

Within and Beyond: Pavel Kohout's *Play Makbeth* and its Audiences¹

Hana Worthen

In this article I consider the multiplex audience of Pavel Kohout's *Play Makbeth*, staged by the dissident Prague Apartment Theater of Vlasta Chramostová in the late 1970s, in part by placing this event on the interface between Czech postwar Shakespearean and post-revolution theatrical criticism. Oppressed by the *normalization* following 1968, this theater remedialized its productions in order to reach audiences within and beyond the Iron Curtain, putting tension on our traditional understanding of theater as a genre based on the concept of present spectators and their perception of the ephemeral moment of performance.

It is the task of Czechoslovak cultural workers today to assist the development of the human personality on new lines, and to overcome the distorted mental attitudes surviving from an earlier time. In this cause a welcome ally is Shakespeare who passes judgment on all who would like to live at the expense of society, either by setting themselves against it or above it; whether they are false to themselves in pursuing their aims, or whether they play the part of parasites; whether they are heroes of tragic magnitude, or figures of ridicule.

Jaroslav Pokorný, 1955²

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1. I would like to thank W. B. Worthen and Barbara Hodgdon for the indefatigable sharing of their Shakespeares with me; a version of this paper was presented in the Theatrical Event working group of the International Federation of Theater Research meeting in Maryland, 2005.
 2. Pokorný 65.

Five actors of the Czech room theater's Macbeth live outside the borders of freedom. Their theater is an act creating freedom. . . . It is a space where we come to realize our freedom: you, the actors, and we, the spectators.

Jindřich Černý, rev. of 1978 production³

It might be argued that a production of “Shakespeare” seen live by an unusually restricted number of spectators actually had one of the most diverse and intriguing “audiences”: *Play Makbeth* by the Czech dissident playwright Pavel Kohout, which premiered in the Prague Apartment Theater of the actress Vlasta Chramostová in 1978.⁴ This production was not only secretly filmed and broadcast outside Communist Czechoslovakia, but it also inspired Tom Stoppard’s *Cahoot’s Macbeth*, written after Stoppard met Kohout and Pavel Landovský, the protagonist of *Play Makbeth*, in Prague in 1977 (Berkowitz 117; Stoppard, *Dogg’s Hamlet* 142).⁵

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3. Černý 18. Here and throughout the essay, all translations from Czech to English are mine.
 4. I capitalize “Apartment Theater” (sometimes called Home or Living Room Theater) when referring to the performances taking place in Vlasta Chramostová’s home, and use lower-case “apartment theater” to indicate the genre. Chramostová was born in 1926 in Brno, where she studied acting at the conservatory. After her studies, she worked in Brno and Olomouc. Moving to Prague in the 1950s, she performed in the Divadlo Československé armády (Theater of the Czechoslovakian Army), known today as Divadlo na Vinohradech (Vinohrady Theater). Here she ended her career in 1970, as a protest against the official suspension of the director František Pavlíček, and started to perform in Divadlo za branou (Theater behind the Gate), which was itself banned in 1972. Chramostová was one of the first signatories of *Charta 77*, the manifesto for human rights. For her critical stance toward the practices of the regime, Chramostová was persecuted and could not perform on any official stage or in any movies; her films were withdrawn as well. For writing a letter to the politicians of the Czech Communist government, party chief Miloš Jakeš and the premier Ladislav Adamec, she was convicted in the summer of 1989 and given a one-year suspended sentence. She began to perform again on the official stages during and after the Velvet Revolution in the autumn of 1989 (Voráč 25, n. 6). The text of Kohout’s *Play Makbeth: Tragédie Williama Shakespeara upravená pro bytové divadlo* (Play Macbeth: Tragedy by William Shakespeare adapted for Apartment Theater) was published in Czech in 1991. In referring to Kohout’s text and the play produced by the Apartment Theater, I use the title *Play Makbeth*. Since Kohout combines the English *Play* with the standard Czech spelling of *Makbeth*, it is not surprising that significant variation in the title has occurred: the play sometimes appears in Czech as *Hra na Makbetha* or *Hra na Macbetha*, or even as *Play Macbeth*.
 5. Stoppard notes that the “comma that divides *Dogg’s Hamlet*, *Cahoot’s Macbeth* also

As Macbethian instigations, *Play Makbeth* and its successors were acted behind, alongside, and before the Iron Curtain, and introduced a distinctive opportunity to enlarge the essential conception of this theater and its "audience." *Play Makbeth* enables us to explore the ambivalent function of Shakespeare as an instrument of subversion in promoting a specific, oppositional, ideologically toned version of cultural memory for Czech audiences. The Apartment Theater's *Play Makbeth* was, as Kohout put it, "nevertheless Macbeth," an instance of the fluid and adaptable historical and social imagination of Shakespeare in Czech lands.

