

“Be patient till the last”: The Censor’s Lesson on Shakespeare

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This essay comments on the impact of political censorship on the moods and attitudes of the Polish audiences of Shakespeare performances under the Communist regime. In particular, the essay evokes the political ambience of the theater and the role of Shakespeare performances in both manifesting and forging dissident attitudes. Additionally, it strives to elucidate the way in which Kottian criticism reflected the subversive readings of Shakespeare in the Stalinist period, along with the way this criticism, notwithstanding various ideological reservations, partook in shaping the interpretative habits of the audiences of the subsequent decades. With recourse to selected productions, the essay reconstructs the directorial strategies, the associative code, and the patterns of patient and attentive listening that made it possible for Poles to credit Shakespeare with their ideological predicaments.

We have found ourselves in the most embarrassing situation when the dramaturgy of the whole world, from Aeschylus and Shakespeare to Brecht and Ionesco, is a collection of references to the Polish People’s Republic.

Leszek Kołakowski, 1968¹

When speech is censored, the Muses play the classics. Indeed, there is hardly a diagnosis that delineates better the paradox of both strict control and amazing topicality of the Polish theater under the Communist regime than the one quoted above and verbalized in

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1. A speech delivered at the gathering of the Polish Writers’ Association, rebuking censorship, quoted in Fik, *Kultura polska* 419. This and all subsequent translations of the Polish texts are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

the spirit of heated political debate. Mistrustfully screened and pruned of political innuendos, the theater armed itself with classical drama and excelled in the employment of ambiguity, silence, and subversion. The risky game with the censors was played on and off the stage and was judged by one of the most watchful, observant and politically-minded European audiences of the postwar period. Apparently, there was no playwright who would match this dissenting mood and temper more fittingly than the timeless, classless, and unsettling Shakespeare.

In defiance of common sense, the 1970s were the Golden Age of the Polish theater. Censorship, which effectively paralyzed public life, granted the theater the privilege of a relatively autonomous space where dissident meanings could thrive and multiply, provided that they were well disguised and did not provoke civil disobedience. In curious consequence, the predominance of controlled speech forged the belief that truth, if any, must not be plain and simple, but veiled, concealed, and thereby protected. Thus, inadvertently, it was the censor's lesson to install the habit of vigilant listening, reading in-between the lines and interpreting pauses. Ironically enough, watching Shakespeare's performances under censorship was both intellectually and ethically satisfying, as it was brisk intelligence which allowed the audience to share in dissident disapproval. Yet, with all its gratifying rewards, the experience required special and attentive patience of the kind mentioned by Brutus when he faces the Roman crowd in the Forum scene of *Julius Caesar*. The sophisticated, casuistic argument of Brutus needs time to unfold, and therefore it can be best expressed in the seclusion of his orchard, with no audience at all. Aware of the inherent difficulty, Brutus repeatedly mingles humble request with proud ordering: "be patient," "stay silent," "hear me."² Thus, the success of the speech hinges on the authority of the speaker and the gracious consent of the audience to "stay patient till the last." Then, and only then, shall Brutus explain to them why Caesar was dangerous and had to die. (Incidentally, does he really say why Caesar was dangerous, or merely assures them that he was their enemy? For the purpose of anti-Communist instruction, either one would suffice.)³

2. Compare the whole passage: "Be patient till the last. Romans, countrymen, and lovers, hear me for my cause, and be silent that you may hear. Believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe. Censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses, that you may the better judge" (*Oxford Shakespeare* edition, 1988, 3.2.264-69).

3. By way of analogy, in 1966, Konrad Swinarski, a leading Polish director of the time, while rehearsing *Hamlet* in Tel Aviv encouraged the Jewish actors to view Claudius's



The audience of the Stry Theater in Krakow, Poland, before the commencement of a dissident play in 1973. Photo by Jerzy Sadecki.

The audience of the 1970s was tuned to the seditious analogies in the dramaturgy of all previous ages. What was this audience like? One of the publications documenting the history of the Stry Theater in Krakow opens with a picture of the lobby packed with people, shortly before the commencement of a play in the early 1970s.⁴ The faces reflect none of the cheerful relaxation of cultured intelligentsia awaiting evening entertainment.

murder of Old Hamlet as a crime, and yet a political necessity, prompted by the aggravating conflict with Norway. There are killings which seem morally justified from the point of view of society, argued Swinarski, like the example of Khrushchev killing Beria. The ensemble willingly agreed (203-04). Lavrentiy Beria was in charge of the Soviet security system (NKVD) and responsible for the execution of Stalin’s Great Purges in the 1930s, affecting also the Jewish population. Following the death of Stalin, he seized power but was arrested and executed in 1953, in a coup led by Lavrentiy Khrushchev. Khrushchev condemned the crimes of Stalinism and apparently initiated a new course in Soviet politics. In the 1960s, Beria was a symbol of the evils of Stalinism. Today the perception of this historical figure is less unambiguous.

