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The Cultural Role and Political  
Implications of Poland's 1947  
Shakespeare Festival

# ABSTRACT

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Emerging from the atrocities of war, and still hoping to avert the results of the Yalta conference during which the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe, including Poland, were “handed over” to Stalin, Poland’s 1947 Shakespeare theatre festival was a sign of courage and defiance. At the Festival 23 productions of 9 Shakespeare’s dramas were staged by theatres in 11 towns, with its finale in Warsaw. My paper will show that the Festival was an attempt to demonstrate both Polish cultural links with Europe, and to subvert Marxist ideology and Soviet culture.

**Keywords:** Communist regime, World War 2, Marxist ideology, Soviet culture, Shakespeare in Poland, Cold War.

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The end of World War II, from which Poland emerged victorious, but devastated, not only inspired joy of liberation, but also an urge to revive the Arts. The main aim of the national Shakespeare Festival held from 17 July to 31 July 1947 was to activate Polish cultural life; however, it also became implicated in politics. As an active participant in the political events of Polish history, Shakespeare found himself at the bulwark of democracy amidst the encroaching communist enslavement of the Central and South-Eastern Europe (Kujawińska Courtney, “Celebrating Shakespeare” 23–25).

Still hoping to avert the results of the Yalta conference during which the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe, including Poland, were “handed over” to Stalin, Poland’s 1947 Shakespeare theatre festival was a sign of courage and defiance. It was not only an attempt to demonstrate Poland’s connection to Western Europe, while at the same time subverting Marxist ideology and Soviet culture, but also an attempt to reclaim the Polish theatre’s pre-war international status. It is significant that Shakespeare was selected by the Polish theatre as the patron of this ambitious endeavour.<sup>1</sup>

The Shakespeare Festival was probably inspired by Waclaw Borowy’s article “W jakich przekładach grać Szekspira” (“According to Which Translation Are We to Act Shakespeare?”) published in the newly-created monthly *Teatr* in 1945. The opening lines of his work, “after six years of theatrical hunger we thirst after GREAT THEATRE,” succinctly evaluated the aspiration of the Polish people after World War II:

We are neither particularly interested in any kind of light entertainment (which we would wholeheartedly welcome in some other time), nor are we interested even in the so-called regular theatre repertory. We long for GREAT POETRY (presented . . . in great renditions). (27–28)<sup>2</sup>

Expanding his line of reasoning, Borowy explained that theatre lovers unquestionably yearned for Shakespeare, who for centuries had been regarded as one of the most important poets and dramatists in the Polish arts. To prove his point, the critic presented his comparative study of the most eminent Polish translations of Shakespeare’s texts, stressing their role both in pre-war Poland, and in post-war theatre. Observing that “the root of our theatrical life is sound, despite the disasters of war and occupational hecatombs,” Borowy added: “for sure the talk of staging a [Shake-

<sup>1</sup> Wiktor Hahn (251–60) and Jan Ciecchowski present a full documentation of the Festival. See also Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney, “Celebrating Shakespeare” (23–26).

<sup>2</sup> If not indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

sppeare] play will soon begin in a theatrical milieu” (“W jakich przekładach” 27–28).<sup>3</sup> His prediction came partially true. Not only did the Festival help rejuvenate Polish theatrical life, but also Polish cultural life in general.

Indeed, the Festival was a profound expression of human resilience, challenging, emboldening and igniting theatrical circles. Yet, at the same time, it also revealed the impoverished state of Polish culture after World War II. Throughout the war there were no Polish productions in the territories under German occupation where the anti-Polish politics of the Office of Racial Policy (*das Rassenpolitische Amt*) had been enforced since its creation on 23 November 1939.<sup>4</sup> The Nazi policies were aimed at the cultural genocide of Slavs, including Poles. Places of learning and culture—universities, schools, libraries, museums, cinemas and theatres—were either closed or designated “Nur für Deutsche” (“Only for Germans”). Thousands of university professors, teachers, lawyers, artists, writers, priests and other members of the Polish intelligentsia were arrested and executed or transported to concentration camps. The reasoning behind the policy was clearly articulated by a Nazi Gauleiter (district governor): “In my district [any Pole] who shows signs of intelligence will be shot” (qtd. in Kujawińska Courtney, “In This Hour” 125).

