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"AND IN THIS HARSH WORLD DRAW THY BREATH IN PAIN, TO TELL MY STORY": THE RECEPTION OF *HAMLET* IN PILSEN THEATRES

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Abstract

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's most widely discussed and popular plays. Its reception history is as long as its stage history. It also found its way to Pilsen theatres. The aim of this article is to trace the reception of the productions of *Hamlet* that have been staged in Pilsen since the opening of the new Municipal Theatre in 1902. The first part draws on a range of period theatre reviews and critical commentaries, whereas the second part is based on the author's aesthetic experience. The article furthermore attempts to find out how directorial intentions and choices, along with particular acting strategies, shaped the Shakespearean productions in question.

Keywords

Hamlet, William Shakespeare, the Municipal Theatre, the J. K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen, Shakespeare Festival, 1916

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Introduction

STAGING *Hamlet* naturally presents a considerable directorial challenge as it is Shakespeare's longest and perhaps most difficult text. Understanding the play, in addition to Hamlet and the other characters as well as the relationships between them, is particularly hard. Whether Hamlet will be a sensitive and hesitant prince, a neurotic intellectual, a seeker of truth or a righteous avenger is naturally a question of dramaturgy and directorial intention.

The objective of this article is to trace the reception of theatrical productions of *Hamlet* on Pilsen's stages since 1902, when the new Municipal Theatre was opened, through the twentieth century to the present day. Following a chronological structure, it focuses on how theatre reviewers perceived the productions in a given period of time and to what features and elements they paid attention when evaluating

them. The first four sections, which deal with the productions staged from the start of the twentieth century until the 1970s, draw mainly on period reviews published in local newspapers. The use of reviews, however, raises some problems. Except for certain rarities, especially in the case of the early twentieth-century productions, they suffer from subjectiveness, incompleteness or even fragmentariness, and they may be oriented by pragmatic concerns. It is thus necessary to view them with a critical eye. The remaining three sections, which are concerned with the productions staged at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium, are based on the author's self-report. The Hamletian overview concludes with the production of *Hamlet* presented at the International Theatre Festival to show that Pilsen's audiences have an opportunity to see a number of foreign language performances of Shakespeare's plays. One of them was produced by the Lithuanian theatre ensemble Meno Fortas and directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius in 1997, starring Andrius Memontovas.

1. *Hamlet* Viewed through the Lens of Theatre Reviewers

1.1 *Hamlet* at the beginning of the twentieth century

One of the first premieres in the newly opened Municipal Theatre in Pilsen was *Hamlet*. It was staged on 18 October 1903 by Vendelín Budil.[1] The director based the play on a new translation by a Czech poet Josef Václav Sládek (1899), which was first performed on that occasion. Although the contemporary announcement of the play's premiere incorrectly listed a Czech actor Josef Jiří Kolár[2] as the translator, post-premiere reviews set the record straight. The mistake regarding the translator's name was to some extent understandable, since Josef Jiří Kolár was not only an actor, but also a translator. He did translate, among other things, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which was performed at the Estates Theatre in Prague in 1853. Interestingly enough, Kolár's translation was also used by Emil Kramuele in the very first production of *Hamlet* in Pilsen in 1864, which can be seen as a symbolic contribution to the celebration of the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth.

Although the translator was eventually correctly identified, Budil's directorial intention remained more or less unspecified. The reviewer of the regional periodical

[1] The new Municipal Theatre was opened in September 1902 with the premiere of Smetana's opera *Libuše*, which met with rapturous applause. From its opening in 1902 until 1912 the Municipal Theatre was under the direction of Vendelín Budil (1847–1928), an actor, set and theatre director, and translator.
[2] Josef Jiří Kolár (1812–1896) was a Czech actor, director, translator, and writer.