Yet while the Apartment Theater seems to be a definitively local event, Czech dissidents used the available media—sound and film recording—to bring their performance to a wider public, beyond the barrier of state censorship. The significance of this event arises from its mediation of a complex structure of relations—private vs. public, dissident vs. official, cultural vs. social, East vs. West—through the iconic force of "Shakespeare," framing a genre that cannot be adequately addressed without understanding how the Apartment Theater put a distinctive pressure on the categories of temporality and location defining theatrical performance; failing to grasp this genre, the taxonomies of post-Communist Czech theater criticism have subsequently misrepresented the efficacy of the Apartment Theater. In order to apprehend the meanings it generated, *Play Makbeth* requires us to restore the interplay of its concentric audiences.⁶

The question of "the audience" of *Play Makbeth* emerges against the backdrop of Shakespeare's authority in Czech theater since the national awareness movement of the nineteenth century, which underwent considerable flux in the intellectual and political environment of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Jaroslav Pokorný's *Shakespeare in Czechoslovakia* provides insight into the ideological complexity compressed in "Shakespeare" in the mid-1950s. Like the broadcast of *Play Makbeth*, this publication was directed toward an external audience/readership; written in English, the

serves to unite two plays which have common elements: the first is hardly a play at all without the second, which cannot be performed without the first" (Stoppard, "Introduction" 141). After emigrating, Kohout returned again to the subject of the Apartment Theater, in a play entitled *Marie zapasí s anděly* (Marie Struggles with the Angels), premiered in the *Akademietheater*, Vienna, March 7, 1981; it was adapted for television as *Gli Angeli del potere* by Giorgio Albertazzi in 1988, and paraphrases the story of a non-conformist actress whose life and circumstances resemble those of Chramostová.

6. For a wider reading of "efficacy" in Czech theater, see Beck.

study represented the state of Marxist Shakespeare with Leninist leanings. Yet as Milton Crane, the reviewer for *Shakespeare Quarterly* noticed, Pokorný's *Shakespeare* was beset by conflicting agendas. He proposed "a proper social understanding of Shakespeare [as] critic of declining feudalism and champion of the rising middle class, the new aristocracy, and the intellectuals" (Crane 119). While presenting "the Bard" as leading the Czechs into the next stage of Communism, he also showed the other side of Czech Shakespeare: for despite the historical necessity of the alliance between Shakespeare and the Socialist state, Pokorný revealed a defiant playwright, particularly noting that *Macbeth* "became the most translated of Shakespeare's dramas in the literature of a nation which for 300 years had been oppressed by foreign domination" (Pokorný 63). Observing "how Czech patriots, during the Nazi occupation of their country, found a rallying point of resistance to the oppressor in productions of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and other plays," Crane emphasizes the implied and unseen discrepancy between these dialectically inseparable, conformist and nonconformist Shakespeares. Crane's Cold War skepticism struck a note that would resound later, especially after the invasion led by Breznev's military forces in 1968: "One can only wonder whether such productions are again being staged in Mr. Pokorný's Czechoslovakia" (Crane 119).

In the 1960s, Shakespeare was part of the *thaw* (the relaxation of repression and censorship that eventuated in the Prague Spring of 1968), providing one means for the political, cultural, and aesthetic transformation of Czech theater, and an important milestone of its achievements in relation both to Soviet and to Western European stages. The thaw melted the strict division between Eastern and Western influence, between ideologically loaded visions of Shakespeare in Czechoslovakia. In 1964, Peter Brook was invited to stage his *King Lear* in Prague and Jan Kott lectured at a Shakespeare Conference there. Yet, while Brook's *Lear* was regarded as an enchanting and relevant approach to Shakespeare, Kott's innovative critique was challenged for its historical inaccuracy. The thaw brought Shakespeare, with contemporary critical controversies, into the country, reciprocally reincorporating the Czech audience into the world theatrical community.⁷

Nevertheless, the occupation of August 1968 re-segregated the Czech audience within this global public, causing the Czech theater to undergo a (second) wave of drastic change, which has been called *normalization*, a

7. For additional remarks on the reception of Brook and Kott in Prague, and on Shakespeare studies in Czechoslovakia in this period, see Stříbrný, *Whirligig* 222-23.

process of ideological reinforcement that subordinated its pluralism to centralization and censorship, lasting through the 1980s.⁸ While the majority of modern Western drama was unthinkable, the classic Shakespeare—partly due to his acceptance in the Soviet theater—remained onstage, though given the development of both censorship and theatrical aesthetics throughout the postwar period, it would be unfair to say that Shakespeare productions were held to a simple paradigm.

Despite normalization, spectators were able to report on the range—and potential resistance—of Shakespeare to that now-separated part of the audience emerging during the thaw, a critical audience in the West. Throughout the 1970s, it was possible for Shakespeare productions to have a critical edge, to be “distinguished by a good deal of independent probing into the deeper layers of Shakespeare’s text, bringing out thought-provoking contrasts and conflicts between dream and awakening, illusion and reality, life at the top and life at the bottom of society (not only sweet Bottom), or the craving in older people for strict authority and the even stronger craving for emancipation among the young” (Stříbrný, “Shakespeare” 285). Alert both to the expertise of professionals beyond the Iron Curtain, and perhaps to the limits of cultural censorship behind it, Zdeněk Stříbrný implied the recognition of the politically-inflected tragedies as problematic, while also depicting the theatrical recoding of the comedies, accenting the conflict between old and young as a struggle between authority and emancipation. Framing a modest social critique emerging through Shakespeare performance, Stříbrný noted events possibly meaningful to an international audience of Shakespeareans (the fact that *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* were relatively unperformed in comparison with the frequently-staged comedies); he also suggested a reversal between the center and periphery of Czech theater, which now saw “some exciting stagings in the provinces” (285), where nonconformist cultural and intellectual figures had been relocated.⁹

Stage production in the decade of the Apartment Theater took place in a landscape in which an oppressive ideology was widely, if unevenly and covertly, seen as false to Czech cultural memory, social reality, and social

8. A number of the official, state, or city theaters were closed, and small theaters were fused together or integrated into larger ones. An official repertoire was prescribed: native Socialist plays, drama of the Soviet Union and of other Socialist countries, classical drama, and plays by the progressive authors of capitalist states (Just, “Divadlo v totalitním” 15).

