as well as the wooing of Catherine and her lesson in English. Clearly, the interest of such a reading of the play concentrates on positioning Henry in the face of the Other, which in the situation of the war means a challenge not just to the power of the king, but also to the sense of responsibility, of the weight of decisions taken, of moral stance, of ruthlessness, of loyalty and patriotism. Each incident, each encounter multiplies questions and sheds light on the confusing ambiguity of the position of a political leader who may have the most honourable, rational and saintly motives in considering the war, but is unable to see through the manipulation of his councillors. Whose courage, valour and mettle are exemplary, but who readily agrees to atrocious acts and cruel execution of war. Who is a charismatic military leader leading his army to a victory against all odds, and celebrates it over ten thousand French that “in the field lie slain” (IV.8.84). But the focal point is the language, which in this reading performance is the strongest presence and, therefore, exposes its specific dual function: on the one hand, that of the creator of the world, the great tool of art; on the other, that of lies and manipulation, a tool used to hide the truth behind the mask of words, the tool of politicians. In the former function, the power of the word is efficient by appealing to human imagination and reason, makes art, especially literature, but also, emphatically, theatre, the indispensable handbook to understand life, the best tool in commenting on the condition of our world. In the latter function language works in the opposite sense; it is a tool used to create false reality, to manipulate, mislead, misrepresent, often for personal gain and glory. Through this specific *aporia* of the very nature of what we do with language, this particular production of Shakespeare’s history play becomes a pungent reading of the human condition now and at any time; Shakespeare’s art becomes the gate through which the authors of this unusual production were able to offer the report on the condition of our world.

What condition of the world emerges from the production? To answer this question, one must look critically into the selected incidents with a clear understanding that Piotr Kamiński is responsible for the narrative they form. In a way, one may conclude the report on the condition of the world is the joint effort of Shakespeare and his translator. However, one must also stress the performance of reading: the three actors open all possible ambiguities to perfection and help to diagnose the complexity and ambiguity of the report rather than offer a black-and-white commentary.

Kamiński has selected carefully those passages in which God is invoked: Scene 1 opens with Canterbury’s words, “God and his angels guard your sacred throne” (I.2.8). Henry’s initial gambit in the discussion of the Salic

law and the justification of starting the war with France is peppered with God: “God forbid,” “For God doth know, we charge you in the name of God” (I.2.15-26), etc. (Here the translator’s effort to keep the Polish version closely to Shakespeare’s words is clearly visible: *Bóg* appears in the Polish text as many times and in equivalent phrases). Since the King finishes the opening speech with the declaration that he will

...believe in heart
That what you speak is in your conscience washed
As pure as sin with baptism (I.2.35-36),

he is ready to make his claim “with right and conscience.” Much of the scene is cut, to make the King’s decision ring loud:

Now are we well resolved, and by God’s help
And yours, the noble sinews of our power,
France being ours we’ll bend it to our awe. (I.2.231-232)

During the interview with the Archbishop, Henry holds a rosary, a prop that will appear in his hand again and again (Scene 1, 4.30-9.50). Characteristically, the dialogue with Montjoy (Scene 4) is punctuated with shots focused on Henry’s hand wrapped in the rosary; the movements of the hand punctuate, first, the threats of the King of France and then, Henry’s proud answer:

yet, God before, tell him we will come on, (...)
We shall your tawny ground with your red blood
Discolour. (III.6.160, 166-167)

The great speech delivered before the siege of Harfleur (Scene 2) ends with the words, “God for Harry! England and Saint George.” This is immediately contrasted with the ensuing dialogue of Henry with the commander of Harfleur (Scene 3) where the promise of the atrocities inflicted on the people of Harfleur if the town does not surrender, makes Henry’s promise of mercy sound particularly hollow and forces us to reinterpret the war cry “God for Harry.” It also reverberates strongly in Scene 4 with Montjoy in which the bloody consequences of war are accompanied by the convulsive movements of the fist holding the rosary. Henry’s promises of mercy for Harfleur sound in this context highly ironic; one cannot take them on face value, just as the rosary around his fist looks more like a weapon than a prayer.

Scene 5 centres on the exchange of Henry with Williams (as the essence of the King’s conversations with soldiers) and turns around the king’s responsibility for sending his soldiers to death. Henry’s argument rejecting the king’s responsibility rests on individual responsibility of each man: they should

be prepared for dying free of sins. This, delivered by the actor in an increasingly irritated voice is punctuated by an energetic vulgar Polish expletive. If, as Rosiak suggests, the play is, among other aspects, about growing to power, then this dialogue and Henry's argument mark the logical line of development in the production from adopted piety, to becoming a ruthless military leader, to reacting with irritation and anger to criticism which suggests a deep-seated conviction of one's right to decide about the fate of others. Another line of development which takes Henry from his initial anxiety about leading people to death if the war is decided, to being utterly disinterested and indifferent to his soldiers' fears. Later negotiations with Montjoy (Scenes 7 and 9) show Henry concentrated on victory to the extent in which the terrifying pictures of the theatre of war make no impression on him. The victory fills him with more power and more recognition of that power, which, repeatedly, Henry will officially disavow by ascribing the English victory to God—"Take it God, For it is none but thine." (IV.8.83)

Parallely to this representation of power and ruthlessness, we may watch the other face of war: courage, valour and patriotism. This theme appears in Scene 6, in the conversation with Westmoreland who stands here for the English lords who are aware that the French army far outnumbers the English forces. The initial exchange is a short introduction to Henry's declaration of courage and honour, finishing with the famous Saint Crispian passage. Delivered with great energy and obvious emotional engagement, Henry's words are reflected in the face of Westmoreland which from a worried, dispirited and subdued expression gradually changes to a hopeful, optimistically glowing expression of belief in the English spirit and hope for victory. The next encounter is with Montjoy (Scene 7) who comes to warn Henry "of his most assured overthrow" (IV.3.85). The king's answer is full of pride—"let me speak proudly" (IV.3.114)—and the pride is combined with contempt for the French and belief in the victory over the French. In the situation in which the French have an obvious advantage, such combative courage may inspire admiration for the unwavering patriotic stance and belief in one's own cause.

However, the war has other dimensions. Immediately after Henry's two great speeches, French voices in the battlefield are heard (Scene 8): "Le jour est perdu, tout est perdu!" (IV.5.2) The conflated voices of Orleans and Bourbon bring the despair of the defeated to the front: "Let life be short, else shame will be too long" (V.2.25). In the next encounter (scene 9) we first hear Henry sending his herald to the French with the expressive will to fight and defeat the enemy with no hope for mercy:

...we'll cut the throats of those we have,
And not a man of them that we shall take
Shall taste our mercy. (IV.7.64-66)

and then hear humbled Montjoy begging for the permission to bury the dead: "O give us leave great King,/ To view the field in safety and dispose Of their dead bodies" (*Henry V*, IV.7.84-86). The quick succession of these scenes is offered instead of the "vast fields of France crammed in this wooden O" (Prologue). The discursive presentation of war, the exchange of arguments, emotions, and moods, the concentration on Henry against all French leaders in the person of Montjoy, strips the war of whatever appeal it might have in the sense of heroism, valour, or patriotic effort. Scene 10, the counting of the dead on both sides, sums up the war as a cold business: it is counting gains and losses, sealed with Henry's triumphant exclamation, "Was ever known so great and little loss On one part and on th'other?" (IV.8.114-115) And in this moment God is remembered, the useful shield behind which Henry's great pride in victory is hidden, regaining the pious posture of a good Christian.

The ironic coda to this grim business of war is the end of the scenario, a brief encounter between England and France:

Henry:

Peace to this meeting, wherefor we are met.

Unto our brother France, and to our sister,

Health and fair time of day. (V.2.1-3)

Charles:

Right joyous are we to behold your face,

Most worthy brother England, fairly met. (V.2.9-10)

The speech is a conflation of the words which in Shakespeare's play belong to Queen Isabel and to Burgundy. The latter's speech is particularly poignant here. The description of "this best garden of the world" (V.2.37), France, destroyed and damaged by the war is a description of utter calamity and catastrophe, the turning upside down of the fates of people and what they have achieved. The contrast of the civilities exchanged between the enemies and of the result of the war is the final and strongest comment in the report on the condition of our world. The absurdity and senselessness of war which people present as justified and fought with God on their side rings horrifyingly true at any time. When the war is over, the leaders will negotiate for peace and the best possible solution for each party involved. In the case of *Henry V* the winner gets the French royal princess for wife. Let us not forget that this peaceful solution will end in the further bloody years of the Hundred Years War.

Conclusion

The unique power of this production depended on several factors, which all were interwoven. First, Kamiński's translation with its lexical richness, powerful phrasing and rhythmic perfection made Shakespeare's text clear and resounding to the ear with a powerful effect. This, then, tied up to perfection with the actors' interpretations who were able to render all ironies in their voices, and, at the same time convey the characters' emotions, convictions and fears. Third, the director's approach of connecting the idea of "this wooden o" with the restrictions of life in the pandemic situation and the use of a severely restricted space for the production as well as the presentation of just three actors whose performance was restricted to reading (and at the same time, as was said above, not restricted at all) offered a vision of a truly liberating art of theatre for the audience, the members of which were all imprisoned in their own homes. Fourth, the concentration on the selected problems lifted from the play and their enacting with very limited means, with no pomp and circumstance to which most of the well known earlier productions (especially films, e.g., Olivier's and Branagh's) had made us accustomed, demanded great concentration in following the play; it was also an opportunity for reflection both on Shakespeare's play and our own experience of politics, for the production had a clear political edge. Naturally, the frame of Rosiak's Report on the Condition of the World strengthened the last point.

The production was finished and presented before Russia attacked Ukraine. However, working on this paper and going through the production several times, I have been painfully struck by the aptness and relevance of Rosiak's and Kamiński's report on the condition of the world. They did not play an oracle but simply extracted from *Henry V* all that referred to our human erroneous ambitions, mistaken notions and vicious acts, all connected with the struggle for power and with war under the too-well-known excuse that God is with us and not with them. The Russian attacks continue, the viciousness of the wars spreads in our world, and so many young lives are lost and discolour the tawny earth with their blood. Thus, one may also conclude that the production's strength lies in its creators' ability to read Shakespeare from the vantage point of their own experience of their world.

The director of the production, Vita Maria Drygas (premiera-henryka-v), confessed: "having worked on documentary films, I saw war with my own eyes. This time I had a chance to work on this theme with eminent actors. Shakespeare's play in the context of my own experience is horrifyingly actual." It is to be hoped that the neglected reception of history plays in Poland has been corrected. The production of Rosiak and Kamiński has strikingly shown the relevance of great art for understanding the human condition. It proves that *historia magistra vitae* may have a chance to teach us something if the power of

the poetic word, great acting and thorough understanding of what theatre art is about, come in succour. It is to be hoped that that is not an unduly optimistic statement.

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Martin Pšenička* 

“...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 Biřák. 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 Biřák, normalization, Norman Rabkin, production.

* Charles University, martin.psenicka@ff.cuni.cz

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 Biřák, Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Central Committee for Foreign Policy and Ideology.

Troubles on the Threshold of Normalization

Vasil Biřák, 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.

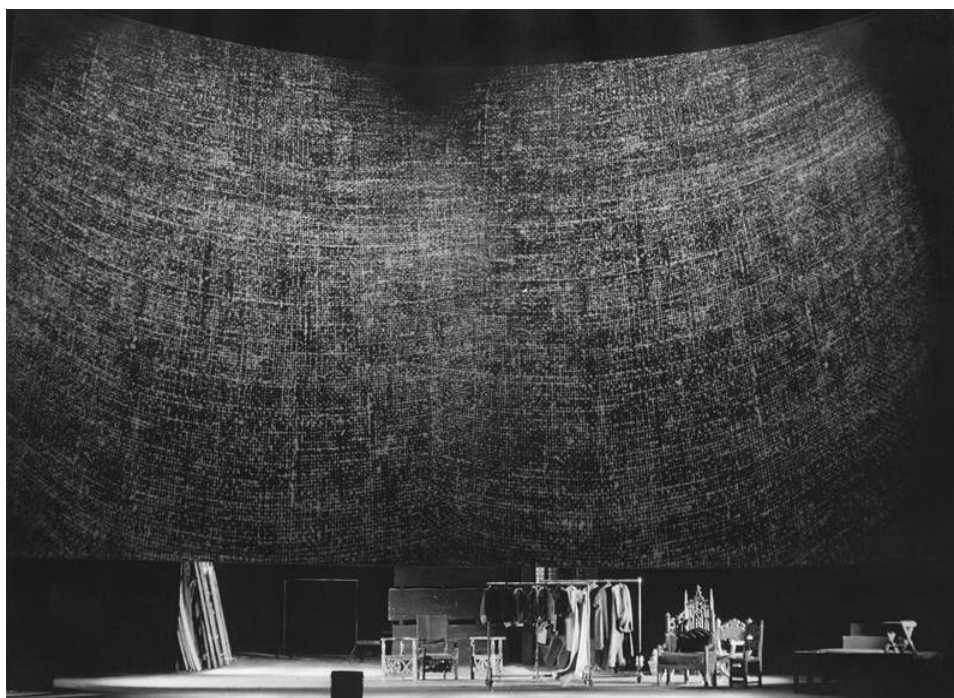


Figure 1: *Henry V*, National (Estates) Theatre, Prague, prem. February 5, 1971, director: Miroslav Macháček, stage design: Josef Svoboda. Photo by Jaromír Svoboda, National Theatre Archive, Prague

Before Biřák'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 Bohuš 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 Biřák... 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 Biľak, 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 Biľak 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”).

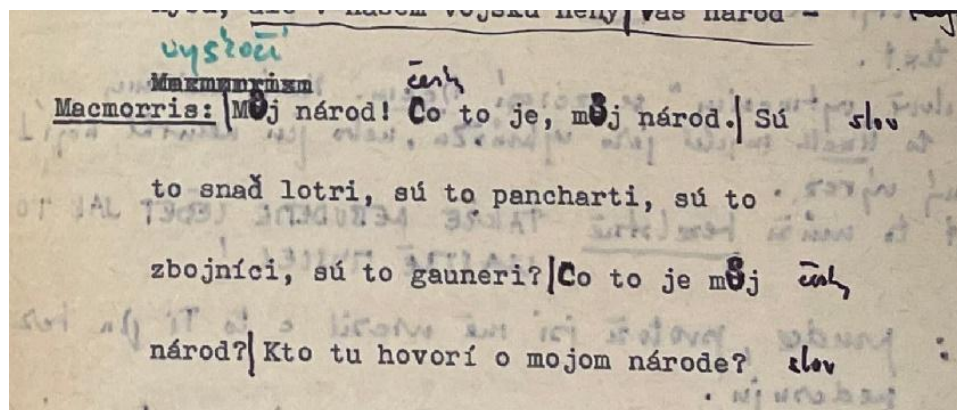


Figure 5: An excerpt from the director’s book, in which Macháček marked segments pronounced in Czech (“česky”) and Slovak (“slov”), while it is clear that the Czech words were subsequently transcribed into Czech, and thus that Macmorris originally spoke only Slovak

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)

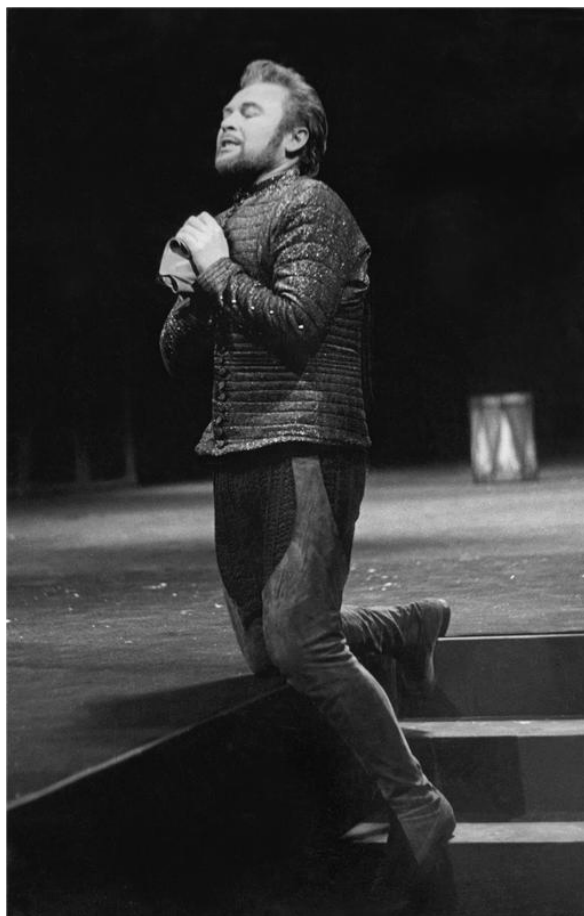


Figure 6: Luděk Munzar as Henry V. Photo by Jaromír Svoboda, National Theatre Archive, Prague

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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David Drozd* 

Dramaturgy of *Hamlet(s)* in Czech Theatre between 2000 and 2023

Abstract: The paper focuses on five Czech productions of *Hamlet* that attracted the most critical and public attention between 2000 and 2023. Namely, the productions directed by Miroslav Krobot (2006), Jan Mikulášek (2009), Daniela Špinar (2013), Michal Dočekal (2021) and finally the most recent version by Jakub Čermák (2022). All five performances could be seen as contemporary reinterpretations of a classical text using a (post-)modern stylistic approach, as examples of post-millennium *Hamlets*. The paper discusses dramaturgical choices (such as the conceptualisation of the ghost, the mousetrap scene, or the character of Fortinbras) in order to identify and analyse possibilities for interpreting *Hamlet* as a political drama in the context of Czech performance tradition and the current political situation. The results show that performances generally present variations of *Hamlet* as a family drama, foregrounding different issues of memory and body, while the political reading is obsolete.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, dramaturgy, directing, post-modern theatre, performance analysis, Czech theatre.

In this paper I will analyse some of the representative productions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Czech theatre in between 2000 and 2023. Performances directed by Miroslav Krobot (2006), Jan Mikulášek (2009), Daniela Špinar (2013), Michal Dočekal (2021) and finally Jakub Čermák (2022) all received strong critical and audience response, so one could assume these productions are more than just singular directorial encounters with the notorious and canonic tragedy, but might also suggest certain trends of in Czech approach to Shakespeare. Marta Gibinska and Jerzy Limon wrote that we are often "test[ing] our contemporary reception of Shakespeare through *Hamlet*." (5) According to Jarka M. Burian, "Czech productions of *Hamlet* have served as a microcosm of the Czech theatre and its relation to the forces that have dominated the life of

* Masaryk University, Czech Republic. drozd@phil.muni.cz



this nation in the heart of Europe.” (195) It is worth testing these notions. The idea of *Hamlet* as a mirror is still tempting.

The time frame of my focus is very pragmatic. Czech theatre saw a wave of productions of *Hamlet* around 2000 and currently, in seasons 2023/24, six new productions of *Hamlet* will be staged on Czech and Moravian stages. With shows already being performed, there will be a total of nine productions of *Hamlet* to be seen at once. So this abundance serves as a logical marker, prompting the question: what was going on in between? That’s why I am focusing on the samples of post-millennium *Hamlets* from the Czech context.

Czech *Hamlets*—Tradition and Transition

It is widely acknowledged that *Hamlet* played a significant role in Czech theatre before 1989. In his book *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (2000), especially in chapter *Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain* (96-135), Zdeněk Stříbrný provides various examples of how the character and play of *Hamlet* became the “judge of his own time and servant of the future,” whilst his personal revenge was but a marginal motivation of his actions. “Denmark” was treated as a totalitarian state, which was unfortunately a natural interpretation at that time. Status of classical work at the same time prevented interventions of censorship: “Even the dyed-in-the-wool apparatchiks did not dare to attack him (William Shakespeare) openly, although they found it personally offensive to hear from Hamlet that something was rotten in the state of Denmark.” (Stříbrný 97) In the Czech context before 1989, according to Stříbrný, *Hamlet* was presented generally as a political tragedy—or tragedy combining political and personal. Jarka M. Burian interprets Czech performance tradition in a similar way. Moreover he claims that till 1989 Czech performances, often political in interpretation, “seemed to rise to the challenge of staging *Hamlet* while still remaining close to its form and substance.” (Burian 209) The text of the canonic Shakespeare’s play was still much respected (only choice of translation might be of an issue).

During the transitional period of the 1990s, this approach was almost entirely disregarded. The most notable performance of *Hamlet* was directed by Jan Nebeský and first premiered in 1994 at Divadlo Komedie, running until 2002. Nebeský had the Ghost speak through Hamlet’s mouth, actually possessing and contorting his body. Adaptation of the play included not only substantial cuts of the translation, but also addition of extra texts—this was totally impossible before 1989. Nebeský transformed the script into a multi-layered palimpsest (resembling T. S. Eliots’s *Waste Land* rather than Heiner Müller’s *Hamlet Machine*). Reviewer Jitka Sloupová remarked after some years: “*Hamlet* with David Prachař in the lead—still in the repertoire and still maturing—is the loneliest of Hamlets you could imagine, a youth whose tragedy

is not shared even by the ghost of his father, only by some voice from his inner being.” (*Theatre without Respite* 29). Milan Lukeš, a scholar of Shakespeare and translator, deemed Nebeský’s interpretation “disorganized, unstable, and illogical, and it’s obviously psychoanalytic.” Lukeš regarded this version of *Hamlet* as a symptom of social change, with the most critical point being the portrayal of Fortinbras’ ultimate arrival. “Nebeský doesn’t care about the conventional question of who Fortinbras is, which is the usual interpretation issue. This person, who is barely noticed, only speaks a few phrases at the end in a way that nobody—neither on stage nor in the audience—really cares about. There is no interest in the future. No social release occurs, not even a mockery of such a release, which would at least demonstrate a desire for it.” (Lukeš 5) In the mid-90s, this “diminishing” of Fortinbras would have appeared as an inconceivable provocation, especially when confronted with relatively stable performance tradition after 1945, where the interpretation of Fortinbras was always an issue, as Lukeš notes. However, nowadays it is one of the most viable and even desired dramaturgical choices.

In retrospect, it can be said that Nebeský’s *Hamlet* created room for radical interpretations of *Hamlet*; it is recognised as the first—in Czech context—deconstructivist and post-modern approach to the play.¹

The exploration of new ways of performing *Hamlet* continued and resulted in eight different productions around 2000, premiered in one season. Jitka Sloupová’s paper, *Hamletomania in Bohemia*, summarises the variety of approaches taken, ranging from traditional to post-modern, as well as from respecting the text to wild deconstructions. Idea of *Hamlet* as political play was preserved in one case only; Zdeněk Kaloč interpreted *Hamlet* as a political parable demonstrating the never-ending change of totalitarian regime, very similar to Jan Kott’s idea of *grand mechanism*. The other shows explored very subjective ways for reading the play, which included textual extrapolations, diverse performance styles and focused rather on Hamlet as a sensitive intellectual. The abundance of *Hamlets* demonstrates not only the obvious fact that a single interpretation tradition is no longer sufficient, but also scepticism to the genre of tragedy as such (*Hamlet* is becoming often grotesque) and scepticism toward the future (usually nobody arrives to listen to Horatio’s testimony). So around 2000, we could see also in Czech context “the transition from a tradition of ‘political’ Hamlets/Hamlets, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, to post-modern, ‘post-dramatic’ Hamlets with a new ‘part’ and a new location.” (Cinpoes and Guntner 285) Symbolic conclusion of this transition period might be the very last performance of Nebeský’s *Hamlet* in 2002.

¹ For a more detailed interpretation of *Hamlet* by Nebeský see Martin Procházka: *From Affirmative Culture to the “Condition of Justice:” A Reading of a Czech Post-Communist Hamlet*.

...After 2000

If the 1990s in Czech Theatre explored the variety of possibilities prompted by new social and political situations, the post-millennial *Hamlets* represent different cases. This article examines in detail five remarkable productions, through which I will illustrate recent trends in “Czech” performances of *Hamlet*.

The directors come from different generations. Miroslav Krobot, a well-respected director in his late fifties, directed *Hamlet* in 2006. Similarly, Michal Dočekal is now a highly respected artist, artistic director of Prague City Theatres, where he put on his version of the same play in 2021. In contrast, Jan Mikulášek and Daniela Špinar were regarded as promising young talents at the beginning of their careers, both in their early thirties. The most recent director of *Hamlet*, Jakub Čermák, is also considered a young talent. He is already forty, but he has mainly worked in small (independent) theatres. It's only in the past 4-5 years that he has gained recognition from larger, established theatres and made a name for himself in this field. In Spring 2023, he was appointed as the head of the drama department at the regional theatre in České Budějovice. He produced his own version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the theatre a year before that, in 2022.

2006—*Hamlet* as Ironic Psychological Drama (Krobot)

Miroslav Krobot (born 1951) started working on *Hamlet* later in his career, when he was already the artistic director of Dejvické divadlo, a small theatre in the suburbs of Prague. He gradually developed a respected ensemble of outstanding actors, with a distinctive style that effectively utilised the small-scale stage for decent, modern, psychological performances with playful moments of irony. This ensemble style was also clearly seen in *Hamlet*, which Krobot directed.

If we observe productions of *Hamlet*, and canonic classics in general, over a prolonged period, we may think they become less stylised and “pathetic,” more “realistic.” But often the old “pathos” is replaced by only the excessiveness of the contemporary grotesque. Krobot's *Hamlet* is quite a different case. The interpretation and style are indeed consistently actual, down-earthed and sober. The production is based on a vigorous adaptation of a translation by Jiří Josek, one of the most current existing Czech translations. Adaptation relies very much on Josek's colloquialism and situationality, using them effectively to create “civilistic,” non-pathetic *Hamlet*. At the end the production presents the well-known plot in a unique light by reimagining the premise.

Karel Tománek, the dramaturge, has assembled an extensive collection of meticulously dated working notes in the programme of the production, which demonstrate a comprehensive and protracted exploration of the production's

themes: “Why should Gertrude have an un-conflicting relationship with Hamlet at the beginning?”—“Given that Hamlet and Ophelia have no real ‘love scene,’ it appears that Hamlet is not particularly invested, and Ophelia is merely fantasising about the entire relationship. And then it doesn’t matter if she’s thirteen or forty. Of course: the older she gets, the sadder it gets.”—“What if our story began with Hamlet having no aversion to Claudius or his mother?”—“What if Ophelia was not naive? What if, on the contrary, she impresses Hamlet with her independence?”—“What if the ‘ghost’ was more troubled by his wife’s infidelity than by fratricide?” (programme for the production, 2006) All of these questions constantly deconstruct conventional clichés of *Hamlet* production, exposing the many motivational gaps purely from a psychological perspective. This approach allows for a re-evaluation and deeper understanding of the play’s relational structure and its relevance in a modern context. The original play’s “tragic” fatalism, coincidences, and predetermined revenge are challenged, or more accurately—eliminated. What remains are characters with contemporary sensibilities and hypersensitivities.

Costumes were modern, consisting of black suits, white collars, and sophisticated yet sombre dresses for women—as if we were in a family business or high society gathering. The setting for the first half of the play is in keeping with the theme, with just a few plain wooden tables, chairs, and tin cupboards in which the characters keep their personal belongings (Ophelia has a considerable number of fluffy animal toys and cigarettes). The opening scene of the performance, speech of Claudius to the assembly of lords, in this version looks more like a routine business meeting in a small company that is actually run jointly by two families.

Among Tománek’s comments published in the programme is a telling extract from the secondary literature, namely from Martin Hilský’s introduction to his translation of *Hamlet*: “[In] an Ibsenian living room it is impossible to conduct a poetic dialogue or monologue—the prerequisite of poetic drama is an anti-ilusive mode of staging.” (47) Remarkably, Krobot’s production takes place in a variation of such an Ibsenian parlour. The monologues, though not cut out, are played out as speeches to different stage partners—the theatrical result is fascinating: the intimate confessions are in fact even more cruel and absurd when spoken to a partner who is present but does not respond. And above all these “monologues” do not bring any relief. Claudius’s prayer, the confession of a murderer spoken directly to Hamlet, is overpowering in its frankness. As stated by the dramaturge in the programme: “Paradoxically: the more honest they are, the more isolated they become.”

Central to this production is the issue of dysfunctional family relationships, which the nervous and oversensitive Hamlet (performed by Jaroslav Plesl) finds difficult to bear. In line with this, following a formal family

meeting (in the original Scene I.2), he sighs: “So many family ties? It’s like being imprisoned.”² In the end, no character is able to escape from this “prison”—and although they all perish in the end, the story is told in a different but necessary way, as it is determined by the today’s psychological logic. The reviewer Martina Musilová described the end of the production as follows: “The story should have a satisfying conclusion, but the characters lack the fortitude. No emotion is sustained long enough to inspire meaningful action. The excitement immediately dies down and the characters sink into their innermost selves. [...] Society is disintegrated by the impact of its deeds.” (Musilová 105) In this version, Claudius acknowledges that he can never silence his conscience. As a result, he poisons his beloved Gertrude and ultimately drinks the poison himself. The Hamlet in this performance is delicate and nuanced, and his struggle with the blunt, realistic, and pragmatic world is unavoidable. “He has a polite tone, a logical understanding of the situation and a detached intellect that enables him to use sarcasm to mock the incomprehensible and absurd actions of his adversaries.” (Musilová 105) The consistency of the interpretation is evident in the final and significant scene of the play—the duel with Laertes. It does take place on stage at all.

