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Editorial

The year 2020 is a special year for Shakespeare studies in Poland because it has been 25 years since the death of Professor Henryk Zbierski, one of the greatest Polish Shakespeare scholars and founders of modern Shakespeare studies in Poland in the second half of the 20th century. 2020 is also the year when another eminent Polish Shakespearean, of world-wide renown, Professor Jerzy Limon, celebrates his 70th birthday. This humble issue is, consequently, dedicated to Shakespeare studies in Poland; all the contributors are members of Polish Shakespeare Association and showcase different themes and different approaches to Shakespeare. Joanna Różańska, capitalising on her stay in Dubai, offers insight into the transfer of Shakespeare to Arab culture in general and theatre in particular, mapping a the vagaries of Shakespeare adaptations and appropriations. Anna Wołosz-Sosnowska looks at a most extraordinary, formally experimental and socially-relevant production of Hamlet directed by Maja Kleczewska and staged by Teatr Polski in Poznań in a most specific venue: an old abattoir. Jacek Fabiszak and Urszula Kizelbach discuss another theatre production, The Merchant of Venice, winner of the 2019 Golden Yorick award from Witkacy Theatre in Słupsk, which takes a play found 'difficult' by many scholars and commentators in the post-Holocaust era to comment on contemporary social and cultural practices and mechanisms. Finally, Wojciech Kieler, a prominent theatre critic, gives a compelling interpretation of the (Im)Perfect Dancers' production of Lady Macbeth, a fascinating ballet performance, in which dance choreography is matched by and combined with light choreography. Kieler expertly discusses the nuances and subtleties of the performance.

The articles are by no means fully representative of Shakespeare studies in Poland. They are just a sample of research conducted by Polish scholars, which in this particularly case focuses on theatrical productions – this is what all the articles share. At the same time, they centre on different aspects of stage adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, deploying different scholarly perspectives.

Jacek Fabiszak

Bringing Shakespeare to Dubai: On Cultural Transfer of Shakespearean Drama, 2012–2020

Joanna Róžańska
Polish Shakespeare Association

Abstract: No one doubts that Shakespeare is a unique, universal icon ingrained in the collective consciousness all over the globe; therefore, his presence in the Middle Eastern cultural perception should not come as a surprise. In fact, the Bard is one of the very few easily recognizable Western artists in this GCC region. In my article, I examine the problem of a specific transfer of Shakespearean drama to Dubai, and I put in question Bard's total universality. To explain my thesis, I made an attempt to provide comprehensive characteristics of this young Muslim Emirate, which in less than fifty years of its existence has become an extremely successful, multicultural, and sociological experiment with more than two hundred coexisting nationalities. I concentrate on several cultural factors that affect the dramas' relocation and how theatre managers/directors/artistic directors manage with that challenge. I review processes of possible adaptations conducted in order to satisfy prospective theatrical audience of multitude backgrounds and cultural requirements as well as expectations of this Islamic Emirate (including reasons for censorship). I aim to give a general picture of Dubai theatres, both mainstream show business stages together with as independent performing arts venues; I explain reasons for little presence of particular Shakespeare's dramas, possible misinterpretations and justifications for oeuvre selection that was done in the certain period of time 2012–2020. To present the most comprehensive picture of Shakespeare's drama relocation to Dubai, I was pleased to conduct multitude conversations with highly respected and esteemed people of culture and arts who represent honourable institutions of Dubai – Mr. Yasser Al Gargawi Director of Cultural Events in the Ministry of Culture & Knowledge Development, currently the Chairman of Dubai National Theatre, Mr. Joseph Fowler, Director of Dubai Opera, Arts & Culture for the World Exhibition - Expo 2020, and Mr. Gautam Goenka, Artistic Director and Co-Founder of The Junction (theatre).

It is believed that Shakespeare is a unique, universal icon ingrained in the collective consciousness all over the world; therefore, his presence in the Middle Eastern cultural perception should not come as a surprise. In fact, the Bard

is an artistic and cultural brand in this Arabic region; however, when one takes into consideration what gets transferred out of the Shakespearean dramas, his art's alleged universality needs to be put into question.¹

I would like to examine the problem of a specific relocation of Shakespearean drama to Dubai, a very young Islamic Emirate that in less than fifty years of its existence has become a hub of multicultural exchange with 202 coexisting nationalities. In particular, I would like to concentrate on cultural differences, local customs and traditions that forefend some potential actions on stage and on the diverse cultural codes that may disturb or preclude reception of the content – ideas, motifs or reasons for characters' actions. Shakespearean "total" universalism becomes questionable when one tries to relocate his plays to the local environment with its heterogeneous audiences who do not share a Western cultural background, reject, and interpret differently Shakespeare's oeuvre. I would like to address the problem of staging Shakespeare's works in the specific context of Dubai: discuss the unique character of the city and its brief history, reasons for selecting Shakespearean productions and the adaptation strategies deployed in accommodating Shakespeare into the culture of Dubai.

The character of the City – Dubai: an experimental city

To fully understand the problem of the Bard's drama being relocated to this region, it is important to recognize the historical and cultural uniqueness of Dubai, one of the seven Emirates, which emerged from the desert and became an icon of economic prosperity and modernism in an extremely short time. This unique Arab, Muslim metropolis transformed into a cosmopolitan, multicultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual nucleus of varied traditions and at the same time home to expats from all over the world within a forty-eight year-period. It is important to have a quick look at some facts that may frame a picture of the country and Dubai's particular distinctiveness from a historical perspective. The region of today's United Arab Emirates was dominated by the British Empire for more than two hundred years up to the early 1970s. The British departure from the region evoked an immense geopolitical transformation, which was the catalyst for the union between Dubai and the

1 The theory that Shakespeare is a universal icon is widely shared within academic and non-academic circles; I participated in the wide-ranging discussions over the bard's universality during the conferences, ESRA conference held in Gdansk 27–30 July 2017, e.g.

other six local Sheikhdoms. In 1972 Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Ruler of Abu Dhabi at that time, and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai, officially founded the new federation that gave birth to what is now known as the United Arab Emirates. That was the beginning of rapid growth in a region originally inhabited by Bedouin tribes, who lived nomadic lives sustained through fishing, herding, date farming and trading (*The Report Dubai 2015*, 18).² The discovery and exploitation of oil, political stability together with visionary leadership, led Dubai to unbelievable prosperity and, again, I would like to highlight that it completely metamorphosed in just 48 years. Interestingly, Dubai was evolving quite slowly before establishing the Union. This fishermen and pearl hunters' village altered into a small, more or less urban place which Jim Krane in his book *City of Gold* (2010, 302–303) calls a muddy town that "... wasn't electrified until the 1960s." In the 1970s everything changed; Krane underlines the uniqueness of the sudden and rapid growth of Dubai:

However improbable its leader's [Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai since 1990] goals, Dubai has undergone perhaps the fastest rise to wealth from underdevelopment in the history of the world. Men born into hand-to-mouth subsistence now live in greater splendor than the tycoons of Beverly Hills and Long Island. Dubai's rise was so improbable that it makes sense for Sheikh Mohammed to think big when he triangulates where the city will go in the current century.³ (2010, 302–303)

Dubai is an exceptional experiment. The city grows at an extremely fast pace and "Though this be madness, yet there's method in't". Apparently, nothing is impossible in this city of wonders with its glittering skyscrapers, black marble boulevards, human made peninsulas, islands, lakes and rivers. It is necessary to point out here that this Middle East Disneyland is not a "child" of funds and national economic prosperity only, but in fact, it is a city built on particular dreams and visions accompanied by concrete, precise plans and strategies.

2 Oxford Business Group. 2015. *The Report Dubai 2015*. Accessed May 27, 2018. www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/country/UAE:Dubai.

3 Krane, J. 2010. *City of Gold*. New York: Picador.

Innovation and multiculturalism are part of the UEA's cultural mission and vision. The Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development states on its official website that, among other tasks, it "works to enrich the cultural ecosystem in the UAE through ... providing a platform for artistic talent and innovation [as well as] promoting cross-cultural dialogues."⁴ Whilst the city is becoming a hub of international, multicultural and peaceful cultural exchange, it still needs time to evolve. A number of observers have accused Dubai of lacking in genuine soul or permanent, come-to-stay for long term foreign residents.⁵ Yet, these are harsh and erroneous criticisms: the city's urban structure changes on a daily basis⁶ as does its cultural scene and social platform. For instance, Krane (2010, 305), who represents Western perspective, stated in 2010 that, "Dubai's cultural side is in its infancy" and explained that the most rapid artistic movement was observed in Al Quoz industrial district⁷ where, after changing it into galleries and artistic centres, foreign artists mainly from Egypt, Syria and Iran exhibited and sold their works. He argued that "Dubai has [had] precious little in the way of theatre, museums, or music. There is no garage culture of rock bands, nothing in the way of neighbourhood theatres, no modern dance, no writers' hangouts" (Krane 2010, 305). At the time of writing this essay in 2020, these statements are no longer true. In fact, Al Quoz still offers art galleries; however, the owners and the artists represent a more diverse spectrum of nationalities, including the Emiratis, Westerners, Jordanians, Lebanese, Indians and many more. The two new initiatives in the district are worthy of note: The Junction and The Courtyard Playhouse,⁸ which are unique, small theatrical venues that play an important role in the artistic bohemia mentioned by Krane. Both theatres play a most vibrant role in the city and the playhouse owners' attitude and passion, together with their concrete strategies, guarantee the theatres' development in the local artistic field as well as its repertoire diversity. Moreover, in 2015

4 United Arab Emirates Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development. 2012. Accessed December 15, 2019. <https://www.mckd.gov.ae/en/about/>.

5 Many foreigners only come to Dubai for the length of their contracts and do not appear to contribute to its cultural development or integrate with local citizens.

6 Nothing is ever impossible in Dubai, as Anthony Harris (qtd. in Krane) comments: "Can you build another row of shoreline apartments in front of the ones you just built? Of course, you can! Let's have another row of shoreline apartments in front of the shoreline apartments" (Krane 2010, 304).

7 The Al Quoz district is the semi industrial part of the city, ten minutes from Madinat Theatre, fifteen minutes away from the famous 7-star hotel Burj Al Arab and the public beaches.

8 The Courtyard Playhouse was established in 2013 and The Junction Theatre - a small stage (160 seats) private playhouse- in 2015.

Dubai welcomed another venue, the scene that changed the character of the city and enriched its cultural capital – the Dubai Opera house. That project greatly differs from the theatres of the Al Quoz district and serves an entirely different function; its establishment proves fact that Dubai has an ambitious and varied plan for its cultural development. Indeed, the distinctiveness of the old and new venues, their contrasting visions and missions clearly evidence artistic diversity of the city. All these new projects corroborate the thesis of the rapid cultural development of Dubai as well as the direction of changes implemented by the authorities and the community.

To conclude, the city has accomplished the dream of highly ambitious achievements in an extremely short time. A new quality metropolis is becoming a modern platform for all nationalities and cultures as Krane (2010, 311) observes “Sheikh Mohammed wants to recreate ... the ancient spirit of learning and tolerance. But his ambitions go beyond that. He views Dubai as the engine that will drag the Arab world into a renaissance.” It seems that these plans of the Ruler of Dubai are already achieved; however, the shape and the character of the city evolve and mature every single day. Having outlined the picture and short characteristic of Dubai, there is a need to examine the nature of the population that inhabits the region and is a potential audience of Shakespeare transferred to this Islamic “wonderland.”

