



Zsolt Almási*
Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney**
Mădălina Nicolaescu***
Klára Škrobánková****
Ema Vyroubalova*****
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. madalinanicolaeescu@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@lils.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 Viața 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 Șerban, 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 Fajr International Theatre Festival in 2018-2019 (Farinaz Kavaniifar). 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%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 polemics 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. Kłata 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 theatre-goers 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 head-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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