9. Stříbrný treats the uses of Shakespearean comedy in the postwar period more extensively in *Whirligig* 218-19.



Visitors to the 1954 Shakespeare Exhibition staged at the National Museum in Prague. (The author has not been able to identify the copyright holder and would be grateful for any assistance.)

identity; and despite conformist productions, Shakespeare continued to exert a critical function on stage. Given the farcical gap between the illusions promoted in the media and visible social realities, Shakespeare was not easily appropriable by the state. As Martin Hilský argues, “The fact of the military occupation was a narrative, a text, which was superimposed on any other narratives, or text. . . . The normalization became a kind of narrative framework, which affected every other discourse so strongly that no one could escape it. And this narrative engaged with the meaning of Shakespeare, as if the reality, the Czech reality of the seventies, were a text that inserted itself into the text of Shakespeare production” (154).¹⁰

10. An important part of imposing the illusion was to create the impression of the support of theater professionals, while organizing them within the apparatus of the

This “critical” Shakespeare might be coupled with the configuration of contemporary theaters and with a significant understanding of the relation between the theater space and its audience explored by the Prague Circle. A network of theaters, mainly arising in the 1960s, intervened between the discourses of the government-supported and the illegal, explicitly dissident theaters of the late 1970s—the so-called “grey zone,” consisting of small, studio theaters.¹¹

Writing in 1966, Jan Kopecký defined these theaters as the most suitable spaces for producing Shakespeare, particularly when the open dialogue between stage and audience recalled the “homogeneous theatrical space of Shakespeare,” a sense of theater as active communication lost through the imposition of the “transparent wall of theatrical illusion” characteristic of the proscenium theaters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (107-08). Idealizing and schematizing the “native environment” of early modern theaters, Kopecký located the origin of the “grey zone” venues’ political aesthetic in the paradigm of the Elizabethan playhouse, where an “agreement between the stage and the audience (the conventions of creation and cognition) gave fiction

state: Svaz českých dramatických umělců (The Union of the Czech Theatrical Artists, 1971) and Svaz československých dramatických umělců (The Union of Czechoslovakian Dramatic Artists, 1978) were founded for this purpose. Their political character climaxed in the signing of *Anticharta 77*, a manifesto against *Charta 77*. The goals of *Anticharta 77* were publicly declaimed in a demonstration in the Prague National Theater: “For the new creative deeds in the name of Socialism and peace.”

11. Divadlo Husa na provázku (Goose-on-a-String Theater), “husa” or “goose” obviously recalling President Gustav Husák’s name, founded in Brno in 1967 (professional from 1972, renamed as Divadlo na provázku in 1969, renamed again Divadlo Husa na provázku in 1990); Studio Y, founded in 1963 in Liberec, which moved to Prague in 1978; Divadlo na okraji (Theater on the Edge) founded in 1969 in Prague, professional from 1972; HaDivadlo (HaTheater), founded in 1974 as Hanácké divadlo (Haná Theater) in Prostějov, becoming a professional theater in Brno in 1980. These theaters sometimes continued the experimental or alternative attitudes of the prewar avant-garde theater, and while different from one another, they shared superficial characteristics. They often produced their work in atypical spaces—gymnastic arenas, halls of different types. With an anti-illusionist aesthetic, they were programmatically committed to the active participation of the audience, adapting dramatic texts, using nonsense, radical irony, and grotesque or black humor to create an actual, collective dialogue with the spectators (to avoid censorship, sometimes these adaptations were not finally decided until the show opened). This dialogue had the potential to engage social critique, but given its duplicity and ambiguity, the “official” spectator could easily sit alongside the “dissident” one (Voráč 23-24; Just, “Divadlo—pokus o vymezení” 449-54).

the chance to exercise a real effect.” Kopecký assumed the verbal and poetic talents of Shakespeare; what makes the plays theatrically and dramatically effective on the modern stage, he said, is the “fundamental, inherent quality of Shakespeare: a conception of the theater as a means to the invention of a fictitious world created by two sets of people working together in the united space of the theater (= the age!) to understand the likeness of their world and their own place in it.” He articulated one version of Dennis Kennedy’s “danger and force” (5) of Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain: rejecting a theater in which the stage retails an illusion to the audience, Kopecký’s Shakespearean stage held “actors and audience in the same unified and uniformly lit space where they could see each other and be aware of each other” (107-08).

This conception of early modern theater, published in a volume entitled *Charles University on Shakespeare*, measures the distance between Pokorný’s Shakespeare as “great Renaissance humanist” (Pokorný 5) and Shakespeare in the thaw. Once more disseminating a view for English-speaking readers, *Charles University* imagined a transformed Shakespeare in the culture of the future, largely by grounding the work of “Shakespeare” in a relational conception of theater—the active exchange between performance and its audience—rather than in the text. For all the historical change, what seems to make contemporary Czech Shakespeare “nevertheless” Shakespeare is the dialogic force of performance.

Kopecký envisioned the “signs” of “the new theatrical conventions without which the Socialist theater is unthinkable . . . beginning to emerge: new relationships between the stage and the body of the theater are being built up today in what we call the ‘little theaters.’ Here, after a long interval, the ‘common ceiling’ above the two fundamental components of live theater in the Shakespearean sense is being formed” (112). Though Kopecký promoted the “common ceiling” as an ideal of Socialist theater, it represented for him an institution of fundamentally democratic exchange. During normalization, however, the “common ceiling” only intermittently enabled a common critical solidarity between the stage and its public. Under the watchful gaze of the censors, the theater only at times may have intended to share a certain “coded” or veiled meaning with its audience; at other times, the audience took the active role, spontaneously creating an ironic or critical element of the production in an unexpected way. Taking the “common ceiling” both literally (joining the “technical” and the “spatial” elements) and metaphorically (“meaning the creative unity of the two fundamental poles,” actors and audience), Kopecký thought it “natural that this should be taking place in the small theaters, usually not theaters [as such], but small halls or

large rooms where the people are 'at home.'" Kopecký's understanding of the "natural environment" for Shakespeare proved arrestingly prophetic.