Plzeňské listy, signed with the abbreviation NB, which represented the former director of the Švanda Theatre Company Pavel Nebeský, limited himself to an evaluation of the actors' performances without any specific mention of the direction or dramaturgy. As in previous Shakespearean productions, Budil was probably influenced by his directorial and acting models, Josef Jiří Kolár and Ermete Zacconi,[3] when directing *Hamlet*. Josef Jiří Kolár's acting style bore the strong stamp of Romanticism, which was especially evident in his portrayal of Shakespeare's characters. Ermete Zacconi's performance was dominated by naturalism and verism and laid stress on psychological characteristics. Whereas Kolár emphasised Hamlet's rawness, which escalated to despair resulting from his inability to take revenge, Ermete Zacconi underscored the psychopathic details of the characters and their actions.

The Danish prince was enacted by Miloš Nový.[4] His Hamlet was a psychologically complex character, whose mind was troubled and at certain moments cut off from the common reality. As the reviewer noted, "in a critical, tragic situation, [Hamlet] acts in such a way that he gives the impression of being unreasonable, insane, and even mad" (NB 1903, 4). This assessment, however, does not indicate whether Nový's Hamlet resorted to the pretence of madness or actually suffered from insanity. The actor excelled especially in the monologue "To be or not to be" (3.1), in the scene with the players (3.2), and the scene in Hamlet's mother's bedroom (3.4).

Anna Archlebová's Ophelia impressed the audience with her attractive appearance, nicely decorated robes, and a precise Czech pronunciation, which was not common at that time, as the reviewer noted (NB 1903, 4). However, her grace contrasted with her not very successful acting style, which did not reach the same level as other actors, which might have been the reason why she was engaged only in the year 1903. As the reviewer further noted, Vilém Šádek as the Ghost was too tearful, wailing, and unroyal. Although it is not directly confirmed in the list of roles, Rudolf Deyl mentions in his memoirs that the role of Polonius was played by Vendelín Budil (Deyl 1973, 69). Although the performance of *Hamlet* was not quite up to scratch in all respects, as the reviewer observed, the final impression was altogether "astonishing." The theatre review does not explicitly mention the set design, but it was probably created by Budil himself. He was a gifted painter and often complemented the set design with his own proposals.

[3] Ermete Zacconi (1857–1948) was an Italian stage and film actor.
[4] Miloš Nový (1879–1932) was a Czech actor, director, and theatre director. He honed his acting and directing skills when working with Vendelín Budil at the Municipal Theatre (1902–1914).

At the end of the year 1906, Budil staged one of his famous New Year's Eve programmes. It was an entertaining show featuring well-known characters from national and international plays. The diverse theatrical collage was entitled *The End of Tyranny*. The tyrant was Shakespeare's usurper of the throne Richard III, who was awakened from a terrible dream before his battle with Richmond by a visitor. Since Richard III cannot clearly see who the visitor is, he asks him the same question as the sentinel Barnardo asks the other guard Francisco at the beginning of *Hamlet*, "Who's there?" (*Hamlet,* I.1.1). As in *Hamlet,* the question does not elicit the expected answer, since the speaker is a young teacher, Zajíček, from Alois Jirásek's play *The Lantern* (Lucerna, 1905), who offers him an "unused cassation."[5] The show featured well-known scenes and soliloquies from *Hamlet* (the prince's scene with Polonius, Ophelia, and his monologue "To be or not to be"). Hamlet and Richard III further met a number of other dramatis personae, such as Bizet's Carmen, "our swaggerers" and "the bartered bride."[6] The theatre review published in *Plzeňské listy* described Budil's programme as a divertissement with funny moments (NB 1907, 2). The humorous New Year's Eve theatre collage, designed to entertain the audience on the last day of the year, allowed Budil to apply his knowledge of plays and operas, while developing his artistic creativity and imagination. Since the plays from which Budil drew inspiration for his show were performed on the stage of the Pilsen theatre, it can be assumed that the audience had them fresh in their minds and could be amused by the unusual roles assigned to the characters and their uncommon encounters.

1.2 *Hamlet* in 1916

The second production of *Hamlet* took place in 1916, when the world commemorated the tercentennial anniversary of Shakespeare's death.[7] The Shakespeare tercentenary celebration in the Czech lands can be understood not only as a great theatrical achievement, but most importantly as a presentation of Czech national self-awareness

[5] In Jirásek's *The Lantern*, the teacher Zajíček tells a village girl Hanička that a glorious welcome is being prepared for the arrival of the princess. It also includes a celebratory music composition known as a cassation.