Shakespeare’s prospective audience in Dubai

Dubai is the planet’s most cosmopolitan and tolerant city, a beacon of peace and prosperity where all of mankind is welcome This is the city’s greatest achievement. (Krane 2010, 307)

Dubai is a particularly unique stage for Shakespearean drama, and this results from the multiplicity and structure of the local population and by extension, the prospective drama producers and the audience. “Since 2000 the emirate’s population has more than doubled, almost entirely as a result of foreigners settling in the UAE. As for the end of 2012, Emiratis made up around 11% of the population, while expatriates account for the remaining 89%” as *The Report Dubai 2015* (2015, 21)⁹ states. It has been noted that: “As we step into 2020, we reflect on the way the nation’s

9 Oxford Business Group. 2015. *The Report Dubai 2015*. Accessed May 27, 2018. www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/country/UAE:Dubai.

population has grown more diverse and how its vibrant expatriate community (which makes up around 80% of the population) has had a profound impact on the country's culture" as Global Media Insight informs in their "United Arab Population Statistics."¹⁰ Estimates of Dubai's total population, 3.32 million in 2020 (Global Media Insight, 2020), are based on flows of migrants rather than the number of permanent residents. A bigger picture of the migration scale should be considered, though. The UAE population includes circa about 9.5 million people in total, and over 55% of the residents originate from South Asia (including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka), 11% are Emirati, 12% are Arabs from Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and only 4% of nationals from Western countries in 2016¹¹ (Abu Dhabi2 Information for Residents & Travelers, 2020). These data illustrate the nature of the local multi-ethnic environment and give an idea of the scale of globalization that occurs here. Even though the number of the Westerners is not overwhelming, Dubai, with its liberal approach to integration with other cultures, directs its interest towards (among others) Western civilization. Therefore, it seems only natural that Shakespeare as the most widely recognizable intellectual and cultural icon is transferred and adapted. In fact, the Bard's dramas are constantly staged and tailored to fit the local environment of potential theatregoers who have had diverse exposure to the performative arts and have been of different traditional as well as educational backgrounds. One may say that Shakespeare knocks at Arab households and, after some alterations made to his art, he is doing that quite successfully.

Questioning Shakespeare's universality: case study one

According to Gautam Goenka, Artistic Director and Co-Founder of The Junction in Dubai, over the past fourteen years the number of productions of plays by Shakespeare staged or invited to the local theatres¹² has been rapidly increasing. However, as I have observed, the selection of the plays (that are usually staged in the classical way) is constant and rather limited. Among all Shakespearean tragedies, only a few are most welcome on Dubai's stages and they are *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*. I believe there are two main reasons for this choice. Firstly, these plays are the most famous, iconic,

10 Global Media Insight. 2020. United Arab Emirates Population Statistics. Infographics. Accessed April 12, 2020. <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/>.

11 Abu Dhabi2 Information for Residents and Travelers. 2016. Nationality Wise Population in Seven Emirates of UAE. Accessed April 14, 2020. <http://www.abudhabi2.com/uae-population-by-nationality/>.

12 I do not mention school productions here.

universal dramas about the human condition and wide scale of emotions. All of them may be embedded in any socio-cultural¹³ context and, in fact, they are generally well perceived/understood by all spectators, whereas, for example, the reception of Shakespeare's history plays, such as the *Henriad*, or *King Richard III*, and, similarly, the Roman plays (*Titus Andronicus* or *Julius Caesar*), might be difficult for audiences whose collective consciousness is more heterogeneous. The historical, political, tragic as well as comic themes in these plays, such as the simultaneously comic and tragic dimensions of the drunken Falstaff, might not be readable for such a diverse audience. Secondly, the classical style¹⁴ in which these mainstream tragedies are usually¹⁵ staged must also be taken into account, since its aim is to avoid any mention of political or religious subtexts and strictly abide by the Emirati moral and legal codes.

There is a need to take into light Dubai's specific historical situation. As stated earlier, the real, experimentally rapid political, social and economic transition completely changed the Emirati way of life and rapidly opened them to the globalized world and, from the national perspective, the shift was not as easy as it may seem. As Wilson observes in his book *Rashid's Legacy. The Genesis of the Maktoum Family and the History of Dubai*:

They were faced with a nation that was backward and had been isolated from the rest of the world for more than a century. Bringing development to the Emirates meant opening up the country to a vast foreign influence that inevitably threatened the Emirati culture. Only by striking a careful balance did they guide their people and succeed in preserving a national identity while the people enjoyed the fruits of a massive social and economic boom.¹⁶ (Wilson 2006, 543)

The experiment has been unique and difficult. The Emiratis had to balance and carefully conduct the process of cultural disclosure and decide on whether

13 I would like to mention that possible Elizabethan cultural implications in, for example, *Othello* may not be decoded in a similar way as they are by Westerners.

14 I do not discuss the Elizabethan original way of staging here, but I use the word "classical" to present the nineteenth-century way of staging Shakespeare and reverence for the authority of his text.

15 Shakespearean famous dramas are usually staged in a "classical" way in Dubai; however, there are some exceptions to that rule.

16 Wilson, G. 2006. *Rashid's Legacy. The Genesis of the Maktoum Family and the History of Dubai*. Media Prima.

to adapt some elements of international, globalized culture. The main question that may still have been arising is how they should protect their own cultural identity from expansive, sometimes unwanted and unsuitable foreign influence. How to implement the best elements of transnational heritage without weakening the Emirati national spirit? Which cultural essentials to choose and how to apply them to local, traditional, and religious norms? The transfer of Shakespeare to Arabia is in fact the resettlement of a foreign culture, albeit a globalized one nowadays, but still belonging to Western, external and “imported” philosophy. The Emiratis found a solution. They have built a specific bridge between different, quite separate, traditions and have made an attempt to gently blend them. As a result, Dubai became a unique, cosmopolitan, tolerant city that carefully protects its national identity and local principles. It is a Muslim agglomeration and the artists, performers and theatrical managers must follow the rules and respect Islamic customs and ethos. To legally protect local values and morale, the UAE authorities imposed censorship that forbids anyone to stage and at the same time discuss or comment any regional politics, religion (Islam and other beliefs) or demonstrate any kind of pornography, which is interpreted very broadly here. Nudity on stage or any provocative, offensive sexual behavior/acting that may insult feelings of the varied audience, are strictly prohibited. Yasser Al Gergawi, the Director of Cultural Events in the UAE Ministry of Culture & Knowledge Development,¹⁷ argues (Warrier in *Khaleej Times*, 2015) that the implemented restrictions are not intended to limit creativity in the arts:

Dubai censorship on creativity is minimal and aimed at safeguarding the sentiments of the Emirate’s public.... There are very few don’ts. Being negative about God or religion is one, whichever is the one you believe. Another is pornography. Politics is the third one. Do not get involved in politics. Being a peaceful place, the UAE doesn’t want to hurt the sentiments of others. Otherwise, you can speak whatever you want.¹⁸ (Warrier, 2015)

17 Yasser Al Gergawi was an Acting Director of Projects and Events at the Department at the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority.

18 Warrier, A. 2015. A bit of good censorship can help creativity: Dubai Culture official. *Khaleej Times*, 12 March 2015. Accessed April 17, 2018. <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/general/a-bit-of-good-censorship-can-help-creativity-dubai-culture-official?X-IgnoreUserAgent=1>.

The law and the respect for local traditions, customs and moral conduct prevailing in this part of the world may result in self-censorship as well. The artists and theatre managers are not willing to transfer the plays that may evoke constraints or be misinterpreted. That might be the reason for the absence of (e.g. *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Comedy of Errors*) or difficulties in the transition of some Shakespeare's comedies onto the big stages in the city. I would not suggest here that the comedies are not welcome in Dubai.¹⁹ Instead, I would like to highlight the need for particular adjustment(s), subtle modifications of the text(s) or ways of staging that might be required in certain cases. Context and content of some of the dramas such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and their sexual implications²⁰ cause considerable difficulties when the comedies are relocated in their original shapes. The Muslim perspective on the love affair between enchanted Titania and Bottom with the donkey's head is a case in point. What in the Western approach is perceived as a comic and relatively "innocent" motif of the play, from the Arab/Muslim perspective might be viewed as vulgar, disrespectful, and very abusive treatment of a woman. What is more, Titania's social roles in the play seem crucial as well: she is a wife and the Queen of fairies, an authoritative and esteemed persona who is sexually insulted. This is not a subject for comedy and might not be well perceived by an audience in Dubai. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, when asked by Joseph Fowler, Dubai Opera Artistic Director (at that time),²¹ to recommend a proper theatrical production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to be staged in June 2018, I found the task not an easy one, and finally I was not successful.²² Fowler suggested that a perfect performance should be "a classical, 'light' production suitable for the family" (Joseph Fowler, 2017, personal communication). Without doubt, the Western theatrical troupes may offer a suitable show; however, the problem is that a vast majority of the critically acclaimed

19 In 2019 Dubai Opera invited *Much Ado About Nothing* directed by Derek Bond, New English Shakespeare Company, UK.

20 It sounds like a commonplace, but themes naturally accepted by the Westerners, in Muslim culture could be perceived as unaccepted or illegal moral misconduct.

21 Currently, Director of Opera, Arts & Culture for the World Exhibition – Expo 2020, previously Fowler occupied the positions of General Manager at DUCTAC, Theatre & Entertainment Director at Madinat Theatre and Artistic Director, Director of Programming & Events at Dubai Opera.

22 Fowler explains "I programmed and presented a production of *Dream* which was adapted for younger/school audience, however, within the context of my search for the same title for inclusion within the Dubai Opera programme, I was seeking a larger scale professional production that would be suitable for a larger audience demographic" (Joseph Fowler, 2020, personal communication).

productions, which I know from Shakespearean festivals conducted in Europe, seem too “brave” or too “experimental”²³ to be staged in Arabia. For example, the two performances which were highly successful at the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival and could be recommended to be invited: The Baltic House Theatre’s *Dream* directed by Silviu Purcarete²⁴ and the South Korean production by Yo-hangza Company directed by Yang Jung-Ung, seem inappropriate to be staged in Dubai. Purcarete’s famous performance starts with historical and political allusions to communistic oppression that are easy to decode by Western audience and, at the same time, may be totally unclear for many Dubai spectators. What is more, Purcarete’s female fairies appear far too lascivious and extravagant to be accepted by the local audience. Yang-Ung’s production, in turn, relied heavily on South Korean theatrical conventions. While this performance appears exotic and attractive for the Festival audience in Europe (new interpretation, innovative approach to the well-known play, and multiple changes of the plot, chronology, staging, characters, shifting of attention to less known or less evident themes included in dramas, etc.) it was unlikely to suit the Dubai Opera audience expectations. The main problem here might be the audience requirements (a classical, standard Shakespearean performance without severe changes of the plot, but proper chronology, and “usual” characters) as well as “double decoding,” by which I understand a transfer of original Elizabethan drama into Korean theatrical style and cultural coding. That “alteration” was a highly anticipated practice by the majority of the Gdansk Festival spectators; however, the Dubai audience could be left unsatisfied with such a “strange Shakespeare/non-Shakespeare.” This does not mean that Dubai theatres absolutely refrain from staging “risky” dramas; instead, the prospective plays are tailored, trimmed, and then staged to fit the local standards. Fowler, who has invited numerous Shakespeare’s plays to the region, explains that: “Comedies are very much welcome and often better received than tragedies as these have a wider family appeal” (Fowler, 2017–2020, personal communication). Based on that, it seems that there *is* a space for the Bard’s witty dramas and tragedies, though, of course, they must be properly adjusted to certain local requirements and audience – thus usually staged in a “classical,” Victorian

23 By “experimental” I mean, unusual, altered, non-classical in form or/and in contents shows.

24 The performance is the result of cooperation between Russian Baltic House Theatre and Romanian theatre director Silviu Purcarete.

style or sometimes modern, even avantgarde mode but modified in a particular way (no sexual, or political inclinations) to obtain acceptable moderate and balanced productions. It might be the reason why both of the shows – the Globe Theatre production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed at the Madinat Theatre in 2015 and *Othello Remix*, an original production of Chicago Shakespeare Theatre with collaboration of Richard Jordan Productions Ltd. were successful performances in Dubai. In fact, Fowler admitted that the comedy show was “designed especially for young people” (Joseph Fowler, 2017, personal communication) and therefore, had an educational purpose.²⁵ Consequently, the *risqué* aspect of the play was delivered carefully, in the same way as performances offered to the young all over the world. In the case of the second drama, Fowler claims that:

This all male production takes Shakespeare’s text and adapts it over original beats resulting in a hip-hop urban version of this classic play. A radical take on a classic proving that Shakespeare himself was the original master of rhythm and rhyme. I programmed this production at DUCATC and it was a huge success reconfirming again the appeal of Shakespeare but also demonstrating that the Dubai audience is prepared to discover new productions of Shakespearean classics. (Joseph Fowler, 2020, personal communication)

It shows that the key to success of this performance could have been an attractive form of a hip-hop musical adaptation that in fact remained a popular and often invited to the UAE concert shows. Moreover, Shakespearean flourish and difficult to follow original text was altered into a modern language of the young, the every-day English language of twenty-first-century media. Finally, the play was staged without any sexual, religious, or political leanings; it was just a universal, emotive, and passionate story about love, envy, anger, jealousy, and distrust. This *Othello* tells a core story of the drama simultaneously excluding ambiguous aspects of the tragedy.