4. For the photography, see Halberda et al. 17. The performance is *Forefathers* by Adam Mickiewicz, directed by Konrad Swinarski in 1973.

They are serious and solemn, with their eyes unvaryingly fixed on a female figure who stands, facing them, at the top of the auditorium stairs, blocking the entry. The woman leans characteristically to the right to pull her sleeve up more easily and read her wristwatch. The gesture might be simple and prosaic, and yet the pose appears exaggerated and histrionic, as it points to the existence of some higher authority which has set the hour, and therefore, shields her against the suspicion of a mere caprice of not letting people enter. The anxious mood of the audience reflects also something of the necessary foresight of customers queuing in long lines for basic supplies, as Socialism, in principle, guaranteed egalitarian access to goods, which, however, it often failed to provide. The people in the lobby are all set and eager, and yet their excitement has not taken over their respect for age, and the eldest are conveniently grouped around the stairs, whereas the teeming, disputant students fill up the back. For them, partaking in the political theater is a chance to subscribe to the tradition set by those standing in the front, whose experience comprises the stormy theater of the 1950s, which grappled with Stalinism and first positioned itself as a veiled alternative to the official worldview. It was the theater which had earned trust and worked out the associative logic and interpretative code of historical transposition, without which characters and events remained fixed to their setting and thus alien and irrelevant. It was a ploy the censors had to ignore, or else they would have to engage in fighting with past fictions, and they would thus deepen the impression that the Socialist system was absurd.

Suppose we let our audience remain for a while in the lobby of the theater in Krakow. The place is important, as it is the same theater which in 1956 housed “the Polish *Hamlet* of the mid-century” so suggestively described by Jan Kott in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Waiting for *Hamlet* in 1956 involved the same concentration and was built on a similar mood of contempt. What was different, however, was that the early postwar theater scrutinized the classics, Shakespeare among them, in search of ethical guidelines. The theater of the 1970s was already using the works of the past as a blunt insult thrown to discredit the system and humble the enemy. The key to understanding the theater of the 1970s lies in interpreting its relation to the theater of the 1950s. It is the latter which is the source of the former’s vitality and political bias.

The 1950s

In the dismal realities of Stalinism, Shakespeare led a double life. One was cheerful and superficial, whereas the other meditative and precarious. The

recollections of the first one, now rather rare, are predictable and unfailingly awkward, such as the English textbook approved by the Polish Ministry of Education in the early 1950s, which opened with a pastoral summary of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, followed by an imperative interpretative guideline:

In his seminal study *Shakespeare*, the Soviet critic M. Morozov describes *The Tempest* as a hymn celebrating humanity and its happy prospects. The play symbolizes human victory over nature and the eminent triumph of the positive element over the bestial. Prospero defeats the dark forces of nature embodied by Caliban . . . whereas the useful forces represented by the elemental spirit Ariel are forced to obedience by the power of his knowledge. The mature wisdom of Prospero paves the way towards happiness for the young generation, Miranda and Ferdinand. (Bastgen 18) ⁵

The triumphant note resounding in this brief commentary and the reassuring vision of a blissful future harmonize with well-digested slogans of Communist propaganda boasting about human abilities to tame nature through the introduction of electricity into the countryside, for example, and the eradication of long-embedded superstition. Needless to say, the book abounds in joyful images of a workers’ paradise which is conveniently interspersed with the gloomy narratives of the past such as “White Cotton and Black Skin,” or “The Slave’s Dream.” (With all their prophetic foresight, the editors, like Morozov himself, clearly failed to establish the sympathetic connection between slavery and the postcolonial Caliban.) Hence the sustained appreciation for the Elizabethan playwright testified to the poised aesthetic judgment of the new regime, which while condemning the social injustice of the previous epochs, carefully sorted the wheat from the chaff to save the universal treasures of the early modern past. The pragmatic approach to Shakespeare extended also to translation practices, and in 1947 a compre-

5. M. Morozov’s *Shakespeare* was published first in 1947, and the Polish translation appeared in 1950. In the review of Soviet Shakespeare criticism authored by George Gibian the book met with fairly warm praise because except for a few references to Marx and Engels, it refrained from “speculations about class origins and the class interpretations” of Shakespeare’s works (32-33). In the late 1940s Morozov’s relations with the Western academic world rapidly deteriorated, and he attacked “the West and its bourgeois critics” for failing to see that the realism of Shakespeare’s plays testified to the social injustice of his age and, if honestly admitted, would awake the masses and “liberate the people in capitalist countries” (34). This ideological credo only strengthened the dissemination of his former criticism in Eastern Europe.