[6] *Our Swaggerers* (*Naši furianti*, 1887) is a Czech comedy written by Ladislav Stroupežnický. Budil staged the play on 26 February 1903. *The Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*, 1866) is a comic opera in three acts composed by the Czech composer Bedřich Smetana to a libretto by Karel Sabina. It was performed during Budil's directorship in 1905.

[7] As Clara Calvo points out, the commemoration of the poet's death in Britain epitomised the defence of the spiritual property of the nation, threatened by a German invasion (Calvo 2004, 81).

and identity. It furthermore attempted to strengthen the autonomy of the Czech theatre and demonstrate the Czech pro-Allied attitude during the Great War.[8] Prague contributed to worldwide Shakespeare celebrations with a cycle of sixteen Shakespearean productions, mostly directed by Jaroslav Kvapil with Josef Václav Sládek's translations.[9] The festival was undoubtedly an important event in the Czech Shakespearean theatrical tradition.[10] The Pilsen celebration of Shakespeare's anniversary was not as magnificent as in Prague; however, four Shakespeare productions (*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) were staged at the beginning of May 1916. Of these four, *Hamlet* met with an especially enthusiastic response from audiences and reviewers alike. The production was directed by Jaroslav Počepický from J. V. Sládek's translation.

The Plzeňské listy reviewer remarked that the experienced Shakespeare actor Bedřich Karen[11] played a melancholic prince, who succumbed to emotion and his sombre mood (Bureš 1916, 4). His emotions, however, fused with rational thoughts. Even during his emotional outbursts, he did not abandon his rational thinking. He mused both on his own inner feelings and the surrounding world, yet this philosophical contemplation led to his complete mental and physical exhaustion.[12] His face was pale and unhealthy-looking, with sunken cheeks and deep-set eyes. His

[8] Czechia was a part of Austria-Hungary, fighting together with Germany (the Central Powers) against the Allied Powers (Great Britain, France, and Russia). The Czech appropriation of Shakespeare was first associated with the search for political autonomy rather than with cultural independence. It gained even greater significance during the Great War, since it embodied the spirit of the nation.

[9] For more information on Czech Shakespeare festivals, see Filip Krajník and Eva Kyselová's chapter in *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* (2021), 55–74.

[10] As Martin Procházka argues, notwithstanding the attempt to transform Shakespeare's work into cultural capital, due to the character of the national theatre, it rather preserved its status quo as a sacred gift (Procházka 1996, 51).

[11] Bedřich Karen (1887–1964) was a theatre and film actor. In 1910, he was engaged by Vendelín Budil to the Municipal Theatre, where he portrayed a number of Shakespearean roles, e.g., Lysander (1913), Prince Hal (1913), Lucentio (1914), Bassanio (1914), and Ferdinand (1915).

[12] It may be assumed that Karen's Hamlet was influenced by Eduard Vojan's performance in the role of the Danish prince. Vojan first performed Hamlet in 1905, then in 1915, as part of a Shakespeare Festival in 1916, and shortly before his death in 1920. In comparison to the 1905 production, Vojan further developed and emotionally deepened his performance. He kept the prince's cultivation, his painful, sharp irony, and the gesticulations of a noble tragic figure. The prince, however, had matured. The former youth transformed into a man in whom adolescence and maturity mingled and churned. Hamlet's transformation was naturally reflected in his behaviour. The prince's sadness and irony gained a new dimension – from playful mocking that balanced philosophical consideration and wistfulness, wrathful and unfriendly sarcasm accompanied by grimaces, piercing glares, and laconic speeches in which he chastises his surroundings, to the desperately ironic complaints on the impossibility of his love towards Ophelia and an alienation from all that is human. The "To be or not to be" soliloquy no longer sprang from the abyss of his deepest despair as in the previous productions and carried deep philosophical tones rather than merely being a painful personal confession (see Mišterová 2016, 111).

