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Shakespeare on the political stage in the twentieth century

Did Shakespeare have a political agenda? Up until forty years ago most scholars and readers would have affirmed that his reputation rested on exactly the opposite, namely on *not* being partisan, but for *all* time.[1] For centuries his plays were seen as timeless models of human nature; as such they were performed on the stage, as such they were studied, debated, translated into many languages, assimilated into foreign literatures and adapted to widely different media.[2] None of his plays are *drames à thèse*, and yet they have been appropriated by the political stage like no other.

The reason for this is simple. Although the plays are not partisan (unless the general support of the Tudor myth in the histories is counted as such) they deal with material eminently suited to transformation into political theatre. The history plays and the Roman plays for example can be read as so many case histories of the ways of gaining, wielding and losing power, and the protagonists are thoroughly familiar with Machiavelli's lessons in *Realpolitik*. However, the conflicts shown are never played out merely on the surface level of intrigue and counter-intrigue. They are always set within a wide moral frame including questions of legitimacy, of right versus might, and they never lose sight of the metaphysical dimension of order versus chaos. Furthermore, the many soliloquies and dialogues in which these questions are broached represent not only fully fledged theories of politics but – given a critical political situation in a given country at a given time – constitute a serious attack on the ruling class or system. During the last years of the Nazi regime in Germany, performances of the history plays were forbidden; they contained too many examples of cruel power grabbers being brought to rough justice. *Troilus and Cressida* fell out of official favour as well. German audiences who used to thrill to Ulysses' speech on 'degree, priority, and place' (1.3) might have discovered more pertinent matter in the nihilistic railings against authority by the 'deformed and scurrilous Grecian' Thersites than in the grandiloquent heroics of the warriors of both sides. In certain political situations some Shakespeare plays only need to be played straight to

be politically subversive. Stalin knew why he did not want Soviet audiences to watch *Hamlet*. Even in Shakespeare's time a performance of *Richard II* parallel to the Essex rebellion gave the play a contemporary political twist that might well have proved fatal to the playwright.

There is political matter even in the comedies. Duke Frederick has usurped the place of the exiled Duke in *As You Like It*; Prospero in *The Tempest*, himself a victim of usurpation, has usurped the island from native Caliban and thus invited scathing post-colonial interpretations; *Measure for Measure* can be regarded as one long disquisition on the right use of authority; after the Holocaust *The Merchant of Venice* is obviously no longer the same play; and feminist readings of practically all the comedies will yield plentiful instances of outspoken or unconscious sexism: politics, in other words, is either explicit or implicit in most of the plays.[3]

It is a matter of directorial decision whether the political potential of a play is realised in performance or not. Productions designed to represent the national heritage and aimed at a general audience seeking first acquaintance with the plays (like the well-known BBC television series of the 1980s) will refrain from projecting political messages. Equally, most stage productions of Shakespeare until well into the 1920s were apolitical: their *raison d'être* was to celebrate great dramatic poetry and identify with the larger-than-life characters, as presented by actors keen on coveted roles for audiences who knew and revered the plays from their schooldays and enjoyed the communal ritual of seeing them enacted in exemplary and largely traditional form. The First World War and its aftermath disrupted this civilised consensus for good. Conditions in several European countries, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Soviet Russia, were such that for theatre to provide the 'culinary' entertainment (Brecht) of pre-war days was felt to be irresponsible by avant-garde directors. Theatre should respond to the pressures of the age rather than deflect the minds of the viewers from urgent concerns by aesthetic diversions. For Erwin Piscator and to a lesser extent for Bertolt Brecht this meant sociocritical agitation, turning the stage into a political platform and using contemporary plays to provide comments on burning questions like abortion, pacifism, exploitation, or mass unemployment. For Leopold Jessner this meant shaking the classics out of their museum-like torpor and giving them a topical edge, by a variety of means. Both strands have persisted: each year there is a tremendous output of sociopolitical plays on every conceivable subject, just as the movement to reshape the classics into political commentary begun with Jessner shows little signs of abating. It is this latter phenomenon that the rest of this chapter will discuss.

For the political potential of Shakespeare's plays to be released, three things must come together: a political or social situation crying out for critical

comment; a director and ensemble willing, able (and also ruthless enough) to use the plays for this purpose; and audiences alive to the sociopolitical climate and therefore primed to catch allusions. The combination of these three requisites during the twelve years of Nazi rule in Germany, in West Germany during the 1960s and 1970s, and in East Germany for the period from 1945 to 1989, makes the German example the most indicative. There are, however, many other cases in point; especially in Eastern Europe, where Stalinist dictatorships in countries locked behind the Iron Curtain and waves of rigorous suppression drove theatre people to protest against the prevailing inhumanity, in particular by means of Shakespeare. (See also chapter 10 above.)