hensive list of obligatory references and readings was compiled for future translators aiming to improve on the quality of already existing versions. Soon afterwards, this somewhat old-fashioned idea was replaced by the recommendation to conflate the existing translations and thereby create an improved and at last entirely adequate text (Borowy 19). The rectified approach clearly, though perhaps inadvertently, echoed the intensely propagated trust in the superiority of collaborative efforts over the chimerical, selfish, and all-in-all detrimental labors of a solitary genius.

As if in defiance of official recommendations, the other life of Shakespeare was secluded and isolated, with a tint of escapism. Here, reading Shakespeare was almost always informed by the desire to find in his plays guidelines as to the proper intellectual and ethical stance, which would account for the atrocities of World War II and of the system which followed it. It was precisely the experience of sequential evil, one totalitarian crisis replaced with another, which made the East European audiences incurably distrustful of the reconciliatory epilogues in Shakespeare's tragedies. In these countries, the feelings of relief and euphoria born from the victory over Nazism were repeatedly employed to pacify and discredit resistance against Communism. Interpretations written in those times often reflect readings underlined by the simplicity of purpose bordering on naivety. Again and again, Shakespeare is treated as an authority, capable of providing unequivocal solutions to the dilemmas posed by contemporary life. Significantly enough, in an essay written in 1952, Zbigniew Herbert, then an unknown poet, links the first climax of *Hamlet* with the Prince's decision to stage the Mousetrap.⁶ What makes Hamlet visualize the crime before Claudius is not his desire to test the reliability of the Ghost. Hamlet needs no proof of Claudius's crime, argues Herbert. "The dumb show is the first bloodless revolt . . . It is an aesthetic revenge which Hamlet the artist must taste first," (60) concludes Herbert, thus envisioning the course soon to be taken by the theater of his own time. And yet art alone cannot set things right, and Claudius hides in his darkness without acknowledgment of his sins. The realization of the cynical persistence of evil against and despite art at last spurs Hamlet to his acceptance of the avenger's role. "There are situations when a man should afford to be able to have no philosophy," reasons

6. Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998) published his first book of poetry in 1956 and soon became an influential moral authority. Most of his writings evolve around the figure of Pan Cogito, an ironic, inquisitive intellectual pondering over the riddles of existence.

Herbert, and sees Hamlet's greatness in "his nihilistic impetus, ardent negation, and bitter skepticism" (60). For Herbert, Hamlet's victory over fate is complete when he chooses his weapon before the final duel. "When the time is right, we shall choose a heavier rapier, and a heavier death," promises Herbert emphatically in the concluding sentence of his essay. The pledge sounds histrionic, but the logic of Herbert's reasoning reflects well the maturing mood of Shakespeare audiences.

What for Herbert was a call to arms, for Roman Brandstaetter, a poet and a translator of Shakespeare, was a pessimistic anatomy of triumphant crime without, however, a suggestion of a compromise on any of the ethical principles of the victims.⁷ In August 1956, Brandstaetter published an important essay wherein he juxtaposed Hamlet and Fortinbras, seeing the triumph of the latter as a symbolic and, in a sense, apocalyptic return of evil, extinguishing all hopes for a free Elsinore. Brandstaetter's essay presaged the politically evocative mood of the performance of *Hamlet*, based on his translation and within a month produced in Krakow, and then used by Jan Kott to elucidate his ideas of a contemporary Shakespeare. Perhaps, speculated Brandstaetter, with time the center of gravity of the play had been shifted, and now in place of a revenge tragedy, *Hamlet* was the tragedy of a man besieged by the skeptical pessimism of his epoch. In contrast to the Prince, Fortinbras is a cool and unreflective *condottiere*, a ruffian winning over an intellectual. For Brandstaetter, Hamlet's apparent passivity and indecisiveness stemmed from his obsessive and throbbing contemplation of *mysterium iniquitatis* of both *his* and the *contemporary* world. The spiritual tensions of the play had already been delineated by Brandstaetter in 1954, in his poem *Hamlet i łabędź* (Hamlet and the Swan), where images of a fictional Elsinore mingle with the nightmarish flashbacks of the first half of the twentieth century: "charred bodies, trees burned down in the Hiroshima rain, women's bags made from human skin, houses built on graveyards, and flutes carved from tibiae." "To strike accurately in the back of the king who kneels in his chamber"—says Hamlet—"I must make my thought simple, my thought which is an intricate monogram of my life. . . . But how can I do it, having lost faith in man?" (40). Elsinore is "a mad coffin spinning in the Cosmos." "Tear off the curtain—begs Hamlet in the final couplet—and