Roughly a decade later, the Apartment Theater was compelled to materialize a radical instance of his vision by staging Shakespeare, briefly coalescing a diverse cast of actors and spectators, under the "common ceiling" at Chramostová's "home."¹² Shakespeare's utility to the Apartment Theater emerges from the way the theater's repertoire and production practices addressed its audience, once again engaging, though secretly, the audience of the thaw. *Play Makbeth* was one of four productions undertaken between 1976 and 1980: in total, the theater staged about seventy performances, mainly in the center of Prague but also in private homes in Brno and Olomouc. Tellingly, one of the productions was recorded and two others were filmed: these audiovisual versions were broadcast abroad before the Velvet Revolution and again in 1990-91 by Czech television (Voráč 29, 40). Beginning with a staged reading of Jaroslav Seifert's *Všecky krásy světa* (All Amenities of the World) in October 1976, a celebration of the Czech poet (1984 Nobel Laureate) neglected at that time by the Communist regime, the Apartment Theater took a critical stance toward the official culture, while extending the Czech theater's nationalist discourse. An audience of about thirty people, many of whom would soon initiate or sign *Charta 77*, saw the premiere; at least twenty additional performances were sporadically given, in Prague, Brno and Olomouc throughout the following year. The first production initiated the Apartment Theater's use of alternative media to extend its audience: an abbreviated gramophone record was published by Šafrán in Uppsala, Sweden in 1978 (Voráč 25-27).

In December 1977, a reaction to the first trials of the signatories of *Charta 77* took shape in *Appelplatz II*, subtitled, *Bít se pro Ano a pro Ne též se bít* (Fight for Yes, and Also Fight for No). A montage of texts by various

12. A group of underground, nonconformist dissident performances during the normalization continued traditions opposing the official ideology and its institutions looking back to the period of German occupation. Given their illicit character, many events were limited to stage readings, though usually accompanied by some degree of scenic lighting and scenography. One such example is *Divadlo u stolu* (Theater at the Table), founded by František Derfler in Brno in 1988. *Divadlo na tahu* (Theater on a Spree), led by Andrej Krob, another signatory of *Charta 77*, presented Václav Havel's plays; in 1975 they were able to circumvent the censorship—with the assistance of Bertolt Brecht—and stage Havel's *Threepenny Opera* in a tavern in Horní Počernice. A surprising number of dissident performances were recorded, suggesting a conscious effort to reach an extended audience; extensive production information about these recordings is available in Voráč 29-35, 40-42.

classic, dissident and other authors (for example, Edmond Rostand, Bertolt Brecht, Václav Havel, Karel Sidon, Ludvík Vaculík), it was based on the Polish author Jerzy Andrzejewski's concentration-camp story *Apel* (Roll Call), published in the 1940s. Andrzejewski's story of an Auschwitz actor, who is the last of the prisoners to hold on to his humane values, inspired the production; the number two (II) in the title implies life under normalization as the sequel to life in a concentration camp, while also identifying this as the second production of the Apartment Theater, self-consciously establishing a performance tradition with its evolving audience. This production also had about twenty performances, in the same spaces as the first one; it drew the attention of the Czech State Police, though interrogations or hearings took place only sporadically (Voráč 27-28).

Play Makbeth premiered on June 13, 1978, and was performed about eighteen times. During the production, police interrogations became frequent. *Play Makbeth* traveled to other homes: to Daňa Horáková in Pařížská ulice, and to Václav Havel's summer cottage, na Hrádečku (Kosatík 343). The police interruption of the performance in Ivan Havel's apartment (Václav Havel's brother) brought the run to an enforced *dernier*. Shortly thereafter, in 1979, three of the five ensemble members, Kohout, Landovský, and Vlastimil Třešňák emigrated (Voráč 28).

The history of the Apartment Theater ends in 1979, with a monodrama by František Pavlíček *Dávno, dávno již tomu—Zpráva o pohřbívání v Čechách* (Long, Long Ago —News of the Burials in Bohemia) about the life of Czech national awareness writer, Božena Němcová, an emblematic figure of national identity during the nineteenth century and later a symbol of resistance during the Nazi occupation in World War II.¹³ *Long, Long Ago* had seven performances before Chramostová called a halt to the production when the police imprisoned spectators as well as actors; sitting before the door, the police also prevented the spectators from entering her apartment. This production was videotaped and broadcast in Austria by Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF) on the hundredth anniversary of the opening of the Národní divadlo, the Prague National Theater, celebrated on December 18, 1983 (Voráč 29). It implied the visible connection of the Apartment Theater to the ideologies of Czech national awareness, the liberation from the cultural oppression imposed by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and, more subtly, emancipation from contemporary social and cultural oppression.

13. About the unexpected evocations of Němcová in Czech cultural memory of the German Occupation, see Pecharová [Worthen].