25 Fowler adds: “It is also important to emphasise that as a means of implementing an effective audience development plan, content for the younger audience demographic is of great importance. Cultivating an interest, understanding and appreciation for the theatre and the theatrical experience with young audiences is key to the long-term sustainability of a committed and loyal audience.” (Joseph Fowler, 2020, personal communication).

It proves my assumption that awareness of the rules, customs and traditions is an important feature when choosing the performances and their way of staging and even unconventional adaptations of Shakespearean dramas are welcomed in Dubai as long as they follow the rules.

Case study two: *Hamlet*

Interestingly, problems with transferring Shakespearean drama to Dubai may be not limited only to historical plays and comedies. There are some motifs, some specific cultural implications present in tragedies that may also cause confusion and, surprisingly, this may apply to the most famous tragedy: *Hamlet*. The spectators' approach to the central conflict of the play – Hamlet's angry reaction, in fact, a rebellion against his mother's decision to marry Claudius just a few months after her husband's death may cause some misunderstanding in the interpretation of the whole plot, including the Prince's actions and reasons for his further decisions. In Islamic tradition, a widow's prompt remarriage with the brother of a deceased husband (or just a close relative) is justifiable or even expected. It is a traditional custom or, in some regions, a family duty to provide a woman with support and protection that is understood as another marriage within a "clan." From this point of view, Hamlet's response to the matter may seem controversial, illogical or extreme. Put simply, what seems natural in some cultures may be perceived as unusual in others. I am not going to mention here the hypothetical problem of the *possible* cultural misunderstanding, but I present the conclusion I made after numerous discussions with my Arab students and theatregoers from the region. They drew my attention to the matter of the probable decoding problem(s); however, one must take into consideration that globalization and constant cultural exposition and exchange unified the language of arts and mutual understanding. Arab spectators are aware of Western customs and traditions,²⁶ so in many cases they may not have any problems with the interpretation and reading of this particular Shakespeare's message in the context of European lifestyle.

The issue of cultural decoding is a very important factor when choosing a performance, but there are other causes that may discourage theatre managers from inviting particular productions. In fact, some modern and highly experimental adaptations of Shakespeare's plays may be unaccepted or doomed

26 Due to globalization and exposure to films, computer games, books, etc. Arabs perfectly well know Western conduct and style of life.

to failure. Moreover, the method of staging may be a crucial factor that decides whether the show is considered legal and there are cases when performances are definitely rejected. Deep changes made to the classical text, plot or chronology of action, political and religious connotations, or lasciviousness (acting, costumes etc.) on the stage exclude such productions from being staged in Dubai. It is, after all, the audience who decides what is appropriate and suits their tastes, and eventually has the final say in deciding whether to attend the show or not. Hence, artists, theatrical managers and producers must follow and satisfy local theatregoers' needs. Lastly, as Dubai spectators belong to diverse cultures, traditions and backgrounds, proper selection of the productions seems inevitable.

Dubai stages

Dubai offers three types of playhouses – national Arabic centres, and two types of private sector stages – mainstream big scenes and smaller ones that seem to play the role of a kind of “off stages” or “independent performing arts venue(s)”²⁷ such as The Junction and The Courtyard Playhouse, mentioned earlier. I propose such a very general division for the sake of this article, and I would like to concentrate on the international stages to discuss the differences in the choice of Shakespeare's plays, in terms of staging and reception. The big stage theatres such as Madinat Theatre and the Dubai Opera House are very stylish, luxurious centers that represent a commercial side of the local show business. Ductac, a beautiful, elegant venue, alike the two mentioned before, offered parallel repertoire, and attracted similar audience, however it was not a typical commercial entity. Fowler explains the differences between the theatres:

Ductac was a not for profit community theatre which had to be auto sufficient in its financial structure in order to remain open and operational. Madinat Theatre is a commercial entity, however, sits within the larger portfolio of Madinat Jumeirah and therefore benefits directly and indirectly by this positioning. Dubai Opera is a commercial entity and relates on sponsorship, corporate partners, and self-generated revenue in order to operate. (Joseph Fowler, personal communication, 2020)

27 The Junction calls themselves that way on their website, available at: <http://www.thejunction-dubai.com/> (Accessed February 4, 2020).

The venues operational systems differ, but they have a lot in common. All of them are settled in hotspots of the city, the prestigious must-go-to places frequently visited by numerous residents. The Madinat Theatre, with its marble interior, crystal chandeliers and bunches of fresh flowers on white round tables describes itself on its website as “a state-of-the-art venue situated in the heart of the bustling Souk Madinat Jumeirah.” I would like to add here that this Souk is a counterpart to an old traditional Arabic trade market surrounded by the most deluxe beach hotel resorts with canals, waterside fancy restaurants and promenades with the view on the one of the most famous Dubai landmarks – Burj Al Arab, the seven star chic hotel that is presumed to be the most expensive in the world. The Madinat’s website comments on its venue:

The Madinat Theatre is a space which can accommodate large-scale shows but with an intimacy that allows the audience to truly connect with the production and the performers. Guests enter the theatre through the reception foyer with its grand columns and marble floors proceeding into the main auditorium where plush tiered seating and soft lighting set the scene for the performance. The Madinat theatre is ideally suited for Musicals, Plays, Classical Ballet, Stand-up Comedy and has the audio-visual support for film screenings.²⁸ (Madinat Theatre website, 2017)

The playhouse’s setting and its elegant design play an important role: they attract a wealthy audience and preordain a certain type of mainstream performances that are to be welcome. The other venue that might have been compared to the Madinat in terms of audience and types of invited shows was The Center Point Theatre, Ductac. Unfortunately, in July 2018, due to unknown reasons, the theatre was closed and, as Pdraig Downey, who directed and produced ten shows at Ductac up to 2018, said for *Khaleej Times Magazine*:

It was a community theatre that brought everyone together: Emiratis, Arabs and expats. The closure of Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Center (Ductac) marks a huge blow to the arts scene in Dubai.

28 Madinat Theatre Souk Madinat Jumeirah. 2015. Accessed November 15, 2017. <https://madinat-jumeirah.etixdubai.com/>

Ductac was a more intimate style theatre that had a commercial element to it. The stage's location in a shopping mall gave it a commercial element that satisfied Dubai's nature. We got flyers on shows distributed to shoppers and strong social media pages. People had general knowledge about the space. (Zakaria in Khaleej Times, 2018)

Indeed, this playhouse had a specific location as it belonged to Mall of Emirates, one of the prime and most luxurious shopping centres worldwide, well known for offering the biggest indoor ski slope in the world. In fact, the mall looks like a museum or a gallery of fine arts with its majestic interior design - glass ceilings, beautiful hall exhibitions, displays and cultural activities offered to the visitors on various occasions. The playhouse was one of the most popular cultural destinations in Dubai. Interestingly, Fowler says:

Ductac provided the largest community and local offering for amateur dramatics as well as performance and visual arts education. The seasonal programme I curated during my tenure as general manager was an equally balanced offering of local/amateur content that sat alongside professional regional and international productions. The closure of Ductac paved the way for The Junction and The Courtyard Playhouse who have filled a degree of the void the absence of Ductac has created. (Joseph Fowler, personal communication, 2020)

Certainly, Ductac offered a wide variety of activities such as theatrical competitions, acting and dancing classes for children as well as young students and was a very dynamic player on the local artistic stage. Downey adds: "[Ductac was] at the heartbeat of the theatre and arts community for a decade and has been [was] the life and soul of the community."

Last but not least, it is essential to take a look at the greatest venue in Dubai, already mentioned in this article: the Dubai Opera called by Fowler a "commercial professional venue that promote and present professional medium to large scale international productions." The venue is an impressive construction placed in the heart of Dubai, the Downtown area with Burj Khalifa, Dubai Fountains and Sheikh's Boulevard. The playhouse is designed for a more numerous audiences and for bigger scale projects than The Madinat and Ductac. The Opera's Website informs us that:

Located at what's billed as 'the most prestigious square kilometre in the world', Dubai Opera is the radiant centre of culture and arts in Downtown Dubai and the shining pearl of The Opera District. With its unique 2000-seat multi-format theatre, Dubai Opera is a definitive international destination for performing arts and world-class entertainment productions. Dubai Opera passionately embraces its role as the vibrant cultural heart of Dubai, and is committed to produce and host the finest, authentic, creative, and engaging performing arts experiences from Dubai and the world.²⁹ (Dubai Opera website)

Undeniably, the scale and beauty of the playhouse is breathtaking, and the shows invited by the Opera reflect its mission. The two theatres (plus Ductac until 2018) also target affluent spectators and propose similar mainstream entertainment; they belong to Dubai show business, which aims to amuse, promote the arts, educate and, at the same time, make a profit. Therefore, the choice of Shakespeare's plays for these stages is mainly driven by audience satisfaction, which is natural when we take into consideration the private sector objectives. For that reason, the selected performances are usually mainstream ones, widely known and acclaimed. Fowler explains the choices of the performances he invited to the three venues he managed:

Prior to my current position, in the positions I have occupied at DUCTAC, Madinat Theatre and Dubai Opera, I have [had] responsibilities not only to create and implement a diverse programme, but also ensure that the content I am programming is not only in alignment with the profile of venue in question but will also contribute to the artistic landscape of the city, and indeed the region. It is also of great importance that the productions I select and programme also contribute to the enhancement of appreciation for the respective art forms and the heritage they represent. With these criteria in mind, as well as an important respect for the local customs and cultural sensitivities of the UAE, I have programmed, with a certain degree of caution, works by Shakespeare placing emphasis on well-known titles and also productions that

29 Dubai Opera. Available at: <http://www.dubaiopera.com/about-us/> (accessed November 17, 2017).

have a particular academic relevance and/or associated academic programme that has a relevance and value in relation to the academic syllabus of the particular year/ season. The Globe is a very good example of these criteria. (Joseph Fowler, 2020, personal communication)

Fowler reveals the reasons for his selections, which not only seem reasonable but also guarantee commercial and artistic success. Characteristics of the performances that satisfy the needs of the particular group of spectators who visit the mainstream theatres in Dubai will now be discussed.

Case study three: commercial Shakespearean productions

Commercial theatres usually limit their canon to the tragedies, as signalled earlier in this article. The adaptations are usually (believed to be) “classical,”³⁰ with the full text, true to the original plot that is presented in chronological order, stunning costumes and numerous props. Changes made to the original versions of the Bard’s plays (if any) are usually driven by the necessity to omit the parts deemed morally unsuitable to be staged in Dubai³¹ or to cut the long texts. These modifications are not meant to send any specific “message,” introduce new meaning or a new context. I have observed two reasons for that; firstly, the audience may not recognize the director’s intentions; secondly, such modifications might be misunderstood, and they may confuse or even disturb comprehension. The shows should be traditional; thus, the producers implement classical stage design, traditional text delivery and music. The staging ought to be as universal as possible since the shows aim at gathering a numerous and international audience, including UAE officials, authorities, representatives of local artistic environment and ordinary spectators of all nationalities. The performances are usually produced by recognizable, famous institutions that guarantee both the audience’s satisfaction and commercial success. Al Gargawi explains that:

... most of the private sector in this part of the world prefer to go to mother home of Shakespeare and that is the reason Dubai

30 The first exception to the rule “only traditional Shakespeare on commercial stages” was *Othello*, invited (by Joseph Fowler) to Dubai Opera in January 2019 and produced by Richard Twyman, English Touring Theatre from London.