mood swings ranged from periods of elation and restless activity to those of melancholia and resignation. An important clue to Hamlet's character, particularly with regard to his mental distress, was provided by the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, interpreted most likely in terms of national independence (Bureš 1916, 4). Although the contemporary review commented mainly on individual artistic performances and did not mention any suspect metaphors or even cuts, the idea of a search for (not only moral) freedom was probably shared in a circumspect way with the audience, which might have felt they were involved in Hamlet's quest for answers to the fundamental questions of existence and the meaning of life (Mišterová 2017, 220). Even the prince's comment on "the time out of joint" (1.5.196) or Rosencrantz's remark that "their [players'] inhibition comes by the means of the late innovation" (2.2.328–29) might have alluded to a political subtext.[13] The theatre review does not mention Fortinbras or the concept of his final speech. It can be assumed, though it is not confirmed, that the scene was omitted, as it was in the Prague production of *Hamlet* in 1915.[14]

Otýlie Benišková emphasised Ophelia's humble love, devoted obedience and madness stemming from unrequited love. According to contemporary critics, Fišer's Polonius lacked a warmer fatherly tone in his speeches to the quick-tempered and sometimes too hasty Laertes (Vladimír Jerman). Jaroslav Počepický sharpened the edges of Claudius's villainy and added a human dimension to the character. Adolf Kreuzmann transformed the ghost of Hamlet's father into a majestic apparition.

The author of the set design was Bohumil Krs.[15] Krs's maximally simplified set, consisting of two arches, which were connected by two side walls with doors, allowed for quick and efficient scene changes. Costumes, also based on Krs's designs, were in harmony with the simple scenic arrangement. Krs's feeling for colour was mainly shown in lighting, which used red for the bloody events and yellow for the scenes of ugliness.

1.3 The First Republic *Hamlet*

In 1922, Bedřich Jeřábek, the former director of the Slovak National Theatre, became director of the theatre. His focus was mainly on opera and operetta. The development of the drama company rather stagnated in terms of both quantity and quality.

[13] With the outbreak of the Great War, the Pilsen theatre was closed. In 1916, the theatre director was appointed a commander of the Pilsen war hospital and a captain of artillery (Kříž 1927, 52).
[14] Likely (yet not only) in reaction to the criticism against the removal of Fortinbras's scene, Kvapil added the role of the Norwegian crown prince into the performance in 1916. The role of Fortinbras was played by Vendelín Budil's disciple Miloš Nový (1879–1932).
[15] Bohumil Krs (1890–1962) was a painter, graphic designer, illustrator and set designer, a graduate of the Prague School of Arts and Crafts.

Only Shakespearean stagings somewhat rose above the generally mediocre productions, one of which was *Hamlet* (1926), and Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1925).[16]

Hamlet was the last Shakespearean production of Jeřábek's directorial period. The performance was directed by Jaroslav Počepický, who also designed the set. He staged the production based on Sládek's translation and cast Josef Fišer as the Danish prince. As in previous cases, the theatrical reviews were rather sketchy. A theatre reviewer of the *Český deník* observed that Josef Fišer captured the prince's vigour, particularly in the scene in the queen's bedroom, rather than a certain resignation and hesitancy (DK 1926, 5). The performance of Heda Židová as Ophelia was awaited with both doubts and hopes, since, until then, the young actress had only acted in operettas and comedies (e.g., *Peg of My Heart*, 1924 and *Lady Fanny and the Servant Problem*, 1925). Židová, however, rendered the role successfully and created a believable Ophelia. Otýlie Benišková's Gertrude was a combination of royal dignity and femininity. In many moments, Gertrude's feminine desires prevailed and pushed her royal majesty into the background. She was more a woman than a queen. Antonín Tihelka's Claudius was marked by excessive good-heartedness, which did not correspond to the nature of the character. Vladimír Javůrek's Ghost gave the impression of excessive pathos and affectation.

Počepický's set design made use of a unified concept of the stage space. The change of scenes in the homogeneous and largely abstract space was often allusive, e.g., the royal chamber was turned into a cemetery by replacing the queen's bed with a cross. The uniformly designed space undoubtedly allowed for a quick and efficient sequence of scenes, but at the same time, according to contemporary reviews, deprived the audience, accustomed to Skupa's decoratively rich sets, of an artistic experience.