Krobot’s Hamlet finishes his part by saying “the readiness is all.” He undoes his shirt button and walks offstage to meet Laertes, leaving his sword behind. This was one of the simplest, yet most theatrically powerful endings of *Hamlet*, leaving the audience stunned by the impending tragic conclusion. However, it doesn’t need to be shown, and remains only anticipated, as it is entirely unavoidable. In Krobot’s version the original duel scene is in fact impossible, it would not fit into the overall psychological and un-pathetic approach. Logically, this version of *Hamlet* doesn’t include Fortinbras at all.

Krobot turned *Hamlet* into an atmospheric psychological drama, reviewers mention Strindberg or Ibsen to evoke the style. This approach is coherent with other Krobot’s productions. It almost appears to be another modern “Chekhovian” production that draws inspiration from Krobot’s adaptations of Goncharoff’s *Oblomov* or his production of Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* (the two feature productions of Dejvické divadlo). Miroslav Krobot was directing Shakespeare only very occasionally, so in his case it is evident that he is appropriating Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into his own creative universum and acting style of the ensemble based on a combination of understatement and irony.

² The quote is a re-translation of Jiří Josek’s translation from the script. His Czech translation was modified to some extent, so it is impossible to quote original Shakespearean text here.

2009—Hamlet from “Normalisation” (Jan Mikulášek)

Jan Mikulášek’s (born 1978) production of *Hamlet* premiered in 2009 at Goose on the String Theatre, an experimental theatre in Brno renowned for its unconventional and frequently subversive methods of interpreting texts and subjects.

The setting is the hall of a once posh villa, where the wallpaper is peeling off the walls, the old-fashioned TV is often grainy and tea is served from a large kettle, which at least part of the audience remembers from school canteens in the communist 1980s. On the walls there are snapshots of the actors when they were children (these are authentic photographs!). Hamlet’s story is set in a current time and place but reminds the audience also of the period of communist “normalisation” in the 1970s and 1980s. The costumes, which are slightly outdated but could still be considered modern, match this setting. The show starts with a “prelude”—a mimed scene that suggests the play’s past and upcoming events, starting with the death of Hamlet’s father. It’s ironically accompanied by Karel Gott’s popular song “Dad, Stay at Least Until Christmas.”³ These elements all contribute to the ambivalent feeling that political “normalisation” is still ongoing.

Mikulášek and Krobot both emphasised an aspect of the family drama in the text. As a result, the comical element represented by the gravediggers and, above all, the entire Fortinbras line disappear from the story. However, the family in the story is peculiar, often grotesque, and sometimes their actions are accompanied by musical variations of The Addams Family theme. In my own review from 2009 I emphasised the fact that Mikulášek employs impressive visual metaphors in his production:

The most important prop is soil—it first appears at the entrance of the ghost. The Ghost is performed by the whole cast—as if they were a mirror of Hamlet’s overstimulated mind. All the actors perform as the Ghost, reciting lines as chorus and dropping soil from jars onto the floor. The soil, as a sign of the prematurely buried father, is everywhere. Hamlet scatters soil from pots, actors carry it in their trunks, and Claudius even uses it as a deadly poison. The theatre group takes on a more significant role than usual. The actors double (of foreshadow) behaviour of the main characters, anticipating their fates and revealing the roles the characters are given to play. Ultimately, the interpretation results in a fatalistic reading of Hamlet. Once the lead character wields his sword, it’s only a matter of time before he stabs his target. There is no doubt, only passive waiting. (Drozd)

³ Karel Gott (1939-2019) was an extremely popular Czech pop singer. His career started in the 60ties and in fact never faded. He is considered one of the symbols of communist normalisation, one of those who provided entertainment during communist rule and helped to “normalise” totalitarian regime.

The way in which Mikulášek presented the revelation of the Ghost is symptomatic—all the actors recite his text together (i.e. de facto the Ghost is speaking through the mouths of all the characters), while sprinkling dirt on the ground. The soil would then get in the way of the characters and would stain the characters' clothes. The Ghost in this case is not just a subjective hallucination of Hamlet, but rather a manifestation of a collective subconscious.

The production was characterised by balanced acting performances that combined—as was typical of Mikulášek—matter-of-factness with expressive and grotesque exaggeration. However, it was dominated by Hamlet played by Jiří Vyorálek—withdrawn, cynical and wounded in self-defence, a bit of a James Dean-like avenger without a cause (he plays a large part of the performance in a shabby jacket). Mikulášek's Hamlet has not many doubts, in the frozen time of “normalisation” you just wait for the ultimate end.

In my own review, I also complained that the creators reduced the political dimension too much. With hindsight, however, I admitted that it was Mikulášek's scenic images that stuck in my mind. “The dilapidated room is gradually flooded with layers of dirt as a ubiquitous memento of mortality and the inevitability of the human end,” aptly wrote Iva Mikulová (7). Mikulášek's production of *Hamlet* portrayed a dysfunctional family in a grotesque and bizarre manner. However, it ultimately highlighted the existential issues of its era, as well as the social and political atmosphere of the time. The play's setting, while unclear, seemed to be trapped in the timelessness of the “normalisation” period. Despite the explicit political dimension of the play being carefully erased, the implicit statement was clear—Czech society (of 2009...) has not got rid of the “normalisation” of our communist past. The show might demonstrate symptomatic tendency: *Hamlet* could not be any more anti-regime play after 2000, but in Mikulášek version it still spoke implicitly about hidden political traumas of actual Czech society.

2013—Hamlet as Nordic Noir with a Royal Twist... (Daniela Špinar)

Still running is the production of *Hamlet* directed by Daniela Špinar (born 1979) in Švandovo divadlo in Prague. In this instance, the director aims to present a contemporary interpretation by casting relatively young Patrik Děrgel as the protagonist. This portrayal shows a vulnerable and highly sensitive, yet beautiful boy who is affected by the world around him, without the traditional heroics of an avenger.

Again, the story happens inside—this time it's in an opulent, slightly austere and detached modern royal house, where historical displays of family history (including the armour of late King Hamlet) are showcased in large cabinets. The outfits are current but respect the fact that we are in a royal court,

so Claudius wears a uniform for most of the action, and Queen Gertrude's gown is truly luxurious. In fact, with a little bit of leeway, this could be a modern-day "Danish" royal court. This upper class is accustomed to showing themselves to the media: Claudius's official speech in scene I.2 is acted out by Špinar as a press conference for journalists. The only problem is the oversensitive Hamlet, who doesn't fit into the polished media image.

Patrik Děrgel as Hamlet enters the stage wearing a black suit which is both expensive and elegant. However, as he becomes increasingly frustrated, he peels away the formal dress and spends most of the performance in white underpants, sometimes even completely naked. The hypersensitive portrayal of Hamlet is particularly powerful during the scene with the Ghost, where he recites Ghost's lines himself in a drug-induced trance as he stares at the vacant armour of his deceased father. He appears lonely, fragile, and brimming with ambiguous premonitions. In Špinar's version of *Hamlet* the phrase "Oh, my foresighted soul!" is emphasised. (This line is also foregrounded in Krobot's and Mikulášek's interpretation.) The scene, resembling a royal museum, becomes a museum of Hamlet's memories, materialising his inner world. Hamlet remains on the stage all the time. Even when he is being taken to England, he merely withdraws to one of the compartments, as if he is locked up in a mental hospital, and he is writing neurotically on the walls of his glass prison.

The radical and consistent subjectivity of Špinar's interpretation is evident in the conception of the final image: all the characters, living and dead, are squeezed into one of the display cases. They exchange the last few lines, but in the end the dialogue from the duel scene plays out only as a recording—perhaps it is Hamlet's memory, perhaps his imagination. And this is the image Hamlet faces, naked, sword in hand. Again, no Fortinbras arrives; Hamlet's last words in this case are "The rest is silence."

Špinar often conveys the emotion of the stage picture using popular songs, much like Mikulášek. In the final scene, the recurring refrain of Mr. Lonely (by Bobby Winton) reflects the basic feeling of Špinar's Hamlet: "Now I'm a soldier, a lonely soldier / Away from home through no wish of my own / That's why I'm lonely, I'm Mr. Lonely / I wish that I could go back home." The song stands in the show as a trendy cultural reference and an emotional emblem, inviting the audience to empathise with the hypersensitive hero. At the same time, it replaces many original verses, which have been cut out, providing new emotional and poetic impact.

Špinar's version of *Hamlet* has received critical and audience acclaim for 10 years (and it is still running). It provides a subjective interpretation infused with trendy and cosmopolitan pop-culture elements. In contrast, Mikulášek's version focuses on the local political and emotional history. Špinar's production has a universal, global appeal.

Jakub Čermák (2022) Contra Michal Dočekal (2021)

It seems from the provided analysis that the prevailing tendency in Czech theatre is to see *Hamlet* as a family drama. The two most recent productions of *Hamlet* partly confirm this preliminary observation, but also bring more subtle variants to it. Directors came from very different backgrounds and generations, which of course results in very different conceptualisation of *Hamlet* as such.

Jakub Čermák (born 1980) staged *Hamlet* on the chamber stage of the regional theatre in České Budějovice, a venue usually reserved for contemporary drama or provocative productions of “classics”. Čermák again reads the play with focus on family issues. He emphasises Hamlet’s perspective on the situation. The production opens with a very visually striking sequence of a funeral mourning, followed by a wedding (and a segue into a monologue by the new king, Claudius). Čermák’s Hamlet, seated in the front row of the audience, disrupts this impressive ritual by stubbornly repeating a single line: “But my daddy is dead!” Čermák has a very cinematic stage language and the visuals of his production are striking. The spectacularity of the production is even enriched by pop culture references: two horror-like clowns instead of gravediggers remove the dead characters from the stage, Rosencranz and Guildenstern are presented as Japanese-style Lolitas. Čermák also plays around with gender issues. He presents Rosencranz and Guildenstern as teen-age girls, which gives all their dialogues with Hamlet an uncanny erotic vibe. Also, there is quite evident homoerotic tension between Laertes and Hamlet. This evident, but unspoken sympathy drives Laertes maybe more than the urge to avenge the murder of his father. The final duel thus becomes a scene of erotic seduction.

It is not really surprising that any explicit political motives including Fortinbras story are omitted. More interesting is the marginalisation of Horatio, who is often considered an important Hamlet’s counterpart or the only surviving witness of his drama. Čermák reduces his role to a minimum, but at the end it is Horatio who takes the royal crown for himself. The idea of Horatio as hidden spiritus is definitely not new nor original, in this case comes as quite unmotivated surprise.

Čermák’s interpretation is not really coherent: he evidently aims to make *Hamlet* our contemporary again through pop-culture aesthetic or usage of multimedia—e.g. one dialogue of Ophelia and Laertes is performed as a video call. The concept works in detail, but it is difficult to interpret the overall message. In the centre of the show, there is actor and rap-singer Daniel Kranich. He is using his craft especially in monologues, which are turned to proper musical pieces. If we follow the main hero, the concept seems to be very simple—Čermák’s Hamlet is an angry, oversensitive, and aggressive teenager in an intact posh society. The visual design is brand new, but the message is really not that different from Špinar’s reading. Čermák takes further the concept of

Hamlet as a current young man with all his inner issues—in this case much more focusing on erotic (and gender) aspect.

In October 2021 *Hamlet*, directed by Michal Dočekal (born 1965), premiered at the Prague City Theatres. In my overview, Dočekal represents a mature generation of directors (in 2002-2017 he was also the artistic director of the drama department of the National Theatre in Prague). Dočekal's style is highly post-modern and anti-illusionist.

Dočekal directs *Hamlet* on a stage that resembles a fragment of an abandoned living room or a photographic studio, constantly emphasising the theatricality of all the action. Actors often deliver speeches through microphones, changes of the set are presented openly as part of stage action and live cinema often doubles real-action of actors. Unlike the previous productions mentioned above, Dočekal wants to retell Hamlet's story in an epic way. The text has been radically altered, notably by adding fragments of Müller's *Hamlet Machine* to Hamlet's monologues. These fragments increase Hamlet's scepticism: his disgust and revulsion are not just disgust at the perverse family relationships, but disgust at society as a whole. The Müllerian fragments, of course, no longer bring any historical political connotations into the production, but become a critique of today's globalised society. The world of this *Hamlet* is cold, cruel, and arrogant.

The most notable change is the extension of the role of the travelling actors: after a very abbreviated version of the mousetrap scene, a short variation on Müller is inserted. In the moment of poisoning the king in the theatre-within-a-theatre, the main actor says: "After the death of the rightful king comes the revolution" and continues with Müller's famous monologue, starting with "The revolution begins as a stroll..." The description of the uprising unleashes a rather obscene action on the part of the actors, illustrating the revolution. For Claudius in the particular production is outrageous—even more than his personal guilt—the idea of public scandal and eventual revolt. While the Hamlet in Dočekal's production would probably be able to provoke such an uprising, at the same time, unlike previous Hamlets, he is plagued by a real identity crisis (that's why he often speaks in Müller's words again: "I was Hamlet...", "My play is cancelled...", etc.)

In this version, however, Fortinbras once again has the last word. He is only briefly mentioned at the beginning, and not a word is said about him throughout Hamlet's story. But he eventually arrives with the familiar sound of today's invading armies that we know from war films and documentaries. He speaks to us, probably in Danish, but in his words we hear the familiar slang of today's international politics: "humanitarian intervention" or "destabilised internal situation". It is also significant that Horatio is once again witnessing Hamlet's story in this production. At the beginning, we see him writing Hamlet's (or Müller's?) words on a typewriter, and likewise, with the typewriter on his knees,

he watches the final battle in which Hamlet dies. But even though he later demands to speak, Fortinbras does not allow him to give his testimony.

Obviously, Dočekal does not want to reduce *Hamlet* to a subjective family drama, so he retains the character of Fortinbras (and also Horatio) as a framework, giving Hamlet's inner dilemma a wider social relevance. Dočekal's approach differs from the perspective taken by other (mainly younger) directors before. For Dočekal again *Hamlet* is explicitly a political and social drama with a very sceptical message: Hamlet's political action is finally totally futile in the world of global politics, where the internal political crisis of a state might be solved by invasion of global power.

This production is not the first encounter of Dočekal with Shakespeare. So even though it seems an exception in the context of above-mentioned productions, at the same time it is pretty coherent with Dočekal's approach to Shakespeare. Dočekal still keeps the concept of Shakespeare as an epic storyteller, but as a director of post-modern sensitivity, he employs all possible means of theatre expression to create his anti-illusive, multi-media and multi-style version of Shakespeare.

Faces of "Subjectivity"

It seems from my overview that almost all featured Czech performances of *Hamlet* opt for rather subjective reading of the play from the perspective of Hamlet, interpreting the canonical play mainly as a drama of a family. But in detail there are many subtle nuances which allow deeper analysis of directorial approaches. The brief comparative analysis will focus on the dramaturgical choices made by production teams. The aim is to demonstrate how these productions negotiate the image of *Hamlet*, both as a play and as a character, in relation to local tradition and the global context.

It seems obvious that the most prominent productions of *Hamlet* in the last two decades have read the play as a family, intimate drama. In many versions, the political aspect of the play is more or less suppressed, and often the Fortinbras line is removed altogether. As mentioned above, the first significantly problematised political reading of *Hamlet* in the Czech context was presented by Jan Nebeský in 1994. Later significant *Hamlets* are studies of dysfunctional family relationships and personal or relational "hells." Hand in hand with this goes a transformation of the concept of the Ghost—often no longer a mysterious apparition that sets *Hamlet* a fatal task, but rather the Ghost is a materialisation of Hamlet's premonitions and fears, a projection of his distraught soul. *Hamlet* thus becomes not only a play about family, but also about memory and childhood—more precisely, about a lost, unattainable innocent childhood. The Ghost comes because Hamlet will not and cannot forget.

The theme of memory was very strong, especially in Mikulášek's, Špinar's and Čermák's versions. In the first case, for example, it materialised in the real childhood photographs of the actors that hung in the stage area (the only photograph we never saw was that of the old Hamlet). In fact, the motif of the photograph, as a metaphor of nostalgia and at the same time of memory, ran through the whole production: Horacio, as a witness, occasionally took photos of key scenes, and finally he took a photo of the final scene with all the family members dead. In the case of Špinar's production, the performance space was actually a royal family museum with exhibits and faded paintings on the walls. In this museum, the exhibits become the characters themselves. Hamlet by Čermák lives in a world dominated by big images of Claudius, Gertrude and deceased king Hamlet. In this version Hamlet is confronted with media images of new King and Queen, new simulacra which threaten to erase his own personal memory of the father.

In this respect, David Prachař's performance as Hamlet in Jan Nebeský's production in 1994, which for the first time in Czechia showed Hamlet as a painful and twisted, stuttering and stammering body, cannot be overestimated. This was Hamlet no longer as a great tragic hero, but as a neurotic being, an ironic commentator and a gender ambivalent figure. There is a clear connection to concepts of Špinar and Čermák. In the first case Špinar presents Hamlet, who spends most of his time on stage in his underpants and ends up naked facing literally materialisation of all his anxious fantasies, the latter version by Čermák plays around with gender issues, using rap as very expressive, personal, and bodily way of performing Hamlet.

There is an interesting nuance between concepts of Mikulášek, Špinar and Čermák: all three performances are very much about the body and memory. But in Mikulášek's case, the memory that haunts Hamlet is also political, it is a memory of local history, of "normalisation"—so even though it looks like a family drama, the performance has a very strong implicit political meaning. 20 years of so-called normalisation are still for many people a traumatic part of their memory, but Czech society after the Velvet revolution in 1989 never really properly addressed this trauma. So, it is crucial that Mikulášek shows how suppressed or ignored political "normalisation" still forms bases of our everyday politics.

In the case of Špinar or Čermák, we really see "our" current society being reflected on stage. What we get is a very general, relatively vague image of an estranged, cosmopolitan, and global society. I believe that Mikulášek's *Hamlet* is the most political *Hamlet* of all analysed here. In this production compulsively emerging family memory is also a collective memory, an evocation of a suspended traumatic history. In Špinar's or Čermák's case, I would say that the trauma is only personal, and the same goes for Krobot's version, which also reads the whole story as very private.

Paradigmatic shift from political to more private or personal readings of *Hamlet* could be demonstrated also on conceptualisation of travelling actors and the mousetrap scene. In pre-1989 productions, these scenes were a statement about the meaning and power of theatre, theatre as a true mirror of truth or even theatre as the subversive art. After 1989, and even more so today, this meaning of the scene is significantly diminished: In Krobot's version, the actor's scene is very short, reduced to the minimum which the story requires. Making scenes with actors theatrical in any way would disrupt the style of the show based on understatement. In the version by Mikulášek actors represented a kind of timeless destiny that predetermines the fate of the play's heroes, so they were providing a universal frame to personal story. Špinar's solution was the most radical—the actors simply did not appear, and so Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Polonius all acted out Hamlet's scenario directly as a kind of family psychodrama. The shift to family drama was the most explicit here.

In many of the productions that I leave aside in my analysis, the fact that the actors represent a stylistically different, "old-fashioned" layer in the context of the original play, becomes an excuse for a parodic conception of the mousetrap scene. This approach, however, fundamentally undermines the possibility of the scene having any effect on the conscience of Claudius and works only as a self-content meta-theatrical joke. This is also the case of Čermák's production where the scene is a grotesque parody of Elizabethan theatre. It fits into his tendency to enrich production with intertextual references, but it is very doubtful how much it helps to grasp the core of the situation.

Significantly, Michal Dočekal is the only one who expands the scene with actors. First—Hamlet's speech to actors can be used as meta-theatrical and anti-illusive commentary, second—extrapolation of the scene to description of revolution, borrowed from Müller's *Hamlet Machine*, explicitly actualises political impact of the play, rendering Hamlet not only as frustrated or traumatised persona, by again as critical intellectual. In fact, another instructive comparison could be posed here between dramaturgical approaches in productions by Jan Mikulášek and Michal Dočekal. Dočekal is re-accessing explicit political reading of *Hamlet*, while for Mikulášek personal memory implicitly becomes political.

Conclusions

I could say, referring especially to the *Hamlets* staged by Krobot, Mikulášek, Špinar and Čermák, that Czech post-millennial Hamlets are (hyper)sensitive, lonely, introspective. In all these productions Hamlet's "O my prophetic soul!" is foregrounded. *Hamlet* is generally performed first as a family drama, then of course the Ghost takes the form of a collective or individual hallucination.

Issues of the body and memory are at the centre. Interesting nuances lie in the very nature of the memory that haunts each of these Hamlets—it may be very personal, it may be collective, it may be historical. In all cases, Hamlet's "too solid flesh" is exposed on stage as a suffering body full of extreme emotions. These emotions speak for themselves, but sometimes they lack words—instead of Shakespeare's text, there might be a quotation from an iconic, universally known popular song, rap or striking visual image.

Such a subjective, individualistic approach to *Hamlet* is not really surprising or new. But it probably inevitably reflects the "age and body of the time" in post-millennial Czechia, where it seems that there is no real possibility of essential political action and society is only becoming more global, neoliberal and self-satisfied. What strikes me is that the memory that haunts these "Czech" Hamlets is rather individual, personal, private, compared to *Hamlet* by Krzysztof Warlikowski (1999), Thomas Ostermeier (2008) or Jan Klata's *H.* (2004). In these productions, we could also see that the Hamlets were neurotic and oversensitive, but their personal story was always part of the history. Czech Hamlets seem to be mostly untouched by historical contexts, with particular exception of the version by Jan Mikulášek. I am tempted to conclude by saying that the most recent "interesting" Czech attempts at *Hamlet* are more concerned with Hamlet's subjectivity, his body and flesh, while lacking a metaphysical/social perspective (Dočekal's version being an obvious exception).

My exploration of selected Czech post-millennial *Hamlets* confirm with the conclusion of Cinpoes and Gunther that "Shakespeare's play is no longer simply a vehicle for recovering, or creating, a national cultural memory" (284). But still *Hamlet* is part of the canon and every performance is highly expected as an artistic challenge—cultural relevance of the play is eminent. It seems that the dramaturgical approach to individual plays of Shakespearean canon is what makes Czech theatre different from Germany or Poland. When it comes to performing politics through Shakespeare, *Macbeth* or *Richard III* are—speaking already from a statistical point of view—the obvious choice.

In 2000, Shakespeareologist Zdeněk Stříbrný wrote: "In the West, the shift of interest from *Hamlet* to *King Lear* as Shakespeare's central play, seen no more as a tragedy of redemption but as one of despair, has been noticed since 1960. In the East, the position of *Hamlet* has been so strong that fully resonant productions of *King Lear* have been much slower in asserting themselves." (143) More than twenty years later, we can say that the development in the Czech milieu has been different—it is quite difficult to say what is the key Shakespearean tragedy in terms of dramaturgy, but *King Lear* has not become it. The three plays mentioned above dominate—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*—*Hamlet* is interpreted predominantly as an individual and family drama, while the other two function as studies of the pathological lust for power. So if there is

anything specific about the Czech theatre concerning Shakespeare performances, it is not the complete lack of politics in Shakespeare, but it is this attribution of the individual plays to particular topics.

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Tomasz Kowalski* 

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

* Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. tomkow@amu.edu.pl



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“thinking with Shakespeare” (a term coined by Andrzej Żurowski), 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” (Żurowski 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 "żydłaczyć," 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 apophasis 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 Szturem: Cwiszyn/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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Agnieszka Romanowska* 

No Calm After the Storm. A Decade of *The Tempest* in Polish Theatres (2012-2021)

Abstract: The article discusses twelve productions based on *The Tempest* shown in Polish theatres in the years 2012-21, a decade whose challenges included escalation of the migration crisis, increasing climate change, social and political unrest around much of the globe, and the covid pandemic, but which was also marked by important Shakespearean anniversaries. In order to inspect the play's significance for contemporary Polish audiences the productions are scrutinised in relation to four categories of interrelated issues: modification of characters, depiction of suspended reality connected with sleep, dreaming, memory and recollection, references to current social and political challenges, and employment of the play's meta-artistic potential. The productions' interpretative tendencies reveal a number of common denominators which are analysed with an aim of explaining why, in today's Poland, the possibility of reconciliation and return to some form of re-established order that the playwright contemplates is seen as very difficult, if not impossible.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Polish theatre, adaptation, theatre seasons 2012-2021.

Introduction

The intensity of *The Tempest*'s presence on theatre stages, as well as in the literary and critical discourses worldwide, proves the play's unceasing relevance and the richness of its interpretative potential. Some reasons for this popularity can be found in several aspects of this drama—plot looseness, employment of the improbable and the supernatural, variety of form and tone, the open nature of its ending, to name only the most obvious ones—that make it a flexible material for adaptation. As the author of *The Sea and the Mirror* put it

* Jagiellonian University, Poland. a.romanowska-kowalska@uj.edu.pl



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succinctly, “[l]ike other mythopoeic works, *The Tempest* inspired people to go on for themselves” (Auden 297). “Going on for themselves” is evident in the interpretations offered by the twelve productions prepared in Polish theatres in the theatre seasons 2012-21 (there was no new production in 2022). They were directed by: Maja Kleczewska (Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz, 2012), Igor Gorzkowski (Studio Teatralne KOŁO in Warsaw 2012), Piotr Jędrzejak (Teatr im. Jaracza, Olsztyn 2012), Dan Jemmett (Teatr Polski in Warsaw, 2012), Krzysztof Garbaczewski (Teatr Polski in Wrocław, 2015), Agata Duda-Gracz (Teatr Capitol in Wrocław, 2016),¹ Anna Augustynowicz (Teatr Współczesny in Szczecin, 2016), Paweł Passini (neTTtheatre in Lublin, 2018), Paweł Miśkiewicz (Teatr Narodowy in Warsaw, 2018), Damian Josef Neć (Jewish Theatre in Warsaw, 2020), Grzegorz Jarzyna (National Academy of Theatre Arts in Cracow, 2019 and TR Warszawa, 2020), Jacek Kaczmarek (Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre, 2021).² These productions share several common features, the most obvious one being a boldly creative approach to Shakespeare’s text. Some of them can be classified as loose adaptations, while the majority are appropriations based on various kinds of rewritings in which fragmented passages from *The Tempest* appear in scripts that heavily modify Shakespeare’s language, plot and characters. While the welcoming openness of the play was utilised in all of these stage adaptations, the discussion presented below reveals other, more specific, reasons for the play’s popularity in Polish theatres.

With almost thirty productions in the last twenty years, *The Tempest* belongs to a group of Shakespeare’s plays that are very frequently staged in Poland, right after *The Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet*. In the ten years I focus on, *The Tempest* was adapted as many as eighteen times—including opera, ballet, radio, pantomime and puppet theatre interpretations, although these lie beyond the scope of my analysis. While such frequency naturally entails a variety of approaches, it also helps to discern certain staging fashions and interpretative tendencies. My aim is to describe the functioning of *The Tempest* in Polish theatre against the background of a period characterised by an escalation of the migration crisis, increasing climate change, social and political

¹ Most of the comments on this production are based on my analysis in: A. Romanowska, “Images of Death in Agata Duda-Gracz’s Version of *The Tempest*,” *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* 12.3 (2017): 235-244.

² In the discussion that follows I will refer to particular productions using the surname of the director. The productions represent various theatrical environments, from big stages in major Polish cities (Warsaw, Wrocław, Gdańsk), to local theatres (Lublin, Olsztyn), to small cultural institutions (Studio Teatralne KOŁO, Warsaw Jewish Theatre) and a theatre academy. Some of the productions are discussed more extensively, while others have been treated more selectively, which reflects my effort to include all relevant material without burdening the reader with too much additional information.

unrests in many places of the world, the covid pandemic, but also one marked by milestone Shakespearean anniversaries—the 450th anniversary of his birth in 2014 and the 400th anniversary of his death in 2016. Taking into account this conglomerate of contemporary challenges and the increasingly complex reality we are facing nowadays, I intend, more specifically, to argue that these productions can be seen as an extended examination of the play's themes of forgiveness, reconciliation and possible restoration linked by a decisive negation of any happy ending. The majority of the productions reflect their authors' great scepticism towards the possibility of true forgiveness, lasting peace and the reestablishment of stable and secure relationships. I will try to demonstrate that the play's popularity on Polish stages can be explained not so much by the fact that it depicts an individual's development from revenge to forgiveness and offers a resolution that promises restoration of the right order, but rather by the very fact of its ending's ambiguity. It is the uncertainty of penitence, correction and stability and the unpredictability of reestablished power relations that Polish audiences relate to in *The Tempest*.