Leopold Jessner, directing *Richard III* at the Staatstheater in Berlin (1920), set the pattern for the more pointedly politicised performances of the future. Attention was no longer to be focused on the clash of heroic individuals; instead, the production should illustrate an overarching concept in order to bring out the 'essence' of the play. After four years of mass slaughter in Flanders fields, the time for admiring traditional heroes was past. For a generation formed 'under the hydraulic pressure of events', proclaimed the shell-shocked Piscator, it was necessary 'to formulate the insights tested under the thunder of the guns'. Or, in the words of Leopold Jessner: 'The face of the age had changed, and so . . . of necessity, had the theatre.' Fritz Kortner as Richard was too powerful an actor to allow himself to be contained in a formula, but his expressionist acting was distinctly shaped to highlight the 'career of power based on violence and murder' that Jessner felt the play exemplified (fig. 25). Six years later he directed *Hamlet* as a denunciation of the corrupt and fawning imperial court surrounding the kaiser, who had been forced to abdicate after the war. *Hamlet*, to Jessner, was a political play even if Berlin audiences were not yet prepared to see it as such. 'What possible interest . . . could the psychology of the Hamlet-figure have for a contemporary audience? The gramophone record of "To be, or not to be" is worn out.'[4]

Hitler's assumption of power and the ensuing strict surveillance of the theatres reduced the chances of making a classical play comment on the present state of Germany and the pernicious character of its leaders. There was one exception, *Richard III* directed by Jürgen Fehling at the Staatstheater in Berlin in 1937. Richard (Werner Krauss) cultivated an exaggerated limp (putting everyone in mind of Joseph Goebbels, the deformed and deadly Minister of Propaganda), his bodyguards wore black SS-type uniforms, the costumes of the murderers of the princes suggested the outfit of other Nazi ruffians, and the Scrivener spoke his revealing lines directly at the audience. The production caused great offence in official quarters, but the allusions,

25 *Richard III*, directed by Leopold Jessner at the Staatstheater, Berlin, 1920, with Fritz Kortner as Richard and Rudolf Forster as Buckingham.

though perfectly comprehensible to those who wanted to see, were ambivalent enough to prevent the director from having to suffer serious consequences.

Across the border, in neutral Switzerland, there was no need for guarded suggestion. At the Zurich Schauspielhaus a group of Jewish and left-wing actors and directors who had fled the Nazi terror were determined to use the stage as a platform and to sharpen the political awareness of their audience. In their first Shakespeare production, *Measure for Measure* (1933), the director Gustav Hartung took pains to work out the analogies between Angelo and Hitler; in later productions of politically relevant plays such pointed reference was no longer necessary. The Swiss spectators had no illusions any more about the dangerous clique ruling Germany. They realised that Shakespeare was indeed a contemporary author: his presentation of pre-Tudor power struggles reflected their immediate experience. Under the

shadow of war, *Troilus and Cressida* (1 September 1938) held a special lesson for the Swiss nation: Hector (who does not want the war) is killed the very moment he has laid down his arms. The Swiss heeded the warning. Theirs was to be an armed neutrality. A year and a day later they ordered general mobilisation.

It does not need a general catastrophe of the Hitler type to give Shakespeare plays a topical edge. For a racially segregated society *Othello* deals with a burning concern, even if Othello is only played by a white man painted black. If, however, he is a black man wooing, winning and murdering a white Desdemona, the whole issue of miscegenation is invoked and likely to divide audiences. In South Africa under apartheid conditions Janet Suzman's 1987 production of the play at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg ran into further difficulties: the black actor, John Kani, who had to pass through several road blocks and was himself frisked by white policemen in an insulting manner before reaching rehearsals, found it increasingly difficult to achieve the emotional equilibrium that would allow him to bow to the 'Most potent, grave, and reverent signiors, / My very noble and approved good masters' (1.3.76 f.) and to indulge in glorying reminiscence of how he won fair Desdemona's consent.[5]

Unpredictable extraneous events and conditions like those described above can suddenly charge plays with contemporary meaning. In such cases it is not even necessary to alter the text; it is the act of performing a particular play at a particular historical juncture that constitutes the political significance. The case is different when directors and ensembles deliberately decide to turn performance into politics. At this point they enter the wide area of conscious reinterpretation and adaptation, to put across preconceived messages. Again, the developments in German theatre, East and West, are indicative.