31 In this case, after certain adaptations, the comedies fit the standards.

theatrical event managers try to contact The Globe Theatre, recognized as the most prestigious institution and authority on Shakespeare and sign contracts with them. (Yasser Al Gargawi, 2017, personal communication)³²

The Globe Theatre is a good example here. Being a very prestigious, famous and internationally recognizable organization, they have become a very active contributor to the local show business. There have been numerous Shakespeare productions offered by them during the last few years, both for young spectators as well as for adults. The Globe Education section, which specializes in the theatre and theatrical education for the young, cooperated with The Madinat Theatre and have (among others) staged *Macbeth* (2011), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2012) (both directed by Bill Buckurst), *Romeo and Juliet* (2013), *Othello* (2014).³³ All the performances might be classified as traditional, universal productions that were conventionally and very professionally staged for firmly educational purposes. Fowler claims that the shows he invited were successful and the multinational (mostly Western) audiences responded enthusiastically.

Amongst the target audiences were of course schools, both locally based [Dubai] and nationally from across the UAE. Schools from Al Ain, Fujairah, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi regularly attended school performances of the Shakespeare titles I programmed. In regard to nationalities, these were varied with the vast majority being English native speakers, as well as Europeans. Attendance figures would have been an average of 70% capacity of the Madinat Theatre which would equate to approximately 315 per show. I would usually programme 6 to 8 performances of each title. (Joseph Fowler, 2017, personal communication)

The majority of The Globe Theatre's productions seem to be very prosperous in Dubai; thus, it may not come as surprise that another production offered by the troupe, this time dedicated to an adult audience, was a classical *Hamlet*

32 Quotation with a permission of Yasser Al Gergawi, recorded messenger discussion on June 4, 2017.

33 Playing Shakespeare with Deutsche Bank was the Globe Education's flagship programme for schools in the region.

directed by Dominic Dromgoole, and staged at The Centrepoint Theatre, Ductac in 2015. Dubai was one of the cities the troupe visited during their two-year international and acclaimed award-winning tour (UNESCO patronage) to commemorate Shakespeare. The director presented a traditional performance suitable for the multicultural expatriates as well as the Emiratis. His *Hamlet* was a faithful version of the play with an effort to take up Shakespeare's way of staging as much as it was only possible. The show was very well acted, energetic, classical and was well received by the local audience that numerous attended the production (the tickets were sold out). These examples give an idea of commercial, professional productions welcomed on Dubai big stages that offer "big name" shows produced by prestigious companies and gather large audiences. According to Al Gergawi during the last five years over 15,000 spectators attended the Bard's performances staged in the main theatres and this number is just a vague estimate.

Case study four: non-commercial Shakespearean productions

In order to present a complete picture of Shakespeare's presence in the city, we need to take into consideration other stages with smaller scale productions that are addressed to a slightly different audience than the one described above: The Courtyard Playhouse and The Junction with their small but convenient stages, alternative programmes and limited number of seats.

The first one, The Courtyard Playhouse, "the passion project" as the founders call it themselves is a KHDA³⁴ licensed Performing Arts Training Centre Home to Theatre sports. It is a small-scale project, owned as well as managed by Joanna Kemsley Dickinson and Tiffany Schultz from England and South Africa respectively, and run by a very prolific community of artists, volunteers and performers³⁵ who describe themselves on their website in the following fashion:

... we wanted to have a 'home' for Drama Dubai. We were also tired of complaining about the 'soulless' feeling at some theatres and art spaces in Dubai and decided to create something which contrasts sharply with the stereotypical Dubai image of the best, biggest, most famous, etc. ... so the Playhouse is small, intimate,

34 Knowledge and Human Development Authority in Dubai, Dubai Governmental body.

35 Expats and young Emirati.

cosy, quirky, genuinely community-based and made with a lot of love and passion.³⁶ (Courtyard Playhouse website)

They play a diametrically diverse role in Dubai culture. This kind of a playhouse is not a part of mainstream show business. The Courtyard Playhouse attracts international spectators who become involved in theatrical productions; it often showcases amateur actors, actresses, directors, dramatists et cetera:

[We wanted to] to create a space for locally based talent to develop and thrive. A space where artists, writers, directors and community groups could afford to hire and not have to compromise artistically because of the overriding need to sell tickets.... We now have a full complement of workshops for all ages and events almost every night from stand-up comedy and improv' to community theatre productions and National Theatre screenings. (Courtyard Playhouse website)

The community is important in terms of enriching the local artistic stage; however, they do not greatly contribute the relocation of Shakespeare's dramas. I learnt that they are improvisational theatre and they do not usually *perform* Shakespeare; instead, they broadcast National Theatre Live and Royal Shakespeare Company's productions at their playhouse. The latest live Shakespearean screening organized by The Courtyard Playhouse was *Julius Caesar* by the National Theatre Live, broadcast live from The Bridge Theatre from London in 2018, which they perceive as an accomplishment. The audience was not very numerous; however, from the perspective of the multinationalism of the spectators and their active contribution, the show is considered a success.

The other theatre located in the same district is The Junction, a small playhouse launching many artistic events, with ambitious plans for the future and involved in Shakespearean productions. Goenka gives details about their idea of the theatre:

In the last years The Junction has hosted over 100+ events including theatre, music, dance, drama, comedy and poetry. The philosophy of the venue remains to foster talent from UAE for the

36 Courtyard Playhouse. Accessed December 15, 2018. <https://courtyardplayhouse.com/about/our-story/>.

UAE. A feasibility project was started in early 2012 to see what it would take to build our own space. In 2014 we approached Alserkal Avenue to see if they would like to house this project. In the same year, 3 families came together to fund this initiative. The active partners were Gautam Goenka (me), Rashmi Kotriwala and Arjun Burman. All funding for the space came from these partners [Indian origin expats settled in Dubai].... After many delays, bumps, hurdles and challenges The Junction was inaugurated on 18th November 2015. ... (Gautam Goenka, 2017, personal communication)

This description reveals facts about the origin of the project and venue itself, it demonstrates the spirit of the place and commitment of the owners. In fact, the Junction became a home for specific art lovers, people who are involved in productions in their free time, coming from various cultural backgrounds. The vast majority of the plays (Shakespearean and other dramas) are acted by amateurs for a limited international audience (160 seats). The stage usually promotes nonprofessional or not well-known artists who can contribute to the development of the “off stage,” independent performing arts theatre in Dubai. The casts usually consist of multinational actors, directors, musicians, and production staff. According to Goenka, this international diversity of people engaged in a production guarantees the interest of spectators of various origins and helps in gaining a multicultural and numerous audiences. The expectations of the spectators also differ from the mainstream productions audiences in that The Junction offers an “experimental” approach to Shakespeare’s plays. The performances do not have to be traditional, and respectively the texts might be trimmed, the chronology of plots disturbed, music as well as the costumes are not required (optional), characters may be added or omitted and so on. A very good example is the production of *Macbeth* directed by Liz Hadaway and staged at The Junction in 2017.³⁷ The performance was financially supported by local companies and The United Arab Emirates Ministry of Culture & Knowledge Development. The show was an interactive adaptation of the play with the audience following the actors from the stage of the theatre through an outside promenade. The audience was invited and even expected to freely

37 There were three shows presented in Abu Dhabi, Ajman and Dubai.

roam within “the world of the play to explore the space.” As the playbill informs: “Each audience member will see the story from a unique perspective. Your story will depend on the choices which you make.” There were twenty-five multinational, usually amateur, actresses (including Emirati artists) playing diverse roles with a vast representation of eleven dancing, whispering and shouting witches on the stage(s). The performance gathered a big audience that was actively contributing to the show; however, according to Goenka, the spectators were somehow lost during the production. Due to the fact that some parts of the original play were excluded, and the location of the scenes was changing too rapidly people were not able to follow the plot. Considering the above, it was recognized by The Junction as a partial success. However, the show was an attention-grabbing attempt to stage Shakespeare in an unconventional way and Dubai audience reacted with assent. Another example of an “experimental” Shakespeare introduced by The Junction was *Shakespeare in the Sands* project, which was to popularize filmed versions of all the Bard’s plays recorded by The Globe Theatre. The viewers definitely rejected the idea and after just two screenings with an almost empty auditorium the show was abandoned and finally cancelled. However, The Junction did not give up Shakespeare. Instead, in 2018, they proposed modern and highly avant-garde local community production based on two of the most popular Bard’s plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* under a title *Enter Macbeth*³⁸ directed by Meghana Mundkur with a cast of fifteen people. Scott Campbell in his promotional article “Shakespeare mash-up *Enter Macbeth* is coming to Dubai” (*Times Out Dubai* 2018) described:

The hilarious production *Enter Macbeth* is coming to Dubai, and there are a whole load of surprises in store. The production – based on two of the most popular of the Bard’s plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* – features a director on the cast, an Arabic Macbeth, guest appearances by Voldemort and Darth Vader as well as a whole lot of other chaos. With a principal character missing and half the cast on the verge of revolt, they must take drastic measures to keep the script from being shelved and the set from going dark. With the cast

38 Campbell, S. 2018. Time out Dubai. Shakespeare mash-up *Enter Macbeth* is coming to Dubai. Accessed April 12, 2020. <https://www.timeoutdubai.com/culture/theatre/387135-shakespeare-mash-up-enter-macbeth-is-coming-to-dubai>.

grasping at straws to keep their numbers even, they soon resort to recruiting from other scripts in Shakespeare's First Folio, hoping that doing so will bring an end to all their problems. Little do they suspect what further doom awaits – and it all makes for a hilarious evening. (Campbell, 2018)

The description of *Enter Macbeth* gave an actual idea of this interactive performance, which indeed was a comical exemplum of playing with Shakespearean dramas in order to achieve an experimental, creative effect of the classics. Interestingly, the production was a success, as Goenka claimed (Gautam Goenka, 2020, personal communication) over one hundred young spectators of multicultural backgrounds attended the shows each evening (three days of shows) and the audience was delighted. The producer and creative consultant of the production, Asad Raza Khan, stated:

These days, people want to be entertained and that is what we are giving to them.... We want to make the Bard presentable, accessible, and interesting for all ages including kids. We aim to perhaps create some sort of interest in his works, via what we are doing here. In any case, you can expect a crazy fun night at the theater. (Khan qtd. in Campbell, 2018)

Conclusion

Dubai, an oriental huge city that consists of the nationalities and cultures from all over the world, is a specific scene for Shakespeare. One must take into consideration the cultural diversity of the prospective spectators, local customs, social conduct, and respect of the local regulations. Not every one of Shakespeare's performances fits the needs and the expectations of Dubai theatergoers. The cultural differences sometimes make it impossible to accept the Western perspective Shakespeare is associated with as, obviously, not all the Bard's images, themes and motifs are universal and appealing everywhere in the world. Shakespeare's dramas may be recognized and globally well known; however, Shakespeare may not be transferable to every single culture. Dubai's Muslim tradition, customs, beliefs in addition to specific multicultural population of various cultural backgrounds may be a good case in point.