In order to provide evidence for these claims, in the subsequent sections of the article the productions will be examined along four interpretative lines. First, aspects of character modification will be analysed to illustrate that the productions' pessimism is partly related to the weakness of the father-ruler figure of Prospero and the self-destructive, disoriented or suppressed actions of the young generation. To pinpoint the circumstances that determine such presentation of the main characters, two further issues will be examined next. The second section focuses on the significance of sleep, memory and recollection to illustrate how the prevailing sense of entrapment and inertia felt by the characters flows from them being infected by and locked in the traumas of the past. The third part of the article discusses the productions' references to present day challenges of global and local character that shed light on the disheartening context in which the characters are forced to function. Finally, employment of the play's meta-artistic potential will be scrutinised to explain why this aspect is so commonly taken into account by the productions' creators.

“O brave new world”—Character Modifications

Most of the discussed productions highlight or augment the theme of power relationships by changing or modifying the characters' position and agency in a way which gives voice to the dependants and those terrorised into service or obedience. Productions in which Miranda is shown as incapacitated and meekly obedient to her father (like in Gorzkowski or Augustynowicz) are rare. Kleczewska's Miranda, in her wedding dress, opens the performance, but by no means is she a gentle bride to become a submissive wife. She is impudent, even

when silent, ignoring her father's attempts to make her listen to his story while provokingly staring at Ferdinand across the table. Kleczewska interprets *The Tempest* as a story about a father's guilt towards his children and shows Miranda, "infected by her father with the siege mentality syndrome"³ (Cieślak), as a daughter aggressively fighting to free herself from the prison of the toxic family and ready to take revenge on her parent. She is temperamental, vulgar at times, full of repressed anger and frustration. Other productions also show Miranda's readiness to mature by emphasising her mutinous attitude towards parental authority. In Garbaczewski, Miranda is utterly bored with Prospera's past traumas, irritated by her mother retelling the story she feels disconnected from. In Passini, at the beginning we see Miranda with her eyes covered to emphasise her lack of knowledge and innocence, but later she is given a speech about her needs and desires which can be understood as a feminist manifesto of independence. Actually, Passini ends not with a renouncement of magical and artistic powers but with a transfer of these to the next generation, with Miranda becoming empowered by the magic inherited from her retiring parent.

The process of growing independent is underscored by Miranda's yearning for physical love. In Garbaczewski, her relation with Ferdinand is a chance to escape from an overprotective mother, as proved by their frenzied lovemaking which seems to be done to spite her. Kleczewska's Miranda, running around the sandy beach of the island in her bathing suit, is at times a childish young woman playing with Barbie dolls, at times a lascivious siren trying to erotically provoke Caliban. When she meets Ferdinand, she has no inhibitions—her kisses are violent, animalistic, as if desire changed Miranda into a hungry predator. In neither of these two much acclaimed productions, however, does Miranda's rebellious attitude fuel lasting energy that would support her in the future. On the contrary, the strong negative feelings she is experiencing leave her burnt out and exhausted.

The portrayals of Caliban extend the character's potential and complicate his position in the play, which is especially visible in his relation to Prospero. In Garbaczewski, Caliban is often shown throwing mad curses at the hated Prospera, but there is also a scene in which she is holding him close to her body, as if breastfeeding, in an attempt to calm his violent rage. In Augustynowicz, Caliban is moving around in a wheelchair, as many other characters do in this production,⁴ but he is different from the rest by being the

³ Translations of quotations from sources in Polish are mine (A.R.).

⁴ In Augustynowicz's gloomy and pessimistic interpretation, the wheelchairs function as a metaphor of confinement, emotional paralysis and helplessness. A very different foregrounding of disability occurred in Justyna Łagowska's 2020 production based on *The Tempest*. This theatrical workshop, titled *Rozbitkowie* [The Shipwrecks], was realized by the actors of Kraków's Teatr Ludowy with a group of people suffering from blindness and visual impairments, and was aimed at creating a syncretic plane of

only one immune to Prospero's empowering spell. In Neć, Caliban turns into one of the Nazi executioners of Prospero and other characters during their transport to Treblinka. In Duda-Gracz this character is represented by a couple, the Calibans, who are introduced as Prospero's impoverished neighbours. In the past, this ageing hippie and his black spouse used to earn money by cleaning Prospero's house and doing small repairs. The Calibans take revenge on Prospero for his contemptuous treatment, clearly based on racist and social prejudices, when—transformed into the Macbeths—they stab him multiple times on his own sofa. In Miśkiewicz, Caliban and Ariel are depicted as Prospero's alter egos, his inner voices, and those who speak on his behalf. Caliban and Ariel are played by the same actor and he is very similar to the actor playing Prospero. There is the physical similarity of body posture, but also one created by costume, movement, gestures and intonation. Tattered clothes on their hunching backs and the slowness of speech and movements clearly suggest the fatigue and world-weariness which is the result of their prolonged exile and isolation.

Such interpretations of Miranda, Caliban or Ariel are, necessarily, accompanied by significant modifications in the character of Prospero. Kleczewska and Duda-Gracz think in terms of a family drama in which Prospero is a tyrant whose complexes and frustrations result in authoritarian parenting, home violence or, at the very least, in negligence. Such a Prospero epitomises degeneration and failure as we watch him plodding around the island in dirty pyjamas—unwashed, bored and arrogant—lounging in his unmade bed, solving crosswords or staring into a blank TV screen, while his island has been reduced to a messy room. This is a Prospero degraded, deprived of his nobility, wisdom and power. A parody of a good father and the antithesis of an effective ruler. Definitely not anyone able to create and secure a happy future.

In Miśkiewicz, Prospero is everything but domineering. Feeling guilty and wronged at the same time, he is virtually silenced by exhaustion. In Augustynowicz, his island is a hospital in which he ultimately dies. In Garbaczewski, the tyrannical mother, Prospera, resembles a patient weakened by chemotherapy. Initially, she is too tired to even stand up—we see her sitting or lying on the ground, living only to obsessively repeat the recollections of her traumas. In Jemmett's farcical interpretation, Prospero is a delirium-stricken drunkard, mumbling or shouting his lines towards his similarly alcoholised companions, whose island is a "kingdom of outcasts, clochards, city beggars" (Grzegorzewska 55). Kaczmarek's Prospero, rummaging through the trash washed ashore by the sea, resembles a homeless vagrant looking for food in

communication in which sight was not the dominating sense. The production activated the senses of hearing, touch and smell with the aim of enabling the workshop participants to become co-creators of the staging, but also in order to offer a performance that would be available to blind and visually impaired audiences without audio description.

dustbins. In many productions Prospero is murdered, dies or is left suspended in a death-in-life existence, so the perspective of a peaceful restorative ending is not even an option.

In several of the productions character modifications include shifts in the characters' gender, a development that has been present in Shakespearean stage and screen adaptations for at least three decades, and one that has brought with itself not only female Prosperas and Ariels, but also Mirands, Sebastianas, Trinkulas, as well as non-binary characters.⁵ In Garbaczewski, this shift works not so much towards relativising the gender of the main character, as to highlight a traumatised toxic mother's destructive influence on her daughter. At the end of the play *Miranda*, "sentenced to a timeless existence" (Katafiasz, *Zabawy w otchłani* 112), is left on the island, embittered and drained of all energy by her mother, the emotional vampire, while Prospera revives and leaves together with her new spouse, Alonza, the queen of Naples.

Sometimes gender shifts are introduced for more specific reasons. Passini's Prospera is shown as an old sorceress, shaking convulsively with every move, trudging with a walking stick, bending to the earth, but still powerful enough to undertake what she sees as her last task—that of reconciling with her enemies. In this production the lean body of the actress on the one hand helps to depict the character's senility and, on the other hand, creates a contrast between the vulnerable body and the power of the magical art. In Jarzyna's post-apocalyptic interpretation, the cast of eight actors and five actresses depict androgynous characters who—wearing white pants, white bandages masking their breasts and white mascara on their hair—are creatures of indeterminate gender and of no personalities, partly avatars, partly human beings. Duda-Gracz's female Ariel is one of the three women, including Prospero's wife, who were abused by the tyrannical husband, father, and master. Having died in a fire which indirectly resulted from Prospero's negligent treatment of his wife, they are now revived to accompany Prospero in his traumatic recollections. Ariel's naked breasts, her thin body covered with ash, and the wounds on her shoulders left by the burnt out wings, highlight the character's vulnerability. At the end she is virtually crushed by Prospero bluntly informing her that there has never been anything supernatural, anything magical, about her, that she is just an ugly naked body. A female body.

The productions also employ interesting modifications in the characters' age. Kaczmarek's Prospero is about forty. He is still full of energy, but aware

⁵ A well-known case is Helen Mirren's Prospera in Julie Taymor's 2010 film adaptation, a role that has gained much critical acclaim. So has Alex Kingston for her role in the 2023 Royal Shakespeare Company production. Among Polish productions of *The Tempest*, memorable roles were created by Magdalena Cielecka as Ariel and Stanisława Celińska as Trinkulo in Krzysztof Warlikowski's 2003 Warsaw adaptation.

that this may be the last moment in his life to do what he desires most, that is to enact his revenge, and this awareness erases in him any pity or human kindness. The approaching mid-life crisis makes him egocentric, full of suppressed regret and anger. This Prospero is dangerous and violent. He may be a representative of civilization, but we are not deluded as to his intentions: he is interested neither in forgiveness nor in reconciliation. Instead, he is methodically planning his vengeance. In Neć's Jewish Theatre production, Miranda is an old woman. Or rather a girl and, at the same time, an old woman, as if trapped in a time loop. She is both a child who had no chance to grow up because of the Shoah and a young bride who grew old because her lover disappeared in the storm of the Holocaust.

The last decade's Polish theatre adaptations of *The Tempest*, with their insistence on toxic parents who infect their children with fear, hatred, and apathy are consistent with the popular reading of this play as one depicting bleak consequences of defective parenting, egocentrism and psychological violence in family relationships. The discussed modifications, being, naturally, the most obvious expression of the adaptive and appropriating strategies employed by the directors, at the same time very precisely reveal their interpretative choices. No return to the old world is possible because of the weaknesses and vices of Prospero and the inability or unwillingness of his successors, and there are very few indications that any new reliable order can be hoped for in future. The analysis of the productions suggests two sorts of explanations for this.

“Thou art inclin'd to sleep”—Suspended Reality of Sleep and Recollection

The first is that all the characters are shown as, directly or indirectly, trapped by the spell that forces them to relive their past. Prospero's magic, which creates the framework of suspended reality, is in the productions rendered by a variety of means, but—quite in line with Shakespeare's text—the two dominating channels suggesting unreality are sleep and, in the case of suspended time, memory and recollection. *The Tempest* thematizes the dream state, “deliberately and directly exploring the poles of sleeping and waking, vision and reality, art and the human condition” (Garber 187). Miranda is totally powerless against Prospero's sleep-inducing spell (“Thou art inclin'd to sleep; 'tis a good dullness/ And give it way: I know thou canst not choose” 1:2:185-186) and, as the innocent and unknowing, she is granted a deep restorative sleep, even if magically induced. The guilty, on the contrary, are punished with sleeplessness, nightmares or tempting visions of unreal happiness. While sleep may be described as a period of suspended wakefulness and limited consciousness, Prospero's design results also in a specific suspension of time. The crew of the saved ship are magically

put to sleep, while in the meantime the shipwrecks go through their time of purgatory which involves sleep and daydreaming. Finally, sleep and dreaming are the figures used in Prospero's assessment of the human condition in the speech that closes the masque: "We are such stuff/ As dreams are made on; and our little life/ is rounded with a sleep" (4:1:156-158).

While Shakespeare's Miranda does not oppose the "good dullness" she believes was caused by Prospero's sad story and has, at least in her father's assessment, "slept well," this cannot be said about the characters in the discussed productions. Kleczewska creates "an inferno of daydreaming and dreams. The reality melts into some dream visions, oftentimes into nightmares. Identities of characters become blurred. The viewer is disoriented" (Nowak). In the opening, we listen to Miranda's recitation of a chaotic train of words, uttered monotonously, as if she was learning to speak, or as if in a trance. Listening to this catalogue of dissociated words which do not create any coherent whole is initially rather intriguing, but soon turns confusing and/or soporific. The stage is dark, except for a single spot of dim pale violet light where she is standing. The pace of this scene is very slow, and even more so is the pace of the next one, of the wedding party (here shifted to the beginning of the play), which is acted out in the same deathly pale light, suggestive of a nightmarish dream. Dreams dreamt by the audience and shared with the authors of the performance, are part of Kleczewska's psychological experiment as in the initial stages of her work she asked inhabitants of the city of Bydgoszcz to report their dreams and recollections she later collected and partly used in the staging.

Darkness dominates Garbaczewski's stage design with its black cloth and black shiny, as if wet, panels of the stage, while the films projected on the surrounding walls and the skilfully operated lights create a feeling of dreamy hallucinations. Gorzkowski creates with subtle poetic tools a magical world with its atmosphere of uncanniness and mystery, "as if in a dream" (Czajkowska). For Jemmett, sleep is a delirium nightmare dreamt by the whiskey-addicted Prospero who is "saved from insanity by creating a spectacle of the shipwreck" (Pawlicka). In Augustynowicz, Miranda appears on stage always with her bed, as if never fully awake, indifferently reciting her lines. As all other characters, apart from Prospero, she utters her words in an emotionless dead voice that reminds one of day-dreaming. This helps to create an aura of unreality, in which the characters function under a spell—obedient puppets in the powerful magician's hands, never fully aware of their own existence and never entirely free.

Prospero's island can be seen as "a place where memory—private and communal, mythical and imaginary, traumatic and tender—can be replayed, repaired, or revenged" (Palfrey 138). To replay the memories the magician needs to conjure a storm, but before an opportunity offers itself they need to be shared with the so far unaware offspring who is thus shocked into maturity while becoming traumatized by her parent's past. The repairing process starts when the

wrongdoers, who live their lives apparently free from remorse, are forcefully reminded about their forgotten atrocities and confronted with their past crimes. What can these recollections lead to? Can the re-enacted past become a better future? Or is it bound to turn into revenge and repay? In Duda-Gracz, Prospero's island is a prison created by memory, in which the compulsively recollected past proves oppressive to those remembered who, by the power of Prospero's *theatrum mentis*, are forcefully revived to rehearse their past lives. The effect is supported by the production's loose structure in which day-time episodes brought back from the past mingle with surreal dreams and visions of alternative existences. In Miśkiewicz, similarly, we are presented with a world which is surreal, resembling a dream vision, or some ritualized cycles of recollections that produce ghost-characters such as Miranda—more of a spirit than a real young woman.

The workings of memory are at the very core of the Warsaw Jewish Theatre's production which puts *The Tempest* to a specific test of time and memory, with "the reality of the island [...] designated by the past and eternally condemned to commemoration" (Bryś). The authors were inspired by *The Tempest* translated into Yiddish and staged in 1938 at Folks Un Jugnt Theater in Łódź as a cooperation of Polish and Jewish actors. Several months before the outbreak of the second world war this production was shown in Warsaw, where it was still received as a sign of hope for a peaceful future in spite of the fascists growing in power and the escalation of anti-Semitic violence. The play's message was idealistically interpreted to be that "the secret of the righteous ruling of the world is mercy that does not come from weakness but from the feeling of panhuman unity"⁶ and the actor playing Prospero expressed his belief in the restorative power of art and artistic creation which could help the Jewish people survive the tempests of enmity and violence. Eighty two years later, Neć created an adaptation which he wanted to be universal and timeless. Its characters are set against the background of the ruined Warsaw Jewish district, a post-catastrophic picture as if suspended in time. Although the storm of war could happen everywhere, with Yiddish being the language of the performance, "a meta-warning against the returning demons of the past,"⁷ and with Jewish songs and lamentations, as well as fragments of documents from the Ringelblum's Archive included in the script, it is impossible to forget about the context of the second world war. Simple, yet powerful, scenography and actors moving in a "ghostly danse macabre" contribute to a disturbing sense of desolation in a world annihilated during the war and forgotten (Spiechowicz 3). The central force is Ariel, not Prospero's servant, but rather a kind of emanation of the Old

⁶ Quoted after the theatre's webpage, <https://www.teatr-zydowski.art.pl/en/productions/der-szturem-cwiszyn-burza-pomiedzy-tempest-between>, accessed 2 September 2023.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

Testament's Yahweh (Domagała). His time of trial, the Shoah, is a storm more cruel and a trauma more lasting than any of the plights of dethroned rulers or children rebelling against their toxic parents. With the story of the Holocaust turned into a threatening vision of potential consequences of any discrimination, the Jewish Theatre's production proved, again, that "Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a universal warning" (Feliksik 5) and resonated very strongly in the nowadays dramatically polarised Polish society.

The past dominates the minds of the productions' Prosperos and has a thwarting influence on the younger generation. Although much of this is shown in terms of family drama, Prospero's situation can also be perceived in political terms. If we see him as an allegory of the state, it is clear that these productions say something more general about the place where they originated. Polish people, as other nations with the history of political subjugation to foreign states and weakened by endless internal conflicts, have the tendency to feel so overwhelmed by the memory of their difficult past that it never allows them to feel fully secure, blocking their activity and belief in the prospect of an optimistic future. Polish literature, especially of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, abounds in images of passivity, inaction and impotence that frustrate any attempts to regain independence and security. This explains why Shakespeare's depiction of the magician's powers that limit agency of other characters is so readily explored and exploited in the discussed stage adaptations created after two post-communist decades that have brought their own internal problems coupled with global challenges.

"You do assist the storm"—Local and Global Disasters

The second reason for the general disempowerment of the characters in the discussed interpretations seems to be the fact that, in addition to the burden of the past, the present is not quite optimistic, either. Prospero's magically created storm and the ensuing shipwreck—one of Shakespeare's favourite manifestations of an unforeseen catastrophe (Greenblatt 85)—can be viewed from two different perspectives. One is that of the shipwrecks, "little knowing that their plight is part of a master plan" (Habermann 69), and oblivious to any possible links between the deadly misfortune and their own past. The other is that of Prospero and his activities, "where chance is resignified as design and destiny" (70). But as this design includes a mental and narrative recreation of his and Miranda's suffering, the two perspectives are, in fact, more blended than we usually tend to notice. Many of the discussed productions underscore this aspect of the recreated, or never-ending, suffering as they blur the boundaries between the wrongdoers and the victims and present their forced coexistence on the island as self-induced punishment. In doing this, the productions oscillate

between post-apocalyptic visions of a dystopian reality resulting from a global ecological catastrophe,⁸ and more limited, though not less violent, catastrophes of a local—oftentimes personal—character.

Kleczewska's island is both a tropical beach and Prospero's room. In the first scenes we learn that the characters are survivors of a disaster that annihilated human civilization and transformed the globe into a pile of corpses. When the rain comes, it changes the sand of the beach into mud and puddles, and the storm (here shifted to the final minutes of the play) becomes a sand (and sound) tempest that virtually sweeps the characters off the stage. While the director demands from her actors extreme emotions and physical endurance, the exhaustion this involves is underscored by their plodding through sand and mud, dirty, in soaked clothes. In Jarzyna's futuristic adaptations, the characters find themselves in an unspecified isolated place as a result of a spacecraft failure. They are survivors of an ecological catastrophe or refugees from a dying planet. This production blends visions of a post-ecological reality after some kind of global catastrophe with glimpses of current politics and local traumas. There are allusions to the crash of the Polish government plane in April 2010 and to the protests against the ban on abortion that were organized in several cities at the turn of 2020 and 2021. An aircraft disaster is also suggestively alluded to in the opening of Augustynowicz, in which Juno, Ceres and Iris instruct the audience about the safety measures on the plane and how to put on life vests. Dressed in black gowns, with their heads covered, they look like mourners, but may also raise associations with Islamic terrorists (Liskowacki 52).⁹

If the productions do not refer to the ecological issues or political conflicts, they allude to the migration crisis. In Duda-Gracz, the storm scene is the central episode of the production. The shipwrecks are a group of strangers forced to participate in a kind of social experiment. On the island, they are tormented not only by disorientation and fear, but also by recurrent memories of themselves dying. The scenes of shipwreck and drowning, bodies and pieces of belongings on the front stage, as if washed ashore, are bound to remind the audience about refugees' deadly sea journeys and their capsized boats. In

⁸ Unsurprisingly, the enduring popularity of post-apocalyptic themes finds its reflection in Shakespearean adaptations and rewritings. A telling case might be Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 post-epidemic novel *Station Eleven* that interacts with the Shakespearean canon on various levels, and which was adapted for television in 2021. A recent theatrical example is the 2023 RSC production of *Macbeth* which is set in a Scotland wasted by a climate catastrophe.

⁹ Staging Shakespeare's shipwreck as an aircraft disaster is by no means a new idea—the most successful Polish production of *The Tempest* to do so was Warlikowski's adaptation (see note 2 above). When it premiered in 2003 such staging resonated with the audiences' traumas after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York that had occurred but two years earlier.

Kaczmarek, the stage is dominated by big containers sticking out of the sand, while useless remnants of the long lost civilised life lie around—a tape-recorder, pieces of jewellery, books. In Passini, there is a huge wooden cage-like fence constructed on stage which may signify Prospera's attempts to separate her civilised world from the world of the savage others. Jemmett's characters—worn, dirty, in shabby clothes—seem not to belong to the neglected and deserted place they inhabit. "They resemble migrants who, uprooted from their native land, have not adapted to new circumstances" (Lebiedzińska), or the homeless that can be seen in any big city sleeping on park benches or on the streets.

Interestingly, the other production that alludes to the second world war, the one by Passini, in which Prospero's wrongdoers are wearing uniforms of the nazi German navy, is, unlike the other productions discussed here, more optimistic about the future. The world which is inherited by Miranda is not free from grave problems, but at least Prospero opts for forgiveness and decides not to transmit the traumas of the past to the next generation together with the transfer of rule. This being an exception that proves the rule, the productions in general show the characters' entanglement in the topical problems and challenges of the modern day.

"By my so potent art"—Sorcery of Artistic Creation

From what has been written so far it can be seen that the frequency of *The Tempest's* Polish adaptations in the last decade is connected with the space this play allows for accommodating our frustrations and fears grounded in the past, as well as our disappointments and pessimism with relation to the present and future. The other factor responsible for the play's popularity in Polish theatres is its meta-artistic character which, in the context of adapting foreign classics, and especially Shakespeare, presents itself as a very tempting field of artistic expression. Although it is a truism to perceive *The Tempest* as the playwright's farewell to his art, it would hardly be possible to ignore the play's meta-artistic qualities in any interpretation. It reveals, as do many other texts written by Shakespeare, the author's fascination with the power of poetry and theatre. In fact, "Prospero is, to some extent, an imaginative paradigm of Shakespeare himself in his function as poet" (Murry 391), and Prospero's monologues are meta-artistic pieces contemplating imagination, art, and the limits of artistic creation. No other play by Shakespeare, perhaps with the exception of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is more open for creativity and inventiveness on the part of its interpreters in exploring the essence of theatre in their own ways. These ways are most obviously manifested on the verbal level because, dealing with translations, the adaptors feel much less restricted by the original

text than their English-speaking colleagues and are more likely to produce their own scripts. On the non-verbal level, the artistic freedom of the adaptors may sometimes lead them to quite risky experiments, like the one by Jędrzejak who substituted theatre with cinema, transforming his Prospero into a film director and the island into a film production company specializing in film noir. Most of the interpreters, however, take advantage of the setting that is naturally there, that of the theatre.

Kleczewska's production emphasizes the meta-artistic quality of the play by foregrounding the very act of creating theatre. If Prospero's "princely power is precisely the playwright's power to determine the fate of his creations, and his magical power is precisely the playwright's power to alter space and time, create vivid illusions, cast a spell" (Greenblatt 372), Kleczewska seems to be testing not only the physical and emotional limits of her actors, the psychological endurance and patience of her audiences, but also the means and boundaries of theatre itself. Kleczewska's work is founded on her "conviction about Shakespeare's plays offering his adaptors freedom to talk about their own world" (Katafiasz, *On nas wymyślił* 13), and it must be admitted that she is quite uncompromising in the way she uses this freedom. Her retelling resembles a patchwork, rather than a palimpsest, a mosaic of associations, and the few traces of Shakespeare's romance which she retains can be used only as vaguely visible points of reference, or "a compass" (Wakar, *Niezidentyfikowane obiekty...* 47), to help the audience through the deliberate chaos of the production's collage of sounds, images and special effects.

Meta-theatricality is fundamental also in other productions. Gorzkowski presented Ariel as an actor in Prospero's theatre. Undertaking new tasks demanded from his master-director, he changes his costume and make-up. In Garbaczewski, the stage space is divided into the upper part, where on the screen we see glimpses of the off-stage life—actors talking about trivial things, commenting on each other's work, arguing—and the lower part which is Prospero's island, where the director, "playing with unbridled theatricality" (Mrozek), employs colour, light and sound to overwhelm the spectators with the eeriness of the place and its inhabitants. Miśkiewicz highlights meta-theatricality by creating a performance that is at the same time spectacular and intimate. A relatively small auditorium is constructed on part of the stage which brings the spectators closer not only to the actors (who often address the audience), but also to the stage machinery, with its cables, lifts and turntables, which is deliberately displayed to create an association with a ship engine room. The director merges an openly intellectual approach—incorporating fragments of Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, Dagerman's *Island of the Doomed* and allusions to Grzegorzewski, Jarocki and Nekrošius—with theatrical illusion and spectacle, employing special effects and depending on physical fitness of the actors. In this case, again, creative freedom and critical distance of the adaptation's authors

is demonstrated, and the result is a production that can be described as a “deliberately introvertive essay” (Wakar, *Próba eseju...*), an auto-thematic commentary on theatre as a space of intellectual and artistic exploration of and contemplation on the human condition.

In Augustynowicz, the theatrical space is arranged in a way that may be seen as “a murky reflection of the Elizabethan theatre” (Liskowacki 53), with the stage extending to the auditorium and the onstage gallery which, on the one hand, can be perceived as a visual allusion to the sixteenth century public theatre’s balcony and, on the other, to the tiers of galleries with seats for spectators. This, combined with the opening life vest pantomime—suggesting that the storm and its consequences may at any time afflict the viewers as much as the characters—produces an effect of uneasiness by blurring the boundaries between the performance and its spectators who can see themselves reflected in the unresisting, paralyzed and disillusioned characters on stage. In this way, theatricality works even stronger towards foregrounding the creative independence of the production’s authors lead by the director—a demiurge who depicts “her own independent, autonomous worlds which are not an interpretation or reinterpretation of the literary meanings” (Ostrowska).

Duda-Gracz utilizes the meta-artistic potential of the play by introducing an autobiographical key to her reading of the themes of fatherhood and father-daughter relationship that become enriched and complicated by references to the artistic legacy of Jerzy Duda-Gracz (1941-2004). Rewriting *The Tempest* as a daughter of this very original twentieth-century Polish painter, the director is quite open about her father’s impact on her private and artistic development, as well as on her interpretation of this particular play. “In his bitterness and loneliness he resembled Prospero” (Kowalska, *Jestem irytująca...* 16), she says in an interview about Jerzy Duda-Gracz’s last years. Creating the character of Prospero, the director paid tribute to her father and, at the same time, contested him, acknowledged his influence, but also—like Ariel—released herself in order to independently contemplate the meanings and consequences of being an artist. As a stage designer, she “quotes,” in a number of visual metaphors, two of her father’s paintings. In the opening and the closing scenes of the production, the audience faces an elderly man in a dirty undershirt and pyjamas, sitting on an old sofa and staring at his own face reflected on the blank television screen. These scenes create a stage reproduction of the last self-portrait of Jerzy Duda-Gracz. The other painting referred to is “Hamlet Polny” [Field Hamlet]. This Hamlet—an old alcoholic, his body hardly covered by a stretched soiled undershirt—is sitting on a worn out sofa in an unharvested cabbage field. His eyes, hardly open, express dullness and fatigue. Among the cabbage heads there lies a skull. The production’s characterization of Prospero is based on this image, and other characters bear many resemblances to the grotesquely ugly, neglected, and marginalized people of the kind Jerzy Duda-Gracz frequently pictured in his

paintings. In spite of these quotations and allusions, it is not her father's art but the father-artist figure that Agata Duda-Gracz focuses on, as much as she focuses on the daughter-artist who tries to reconcile with her parent by manifesting artistic independence in her Shakespearean scenario. "She is the real Prospero, her theatre is the island and Prospero's wand is held by the narrator whose voice introduces the subsequent episodes" (Kowalska, *Smutek kapuścianych głów* 58).

While drawing on the meta-theatrical quality of *The Tempest* is by no means innovative, theatre practice of the past decade in Poland strengthened the tendency to treat Shakespeare's play merely as an artistic reference and to use Shakespeare's text only fragmentarily in scripts that combine it with the scriptwriter's text and, frequently, with other texts quoted in the productions. Thus, *The Tempest*'s rich cultural legacy and, more generally, Shakespeare as a cultural icon are alluded to, employed and exploited, but this is done not in order to pay homage to the playwright (even though Shakespearean anniversaries would justify such gestures), but to create an intertextual auditorium for one's own artistic voice to sound loud and bold.