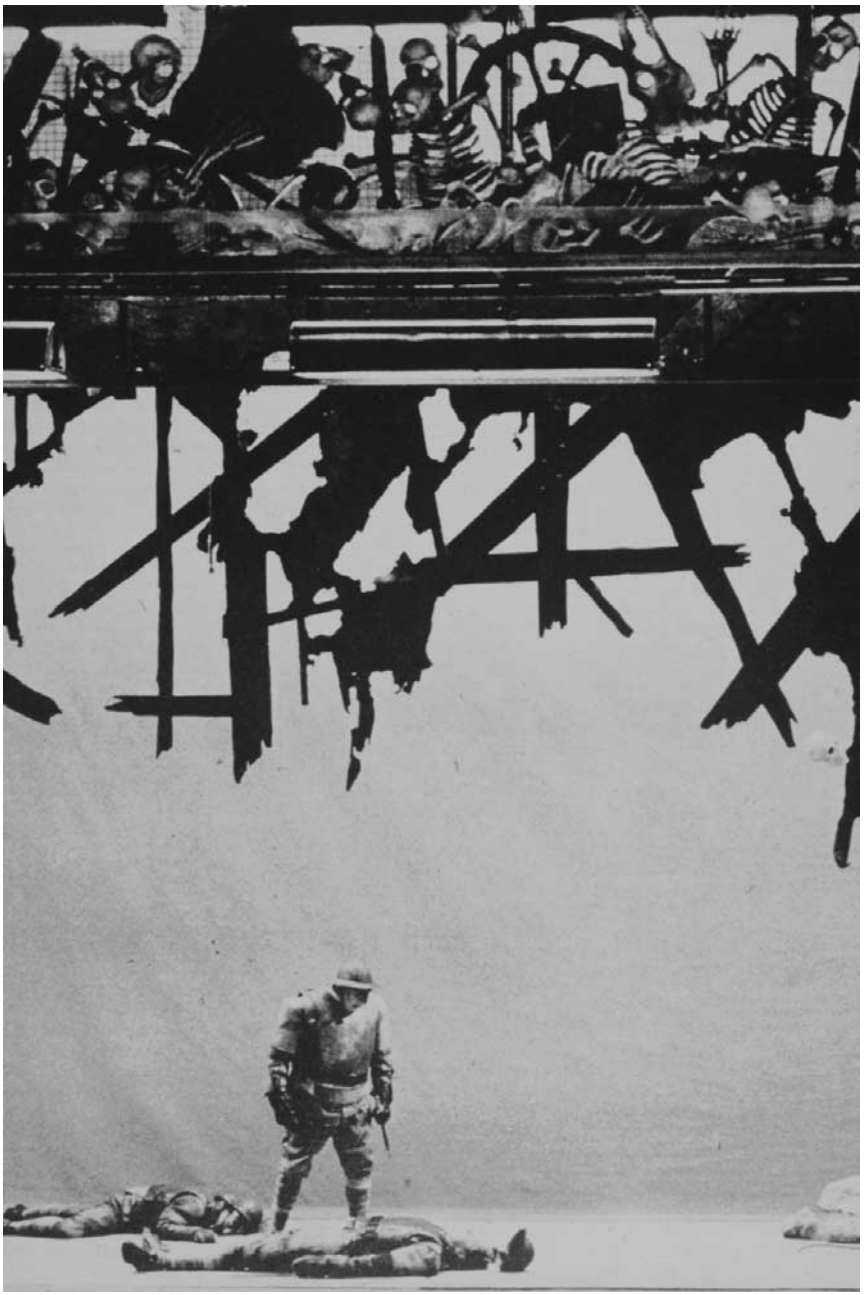
Brainwashed and dissected: political Shakespeare in Germany, 1964–1990

Early in his career Brecht attacked the traditional veneration of the classics, Shakespeare included, as a form of cultured self-hypnosis. They were valuable only as 'Material' (i.e., the reworkable substance of a play), and needed reshaping from a clear ideological standpoint to give them contemporary relevance. His adaptation of *Coriolanus*, first staged in 1964 by the Berliner Ensemble eight years after his death, showed textual alterations designed to undermine the legitimacy of senatorial rule by giving the citizens recognisable characters and interests, turning the tribunes into politically conscious people's representatives, and making Volumnia in the end side with Rome and the people reject her son.[6] Compared with the subsequent mutilations

of Shakespeare's texts by younger directors, Brecht's handling was conservative. Its impact derived from its undeflected political focus – and from its exemplary *mise-en-scène* as non-identificatory, presentative theatre.