1.4 The Normalisation *Hamlet*

Hamlet was staged again after a hiatus of forty-eight years in the year 1974. The premiere took place on 30 March based on a new translation, which the director Ota Ševčík commissioned from Milan Lukeš to "help him realise the basic idea of the production – the problem of humanity's irreconcilability with the smallness of spirit,

[16] At the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, an unfortunate event marked the theatre's operation. On 17 August 1922, the theatre warehouse burned down, along with the decorations, so a new wardrobe and decorations had to be purchased. A famous Pilsen puppeteer, Josef Skupa (1892–1957), participated in the restoration of the decorations and extensive technical modernisation of the Pilsen stage in 1922–1923.

with compromise and opportunism" (JPA 1974, 13, translation by author). The set design was created by the guest set designer Jaroslav Dušek.

The 1974 *Hamlet* should be perceived through the lenses of "normalisation," whose objective was to eliminate reformism and legitimise the new status quo, albeit based on pre-reformist principles. The main features of the normalisation programme were bureaucracy, the absolute power of the establishment, and the push to oust the opposition and non-party intellectuals. As Zdeněk Stříbrný observes, "theatres were closely watched, especially after the Soviet-led military invasion in 1968. This was called the period of normalization officially but totally falsely, because everything was becoming more and more abnormal" (Stříbrný 2007, 201). It is thus probably not surprising that the normalisation *Hamlet* (1974) accentuated the theme of the search for the truth and the meaning of life, strengthened by the motif of revolt against fate. The play about the removal of the usurper of the throne thus spoke to the audience with a parallel to the contemporary situation.

The directorial concept, which benefited from the logical and meaningfully accurate translation by Lukeš, focused on Hamlet's painful and difficult journey in search of the truth. The role of Hamlet was alternated by Viktor Vrabec and Pavel Pavlovský. Both actors rendered Hamlet in accordance with their own experience and age.[17] Viktor Vrabec's Hamlet was close to a sensitive, sophisticated intellectual who carefully considered his words and acts. According to theatre reviews (JPA 1974, 13), Vrabec's thoughtful performance became the axis of the production. In contrast, Pavel Pavlovský gave the impression of a wounded youth who longed to punish the intruder on the throne. Thanks to both actors, Hamlet was enriched with a number of attributes. He acted with wisdom and prudence, thinking through the steps of his deeds thoroughly and logically. Hamlet's wisdom was combined with conscientiousness, fairness and perhaps certain circumspection. He was not, however, an indecisive *cunctator*, since his seemingly hesitant caution was conditioned and driven by a desire to reveal the truth about what had really happened. He was neither a great hero nor a cowardly weakling. He was a man who knew his goal and wanted to achieve it. He wanted to punish Claudius, but revenge was only his secondary need, subordinate to the need to know the nature of his father's death. Based on theatre reviews, it can be assumed that his madness or abnormal behaviour were to some extent mitigated and suppressed. The prince's deeds, on the other hand, were characterised by an internal logic and integrity of means of expression. His pursuit of truth and vengeance showed the veracity of a man aware of his responsibility and consequences of his acts (MIK 1974, 5).

[17] Viktor Vrabec was born in 1941 and Pavel Pavlovský was born in 1944.

Claudius was portrayed by Jiří Samek as a strict ruler and self-proclaimed ruthless usurper. In the view of critics, Queen Gertrude, played by Netta Deborská, was characterised by the passion and lust of an ageing monarch, who had eyes only for her new and still young husband, whom she blatantly embraced whenever she could. Inside her heart, her royal majesty was at odds with her physical desire for Claudius, her conscience and perhaps even a deep-hidden maternal love. In contrast to the excessive physicality of Claudius and Gertrude, the character of Ophelia (Naďa Konvalinková/Věra Vlčková) was built on the different experiences and temperaments of both actresses. Konvalinková's Ophelia looked more youthful and more naive. The more sincere and transparent she was, the more clearly her mental transformation became apparent. Although only seven years older, Vlčková's Ophelia resembled a more mature young woman, who became emotionally attached to Hamlet with a certain fatal resignation.