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Maja Kleczewska's *Hamlet* as a Mirror of Contemporary Poznan and Poland

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Abstract: *Hamlet* is a timeless play, which has been inspiring artists - actors, directors, film makers as well as writers, for over 400 years. The beauty of language, but also the universality of the topics such as revenge, betrayal, struggle for power, love, as well as the role of theatre are the reasons why *Hamlet* is still so contemporary. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's plays reveal their full potential when they are staged, but staging *Hamlet* in the 21st century in Poland, in Poznan is connected with the question 'why?'. What is the reasoning behind staging this Elizabethan play today? Nowadays the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, both on stage and on screen, are not without a reason; the already mentioned universality transforms itself into a comment on socio-political situation. In the play itself, Shakespeare refers to the theatre-mirror metaphor which comments on the reality.

By staging *Hamlet* in Teatr Polski in Poznań (2019) Kleczewska touched upon many contemporary problems of Poznań and Poland. She collected and commented on the anxieties and issues with which we tackle. Multiculturalism, Ukrainian immigration, multiple languages on the streets, feminism, the role of culture are just few topics touched by Kleczewska in the performance, but also topics which make the audience consider their place within the socio-cultural space. The aim of the paper is to indicate and analyse in these elements which occur in the performance.

Key words: *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, Maja Kleczewska, Poland, theatrical performance, women, multiculturalism

Hamlet is a play which touches upon numerous problems and issues, such as power, vengeance, honour, family, but also the function of art and the role of theatre. Jan Kott in *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (1974) drew attention to the timelessness of the play by famously stating that "[w]hat matters is that through Shakespeare's text we ought to get at our modern experience, anxiety and

sensibility” (Kott 1974: 58). Every attempt to stage a Shakespearean text should find a key to interpret the play and to draw the audience, and pique their interest, a key which will help the audience read, and later interpret, the director’s intensions. In Act 3 Scene 2, Hamlet welcomes the actors who have just arrived at Elsinore and expresses his opinion on the role of a theatrical play, he instructs them how a performance should look and indicates the ephemeral nature of acting and the theatre.

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance – that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing whose end both at first and now, was and is to hold as ‘twere the **mirror up to Nature** to show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it makes the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of which one must in your allowance o’erweigh a whole theatre of others. (*Hamlet* 3.2, 17–28)¹

The mirror metaphor which was used by Shakespeare in reference to the role of the theatre, was the metaphor also later adopted by Kott, “[f]or *Hamlet* cannot be played simply. This may be the reason why it is so tempting to producers and actors. Many generations have seen their own reflections in this play. The genius of *Hamlet* consists, perhaps, in the fact that the play can serve as a mirror” (Kott 1974: 57). He also claims that it is impossible to stage all the *Hamlets* that exist in the play, all the themes, plots, and motifs; the play is a sponge, which absorbs the issues and problems of the contemporary world and through a performance reflects on it. Both metaphors, of the mirror and the sponge, burden the director, the actors with the responsibility to include contemporary concerns into the performance and reflect on them, and the role of the audience is to recognise and interpret them.

Every theatrical performance of *Hamlet*, and any other Shakespearean plays may raise a question whether a play from the beginning of the seventeenth century is able to comment on the contemporary socio-political situation in Poland and Europe and what the reasonings are to stage the play today. All these

1 Emphasis mine.

questions also come to mind while experiencing Maja Kleczewska's *Hamlet/TAMJET* staged by Teatr Polski in Poznań.² The story about the Danish prince functions as a cover, as it can bring together many of the current issues and comment on them. Kleczewska did not base her performance solely on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but she also reached for Heiner Müller's *HamletMachine*, which on one hand may suggest the insufficiency of the Shakespearean text today, but on the other hand enriches the text and may also be used in the performance to hint a potential metatheatrical dimension.

The performance begins with a collectively sang, or rather cried out, words "I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and spoke with the surf BLABLA at my back the ruins of Europe ... My drama will not happen anymore," the words become a key to interpreting the performance as a commentary on the end of Europe and its cultural downfall. Müller's text also constitutes a frame; it is a beginning and end, which are not clearly marked here. The performance is always played twice with a smooth transition from one into another, with the confused audience not knowing whether they should leave. Here the beginning and end merge, the end becomes the beginning of something new. Kleczewska's *Hamlet/TAMJET* performance is about the doom of the Western world and downfall of its culture, hence the evoked confusion intentionally draws attention to the ease in which 'the end' – either of the performance or the world – can elude.

Kleczewska's theatrical performance is very rich semiotically and at times even over-saturated with signs and meanings for the audience to be able to notice and understand them all. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to discuss all these elements, hence only three aspects will be analysed in the present article. Although all three are quite overt and straightforward, they still seem to require further scrutiny. These elements are: the location of the performance in the Stara Rzeźnia in Poznań, the depiction of female characters, and the multicultural dimension of the entire performance. The analysis of these issues will be set within a larger socio-cultural context and conducted with recourse to theories of performativity.

Most reviewers pay attention to the location of the performance, namely staging the play, the theatre building, and (re)creating the Elsinore castle in the Stara Rzeźnia in Poznań.³ Mike Urbaniak (2019) states that the "post-industrial

2 The premiere took place on 7 June 2019.

3 Although the Polish place name Stara Rzeźnia is used in this article, it seems important to provide its literal translation as it is quite telling, namely the Old Slaughterhouse (or the Old Abattoir) in Poznań.

and hypnotic space of the Stara Rzeźnia creates, for all intents and purposes, half of the performance.”⁴ Further, Gruca (2019) adds that the building from the beginning of the twentieth century, impressive in its own right, has a particular ambience. Reviewers such as Ostrowska (2019), Wittchen-Berełkowska (2019) and Obarska (2019) also noticed that the director used a gimmick in the form of headphones, by means of which the audience experienced the performance. Both the venue and the headphones are elements which the reviewers immediately associated with the Malta Festival⁵ and the Silent Disco, an inseparable event of the festival. However, the comparison seems to be quite a simplification, which takes away the seriousness of the performance, especially when its main theme is taken into consideration, i.e., the fall of European values. Naturally, on one hand the choice of the venue outside of Teatr Polski made the performance more attractive and contributed to its commercial success, but on the other hand staging *Hamlet* outside the theatre building meant acquiring additional meanings. Kleczewska is not the first director to stage a Shakespearean play outside the theatre building. The better-known examples in Poland are *H.* by Jan Klata (2004), which was staged in a shipyard, and Grzegorz Jarzyna’s *2007: Makbet* (2006) staged in an abandoned factory. Each of these examples treats the theatrical space not as an insignificant element but as a meaningful and semiotically charged one. In both cases, these spaces provided an integral and interpretative element, contributing to their success, hence it is impossible to perceive staging *Hamlet/TAMJET* in the Stara Rzeźnia only in commercial terms.

The building of the Stara Rzeźnia, located close to the city’s Old Town, opened in 1900 and until the mid-1990s it was a working slaughterhouse. Despite its architectural beauty, it was a place where animals were killed and, although it was later adopted for cultural events, it has not been fully renovated or restored. As Howard (2019: 4) states, “a space is a living personality with a past, present and future. Brick, ironwork, concrete, wooden beams and structures, red seats and gilt and decorated balconies all give a building its individual characteristic.” Although Howard mainly has a theatre building in mind, it is also possible to refer this idea to any theatrical space, and its past and present affecting both the audience and the actors. The scenography by Zbigniew Libera follows this

4 All translations from Polish mine.

5 Malta Festival Poznań, previously known as Malta International Theatre Festival has been held since 1991. Apart from theatrical performances the program often includes, exhibitions, concerts, and quite often a silent disco party.

line of thinking; he adopts the state of building and uses it as a background for the performance, the walls with falling off plaster and a few remaining tiles from which blood could have been easily washed off, were covered with red carpets, which could actually resemble blood.

A slaughterhouse is a place which a society wants to repress from its collective consciousness, because it is a place where animals, living creatures, are transformed into food produce. *Hamlet* is a play with a tragic and bloody ending involving multiple victims, that is why staging it within the walls of a slaughterhouse should evoke anxiety and uneasiness in the audience. It is not about equaling human suffering with that of the animals, but about bearing in mind that Kleczewska is presenting her vision of the end of Europe, and the treatment of animals in the contemporary world can be one of the causes for its downfall. The popularisation of ecological ideas (which include dietary choices, i.e. reduction of meat consumption) and wide-spread environmental protection, as well as eco-criticism, are among the discussed issues concerning the future of the Europe and the world. A slaughterhouse can symbolise the fall of the protagonist and the characters as well as the fall of Western civilisation due to the mistreatment of animals.

Interpreting *Hamlet/TAMJIET* through the prism of its performative space is ephemeral and changeable, as the staging space changes. After the Stara Rzeźnia had stopped operating as a slaughterhouse, despite its decay and devastation, it became a venue for cultural and artistic events. This transience and passing, and to some extent the downfall, has been enhanced by the fate of the Stara Rzeźnia, which has since been demolished and replaced by a housing estate, although some architecturally beautiful elements of the original buildings are to be preserved.⁶ It is also possible that *Hamlet/TAMJIET* was among the last, if not the very last, plays performed there. Recalling Howard's words about the past, present, and the future of the staging space and their interpretative impact, comparisons with the play's ending come to mind. The demolition of the Stara Rzeźnia resembles the metaphorical demolition and decay of Elsinore, i.e. Europe. A collective and colonising Fortinbras, who is more of an idea or construct than a single man, appears, and it is he/they who is/are to create the world anew on the ruins of Elsinore.

6 Fortunately, despite an initial uncertainty the performance can still be performed in the Stara Rzeźnia after the initial demolition works were completed. In August 2020, *Hamlet* was staged there as before, but with a few changes.

By leaving the traditional framework of a theatre, with its clear division into the stage and the auditorium, and staging the play in the post-industrial space, Kleczewska has also altered the dynamics of the performance and its reception; the clear division between the actor and the spectator has become blurred. The multiple plots simultaneously taking place turn the audience into a voyeur, somebody who not only observes but is observed, who listens through the headphones but is also listened to, eavesdropped on, and spied on. The performance does not draw any clear-cut borders where the spectators can walk or sit; they follow their own chosen path, a plot or an actor.

Erika Fischer-Lichte in her studies on the phenomenon of performance notices that a performance “consists of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. Performance, then requires two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, to gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime. Their encounter – interactive and confrontational – produces the event of the performance” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38). But in Kleczewska’s case the co-presence or coexistence is not passive, as she allows a certain degree of freedom and expects the spectators to be active and, only to a point, interactive. In *Hamlet/TAMJIET* the viewers are an integral element of the performance, as they are responsible for creating the performance to some extent, no matter how clichéd this sounds. The actors at times need to be more aware of their surroundings and the position of the audience and their reactions.

A good example is Gertrude’s bedchamber (where the closet scene takes place) or the throne room, where the viewers can approach the actors closely or even sit with them at the same table just to strengthen the experience. The story is linear but the particular plots happen at the same time in various places of the theatrical space, hence the audience is charged with greater responsibility to create meaning and to work out their own manner of reception; free will becomes one of the constitutive elements of the performance. The audience members are not limited to passively sitting and observing the events; they are able to follow the actors as they move around, or sit in many spots to observe the actors, other viewers, or just watch the events from throne room that are broadcast on screen. There is not just one manner of experiencing, consuming, and reacting to the information and the play, much like the contemporary world. In today’s overstimulated society, every single person is responsible for determining whether a piece of information is true or fake; one has to question and ask rather than blindly follow the crowd and *Hamlet/TAMJIET* depicts this well.

Despite the initial feeling of loss, the viewers quickly adapt to the new situation and make the best of it. What is experienced and seen is quickly documented, photographed and posted on social media as proof that the experiences have really taken place. Similarly, with *Hamlet/TAMJET* Teatr Polski from the beginning encourages taking pictures and making films to post them on Facebook and Instagram. Naturally, on the one hand this is a form of marketing, however, on the other hand it reflects the way contemporary audience members consume and react to a performance, something Kleczewska indicates quite clearly.