In the 1960s and 1970s Brecht's disciples in East and West Germany subjected the history plays to similar, though far more abrasive ideological questioning. In this they followed the lead of Jan Kott, the Polish director and Shakespeare scholar, whose merciless analysis of the plays in *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (1965) reduced the dynastic power struggles to a 'Grand Mechanism'. He revealed the efforts of the agents involved to claim legal or moral motives for their destructive actions as so much 'ideology', that is, as an either conscious or unconscious concealment of selfish urges behind acceptable discourses. The three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III* provided welcome copy for debunking and critique. Of the three productions – John Barton and Peter Hall's *The Wars of the Roses* (Stratford, 1964), Giorgio Strehler's *Il gioco dei potenti* (Milan, 1965) and Peter Palitzsch's *Der Krieg der Rosen* (Stuttgart, 1967) – the latter was the most uncompromising, a stark denunciation of the power game that underlined the message by the dramaturgic and visual means of expository theatre. Scenes were reshuffled to bring out blatant contrasts and contradictions. A narrow frieze above the whole width of the stage displaying broken weaponry, severed limbs and skeletons as emblems of war and destruction, served as a constant reminder of the human cost of the power game (fig. 26). In 1968 the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt brought out his adaptation of *King John*, which premiered at Basle and was widely performed during the next two years. In this adaptation King John and Philip of France are absolutely amoral, war to them is a sport, contracts are there to be broken, their citizens, mere 'scum', pay the cost, and Cardinal Pandulpho, risen from the gutter, understands and absolves it all. Only the Bastard, ineffectual spokesman of reason and humanity, is a figure of faint hope.

In the view of Jan Kott and the new generation of directors that followed in his footsteps, history was a nightmare. Existence under the shadow of 'the Bomb' had become a philosophical absurdity. The threat of nuclear annihilation and its deterrent involved such baffling contradictions that the intellectual's response could only be to work towards a radical critique of the ideology that had led to this impasse. No means were to be spared to expose its underlying absurdity and inhumanity, and the theatre would have to play its part. It was impossible that in a world gone insane the classics should remain inviolate loci of meaning. They had long been treated as icons of ultimate reconciliation, but the order and harmony traditionally regained in the fifth acts were now felt to be fraudulent shams. It was this mood of profound disaffection that produced the impulse to wrench



26 Peter Palitzsch's *Der Krieg der Rosen*, Stuttgart, 1967.

the classics from their moorings. Look beneath *King Lear* and find Beckett's *Endgame*, as Kott suggested. Look beneath *Macbeth* and find a meaningless succession of treachery and slaughter, was the lesson to be learnt from Eugène Ionesco's *Macbett*. The adaptations and recastings of Joseph Papp, Charles Marowitz, Edward Bond, Tom Stoppard and many others were similarly radical transvaluations that reflected the progressive schizoidism in the world-view of western man.

Whether such adaptations should count as *bona fide* political theatre is a moot point. They were certainly part of the great cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in which traditional institutions and figures of authority were dismantled. In Germany this cause was taken up with greater insistence than elsewhere because the theatrical avant-garde were bent on finding *their* answer to the question of all questions: 'What had made the Holocaust possible?' Were the classics really innocent of complicity with the forces that had led to this abyss? Adolf Dresen, an East German director rehearsing *Hamlet* in the harbour town of Greifswald on the Baltic in 1964, summed up the dilemma in the succinct phrase 'Buchenwald is near Weimar', that is, the proximity in Germany of the worst (the infamous concentration camp) and the best (Weimar, home of Goethe and Schiller, seat of the muses) is no coincidence. This conviction spurred German theatre people to subject the classics to a painful questioning in order to discover hidden pockets of 'ideology'. Shakespeare, in this process, was psychoanalysed, politicised and brutalised in order to strip his plays of an imputed tendency towards affirmation and to rescue them from what Peter Brook called 'deadly theatre'. To recoup their original explosive power and make them reveal their inner material contradictions, they were inserted into radically contemporary contexts.

From 1964 to the early 1980s, West German theatres underwent a veritable revolution with productions out-Kotting Kott in the service of revealing hidden power structures and unmasking their exploiters to effect the ideological transformation of their audiences. In the critical political discourse of the time, state power was execrated. Marxist or left-wing directors could be relied on to show the acquisition and wielding of power as acts of unmitigated selfishness, treachery and cruelty. For example, Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* was progressively turned into a villain after having been revered as a basically benign, if occasionally odd patriarchal ruler. Other figures of authority also lost their aura. The means to this end were heavy alterations of the text, drastic cuts and deliberate presentations against the grain. Audiences felt they were being brainwashed and intentionally deprived of treasured cultural experiences. But in cases where such innovative productions were indeed the result of plausible new readings, and furthermore

accompanied by appropriate visuals, the departure from tradition was compensated for by opening up a thrilling new aesthetic, albeit of disjunction, shocks, *non sequiturs*, but also of unprecedented penetration into the deep core of the texts. Hansgünther Heyme, Hans Hollmann, Claus Peymann, Peter Stein, George Tabori and Peter Zadek were among the foremost directors to have effected this change.