In the Apartment Theater Shakespeare stood alongside a neglected Czech author (Seifert), a brilliant anti-totalitarian writer (Andrzejewski), and a figure of national awareness in the German-dominated Bohemia (Němcová). Each of these authors worked to oppose oppression, much as the scholars in the *Charles University on Shakespeare* volume regarded Shakespeare both as a universal genius (adopted by Czech nationalism) and as a Renaissance writer advocating humanist toleration, rather than merely echoing the beliefs and platitudes of the early modern monarchy. Indeed, as Jan Mukařovský pointed out, Shakespeare had been assimilated to the “national revival,” and so took a “political role” in the rise of Czech theater, filled a “repertoire insufficiently provided with plays by native authors” and, paradoxically, “played a most significant part in the struggle to free Czech culture from overwhelming foreign influences, throughout the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century” (12). As a canonized author, Shakespeare had been performed on the official stage and had been long associated with Czech cultural and political identity. Also, as we have seen, scholarship in the 1960s located an anti-authoritarian “Shakespearean” populism in his plays’ origins on the open-air stage. Stříbrný’s review of Shakespeare in the 1970s suggests that both provincial and metropolitan Czech, Moravian, and Slovak theaters continued the tradition of a national, anti-authoritarian Shakespeare: Jiří Fréhár’s 1977 *Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the E. F. Burian Theater in Prague, for example, stressed the “cruelty of Theseus, Egeus, and, to some extent, Oberon,” for “subjecting young people to dehumanizing authority” (Stříbrný, “Shakespeare” 287). The widespread conception of an anti-authoritarian Shakespeare as “nevertheless” Shakespeare stands behind the Apartment Theater’s understanding of *Play Makbeth*.

The Apartment Theater staged the complex dialogue between public and private, between stage and audience, and between the space of life and the space of art. It was filmed, the film was smuggled to England, from England brought to Austria and broadcast by the Austrian television channel ORF in 1979 for viewers in the West, who could not attend any of the performances (Kosatík 343). This extended “audience” is hardly negligible; after all, Tom Stoppard’s 1979 *Cahoot’s Macbeth* might be understood to restage the local occasion of Kohout’s play for a still wider public.¹⁴ As Gerald M. Berkowitz noted, Stoppard’s play both dramatized and reproduced the “tremendous power” of the Apartment Theater, effectively extending the “danger and

14. Premiered by the British American Repertory Company in London on July 21, 1979.

force” of the event, from *Macbeth* to *Play Makbeth* to a Western audience: “repressive societies fear artistic expression because it is a ‘language’ they don’t share and thus can’t control, and therefore an artist’s imagination is itself his greatest weapon against tyranny” (118). On the one hand, then, within Czechoslovakia *Play Makbeth*’s audience was confined to a consciously restricted circle, though word-of-mouth reports made these unseen events noticeable to people with an interest in them. On the other hand, outside Czechoslovakia a film audience took shape, one not limited to the dissident circle. There was also a potential Czech audience of the broadcast in the border areas, where people could illegally receive this channel. A Shakespearean academic audience might also have triangulated the echo of the Apartment Theater production through a 1982 *Shakespeare Quarterly* review of a German *Macbeth* (Theater der Stadt, Bonn), which was plainly a production of Kohout’s *Play Makbeth* (DeCatur); through an accompanying review of *Play Makbeth* in the Raamtheater, Antwerp (Vos); and through Stoppard’s play as well as the various commentaries surrounding it and its stage productions.

In 1978 Prague, a more circumstantial “audience” appeared under the “common ceiling.” This unique account of the interaction between police and dissident artists, drawn from Chramostová’s memoirs, is worth quoting at length:

We performed. Standa [Chramostová’s husband Stanislav Milota] was not among the audience. He prepared the food for the spectators in the kitchen. He was alert, and it looked to him that we were already being watched by the early evening. At once he heard a strange shuffling in the outside hallway. Quietly, so that he would not draw attention to himself and so that he would not disturb us, he sidled up to the door in the foyer, looked through the eyehole, and saw “spinach.” We called the policemen this, because of the color of their uniforms. They were about ten or twelve, threateningly climbing up the stairs toward our apartment, with their truncheons in their hands. The commanding lieutenant came to the poster we always put on our door before every performance and leaned in to read it: “Ring after 11 p.m.,” he read. Standa observed him through the eyehole. There could have been only 10 cm or so between their eyes. Comrade finished his reading, and rang the bell, one short ring. Standa opened the door immediately and vigorously, and holding his finger over his lips whispered, “Shh! What’s up?!” “Police,” whispered back the confused lieutenant. Then

they whispered a bit to each other. . . . Everything happened so quietly, that we in the fervor of performing did not realize it. In the meantime, Standa convinced the lieutenant that he could really only admit him alone, with at most two other policemen. Standa gestured with his eyes to the corner, where the spectators had left their shoes, and the lieutenant left his shoes there, and went quietly to the kitchen in his socks. . . . Standa said to him, "Do you know where you are? My wife is playing Shakespeare for friends, if you know what I mean. It will end in few minutes. We also have a foreign guest of the Cultural Ministry, a professor from the Theater School in Stockholm, so you just can't break in like this." Standa spun out the discussion, because he knew that we would be performing for another twenty minutes more. The lieutenant explained that they were notified that someone was disturbing the night's peace, and having some kind of unspecified orgy. "But what time is it?" asked Standa strictly. "This is no orgy. It's Culture!" "OK, so I will tell the comrades to wait." "Do so, but quietly, please." Time passed. Slowly. Standa took advantage of the discussion as a modest agitation. . . . We sang. . . . The performance ended. And of course, with applause. (Chramostová 276-77)