Under the control of the German propaganda machinery, in some cinemas Polish people were allowed to see Nazi German movies, preceded by propaganda newsreels. The situation was even worse in theatres. Yet, the Polish Government in Exile in Great Britain created the Polish Underground State, an underground administration that operated in Poland throughout the war. It was the only political entity of this kind in the territories occupied by the Germans in Europe. Especially significant for the preservation of Polish culture was the role of the Department of Education and Culture, and the Department for the Elimination of the Effects of War.

Beginning in 1940, the underground theatres, namely in Warsaw and Cracow, were coordinated by the Secret Theatre Council. The underground actors (among them Karol Wojtyła, later Pope John Paul II), many of whom had officially mundane day jobs, secretly presented poetry readings and performed plays written by Polish national artists. These activities were intended to preserve and sustain Polish culture and its national values, and to inspire resistance to a systematic anti-Polish policy that posed

<sup>3</sup> Later that year Borowy published his evaluation of Shakespeare’s translations in Poland, and he continued this subject the following year (“Przekłady Shakespeare’a” 25).

<sup>4</sup> For the theatrical activities of Poles outside the Polish territories occupied by the Nazis see Kujawińska Courtney, “In This Hour” (112–42).

the threat of total cultural annihilation. In his article “The Extermination of the Warsaw Theatres,” published in May 1946, Bohdan Korzeniewski described the state of Warsaw theatrical life in 1939 when there were 14 repertory theatres, one operetta and 4 musical houses. By 8 May 1946 none remained: during the course of the war approximately 84% of the city was destroyed due to German and Soviet mass bombings, heavy artillery fire, a planned demolition campaign, revolts, uprisings (Korzeniewski 36–41).

Yet the material destruction of the capital and of the majority of cities and towns in Poland did not destroy the nation’s spiritual endurance and vivacity, and Shakespeare was to become a part of the project to bring culture in Poland back to life. The acts and regulations prepared and published by the Secret Theatre Council during the war had a significant influence upon the post-war theatrical life: the Council also stressed the role of world dramaturgical classics, among them Shakespeare, in the revival of theatrical activities in Poland (Lambda 49–71).

The first announcement about this Festival appeared in *Gazeta Ludowa* (*People’s Newspaper*) created in 1945 as an official daily publication of PSL (traditionally translated as Polish Peasants’ Party).<sup>5</sup> Both the newspaper and the party were treated as the centre of the anti-communist opposition, led by Stanisław Mikołajczyk, a Polish politician, who had been Prime Minister of the Polish government in exile during World War II, and later Deputy Prime Minister in post-war Poland, before the USSR took political control of Poland. Since the Shakespeare Festival was to demonstrate strong Polish affinity with Western European values, particularly with Great Britain, it was not surprising that Mikołajczyk’s newspaper was especially interested in its organization.<sup>6</sup>

The *Gazeta Ludowa* announcement of the Festival, which appeared as early as May 1946, gave a full report of the conference organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts during which the Shakespeare Festival was advertised. The news of the Festival, which was also to have an element of

<sup>5</sup> The communists limited its circulation to circa 70,000 issues on a daily basis and 80,000 issues on holidays. Media specialists stress the modern layout of the newspaper: it had a supplement for women, pages devoted to literary and cultural news, and additional space for current social actions or anniversaries. *Gazeta Ludowa* was closed in autumn 1947, after Mikołajczyk’s escape to Great Britain when the election results were announced and Poland officially became a communist state.