East Germany

The situation in East Germany was different. Theatre was expected to contribute to the establishment of a socialist culture based on a militant and optimistic, that is socialist, humanism. Charged with this agenda, and under fairly strict control by Party ideologues, there was no room for an art free from politics, neither in principle nor in practice. The authorities favoured an art of affirmation, not of criticism. But at the height of the Cold War in the 1960s the artists who at first had trustingly supported the guidelines laid down by the authorities began to chafe under the discrepancy between their own (critical) view of socialist reality and the confident and roseate representations they were expected to produce. Shakespeare was part of the official GDR culture and he was proclaimed as a precursor of socialist humanism during the state celebrations on the occasion of the quatercentenary in 1964. In the light of such elevated endorsement it is not surprising that deviations from normative stagings were treated as wilful attacks on the 'Heritage'. To theatre artists with a knowledge of the exciting work done in their field elsewhere, this constituted a suffocating restriction. Yet opposition could never express itself in total negation or rejection, as in the West; it had to operate by subterfuge.

In this process critically minded theatre people received unexpected support through Robert Weimann's *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*, a study of the plebeian elements in early English drama and their reflection in the work of Shakespeare. This profound and scholarly investigation had extraordinary consequences for theatrical practice. At the same time as Mikhail Bakhtin's exposition of the medieval carnivalesque counter-culture in the works of Rabelais became known in the West, Robert Weimann unfolded the spectrum of popular (and subversive) characters, attitudes and qualities to be found in the dramatic traditions since antiquity and their re-emergence in Shakespeare's plays. Of immediate relevance was the linking of the Vice-figure to Richard III and Iago. Vice-type Richards soon abounded in East and West Germany, but for a villain to jump down into the stalls, harangue spectators at close quarters and thus enmesh them in a complicity

of evil was a new experience for East German audiences used to being kept at Brechtian distance (*Richard III*, directed by Manfred Wekwerth, Berlin, 1972). Weimann also pointed out the great subversive potential inherent in performance itself, a danger well known to the Puritan enemies of the theatre in Shakespeare's time. East German Shakespeare directors welcomed the scholarly support of their desire to brush the plays the wrong way. It was also in the staging of the comedies that contemporary attitudes not provided for in the Party programme found expression.

In the 1970s most performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on East German stages departed from the Reinhardtian model with a vengeance. Hippolytas were brutally subjugated, little love was lost between the young couples, and their release in the forest near Athens took on extreme forms of aggressiveness and sexual directness. This was not only an imitation of western examples and a reflection of changed relations between the sexes, even under socialism, but also signalled profound disaffection and an unsolvable dilemma. The three worlds of the *Dream* invited experiments with class differences and social contradictions. Some directors managed a qualified final harmony in the fifth act, for example Christoph Schroth in his production at Halle in 1971; Alexander Lang (Berlin, Deutsches Theater, 1980), however, so drove his ensemble to explore the disjunctive potential of the play that no return to a socially viable community was indicated.

More direct protests could be registered with *Hamlet*. The prince could be presented as an angry young man and dangerous outsider, and above all the analogy between the GDR, fenced in behind death-strips and barbed wire, and 'Denmark is a prison' was too obvious and inviting not to be touched upon. Laertes waving his blue passport, the coveted document allowing trips to Paris, only raised an understanding laugh; but forcing spectators past barbed wire on their way to the ticket office, with a machine gun mounted on the theatre roof (Potsdam, 1983, directed by Piet Drescher), took the joke too far: the machine gun was forbidden. It was left to Heiner Müller, an author of unusual poetic power and famous for abrasive plays about life and work in the GDR, to use Shakespeare for a final showdown. Inspired by a grim vision of history that had informed his translations/adaptations of Shakespeare and Greek plays, Müller linked *Hamlet* and his own incredibly brutal ten-page scenario entitled *Hamletmaschine* to form an oppressive and imposing amalgam. It constituted an ultimate reckoning, taking in human history from ice age to heat death and presenting an irredeemable world at the end of reason, culture and time. It was a dirge for the state that went out of business when the production was prepared and a gloomy comment on the globalised world that took over (Berlin, 1989/90; fig. 27).

27 Heiner Müller's *Hamlet*, 1989/90.

Political Shakespeare in Eastern Europe

The reception of Shakespeare in Eastern Europe owed a great deal to the German example. The Schlegel-Tieck translation (1797–1840), which turned Shakespeare into the 'third German classic' next to Goethe and Schiller, often served as a bridge for Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Russian translators. Shakespeare in Eastern Europe came to be closely linked to intellectual movements striving for greater national and cultural independence. His characters were familiar figures to the reading public, above all Hamlet; his dilemma caught the imagination of countless young idealists: 'Hamletism' denoting indecision, political ineffectualness, dreamy self-absorption, was a recognised condition of the soul among Russian intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century.