Staging *Hamlet/TAMJET* in the Stara Rzeźnia is connected with one more characteristic element, namely performing chosen scenes and events as well as the entire performance on a loop. The consequences of the loop are twofold. First, it allowed the audience to (re)experience a greater number of scenes sometimes non-chronologically, it also created the impression that actors at times function on autopilot, going round in circles and repeating the same phrases. Second, the play ends suddenly but immediately it starts once again from the beginning, which confounded the audience; for some the performance did not have a clear beginning, whereas for others there was no clear ending. The loop, or routine, brings to mind the contemporary experience of culture, especially TV, which is often based on reruns of films, series, and even sporting events. The contemporary viewer, just like the audience during Kleczewska's performance, may feel at a loss and at times does not distinguish a new program from a rerun.

The depiction of women, Gertrude and Ophelia, in Kleczewska's *Hamlet/TAMJET* is another significant and semiotically charged element. Both characters often function in opposition to one another; youth and maturity, idealism and realism, innocence and guilt. The director has cast the female characters in a very interesting way, still preserving the contrast, but also drawing attention to the perception of women in the 21st century. Gertrude, played by Alona Szostak (a Russian by birth), has been presented as a beautiful and sensual woman, dressed in a long white gown, coquettish towards both her son as well as husband. Her exterior and interiority contradict, her white dress suggests her purity and innocence but her behaviour does not support that perception. Despite her strong position and influence in court, Gertrude-queen seems bored with everything that surrounds her; as a result, she drinks and a wineglass becomes her inseparable companion. Power and influence seem to overwhelm her, alcohol functions as a stress-release, but also leads to situations in which the limits of ridiculousness and impropriety are crossed.

The “Mousetrap” illustrates this behaviour well; she sits among the audience members and comments loudly and crudely the events on stage, thereby disturbing everybody around her. Domagała (2019) has noticed that Gertrude has been presented as a “cheated woman/object, who was used by her brother-in-law as a tool to gain power, and now drowns her resentment and humiliation in alcohol. In the “mousetrap” scene she behaves like a spoilt film star only so that she can show her son her aching and suffering heart just few minutes later.” Gertrude is exposed to the public view, and as a public person the public/audience has their own expectations towards her regarding her conduct and image – here Gertrude can be compared to politicians’ wives, which should be seen but not heard.

Gertrude is aware of the expectations which her subjects have of her, hence she attempts to control it, but her public image when seen with Claudius is different than in her private life with Hamlet. She creates two images of herself but alcoholism and lack of control and good manners, which stem from the inability to deal with power or from sensing her impending end, shatter the images. Gertrude-mother appears to be different from the public image; she does not emanate confidence anymore, which manifests itself in her language. The language of the court and in public is Polish, whereas in private she turns to Russian/Ukrainian (she mixes the languages constantly), especially in contact with Hamlet. It sounds as if they use a secret language that only they can understand, which hints at their intimate relationship. Hamlet in the performance suffers from the Oedipus complex, fuelled by Gertrude herself, which has an unexpected outcome with Hamlet raping her. Kleczewska depicted Gertrude as a complicated character full of contradictions and burdened with expectations with which she is not able to deal. The external beauty and social position, which in the times dominated by social media, celebrity oriented-media and the celeb-ritization of politics, are highly valued.

Ophelia (played by Teresa Kwiatkowska), constructed in opposition to Gertrude, differs significantly from the typical depiction of Ophelia as a young, beautiful and slim(!) girl. In an interview Kleczewska and Chotkowski, the playwright, justify their vision, “we wanted to challenge the stereotype of an ethereal Ophelia – a little girl, Hamlet’s victim. Maybe Ophelia has been involved in court intrigues, or maybe she has been suffering from a disease for a long time and she just made up Hamlet’s letters, or maybe she never was seduced and abandoned?” (Liszewska 2019). Ophelia, due to her age and appearance,

similarly to Horatio⁷, because of his disability, does not fit into society, where the greatest value is outer beauty. At one point, even Gertrude ridicules her plump appearance and talks to her as if to a child. As a result, she experiences physical and psychological violence; she is excluded and rejected from the society of Elsinore, which contributed to her mental decay and madness.

In an interview Kleczewska observes that “women at a certain age are denied love and sexual desire, for which, just like Ophelia, they pay a high price. We wanted to claim the 60+ people’s right to love, our Ophelia is courageous enough to fight for herself” (Liszewska 2019). Kleczewska draws attention to 60+ people and their right to love, but in the performance, it is also the love to a younger and good-looking man. The mismatch, in age, looks and position, seem to shock the most, as contemporary society is judgemental, especially towards the weaker and those who do not fit the majority. Kwiatkowska’s Ophelia reveals her tragedy in the madness scene, when she appears in a white wedding dress with a tacky “I love you” written across it. She walks around the audience, accosts them and gives out the non-existing or invisible flowers, until then Ophelia was socially invisible herself, it is her madness and “inappropriate” behaviour that make her noticeable. No longer is she ethereal and invisible when walking to the table in the Throne Room, her madness finally gives her courage to become an independent and somewhat wild woman, who has been until that moment unappreciated and overlooked. Unfortunately, the act of rebellion leading to madness occurs too late to change anything. Ophelia dies on that table as if sacrificed by Claudius and Gertrude for society’s clear conscience.

Finally, one of the most overt elements of the performance is its multicultural nature, due to the multinationalism of actors who speak numerous languages during the play. A case in point is casting Roman Lutskiy, a Ukrainian actor, as Hamlet (Polish media constantly Polonize his name – Łucki).⁸ The performance is multilingual and multicultural, allowing Kleczewska to disturb the image of Poland (and Poznań) as an open and tolerant society, thus revealing or shedding more light on its prejudices. Poland is no longer linguistically, ethnically, and nationally homogenous, although conservative or right-wing Polish

7 Horatio in the performance looks like Stephen Hawking, the brilliant physicist. He moves in a wheelchair, and due to his difficulty with speech, nobody listens to him or pays him any attention.

8 After the performance some audience members leaving the theatre were heard saying that the actor playing Hamlet was handsome but it would have been better if he were Polish, which is telling as far as the Polish attitude towards multiculturalism in culture is concerned.

politicians would like to believe otherwise. By casting actors of different nationalities, Kleczewska attempts to mirror the social composition in Poland, with Ukrainians and other nationalities living next to Poles. Although she does not address the issue explicitly, the director challenges the perception that foreigners are cheap labour rather than highly qualified workers, experts, and artists who can enrich society both culturally and linguistically.

Hamlet mixes languages and experiences (code switching between Polish, Russian and Ukrainian); his language highlights his isolation and, despite the attempts to find common language with the people around him, he remains misunderstood both in terms of language and the values he follows. Kleczewska wanted to draw the attention to multilingual society and families, like in the mentioned closet scene between Gertrude and Hamlet when suddenly they switch to Russian, making themselves less understandable to the audience. Multilingualism should be perceived as an enriching element for any society rather than a factor that isolates and stigmatises. Interestingly enough, despite the Ukrainian language being widespread in Polish streets and used by immigrants, it is still a language not learnt by many people, hence it may have evoked the feeling of uneasiness and confusion in the scene when the languages were mixed. Nevertheless, multinationalism present in the performance should not be perceived as something extraordinary and unusual but as a normal state of affairs, one which only reflects the social situation.

Another indication of multiculturalism in *Hamlet/FAMJIET* is Fortinbras, which is a collective, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural construct, rather than a single person, and is derived from non-European cultures. Fortinbras, or the name Fortinbras(es) would be more suitable, is inclusive and diversified, played by a Hindu, Mandara Purandare, a Senegalese, Gamou Fall, and Flaunette Mafy from South Africa. The triumphant invasion of these cultures is possible due to the downfall of European values. Fortinbras(es) who come(s) from Africa and Asia is/are depicted as a collective invader and coloniser of the debris of Europe, whose cultural collapse is connected with Claudius' and Hamlet's death. However, in Kleczewska's performance the end is not final but it is a beginning of the new. The invaders do not destroy Europe, it was done without their involvement, they wait to create the world anew once it had been destroyed, nevertheless their impact is not destructive in nature. In this way, immigrants need not be perceived as the ones responsible for the destruction of one's culture.

Unfortunately, instead of being open to various cultures and perceiving them as an enriching element, the increasing nationalism and racism in Europe

often treats “aliens” as people who come from subordinate and worse cultures and a threat. Interestingly enough, this also reveals the weakness of European culture, one that can collapse without outside intervention. Although it seems that Fortinbras(es) colonise Europe, they appear only after the death of all the characters who would have been able to see the destroyed Europe. The colourful entrance of Fortinbras(es) full of noise and music is a promise of renewal and creation rather than destruction.

Kleczewska followed Kott's words and created a performance for our contemporary times, one that addresses significant current socio-cultural issues of Poland, and one that moves the audience and makes them think. The performance itself, together with the performative space of the Stara Rzeźnia, is multifaceted with numerous meanings and interpretations. Staging the play outside of the theatre building was not only a commercial decision contributing to its success but one that added new meanings. Both the history and the future of the Stara Rzeźnia can be viewed as factors which become interpretive signs. The vision of modern women, their position and perception in society and the media are issues also addressed in *Hamlet/TAMJIET*. Kleczewska has attempted to break with the conventional approach towards and categorisation of Gertrude and Ophelia, thereby showing their complexity. The multiculturalism of the performance is visible even in its title, *Hamlet/TAMJIET*, but also in the casting and language that is used. Although reviewers claimed that it is a play about the end of Europe, it does end on an optimistic note with the arrival of Fortinbras(es), who marks a new beginning, literally of the performance (which is looped) and metaphorically for culture and society.

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The Merchant of Venice on (Polish) Stage: The Past (Tense)?

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to consider a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Poland after the publication of Jan Gross's *Sąsiedzi* [Neighbours] (2000), which rekindled, or perhaps started, the discussion on the nature of the Polish-Jewish relations. Furthermore, the play itself is considered difficult in the post-Holocaust era. For these reasons, it seems interesting to discuss Szymon Kaczmarek's production (2019) and the director's handling of this dramatic and cultural 'hot potato'. Although Kaczmarek does not refer to Gross's publication directly, yet he uses the fate of Jewish and female characters in the play to comment on the marginalised in present-day Poland.

It may seem that *The Merchant of Venice* belongs in the past and one can write about the play's performance history mainly in the past tense. Małgorzata Sugiера (1997, 7) has observed that *Merchant*, next to *The Taming of the Shrew*, is very difficult to stage or film after 1945:

Two plays by Shakespeare ignite considerable controversies and require radical ideological revisions: *The Taming of the Shrew*, with its clearly misogynistic images of marriage and ways of establishing male domination; and *The Merchant of Venice*, with its antisemitic appeal, equally unacceptable to the sensitivity of present-day recipient.

It is debatable, though, if one can call *Merchant*¹ unambiguously antisemitic (while there is no denying the fact that *Shrew* is misogynistic). The play may be read as antisemitic, as its discriminatory potential is both manifest and latent; be that as it may, the text is certainly controversial, especially after the Holocaust. For this reason, it has become another "problem play" for the Western culture and Shakespeare scholars in general, and contemporary Polish culture in particular.