<sup>6</sup> After all, the Allied leaders, particularly Winston Churchill, tried to bring about a resumption talks between Mikołajczyk and Stalin, even at the time when it was obvious that the Soviet armed forces, not those of the Western Allies, would seize Poland from German occupation, and the Poles feared that Stalin intended both imposing Communism on Poland and annexing Poland’s eastern territories, which were populated by Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians.

a theatrical contest, was enthusiastically received by all the Polish theatres. They quickly sent their Festival repertory to the Ministry. A detailed survey of the dates demonstrates that the theatres in a way pressed the Ministry to prepare the Festival regulations.

Although at the beginning of 1947 more and more articles appeared in the Polish press on the achievements of the Soviet theatre, and its Sovietization via Social Realism, Shakespeare unquestionably occupied a paramount position in the overall content of *Teatr*. This monthly periodical played a significant role both in promoting the Festival and in pressuring the Ministry to keep to its commitment to organize the important event. Each of its issues published from May 1946 to July 1947 contained articles devoted to the importance of Shakespeare in Polish culture (e.g., Rulikowski 3–15). Theatre specialists, as well as literary and culture critics, wrote about the international position of Shakespeare in the world civilization. Some presented critical analyses of his plays, others centred on the universality and modernity of his works.

The earliest Marxist approaches to his plays were of an elementary character. Bolesław Hajdukiewicz, for example, criticized Shakespeare's plays for their interest in bourgeois values at the expense of those belonging to lower social classes. Analyzing *Twelfth Night* from a modern Polish theatre-goer's point of view, the critic asked:

Should Viola . . . dreaming about turning herself into "a willow cabin" [at the lover's gate] to shut her soul there, need the aristocratic accoutrements for expressing her simple and honest love? (39)

Calling for socialist and democratic interpretations of his plays to make him even more appealing to the audience, Hajdukiewicz explains that, although Shakespeare is a product of his time, his significance is universal (38–43).

It was sheer luck that that the Festival and its preparation were in full swing between June 1946 and July 1947. If it had started later, the event would have been cancelled. In July 1946, a forged national plebiscite known as the "three times YES" referendum, was held, followed by elections in January 1947. The subsequent "miracle in the ballot boxes," which gave communists 80% of the vote, effectively ended multiparty Polish politics. Mikołajczyk, who would have likely become Prime Minister had the election been honest, immediately resigned from the government in protest. Facing arrest, he left the country in April.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The popular tradition has it that Winston Churchill, upon seeing him in London, apparently remarked: "I am surprised you made it out alive." Yet, in London Polish

Although twenty three theatres initially expressed their participation in the Festival, ten resigned. The state of their ensembles (limited number of actors and actresses) and financial difficulties (scarce or no state subsidies) were given as the justification for their decision. Eventually only five theatres participated. They presented nine of Shakespeare's plays—three productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; two each of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing*; and one each of *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* (K. M. 22–24).

The choice of the plays is not surprising—nine comedies, one romance and only two tragedies. It is believed that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which attracted the attention of three theatre companies, was so popular because it was relatively easy to present with a limited and even amateurish cast.<sup>8</sup> Before the publication of Jan Kott's essay (1964), in which he demonstrated the submerged bestial instinct in the humans unleashed by the fairy world in this “most erotic of Shakespeare's plays” (Kott 248), the play was treated as a charming trifle full of gossamer and moonshine.

The Festival lasted for three months and seven days. It began on 23 April, the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, with the production of *The Taming of the Shrew* staged by the Polish Theatre in Bielsko-Biała, and it ended on 31 July 1947 with the presentation, in Warsaw, of *As You Like It* by the Teatr Wybrzeże from Gdynia. Over these three months the Jury of the Festival travelled to see the productions staged all over Poland. As a reporter of one of the opening nights wrote, the staging of a Shakespeare play:

... constituted a considerable challenge for the local theatre, whose staff consisted only of twenty people. To earn their living they had to tour the province, struggling with financial and material deprivation, and frequently with an ill will of various decision-makers and governing bodies. Despite their daily difficulties and mundane problems, the troupe showed an immense ardour, fervour and enthusiasm in their production. If this exhilarated atmosphere spreads all over Poland, the “Shakespeare fever” will bring forth blessed fruition. (J. K. 47)

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government in exile regarded Mikołajczyk as a traitor for having co-operated with the Communists. He emigrated to the United States, where he died in 1966. In June 2000 his remains were returned for burial in Poland. His papers are in the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University.