Polish writers and theatre artists interpreted 'To be, or not to be' as the ultimate question that their compatriots (till well into the twentieth century) would have to answer in order to achieve (or regain) national independence or civil liberty. 'To fight, or not to fight' was the question that marked the Polish dilemma. In periods of political unrest in Poland after the Second World War (1956, 1968, 1970, 1981) there was a significant rise in *Hamlet* productions.[7] The play could easily be made to comment on the actual political situation dealing, as it does, with undiscovered but suspected crimes, usurpations, military coups, surveillance and international imbroglios, aspects that Polish audiences felt immediately related to contemporary politics in their country. After the proclamation of martial law in Poland in 1981, the 1982 *Hamlet* directed by Andrzej Wajda had a Fortinbras in the uniform of the hated Polish Security Forces, and Hamlet's lines 'Forgive me this my virtue, / For in the fatness of these pursy times / Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg' (3.4.153–5) earned standing ovations.[8] Similarly, the *Hamlet* produced in Cracow (1956), two years after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in which Khrushchev had disclosed the extent of Stalinist crimes, vibrated with political immediacy.

The appropriation of Shakespeare in Eastern Europe was intimately connected with the national revivals in most Slavonic literatures, translation of his works into Hungarian, Czech, Slovakian, Slovene, Serbian for example helping to raise the status of the vernacular languages in relation to German, the official and literary language of the Habsburg Empire. Russia had its own Shakespeare tradition. His literary influence was immense, all the major authors (Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy) succumbing to his spell or battling with his mighty shadow, but stage productions were hampered by censorship.

Censorship continued to dog theatrical performances after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. 'Political' Shakespeare in the sense of making the plays comment critically on government decrees or Party policies was out of the question. Only a few directors would risk topical allusions, least of all with *Hamlet* (later to be forbidden altogether by Stalin), which had such obvious applicability to political practice in dictatorships. Director Nikolai Akimov was the exception. His 'entirely iconoclastic, grotesque' *Hamlet* of 1932 at Moscow's Vakhtangov Theatre became really topical only two years later when Stalin travelled to Leningrad 'to kiss dear comrade Kirov in the coffin', the popular Leningrad Party secretary suspected of having been murdered at Stalin's instigation. Shades of Claudius hypocritically mourning his 'dear brother's death'.[9] Though deprived from turning Shakespeare into politics, Soviet theatre enjoyed striking innovations in staging inspired by Russian constructivism, a movement that influenced set design in the rest of Europe until well into the 1930s. Theodore Komisarjevsky mounted a much debated 'aluminium' *Macbeth* at the Stratford Memorial Theatre in 1933. Other emigrés took the style to the Continent and even the United States. The Russian enthusiasm for *Hamlet* was reinforced by Boris Pasternak's idiomatic translation of 1939 and its production at the Taganka Theatre in Moscow by Yury Lyubimov with the poet and protest singer Vladimir Vysotsky in the title role. In its long run of 217 performances between 1971 and 1980 Moscow audiences came to identify Vysotsky with Hamlet, and 'the Prince in a metaphorical Soviet gulag' with their own situation 'of a spiritually deprived living death', in protest against which Vysotsky 'declaimed, to the accompaniment of his guitar, Pasternak's once forbidden poem "Hamlet"' at the beginning of each performance.[10] Although the production was a radical departure from the traditional manner of presenting the play, there was no attempt to deconstruct the Hamlet figure. Nor were the political implications foregrounded to the extent of obscuring the philosophical and psychological dilemmas Hamlet has to face. A similar balance can be observed in the famous *Hamlet* film directed by Grigori Kozintsev of 1964. A single, silent scene introduced by the director sufficed to transmit the 'political' lesson: Ophelia is being encased in tight courtly costume and taught to dance, smile and be a subservient doll in the hands of her manipulators: the young are doomed from the start.