1 Henceforth we will use the English title: *The Merchant of Venice* to refer to this production.

The problematic nature of *Merchant* has also been observed by others. For example, John Drakakis (2010, 121) signals the text's particular dependence on the context of its staging: "the *Merchant of Venice*, perhaps more than most Shakespearean texts, was submitted to the forms and pressures of the time." Drakakis further (2010, 129) quotes Dennis Kennedy to emphasise the radical caesura of 1945: "The events of the Second World War have ... 'completely transformed our ability' to read the play. Indeed, he [Kennedy] argues that 'since 1945 we have been in possession of a new text of the play, one which bears relationships to the earlier text but is also significantly different from it.'" In other words, the interpretation, staging or filming of the play calls for a fundamental revision, especially in the presentation of not only the character of Shylock, Jewish-Christian relations, but also – as Szymon Kaczmarek's production from the Witkacy Theatre in Słupsk, which we intend to discuss in this article, shows – the role and position of female characters and the "Venetian romance" (Orgel 2003, 154). It is also necessary to note the performance history of the play in Poland after 1945. Significantly, Kaczmarek's version counts thirteen in the Polish post-war performance history, according to our census, with only two before 1989 (in 1958 and 1970) and five after 2001.²

The years 2000/2001 mark another significant caesura in the difficult Polish-Jewish relations: Jan Gross's publication of an account of the murder of Jewish people in Jedwabne by the Poles: *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Polish Jews in Jedwabne, Poland*, which fuelled an uneasy discussion about Poles' responsibility for Jewish deaths in WWII, and its official acknowledgement by the Polish authorities 60 years after the pogrom, in 2001. These events were followed by such films as the Oscar-winning *Ida* (dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, 2013) or *Pokłosie* [Eng. *Aftermath*, dir. Władysław Pasikowski, 2012), all of which further deepened the lingering notorious stereotype of a Pole as a Jew-eater in the West (as opposed to the stereotype of the heroic Jew-saving Pole in Poland). Yet another significant circumstance must be considered here: the literal, physical absence of the Jewish community in Poland after 1968 resulting from the communist-driven campaign to force Poles of Jewish origin to leave Poland,³ following the severing of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967. Admittedly, the situation, after 1989,

2 See Anna Cetera's (2015, 248–294) "Kupiec wenecki na polskiej scenie" [*The Merchant of Venice* on Polish stages]. Interestingly enough, in independent Poland (after 1918 and before 1939) *Merchant* was performed three times.

3 This may be another reason why, before 1989, *Merchant* was staged only once – in 1970.

has changed and the number of Polish citizens claiming Jewish ethnicity rose to 7,353 in 2011 and has been growing since.⁴ It is in such a context that we will look at the Szymon Kaczmarek's *Kupiec wenecki*, the winner of the 2019 Golden Yorick award at the 23rd Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival.

Interestingly enough, it is rather difficult to find references to such issues in the reviews of the production. What reviewers emphasise is the modernisation of the play, with its insistence on avoiding the visual splendour of Venice (unlike in, e.g., Michael Radford's film, 2005) or lavish and dazzling historically accurate costumes. The production also shuns highlighting the motives of the power of friendship and love, associated with Belmont and contrasted with the business-like and ruthless image of Venice. Justyna Borkowska notes that the play "was put in modern times, its action set in a harbour city, in an industrial space, and Shylock is presented as an economic immigrant." Kaczmarek himself admits he shows not only contemporary Venice, but one never imagined on postcards or tourists' photos. It is not the Rialto,⁵ St. Mark's Square or the canals, but a wharf with concrete-looking breakwater tetrapods and numerous containers with merchandise. Shylock, wearing a tracksuit, unpacks the goods he intends to sell which happen to be wigs. Jessica is working with him. For both of them, the Venetian wharf is a place of hard work, indeed a fight for existence. The external tokens of their otherness are Shylock's sidelocks and Jessica's wig.⁶ When Jessica elopes with Lorenzo she takes off the wig and dons a black baseball cap in a symbolic gesture of assuming a new identity and severing links with her Jewish origins.

Antonio and Bassanio are also presented as contemporary characters, yet they are not toiling; instead, for them, the same wharf becomes a beach where they enjoy sunshine and romance as lovers. They are the elite of Venice; clad in smart suits, gold chains with crosses on their necks, and sandals on their feet. Be that as it may, even for them the wharf is *not* some pristine pleasure beach, with deck-chairs and palm trees, but an industrial area. Kaczmarek deprives the characters and setting of the saccharine aesthetics associated with commercials. According to Anna Jazgarska, "Venice (intricately designed by Kaja Migdalek and musically

4 https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%BBydzi_w_Polsce (doa: 30 April 2020).

5 This location is very popular in my Anglophone stage or film versions of the play, e.g. in Fyodor Komisarjevsky's 1932 production with Ernest Daniels's "drunken bridges" (Drakakis 2010, 123) or Radford's visually lavish film.

6 A Chassidic woman is not allowed to show her hair in public and she wears a wig (*sheitel*).

framed by Żelisław Żeliszawski) boils down to dark alleys of a harbour city full of warehouses and peopled with shady 'businessmen'". Interestingly enough, both groups of characters – Shylock and Jessica on the one hand, and Antonio and Bassanio, on the other – occupy the same "backstage" of Venice.

The production explores the marginalised and excluded: Kaczmarek puts his production in contemporary times, highlighting the topical story of migrants, which gradually and naturally led him to the concept of alienation, mainly cultural one. The director is looking in the 16th century play for equivalents of contemporary figures of exclusion (due to age, gender, religion, colour) and shows on stage relations which still prove social inequality and class consciousness. (Borkowska)

Otherness and its facets is thus an obvious aspect of the production; in their discussion of the character of Shylock, Stephen Orgel speaks of him as being "conventionally identified as an outsider" (2003, 144), whereas Stanley Wells (2020, 45) brands him a "discordant character." In the case of Kaczmarek's production, virtually every figure stands for an "Other," understood in a general sense: "[t]he existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007, 154); consequently, each character deviates from what is "normal." Shylock is a Jew who is deprived of everything by the system; he is a migrant from the East, biblically associated with Eden, yet the Middle East has become a place devastated by turmoil and war, indeed a paradise turned to hell.⁷ Antonio is a homosexual who loves Bassanio so much that he is ready to help his lover win the hand of a woman, Portia (Monika Janik). Moreover, Antonio is both gay and anti-Semite, when – together with his lover – he sneers at Shylock.

The woman is also presented as an "Other" in the production. Portia's and Jessica's worth is measured with the money they bring into their relationships. Portia's father (present in the production on video tapes) treats her like a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder.⁸ During the bid she is put in a container and her

7 Kaczmarek does not create Shylock as an 'orientalist', Levantine Jew, like Bill Alexander did in the RSC 1987 production with Antony Sher in the role of the Jew (cf. Drakakis 2010, 137–138).

8 This is of course reminiscent of Baptista Minola's treatment of Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

image is relayed by means of a camera onto a screen outside the container. There are three containers (equivalents of the play's caskets) and one of them literally holds Portia. This convention reminds one of popular TV shows, like *Storage Hunters*, and the association is of course intentional, as it further commodifies Portia. Jessica's value in Lorenzo's eyes becomes apparent when she brings her lover the money she stole from her father: Lorenzo strips off the mask of a caring husband. In Belmont, he sunbathes in a deckchair while she cooks and serves him meals. Soon she falls victim to domestic violence. Lorenzo thus turns out to be not only a bully, but also an anti-Semite, who in Jessica's presence jeers at her father. Łukasz Drewniak sums up the issue of the "Other" in the production in the following way: "[t]he sensational and fairylike plot of the play on purpose reveals the latent ruthless clash of handicapped members of any community (that of gays, Jews, and women)"; the nature of the handicap in the production consists in depriving of characters of agency as well as social and legal equality.

Kaczmarek's production also addresses the issue of *playing* different social roles in the context of popular culture, including the performance of gender roles. It is clearly visible in the character of Portia, who becomes the central figure next to Shylock, very much in accordance with a theatrical practice dating back, in the Anglophone world, to the late 19th century. In some productions, such as Leslie Reidel's US version from 2016, it is "Portia, not Shylock ... who is the center of the action" (Halio 2020, 54). In the Słupsk production, Portia assumes at least three roles: first that of "a maid" who needs to present herself favourably to the suitors - here, she creates an image of a sex-bomb, puts on the mask of liberated feminine sexuality with heavy make-up, artificial nails, a short, gaudy dress, etc. When Bassanio makes the right choice, she happily joins him instantly removing the make-up and taking off the nails and dress. She metamorphoses - her second role - into a model housewife, a Victorian "angel in the house." Finally, in the third role - that of Balthazar - she assumes a cross-gender identity by putting on a striped suit and emphasising the masculine attributes of her "character." Monika Janik's Portia is so convincing in each and every role that it is impossible to determine her "true" self on the one hand, and what it takes to be a man or a woman, on the other. The illusory nature of representation that the production displays and highlights is further fostered in the use of camera which helps create Portia's identity as a marriageable woman as well as that of her dying father (on his deathbed). Reviewers have also noticed the significance of appearances in the production - Justyna Borkowska finds them

“ones of the key phenomena heavily underlined in the play. ‘Appearances’ refer to people, emotions and situations. They are entertainingly and cleverly shown in ‘Portia’s metamorphosis’ after she won her ‘prince charming’”.

Portia is not the only character whose image and identity mutate and lack clarity; this is also true about Shylock: “Igor Chmielnik’s Shylock is also a synonym of appearances in the production. The Jew does have money but he works very hard to earn it – he sells his merchandise and packs and unpacks the containers himself. He carries packages with wigs, which – though referencing Jewish traditions – are yet another example of appearances” (Borkowska). Like Portia (and his daughter after elopement), he plays different roles, which is especially visible in the trial scene (4.1): Shylock comes to court dressed in the costume of a Chassidic Jew, wearing a fur hat (*shtreimel*) and a black silk frock coat (*bekishe*; equivalent of the play’s ‘gaberdine’), in other words a stereotypical image of a Jew, more precisely an Eastern European Jew.⁹ Such a representation of the Jew, coupled with acting reinforcing the stereotype, bordered indeed on parody. This Shylock loses his dignity by trying to replace it with pretended arrogance. This image is as unexpected as it is surprising; it leads to confusion among the spectators. This, as Stanely Wells (2020, 48) observes, is to be *expected*:

All the moments in which the actor [any actor] has the clearest opportunity to play for sympathy, including the ‘hath not a Jew eyes’ speech, and Shylock’s grief at his daughter’s betrayal, have come before this [Shylock’s declaration of his vindictive desire for revenge in 3.3]. In other words, the audience is swayed increasingly during the course of action towards the interpretation of Shylock as a remorseless villain up to the point at which they see him at the words, with his knife poised above Antonio’s breast.

The spectators of Kaczmarek’s production and Chmielnik’s performance are not easily *swayed*, however. When they see Shylock dressed as a Chassid, they are first baffled, then they laugh, which many reviewers found inappropriate as if the audience, like Salarino and Salanio and others, are sneering at the Jew:

9 This stereotype of Jewry has been deployed in Anglophone productions; Drakakis (2010, 131–132) notes that Jonathan Miller’s 1970 production with Laurence Olivier whose “appearance [was that of] a central European Jew” (132).

Although it is rather difficult to find fault with the production, this is not true about some spectators' reactions. Bursts of laughter accompanied Shylock who in the trial scene appeared dressed in a traditional Chassidic costume, including the characteristic fur hat... Laughter was also heard in the scene when it turned out that the Jew cannot claim his rights only because of his religion. The audience was also clearly pleased in the final scene in which the Jew, by the law, is forced to be baptised. This scene is beautiful and extremely expressive; Shylock resembles here Christ led to crucifixion. (Daniel Klusek)

Irrespective of the didactic endeavours of the reviewer, he manages to capture the nature of the audience's response as problematic.¹⁰ But reproaching the spectators (some of them) with disgraceful conduct may be ignoring the pretentiousness of the image of the Jew and his behaviour (so different from what one has seen so far): the audience observes that Shylock demonstrates his devotion to religion in too ostentatious a manner, which may be found false and exaggerated (another appearance). On the other hand, one needs to consider the director's intention to, as Łukasz Drewniak put it, "release ... in the Słupsk audience unwanted emotions – sneer at the sight of the Jew in a Chassidic dress." Perhaps Kaczmarek did not intend to provoke the spectators as Richard Olivier did, who, in his 1998 New Globe production, had "the audience ... encouraged to hiss Norbert Kentrup's Shylock whenever he appeared" (Drakakis 2010, 151). Yet the combination of the stereotypical image and Chmielnik's strange loss of finesse in his rendering of the figure (to be regained in the scene of the forced baptism)¹¹ inevitably led to a considerable shift in the audience's response.