7. Roman Brandstaetter (1906-1987) was a playwright, poet and translator (notably of the Psalms). All his writings are permeated by a strong sense of Christian metaphysics. His translations of Shakespeare are *Hamlet* (1950), *Richard III* (1950), *The Merchant of Venice* (1952) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1958).

save me from my doubts” (42). In 1956 the curtain must have remained drawn, as Brandstaetter insisted so that in performance the final entry of Fortinbars should be obscured by deep darkness. Absolute darkness.

The predominant mood of pessimism permeating the Polish readings of *Hamlet* in the early 1950s mirrored the political situation in the country. However, the death of Stalin in 1953 triggered reformist movements of which the most important was the XXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party that raised hopes for the relaxation of the Soviet grip on Poland. These hopes were swiftly, if naively, translated into the Poznań insurrection bloodily crushed in June 1956. The social unrest continued until the Plenary Session of the Polish Communist Party held between October 19 and 24, 1956. This Session condemned the policies of Stalinism and gave power to Władysław Gomułka, a Communist activist previously deterred for seemingly right-wing inclinations. These changes initiated the so-called “Polish way to Socialism,” which refrained from compulsory nationalization of farming, reaffirmed the autonomy of the Catholic Church, and introduced more lenient censorship, if judged against other Communist countries. In January 1957 further changes followed, such as, for example, the consent of the Ministry of Culture for the decentralized management of theaters. As a result, the decision regarding the repertoire was delegated to local authorities. In the long run the new policy resulted in a more varied choice of plays, informed also by certain ideological liberties. In January 1957, Warsaw hosted the first performance of *Waiting for Godot*, which augured the arrival of “Western” existentialist theater.

The succession of events in 1956 appears crucial for uncovering the logic and dynamics of the Polish attempts to shake off Communism. All of them stemmed from the promising interpretation of the Soviet internal frictions, involved the threat of civil war at home, and resulted in the conditional reaffirmation of the system for the price of replacing the discredited apparatchiks, which had apparently “deviated” from proper Socialism, with more liberal-minded party leaders.⁸ The Polish tensions of 1956 found both their acute reflection and powerful stimuli in the theater. On September 30,

8. An important aspect here is the relatively non-violent resolution of the conflict, with substantial allowances on both sides. The parallel Hungarian Uprising from October 24 to November 10, 1956 involved heavy casualties and was put down by the intervention of the Soviet Army. A similar pattern of social unrest and political concessions appeared in Poland in the 1970s, 1980s, and eventually in the 1990s when the Polish United Workers’ Party lost in the free elections and handed over its executive power.

1956, a fortnight before the beginning of the first truly reformist Plenary Session of the Polish Communist Party, the theater in Krakow staged *Hamlet* in a way which once and for all repudiated any possible alliances of Shakespeare with the ruling regime. Such an alliance was further denied in Jan Kott’s recognized account of this performance:

The *Hamlet* produced in Krakow a few weeks after the XXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party lasted exactly three hours. It was light and clear, tense and sharp, modern and consistent, limited to one issue only. It was a political drama *par excellence*. ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark’—was the first chord of Hamlet’s new meaning. And then the dead sound of the words ‘Denmark’s a prison,’ three times repeated. Finally the magnificent churchyard scene, with the gravediggers’ dialogue rid of metaphysics, brutal and unequivocal. Gravediggers know for whom they dig graves. ‘The gallows is built stronger than the church,’ they say. . . . ‘Watch’ and ‘inquire’ were the words most commonly heard from the stage. In this performance everybody, without exception, was being constantly watched . . . At Elsinore castle someone is hidden behind every curtain . . . Everyone at Elsinore has been corroded by fear . . . Politics hangs here over every feeling, and there is no getting away from it. All the characters are poisoned by it. The only subject of their conversation is politics. It is a kind of madness. (*Shakespeare* 48-50)

The suggestive, dense language of the report renders fittingly the political fierceness of the play staged in Krakow which, in turn, mirrored the rising wave of discontent which was overwhelming the country, and shortly afterwards, swept away the first of the postwar Communist governments. Thus, the *Hamlet* staged in Krakow in September 1956 was the first openly dissident *Hamlet*, the *Hamlet* “corroded by fear” and “poisoned with politics,” and yet to some extent a winning *Hamlet* which by diagnosing the state might have prompted its remedy. It was indeed, wrote Kott, “the *Hamlet* of the Polish October” (*Szekspir* 85). And yet, while introducing the thought of the political and contemporary Shakespeare to the Western audience, Kott, or perhaps his editors, soberly assessed the force of his argument and mediated meaning by eliminating the original context. In the English edition of *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, *Hamlet* of the mid-century has become “the *Hamlet* staged a few weeks after the XXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party” (48) or, more emphatically, “the Polish *Hamlet* after the XXth Party Congress,” (51), a historical gloss entirely absent from the Polish text.