The Czech appropriation of Shakespeare was at first less dominated by the desire for political independence than the desire for cultural independence. In the 1920s and 1930s the Czech National Theatre in Prague won international fame for its daring staging with expressionist sets and abstract stage constructions in the manner of the Soviet avant-garde, but it was only when the country was occupied again, first by German troops (1938–45) and then

as a Soviet satellite in 1948, that pressing occasions for 'political' Shakespeare arose. The 1941 production of *Hamlet* in the Vinohrady Theatre in Prague is said to have 'emphasised, with due caution, the helpless situation of an intellectual attempting to endure in a ruthless environment'.[11] Twenty-three years later director Otomar Krejča and stage designer Josef Svoboda, both with outstanding international careers before them, collaborated in a rousing presentation of *Romeo and Juliet,* which caught the mutinous restlessness of Czech youth trapped in the stifling Cold War atmosphere. After the crushing of the Prague Spring by the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, theatres were once again thrown back on guarded allusion and insinuation. It took ten years before another *Hamlet* production expressed the feelings of the young generation. Directed by Evald Schorm at the small Balustrade Theatre in Prague, this 'raw, underdone *Hamlet*, with blood dripping from wide-gaping wounds in both bodies and souls' was a tragical farce in which the presumptions of the high and mighty were shown in all their futile absurdity. The grave-diggers were clowns who took over the end of the play, pulled a camouflage net over the corpses and dusted the heap with disinfectant. According to the testimony of Zdeněk Střibrný, spectators felt shattered but also 'a peculiar relief, a kind of modern absurd catharsis'.[12]

Colonial and post-colonial Shakespeares: *The Tempest*

The examples discussed so far sketch national appropriations inside Europe that derive from similar motivations and follow similar patterns. Cultural exchange here was between equals sharing in a common European heritage. Shakespeare in the colonies and in commonwealth countries was a different matter, although politically unproblematic as long as his works were unchallenged items in school or college curricula, where the study of this unparalleled genius was said to bring the choicest fruit of western culture (second only to the Bible) to the knowledge of less fortunate or even totally untutored races. Canon-building and empire-building went hand in hand; native cultures were marginalised by the hegemony of the 'mother' country. It was only when the freedom movements in Africa and Asia achieved independence for their countries in the 1950s and 1960s, and a new generation of indigenous intellectuals supported by sympathetic activists from abroad contested the legitimacy of colonial domination, that the questions at issue could be properly focused. (See also chapters 14 and 15 below.)

The appropriation of Shakespeare is paradigmatic for the problems emergent nations face in establishing cultural identity as a compromise between imitation, rejection and assimilation. A Mozart symphony, leaving aside pop

versions and arbitrary rearrangements, has to be played the same everywhere. *The Tempest*, to be stageable at all, has to be translated into the vernacular or literary language of the region concerned, and assimilated to indigenous theatre traditions. Performing the play in imitation of western models is no longer enough. Awareness of one's cultural independence forbids such 'mimicry' and demands that the alien play be rewritten according to the nation's own cultural/ideological code. Viewed from a post-colonial standpoint, Caliban's abject serfdom and his clear insight into the process by which the colonising Prospero has taken possession of the isle provides such obvious parallels to the fate of formerly colonised nations that fundamental revisions are *de rigeur*. Prospero's legitimation of his rule rests on a single point, namely the assertion that Caliban's debased nature is impervious to nurture, 'Being capable of all ill!', as proof of which he points to Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda. This, for centuries, has clinched the argument, and post-colonial interpretations have had to find a way around it. By deconstructing the relevant passages it is easy to show that Shakespeare was voicing commonplace contemporary assumptions: for example, about native languages as so much 'gabble', about the natives' ignorance of good and evil, their general intractability and their uncontrolled sexual passions. These are now recognised as items in the colonial ideology of the time and are firmly rejected. Caliban is rehabilitated, Prospero made to stand in the dock.

Directors following this altered view of the play on the stage have turned Prospero into a morose and spiteful authoritarian and raised Caliban's complaint to the level of a forceful and justified demand for freedom. The stumbling block of the attempted rape remains and they have gone to some length to clear it out of the way: for example, by casting an attractive young man for the role, allowing Miranda to flirt with Caliban when the old man is not looking, and generally downplaying both Miranda's aversion and the significance of the long-past criminal attempt. Only Peter Brook in his widely travelled multiracial production (Zurich, 1990) managed to alter the emotional geometry of the play in such a manner that even this scene, for a few performances at least, became an asset. His black Prospero, a wise and gentle African magician, made the issue of white domination and colonisation irrelevant; Miranda was a beautiful Indian princess and the understudy for Caliban a blond, handsome, serious youth. His answer to Prospero's accusation 'till thou didst seek / To violate the honour of my child' was a joyous exclamation

> O ho! O ho! would't had been done!
> Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
> This isle with Calibans.

The moment's pause that followed gave the audience time to realise that these two beautiful creatures would indeed have been ideal progenitors of a happy race of islanders, and spectators experienced, with Caliban, the fleeting vision of a utopian state of beauty and bliss.