Conclusion

Polish theatrical readings of *The Tempest* created in the last ten years confirm interpretative tendencies widespread nowadays in English-speaking, as well as other non-English-speaking productions. They give voice to the originally minoritized characters, and make the play more diverse by modifying the characters' gender. Almost all of the discussed productions highlight the family drama, most of them augmenting the toxicity of the parent-child relationship, frequently featuring a powerless, disillusioned or vengeful Prospero. All of the discussed productions take advantage of the meta-artistic potential of the play, drawing the audiences' attention to the act of artistic creation, problematising the position of an artist and manifesting the creative powers of the adaptors. While only one of the productions blatantly alludes to the current social or political problems, most of them set the events against a background of increasingly topical issues, like the migration crisis, the prospect of an ecological disaster, or war. After all, as testified by the 2022 film, *The Hamlet Syndrome*, Shakespeare remains a globally functioning cultural channel through which people of various backgrounds are willing to communicate their individual and collective traumas, and one may easily predict that in the next few years we are going to see Polish productions of *The Tempest* relating to the war in Ukraine.

Indeed, the new war waged by the Russian aggressor against Ukraine provides one with a more acutely topical perspective on the last ten years of *The Tempest* in neighbouring Poland. The discussed productions' great scepticism

toward lasting forgiveness and reconciliation is manifested either through underscoring the vengefulness, cruelty or weakness of Prospero, highlighting his family's and his servants' hatred towards him, or by devising an ending which shows all characters broken and petrified in a state of disillusionment and pessimism. As I have demonstrated, the frequency and the pessimism of Polish productions of this play, although confirming many of the interpretative paths popular elsewhere, can be explained by the specificity of the local context: our entanglement with the past, insecurity of the present and pessimism about the future.

As testified by the discussion of the productions' use of *The Tempest's* meta-artistic content, Shakespeare's play continues to be a functional and resonating cultural artifact through which, albeit with much reinvention, we are willing to address our current problems. *The Tempest's* heterogenous nature, ambiguity, ambivalent tone, and bitter-sweet resolution offer a range of interpretative possibilities from which today's adaptors choose the aspects that best resonate with their reality: pessimism, disorientation, lack of trust in political authority and in human relations. Thus Shakespeare is not so much rewritten to fit our times, but rather creatively explored. Evidently, *The Tempest*, for all its fantastic elements, airy spirits, and mythological deities, has been never far away from the world we live in, and today, in an epoch of social disillusionment, political strife and perspectives of precarious future, it seems to be closer than ever before.

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Ivona Mišterová* 
Filip Krajník** 

Passion and Politics in Diego de Brea and Jakub Čermák's *Edward II*: Marlowe's Controversial History on Czech Stages

Abstract: The present article outlines the stage history of Christopher Marlowe's history *Edward II* on Czech stages, focusing chiefly on how the respective directors approached the titular character of Marlowe's play and his sexuality. The study focuses on two post-2000 productions of the play: Diego de Brea's *Edvard Drugy* for the Slovenian National Theatre, which toured to the 16th "Divadlo" International Theatre Festival in Pilsen, West Bohemia, in 2008; and Jakub Čermák's production of *Edvard II.* for the independent Czech theatre company "Depresivní děti touží po penězích" (Depressive Children Yearn for Money) that premiered in 2023 in Prague. Since for both Czechs and Slovenians, King Edward II is a minor figure of English history and Elizabethan history plays are generally less appealing to them than other genres, both the directors sideline the political dimension of the story to fully explore the issue of social and sexual norms and relate it to current social and cultural discussions both in the West and the former Eastern Bloc. Stressing the motif of social and sexual otherness even more bravely than most recent Western productions, de Brea and Čermák offered not only valuable contributions to both local and global reception of Marlowe's *Edward II*, but also raised the visibility of LGBT theatre in a region where it has only a modest history and tradition.

Keywords: Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Diego de Brea, Jakub Čermák, Elizabethan theatre, LGBT theatre, queer theatre.

* University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic. yvonne@kaj.zcu.cz

** Masaryk University, Czech Republic. filip.krajnik@phil.muni.cz



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“My father is deceased; come, Gaveston,
And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.”
Ah, words that make me surfeit with delight!
What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston[.]

(Edward II, scene 1.1-4)

A “university wit” and *enfant terrible* of early-modern English theatre, Christopher Marlowe ranks among the most significant authors of his time. His contribution to English Renaissance theatre can hardly be overstated: together with Thomas Kyd, he is credited for revolutionising dramatic blank verse, making it “native to the genius of the English language” on the one hand and “the characteristic vehicle of expression of an individual poet” on the other (Brooke 187). His first play for adult actors, *Tamburlaine the Great* (ca 1587), inspired at its time a wave of dramatic pieces with exotic settings and bombastic language, such as Robert Greene’s *Alphonsus King of Aragon* (1587), George Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* (1589) or the anonymous *Lochrine* (1591) (see Berek); his *Doctor Faustus* continued to influence the development of English theatre well into the 18th century (see Krajník and Hrdinová). Marlowe’s dramatic works have introduced an impressive ensemble of daring and captivating characters, such as the aforementioned Tamburlaine and Faustus, as well as Barabbas the Jew, the Duke of Guise or King Edward II. His life and work have been examined from various perspectives (see Stříbrný; Bevington; Honan; Logan; Robert A. Potter; Krajník; etc.).

Of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Marlowe is probably most embedded in general awareness, his character appearing in all major fictional biopics of Shakespeare, including John Madden’s award-winning *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), Roland Emmerich’s *Anonymous* (2011) or the short-lived television series *Will* (2017). His *Doctor Faustus* has been regularly staged since the late 19th century, with Matthew Dunster’s 2011 production for Shakespeare’s Globe or Jamie Lloyd’s 2016 production for the Duke of York’s Theatre in London being some of the recent examples. While other Marlovian plays have also enjoyed a number of modern revivals, it is his only English history *Edward II* that has in recent decades become “almost equal to *Doctor Faustus* as Marlowe’s most performed and adapted play” (Lois Potter 272).¹ Especially since the 1960s, the play has attracted the attention of a number of preeminent directors and actors for its sexually transgressive themes, including Ian McKellen, Simon Russell Beale and Eddie Izzard. Stephen Guy-Bray argues that

¹ Apart from Lois Potter’s survey, on the recent staging tradition of *Edward II* see Fulluer; Stephen Guy-Bray’s Introduction to the most recent New Mermaids edition of the play (Marlowe *Edward II* x-xii); and Škrobánková.

“the theatrical productions of the play tend to be more radical than the critical analyses” (Marlowe, *Edward II* xi); the same could also be said about Derek Jarman’s 1991 film adaptation of Marlowe’s piece, which “on the background of the familiar story reflects on the fight of gays for equal rights, as well as the panic in Anglo-American society caused by the medialisation of the HIV virus” (Škrobánková 65; working translation by IM and FK). It appears that, after centuries of neglect, Marlowe’s play about an unpopular medieval king, whose rule was brought to an end by an invasion instigated by his own wife, has finally gained unquestionable cultural importance and found a strong popular following.

In the Czech Lands—the Czech part of former Czechoslovakia and today’s Czech Republic—*Edward II* has had a modest but certainly interesting staging tradition. The printed edition of Otokar Fischer’s first Czech translation of the play mentions that his version premiered on 25 January 1922 at the National Theatre in Prague and boasts that this had been the first modern production of the play, as well as its first staging outside England (Marlowe, *Edvard Druhý* 117). While Marlowe’s play had, in fact, already been revived in England in 1903 by the Elizabethan Stage Society at Oxford (dir. William Poel) (Dibelius 3), it is true that the Czech production of Marlowe’s *Edward II* took place a year before its first German production in Berlin and two years before Bertolt Brecht’s celebrated adaptation, *Leben Eduards des Zweiten von England*, premiered in Munich (Škrobánková 64).

The 1922 Prague production of *Edward II* was directed by Karel Hugo Hilar, the head of the Czech National Theatre’s spoken drama ensemble and a preeminent representative of the then young and progressive generation of theatre practitioners (he was 36 when his *Edvard II* premiered).² According to Fischer’s testimony, in Hilar’s staging “everything historicising was removed and what was presented was a story of the soul of a king who suffers because of his desires and is horribly punished for them” (Fischer 5; working translation by IM and FK). Considering that English directors started emphasising the play’s sexual and homoerotic themes as late as the 1960s, it could be argued that Hilar’s production was significantly ahead of its time. This artistic bravery, however, earned the director severe reproach from certain established reviewers. Jindřich Vodák, a prominent theatre critic of the time, called Hilar’s adaptation “unfortunate, inconsiderate and harshly arbitrary,” arguing that “Marlowe’s drama was forcibly adapted” to the director’s decadent fondness of homosexuality and that “its dominant sexual motif was by force incorporated into it, as if Edward the Second were a pederastic lecher, who clings to Gaveston and

² For more on the production, including photographs of the set design and some of the actors in costumes, see <http://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz/inscenace/2264>.

Spencer so passionately because he secretly uses them to his wanton need” (Vodák 4; working translation by IM and FK).

While other contemporaneous reviews argued that “Hilar should not be blamed for foregrounding the homosexual motif of the play, for only this interpretation explains the madness of the King’s deeds” (Kodíček 266; working translation by IM and FK) and that the production “with its brave style is one of the best that we have seen on the stage of the National Theatre” (Tille 208; working translation by IM and FK), *Edward II* did not return to Czech theatres for almost nine decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bertolt Brecht’s aforementioned adaptation was produced in Prague, Brno and Karlovy Vary three times; however, as Škrobánková points out, Brecht’s version downplays the relationship between the King and his male favourites to emphasise the motif of the prolonged war conflict, which could have been the reason why the directors opted for the adaptation rather than the original (Škrobánková 64). Furthermore, while Marlowe began to frequent Czech stages as late as the 1990s (with a single exception of a production of *Doctor Faustus* in a regional theatre in Liberec, North Bohemia, in 1985), Brecht’s dramatic pieces were regularly staged in Czech theatres at the time, so it was in all probability his name rather than Marlowe’s that motivated the productions.

The revival of Marlowe’s *Edward II* on Czech stages thus only took place in the new millennium. On 13 September 2008, the Slovenian National Theatre brought Diego de Brea’s production of the play (which premiered in Ljubljana in 2005) to the 16th “Divadlo” International Theatre Festival in Pilsen, West Bohemia. Fifteen years later, on 16 June 2023, Czech director Jakub Čermák staged *Edward II* as part of the “WILD!” festival of queer theatre with his “Depresivní děti touží po penězích” (Depressive Children Yearn for Money), an award-winning independent theatre company based in Prague. These productions were staged in a cultural context very much different from Hilar’s pioneering endeavour a hundred years earlier: Marlowe’s plays—especially his *Doctor Faustus*, which was translated four times into Czech (see Krajník and Mitrengová) and repeatedly staged both in Prague and the regions—had found their home in Czech theatres and Czech public awareness. An additional factor contributing to Marlowe’s relative popularity among Czech audiences was the strong tradition of the Summer Shakespeare Festival in the country, an open-air theatre festival devoted to the works of Shakespeare, established in the 1990s, which popularised early-modern English drama even among casual Czech theatregoers (see Krajník and Kyselová). The latest Czech translation of *Doctor Faustus* (which premiered in Ostrava in 2015) was done by Martin Hliský, a preeminent Czech scholar and translator of Shakespeare, and the “academic face” of the Summer Shakespeare Festival.

The following text will examine each of the two productions of Marlowe’s *Edward II* that appeared on Czech stages since 2000, comparing and

contrasting their approaches to the original text and their strategies to make it relevant and relatable in the former Eastern Bloc at the beginning of the 21st century.

Diego de Brea's Directorial Vision: Exploring Themes of Homosexuality and Power in *Edvard Drugi* at the "Divadlo" International Theatre Festival

Founded by the government of the Republic of Slovenia and financially supported by the Slovenian Ministry of Culture, "Slovensko narodno gledališče Drama Ljubljana" holds the formal status of a national statutory institution. It carries on the rich tradition of the Slovenian Dramatic Society, which presented its first production in the Slovenian language back in 1867. Over time, it evolved into the Provincial Theatre in Ljubljana, and in 1892, it was officially renamed the National Theatre in Ljubljana. Following World War II, the theatre adopted its current name, the Slovenian National Drama Theatre of Ljubljana (SNG).

Throughout its history, SNG has not only produced Slovenian plays but also presented well-known world dramatic pieces, encompassing both classical and contemporary works. In recent years, SNG has earned a reputation for its innovation, high-quality productions and audacious performances, solidifying its position as one of Slovenia's most daring theatrical establishments. The ensemble has also been active on the international stage, participating in numerous prestigious festivals across a range of countries, including Germany, Sweden, Portugal, Poland, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, South Korea, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Austria, Serbia, Montenegro, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.³

Pilsen hosted SNG at the "Divadlo" International Theatre Festival in 2008. This festival is dedicated to introducing and showcasing significant Czech and foreign theatrical productions, including spoken drama, music, dance, puppetry and street theatre. Its objectives aim to connect performing artists from diverse corners of the world with theatre enthusiasts, creating a platform for unconventional performances and interpretations. In doing so, the festival contributes to the integration of Czech theatre into the broader European and global theatre landscape.⁴ The 16th edition of the "Divadlo" International Theatre Festival featured a highly enriching and thought-provoking program, boasting remarkable productions such as Václav Havel's *Leaving*, Jozef Gregor-Tajovský's *Estates in a State*, John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the*

³ For more information, see <https://www.drama.si/en/>.

⁴ For more information, see <https://festivaldivadlo.cz/en/>.

Western World, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Leoš Janáček's *Jenufa*, among others. Notably, Marlowe's *Edward II* (or *Edvard Drugi* in Slovenian) dominated the stage at the Josef Kajetán Tyl Theatre on 13 September 2008 (as mentioned above). The performance was delivered in Slovenian with "running subtitles" in Czech to ensure accessibility.

The direction of the play was helmed by the Slovenian director Diego de Brea, renowned for his interpretations of classical works like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* or Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, alongside contemporary texts, such as his own play *Duel*. De Brea's unique style, characterised by lively sentiment, expressive flair, astonishing realism and his exceptional work with actors profoundly influenced his approach to staging Marlowe's piece. De Brea's naturalistic and emotive stage adaptation of Marlowe's text served as a valuable addition to the impressive array of Marlovian productions, demonstrating the director's talent and vision.

The opening scene is effectively set on a darkened stage, drawing the spectator's attention to Piers Gaveston (Saša Tabaković) emerging from a trapdoor. Clad in close-fitting turquoise green attire, Gaveston begins to read a letter from Edward, summoning him back from exile and offering to share the kingdom with him after his father's demise. The letter fills Gaveston with delight and pleasure, evident not only in the triumphant tone of his voice but also in his gestures, which allude to his sexual orientation and the nature of his liaison with the King. The emotional intensity of the scene is further amplified by the letter's striking red colour, evoking a plethora of symbolic connotations, including passion, love, desire, strength, arrogance, ambition, and even foreboding hints of tragedy for Gaveston and possibly the King as well.

Gaveston then proceeds to tear the letter to pieces, resembling a child's play, akin to plucking petals off a flower while asking simple questions. The ensuing encounter with the King is similarly intense and emotional. The King (Janez Škof), distinguished by his crown and a red cloak, visibly rejoices at the sight of Gaveston. De Brea accentuates the animalistic nature of Edward and Gaveston's reunion. Beyond mere hugging and kissing, they engage in spitting at each other, displaying the raw openness of their relationship and highlighting its physical aspect. Edward's emotional claims for Gaveston further emphasise the physical nature of their love, as he repeatedly utters Gaveston's name in almost every sentence, revealing his deep attachment to him. However, while Edward and Gaveston revel in their long-awaited reunion and intimacy, Edward's lords are disgusted, perceiving the scene as vulgar and obscene. This contrast presents the spectator with a dichotomous view of Edward and Gaveston's relationship that permeates the entire production.



Figure 1: Left to right: Nina Valič as the King's niece, Silva Čušin as Queen Isabella (top), Janez Škof as King Edward II (bottom), and Saša Tabaković as Gaveston in Christopher Marlowe: *Edvard Drugi*, dir. Diego de Brea, season 2004/05, Big Stage, SNG Drama Ljubljana. Photo by Peter Uhan

In Gaveston's presence, Edward finds himself unable to distinguish between his private desires for the young man and his public royal status, which demands a certain degree of regal dignity. Instead, Edward's life becomes governed by overwhelming love and passion, emotions he can no longer control—perhaps, deep down, he does not want to control them. Without Gaveston, he appears as a lifeless puppet, a mere figure whose entire world can be summarized in the short proclamation, “I want Gaveston” (“Gavestona chaču”). Throughout the performance, Edward and Gaveston appear both physically and spiritually intertwined. In a poignant gesture symbolising their absolute closeness, Edward at one point places his royal crown, the emblem of his power, onto Gaveston's head. In this moment, the boundaries between the monarch and his low-born favourite blur, and Edward and Gaveston's roles are suddenly reversed: the King is stripped of his regal symbol while the confident young man proudly raises his head, now “burdened” with the crown. This temporary exchange of roles raises questions—possibly with an underlying threat—about who the true King is and how far this “frolic” may extend. As Edward bestows the crown upon Gaveston's head, revelling in his physical presence, the King's lords, who disdain Gaveston and, by extension, Edward,

openly display their homophobia. They make a spectacle of attempting to wipe off any spots touched by the royal hand, as if trying to distance themselves from what they perceive as an unsavoury association.

Diego de Brea shifted the focus onto Edward II, elevating him to the central figure of the production. Furthermore, he accentuated Edward's (and Gaveston's) homosexual orientation, making it the driving force behind the performance. This aspect profoundly influenced all the events, which were now perceived and interpreted through the lens of Edward's sexuality. The King's orientation thus became a symbol of his otherness, acting as a prism through which both Edward's actions and the consequent political turmoil were observed.

The latent militarism within Edward's lords, represented by the array of ruthless intrigues, seemingly arising from their discomfort with Edward's homosexuality, ultimately leads to Gaveston's removal and Edward's subsequent deposition and murder. The lords' fury is evident through their impatient running to and fro, clandestine negotiations behind the King's back, nervous whispers and the signing of petitions.⁵ Their actions convey a sense of confusion, disorderliness and futility.

As a consequence of their Machiavellian intrigues and relentless pursuit, both Gaveston and Edward eventually meet their demise. After Gaveston's death, a noticeable transformation occurs in Edward's character, lending him a more vulnerable and relatable quality. This change is marked by an acute awareness of the gradual erosion of his authority, reflecting both a physical and mental transformation or, more precisely, a resignation to his fate. However, the King's "alteration" can be seen as parallel to the degeneration and failure of the entire ruling hierarchy. The gradual loss of Edward's royal and human attributes is underscored by the symbolic act of removing his clothing. Stripped to the waist and seated on his golden throne, he retains the crown on his head and clutches a sabre in his right hand, symbolising his brief readiness to defend himself and his crown. Subsequently, events escalate rapidly. Naked and humiliated, Edward is dropped into a cesspool, left to his fate. His captors arrive to torture him, foreshadowing his inevitable death.

As Edward faces death, he discovers a sense of kinship with his murderer, Lightborn (Alojz Svete), and embraces his fate with a peaceful resignation, seemingly reconciled to his impending end. In this poignant theatrical moment, Edward takes on the semblance of a martyr, possibly owing to his sexual "otherness". The climax of the performance—the scene of the King's murder—overflows with pathos and draws a symbolic parallel between Edward's brutal demise and Christ's crucifixion: the naked and bleeding Edward becomes a metaphorical figure nailed to an imaginary cross (represented by

⁵ The lords used large peacock feathers for signing the documents on the stage.

a trolley-like structure in reality).⁶ Despite the evocative imagery, the true motive behind Edward's crucifixion remains shrouded in ambiguity. It is uncertain whether his homosexuality serves as the driving force behind the act or if it is the lords' insatiable thirst for power that propels this violent event, allowing the spectators' imagination to interpret and ponder the underlying meaning.

The closing moments of the performance bear resemblance to the ending of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, where the victorious Earl of Richmond (the future Henry VII),⁷ having defeated King Richard, emerges as both a saviour and the new King, yet simultaneously poses a potential threat of new tyranny. Similarly, Edward II's son, the future King Edward III, silently appears before his crucified father, symbolizing a new hope and, perhaps, a looming menace.

Diego de Brea's *Edvard Drugi* unfolds on a minimalist, Elizabethan-inspired stage adorned with minimal props. It features a versatile trolley, two chairs (one serving as a mobile throne, while the other, a child-sized seat, occasionally accommodates both Edward and Gaveston) and a small statue. Alan Hranitelj's simple costumes complement the director's naturalistic vision. The lords are dressed in black and grey attire reminiscent of medieval courtly fashion, while Queen Isabella (Silva Čušin) and Gaveston don a similar shade of green and grey, perhaps symbolising their intertwined relationships with the King. Throughout the performance, events unfolded rapidly, resembling a sequence of clips, which, unfortunately, contributed to a slightly chaotic ambience.

From Love to Tyranny: Jakub Čermák's *Edvard II*.

In many respects, de Brea's *Edvard Drugi* prefigured Jakub Čermák's production years later. Unlike his Slovenian colleague, before staging Marlowe's play, Čermák had been mostly associated with *avant-garde* theatre and Czech independent scenes (see Zahálka). Yet, throughout his career, he repeatedly turned to classical pieces, be it E. A. Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, or Euripides's *The Trojan Women* (staged with Ukrainian refugee actresses in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of their homeland). A year before his adaptation of *Edward II* (*Edvard II*. or

⁶ As we shall see, both the directors employed the "Edward-as-Christ" trope in their productions. On the Christ motif in Marlowe's original, see Krajník 39-40 and 106-107 (fn. 16) of his translation of the play.

⁷ The notion of the triumphant "golden-haired" Henry Richmond was emphasised, for example, in Jan Burian's 1999 production of *Richard III* for Josef Kajetán Tyl Theatre in Pilsen (see Mišterová 205-209).

Edvard Druhý in Czech), as a guest director he staged Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the studio theatre of South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice—a production with which he, in his own words, greatly struggled at the beginning but which ultimately “rehabilitated” Shakespeare in his eyes (Kalusová). When he decided to produce Marlowe's *Edward II*, like Hilar or de Brea before, he was not really interested in showing a chapter of English history (for Czech audiences, King Edward II is a virtually unknown name)—rather, he strove to relate Edward's story to modern society and its attitudes to the LGBT community. In an interview before the premiere, he explained that “the queer community is perceived as a victim, which it is, but we point out that the tables can turn when the ill-wishing environment drives an individual to the utmost extreme” (Benediktová; working translation by IM and FK). To emphasise the piece's strong message for contemporary audiences, Čermák's *Edvard II.* premiered as part of the annual “WILD!” festival of queer theatre in Prague, whose main feature is a “synthesis of social engagement with high artistic demands” (DN; working translation by IM and FK).

The “victim turned tyrant” theme of the production is exposed even in the prologue written by Čermák, which takes place immediately before the beginning of Marlowe's text. In the silent opening scene, the English kingdom is shown as a factory producing royal merchandise, governed by a harsh and capricious King (that is, Edward I, played by Jan Dolfi). As a tyrannical manager, he forces his employees (who turn out to be the lords of the realm) to fulfil fatuous tasks for his pleasure, such as jumping over the tables and running around the office, for which they are rewarded with cigarettes and the King's condescending approval. The young Edward (the future Edward II) would prefer to stay away from these ostentatiously manly pursuits and rather quietly read from his book of poetry. He is, however, forced by his father (who commands him with a whistle) to join the others, leading to his (the Prince's) general embarrassment. A large postage box is shoved in, from which the French princess in a bridal dress emerges. With obvious disgust, Prince Edward is made to have sexual intercourse with her, with the King again encouraging him with his whistle and the lords observing the act with enthusiastic glee. After the act, the old King collapses and dies, leaving his older son as the sole manager/ruler of the realm. Edward is finally free—from his father's commands, from the inferiority complex before the lords, and from his wife, whom he never desired.

The oppressive machismo of the scene abruptly changes with the entrance of Gaveston. Čermák envisioned Edward's lover as an arrogant and vain disco boy, who immerses the royal court in wild gay partying. What is significant here is the age dynamics of the relationship—a key issue in any stage adaptation of Marlowe's text. While the historical Piers Gaveston was several years older than Edward II and Edward's father, in fact, placed the Gascon

squire in his son's household as a role model for the Prince (Warner 27-28), Marlowe is not specific about the age of the two men and in modern adaptations there have been middle-aged Edwards being infatuated by younger Gavestons, as well as young Edwards having Gavestons in their forties as their counterparts.⁸ Michal Kern, the actor playing Edward II in Čermák's adaptation, was forty-four when the play premiered; Denis Šafařík, Čermák's Gaveston, was twenty-nine, but convincingly portraying a significantly younger man, making the age difference even more pronounced. Kern's Edward's love for Gaveston therefore looks like juvenile infatuation that compensates for the previous stages of the King's life when such feelings were forbidden to him. Edward is ready to engage in Gaveston's hedonistic lifestyle, to the displeasure of the lords, who, on the one hand, assure one another that the new King's sexuality does not bother them, while, on the other, retch at the sight at Edward and Gaveston together. Since Čermák removed most of the political implications of Edward and Gaveston's relationship from his production, the lords' objections become an enactment of modern society's intolerance towards sexual minorities, denied by claims such as, "I am not a homophobe, but..."

An interesting casting choice on Čermák's part was the American dancer and performer Becka McFadden, who enacted Queen Isabella. With her thick accent, McFadden showed the Queen as an outsider, far from her family and homeland, who, spurned by her husband, desperately looks for support—only to find it with Mortimer Junior (Jiří Racek). Čermák employed McFadden's movement skills to underscore Isabella's physicality: she manages to win Mortimer and the barons not through her eloquence, but through her body. When Gaveston is expelled and subsequently resumed, an attempt to establish co-existence between King Edward, Gaveston and Queen Isabella is expressed through an erotic "polyamorous" dance, in which McFadden and Šafařík, in synchronised movements, both try to seduce the King. Both actors, stripped naked, seem to form one common body for a moment in order to pleasure Edward together. Isabella is thus willing to give away her exclusivity to her husband's bedroom to maintain peace in her household and the country. The performance, however, is brought to an abrupt stop by the King, who finally chases the Queen away to engage in a fierce sexual intercourse with Gaveston. The dynamics of this bizarre love triangle is enacted without a single word—a technique popular with Čermák, who in his productions likes to replace literal dialogues with more abstract stage action and imagery. Yet, the situation always remains clear to the audience.

⁸ In Hilar's 1922 production, both Edward and Gaveston were in their mid-thirties. In de Brea's *Edvard Drugi*, King Edward was in his mid-forties and Gaveston in his mid-twenties.



Figure 2: Left to right: Denis Šafařík as Gaveston, Michal Kern as King Edward II, and Štěpán Tuček as the Earl of Kent (in the background left to right: Tomáš Procházka as the Bishop of Coventry, Jiří Racek as Mortimer Jr., and Jakub Koudela as the Earl of Lancaster) in Christopher Marlowe: *Edvard II.*, dir. Jakub Čermák, 2023, Depresivní děti touží po penězích. Photo by Michaela Škvřňáková

The breaking point for the King—and the production—comes with the lords' rebellion and Gaveston's execution. Unlike in Marlowe's original, where Edward learns about Gaveston's death from Maltravers's account, Čermák's Edward is a first-hand witness of the demise of his lover, with whom he is ultimately left alone on the stage. The flow of time ceases, as it were, for a while to create space for the full manifestation of Edward's love for Gaveston, without the previous disco craze or gay stereotypes. In a Christ-like fashion, the King slowly and methodically removes the dead Gaveston's shoes and starts washing his feet. Marlowe's lines "And could my crown's revenue bring him back, / I would freely give it to his enemies / And think I gained, having bought so dear a friend" (scene 4.309-311 in Marlowe's text), originally pronounced by Edward after Gaveston's banishment, have been transplanted here, gaining a new meaning and intensity. After a moment of silent contemplation, Edward stands up and, on the brink of madness, shouts out the soliloquy "My heart is as an anvil unto sorrow..." (scene 4.314-319). At this moment, Michal Kern masterfully embodies the transformation of a childish, effeminate weakling into the tyrant whom the audiences are to observe in the second half of the play.

Indeed, after the intermission, the “corporate” settings of the first half of the production changes into a hotel room-like environment, in which Edward appears in a black cowboy outfit, similar to Gaveston’s outlandish clothing of the first half of the production (here the achievement of set and costume designers Pavlína Chroňáková and Martina Zwyrtek should be mentioned). The King no longer cares about the rules or opinions of others and, without any restrictions, revels when watching on a large television screen the war that he wages on the barons. His emotional tenderness and longing for love resurfaces, however, when he meets Spencer Junior, who reminds him of his Gaveston. For this purpose, Čermák restructured Marlowe’s text (originally, it was Gaveston who introduced Spencer Junior to the King) and allowed Denis Šafařík, the actor playing Gaveston, to re-appear as another lover of the King. Despite the physical similarity, upon their first kiss, Edward is unable to reprise the feelings which he had for Gaveston, indicating that he primarily strives for an emotional rather than sexual connection. Yet, when Spencer is killed during Isabella and Mortimer Junior’s invasion (which, again, takes the form of a stylised dance performance), Edward repeats his “And could my crown’s revenue bring him back” speech, which he first pronounced over Gaveston’s dead body.