Hence the appropriated *Hamlet* was conveniently inscribed in the historical framework which accommodated a better Western sense of Eastern politics, with the peculiarities of local politics shrunk into an irrelevant and rather inexplicable detail. For the Polish audience, the significance of the *Hamlet* in Krakow was anchored in its being before the Polish October of 1956 rather than after the Soviet March of 1956, which is, for what it's worth, longer than "a few weeks." Ironically enough, this sinister testimony from behind the Iron Curtain made it possible to embrace again the utopian enthusiasm of *The Tempest*. In 2001, while commenting on the impact of Kott's criticism, R.S. White noted that the Polish critic heralded "a brave new world of Shakespearean study," and led us "into the uncharted contemporary waters" (279), thereby clearly privileging the elucidating force of the newly forged parallels over their sinister dialectical implications.

For Poles, however, the key to the political Shakespeare became Fortinbras. As long as most of the subsequent stage designs of *Hamlet* projected a relatively compassionate image of the Prince, the status of Fortinbras became, as it were, a separate matter and a touchstone of the Poles' trust in the radicalism and effectiveness of political reforms promised by the successive governments. Significantly enough, the tendency to interpret the Norwegian Prince as cynical and deceitful intensified along with the growing disenchantment with the state policies that followed in the years to come. In a way, Fortinbras became a complex amalgam of political association recurrently employed to reflect on the nature of authority.⁹

Notwithstanding the critical fortunes of Fortinbras, in 1956 Shakespeare himself became a Polish dissident in a way that effectively ruled out any conformist appropriations.¹⁰ By virtue of the recently secured, rather fragile and yet important liberties, the theaters boldly opted for a challenging repertoire charged with dark and desperate metaphysics and menacing

9. Fortinbras becomes the interpretative center in Zbigniew Herbert's *Tren Fortynbrasa* (Elegy of Fortinbras), Warsaw, 1957; Stanisław Grochowiak's *Król IV* (King the Fourth), Warsaw, 1975; and Janusz Głowacki's *Fortynbras się upił* (Fortinbras Gets Drunk), Warsaw, 1990. For a critical account of Polish appropriations of the character, see Kobiałka 199-202.

10. Additionally, the dissident implications of Shakespeare criticism merged with the traditionally anti-Russian association of Shakespeare forged in the nineteenth century, during the period of the partition of Poland, when the Tsarist authorities banned all productions of Shakespeare due to the proliferation of the motif of regicide in these plays. The occupants feared such productions would incite subversive activities on the part of Polish patriots. Needless to say, the ban only strengthened the Romantic cult of Shakespeare.

political innuendos. Significantly enough, in the theater of the following decade, frequently referred to as the Theater of Great Metaphor, Shakespeare became one of the most frequently staged playwrights, and the number of performances nearly tripled from 61 in the postwar period to 155 productions in the years 1956-1965, with the number still increasing in the years that followed.¹¹ Needless to say, the association of Shakespeare with non-conformist ideas was further strengthened by the dissemination of Kott’s critical essays, though the reception of these influential essays in Poland was far more complex than it may appear from the outside.

Kott Our Contemporary

Indeed ever since 1961, the articulate writings of Jan Kott held an unquestionable sway over the Polish reception of Shakespeare, both in critical discourse and stage practice.¹² The dogmatic assumption of the contemporariness of Shakespeare, the idea of the Grand Mechanism and the interpretative association with the Theater of the Absurd became an indispensable ingredient of text analysis. Kott’s essays offered a harsh and unforgiving diagnosis of the nature of political power, and yet, by emphasizing the notoriously cyclical course of history and the futility of individual choices, they constituted also a powerful intellectual alibi for refraining from active civil resistance, an excuse of special urgency for those tempted with secure ethical passivity. Hence, while being sulkily critical of the rulers, Kott’s interpretations expressed bitter, if not cynical, doubts about the abilities of the ruled to set things right. The pessimism of Kott’s interpretation and the liberties he took in stripping the text of its original context raised substantial objections. A recurrent opinion held that it was not Shakespeare who became the object of Kott’s analysis, but rather the contemporary reality forced into a Renaissance costume and that Kott used Shakespeare to address the needs of contemporary readers, who were still recovering from the shock of the Holocaust and the War (Nyczek viii-ix). While doing so, however, Kott did not reinterpret Shakespeare’s plays in a way that would reflect contemporary traumas (which, after all, had been also attempted by others) but exposed and elucidated the allegedly materialist backbone of the *real* Shakespeare—the poet that the previous ages, in their illusions of progress and providence, failed to identify, or feared to acknowledge. And yet the