John Drakakis (2010, 143; 153) mentions, among others, a number of Anglophone productions in which Shylock puts on / or reveals (elements of) traditional Jewish dress in the trial scene. One of these is David Thacker's 1993 RSC version, which shows Shylock "wearing gaberdine and yarmulke as though he had just rediscovered his Jewish faith, pull[ing] a knife from his executive

10 Łukasz Drewniak, too, notes that "Kaczmarek releases in the Słupsk audience unwanted emotions – sneer at the sight of the Jew in a Chassidic dress."

11 Stanley Wells (2020, 47) reminds us that "in a production at Shakespeare's Globe of 2015, starring Jonathan Pryce, the director [Jonathan Munby] went so far as to add at the end of the play an episode portraying Shylock's enforced baptism as a Christian."

briefcase" (David Calder's Shylock up to this point was fully assimilated in the Venetian society). It needs to be said that the "gaberdine" means here black trousers, black vest and a white shirt (plus yarmulke). This production was vehemently contested by Arnold Wesker for "'making anti-Semites ... feel comfortable with Shylock because he conforms to the myth they love'" (in Drakakis 2010, 143). By no means is it to say that Chmielnik's Chassidic Shylock may have aroused antisemitic sentiment in the audience. But the image is certainly shocking and "out of joint" on the one hand; on the other, it is consistent with the production exposing appearances which the audience may recognise.

The situation radically changes in the added scene of Shylock's baptism. This scene together with Shylock's "Hath a Jew not eyes" (3.1.33) are key elements of the production, also because it is here that the spectator is addressed directly by Shylock. Significantly, both scenes function as bracketing devices in the production. Shylock utters his speech just before the intermission (closure of part one of the production) and is baptised and then left alone on stage at the very end of the production. In the former scene, he faces the audience, looking straight at the spectators, with the auditorium and stage fully lit. He utters the speech alone on stage (Salanio and Salarino are not present) in the form of a soliloquy. It is a liminal moment in the production: the play still lingers on, but the lights above the auditorium signal the beginning of the intermission. A border between fictional and empirical worlds is thus opened. Chmielnik's Shylock stares at the audience, he sees the spectators' faces; they, in turn, cannot pretend (unless they turn their faces away) that Shylock is addressing somebody else. It calls on each and every one of the spectators to revise their views on the Jew, the Other, themselves.

Equally unsettling is the last, mute, scene which is not set in the fairy-tale like, romantic Belmont, but in the space of the courtroom, which now looks like a torture chamber, with Shylock carrying the device of torture: a bowl with holy water. Łukasz Rudziński compared this Shylock to a Christ figure: "The final scene of Shylock's baptism is very distressing: half-naked, sneered at, in a white garb, Shylock resembles Jesus Christ. It is with this image that the artists leave the spectators with." What also makes the scene similar to Christ's passion is the stripping of Shylock of his hat and coat, which he so proudly, perhaps even arrogantly, displayed to the Venetians and the court. Chmielnik's Shylock, again, turns to the audience with a mute reproach in his eyes. Although this time the auditorium lights are off, the burden of this scene, in which baptism is not the

source of life but pain and symbolic death, heavily settles on the audience, who actually *sees* and *hears* (albeit silence) Shylock being utterly deprived of identity and agency. The character's deprivation is echoed in the deprivation of the space: at the back of the courtroom there hangs a paper wall with a crucifix on it. At the play's closure, the wall is torn and the crucifix is askew. Kaczmarek's Venice is a place *deprived* of God. At the same time, this scene achieves a metatheatrical dimension as it makes the spectator think about the nature of stage illusion (the wall turns out to be made of paper); thus, the God of the Jews and the God of Christians are reduced to elements of stage design, theatrical properties, or occasionally elements of costume (a gold crucifix on Bassanio's breast).

The last scene illustrates the unpleasant and bitter truths of which Łukasz Drewniak reminds us in his review:

Who knows, perhaps *The Merchant of Venice* is still the most contemporary of Shakespeare's tragedies [sic!]. Its 'contemporaneity' does not consist in the fact that it contains dramaturgic devices ahead of its time and still profoundly affecting the spectator but in the acknowledgement of the fact that to date we have not managed to cope with cursed involvements, which the Man from Stratford revealed in his drama: intolerance, the role of money in love, the position of women in the world of men. These revenants still haunt us from the stage.

And haunt us they will, one is tempted to say, as Kaczmarek's production, like any artistic endeavour, does not have the power to lay those ghosts to rest. Yet, one does admit the courage of the director to use the text of a play which in the Polish context may seem problematic: not in formal terms but in how it is read today, with its comic and romantic traits radically played down. It is a text which very directly speaks of antisemitism and xenophobia, which, for communities and individuals alike, are always disconcerting and unwelcome. Kaczmarek does not, however, capitalise in a direct manner on the symbol of Jedwabne and Polish-Jewish relations. He carefully avoids engagement in the debate on the Polish responsibility of the Holocaust (like *Pokłosie* or *Ida* have done) and the (lack of) collective memory of the Jews in Poland/Polish Jews. One may find such a treatment of Shakespeare's play rather disappointing, but perhaps Jedwabne has become *so* evident a reference in any narrative regarding Jews in

Poland that there is no need to state the obvious. Rather, the director prefers to focus on the current xenophobic as well as misogynistic (political) milieu of the Poland of 2019 by making Shylock and Jessica immigrants and Jews at the same time, and Jessica and Portia characters without agency.

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Reciprocal Mirror and the Captivity of the Text: Planes of Captivity in *Hamlet* by the ImPerfect Dancers

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In his exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet famously states: “Denmark’s a prison” (2.2.). He further expands the concept of prison onto the whole world. The Italian artists from the ImPerfect Dancers, whose *Lady Macbeth* had been applauded by the audience at the 23rd Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival in 2019, juxtaposed in their *Hamlet* two visions of captivity. The first one, constituting the sequence of dramatic events, is the image of madness, which holds soul and mind captive more effectively than the walls of an asylum. At the same time, it ignites the imagination of a young woman, who seeks freedom in reading Shakespeare’s masterpiece. Madness manifests itself here not only as social exclusion but provides an illusory passage to Elsinore. The asylum patient’s alternative emotionality makes her identify with Ophelia, which deceptively mingles two planes – that of Shakespeare’s fiction and apparent empirical reality. This assumption of Ophelia’s self leads the patient from fascination with Shakespeare’s text to an unsuccessful attempt at transgression, which emphasises the degree of the character’s becoming a captive of her own imagination. At first it seems that the border between the two planes of the production was blurred. The young woman tries to keep pace with the characters’ dance, follow the rhythm of their movement, mingle in the crowd of courtiers, even replace Polonius’s daughter. The ensuing scenes expose the illusory nature of this communion and the play’s mirror, in which the protagonist examines herself, turns out to be reciprocal. First, Hamlet, lamenting Ophelia’s death, rejects her as if she were an intruder; then, it is Horatio, the only one who remains alive, who rejects her. Voluntary relinquishing the status of a passive observer (a bystander?) has its concrete price: first, that of shattering the illusion, then functioning in a loop. When it seems that tragedy is finished, characters rise, encircle the sick young woman and start anew another cycle of betrayals, revenges and deaths. Her piercing cry, which ends the production, suggests that she realised that her imagination entered into a pact with the dungeons of Elsinore. According to Ewa Partyga, the crossing points with the stories of the others constitute vital junctions in

how a narrative is woven. There are no such crossing points in the production; there is only a game of illusory reflections, which lead to no significant narrative consequences.

Not only madness becomes a prison in the production, but the stage itself, or – rather – the frame of Shakespeare’s narrative, from which there is no escape. According to Patryk Kencki, another axis of drama is the tension resulting from the subordinate dependence of the fictional world of the production on the fictional world in the play. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as performed by the Italian artists, functions as an intra-work. Its characters are called to life from the darkness and silence by the young woman’s reading from the play’s pages and her imagination. Both activities occupy the opposite extremes of scenic agency. Whereas the imagination brings to life characters with a variety of emotions, potential of finding alternative solutions and filling in Shakespeare’s indeterminacies, the recorded story delimits the sequence of events, leading to the inevitable catastrophe. Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Horatio, Laertes and Old Hamlet become on stage living prisoners of a story concluded a long time ago, which they have to cyclically enact. Their fates are curbed by the tradition which is visualised in the convention of classical dance. The incredible harmony of pirouettes, leaps and lifts constrains the natural expression of characters. The classical convention is conducive to rendering the characters unreal. In the ImPerfect Dancers’ production, this process is counterbalanced by realistic facial expressions and mimetic gestures from the repertoire of conventions of dramatic theatre. Besides, in the scenes emanating particularly heightened emotions, characters’ individual, unique expressions appear to break the form, disrupting the fluency of movements, breaking postures and making particular figures non-finito. This is best manifested by Gertrude, performed by Ina Broeckx. In order to exhibit the effect of internal quiver, the dancer shudders convulsively, which – paradoxically – transforms the conventional representation of the history into a reliable representation of inner emotions, despite the somewhat expressionist hyperbole. This leads to a shift in the paradigm of classical dance. Individualised and fully-fledged characters no longer fit in neither the convention, nor the story. Aware of the inevitabilities of fate, they stretch and bend the story and look for places of indeterminacy they can fill. However, they find themselves in a blind alley, as they cannot change the course of the story.

The production opens with waking dead Hamlet. It is not, however, an element of reverse narrative, one of the links of a repeatedly perpetuated cycle (also visible in Maja Kleczewska's *Hamlet*, staged in 2019 at the 23rd Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk). Hamlet's fate hovers above the character from the very beginning; this process is literally manifested in the stage design by means of a bloodied skull hanging above the stage. In one moment, the Danish Prince begins to stroke the skull gently, not to show his longing for Yorick but for the finality of death, which he cannot experience. Gertrude, too, shares the awareness of the cyclicity of fate and the emotional price she has to constantly pay for coming to life in the readers' minds. This is visible when she puts an inverted black crown on her head: instead of being a token of power, the crown becomes a prison chain.

An excellent example of the conflict between the play's reading and imagining is the character of Old Hamlet, whose stage presence exceeds the shape of the figure outlined by Shakespeare. He is not a mere ghost, but a ghost of the ghost of the Danish king. He is emotionally bonded with those characters he was close with when he was alive. He is especially affectionate to Gertrude, which may be directly derived from the play's closet scene, in which the Ghost forbids Hamlet to mistreat his mother. Old Hamlet/King Hamlet appears in the scene of the dance dialogue between Hamlet and Gertrude to fight against Claudius for the Queen's soul. He repeats this duel parallel to the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, he cuddles dying Gertrude and, like a death angel, he holds dead Ophelia and accompanies his dying son. He appears where the consequences of the revenge he initiated lead him. He seems to be overburdened by the metaphorical role of the director of the tragic events, yet he desperately clings to his stage life. In the scene of the young woman's ripping out from the drama the pages she has read, he painstakingly collects them conscious that he owes his existence to the strokes of print on paper.

The ImPerfect Dancers artist constructs on stage an ingenious chamber of mirrors. Banal as it may seem, the story of the young woman who escapes from the empirical world into an imagined one, peopled with characters from the play of plays, on the one hand alerts the spectator to the potential price and illusory nature of attempts at transgressing between (still apparent) reality and fiction, and, on the other, showcases imagination as a space for an alternative existence of the dramatis personae. The characters, in turn, endowed with emotions that the spectator can easily relate to and

that constitute a springboard for gaining autonomy, are in fact imprisoned in their literary reflections and a world which, constrained by words and marked with a cruel beauty, is for them a mere prosthesis of reality. As a result, a question appears to haunt the production which Hamlet poses in the play: “What have you ... deserved at the hands of Fortune that she sends you to prison hither?” (2.2. 239–241)¹

¹ Quotations from *Hamlet* come from the following edition: William Shakespeare. 1982. *Hamlet*. Ed. by Harold Jenkins. The Arden Shakespeare. Second series. London: Methuen.

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