The assassination scene has been, at least since the latter half of the 20th century, traditionally acted with an erotic or sexual subtext, often with a sense of a parodical homosexual intercourse.⁹ In Čermák’s staging, Edward is stripped of his clothing, remaining only in white underwear (looking very much like a suffering Christ figure, cf. de Brea’s employment of Christ-like imagery above), while the majority of the props have been removed from the scene. Šafařík enters in his third role, as Lightborn, the King’s assassin. Dressed in a police uniform, he performs a striptease for Edward, only to lie next to him almost naked. No act of violence takes place: Lightborn kisses the tortured King, who closes his eyes and calmly dies. It is not obvious from Čermák’s interpretation whether Lightborn actually murders Edward or the King dies after the last act of love. By tripling the roles of Gaveston, Spencer and Lightborn, Čermák’s production shows the three men as a line of Edward’s attempts to find love, intimacy, understanding and emotional fulfilment. It could be argued that only with Lightborn does he achieve these and can finally die satisfied.

In the very last scene of the production, Prince Edward (played alternatively by Jakub Král and Oliver Vyskočil) is majestically crowned King Edward the Third and the audience might expect an auspicious ending, promising the end of tyranny and chaos in the country. However, both Mortimer Junior and Queen Isabella are killed and the new King remains emotionally and physically incapable of ruling. Seeing this, one of the anonymous lords (Jakub

⁹ See, for instance, Fuller 89-90, 97 and 109-112; and Woods 74-75.

Koudela, who previously played the Earl of Lancaster) takes up King Edward I's whistle and, in the same manner as Edward I in the prologue, commands the King to get in line and accept his new responsibilities. The audience is left at a loss as to whether Edward III will make a good monarch and put an end to the spiral of violence or whether he will follow his father's footsteps and ultimately become a bullied man, forced into a role that goes against his nature and too afraid to speak up for himself.

While the central themes of Marlowe's *Edward II*—especially the issue of gay relationships, the conflict between private passions and public responsibilities, and the question of social acceptance of otherness—suggest the play for modern rewritings and reinterpretations, with his queer version of the story, Jakub Čermák goes further than most of the directors who staged the play before him. His *Edvard II.* is not purposelessly provocative, it does not aim to shock. Rather, it seeks to fully employ Marlowe's text to explore very contemporary issues, while pushing the historical and political motifs into the background or even removing them completely. However, even with this approach, Čermák treats Marlowe's text with respect and it is obvious from the production that the director was aware that he was staging a classic.

Concluding Remarks

Based on the productions discussed here, it would be too bold to make any judgements about the significance of *Edward II* in Central Europe or the prevailing strategies of the directors from this region who opt for Marlowe's play. De Brea's *Edvard Drugi* was the first Slovenian production of the play and Čermák's *Edvard II.* only the second Czech one, making them rather anomalies than a more general trend. However, both productions share certain tendencies that might point to certain local specifics, especially when viewed in the context of Shakespearean histories.

For obvious reasons, Elizabethan plays about English history are generally less appealing to Central European audiences than they are to English theatregoers. According to the databases of the Theatre Institute in Prague, since 1945, *Henry V*—one of the most popular historical plays by Shakespeare in the UK—was only staged three times, including an English production with Czech subtitles by the Prague Shakespeare Company in 2013. The three parts of *Henry VI* were staged just once, in a regional theatre in Ústí and Labem, North Bohemia. *Richard II* was staged only six times in Czech theatres, out of which only one new production took place after 1990. The only Shakespearean history that could compare to Shakespeare's comedies or tragedies in terms of its popularity among Czech theatregoers is *Richard III* (staged twenty-nine times),

which can easily be presented as a tragedy with a Machiavellian anti-hero even to audiences who do not know anything about the Wars of the Roses.¹⁰

It is, therefore, no surprise that out of all Shakespeare's contemporaries who wrote history plays, it is Marlowe and his *Edward II* that in the last century repeatedly resonated with Czech audiences and dramaturgical boards of Czech theatre festivals. Especially in the 21st century, when LGBT rights have become one of the central themes of Western cultural debates, Marlowe's play easily allows the dramaturges and directors to sideline the historical and political layers of the work to explore the issue of social and sexual norms and relate it to current discussions in today's society. In this context, it is almost natural that pioneering attempts to bring Marlowe's *Edward II* to Central European stages came from Slovenia and the Czech Republic—the countries that are considered most progressive from the former Eastern Bloc in regard to LGBT rights.¹¹

Both de Brea and Čermák focus primarily on the universality of King Edward's story. Neither of the stagings define the King's character solely by his actions—whether virtuous or malevolent—but rather through his sexuality and its consequences for his environment, which assume a central role in the productions. Edward's non-normative sexuality becomes a motif highlighting his social otherness, and it shapes how his actions are perceived by those around him. De Brea's production of *Edward II* explores obsession, passion, violence and murder as its fundamental elements. It refrains from providing any unequivocal judgement or comprehensive explanation of human behaviour. Instead, the performance offers a glimpse into the world of politics through the lens of Edward's "queerness." Čermák, who has had a long-term interest in queer issues and their representation on the stage, employs Marlowe's play further to explore the relationship between an othered individual and society. His Edward is a deeply flawed man, but from the very beginning, he has at least the partial sympathies of the audience. His hatred and cruelty have a humanly understandable motivation and the audiences are forced to ask themselves whether they should blame the King or his environment for them.

Both de Brea's and Čermák's productions represent valuable contributions not only to the reception of Marlowe in Central Europe, but also to the global reception of *Edward II*. They offer artistically unique takes on one of the most prominent Elizabethan plays outside the Shakespeare canon and provide their own image of its current societal and cultural relevance from both local and global perspectives. Moreover, these productions may serve as catalysts for further exploration of historical plays and their intersection with contemporary social issues, fostering meaningful dialogues in Central European theatre and beyond.

¹⁰ For more information, see <https://vis.idu.cz/Productions.aspx?lang=en>.

¹¹ For a detailed comparison of LGBT rights worldwide, see <https://www.equaldex.com>.

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Zsolt Almási*

“This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king!.” Political Dynamics of Four Hungarian Translations of *Hamlet*

Abstract: In this paper I endeavour to retell a partial history of the Hungarian translation of Hamlet’s commentary: “This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King!” (3:2:239) on the “Murder of Gonzago,” aiming to elucidate the intricate interplay between translation, cultural discourse, and socio-political dynamics. Hamlet’s commentary, seemingly straightforward yet laden with complexity, poses implications capable of reshaping the trajectory and purpose of his theatrical experiment, crafted to probe and establish Claudius’ guilt. The partial history of translations encompasses the epochs of Ferenc Kazinczy (18th century) and János Arany (19th century) up to the modern renderings of István Eörsi and Ádám Nádasdy (20th-21st centuries). Within this framework, I claim that exploring these translations of Hamlet’s commentary offers a gauge of *Hamlet*’s position in Hungarian cultural discourse. The evolving connotations of words, reflective of linguistic shifts, imbue layered meanings not only onto the statement itself but also onto the theatrical experiment it encapsulates. This exploration of translation, interpretation, and linguistic evolution sheds light on Shakespeare’s and *Hamlet*’s socio-cultural-political role in Hungary, as translations serve not merely as transparent channels of meaning but also as reflections on the political and cultural commitments of translators and their audiences.

Keywords: translation, Hamlet, Shakespeare, politics, Hungary, Ferenc Kazinczy, János Arany, István Eörsi, Ádám Nádasdy.

Within the context of the “Murder of Gonzago” scene, Hamlet’s statement, and commentary “This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King!” (3:2:239) (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*) presents a seemingly simple and yet complex claim that merits examination. It holds the potential to reshape the outcome and intention of Hamlet’s theatrical experiment, meticulously devised to investigate and establish Claudius’ culpability. The reason for this is that embedded within the

* Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Hungary. almasi.zsolt@btk.ppke.hu



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interplay of metatheatrical performance and truth-seeking there lies an intriguing political dimension. The performative experiment functions as an opportunity that accentuates the divide between the individual and authority, subject, and monarch. Moreover, it serves as a tool for unveiling concealed truths, those veiled within the depths of human emotions and motivations.

The significance of Hamlet's statement extends further upon closer analysis. It unveils insights into the inclinations guiding the translation, Hungarian in this particular case, and understanding of this statement. An interpretive framework becomes indispensable as we navigate through various translations, spanning from earlier renditions to contemporary interpretations. This journey encompasses the eras of Ferenc Kazinczy and János Arany up to the modern works of István Eörsi and Ádám Nádasdy. It is in this context that I shall argue in this article that investigating the trajectory of translations of Hamlet's commentary on the "Murder of Gonzago" offers a measure of *Hamlet's* integration into Hungarian cultural discourse. Additionally, the evolving meanings of words, reflective of linguistic changes, confer layered meanings not only onto the statement itself but also onto the theatrical experiment it embodies. When navigating this exploration of translation, interpretation, and linguistic evolution, I shall uncover insights that shed light on Shakespeare's and *Hamlet's* socio-cultural-political role in Hungary, as the translations are not only neutrally transparent vessels of meaning in Shakespeare's tragedy but also fascinatingly comment on the political, cultural commitments of translators and their audiences. This role, I contend, has undergone shifts as it spanned from the 18th century to the 21st, showcasing a transformation over time crossing borders in terms of languages, intentions when translating *Hamlet*, reflecting on national and cultural identity, and agency. All these crossings of borders, hopefully, can be demonstrated through retelling a partial history of the translation of a line in the play, namely Hamlet's commentary: "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King!" (3:2:239).

Hamlet and Bacon: the Theatrico-Scientific Experiment and its Discontents

I shall start the exploration by scrutinizing the very context in which the given sentence emerges. It is uttered by Hamlet in the royal court, during the play-within-the-play, "The Murder of Gonzago" with which Hamlet's aim, as he claims, is to "catch the conscience of the King" (2:2:600-601). This couplet that closes the final scene of Act 2 sufficiently establishes in the mind of the audience that they are to witness a theatrical experiment to capture the guilty, which is further corroborated by Hamlet telling Claudius not much before the given line that the title of the play is in fact "The Mousetrap" (3:2:232).

Hamlet’s plan is to recreate the past in his theatrical experiment, his experimental theatre to expose Claudius, orchestrated by means of a past crime showcased in the dramatic performance. The intention is to arouse Claudius’ conscience to the point where it prompts his inadvertent revelation of the fratricide and regicide he committed—the slaying of his own brother, Old Hamlet, motivated by ambitions for the throne and wife.

This theatrical experiment and the intention behind it are like putting Claudius to a test, an experiment. The experiment seems to be based on four assumptions. The first hypothesis is that the play can have an effect on the spectator, the second that Claudius has a conscience, the third that the conscience can be awakened, and the fourth that Claudius is guilty. The hypotheses involve aesthetic and theatrical-aesthetic assumptions, and what might today be called psychological-theological ideas about the nature of conscience. The fourth hypothesis is a suspicion, which is a consequence of Hamlet’s conversation with the Ghost and of his own “prophetic soul” (1:5:48). In fact, the latter hypothesis is ontologically different from the former in so far as the experiment proceeds from a suspicion, as all experiments do, i.e. from a suspicion that there is something that cannot and must not be taken for granted but must be tested by an experiment.

Nonetheless, the formulation of hypotheses alone does not suffice for an experiment to be deemed well-founded and efficacious; an equally meticulous design of the experimental conditions is requisite. Foremost, the experiment’s success is contingent upon the precision of its objective orientation—nature demands to be interrogated, for it harbours its enigmas akin to the concealed conscience. This assertion aligns with Hamlet’s discernment, nurtured over the course of time, encompassing the interval between Old Hamlet’s demise and the enactment of the play-within-the-play scene. Ophelia’s testimony accentuates this temporal framework: “Nay, ’tis twice two months, my lord.” (3:2:126). Thus, Hamlet, to optimize the experiment’s efficacy, undertakes the task of composing and infusing a “speech of some dozen or sixteen / lines, which I would set down and insert” (2:2:535-536), into the original script. This meticulous adjustment bolsters the experiment’s intent, enhancing its purposefulness.

Moreover, the experiment necessitates an observer to monitor the subject’s responses throughout the course of the test. Hamlet, naturally, assumes the mantle of the observer, as he avows, “I’ll observe his looks;” (2:2:592). It is particularly significant here that Hamlet uses medical language for testing, since his wording “I’ll tent him to the quick” (2:2:593) reveals a medical terminology. “I’ll tent” (2:2:593) refers to a medical activity where a “tent,” as Harold Jenkins explains, is “an instrument for examining and cleansing a wound” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 273). The medical terminology aligns with Hamlet’s intentions in so far as he intends to experiment and then cleanse the throne, the state of Denmark. However, the presence of a single observer, particularly one invested in the

outcome of the experiment, introduces the risk of compromised objectivity. Hence, the introduction of an additional observer becomes imperative. Within Hamlet's experimental framework, this role is assumed by Horatio, serving as the second, dispassionate observer. Hamlet precisely delineates their respective responsibilities. Guiding his laboratory collaborator, Hamlet and Horatio undertake the task of vigilant observation, adhering to a structured protocol: "I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot, / Even with the very comment of thy soul / Observe my uncle" (3:2:78-80). Following the experiment, they convene to collectively assess their observations, as articulated by Hamlet: "And, after, we will both our judgments join / In censure of his seeming" (3:2:86-87). Should the subject of their scrutiny divulge their true nature, thereby corroborating the hypothesis, the experiment attains its intended success. This outcome allows for the pursuit of justice, the unsealing of a festering wound, and the initiation of the subsequent purgative process.

Hamlet's engagement in theatrical experimentation, aimed at uncovering the concealed motives of hearts, specifically that of Claudius, assumes notable significance within the intellectual milieu of Shakespeare's times. This historical juncture witnessed the emergence of philosophical and scientific contemplation concerning the pursuit of knowledge through experimental inquiry. Among the thinkers of this era, Francis Bacon stands as a preeminent figure, endeavouring to expand the realm of human knowledge (Gaukroger; Rossi) Bacon's intellectual efforts converged along three distinct trajectories, collectively poised to enhance both the breadth and depth of human knowledge.

In his *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Bacon orchestrated a partition of human knowledge into discrete, investigable domains, as outlined in Book 2. Simultaneously, his magnum opus *Novum Organum* served to lay the cornerstones of systematic scientific exploration, encompassing processes, methodologies, and the systematization of experimentation. This comprehensive framework provided a scaffold for scientific progress. In a complementary vein, his fragmentary treatise "New Atlantis" encapsulated the institutional aspect of scientific enterprise, occasioning the collaborative efforts of scientists (Sargent). This depiction resonates harmoniously with the very process of acquiring scientific knowledge, fostering the collective endeavour that underpins the edifice of scientific advancement.

In the context of the Baconian advancement of knowledge acquisition, discerning parallels with Hamlet's conceptual framework aimed at unearthing the monstrous truth of Claudius' ascent to the throne, and by extension, becoming Hamlet's stepfather, emerges as a tenable proposition. Delving into the orchestration of methodological design, Hamlet finds himself remarkably aligned with Baconian thoughts. Evident is the strategic intent to facilitate an experiment, wherein the enactment of the "Murder of Gonzago" assumes the

role of empirical validation, corroborating Hamlet’s underlying conjecture: Claudius’s complicity in the demise of Old Hamlet.

In this paradigm, the play-within-the-play serves as the institutional apparatus, with Horatio assuming a pivotal position as the collaborator par excellence, actively engaging with the principal investigator across both the experimental phase and the subsequent data analysis juncture. Through Hamlet and Horatio’s optic, the experiment unfolds with flawless precision. The desired impact is efficaciously achieved, with Claudius casting off the veneer of innocence, agitatedly vacating the auditorium. This denouement seemingly suffices to render Hamlet content with the outcomes attained, poised to embark upon his retributive journey, metaphorically alluding to the drinking of “hot blood” (3:2:421). From the vantage point of the audience, the experiment stands validated in its construct and culmination. In swift succession, immediately after the theatrical performance, Claudius surrenders in a (quasi)-prayer scene, therein confessing his sins—an overt confirmation that amplifies the efficacy and resonance of the performed experiment.

If, however, we stop here for a moment and reflect on what has been seen on stage, a nuanced perspective emerges, revealing that the experimental venture did not unfold in strict accordance with its intended design. While the requisite constituents are undeniably present, a supplementary element emerged during the experiment, one that lay beyond the initial ambit of planning. Amidst the unfolding of the “Murder of Gonzago” scene, it becomes evident that Claudius’ reaction was not confined solely to the theatrical rendition itself. Rather, an additional layer came to the fore in the form of Hamlet’s commentary—a commentary that bore distinct audibility to Claudius, for certain utterances were notably and overtly addressed to him, to which he responded. Another reciprocal interaction manifested as Claudius posed inquiries, to which Hamlet responded in kind.

The impetus underlying Hamlet’s decision to interject within the performance could conceivably be traced back to the conclusions he drew from his discourse with the Ghost. This exchange had fostered a realization: that Claudius, the skilful actor, possessed the artistry to mask his authentic nature, veiling it beneath the veneer of dissembling amiability—after all, he “may smile, and smile, and be a villain” (1:5:108). However, cognizant that Claudius was unlikely to spontaneously unveil his true self, particularly following the abortive nature of the dumb show’s impact, Hamlet’s restraint wavered. The compulsion to summon forth Claudius’ concealed crime, coupled with insinuations of Hamlet’s cognizance thereof, proved irresistible.

In sum, thus, the introduction of the commentary precipitated a deviation from the original experimental trajectory. Consequently, certainty proves elusive as to whether Claudius’ perturbation stemmed from the emotive resonance to the theatrical performance or rather from the contours of Hamlet’s

accompanying commentary. The resultant intertwining of these variables obfuscated the pristine integrity of the experiment, leaving a measure of ambiguity concerning the sources of Claudius' reasons to the auditorium.

Particularly salient is a certain commentary, wherein Hamlet seems to redirect the temporal framework of the unfolding performance. At the juncture of Lucianus' entrance upon the stage, Hamlet's comment—"This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King!" (3:2:239)—casts an intriguing light upon a specific textual configuration, prompting further scrutiny. The choice of phrasing prompts a certain curiosity, as certain words—namely, "nephew" and "King"—beckon closer examination. The term "nephew," in particular, elicits an air of peculiarity, for while the narrative refrains from the explicit delineation of the filial affiliation between Gonzago and the murderer, the trajectory of the experiment implies a fraternal bond. This inference thereby invites interpretive engagement, necessitating an elucidation of the shift from a fraternal relationship to one of avuncular lineage. A similar vein of inquiry encapsulates the term "King," for the prior context situated the subject of impending demise as a "duke" (3:2:234), thereby signifying a status divergent from that of a monarch. This terminological recalibration imparts a transformative dimension to the dialogue, demanding a nuanced exegesis.

The introduced alterations, when subjected to interpretative analysis, proffer an intriguing potential: that of a reconfiguration in the temporal facet of the "Gonzago" play. Contemplating the prospect wherein a "duke" and a "brother" figure into the equation, the narrative trajectory could conceivably assume a retrospective tenor, delving into historical underpinnings. In this scenario, the agitation stirred within Claudius could conceivably derive from a dual realization. The initial cognizance centres on the unearthing of truth, wherein the act of murder is thrust into the limelight. A secondary realization entails the confrontation with the sin of the past, thereby catalysing the emergence of guilt's emotional resonance within Claudius' conscience.

Conversely, if the relational dynamic pivots upon the nexus of "nephew" and "King," a paradigm shift transpires. Notably, the past trajectory excludes the presence of a "nephew" in the assumed sinful past, prompting the quest for analogous figures within alternate chronicles. The present configuration unfurls a pertinent relationship—the "nephew" embodied in Hamlet, and the "King" manifested in Claudius—a dynamic far from harmonious. Within this juncture, a volte-face transpires. The theatrical performance relinquishes its historical purview, reframing itself as a harbinger of future events. As Deutermann contends it is "a slip that identifies Hamlet, Claudius's nephew, as a potential regicide" (Deutermann 249). Or as Gottschalk argues "Hamlet's commentary holds the mirror up to Hamlet: he is threatening Claudius, and he is threatening him in the mode of the revenge-villain. The threat cuts two ways" (Gottschalk

163; Bernáth 227-229; Calderwood 95).¹ Thus, the narrative fabric can be construed as an overt admonition, publicly issued before the entire court, signalling Hamlet’s intent to kill Claudius—in the words of Schneiderman, “here the words make the play a realization of his desire to murder his uncle-father and to win the love of his aunt-mother” (Schneiderman 81). In the wake of this pivotal trajectory shift, the experiment may well fail to substantiate its initial hypothesis. Nonetheless, Claudius’ reaction assumes centrality, divulging an underlying disquiet borne of the menace implicit in the publicized threat. As Kemp argues, Claudius’ response stands as a testimony to his agitation, “[i]t is fear, however, not guilt, which motivates Claudius here” (Kemp 10).

The ostensibly unsuccessful endeavour encapsulated within the theatrico-scientific experiment, compounded by the definitive denouement involving Hamlet’s commentary concerning the murderer, resides as an artifact of notable cultural resonance within the Hungarian context. The ensuing sections of this paper shall embark upon a comprehensive examination of the preeminent translations that have rendered Hamlet’s commentary into Hungarian, traversing the spectrum from earliest iterations to contemporary renditions. Noteworthy is the selective focus applied herein; an exhaustive engagement with the ten translations spanning the chronology from the 18th to the 21st century is precluded. Rather, the spotlight is cast upon those translations that boast relative accessibility to contemporary readers and concurrently unveil the politico-cultural stratum underpinning the renderings of Hamlet’s assertion.

During the 18th-19th centuries, the choice of terminologies, whether “*atyjafia*” or “*öcs*” emerges for “nephew” as more than mere linguistic variance; it assumes the mantle of a vessel for socio-political connotations, encapsulating the resonance of Hungarian identity vis-à-vis oppressive authority. While Kazinczy safeguards Hamlet’s experimental design even more than his source, Schröder, Arany’s translation mirrors a nascent Hungary’s pursuit of cultural resilience within an increasingly assertive socio-political landscape. This transition catalyses nuanced interpretations, wherein familial dynamics and regicidal themes beckon a spectrum of connotations, perpetuating a dialectic that bridges the chasm between Hamlet’s intent and Arany’s nuanced yearnings for cultural integrity.

Indeed, the dual prism of Kazinczy and Arany inscribes a chapter in the intricate narrative of translation, one that transcends linguistic boundaries to engage with the pulse of a nation’s intellectual and political awakening. It

¹ Calderwood states that “As a result the player-murderer is an ambiguous combination of Hamlet, nephew to the present king, and Claudius, killer of the former king; and the theatrical murder tells two truths, one about the past, the other about the future. By substituting ‘nephew’ for ‘brother,’ Hamlet makes his own future murder of Claudius issue causally from Claudius’ murder (both real and theatrical) of Hamlet’s father.”

reflects the art of rendering foreign literature not only across languages, but through the crucible of historical and cultural transformation, where translators wield their pens as agents of both linguistic preservation and politico-cultural reinvigoration. Equally of note is the discernible facet that within these efforts, Shakespeare does not manifest as a conduit for cultural subjugation; instead, he assumes a role as a vehicle for the affirmation of a national politico-cultural autonomy, agency and identity.

Ferenc Kazinczy: *Hamlet* and the Politics of the Hungarian Language

The first rendering of the sentence diverges from Hamlet's intended English semantics, elegantly cohering with the cultural-political milieu of its contemporary epoch, the 18th century. Ferenc Kazinczy's (1759-1831)² translation echoes this alignment, articulating the sentence as "Ezt Luciánnak hívják; Atyjafia a' Hertzegnek" (Kazinczy 76), which in a literal construal translates to "This is named Lucian; Brother [atyjafia] of the Duke [Hertzeg]." ³ The first clause of the sentence harmonizes with the English version, unlike the second part. The term "atyjafia" harbours variegated connotations that mirror the lexical fluidity of the 18th century. As elucidated by a contemporaneous lexicon, the term signifies "brother, conceived by the same father in its strictest sense, but this is rather archaic and [...] has a broader meaning such as 'kin,' 'blood relative,' or in an even broader sense brother-in-laws are included. In its vulgar use, it can be used as a friendly address" (Czuczor and Fogarasi 223). Consequently, within the strict definition, Lucianus could be perceived as both a brother or even a companion, thereby eluding a singular construal of the murderer-victim dynamic, precluding a direct analogical mapping onto the Old Hamlet-Claudius or Claudius-Hamlet affiliations. Consequently, the transition from past to future, from historical homicide to prospective threat, becomes contingent upon this interpretative ambiguity.

Conversely, the term "Hertzeg" ("Duke," "Prince") assumes a more conspicuous tenor, summoning forth the original status of the victim. In this light, the translation appears to maintain fidelity to the core tenets of the original experiment, perpetuating a degree of opaqueness in the relational dynamics and adhering to the veracity of the primary design. These deviances from the source

² Kazinczy was one of the most influential intellectuals of his time. He is known as one of the founders of the Hungarian Reformed Era, he worked for the renewal of the Hungarian language, of Hungarian literature, and of the Hungarian theatrical culture. He was a famous poet and a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. To sum up all these Reuss refers to him as an intellectual "blogger" (Reuss 68) of his times.

³ All translations of the Hungarian sources into English are mine if not indicated otherwise—Zs. A.

text suggest that Kazinczy, through these subtle alterations, sought to preserve the integrity of Hamlet’s endeavour, striving to mitigate any impinging deviation that might threaten the experiment’s coherence.

In juxtaposition with its source text, Kazinczy’s translation emerges as an even more deliberate champion of Hamlet’s original intentions underscoring the experiment. To this end, Kazinczy’s praxis, echoing the *zeitgeist* of his era, forwent an English rendition, opting instead to translate from the German. As Sirató convincingly argues in this era it was Shakespeare’s “dramaturgy” and not his texts that bore crucial importance for translations (Sirató 190). Kazinczy’s rendition is a prose translation derived from Schröder’s German tradaptation of *Hamlet*. The specific line in question, as presented within Schröder’s work, reads as “Das ist einer, Namens Lucian, ein Neffe des Herzogs” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prinz von Dännemark: Ein Trauerspiel in 6 Aufzügen. Zum Behuf des Hamburgischen Theaters* 78), translating to “This is one, named Lucian, a nephew of the Prince” (—my translation, Zs.A.). The discernible inference here is that the term “Duke” or “Prince” owes its inclusion within Kazinczy’s version to Schröder’s influence. The term “Neffe” (“nephew”), however, retains a definitive connotation of different generations, and age group relationship. This element conveys that Kazinczy radicalised Schröder’s impulse to return to the original plans of the theatrical experiment. Hence, while Schröder’s translation might be construed as positing a menace directed at Claudius, Kazinczy’s rendition exudes a more explicit guardianship of Hamlet’s original concept. This alignment is evidenced by the resolute retention of Schröder’s terminology, thereby fostering a harmonious echo between Kazinczy’s rendition of Hamlet’s commentary, and Hamlet’s original design, enshrining the essence of the experiment.

Inevitably, the question arises as to the rationale underlying Kazinczy’s decision to translate *Hamlet* from Schröder’s version rather than from the original. The resolution to this question is embedded within the cultural-political undercurrents of 18th century Hungary. During this epoch, Hungary existed as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, a dominion permeated by Germanic cultural predilections. Within the cultural tapestry of Budapest, theatrical renditions transpired in the German tongue, thereby endowing the local audience with familiarity predominantly attuned to the German Shakespearean canon. The literary milieu was similarly shaped, with accessibility skewed toward works transcribed in German. Given this contextual backdrop, Kazinczy’s predilection for translating *Hamlet* from the German source material surfaces as a choice both innate and discernible, underscored by the era’s prevailing sociocultural milieu, sociolinguistic dynamics, and literary accessibility.

Kazinczy’s decision to translate *Hamlet* from a German adaptation introduces an element of complexity that, to some extent, imparts a degree of instability, if not a measure of erosion, to the overtly political connotations

inherent in the act of translation and the apparent intentions of the translator. The published text is prefaced by Kazinczy's Dedication, initially printed separately and subsequently incorporated into the volume. This Dedication is imbued with political and nationalistic assertions, underscored by his advocacy for the establishment of a Hungarian theatre and his veneration of the Hungarian language as a medium for national preservation and as a suitable conduit for literary expression. The Dedication corroborates Fazekas's assertion that "Kazinczy made his translation for political purposes, at a turbulent time when Hungary was hoping to elect a Hungarian-friendly (or Hungarian) ruler after Joseph II" (Fazekas). Within this political context, Kazinczy's deliberate obscuring of the identity of the murderer (whether past or future) and his adherence to Schröder's substitution of the "King" with the "Duke" in the original experiment takes on interpretative significance. The transformation of the "King" into a "Duke" resonates with a world where the King (Joseph II) is already deceased, necessitating a dependable successor who will not impulsively disrupt the experiment's pursuit of truth. Furthermore, Hamlet's reliability and moral integrity are of crucial importance, as in this rendition Hamlet survives and becomes the king of Denmark (Sirató 194).