11. The numbers of Shakespeare productions are based on Żurowski.

12. The Polish discussion on Kott’s volume *Szkice o Szekspirze* started in September 1961 (Fik, *Kultura polska* 338).

most vocal and unsettlingly personal objection was that the whole concept had a therapeutic effect of sorts which helped Communist intellectuals to come to terms with their disenchantment with Stalinism and their own role in the process. In other words, by obsessively emphasizing the inevitability and absurdity of history, Kott set up an excuse for wrong ethical choices, or even more so, for abstaining from any choices at all (Sugiera 47). Above all, however, notwithstanding the intensity of dissident contempt, the logic of Kott's discourse was an impeccably coherent and yet evident permutation of existentialism and Marxist historical dialectics. If, in the West, this Marxist legacy stood a chance of being associated with a daring intellectual pose, or, at worse, innocuous leftist fantasy, in Poland it was an ideological axiom foregrounding real Communism and negating Christianity. Neither of the two could have passed unnoticed or be easily forgiven.

The presence of Marxist reasoning in Kott's interpretations repeatedly troubled and confused Polish intellectuals both at home and abroad. To some, like Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Kott became a qualified member of "the Hegelian bite club," thereby playfully alluding to the long-awaited admission of Kott himself that "in justifying history the Hegelian bite proved to be most sinister."¹³ Kott's criticism was also a subtext and a hidden target of ideological polemics. In 1965, Czesław Miłosz introduced Herbert to the American readership as a master of historical irony reflecting "the collative experience of the last decades," a critic for whom history was not, however, "a senseless repetition of crimes and illusions" (121). A similar sensitivity to ideological shifts resurfaces in Robert P. Merrix's summary of Kottian vulgate in 1979:

His description of the "Grand Mechanism" sounds strangely like the medieval *de casibus* pattern, until we note that the events are determined not by Fortune or the character's moral choice but by a mechanistic absolute . . . Thus, in Kott, providence has been replaced by repetition; cause and effect by epiphenomenalism; individual choice by existential despair. Shakespeare has been condemned to freedom. (181-82)

And yet for the authorities, Kott's criticism was like a loose torpedo launched against all history and ready to hit against any material, or even more so, materialist target. The recognition of this potential was confirmed

13. The anecdote is quoted in Fik, *Autorytecie* 134. Additionally, the Polish acronym of the club (ZUH) is roughly equivalent to the English "little scout," with an underlying suggestion of appreciation for child-like heroism.

by putting Kott on the censor’s list soon after his departure in 1968. Naturally, it was not the concern for the displaced and misinterpreted Shakespeare that motivated the ban, but the fear of breeding a compulsive habit of reading dissident meanings into old plays, as well as of projecting the pathologies of the feudal system in Shakespeare’s plays onto the image of contemporary governments. In this sense, the influence of Kott’s criticism on the audience seemed far more hazardous than the performances themselves. The censor’s instructions, insisting on deleting Kott’s name from the radio, press and television, as well as from all publications of a non-academic nature, understandably affected the reviews too.¹⁴ Thus on the surface of it, the policy effectively banished Kott from texts which either reflected or shaped the attitudes of the audience. Ironically enough, there was hardly a more whitewashing gift that could have been offered to Jan Kott than the irresistible appeal of the forbidden fruit. Perhaps the most balanced native reflection on Jan Kott came in 1997 from Marta Fik, who wrote simply: “Poland did not have another critic who would so radically change, depending on his reading of literature, his understanding of man and history. We may presume, however, that he was sincere in this” (136).¹⁵

The 1970s

Despite the bitter aftertaste of the ideological implications of Kott’s essays, the rebel Shakespeare became a fact. Implicitly exposing the hypocrisy of *contemporary* public life, Shakespeare’s plays slipped out of the censors’ hands due to their overtly Elizabethan costume and were immediately absorbed by the audiences, such as those featuring in our picture and waiting in the foyer of the Stary Theater in Krakow. There is little we can know about these people but for the suggestion of their faces. The view from above catches almost exclusively their heads, thus conveniently delivering us from the temptation to judge them according to their clothes. The prevailing mood is that of silent waiting, giving way (soon presumably) to the mood of silent watching. This vigilant attitude was nicely, if intuitively, caught by Konrad Swinarski, who directed Shakespeare performances in the Stary Theater in the early 1970s:

The theater and the actor live only if being watched. Theatrical silences during performance consist in the spectators’ desire to com-

14. For the censor’s instructions on Jan Kott, see *Z dokumentów cenzury w PRL 19-20*.

15. Translation by Dr. Aniela Korzeniowska.

prehend, or in fact, the desire to submit themselves to something. To some truth, perhaps. (126)

To this audience Swinarski offered first *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1970, and then *All's Well That Ends Well* in 1971.¹⁶ The success of these performances stemmed, at least in part, from the *genius loci* of the Theater in Krakow, and they too have been absorbed by the legend of the place. In this way, they were both an emanation and, subsequently, an archetype of the Polish political theater of the 1970s. All of them built on the unique relation with the watchful, patient audience, without which Swinarski would flee from foreign theaters without finishing the plays he started rehearsing there. It is also abroad that Swinarski found himself repeatedly crashing against the expectations of whatever the Western critics had come to understand as "Kottian" and therefore as synonymous with Polish.¹⁷

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Swinarski's technique is predominantly that of silent interpolation and framing. Without a single word added, Swinarski constructs a stage reality which is not only a menacing version of Shakespeare's Athens, but also an ominous metaphor of censored life and censored theater, arrestingly crossing the footlights to embrace the spectators. Thus the list of characters increases by two mute and symmetrical nonentities, Orientades and Orientides, whose eastern provenance is also half-jokingly insinuated by their grotesque fur caps. Their task is surveillance, so the two ever-present moles spy upon the court and the audience and, with increased caution, upon Theseus himself. The parallel actions of the court and its secret service run in full view of the audience, with an overwhelming suggestion of controlled life, in and outside the theater. With the commencement of the triple nuptials, Orientades and Orientides take their positions on the upper platform and spread out a stately ensign with lions, featuring also on the celebratory garments of Theseus. Those who rule and those who secure their rule are now prepared to meet the people, the "hard-handed men . . . who never labour'd in their minds till now" (5.1.72-73). In

16. In 1974 Swinarski launched the rehearsals of *Hamlet* which, however, were discontinued due to his death in 1976, in a plane crash near Damascus. His other Shakespeare productions were directed abroad, usually in Germany. For the interpretative potential of Swinarski's productions, see Fik "Teatr Orientadesa," *passim*, and "Teatr okrutny," *passim*; Sinko, *passim*; and Swinarski 110-14, 130-44.

17. Swinarski failed to finish his production of *Troilus and Cressida* and *Edward II* in Zurich and Vienna. For the full account of Swinarski's work in foreign theaters, see Walaszek 96-97, 98.

the atmosphere of strict surveillance, Quince's accentuated words reverberate against tense, dead silence:

If we offend, it is with our good will.
That you should think, we come not to offend,
But with good will...
We do not come, as minding to content you,
Our true intent is. All for your delight,
We are not here...
You shall know all, that you are like to know.
(5.1.108-117)

Alarmed, Orientades and Orientides rise and consult hastily. "This fellow doth not stand upon points," snaps angrily Theseus. "He knows not the stop," assents Lysander (5.1.118-20). The plebeian actors and the audience are now all on one side, the former forced to fall into clumsy grotesque to mislead the spies. The next crisis occurs when the inset play calls for a lion on stage, thereby infringing on Theseus's monopoly to represent the state. But the beast soon proves meek and gentle, saving its life by an ostensible display of fearfulness. With the reaffirmed authority of the state, the play-within-the-play clumsily staggers towards its end, with Orientades and Orientides at last relaxed and idle. As if to counteract the overwhelming sense of failure, Puck teasingly plays with the spies and flees from their hands. His final speech sounds nothing like a conventional plea for applause. "We will mend," warns Puck, rising a clenched fist. The fictional Orientades and Orientides are momentarily outwitted, but can the real ones be? "It is a theatrical and interpretative masterpiece," concludes one of the critics and adds soberly: "the production has a revolutionary spirit; it juxtaposes the feudal court with its little aristocratic lords and ladies, with the common people" (Sinko 177). Does the reviewer happen to play his own game with Orientades and Orientides?