Brook's *Tempest* dissolved the political contradictions that other directors, committed to militant anti-colonial agendas, deliberately seek out and bring to the fore. The Caliban syndrome of having to use the oppressor's language to find one's voice has stimulated writers in Anglophone (and even Francophone) ex-colonies to thorough rewritings of *The Tempest* in the course of which they have changed historical perspective, colour, gender, *dramatis personae*, focus and action. A significant adaptation was conceived by Aimé Césaire, the scholar, politician and dramatist. Born in Martinique, Césaire, together with Léopold Senghor and Léon Damas, founded the anti-colonial négritude movement, whose members consciously embraced Africanness without rejecting European influences. He turned Caliban into a radical revolutionary and Ariel into the reformist agent of power, introduced two gods from the West African Yoruba pantheon who disturb Prospero's theatricals but allow him, an enlightened thinker and a fugitive from the Inquisition, to remain on the island (*Une Tempête*, Paris, 1969).[13] The Caribbean essayist and novelist George Lamming (*Water With Berries*, 1972) sees *The Tempest* as a key scenario for unfolding the identity quests of artists and intellectuals under post-colonial conditions. African appropriations of Shakespeare have been more preoccupied with rectifying a historical misrepresentation and injustice; the attitudes range from total rejection (Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind*, 1986) and protest against the 'Othello complex' of uncritical cultural assimilation (in *Ballads of Under-Development* by the Ugandan poet Taban Lo Liyong, 1976) to politically subversive adaptations in Afrikaans in South Africa under apartheid conditions by authors such as André Brink and Uys Krige. Not surprisingly, feminist writers have discovered Miranda as the object of patriarchal domination. In Anglo-Canadian literature her submission to Prospero's order has even come to symbolise the country's former relation to imperial Britain, a state from which both have to liberate themselves to achieve selfhood. Audrey Thomas, Margaret Laurence and Sarah Murphy are among the authors who explore this twofold orientation.[14]

With the passing of the decolonising phase of the 1960s into history and the gradual fading of the cultural anguish caused by colonial constellations there is less cause for political Shakespeare theatre than before. Embattled confrontations still occur on the theoretical plane in the field of post-colonial studies. On the stage, intercultural Shakespeare has produced a new order of primarily aesthetic appropriations, highly poetic refashionings of the plays in non-European theatre traditions. They are contested. The accusations

are that intercultural Shakespeare panders to global consumerism, debilitates through wanton eclecticism and despoils native traditions.[15] Truly decolonised interculturalism apparently is difficult to achieve.

NOTES

1 Post-structuralists would disagree. The analytical methods of New Historicism and cultural materialism are designed to reveal substrata of 'ideology' in overtly clear texts. Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985); and John Drakakis (ed.), *Alternative Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 1985).

2 Little wonder that their author has been credited with the 'invention of the human'. See Harold Bloom's monumental tribute to the Bard in *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).

3 See Philip C. Kolin, *Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism: an Annotated Bibliography and Commentary* (New York and London: Garland, 1991).

4 See Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: the Twentieth Century*, with a section on Shakespeare on stage in the German Democratic Republic by Maik Hamburger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 80, 56, and 58.

5 Janet Suzman writes about the production in *Shakespeare in the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the Sixth World Shakespeare Congress, Los Angeles, 1996*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Jill L. Levenson and Dieter Mehl (Newark: University of Delaware Press and London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 23–40.

6 See Maik Hamburger's description in Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, 379–82.

7 See Krystyna Kujawińska-Courtney, 'Der polnische Prinz: Rezeption und Appropriation des *Hamlet* in Polen' in *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* (1995), 82–92.

8 *ibid*., 90.

9 See Zdeněk Stříbrný, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83 and 85.

10 See Spencer Golub, 'Between the Curtain and the Grave: the Taganka in the *Hamlet* Gulag' in Dennis Kennedy (ed.), *Foreign Shakespeare. Contemporary Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 158–77.

11 See Jarka Burian, '*Hamlet* in Postwar Czech Theatre' in Dennis Kennedy (ed.), *Foreign Shakespeare. Contemporary Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 195–210.

12 See Stříbrný, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe*, 119.

13 For the more recent theatre situation in Africa, especially Nigeria, with Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka as chief exponents, and the sheer language problems they face in establishing an indigenous theatre in a nation where dozens of major languages are in use, see the various studies by Martin Banham, including chapter 15 below.

14 A. Thomas, *Prospero on the Island* (1971), M. Laurence, *The Diviners* (1974), S. Murphy, *The Measure of Miranda* (1987). For a multifaceted combination of

feminist and post-colonial readings of *The Tempest*, see Marina Warner's novel *Indigo* (1992) and the Jamaican Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987).

15 See the debate in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis (London: Routledge, 1996), especially the contributions by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Biodun Jeyifo, Martin Banham, Rustom Bharucha and others. John Russell Brown, however, in *New Sites for Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) sees chances for mutual enrichment in intercultural contact.