János Arany: The English Text and the Politics of Ambiguity

After the 18th century, the next generation of translators, in the mid-19th century, embarked upon their Shakespearean endeavours propelled by different motivations than their predecessors. Their engagement with Shakespeare assumed a new role, wielding to fashion a distinctly Hungarian cultural ethos, an autonomous theatrical realm disentangled from the embrace of the Habsburg dominion, perceived as oppression. What is also significant is that at this time poetry was the most significant genre, and instead of dramaturgy, Shakespeare was "respected for his text, for his lines, consequently for his poetry" (Nádasdy 40). Consequently, a conspicuous divergence unfolds: the recourse to German translations wanes, supplanted by a reorientation toward the English source texts. This strategic shift is substantiated by a fusion of not solely philological considerations but equally fortified by political underpinnings that synchronously resonated with the fervent pursuit of emancipation from the Habsburg Empire during the upheaval of 1848-1849, and after the defeat, the passive resistance articulated by Ferenc Deák. In his seminal study Cieger notes that intellectuals' political positions in the 1860's went beyond a bipolar coward-hero dichotomy: "the real political and private realities may have led to a much wider range of behaviours. They may have involved pretence, concealment, self-exemption, but also introspection and the maintenance of moral integrity" (Cieger 104).

Within this politico-cultural context, János Arany, the eminent poet of this epoch, undertook the task of translating two of Shakespeare’s plays: *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*. These translations, becoming the canonical renderings, endured as hallmarks of linguistic and cultural legacy until the end of the 20th century. Arany’s pivotal role underscores the confluence of literary and sociopolitical imperatives, exemplifying a synergy of literary pursuits intertwined with the broader struggle for political agency and cultural emancipation against the backdrop of Habsburg dominion. Furthermore, Arany also had, maybe unconscious motivations when translating in general and *Hamlet* in particular. As Keresztury notes “the play in Arany’s time still had a very strong political charge, as in *Bánk bán* [A famous Hungarian 19th century drama by József Katona—Zs.A.], since a royal person who benefited from a rotten state was killed in them” (Keresztury 505). This contextual backdrop is further accentuated by the events that enveloped Arany during the 1850s, a period characterized by personal humiliations and existential contemplations. During this phase, Arany grappled with reconciling his identity as a poet with the vulnerabilities arising from exposure to a repressive regime (Dávidházi 77). The subsequent decade, encompassing the 1860s, witnessed Arany’s intricate rapport with the burgeoning regime under Franz Joseph. In navigating this complex terrain, Arany’s hesitant, sometimes self-loathing acquiescence to honours and roles was met with pronounced censure from factions opposed to the embracement of Habsburg sovereignty. This juxtaposition is emblematic of his nuanced stance: “He welcomed the Reconciliation, Franz Joseph as king (we know he was in the crowd on the day of the coronation), but aware that there were significant political and social groups opposed to the new political system” (Cieger 94). Arany’s interpretive renderings reframe Shakespeare’s legacy within the contours of historical nuances, augmenting their relevance within the broader discourse of cultural evolution and socio-political transformation.

Arany’s translation of *Hamlet*’s commentary assumes a more proximate alignment with the original text, yet within the framework of modern Hungarian, the rendering harbours a degree of potential misinterpretation. In Arany’s rendition, the commentary takes form as follows: “Ez valami Lucianus, a király öccse.” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Dán Királyfi* 401), meaning “This is some Lucianus, younger brother to the King” (—my translation, Zs.A). Arany, thus, revisits the designation of the victim as a “King,” thereby retracing the thematic trajectory toward regicide. However, the designation of the murderer introduces a layer of intricacy. In contemporary (20th-21st century) Hungarian, the term “öcs” translates to “younger brother.” Consequently, if one were to peruse Arany’s translation in the absence of commentary—a scenario applicable to most editions—it is conceivable that an assumption might arise, positing either a mistranslation of Shakespeare’s intent or an (un)intentional transmutation of terminology designed to revert to the original blueprint set against *Hamlet*’s plan.

Yet, upon a closer scrutiny, the matter proves less straightforward. Consultation of the Czuczor-Fogarasi lexicon imparts nuanced illumination, elucidating that “öcs” refers not merely to a “younger brother” (as in modern Hungarian) but also extends to encompass a broader spectrum—embracing a male relative, such as both a “younger brother” and “nephew.” In a more expansive connotation, the term is further applicable to “a “younger man,” subsuming instances wherein a fifty-year-old man assumes the role of the “öcs,” in relation to a sixty-year-old counterpart” (Czuczor and Fogarasi 4/1154). This multidimensional scope of the term, thus, unveils an intricate linguistic landscape that complicates the seemingly straightforward dichotomy, underscoring the imperative of approaching Arany’s translation with a sensitivity to the historical-linguistic nuances embedded within the fluidity of language evolution over time.

Consequently, akin to Kazinczy’s “atyjafia,” Arany’s rendering of “öcs” could potentially allude to a nephew; yet its signification extends beyond this, encompassing a spectrum that refers not solely to a “nephew,” but to a “younger brother,” or even a more generalized reference to a younger male figure. This linguistic intricacy engenders a nuanced realm of interpretative latitude, whereby Hamlet’s commentary on the stage action and character might, or might not, harmonize with the original intentions of the experiment. Central to this contention is the query of the murderer’s identity—whether Claudius in the historical past or Hamlet in a prospective future—whose definitive resolution remains undetermined, persistently hovering within an indeterminate zone.

What endures as immutable from the original sentence, and within the confines of the experiment, is the figure of the victim. Irrespective of the perpetrator’s identity—past or impending—the sentence either commemorates or prophesies the regicide of a sovereign, the monarch, wherein the precise individual manifesting the royal persona remains ancillary (be it Old Hamlet or Claudius). A discernible thread emerges that harks back to Arany’s era, wherein the undercurrents of collective consciousness seemingly grappled with a latent issue pertaining to the monarch—a phenomenon particularly resonant in Hungary, where the prevailing Habsburg monarchy had recently defeated the Hungarian uprising against their dominion. This historical juncture elicits the contemplation that an underlying yearning for the monarch’s demise might have nestled within the recesses of Arany’s contemporary ethos, even if he celebrated the coronation of the new king.

As a conclusion to the 18-19th century efforts, the translations traced from Kazinczy to Arany cast an illuminating trajectory upon the interplay of linguistic fidelity and socio-political contextualization in rendering Hamlet’s seminal line. The shift from Kazinczy’s discerning alignment with Schröder’s German tradaptation to Arany’s recourse to the English source text underscores the dynamism inherent in translation as a mediating agent of cultural

metamorphosis. Arany's choice, resonating with the broader *zeitgeist* of striving for autonomous cultural expression, reflects the congruence of linguistic adaptation and nationalist aspiration within the crucible of 19th century Hungary. In Arany's version, the elusive contours of familial relationships and regicidal intent traverse the domains of language, culture, and politics, engendering a hermeneutical tapestry that reverberates beyond its linguistic confines.

Eörsi and Nádasdy, Scholarship as Politics

The latter part of the 20th century ushered in a distinct sociopolitical and cultural paradigm, particularly resonant around the end of the socialist-Kádár regime and after its fall. This transitional juncture bore the promise of liberation for the people. This liberating impulse, nuanced in its essence, encompassed the relinquishment of the regime's centralized cultural politics, coupled with an ardent pivot toward the “Western” sphere—a trajectory that materialized through a fevered wave of translation endeavours, yielding a sea of renderings of contemporary literary works by British and American authors into Hungarian, with varying degrees of quality.

Within this evolving panorama, the advent of new translations can be apprehended as more than mere linguistic enterprises; they encode a palpable agency in the configuration of a national and cultural identity. A side effect of this emergent ethos was a pursuit of heightened translational excellence, punctuated by an evolution in the way Shakespeare's *oeuvre* was approached. This transformation bore evidence of a perceptible departure from the utilization of theatrical Shakespeare as a covert vessel for promulgating political agendas or critiquing the incumbent regime, which does not mean that Shakespeare production would become apolitical. This alteration was notably facilitated by the availability of contemporaneous voices who could serve these ends more overtly. These overarching proclivities naturally imbued the arena of Shakespearean translation with discernible transformations—translations characterized by a reoriented politicization and an augmented dedication to philological precision, emblematic of an epoch navigating the transition between political epochs and cultural paradigms.

The end of the 20th century witnessed the ascension of translating *Hamlet* into the echelons of heightened significance. János Arany's translation, having evolved into the national literary canon, acquired an aura of inviolability—a sacred text—from very early on. As Minier argues “The taboo around Arany's *Hamlet* is as old as the text itself. Indeed, it may be argued that it dates back to even before the emergence of Arany's translation, [...]. This apparently paradoxical phenomenon is primarily because of Arany's fame and the ‘sartorial’ role he was endowed with in the cultural life of the nation”

(Minier 167). Owing to the taboo status of Arany's translation the history of the Hungarian renditions of *Hamlet* can be represented as the history of "detectable attitude of discipleship (utmost reverence for Arany as a significant and defining Hungarian voice of Shakespeare) and the attitude of mastery (translatorial identity that establishes itself in overt rivalry with Arany as a master)" (Minier 164). Simultaneously, however, along with a sense of liberation, the theatrical enactment of Arany's rendition encountered linguistic intricacies, posing formidable challenges for both actors and spectators alike. This predicament, fostering a climate of innovation, catalysed the inception of pioneering initiatives; specifically, directors found themselves compelled to commission fresh translations, with the intention to surmount these communicative impediments and thereby facilitate the unimpeded realization of the play upon the stage. István Eörsi's (1983, Csiky Gergely Theatre, Kaposvár, dir. Tamás Ascher) and Dezső Mészöly's (1996, New Theatre, Budapest, dir. János Ács) translations, the first ones in the line of forthcoming translations, were only partial ones. They selected iconic parts of Arany's translations and kept them unmodified, and retranslated the rest. The complete translations were those of István Eörsi (2003, Csiky Gergely Theatre of Temesvár, dir. Victor Ioan Frunză), Ádám Nádasdy (1999, Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, dir. György Lengyel). Some of these translations found their ways to the printed page. Eörsi István's complete translation came off the press in 1993 (Shakespeare, *Hamlet Dán Királyfi Tragédiája*) and Ádám Nádasdy's rendering was first published in 2012 (Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Három Dráma: Hamlet, Szentivánéji Álom, Lear Király*).

Both the translations by Eörsi and Nádasdy evince a distinct disposition towards the act of translation, diverging from their predecessors in substantial ways. Géza Balogh posits that the divergence between the two translators resides in Eörsi's aspiration to imbue *Hamlet* with the voice of "the roaring poetry of the Beat Generation" (Balogh 6), while Nádasdy's translation "sweeps away all conventions" (Balogh 6). Despite the different translatorial dispositions, both translators have endeavoured to replicate Hamlet's original commentary pertaining to the "Murder of Gonzago" episode with a fidelity that extends to the lexical dimension. István Eörsi's rendering reads as follows: "Ez itt Lucianus, a király unokaöccse." (Shakespeare, *Hamlet Dán Királyfi Tragédiája* 85), while Nádasdy's version concurs: "Ez itt Lucianus, a király unokaöccse" (Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Három Dráma: Hamlet, Szentivánéji Álom, Lear Király* 110). The two translations are visibly identical and are faithful translations of the English version, entailing that in both cases, Lucianus is the nephew of the King. The only difference between the two versions is that Nádasdy augments his translation with a footnote, in which he offers an explanation, positing that "perhaps Hamlet did not intend to remind people of

Claudius’s dark past.” (Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Három Dráma: Hamlet, Szentivánéji Álom, Lear Király* 110 (—my translation, Zs.A.).

István Eörsi’s and Ádám Nádasdy’s Hungarian renderings, marked by their meticulous congruence with the original English sentence, veritably approximate the source text within the confines of the Hungarian language. Consequently, within the ambit of 20th and 21st century translations, the deliberate convergence of these renditions culminates in a comprehensive dismantling of Hamlet’s theatrical experiment, harmoniously resonating with the source material. Remarkably, one of the translators undertakes to ascribe particular significance to these modifications to the original plan, and thus to the temporal scheme of the experiment, thereby engendering an exegetical apparatus to elucidate the rationale underpinning the alteration—underscoring an overt interplay between linguistic fidelity and translatorial interpretation.

The impetus behind the reversion to the philologically accurate source text is entrenched within a transformative shift in the paradigms governing the sphere of translation. Commencing from the latter decades of the 20th century, Shakespeare has risen to an exalted stature within (Hungarian) English studies, emerging as a preeminent subject of scholarly inquiry. Evidencing a panoptic international and domestic scholarly engagement with the Shakespearean corpus, this epoch witnessed the ascendancy of Shakespeare into a beacon of academic veneration. Nádasdy, himself an erudite historian of the English language and a professor who taught linguistics and literature at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, inherently aligns with this tradition (Almás). In this context, the palpable visibility and presence of scholarship within Hungary on this thematic terrain assumes an ineluctable significance that could not be cavalierly disregarded by translators of Shakespearean works. This trajectory is distinctly manifest in the perspectives propounded by both translators, emphatically articulating their reliance upon critical editions of Shakespeare’s play. Each has harnessed the second series Arden edition crafted by Harold Jenkins, alongside a comprehensive consultation of additional critical editions as well as a panoply of translations into disparate languages (Eörsi 7; Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Három Dráma: Hamlet, Szentivánéji Álom, Lear Király* 469). Furthermore, it seems that they intended to make the texts as contemporary as possible, since both translators were working for theatres and theatrical productions aimed at bringing *Hamlet* home, making him and the productions non-historical. Eörsi claims that the director requested a text that can be given to a Hamlet “in jeans” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet Dán Királyfi Tragédiája* 161). Nádasdy defines his method of translating as against the 19th century methodologies: “We can put aside the Hungarian tradition, which translates Shakespeare’s texts with a more colourful vocabulary, a more sophisticated metrics than the original” (Nádasdy 46).

Substantially, it is the aegis of scholarship and the tenets of historical and poetic fidelity that have not merely permeated, but decisively guided the realm of Shakespearean translations within Hungary in the aftermath of the iconoclastic new translations of *Hamlet*. This epochal reconfiguration aspired to foster a nascent canon of Shakespearean translations, underpinned by the edifice of rigorous scholarly engagement, concurrently spanning Hungarian and international spheres of erudition. This scholarly edifice serves to navigate the intricate dialectic between the timeless reverberations of Shakespeare's corpus and the evolving contours of translation, emblematic of an epoch wherein intellectual rigour coalesces with translatorial discernment to shape a distinctly scholarly prism through which Shakespeare's iconic work is rendered anew.

The scholarship and poetic fidelity find resonance within a broader political context, manifesting on two significant fronts. The reference to both national and international scholarship as the underpinning of the translators' endeavour introduces a dimension akin to what may be termed an act of internationalization. In this light, *Hamlet* transcends its role as a mere vehicle for historical nationalism, instead assuming the role of a conduit that facilitates engagement within the international sphere of cultural accomplishments. This aligns seamlessly with the notion of liberation that emerged in the wake of, and subsequent to, the dissolution of the socialist regime. Secondly, the contemporisation of *Hamlet*'s language obviated the necessity for the "double speak"⁴ inherent in the theatre of the socialist era. In this respect, *Hamlet*, occupying the realm of our own contemporaneity, emerges as a potent tool for overtly articulating critique against the backdrop of political discourse in the contemporary Hungarian theatre.

Conclusion

The exploration undertaken herein has unveiled the profound import that *Hamlet*'s commentary on the "Murder of Gonzago" play-within-the-play assumes within the broader ambit of experimental natural philosophy contemporaneous to its inception. My contention has hinged upon the premise that this commentary, with particular emphasis on the line under scrutiny, precipitates an inadvertent derailment of the very experiment it was intended to embody. This spoiling of the experiment is even more conspicuous in light of Francis Bacon's methodological reflections on experimental science. Rather than compelling Claudius to unfurl his concealed past, *Hamlet*'s discourse transmutes

⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of the status of Shakespeare in the socialist regime, and the use of "double speak" see Veronika Schandl's works especially her monograph (Schandl).

into a veiled threat, casting its spectral shadow across the entire court—a transformation emblematic of the multifaceted subtleties attendant to this intricate metatheatrical experiment.

In the subsequent juncture of inquiry, the gaze was intently directed toward four Hungarian translations of Hamlet’s statement and commentary: the 18th century rendition by Ferenc Kazinczy, the 19th century translation by János Arany, and the 20th-21st century ones by István Eörsi and Ádám Nádasdy. The examination of these renderings has been undertaken within a contextual matrix that rigorously embeds their genesis within the historical context of their inception. This contextualization, as an analytical device, has engendered a heightened understanding of the translations’ symbiotic interplay with the prevailing socio-political and cultural exigencies that crystallized during their respective historical epochs. The translational endeavours of the 18th and 19th centuries emerge as deliberate acts of cultural assertion and the fostering of intellectual integrity. A palpable emphasis on nurturing an authentically Hungarian cultural milieu is discernible within these translations, reflecting an awareness of the significance of cultural distinctiveness in an era characterized by shifting socio-political tides. Conversely, the translations of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are underpinned by a distinct proclivity towards scholarly engagement and the cultivation of philological precision. In alignment with the evolving landscape of Hungarian politico-cultural dynamics, these translations exhibit a symbiotic engagement with both national and international scholarship, serving as conduits that bridge scholarship and the tenets of the Hungarian socio-political sphere.

The analysis embarked upon herein attests to the active agency of translations, positioning them as dynamic interlocutors who intricately embroider the historical tapestry with threads of linguistic expression. These successive strata of translation, informed by the provenance of their historical origins, amalgamate to forge an unfolding continuum. In so doing, they facilitate the inexorable evolution towards novel renderings—an iterative process emblematic of the perpetual dialectic between the temporal nuances encapsulated within the prism of translation and the timeless resonance that emanates from Shakespeare’s *oeuvre*.

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Uroš Trefalt* 

Other *Hamlet* in Puppet Theatre: A Contribution to Central European Theatre Diversity of the 1980s-1990s

Abstract: This study aims to address the stigmatization and reductionism of Central European culture by many scholars and to decentralize it. At the *Crossing Borders with Shakespeare Since 1945* conference, the roundtable discussion raised questions about naming and defining “Central Europe” and revealed several discrepancies. However, the discussion lacked cultural, political, and historical context. To address this, the author examines a lesser-known artistic genre, puppet theatre, for answers and comparisons. Zlatko Bourek, a Croatian artist and director, offers a unique perspective on the theatre of the 1980s and serves as an example of the diversity and heterogeneity of Central European cultural expression. Bourek’s work draws from the tradition of Central European puppetry and explores connections between the Iron Curtain and Yugoslavia. His artistic style is exemplified in his adaptation of Tom Stoppard’s play *Fifteen-Minute Hamlet*, which masterfully condenses the entire plot of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into a fifteen-minute performance. Bourek’s concept of combining Shakespearean tragedy with farce, presented through Japanese traditional Bunraku theatre, represents an important experiment of the 1980s. The use of syncretism and the aesthetics of ugliness are notable features of this experiment. It is a breakthrough in the perceived history of puppet theatre for adults and an aesthetic experiment in the era of Central European totalitarianism.

Keywords: Puppet Theatre, Central Europe, Zlatko Bourek, farce, Bunraku, Croatia theatre, aesthetics of ugliness, Shakespeare.

In his book *The Kidnapped West*, the late Czech-French writer Milan Kundera questioned the existence of Central Europe as a distinct cultural entity with its own history. He argued that defining its geographical borders would be a futile exercise since Central Europe is not a state, but rather a culture or a destiny.

* Masaryk University, Czech Republic. urostrefalt@seznam.cz



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Kundera believed that its borders are imaginary and must be redrawn in each new historical situation (Kundera 46-47).

The definition of Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is a topic of interest not only for political scientists but also for artists, theatre-makers, and filmmakers. The current political situation in Europe suggests a stagnation rather than a progressive development that will eventually reconnect a divided Europe. However, discussions surrounding the spiritual specification of this diverse cultural and political space often lead to more questions than answers, with both questions and answers colored by strong opinions. Since the Second World War, Central Europe has undergone significant political and cultural changes that produced a divided Europe. In the new millennium, the region is now searching for a lost moral and ideological commonality. Therefore, it is important to maintain objectivity and avoid subjective evaluations. The identification of most Central European nations after 1989 was manifested in various ways. Sometimes the identification was strongly nationalistic, resulting in events such as the Yugoslav war. Other times, it was a capitalist, conservative imitation of Western democracies and their values. However, culture and art played an important role in these countries as a participant, progressor or initiator of social change. The Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University in Brno recently held a conference titled *KDS / Conference Crossing Borders with Shakespeare in 1945: Central and Eastern European Roots and Routes*. The conference explored the theme of border crossings since 1945 through Shakespeare's works and theatrical realizations. The conference demonstrated that, despite the Renaissance being a universal movement, totalitarian systems in Central European states imposed certain restrictions, censorship, and prohibitions. One commonly employed—and unjust—criterion for defining Central Europe is the communist past of some of these states. Western Europe and the United States have often oversimplified the naming of post-communist countries as “Eastern Europe,” disregarding the differences that fundamentally affected freedom of creation and artistic development even within the former communist countries. Understanding the cultural multiplicity of Central Europe has always been challenging for most of the world's cultures, leading to the schematization and stigmatization of the concept. One division within these states was the Iron Curtain, which separated the two fundamental types of communism in Europe: the Bolshevik one, trapped in the grip of the Soviet Union, and Yugoslav socialism, generally characterized as the middle way or leader of the non-aligned.¹ The Yugoslav model of socialism

¹ The split between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia originated from the 1948 Informbyro (The Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties) meeting and persisted until the countries partially reconciled in 1955 with the signing of the Belgrade Declaration. This separation from the Eastern bloc resulted in

was distinguished by the freedom to travel and constant communication with the rest of the world, which facilitated the flow of information and ideas. The lecture and roundtable titled *Eastern Europe/Central Europe/Central Eastern/Europaeast: Floating Signifier of Cultural and Political Geography* raised many questions. However, it lacked methodological openness in terms of culture, politics, and history. For instance, its conception did not encompass the culture of Austria, which formerly served as a connector of Central European culture, or eastern parts of Italy, such as Trieste, Slovenia, Croatia, and even the area of today's Ukraine, including the city of Lvov (Lemberg) and its cultural context within the framework of Central Europe (Putna 11-17). Thus, the question arises: how can this stigmatization and reductionism of the multiple elements of Central European culture be broken and decentralized? Unfortunately, even after more than 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, many Central European states seem to forget that this region includes independent countries such as Slovenia and Croatia, which have strong historical connections to the rest of Europe and do not need to work as hard to catch up with the years lost behind the Iron Curtain. Perhaps the self-centeredness of some former Eastern bloc states is creating new imaginary borders within Central Europe, hindering the much-needed integration of the entire continent (Rychlík 212-219).

Diversity of Puppet Theatre

While it is a lesser-known artistic genre, puppetry can be used to explore Central Europe's seemingly elusive nature, one primarily defined by culture and destiny. The historic diversity and popularity of puppet theatre in Central Europe is remarkable. Records indicate that puppet companies were already traveling within Austria-Hungary as early as the 18th century. Mathias Unger and Ferdinand Hofmann were among the most renowned directors. In her book *Two Centuries of Czech Puppetry*, Alice Dubská (27) discusses the widespread influence of puppet theatre in Central Europe. She notes that the style and repertoire of puppeteers' performances demonstrate both the universality of theatrical expression during that time as well as the cultural connection of the Central European region. Many puppeteers played a significant role in the popularity and dissemination of puppet theatre. Kundera defines Central Europe as a cultural and fateful space. Therefore, to understand puppet theatre in Central Europe, it is

significant economic challenges for Yugoslavia, which relied heavily on trade with the USSR and its allies. The economic pressures in the country led to reforms that eventually resulted in the introduction of socialist self-government and greater decentralization of the country through constitutional amendments formalizing the reforms.

necessary to comprehend its historical development, political connotations, and aesthetic diversity.

Repertoire theatres in the Eastern Bloc often included Shakespeare as a programming certainty, or offered creators greater political and social engagement, which often drew critical responses from political leaders. That said, during the 1960s in Czechoslovakia's so-called normalization period, performances of many of Shakespeare's plays were banned. The earliest productions to be banned were tragedies such as *Richard III*, *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*. The director Miroslav Macháček's production of *Jindřich V* at the National Theatre in Prague in 1971 served as a response to the repressive policies and censorship of the 1970s following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The invasion led to pro-Russian censorship and twenty years of suppressed freedom. Although Macháček's production remained on the theatre's repertoire for another five years, Macháček did not receive any further directing opportunities at the National Theatre until his death and worked only as an actor. Communist officials and censors criticized Macháček for having *Jindřich V* speak Slovak on the stage of the Czech National Theatre—the language of then Czechoslovak president and Communist Party leader Gustav Husák.²

If theatre during the totalitarian era in Central Europe used Shakespearean language as a tool for expressing social and political criticism, then *puppet theatre* responded to the world around it with a visual language typical of this syncretic art form. The path to modern puppet aesthetics was not without experimentation and new ideas, such as exploring the essence of puppet theatre and puppetry. One reason for seeking a new aesthetic language was the tendency to distinguish puppet theatre from drama. Shakespearean drama played a significant role in this. Throughout its history, puppet theatre has alternated its target audience. The current notion that it is mainly a theatre for children and a miniature version of drama is a stereotype that has persisted since the so-called renaissance of puppet theatre in the mid-19th century. At that time, there was a national awakening in Central Europe and amateur theatres were emerging. Puppet theatre became a promoter of national cultures while also promoting the literary and theatrical genre of fairy tales. A change occurred at the beginning of the 20th century when, due to various artistic movements, experimentation with productions and performances for adults began. This change resulted in the creation of repertory puppet theatres, mostly of the marionette type. Between the two world wars and shortly after World War II, puppet repertoires for children once again prevailed, thanks to the generally favorable cultural

² Presentation by Martin Pšenička “...noxiousness of my work:” Miroslav Macháček's *Henry V* at Normalized National Theatre, at KDS / *Konference Crossing Borders with Shakespeare since 1945: Central and Eastern European Roots and Routes*, 6 July 2023, Brno.

developments in the 60s. This revolutionary approach has brought about a liberalization of puppetry in all its forms. Performances are now more frequently aimed at adults, offering a wider range of staging approaches that have also been applied to Shakespeare's plays. From the second half of the 20th century, productions of Shakespeare's puppet plays were not as rare and were more commonly and frequently produced, especially when we talk about situational comedies or texts that contained certain mythical beings, goblins, or other fantastic characters. Puppet theatres occasionally included Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in their repertoire, but less often tragedies or historical dramas. Creators worked with exaggeration, fairy tale elements or meaningful symbolism. There are several reasons for the changes in relation to both the audience and the emergence of new dramaturgical and dramatic interpretations of Shakespeare in the second part of the 20th century. In her study "Shakespeare in the Post-1989 Hungarian Puppet Scene," Gabriella Reuss (159) points out the different approaches to puppet aesthetics in Hungary and Czechoslovakia since the 1980s, especially in productions for adults. Until 2000, the *State Puppet Theatre Bábszínház* in Budapest insisted on its socialist realist approach to puppet theatre, which relied on an illusory puppet aesthetic. However, in Czechoslovakia, groundbreaking productions emerged from the 1960s onwards, in which *live actors* appeared alongside puppets. In 1983, Czech theatre expert Miroslav Česal wrote a study titled *The Live Actor on the Puppet Stage*, which thoroughly analyses the aesthetic and historical role of the *live actor* in puppet theatre. It should be noted that while Czech modern puppetry did not have a progressive influence on, for example, Hungarian puppetry in the 1980s, the opposite was true for Slovenia and Croatia. In both countries, since the creation of post-war Yugoslavia in the 1950s, puppet theatres have collaborated with Czech playwrights, directors, and artists who have exported their modern staging approaches. Reuss cites theatre theorist Henryk Jurkowski in the introduction of her study; he points out that in the 70s and 80s, theatre practitioners in the Central European region began experimenting with a *third genre*, a new form of theatrical expression that combined live actors with puppetry. This discovery is one of the main inspirations for why I considered it important to open up the question of greater openness in research on the Central European theatre space and the diversity of individual nations in Central Europe.