<sup>8</sup> Its language is relatively simple, and the characters do not undergo significant moral transformations. Even a short survey of Shakespeare's plays on YouTube shows that it is one of his most popular plays to be performed at schools.

Each of these productions was turned into a celebratory and appropriately elevated event in the life of the locality. The plays were usually generally preceded by a series of speeches: firstly, by a representative of the Ministry of Culture and the Arts, and then by one of the Festival Jurors. Then the town's President, or another representative of the local self-government, not only welcomed the public and the distinguished guests, but also evaluated the current state of theatrical life in that locality, and gave provisional plans for its development in the future. An important part in the celebration was also played by the leader of the Trade Union, who, as a spokesman of the solidifying Communist regime, usually criticized the attitude of the pre-war Polish government to the theatrical system and promised assistance in promoting the theatrical artistic achievements in the future (J. K. 46–47).<sup>9</sup>

The Festival Jury officially awarded the actors and actresses, directors and set designers. There were also some distinctions for the ensemble acting. The prizes were funded by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Director of Polish Radio and the Publishing House "Czytelnik."

As Ciechowski deftly observes, the finale of the Festival, which took place in Warsaw's Polski Theatre, was of an elitist character: one ticket for a performance cost the equivalent of 2.5 kilos of sugar—a luxury at the time (18). Tyrone Guthrie, invited by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts to serve as an observer-expert at the Festival, stressed the "wonder" of the Shakespeare Festival despite the country's devastation. With a tight throat the famous British theatre critic narrated on BBC radio:

... the annihilation of Warsaw is so great, that it is impossible to describe it. Everywhere ruins. There are no streets. In deep valleys of debris one can see amorphous trails along which some droshkies move. Everywhere silence, only sometimes one can hear the voice of birds. (qtd. in Ciechowski 28)

The attitude of the anti-communists and communists to the 1947 Festival revealed itself in the press. Although its cultural value was generally noticed, especially the innovative nature of selected productions, journalists and theatre specialists lamented its deficient organization and unfortunate timing. "Vacation, summer holidays, the end of the season," as one critic wrote, "these were the reasons why the Festival, about which the whole of Poland should have been speaking, was only alluded to by a group

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed description of the opening procedures of the Festival productions in the provinces see J. K. (47).

of the initiated” (qtd. in Fik 97). The relatively limited participation in the Warsaw finale of the Festival resulted, as Stanisław Marczak-Oborski indicated, from the exorbitant price of the tickets. While in Shakespeare’s time the lower classes filled his Globe theatre to the brim, in Warsaw “a regular student or worker could only see the gate and the flags,” which decorated the entrance of Polski Theatre/Teatr Polski (Marczak-Oborski 175).

In addition, a few months after the first national Shakespeare Theatre Festival, the Sovietization of Polish culture began with significant changes in theatre management introduced arbitrarily by the authorities. In June 1949 Social Realism (or, rather, Sovietization) was officially decreed the only accepted artistic style. In brief, over a two-year period the communists monopolized their political power in Poland and “it was not in their interest,” as Ciechowski notes, “to tolerate a long-lasting romance between Polish culture and Shakespeare and Elizabethan theatre” (12).