Chramostová's recollection dramatizes the landscape of the Apartment Theater: the tension between secrecy and surveillance, and the theater's savvy reflection of the government's own anxiety about its international reputation to safeguard itself at least momentarily. As Dennis Kennedy justly suggests, "The connections and cultural connotations that derive from playing Shakespeare in his own land in his own tongue are simply not applicable in another country in another language" (3). Nonetheless, in a totalitarian society, the "foreign" conception of Shakespeare's intrinsic value and prestige can operate in dialectical ways. Stanislav Milota's comment, "My wife is playing Shakespeare for friends, if you know what I mean," dramatizes this duplicity. Asserting Shakespeare's undeniable value in official Czech culture, Milota takes his genius as a kind of shield. But he is well aware that Kohout's play, evocative of the contemporary Czech understanding of *Macbeth* as anti-authoritarian drama, restages, while remaining "nevertheless *Macbeth*." Replacing Kohout with Shakespeare, he unveils for us what he veiled for the police: the present force of the language and imagery of *Macbeth* in *Play Macbeth*.

Under the "common ceiling" of the apartment, the police took the role of docile spectators; outside, their internal dossier on the dissidents guided the regime's interpretation. The 1981 report effectively documents the threat that the dissident performance and its audiences posed for the state: "a group

of right-wing oriented actors rehearsed the play *MAGBETH* [*sic*]. The play was tendentiously modified in an anti-Socialist spirit and was performed in different apartments. . . . The performance was also secretly taped on video and transported to the West. The theater circle of foreign countries especially appreciated the acting of Vlasta CHRAMOSTOVÁ, who should be awarded the international prize—the Golden Oscar—for her performance in this role” (rpt. in Chramostová 280). As a principle of cultural prestige, “Shakespeare” seems to function at once as an instrument of resistance while remaining “nevertheless” Shakespeare, and also as an instrument of ideological conformity and control, distorted when it is “modified in an anti-Socialist spirit.”

The dossier lends a certain professional authority to Chramostová; by deriving this prestige from a Western source, though, the police construe the actress as the ideological antithesis of Socialism, making her vulnerable to and available for apprehension. The details were evidently drawn from a denunciation by Stanislav Voltner, a Czech television employee, who was used to represent the collective opinion of the other employees of this institution and who was said to be astonished at how something like apartment theater could be possible and tolerated in contemporary Czechoslovakia (Chramostová 280). “Collective” denunciation, epitomized by the state-produced *Anticharta 77*, was an effective instrument: the police appear to take action not at the command of the Party, but in response to the will of the people. In producing the “collective” denunciations, though, the police also created and disseminated a more general awareness of the Apartment Theater (at least among the censorship bureaucracy), ironically lending it visibility through the act of its suppression.

Play Makbeth seems to have self-consciously dramatized the permeable boundary between public and private by highlighting the dialogue between stage and audience. In a society under surveillance, an apartment is only *apparently* private; yet, as a site-specific genre, the apartment theater depended on the open illusion of privacy. Watched from outside and secretly monitored by listening devices, an apartment’s occupants could not know whether and to what degree it was being watched, or if it might be suddenly entered; “privacy” was a variable experience, one that might be shown, at any moment, to be a performance for an official “audience.”

Describing *Play Makbeth* as both spectator and professional reviewer, Jindřich Černý dramatizes the representational fluidity of the audience proper, occupying the interface between the theatrical fiction and the real world at its back. First, he finds it necessary to mark out the space of the “stage”

from the rest of the “apartment,” even though he actually found a reciprocal interplay between the world of the play and the world of real life. For Černý, the “stage” consisted of “Three chairs and the space between them.” The three chairs—and the three subordinate characters sitting on them—outlined the performance space, surrounding the action of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who were the only actors to move. The other three actors remained more static, bound in a sense to the chairs, marking the palpable boundary between the dramatic or fictive space and the space of the spectators. Černý relates the theater to the real world in a set of concentric rings: the Macbeths at the center, the subordinate characters in their chairs marking the threshold, and the real apartment surrounding them. Yet while the bloodstained couple stood in the center of the theatrical space, the intimate, domestic nature of their story connected them directly to the “real life” space, in effect breaking down the boundary between the “stage,” the “apartment,” and the world beyond (Černý 18-22).¹⁵

The three chairs demarcated stage from audience; at the same time this liminal border was both reinforced and breached by Vlastimil Třešňák's performance of prohibited folk songs conveying much of the action of *Macbeth*, particularly the battle scenes. For Černý, the play's spoken texture was spirited and lively: Třešňák “sings in his mode of the protest song, he drags the noble text down into depths of its bloody, beastly content, and thus he renews it in the until-now-unheard mode of its most innate meaning.” As a spectator, Černý perceived these changes leading to a dashing rhythmicization of the dialogue. Though the metrical structure of the blank verse was broken down, the dialogue nevertheless beat with a signifying rhythm, and in a more pervasive way *rhythm* seemed to convey something important about Černý's experience of the performance. The synchronization of the rhythm of the music and the text was “dramatic,” “emotional,” “angry,” “furious” (18). As a foreign vehicle for Shakespeare's dramatic design, the protest songs took on and recoded the language and action of the fictive *Macbeth*. Nevertheless, for the audiences of the Apartment Theater, this music was a familiar medium of nonconformist expression, especially when sung by Třešňák. Played on the interface between the stage and its world, the music at once transformed the foreign drama into the terms of a recognizable everyday life and imported the accent and rhythm of that life into the world of the drama: the performance allowed its audi-

15. A brief interpretation of the thematics of resistance presented by the text of *Play Macbeth* is given by Stříbrný, *Whirligig* 226-27.

ence to perceive “a world next to a world, the same world, our macbethian drama” (20).