In the chapter *System of symptoms of puppet theatre and adult audience* Miroslav Česal (Kapitovy 1984: 14-17) divides the perception of symbols in puppet theatre between adults and children. However, adult audiences often perceive puppet theatre symbols as dominated by the symbols used in live theatre, making it difficult for them to understand all the expressions used in puppet theatre. This seminal theoretical work is also the common denominator for most Central European puppet theatres after 1945, regardless of political or linguistic differences. The DRAK Theatre in Hradec Králové demonstrated the

third genre in its most famous production, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1984,³ proving that adult puppet theatre is not a diminished form of drama, but a unique artistic expression. Although the presence of Shakespearean plays in Czechoslovak professional puppet theatre was modest in the 1980s, three remarkable productions were created: *Comedy of Errors* at Naive Theatre Liberec, *King Llyr (Lear)* at Alfa Theatre in Pilsen, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at DRAK Theatre.⁴ Czech puppetry expert Nína Malíková (100-104) considers Krofta's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to be a milestone for modern Czech puppet theatre. This is not only because Shakespeare's production left a greater artistic impression on puppet theatre, but also because it was an experience for both the audience and the critic, who forgot that they should be critical and became a mesmerized, amused, laughing, and astonished spectator. It was the quintessence of excellent collaboration between the ensemble and the creative team, and one of the crucial productions of the peak period of the DRAK's style. At the same time, the Croatian theatre ITD's *Hamlet* was created, which followed the principle of the third genre but used a different artistic aesthetic for the adult audience within the context of Central European Yugoslav socialism.

Aesthetics of Ugliness in Puppet Theatre as a Peculiar Social Revolt

Zlatko Bourek, who was born in 1919 and died in 2018, was a Croatian artist and a sculptor, painter, director, set designer, costume designer, puppet designer, and author of animated and live-action films. Bourek's multi-genre approach made him a unique figure in both Croatian and global contexts. Bourek was a counterpart of the Czech puppet school and an experimenter of the third genre and possessed a radical perspective on the aesthetics of European puppetry. Like his drama colleagues, he staged Shakespeare's drama as a critique of contemporary society. He preferred a strong visual aesthetic of ugliness over verbal communication. Bourek's 1983 production of *Hamlet* is a unique interpretation of Shakespeare's classic drama. It employs farce, caricature, and disfigured puppets to create a distorted mirror of society. While it may not be an unambiguous critique of socialist society in Central Europe, it does offer a broader critique of the modern world of the 1980s. Bourek's unique sense of the artistic, the grotesque, comedy, satire, and farce has been applied to a variety

³ DRAK Theatre's 1984 production of W. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Josef Krofta, was a breakthrough, opening up stage space for the actor alongside the puppet.

⁴ Theatre Institute Prague. *Theatre Productions* [online]. [cit. 2024-02-06]. Accessed on: <https://vis.idu.cz/Productions.aspx?lang=en>

of artistic media, including film, visual art, and theatre, and his work appeared in numerous group exhibitions in Croatia and abroad. He has also had solo exhibitions in Duisburg in 1969 (at Nos Gallery) and in New York in 1969/70 (at the Museum of Modern Art, Film Department). In 1977, he directed Salih Isaac's puppet farce *Orlando Maleroso* for the Dubrovnik Summer Festival.⁵ This play was inspired by Dubrovnik tradition and the *Japanese Bunraku theatre*, and marked the beginning of the revival of puppet theatre in Croatia. In 1982, the ITD theatre from Zagreb performed Bourek's *Hamlet* (Shakespeare-Stoppard) to great success. The play was later performed at some of the world's biggest theatre festivals. Bourek's artistic style is characterized by rough and naturalized comedy that borders on the grotesque and the laconic.⁶ The humor is derived from the characterization of the heroes, their various vices, and physical flaws. The focus regularly shifts to the material, instinctive, bestial, and sexual side of human nature. The productions of Bourek and farce coincide in their grotesqueness, loud humor, cheekiness, folly, and profanity. Though situated overall within historical Central European and its culture, as part of formerly socialist Yugoslavia, Croatia did not experience the same level of repressive cultural censorship as did states behind the Iron Curtain. This partial freedom allowed Croatian artists a wider range of creativity that encompassed political as well as cultural and social criticism. This artistic freedom represented a significant turning point in Yugoslavia's gradual disintegration and collapse during the 1980s. Zlatko Bourek discovered an ideal model for his authentic artistic style in Tom Stoppard's play *Fifteen-Minute Hamlet*,⁷ which premiered in 1976 on the terraces of the National Theatre in London. Following his previous success with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1967, Stoppard continued exploring the *Hamlet* theme by condensing the most famous and popular lines from Shakespeare's play. *Fifteen-Minute Hamlet* offers a breathtaking abridgement of Shakespeare's original, including all key scenes and lines, condensed into just fifteen minutes. The abridgement is grotesque, but it captures the essence of Shakespeare's longest tragedy and the anxious Prince of Denmark. Though Stoppard did not write the text for puppet theatre, his play's structure, exaggeration, and characterization are reminiscent of puppet theatre and puppetry. Bourek utilized a strong visual element in combination

⁵ Zlatko Bourek [online]. [cit. 2023-06-23]. Accessed on: <https://zlatkobourek.com>

⁶ A subgenre of comedy that is often identified with farce for its crude and lascivious humor. Simple plots, primarily intended for entertainment and lacking the necessary satirical charge, were popular in the 19th and 20th centuries, although the name is also used for pieces of earlier, medieval and Renaissance origin. Accessed on <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=35183>.

⁷ The play is an excerpt from another play by Tom Stoppard called *Dogg's Hamlet*, which was published 1979.

with words. Stoppard quotes Shakespeare and employs commonly known catchphrases as a point of reference to enhance the audience's understanding of the plot. The play begins with Stoppard's use of Shakespeare's famous lines from *Hamlet*, such as "To be, or not to be, that is the question, There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Though this be madness, yet there is method in it, I must be cruel, only to be kind..." (Stoppard 1). This technique immediately engages the audience and sets the stage for the story to come.

Livija Kroflin, a Croatian theatre theorist, highlights in her research on the significance of his work Zlatko Bourek's exceptional relationship to the text. Despite being primarily a visual artist, Bourek reads Stoppard's *Hamlet* as a transparently clear story. The characters enter with their mouths agape, make a lot of noise, and introduce themselves (or have their names written on their backs). The actors reach the highest level of skill and demonstrate their abilities through combat, without any intention of causing harm. The play demonstrates the beauty and ability of theatre to compress and condense profound messages. The performance seeks close contact with the audience and does not involve psychological nuances due to the wooden facial expressions. As Kroflin writes, "That's the beauty of theatre—it doesn't run 2,000 metres, but 250 metres" (64).

Bourek utilized large, open-mouthed puppets and a special technique called *guzovoz*,⁸ based on the Japanese *kuruma ningyo* technique. Although the traditional Japanese puppet theatre of Bunraku served as inspiration, Bourek's production was not a direct adaptation. The set design was minimalistic, featuring white sheets in the background to facilitate quick entrances and exits for the puppeteers. The actors sat on small crates on wheels, manipulating the puppet heads with one hand and gesturing with the other. The puppet's legs are operated by the actor, enabling swift movement on stage as required by Stoppard's text. According to Henryk Jurkowski (A History Volume II. 445-446), this rapid movement contrasts with the dignified puppet movements, resulting in a grotesque and bizarre impression. He notes that borrowing technology from other cultures is not unusual, though it can compromise originality if not done carefully. Bourek successfully combined the ancient Japanese puppet tradition with a modern interpretation of Shakespeare's text. Additionally, Bourek's idea of using dynamic technology to present a minute-long *Hamlet* is noteworthy. In Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic*

⁸ *Guzovoz* – an original technique that comes from the Japanese *kuruma ningyo*, literally "puppet on wheels." In the traditional Japanese version, the puppeteer sits on a box with three wheels and holds the whole puppet in front of him. With his left hand, he holds the puppet's body and head, and with his right hand, he animates the right arm while animating the puppet's legs with his feet. The animator is dressed in black with a hood on his head and moves the puppet while the narrator speaks the text. (Kroflin 68).

Theatre, the chapters “Image-Time” and “The Aesthetics of Speed” explain the influence of media, aesthetics of speed and quotation on modern theatre in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to the principle of slowing down, stopping, and repeating, some post-dramatic theatre forms attempt to embrace the speed of media time and even exceed it. For instance, the video clip aesthetic, which incorporates media quotations, the combination of live presence and footage, as well as the segmentation of theatrical time in the style of television series, is particularly prominent in the works of younger theatre makers from the 1990s. These younger artists are not put off by their proximity to multimedia spectacles or by co-writing and appreciate the media schema as material to be used more or less satirically and subversively in a fast-paced way (Lehmann 224).

Traditional European puppet theatre includes marionettes, which are puppets controlled by strings. These puppets are characterized by their melancholic demeanor, elegant gestures, and fluid movements. Additionally, there are hand puppets such as Pulcinella, Petrushka, Kasperl and Guignol, which are controlled directly by the animator. These hand puppets allow for dynamic reactions, direct and mutual contact, and natural conflict among characters, which can lead to grotesque and exaggerated performances. According to Bourek, the puppets were too small to express his aesthetic of ugliness effectively, while the marionettes were too slow and elegant. In puppet theatre, technology can undermine dramaturgy, and dramaturgy can determine technology. Bourek found it challenging to reconcile these demands with traditional European puppet technology that prevented him from realizing a production that was farcical, fast-paced, and bound together by an aesthetic of the ugliness. Kroflin (69-70) describes Bourek’s production’s unique aesthetic style. While some may find the puppets ugly, others appreciate the beauty in their ugliness. Either way, it is indisputable that Bourek’s style is distinct and easily recognizable as his own. It was observed that due to the strong visual style, the puppets in Bourek’s play appeared quite similar, making it challenging to differentiate among characters.

Bourek’s *Hamlet* production utilized a unique approach that featured prominent actors from the Zagreb drama studio ITD who had little experience with puppets. This approach was a challenge for Bourek who wished to break from traditional puppetry mannerisms and present new perspectives on theatre, tradition, and puppets. At first glance, his decision to collaborate with theatre actors may seem at odds with the inclinations of puppet theatre’s transformation in the second half of the 20th century. During this time, puppet theatre sought a unique aesthetic and specificity that did not imitate drama, establishing itself as an independent artistic genre. However, according to Kroflin, Zlatko Bourek played a crucial role in the evolution of Croatian puppetry from the traditional model to post-dramatic theatre. He gained more attention from audiences and

critics than probably all other Croatian puppet shows for adults combined, even though he created plays for traditional dramatic theatre and not puppet theatre. In fact, his work gained international popularity.

Conclusion

The example of puppet theatre sheds light on the issue of Central European diversity and its cultural message. Puppet theatre demonstrates that the tradition of travelling theatres since the 18th century has historically and spiritually connected the culture of Central Europe. Nonetheless, due to political events and experiences, puppet theatre has also included diverse creative approaches. Common features characterizing Central European puppet theatre after 1945 include an interest in adult dramaturgy, experimentation with a third genre as well as the staging of Shakespeare's plays, which were considered universal Renaissance material. The aesthetics used by creators to express their relationship to society in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Croatia differed. The division of Central Europe by the Iron Curtain into market economy countries, communist states, and Yugoslav socialism has led to different production approaches in puppet theatre. However, the theoretical foundations remained the same across the two "socialist camps" and the third genre. In the 1980s, the DRAK theatre represented the Czechoslovak puppet school and drew on its own historical and theoretical experience. Croatian Zlatko Bourek drew on the rich tradition of Central European puppetry. However, due to the greater political openness under Yugoslav socialism, he was also inspired by global trends such as the aesthetics of ugliness and a greater connection with Asian culture. Both the Czechoslovak and Bourek's aesthetics stem from the same theatrical culture and historical context and its spiritual culture, but are fundamentally influenced by different political contexts.

Using puppetry as an example, this text emphasizes that defining Central Europe solely based on the states behind the Iron Curtain is a mistake. Instead, we should consider the diverse and varied cultural expressions in the context of political and social specificities.

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Boika Sokolova*

Remembering the Past, Creating the Present

Address given at the Brno Theatralia Conference, 7 June 2023

Dear Colleagues, Dear Friends,

Thank you for inviting me to say a few words at the end of this remarkable Shakespeare conference. I am honoured, and genuinely moved by the invitation. These have been two days of discussion and exchange, filled with the pleasure of being with friends. My colleague Kirilka Stavreva and I, are privileged to have had the opportunity to work with you and be part of this intellectual community. I would also like to thank the Visegrád Fund for supporting this important and timely border-crossing Shakespeare project.

Shakespeare's work is at the heart of our professional lives; it is part of our cultural milieux and is embedded in our educational curricula. The translations of his plays and poetry into the languages we speak, and the centuries-old tradition of showing them on our stages, are some of the strands in the complex processes of our nations' self-identification as European. For this particular project, we chose to trace the routes of Shakespeare transcreations at a particular moment in time, which we all recognised as a moment of shared experience. The diversity of the part of the world where we live inevitably calls us to revisit, remember and reassess history. As we speak, Russia wages a full-scale military aggression against its neighbour, sovereign Ukraine. This heinous act has provoked a powerful affective response to the needs of our Ukrainian colleagues and friends. At this moment of crisis, I would like to turn to the past, to acts of support and empathy, to the power of intellectuals to shape history. Our *lieux de mémoire* are rich in abrasive histories; today, however, I would like to remember generosity and idealism.

Standing here in Brno, I address you as a Bulgarian speaking in the Czech heartlands, and pay a tribute of memory to four Czech intellectuals urged

* University of Notre Dame (USA) in England. bsokolov@nd.edu



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to affective, empathetic and constructive actions with long-term positive effect on Bulgaria.

During the first three decades after Bulgarian liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, an extraordinary number of Czech intellectuals and professionals arrived in the country and actively participated in the processes of nation building. At this point, the Czech lands were still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the spirit and struggles of the National Revival had already yielded fruit in the achievement of cultural autonomy. A highly educated Czech intellectual class had grown within the Austro-Hungarian imperial framework, while Bulgaria had acquired its political freedom from another empire and stood at the threshold of creating its modern self.

At this juncture, many Czechs came to work in the country and often stayed there for the rest of their lives. In true pioneering spirit, teachers, historians, artists, architects, musicians, jurists and businessmen engaged their professionalism in the creation of the institutions and industries of the young Bulgarian state. The revivalist ideas which had driven them, blended easily with Bulgarian revivalist aspirations, and provided much needed European expertise. What is extraordinary about these Bulgarian Czechs, (as they are collectively known), is how well they understood the damages caused by an alien imperial rule and how fruitfully they engaged in the transformation of the country they came to live in, by helping it grow into a modern nation.

Here I would like to pay tribute to some of them, each of whom, to my mind, realised on Bulgarian soil a central idea of the Czech Revival regarding the importance of education in the national language, the study of national history, and the promotion of national culture as pillars of identity. Shakespeare was also part of this legacy.

Thus, in 1879, a young historian, Konstantin Jireček (1854-1918), (later professor of History at Charles University and the University of Vienna, and future founder of Bohemian Balkan and Byzantine Studies), came to Bulgaria soon to become the first Minister of Education. As a student in Vienna, he had met Bulgarians who had risen to prominence after the liberation of the country and who had supported him in his work. Jireček honoured the trust placed in him by applying his knowledge and passion in building the new institutions of the state. He is widely recognised for putting Bulgarian education on a European footing, drafting essential rules for the teaching profession and devising curricula. He was instrumental in the revival of the Bulgarian Literary Society (out of which grew the Bulgarian Academy of Science), served as director of the National Library, extensively wrote about and popularised Bulgaria. His *History of the Bulgarians*, published in 1876 (in Czech and German) was the first book of Bulgarian history, based on modern research methodologies. It preserved its importance well down to the 1920 as “a book by which many generations of Bulgarians were brought up in love for their country” (Preface to the 1928 edition).

On Jireček's invitation, the brothers Karel Václav Škorpil (1859-1944) and Václav Hermenegild Škorpil (1958-1923) also arrived in Bulgaria in the 1880s. They worked as teachers of natural science and mathematics around the country. In their free time, the brothers, who had serious historical interests, travelled and conducted archaeological research. Unlike the imperial archaeologists who were at that time digging up Greece and Egypt, they did not take their finds to adorn an imperial museum. Instead, they preserved them in, and for, Bulgaria. Having settled in the city of Varna on the Black Sea, they founded the Varna Archaeological Society and the Varna Archaeological Museum, whose director Karel was for 30 years, until his death in 1944. In an act of gratitude and recognition for his contribution to Bulgarian archaeology and history, he was buried by the ruins of the first Bulgarian capital Pliska which he had excavated.

The Škorpil brothers, as well as Konstantin Jireček, are remembered with genuine popular appreciation. Their names are given to schools and inscribed in the forms of the Bulgarian landscape—two villages and a mountain peak in the Rila Mountain are named after Jireček. A village by the Black Sea, called Shkorpilovtsi, “remembers” Karel and Hermenegild, whose statues adorn the garden of the Varna Archaeological Museum. In the 2000s, Bulgarian Arctic expeditions gave their names to points in the Arctic—a Jireček promontory and a Škorpil Glacier now feature on the map of that continent.

Another Czech who left a mark is the actor and director Jozef Šmaha. He was invited to the helm of the National Theatre in Sofia in 1904, when the new theatre building—the second most impressive structure in the city of Sofia—was to be unveiled. Šmaha who had been involved in the establishment of the Prague National Theatre and was steeped in Revivalist ideas, was seen as the right person to rise to the occasion and create a repertory to match the highest standards. In his four seasons in Sofia, Šmaha oversaw the staging of more than thirty plays, and mounted three much-discussed Shakespeare productions—the first *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice*, with sets, wigs and properties brought from Prague, followed by *Julius Caesar*. On several occasions, Šmaha performed Lear and Shylock in Czech; he also trained major actors for the parts.

How do these histories speak to us today? To me, they show that in the convoluted strands of our long, multi-national, multi-lingual, post-imperial histories, there have been empathy, understanding and support. Among the ruinous events of time, the gracious acts of the Bulgarian Czechs are definitely worth remembering.

Tracing the Shakespearean strands of our shared history, as our current project does, allows us to cultivate the positive narratives for our professional *lieu de mémoire*. At a moment of aggressive re-drawing of frontiers, of fantastically re-written mythologised histories, of a war in which Ukraine is

fighting not only for its territorial survival but for its language, culture and identity, we recognise something familiar to all of us. On this critical cusp of their and our own history, the past tells us that we should stand by them, support their education, their scholarship, the retrieval of their historical narratives, their engagement with Shakespeare on their own terms. The work of the Czechs that came to Bulgaria in the 1880s shows how the seemingly invisible efforts of intellectuals can shape history.

In our conflicted, chequered, multi-lingual neck-of-the-woods, life has always had the potentiality of a Shakespearean plot. How we perform our part, will shape our common history and memory for decades to come.



Book Reviews

Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Visul unei nopți de vară, Cum vă place by Adrian Papahagi [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It*]. Iași: Editura Polirom, 2020. Pp. 132.

Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Sonete, Romeo și Julieta [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: Sonnets, Romeo and Juliet*]. Iași: Editura Polirom, 2020. Pp. 141.

Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Titus Andronicus, Hamlet [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: Titus Andronicus, Hamlet*]. Iași: Editura Polirom, 2021. Pp. 268.

Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Totu-i bine când se sfârșește cu bine, Măsură pentru măsură. [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: All's Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure*]. Iași: Editura Polirom, 2021. Pp. 178.

Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Troilus și Cresida, Timon din Atena. [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: Troilus and Cressida, Timon of Athens*]. Iași: Editura Polirom, 2022. Pp. 135.

Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Othello, Poveste de iarnă. [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: Othello, The Winter's Tale*]. Iași: Editura Polirom, 2022. Pp. 175.

Reviewed by *Monica Matei-Chesnoiu**

Of volumes introducing students and the general reader to Shakespeare, there is no scarcity. What is rare, however, is one that is not only exceptionally readable (in Romanian) but also well informed and sensible rather than eccentric. Papahagi's collection of *Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi* meets precisely those criteria. Papahagi continues his eminent career as a medievalist, a Shakespeare scholar and professor at Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca

* Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania. mchesnoiu@yahoo.com

(Romania) with this excellent new study. This series of critical studies in Romanian dedicated to Shakespeare's plays is part of an ongoing, ambitious, and well-timed project—initiated in collaboration with the prestigious publishing house Editura Polirom of Iași, Romania—of analysing the entire Shakespearean dramatic and lyrical corpus. Modelled on traditional university lectures published by the author at a later time (Harold Bloom, Tony Tanner, Giorgio Melchiori), Papahagi's exceptional project is a valuable addition to Romanian Shakespeare scholarship. The plays are grouped according to generic, thematic and chronological sequences, and the sonnets are dealt with cogently and intelligently. The translations of the Shakespearean plays used for citation belong to the most recent and accurate collection of Shakespeare's complete works in Romanian, edited (and, for certain plays, translated) by George Volceanov. The author compares extant modern Romanian translation of each play discussed. Throughout the texts, Papahagi carries his learning lightly, but to the experienced eye the learning is ever present; whereas the less-experienced eye is not burdened with a surplus of footnotes, endnotes, or scholarly digressions.

The central idea of the series is to look at Shakespeare's writing career as a mirror of human life, as experienced by the author whom we have learned to name "Shakespeare"—in an endearing title suggesting the multiple meanings that this name and the plays can take. The series of booklets is meant to be accessible to any Romanian reader or, as the author modestly mentions in "Lămurire preliminară" ["Preliminary Note"] (1-9), appended to each volume, "The size of the volumes is sufficiently small to accompany the reader to the theatre, in the lecture hall, or in a not-too-long voyage, associated with unavoidable waiting times in railway stations and airports" (Papahagi 6-7).¹ I really appreciate the author's pragmatic sincerity, which relates to the now-common idea that our "Shakespeare" has become suitable for expressing coherent thoughts in all cultures and spaces.

The volume entitled *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Visul unei nopți de vară, Cum vă place* [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It*] (2020) discusses these comedies, focusing on similar dramatic schemes (refuge to the woods, conflict resolution, restoring civilization, and multiple weddings), as well as the plays' symbolism. The author argues that the theatre's therapeutic value celebrates the tropes of fantastic comedy, resorting to the medieval carnivalesque tradition. In a multi-media combination, the volume is illustrated with the "suave" (53) representation of Bottom and Titania in the painting by Edwin Landseer or the sphynx guarding the entrance of *Parco dei Mostri* in the Gardens of Bomarzo, with the suitable quotation in Italian of the riddle engraved at the base of the statue (67). As Papahagi observes, "In the *Dream*, the symmetrical structure of

¹ All translations from Romanian are mine.

the Renaissance cosmos is deformed, scrambled. Overlapping worlds (spirits, kings, young lovers, clowns, vegetal and animal regnum) intersect or even blend, metamorphosing one into the other” (67). As for the “pastoral symphony” (77-78) in *As You like It*, Papahagi does justice to Rosalind by observing her “intelligence and charm” (78), as well as her “lucid antifeminism” (80) in the prose exchanges with Orlando, which contrast with her lover’s “lame” (81) poetry. Indeed, this volume achieves the rare accomplishment of persuading Romanian readers that there is still a lot to say about these two plays.

In *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Sonete, Romeo și Julieta* [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: Sonnets, Romeo and Juliet*] (2020), the author focuses on the idea of love as a combination of carnal pleasure and sublime desire, common to Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* and *Romeo and Juliet*, arguing that the play should be read “in tandem” (13) with the *Sonnets*. Papahagi correctly observes the play’s Petrarchan sonnet structure and the concept of formalized love in the sonneteering mode. As for Shakespeare’s sonnets, Papahagi cites and comments comparatively two Romanian translations (by Cristina Tătaru and Violeta Popa), discussing the subtleties of translation. An erudite medievalist and connoisseur of classical Greek and Latin, Old French and Chaucer’s English (as well as Italian), Papahagi moves freely through these languages and clears a way through the thicket of medieval and early modern perceptions of love, highlighting the concept’s equivocal attribute. As Papahagi observes, “Love’s ambiguous nature, the combination of its lofty and low status, is reflected in its literary management. Culture carries counter-culture within itself, tradition cannot be separated from anti-tradition, the worm resides from the beginning in the apple of the sublime, unfortunate, ethereal, Platonic courtly love” (17). Various Romanian translations of *Romeo and Juliet* (by Anca Ignat and Alexandru M. Călin, as well as the version by nineteenth-century poet Șt. O. Iosif) are analysed in this part of the study, focusing on their legibility and accuracy. Papahagi concludes this excellent and unconventional volume about love in the same contrastive manner in which it started, addressing both lay and erudite reader: “As a rule, students, who are unaccustomed with textual perversions, read the play as a poem of romantic love, projecting their own joy and suffering on the star-crossed lovers. Ultimately, it is the purest effect of major art: it troubles us because it is about us. The rest is philological subtlety, which is also some sort of parasitic discourse. Irony goes on beyond text” (130).

In the volume entitled *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Titus Andronicus, Hamlet* [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: Titus Andronicus, Hamlet*] (2021) Papahagi discusses issues of revenge in *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* and boldly states that Western culture can be divided into periods “before and after Hamlet” (16), while “the incredible art of Shakespearean tragedy begins with *Titus Andronicus*” (16). Indeed, there is no way of treating such a bloody revenge play as *Titus Andronicus* but lightly and self-ironically,

just as Shakespeare does. Nor can a critic say anything more about the revenge play where revenge does not happen (*Hamlet*), except by looking at it from the angle of self-irony, just as Hamlet does. As Papahagi concludes, in a unifying symmetry about the ending of *Hamlet*, closing all narrative threads, “The usurper is punished with the price of the philosopher prince’s life, and of so many collateral victims, the gravedigger continues his activity, Old Hamlet’s ghost is lost in oblivion, while Fortinbras’s ghost takes shape and sits on the throne. The king is dead, long live the king! *Long live the King!* We come back from where we started” (229). As an auspicious afterthought, the volume contains an Appendix commenting on the textual variants of *Hamlet* (Q1, Q2, the 1623 Folio, but also information about the *Ur-Hamlet*), as well as variants of Romanian translations of *Hamlet* (for scholarly or theatre use). As Papahagi observes, “What the philologist (an endangered species, cannibalized by critics, meta-critics, psychoanalysts and ideologists) questions is lost in popular editions, or on stage, especially when the play is performed on stage” (233). Papahagi ends this erudite textual reading of *Hamlet* self-referentially, with submerged allusions to the poem *L’infinito* by Giacomo Leopardi or to *Pequeño poema infinito* by Federico García Lorca: “Infinitely versatile, the text eludes us even when we seem to have grasped it: no edition can place it absolutely, just as no translation, no production and no book, like this one, which ends here, can grasp anything more than nuances of the ‘infinite poem’” (249).

Based on generic, thematic and chronological evidence, *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Totu-i bine când se sfârșește cu bine, Măsură pentru măsură* [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: All’s Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure*] (2021) examines these “problem” plays to show their “ambiguities” (19) and “symmetries” (103). The author mentions critical controversies generated by these plays, focusing on textual analysis and eruditely discussing the Italian sources, with comments and quotations from Italian critics (Giuseppe Petronio, Mariella Cavalchini), among others (E. M. W. Tillyard, Joseph G. Price, A. P. Rossiter, David M. Bergeron). Glossy illustrations visualize for the reader the Renaissance metaphors of love in Italian Renaissance frescos and paintings, as well as the painting *Helena and Bertram before the King of France* by Francis Wheatley, or frescoes and icons from Romanian monasteries. As for *All’s Well That Ends Well*, Papahagi reviews critical opinions about Helena’s name (Laurie Maguire, Alistair Fowler or Robert Grams Hunter), but also alludes to the name of the wife of the Romanian dictator, Elena Ceaușescu, as a contemporary link to famous (or notorious) women in history who had that name. As Papahagi writes, “Therefore, Helena’s name invokes at once *luxuria* and saintliness, damnation and redemption, marriage between sacred and profane love. *Nomen omen*: several ill-fated women, but one who is almost holy, have had this name in Romanian politics of

the past century” (37).² As concerns *Measure for Measure*, Papahagi restores the play to its well-deserved status, by saying that “Shakespeare transforms a fairly good story into a masterpiece” (94). Consulting modern Romanian translations by Leon Levițchi and George Volceanov, Papahagi comments intelligently on several translation choices. Concerning the multiply-mirroring effects in the play, Papahagi cogently observes: “Shakespeare gives us the feeling that he has discovered another dimension, which lacked in the art before him” (104).