The interpretative strategy in *All's Well That Ends Well* relies also on interpolation, but here Swinarski does not superimpose a frame; he inserts isolated episodes, all, again, reduced to a dumb show. One such scene is the rape of a Florentine girl watched by drunken soldiers and, from their hiding, by the Widow, Helena and Paroles. The scene is brutal and the audience emotionally side with the victim. Given the obvious theatricality of the event, the spectators remain passive; but their passivity draws them also into an ethically uncomfortable alliance with the on-stage audience who are concealed and reluctant to interfere. This hint concerning the possibility of mute consent for evil (for fear of undesired involvement) prepares them for the scene of Paroles's

interrogation where the threat of life becomes an instrument of torture. Paroles is a spineless braggart, and the harsh lesson may appear an adequate remedy for his vices. His pleas, and lies, and confessions are a first-rate spectacle to Bertram and others, with whom part of the audience side throughout the whole scene. And yet with time, and for some, Paroles begins to overstep the comic convention. Exposed and scarred, he is also entrapped, deceived and manipulated. His meanness is a fact, but what chances does he have to display virtue? With the appearances of cheerfulness still preserved on the stage, part of the audience become detached and serious. For them the comedy is already exhausted, while the others continue to laugh at the intimidated wretch. "These can understand nothing of the performance," laments one of the critics (Fik, "Teatr okrutny" 200-01). The climactic point of the play is Paroles's only monologue, abbreviated and set against an empty stage.

Captain I'll be no more,
But I will eat and drink and sleep as soft
As captain shall . . .
I'll after them. (4.3.332-40)

And so he does, crawling, like a dog with its tail between its legs, begging for scraps. When he approaches Lafeu, the latter slaps his face, and the audience again display mixed attitudes. "It is a cruel spectacle. One of the cruelest I have ever seen," states one of the reviewers (Fik, "Teatr okrutny" 200-01).

The apparently happy ending does not cancel the moral dilemmas which arise during the performance; nor does the production hit against any of the political axioms of the time. And yet by elucidating the unsettlingly familiar and dwarfish predicaments of Shakespeare's characters, it implicitly suggests that the revised ideology, as yet, has not bred a new race of men. To the contrary, the play repeatedly asks the audience to identify with the characters of whom none is innocent or heroic. In other words, it scrutinizes the limits of ethical compromise, with an underlying assumption that for many (for us?) life in shame is better than no life at all.

All Exit

Following 1978, censorship became more lenient, in the vain hope that theater and literature would act as a safety vent against uncontrollable eruptions of social protest. The poetics changed, and the analogies became first straightforward and later altogether forsaken. The social energy was absorbed by rallies, marches and strikes, which culminated in martial law in

1981, and later in the collapse of Communism. The most politically-minded audience went into the streets, and actors went after them, or locked themselves in dressing-rooms. Another aspect of protest was the rise of religious enthusiasm, which is, for what it is worth, yet another argument for the affinity of performance and hierophany. The theaters, however, are hardly suited for the role of veterans, and before long they undertook the challenge of embracing a new type of vitality, more appropriate for the shrinking audiences of the 1980s. The fall in the number of spectators was indeed conspicuous. The climactic year was 1961, when the number of spectators reached 8.7 million annually in what was then a country of 30 million people, and remained approximately constant for the next twenty years or so. The falling tendency came only in 1978 and, significantly enough, coincided with the relaxation of censorship. In 1996 the number of spectators stabilized at the level of 3.6 million annually, which incidentally illustrates best the discrepancy between then and now.¹⁸

The unparalleled potential of interpretative twists and turns not only secured Shakespeare’s place in the repertoire but also subjected him to continuous rewriting in the ever increasing number of translations. It is precisely the specificity of the time which made possible the unprecedented theatrical success of the so-called philological translations of Shakespeare which thrived in the 1970s and 1980s. These translations frequently, and rather unmercifully, followed Elizabethan communicative strategies, flamboyant rhetoric and imagery, as well as archaic word register, including time-bound bawdiness. In the 1990s, the comparison of the meticulous adherence to these translations with the spectacular liberties informing some new rewritings deemed the former utterly non-theatrical and, as it might have seemed, once and for all banished them from the stage.¹⁹ However, it was not an updated understanding of the original that enforced new translation strategies but the substantial change of cultural and political ambience of the time, as well as the gradual disappearance of an audience that would stay alert and “patient till the last.” This rare and humble endurance was a fragile and short-lived gift. And in some measure, the censor’s lesson on Shakespeare.

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18. For the statistics of the Polish theater, see Fik, ed. *Teatr: Widowisko*.

19. I refer here specifically to the philological translations of Maciej Słomczyński and to the translations of Stanisław Barańczak, which dominated the theatrical repertoires of the 1990s.

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