There is a captivating symmetry here. This dissident theater operates in a “privacy” which can never be guaranteed, never clearly marked off from the spying “public” world around it. At the same time, in this form of performance, the “private” apartment world is infused by and transformed into the space of fiction, the stage; the Macbeths’ world exchanges with “our macbethian” one. In the terms of these two ideal categories, the official theaters modeled a Soviet epistemology, the state giving a message to the theater to communicate to the audience; in the Apartment Theater’s performance, “meaning” is not communicated down an institutional hierarchy but arises from the experience of negotiating between the real and the fictional, between the private and the public. The audience’s awareness of this distinctive process, its active negotiation with the “stage” and participation in co-creating the meaning of the event, is what makes this production evocative in Czech terms of the original power ascribed to Shakespeare’s theater, lending it an implicitly political “danger and force.”

The production’s complex reciprocity with the political world beyond the apartment’s threshold was reinforced by its fascinating revision of the dominant imagery of *Macbeth*. Chramostová’s apartment hid the underground performances and safeguarded Shakespeare from the incandescent critical understanding of a “deeply humanistic and optimistic Shakespeare” whose realism was seen to synchronize with the values of Marxism (Hilský 152). Chramostová’s account of making the film memorializes the ironic ways the performance materialized and transformed the defining imagery of Shakespeare’s play.

Due to the filming, we had darkened the windows like during the war, so that the light would not reveal us. The strong lamps overloaded the electrical circuits and also our block storage heater. The amateur sound engineers struggled two days with the technology and we were afraid they might not make it at all. . . . They put up the microphones and for some mysterious reason, sound from a nearby radio station came out: “Shiroka strana moia rodnaia.” (Chramostová 275)

The microphones ironically picked up the first line of Isaak Osipovich Dunayevsky and Vasily Ivanovich Lebedev-Kumach’s Soviet classic *Song of the Motherland*, “Spacious [is] my native land”; sung by an American circus performer marching with a crowd of Soviet citizens across Red Square, the song originally climaxed the second of the Great Stalinist Musicals, *Tsirk* (Circus,

1936), directed by Grigory Alexandrov.¹⁶ The darkened windows literally concealed the interior world, where the darkest of Shakespeare's tragedies—as Bradley put it, “almost all the scenes which at once recur to memory take place either at night or in some dark spot” (333)—was played under severe illumination. When the lights necessary for the filming functioned, *Play Makbeth* could be recorded for broadcast beyond totalitarian borders; but when the electrical circuits overloaded, the story was covered again by “the blanket of the dark” (1.5.53). The event of *Play Makbeth* captures these ironic reciprocities: between the congratulatory tone of English-language export criticism and ailing social reality; between the clarity of official Shakespeare and the subversive underground performance; between the illuminated room where *Play Makbeth* was performed and the dark drama it hosted; between the somber truth of everyday life and the living light this dark play held for its participants. In addition to taking up the theme of the criminality of power, *Play Makbeth* was “nevertheless Macbeth” in a more material sense, reversing and recoding the poetic tension between light and dark in Shakespeare's dramatic imagery in the structuring experience of the production itself.

The circumstantial fluidity of the event underlies the difficulties of characterizing its politics. Identifying “political” with the didactic and tendentious art sponsored by the regime, the creators of the Apartment Theater simultaneously avow “political” motives and deny them. For Chramostová, Apartment Theater was an “experiment centered on concentrated, poor theater that does not need anything—only itself” (Voráč 25). Although she also claimed a “defiant” or “resistant” posture, Chramostová did not see the performances as ideologically determined, articulating a distinction between the resistant attitude of her theater and the stance of its productions: “we did art freely and entirely at our discretion.” At the same time, Kohout's introduction to *Play Makbeth* broadcast in Austria clearly points out the resistant “existence, situation and work of the oppositional culture” of Chramostová's theater (Chramostová 276). The question seems to concern the extent to which artistic experimentation in an oppressive state is “oppositional” and so recognized as a form of “political” action.

Chramostová's delicate account of the ideological stance of the Apartment Theater can be seen as an effort to protect artistic creation from the ubiquitous politicization of social life. At the same time, to pursue “art for

16. I am especially grateful to Boris Wolfson for this illuminating information about the song, its context in the musical *Tsirk*, and its ongoing popularity in the Soviet Union and now in Russia.

art's sake" during normalization, when the authorities expected all theaters to have an appropriate political purpose, is to take "political" action. Finally, in drawing its talent from artists banned from the official theaters, the Apartment Theater literally materialized itself against the sphere of legitimate theater.

However, the enforced marginality of the Apartment Theater has led contemporary Czech theater studies to characterize its genre in problematic ways. Taking the theater to be politically inefficacious, in large part because its audience is understood to have been an unrepresentative coterie, Vladimír Just describes apartment-type theater as fundamentally working to "cultivate its own aesthetic garden" and so providing a "reaction zero" instance of political performance. Just criticizes the apartment theater's creative and imaginative autonomy, its critical distance from an explicit political engagement; rather than using the veiled irony and nonsense of the "grey zone" theaters, the apartment theater seems to Just merely to have "ignore[d] the morally illegitimate restrictions" of the state. Just praises the apartment theater's moral commitment, expressed in undertaking theater as an illegal act. Paradoxically, though, the performances of any apartment theater are for Just primarily "not political" because its members performed for a select audience, having been banned from performing in the public sphere ("Divadlo—pokus o vymezení" 457).¹⁷