In the volume *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Troilus și Cresida, Timon din Atena*. [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: Troilus and Cressida, Timon of Athens*] (2022) Papahagi is equally astute and insightful concerning his analyses of the two plays. As he has accustomed readers in the previous series, Papahagi starts with an eminent catch phrase, which is, in this case, “*Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1601) and *Timon of Athens* (c. 1605-1607) are Shakespeare’s anti-*Iliad* and anti-*Symposium*. Even if he probably read only fragments from Homer and ignored Plato, Shakespeare succeeds in giving these authors an anti-heroic and anti-idealistic replica or, more exactly, to revive Troy and Athens in a misanthropic and nihilistic mood” (13). The more “direct” (28) Romanian translation of *Timon of Athens* by Lucia Verona is preferred to the earlier one by Leon Levițchi. Papahagi manages to make this difficult Shakespearean play accessible to Romanian readers by discussing intelligently the play’s sexual puns and the ambivalent and cynical issues about war. As Papahagi rightfully observes about this play, “Venereal debauchery is accompanied by the decline of martial virtues” (61). For *Timon of Athens* (ideally matched with *Troilus and Cressida* in this volume), Papahagi’s catchphrase is: “*Timon of Athens* is the misanthropic and nihilistic antithesis between the Last Supper and Plato’s *Symposium*” (75). In a footnote, Papahagi ironically observes that this does not mean that Shakespeare knew Plato’s dialogue (75n1). Papahagi extends his argument as follows: “Shakespeare’s *Symposium* does not celebrate the love for the human race of the one who offers himself in Eucharistic communion, and it is not even agape or philosophical symposium dedicated to eros, but it is a merciless x-ray of atavistic, cannibalistic hunger” (77). “At Timon’s table,” as Papahagi smartly observes, “they do not devour ideas, as in Plato, but people, beginning with their opulent host, attacked by dozens of hungry mouths ...” (77). The discussion about the fickleness of Fortune is illustrated with a drawing by Jean Cousin from *Liber Fortunae*

² The author makes no specific reference to famous women in Romanian politics named Helena or Elena, implicitly inviting readers to do their own research. My estimation is that, apart from the notorious Elena Ceaușescu, Papahagi may refer to Elena Udrea or Elena Băsescu. None of these women, however, deserve to be noted in the Pantheon of famous Romanian female politicians, and this is why Papahagi keeps an ironic, wise, and reserved silence.

(1568) (86). There is also a photograph taken from the 1978 Romanian Production of *Timon of Athens* directed by Mihai Măniuțiu (118), sensibly commented upon (117).

In *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Othello, Poveste de iarnă*. [*Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi: Othello, The Winter's Tale*] (2022) the author couples the two plays about male jealousy astutely, integrating spatial and racial issues cogently. As Papahagi observes about Shakespeare's imaginary spaces, "In the European imaginary of the time, Africa, the homeland of the witch Sycorax in *The Tempest*, is the continent of magic" (19). The opposition between Venice and Cyprus in *Othello* is seen as a *descensus ad inferus*, a place of individual demarcation: "The voyage from Venice to Cyprus (island of Aphrodite-Venus, aurally associated with funeral cypresses, *cypressus*) is a true catabasis, the Fall of the human race, the return to the heart of darkness, that *heart of darkness* from which Othello hardly escaped" (20). As Papahagi continues his argument, "As in *The Tempest*, whose island is closer to Tunis than to Naples or, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where Alexandria represents disintegrating passion and Rome is structured reason, the road from the European centre to the Oriental periphery is equivalent to the fall from reason and order into passion and chaos" (20). Although I am unable to contest Papahagi's spatial argument here, I cannot but notice his male Eurocentric perspective. Yet Papahagi rebounds in the next statement: "We should note, incidentally, that Othello's and Desdemona's alienation begins with the voyage from Venice to Cyprus, which they take on separate ships" (20). Therefore, Papahagi does acknowledge, like Shakespeare, that there are several perspectives about the world, and they are conditioned by geography and space. In the section about *The Winter's Tale*, Papahagi starts from the play's source and correlates Hermione's name with the *hermae*, the sculpture-columns usually associated with Hermes. As Papahagi observes, "Pandosto is renamed Leontes, in order to suggest the king's leonine, violent and dominating character; the queen is given the name Hermione, which invokes the *trickster* and psychopomp Hermes, but also the *hermae*, in the shape of a column, as remarked by John Ruskin" (97). Interesting association, yet the queen's name might also have been inspired from the ancient Greek city of Hermion, in Argolis.

Tempting as it may be to compare *Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi* to Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, I will resist, except to say that where Bloom offers brilliant insights along with some exaggerations or overstatements, Papahagi's series of booklets is far more consistent. Romanian teachers and scholars will likely regard *Shakespeare Interpreted by Adrian Papahagi* as a reliable introduction for their students. Romanian doctoral students will welcome this series as an inspirational start for their research. The volumes include a brief and selected bibliography intended not only as suggestions for "Further Reading" but also as acknowledgements of

critical indebtedness. Papahagi's Romanian collection of critical texts has the potential to change the way we relate to a Shakespearean play—both to its texts and its subsequent critical interpretations. It may do so, however, at the expense of precisely those energies that have given international Shakespeare so much currency, inside and outside academia, over the past few decades especially.

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Chris Thurman and Sandra Young (eds.), *Global Shakespeare and Social Injustice. Towards a Transformative Encounter. The Arden Shakespeare.* London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2023. Pp. 269.

Reviewed by *Coen Heijes**

One of the latest publications diving into the relationship between Shakespeare and the topic of social (in)justice, bears as its subtitle “towards a transformative encounter.” It is an intriguing subtitle as it indicates on the one hand a process, a movement towards an encounter which has perhaps not yet fully materialized, if ever it will. Although we’re not there yet, the subtitle also suggests that the transformative encounter seems a possibility and that this publication may open up vistas of a fruitful encounter between Shakespeare and social injustice. This encounter then may somehow result in a transformation of Shakespeare theatre, pedagogy and scholarship. It is an ambitious subtitle and it most definitely wettened my appetite for a transformative encounter with the publication itself.

The publication had its roots in the eleventh Triennial Congress of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa, which took place in Cape Town in May 2019 and which included the academic conference, “Shakespeare and Social Justice: Scholarship and Performance in an Unequal World.” The two editors are likewise South African based, Chris Thurman at the University of the Witwatersrand and Sandra Young at the University of Cape Town. While the publication aims to address Global Shakespeare, the risk of basing oneself on post-conference essays inevitably means limiting oneself, which the editors also gracefully acknowledge. The authors of the eleven chapters comprising the volume are based at institutions in respectively South Africa (1), Canada (1), the United States (6), the United Kingdom (2) and Germany (1), which means that the traditional dominance of Anglophone academic institutions is, unfortunately, perpetuated in a volume dedicated to “Global” Shakespeare.

Through the essay in the volume, the editors aim at demonstrating “the potential for radically transformative work that more recent trends in Shakespeare studies and innovative theatre-making invite and enable” (p. 5). After a general introduction, the editors have organised the eleven essays in four different sections. The first part is titled “Scholarship and social justice. Questions for the field” and it comprises three essays, the first of which is by

* University of Groningen, the Netherlands. c.p.a.heijes@rug.nl

Susan Bennett (Rethinking “Global Shakespeare” for social justice). In it, she criticizes the Anglocentric approach to Global Shakespeare and its almost consumerist approach to non-English Shakespeare activities and challenges Shakespeareans to become more inclusive in confronting the challenges of our times. One of these challenges, the increased displacement of persons on account of climate change, war, persecution or poverty, is explored in the second chapter, in an essay by Linda Gregerson (Caliban in an era of mass migration). Gregerson explores the theme of Caliban, Sycorax, migration, postcolonialism, ownership and resistance by way of two twentieth-century novels which build upon *The Tempest: Water with Berries* by George Lamming (1971) and *Indigo* by Marina Warner (1992). Gregerson argues that Lamming’s novel replicates and intensifies the racial anxieties, the paranoia and brutality of colonized and colonizers and after the experience there is no way back to the previous “state of innocence or origin” (p. 46). In *Indigo*, where Warner changes the scene between the sixteenth and seventeenth century fictional Caribbean island of Liamuiga and twentieth century London, the tone is slightly more optimistic, Gregerson argues, although the themes of coming to terms with the disruptive and oppressive effects of colonial settlement and postcolonial sentiment are strongly felt. For Gregerson, the strength of these novels lies in moving beyond “polemically driven analysis [which] is unlikely to capture the full critical or contestatory powers of novels, plays and other literary form or performative modes of engagement” (p. 55). The essay by Alexa Alice Joubin (What makes Global Shakespeare an exercise in ethics) rounds off the first section by providing a wide overview of Shakespearean productions and arguing the necessity of context-based cultural meaning. Joubin rightfully argues against the problematic notion that the “global is imagined to be whatever the United States and the United Kingdom is not” (p. 71), a statement which gains even more strength in a volume dominated by academic institutions from these two countries.

The next three sections of the volume each engage with Shakespeare within a specific context related to social (in)justice. Part two is called “resisting racial logics” part three “imagining freedom with Shakespeare” and part four bears the title “scrutinizing gender and sexual violence.” Part two kicks off with an essay by Dyese Elliott-Newton, “Making whiteness out of ‘nothing’: The recurring comedic torture of (pregnant) Black women from medieval to modern.” The starting point of her essay lies in the treatment of a Black woman, eight months pregnant, who was arrested in 2015 in a parking lot after bringing her second grader to school. The officer forced her to the concrete, stomach first, ignoring her screams that she was pregnant. It’s a horrific image and Elliott-Newton draws upon medieval texts, in particular *Morkinskinna* (1220) as the birthplace of these stories and early modern texts as instruments of their propagation. Basing herself largely on Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness* and

Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, in particular Act 3, scene 5, where Lancelot is accused of making a Black woman pregnant, Elliott-Newton argues how the Black woman's body "functions as a safe and useful space to bury the various social anxieties that challenge the 'perfection' and 'supremacy' of whiteness" (p. 83). The next two chapters in this section likewise build upon *Merchant of Venice* and link its characters and themes with present-day events to argue how and why the play still resonates so much across time and audiences. In chapter five (Feeling in justice. Racecraft and *The Merchant of Venice*), Derrick Higginbotham focuses in particular on the generally underexplored characters of Antonio and Gratiano to explore the topic of white fragility and white rage in their treatment of Shylock. In the final chapter of this section (Marking Muslims. The Prince of Morocco and the racialization of Islam in *The Merchant of Venice*) Hassana Moosa aims at demonstrating how Shakespeare racializes Islam by replacing the "theological essence with a series of cultural non-religious characteristics to produce the image of a 'Muslim'" (p. 121). In doing so, Moosa traces present-day Islamophobia back to Shakespeare's representation on the early modern stage of the Prince of Morocco. While one might argue that other Shakespeare plays should have been included as well in a section on racial logics, the bundling of the analysis around *The Merchant of Venice* does provide a clear focus and allows for cross-comparison, which helps tighten the argument.

Part three of the volume, engaging with imprisonment and Shakespeare, starts with an essay by Kai Wiegandt (Shakespeare in and on exile. Politicized reading and performative writing in the Robben Island Shakespeare) which discusses a series of markings made by the political prisoners on Robben Island to the secretly circulated copy of Shakespeare's works which was smuggled into the prison. Highlighting marked passages from *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *King Lear*, *Henry V* and *Hamlet* Wiegandt explores the interaction between exile, banishment, nationalism and colonization within the context of apartheid and South Africa. In the second essay of part three ("Men at some time are masters of their fates." The Gallowfield Players perform *Julius Caesar*) Rowan Mackenzie reveals the potential for healing and moving beyond the designated prisoner role that acting can have on inmates, in this specific case by zooming in on the production by a prison-group company in 2019 of *Julius Caesar*. While fully aware that Shakespeare is far from a panacea, Mackenzie highlights the joy and pride the production brought to actors and audiences.

The final part of the volume, engaging with gender and sexual violence in relation to Shakespeare's plays, starts with an essay by Kirsten Dey (The "sign and semblance of her honour." Petrarchan slander and gender-based violence in three Shakespearean plays) which discusses the potential for destructiveness in Petrarchan rhetoric and gendered romantic idealization. In doing so, Dey bases herself on *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Cymbeline* and *Othello*. In this comedy, romance and tragedy, Dey argues, Shakespeare created

disenchanted and (potentially) violent Petrarchan lovers and ultimately “makes a case for justice for women, thereby calling upon the audience—then and now—to take urgent action” (p. 190). In chapter 10 (Open-gendered casting in Shakespeare performance), Abraham Stoll explores the increasing normalization of open-gendered casting by discussing two productions of the University of San Diego Shiley Graduate Theatre Program, *Julius Caesar* in 2018 and *Twelfth Night* in 2019. In a detailed case-study, he discusses the casting, dramaturgical and acting choices and how they worked at being more than “mere commentaries on gender politics but as productions that engaged with the full gamut of emotions and ideas that are to be found in such great plays” (p. 220). In the final chapter of the volume (Teaching *Titus Andronicus* and Ovidian myth when sexual violence is on the public stage) Wendy Beth Hyman explores another case study, this time that of a classroom working on *Titus Andronicus* at the time when the controversial Brett Kavanaugh hearings for the Supreme Court took place. It is an impressive essay, in which the voices of students themselves are also heard, that touches upon tough questions revolving around whether or not we ought to teach works of art that dramatize rape and brutality, and if so, how. Hyman offers her essay as an encouragement to her “fellow teacher-scholars who are never sure whether to avoid or dive into these really tough issues—the deaths, the national tragedies, the scandals, the crises on-campus and off” (p. 245). Her answer to the question is an unequivocal yes and it is fitting that a volume dedicated to social (in)justice should end with this essay. If there’s any place in which we, as Shakespearean scholars, can make a difference, it would be in the intimacy of the classroom tackling beauty and ugliness head-on. And while I might argue this volume as a whole has caveats, such as the lack of non-Anglophone institutions, most of these caveats are unavoidable in publications on Shakespeare and social (in)justice. The terrain covered is so wide and diverse that it is virtually impossible to be complete and coherent. Having said that, this is a vibrant, relevant and thoughtful selection of essays which highlight both the potential and the pitfalls in working with Shakespeare to address the challenges that face us today. We need many more of these books.



Theatre Reviews

***Richard II*. Adapted by Brad Fraser; conceived and directed by Jillian Keiley. Stratford Festival, Stratford, Ontario, Canada, 2023.**

Reviewed by *Cynthia J. Cyrus**

And Then There Were the Disco Angels: *Richard II* at the Stratford Festival

Imagine Richard II, divinely sanctioned, supremely self-assured—and strutting his stuff in a disco-club world of the 1980s. Surround him with an angel choir, with flat white wings, to frame and echo the king's actions. Place them on the dance floor, with Richard's dramatic shimmies and upward-reaching arms the most exaggerated, the most noticeable, the kingliest of actions. The Stratford Festival introduces us to a profoundly queer Richard II, one whose lusts and affections match his sense of the place ordained for him in the world. His costume is vivid, bordering on garish: vibrantly white leggings, bedecked with abundant white fringe; his also-white crop-tops which alternate with the swish of a negligée-like sheer ruffled robe (Image 1, below); and his platform boots. These match his grinding, thrusting, human-desirous dance moves. Yet, disco is here a kind of self-betrayal, for the habits of the club so distort the actions of the king that he must, as the story goes, be both unfriended and unkinged, his disco ball transformed into the dome of a prison cell. His friends—Bushy and Green in their fancy black costumes and a black-and-white garbed Aumerle who becomes the focus of the king's amatory seduction—fall away as we shift to the prissier office subculture of grey suits with ironed creases and the more ordered actions of Bolingbroke, Lady (!) Northumberland, and a glitteringly-garbed Hotspur.

In this profoundly moving production, director Jillian Keiley commissioned a score from Rhapsodius (also known as Andrew Craig), a composer and omni-talented musician active in the Ontario arts scene. Rhapsodius founded and continues to direct the Culchahworks Arts Collective, with its strong emphasis

* Vanderbilt University, US. cynthia.cyrus@vanderbilt.edu

on creating musical spaces for people of colour (“About Us”). In terms of his own musical style, he seeks a “nexus point at the centre of Black music genres that originated in North America and the Caribbean” (Craig). For the Stratford Festival production, Rhapsodius has provided a disco-centered score to match the disco-affiliated king. His score calls regularly on the tropes of club music: pulsing dance beat, the thrum of harmonic layering with its repetitive motivic patterns, and the superimposition of upper-register strings, voices, or electronica that add a sense of tunefulness without distraction. Voices are wordless, and tunes dissolve back into the texture without ever fully reaching preeminence. Thus, the audience is guided to watch the dancers’ movements, for gaudy costumes and visual displays ultimately surpass even the catchy auditory element that provokes them.

But disco is not the only kind of music in this production. The events that follow the invasion of Ireland in particular call forth different techniques. A simple melody over a drone expands into parallel moving thirds as Hotspur gives an (inserted) report of the dissipation of Bolingbroke’s cash legacy, for example, music that becomes the dirge of Richard’s hope as we come to his meditation that he must shift from “gay apparel [to] an almsman’s gown” (3:3:154). Most notable of these musical gestures is the choral tone cluster that accumulates as Richard gives up crown and scepter (4:1:212ff). The choir starts by adding voices below and then above a sustained reference pitch to create a wall of dissonance, an aural manifestation of the tensions of this act of self-undoing, as Richard forswears the “pomp and majesty” of his kingly office and releases “all duteous oaths.” Rhapsodius amplifies the intensity of this scene through varied instrumentation as Richard gives away one by one all the elements that formerly defined his world, until there is a release into the thrumming footsteps that accompany the debased king’s march to the tower. This unkinging is, significantly, a palindromic moment with the very beginning of the production. At the start of the evening, before we even arrive at the club scene, the thumping of a booted procession intersects with the high vocalizations gradually pulled outward by seconds into a tone cluster before giving way with an abrupt reveal to the disco language and dance-club energy of the nightclub crowd. From boot-stomps to sound walls to dance and back: Richard’s journey is acoustically managed.

This is far from the first disco-inspired reimagining of a Shakespearean play. From the “discotheque atmosphere” of a 1981-1982 Finnish production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Mustanoja 239) to the Sydney, Australia original production of *Disco Nights*—Wesley Colford’s cross between *Twelfth Night* and the 1970s dance idiom—disco music has been a creative tool for what Colford characterizes as “flair and theatrics” (qtd. in Patterson D3). Disco seems to match well with Shakespearean comedy; it also situates Shakespeare as something relatively modern, as Kevin Wetmore argues. He believes that

the use of rock and disco brings Shakespeare into a seeming distance of decades rather than centuries, “making his work only twenty years distant in the past rather than four hundred” (59). It is a publicly approachable Shakespeare, in other words, adapted to modern sensibilities and appealing to the listening habits of a contemporary audience.

But the disco activity of the Stratford Festival’s *Richard II* takes a more serious approach to the popular genre, spinning out world centered on a hedonistic, queer disco. Set in the 1970s/1980s disco realm of New York City, the production is imagined in a world that post-dates the 1979 Disco Demolition Night at Chicago’s Comiskey Park, where an openly disco-hostile crowd was invited to smash disco records in an event that led to a riot. What had been the casual joy of the early disco movement was more fraught after the event, which had strong homophobic overtones (Finamore; Hubbs 231-232; Lawrence 242-243). Of course, continuities in disco culture from the 1970s to the 1980s include a three-fold emphasis: first, on a heterogeneous dance clientele (echoed here with the varied casting within the Angel Army), second, on what Tim Lawrence has dubbed “collective sociality” of club choreographies (234), and third, on the varied nature of the music sampled over the course of a particular evening. All three elements are echoed in the score and choreography of the Stratford production. But we see as well the open tensions of this post-Comiskey disco of the 1980s, in which a disco-club crowd would itself be aware of the disrepute of the genre among the stodgier members of society. The setting makes visible through choreography, costume design and lighting choices the aesthetic and political tensions which the style (and its social milieu) called to mind. Indeed, the Stratford production capitalizes on the resultant social marginalization of the disco crowd: we are fully aware that there’s an “in crowd” surrounding Richard, and a disapproving one looking on with disdain.

A second element specific to the 1980s iteration of disco is the sweeping impact of the AIDS epidemic. As part of his adaptation strategy, which shortens the play and shifts its footing to the club environment, Brad Fraser has chosen to borrow elements from elsewhere. He turns to *Henry IV, Part 2*, for instance, and inserts the claims of declining health of Falstaff’s recruit Bullcalf captured in a “cough [...] which I caught with ringing in the King’s affairs” (3:2:187). Shakespeare’s portrayal of illness maps neatly onto the pervading concern of the disco community, for, as Nina de Koning and others have discussed at length, AIDS as well as an emotive sexuality are each part of the psychological complexities of the disco experience of the 1980s.

In a similar scholarly vein, Adam Hansen has made the point that disco sits at the intersection of gay and black cultures (50), and the production here casts the leading roles accordingly. Like the 2020 production of *Richard II* by Saheem Ali, both Richard II and Bolingbroke are played by black actors in what Ali has characterized as “color conscious casting,” which adds a layer of racial

dynamic to the interpretation of the play (Dale 2020). In watching Stratford's Richard II (Stephen Jackman-Torkoff) transfer the crown to Bolingbroke (Jordin Hall), we watch a power transfer from one person of colour to another. But whereas Ali's production added gender to the mix by making Bolingbroke female, the Stratford production dwells on questions of human attraction—queer desire—, the visually enacted lusts of the king an external signal of his interior fallibility.

Yet the critique on offer here is not directed toward what amounts to the affirmational and upbeat club environment, that imagined land where dancing angels dwell (Image 2), but instead addresses the cruelty of bland bureaucracy. As the grey suits of Bolingbroke's faction (Image 3) triumph over the flashier world of clubbing, the petty meanness of having Richard enumerate his sins—his acts and even his identity—evokes the modern truisms of the “nothing to hide” argument. The Countess of Northumberland, played in this re-gendered role by Sarah Orenstein, shows us the political reality of a state which possesses the power both to decree an end to private detail and to force the individual to become complicit with telling on themselves. This strips away what philosopher Emilio Mordini frames as “an inner space, which is called ‘private’:

It is not essential that this space holds anything, yet it is essential that each individual has the impression that they own the keys to enter this space and have the power to open and close the door of this private realm. Privacy is not in what we hide but in having the power to hide something. (257)

With the loss of his kingship, Richard has lost the power to defend this inner sanctum; he is compelled bureaucratically to “read / These accusations and these grievous crimes / Committed by your person and your followers” (4:1:232-234). Such a tolling-out of sins, demanded repeatedly by Lady Northumberland, ineluctably attempts to reframe Richard's dance-energized disco persona as a failure. He has neglected to construct an interiority appropriate to the kingship. Yet even in this moment of undoing, this Richard, once proud in white fringe, still possesses something of his own: that grief which “lies all within” (4:1:307), with reverberations from his earlier breakdown at the death of friends Bushy and Green. But just as the partisans in grey suits lacked an appreciation of Richard's club scene, they are equally indifferent to his losses, “the unseen grief / That swells with silence in the tortured soul” (4:1:309-310). Bureaucrats, as both Shakespeare play and Stratford production show, lack empathy. Grey on the outside; equally grey on the inside: costume can be a powerful metaphor.

Throughout the production, imagery is handled through moveable but sparse staging. Mirrored boxes move about to shape the spaces of the stage. Similarly, plastic sheeting can unfurl to become the surface of a pool, can cover a character to make visual the pressure of a coughing fit, can become a shroud.

A few props—the disco ball, the mirror, the sticks which, hooked to the former disco ball, form prison walls—enhance the story, but often the physical positioning of characters tells us who is “in” a conversation and who might be overhearing it. (The Duchess of York’s wheelchair is not a prop but a mobility tool, which speaks to the inclusive casting of the production.) More memorable are the costumes, closely tied to political identities; costume designer Bretta Gerecke deserves a special shout-out for these important visual clues to character type and affiliation as the images (below) show.

Given the affirmational queer disco setting of the Stratford production, there are visual parallels to queer productions from an earlier generation. Chad Allen Thomas’s research on Citizens Theatre (Citz) from Scotland, for instance, has explored the ways in which their productions were simultaneously queer and “Shakespeare.” Thomas finds that Citz productions were “typified by young actors, outrageous actions, raw sexuality, irreverent tone, and frenetic energy” (246), and much the same could be said of the Stratford performance. Both the Citz production of *Cleopatra* (1972) and the Stratford production of *Richard II* (2023) share a focus on the body, clothed and unclothed, as a focus of desire, and on the sexual energy of the young cast. The Citz, Thomas notes, “puts [the actor’s] masculine body on display, exposing his bare torso, pectoral definition, and flat chest” (260). This could equally well apply to Jackman-Torkoff’s costuming, with its strikingly androgynous clothing and ample glimpses of skin. There is a generational difference, however. Whereas queer strategies at the Citz often focused on “cross-gender casting [...] and a coarse acting style” (Thomas 248), the Stratford approach is more comfortable with queerness and more self-consciously inclusive in its approach. Rather than the testosterone emphasis of Citz’s mostly-male casting, Keiley has opted for a comfortably queer Richard, a seducible Lord Aumerle, for women as wives and mothers, re-gendered roles for Northumberland and Scroop, and for the passionate, energized omni-sexuality of the disco floor.

In *Shakespeareer*, Judith Brown characterized Richard II a “superficial king, the king of glam.” For her, King Richard wants “a world tailored to his desires,” but the play, in her reading, “only just *alludes* to Richard’s pleasures—what it actually narrates is their loss and Richard’s painful struggle to understand, then inhabit, this loss” (287, 288). The Stratford production, in contrast to the reading Brown provides, pulls Richard’s pleasures into both visual and acoustical focus. We revel with the revelers, and take our joys from the joyous, carnivalesque milieu. And then we, alongside the once-mighty king, watch and listen as glamour is curtailed and the notes of the vibrant, invigorating score come to an untimely end.

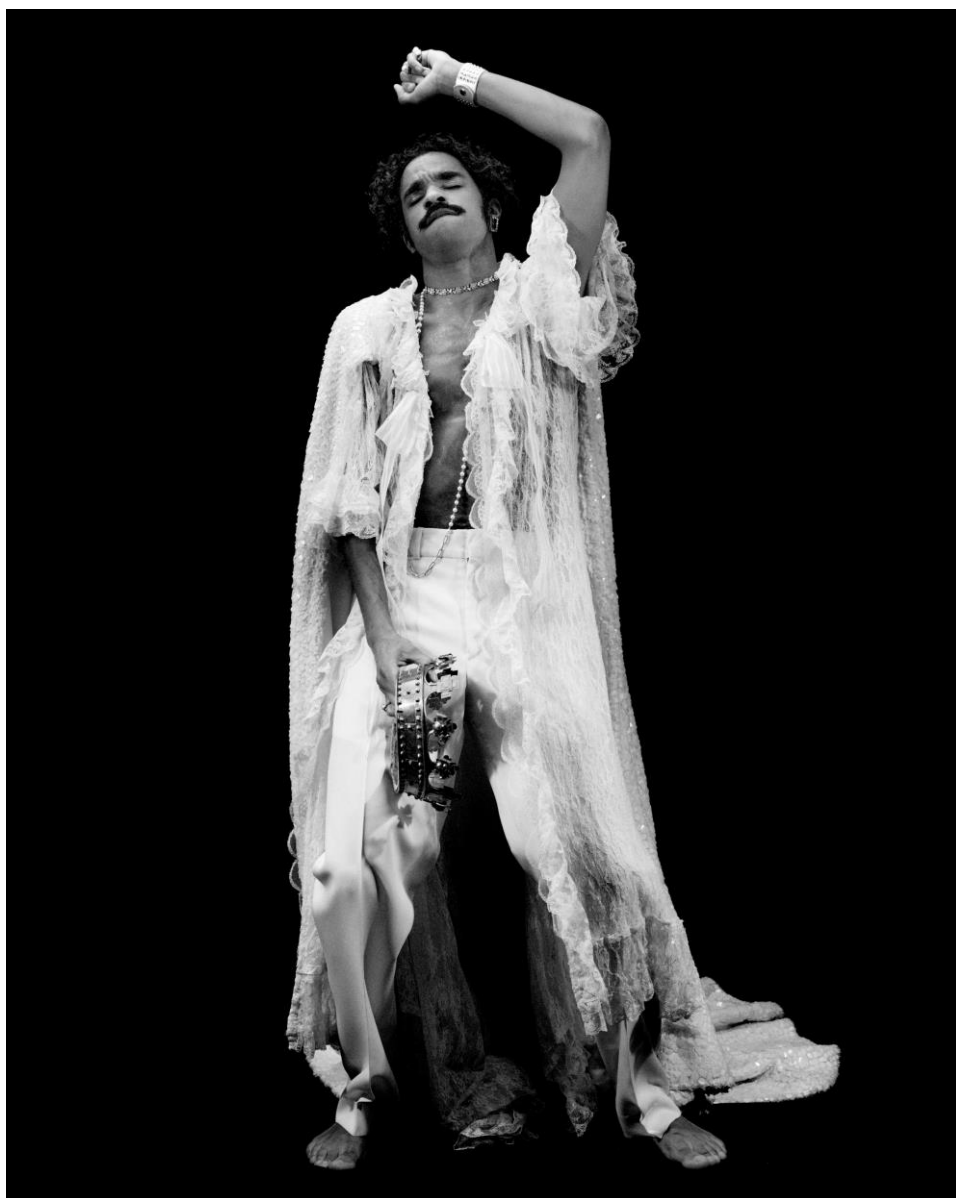


Image 1: Stephen Jackman-Torkoff as King Richard II
Photograph by Ted Belton



Image 2: Stephen Jackman-Torkoff (centre) as King Richard II with members of the company. Photograph by David Hou



Image 3: Stephen Jackman-Torkoff as King Richard II, Jordin Hall as Henry Bolingbroke (centre-left), Sarah Orenstein as Helena Percy, Countess of Northumberland (left), Olivia Sinclair-Brisbane and Alex Wierzbicki as angels
Photograph by David Hou

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