The titles of the journals that zealously published articles and reviews of Festival events indicate their political affinities. Quite an impressive number of articles appeared in the democratic (*Gazeta Ludowa*, *Robotnik*, *Odrodzenie*, *Teatr*) and the Catholic (*Tygodnik Powszechny*) press. At the same time Communist newspapers (e.g., *Kuźnica*) completely boycotted the event. To propagate “correct” values two years later, in 1949, the Ministry of Culture and the Arts organized the national Theatre Festival of Russian and Soviet Drama in which 47 theatres from all over Poland participated.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that the Festival was generally evaluated as an important cultural event, no one classified it as an artistic achievement or phenomenon. Only one production demonstrated impressive dramaturgical innovativeness. This was Leon Schiller’s presentation of *The Tempest* staged by the Polish Army Theatre in Łódź. An advocate of Monumental Theatre, and of the use of Polish Romantic plays on the stage, Schiller, an Auschwitz survivor and a friend of Gordon Craig, turned his production of *The Tempest* into a landmark of East European theatre. He transformed it into a faux-naïf morality play with weird folk-art creatures, fusing fauna and flora. Prospero, as a Shakespeare-like artist and scientist on a set dominated by a giant easel, demonstrated how to fabricate a strange new world (Ciechowski 31–32 and Żurowski 83–85).

Schiller’s production was recognized by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts, though it did not receive the first place. The Jury gave rise to con-

<sup>10</sup> The preparation for this Festival started at the end of 1947. In one of the first articles presenting the achievements of the Soviet theatre and its ideological influence upon the Polish stages, Leon Schiller stated: “it [the Soviet theatre] is the most accomplished mirror of life and it is the most sensitive nation’s instrument in the hands of the state” (36).

trovbery; however, the verdict reflected the Festival's regulations, which stated that the "interpretation of the play should not deform the essence of [Shakespeare's] intention. This concerns any changes of the texts or adaptation" (Kotlarczyk 173).

The award for the first place went to the Wybrzeże Theatre, which staged *As You Like It*. Iwo Gall, its director, believed in creating an inspiring ensemble work, in which all actors and actresses, technicians and staff were equally involved. Following the Festival regulations, he combined elements of Elizabethan theatre with modern staging and design. It is possible that Gall's artistic policy, which was based on community-oriented theatre, influenced the Jury's decision. *As You Like It* was produced on a highly functional, revolving stage, which allowed for direct contact between the actors and the spectators (Ciechowski 34–37 and Puzyna 63).

The most significant result of the Shakespeare Festival was the survey of the theatrical life in Poland after World War II. It revealed the alarming number of eminent actors and actresses who had lost their lives in concentration camps, street roundups and military actions, but it also demonstrated the talent of young performers at the inception of their careers. The Festival also made it possible for a new generation of producers, directors, and specialists in lighting, makeup, costume, sets and sound, along with many others, to prove their skills and achieve recognition, both locally and nationally. It presented Shakespeare's works in various cities, towns and provincial settlements all over Poland, exposing citizens everywhere to the best the world classics could offer. In other words, by taking place in such a variety of urban and provincial localities, the Festival made Shakespeare's dramas widely available. In addition, it also proved the universal value of his works. Since great art is regarded as great only by surviving over the centuries, though usually for different reasons in each epoch, the Festival confirmed, reinforced and even monumentalized Shakespeare's greatness and place in Polish culture.

In his overview of the post-war European theatre, published in the first volume of *Shakespeare Survey* (1948), Guthrie underlined the significance of the Polish Festival for the international community. "Shakespeare's plays," the critic wrote, "have the quality of appealing more powerfully when the emotional spirit of a time or a land is more intense; his genius seems most to be appreciated when men's minds are stirred and life is uneasy." In his conclusion, the critic stated that the Polish Shakespeare Festival should be treated as "a symbol of this" (112).

In 1947 the Shakespeare Festival in Poland revealed the country's desire, despite impossible odds, to be identified with the values of the Western world, and it opened the door for turning Shakespeare into a powerful

weapon against the Communist system. Moreover, it established the uncontested position of Polish theatre in the international arena. In the ensuing years Shakespeare helped both preserve the historical merits of Polish culture and create a new culture that attempted to subvert Communist doctrine by engendering new aesthetics and discourses of power and ideological struggles (Kujawińska Courtney, “Krystyna Skuszanka’s Shakespeare” 228–45). In other words, the Communist doctrine was easier to impose than it was to apply, particularly when Shakespeare took an active role in the Cold War beginning in 1947.

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