The Apartment Theater's implication of a wider audience provides one way to reevaluate its form and effect. For Just, to become *public*, the "theater always needs 'the Others,'" the constitutive fiction of being "to everyone an open occasion, for anything and anyone an unrestricted meeting ('residence') of actors and audiences" (443). Just's definition of *public* performance problematically implies a potentially "unrestricted" audience, but most performances have an imagined community—structured by location, education, class, artistic and political orientation, economic and social factors, and

17. Because it did not engage in "direct political actuality," Just generally sees the apartment theater to stage only a "political model," without participating in an effective social dialogue (457). Just also notes in passing his own relation to the apartment theater audience: "in the normal circumstances the natural spectators of these productions (me and my friends counted ourselves among these natural spectators in the time of the normalization) found out about the apartment theater in Prague and Brno as a rule first ex post facto—from illegal printed responses or news of the broadcasts abroad" (444). Even though Just probably takes democratic society as the norm, the use of terms here like "normal" and "natural" begs for more explanation. In addition to Just's article, see the definition of "Bytové divadlo" (apartment theater) by Pavlovský and Just.

so on. Given its network of audiences, the Apartment Theater seems to have been considerably more *public* than he allows. Although its performers were banned from the official stage, they were not entirely isolated. Many of the dissidents were connected to the “grey zone” theaters, and continued to form part of their audiences. The Apartment Theater was part of an active though marginalized (and visible, given the notoriety—both fearsome and attractive—of those involved) Czech dissident community, sometimes including international guests and the police, seen by an international audience of film viewers, and eventually known to audiences, reviewers, and readers of Stoppard's *Cahoot's Macbeth*, not to mention audiences of productions of *Play Makbeth* undertaken later in the West, or the Shakespearean academic audiences who read about these performances.

Seeing the Apartment Theater as “cultivating its own aesthetic garden,” Just might seem to reinforce Chramostová's sense of the Apartment Theater's aesthetic seclusion, its reliance only on “itself.” Yet, the “defiant” experimentation of the Apartment Theater is hardly understandable outside the essential context of surveillance: regardless of any aesthetic motive, the event could not escape interpretation by the hegemonic powers as a potentially oppositional performance. When Chramostová says, “apartment theater . . . does not need anything—only itself,” she implies less a desire to cultivate her own “aesthetic garden” than a refusal to be compromised by aesthetic ideologies outside her control. This kind of negotiation informs the Apartment Theater's adaptation of the “poor theater” of Jerzy Grotowski to function in the underground context (Grotowski also restricted the number of spectators to his Laboratory Theater). Nonetheless, it was not the primary intention of the creators to search in Grotowski's sense for the essence of the theater in the actor's self-sacrifice to the spectator. Rather, the Apartment Theater emphasized the spatial-temporal co-presence of actors and spectators mediated by the performance of an imagined “nevertheless *Macbeth*,” a co-presence with specific political resonance in 1970s Czechoslovakia. The aesthetic of *Play Makbeth* was strategically limited, literalizing “poor theater” in a different sense, as Kohout wrote the play to take advantage of Chramostová, Landovský, and *the apartment*. While Grotowski's “poor theater” focused on the actor, the Apartment Theater's “experiment” was an enforced, joint exploration of *politicized* space and of the actor's expressive means within it. Performance in the Apartment Theater lent phrases like “art for art's sake” or “experimental theater” a political meaning they could not acquire in the West.

In fact, comparing *Play Makbeth* favorably to the experimental protest play *MacBird!*, produced by American students in the 1960s, Černý

dramatizes the way the state's political context redefines the nature and consequence of theatrical "experiment." Although the play criticized the US government and the Vietnam War, Černý saw *MacBird!* largely as a stylistic experiment arising from the students' boredom with freedom of expression and the desire to explore new modes of theatricality. *MacBird!*, like other Western experimental theater, naively assumed expressive "freedom" within the state, while *Play Makbeth*, staged on the policed border of Socialist society, was seen as an absolute exigency, "our last possibility" to discover and preserve freedom (Černý 18) and to express it within state tyranny. The "danger and force" of Shakespearean experiment cannot be separated from "art for art's sake": *Play Makbeth* turned the prohibited—the freedom to speak, to express, to experiment—into oppositional action.

Although in politics and in practice the Soviet occupation differed from the Third Reich's, the Apartment Theater's choice of repertoire and ethical positioning continued the indigenous socio-political principle of Czech theater, extending it through the Communist regime (Burian 2). The Apartment Theater was a site of critical social discourse, where social-political *efficacy* was promulgated, and its audience multiplied—even though the dissidents were banned from mainstream theatrical institutions. Produced in private homes of various locations (Prague, Brno, and Olomouc), retailed through visible and invisible networks of underground communications, attended by police, renewed and re-characterized in their reports, filmed and broadcast, replayed as *Cahoot's Macbeth* onstage, and made known through Western popular and academic reviews, *Play Makbeth* became a prominent image of Czech dissidence. Achieving a global public, the Apartment Theater's *Play Makbeth* puts a critical pressure on our understanding of the concept of an "audience" and its critical function in theater historiography. Indeed, limiting the Apartment Theater's distinctive formation of an audience prevents us from understanding the kind of dissident efficacy enacted by this form of theater and its redefinition of the audience itself. Given this active suppression, we should regard the entire body of information about the performances—principally the recordings, but also the various accounts, descriptions, and even perhaps Stoppard's play—in the way the theater's creators might have understood them: as extensions of the performance, as an effort to reach the theater's comprehensive audience, and as an instance of the radical necessity of interrogating the force of geographical, ideological, and generic boundaries in the constitution of an audience.

*University of Michigan
United States of America*

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