Jan Dušek's set design divided the stage into sections with retractable white curtains, which, according to the theatre reviewer, evoked the appropriate atmosphere, but at the same time prevented a greater expansion of acting, since their functionality often failed (for example, during the scene with players, in which the king, situated with his throne on a narrow gallery, did not have enough space to show his reaction to the revelation of his secret, 3.2). The simple nature of the set design and its black and white colouring corresponded with the modest costumes (guest designer Jarmila Konečná) that enhanced the characterisation of the individual characters.

2. *Hamlet* in the new millennium

2.1 A Harmless Hamlet?

Hamlet was not performed on the stage of the J. K. Tyl Theatre until 2001. The reason for such a long gap in staging may have been the unwelcome subject of the overthrow of the usurper of the throne in the era of "one-party rule." The premiere took place on 15 December 2001 under the direction of Jan Burian, according to Martin Hilský's translation. The music was composed by Petr Kofroň. The premiere was eagerly awaited. The director described his intention with the following words:

> I rely more on the power of literature and, let's say, acting based on contradiction, with a smaller proportion of directorial and scenographic means to tell the story clearly. I wish our production did not provide a simplistic interpretation of this world, and indeed of Hamlet's story. Rather, it should ask for

> the meaning of this story, because I am convinced that we are living in a moment when it is more important to ask questions than to be convinced of something (Burian 2001, n.p., translation by author)

The directorial intention did not experiment with new perspectives on the Danish prince or insensitively updated the play in the spirit of the computer age. The imaginary camera focused on Hamlet, his search for truth, and his effort to repair the world and establish justice and order in a time that is out of joint, which the prince himself is at the end of the first act. The director's intention resonates with Philip Schwyzer's reading of Hamlet's words, that stem from the encounter with the ghost of his dead father and refer to both "the age in which he lives and the rhythm of things, the beat of events" (Schwyzer 2013, 213).

The directorial intention was in harmony with Karel Glogr's architectural set, allowing the production to run smoothly. The stage was dominated by an unchanging passageway complex with a staircase and gallery, built of a combination of glass, Plexiglas, and soft metal. The building not only suggested the idea of a majestic royal castle, but also reflected the action on stage through the physical properties of the materials used. However, the walls of the castle did not create a true image of reality. Through deliberate distortion, they suggested that the familiar and hitherto secure microcosm of the castle of Elsinore had been disrupted by the death of King Hamlet and the subsequent events. The mirror walls of Elsinore Castle represented an imaginary optical key to the real actions (or intentions) of individual characters often hidden behind (seemingly) pleasant words. The open and walk-through construction of the castle indicated the possibility of the intervention of external factors, while at the same time leaving all characters a certain escape route from what should or could have happened. The external factor was the ghost of Hamlet's father, who appeared in full armour on the illuminated glass top of the castle to tell Hamlet the truth about his murder. With his dignified demeanour and knightly armour, he gave the impression of awe and reverence. Petr Kofroň's music was employed to suggest the elements of atmospheric and psychological drama. It was used when it was necessary to illustrate mysterious actions and mental processes.

Dana Hávová's costume design illustrated the characters of the dramatic personae. Hamlet (Viktor Limr) was dressed in a simple black garment, which evoked not only his grief over the death of his father, but also a certain sobriety and detachment from the events at the royal court. Queen Gertrude (Monika Švábová) and Claudius (Pavel Pavlovský) were visually connected by the scarlet colour of their garments, which complemented each other. The red colour of their clothes was a constant reminder of the fratricide and marriage, which not only followed too hastily after

the death of King Hamlet but was unacceptable from a religious point of view due to the familial relationship. Hamlet thus had the sinful and incestuous act of his mother and uncle, now his stepfather, constantly before his eyes. Ophelia's (Andrea Černá in alternation with Klára Kovaříková) mental transformation was underlined by the change from a dark purple evening gown, which she wore like a carefree girl courted by a Danish prince, to a white dress indicating her mental and physical purity and foreshadowing first her helpless despair and then her death. Horatio (Michal Štěrba), Laertes (Martin Stránský), Rosencrantz (Vilém Dubnička) and Guildenstern (Jakub Zindulka) were dressed in long cloaks. The tiger motifs of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's clothes gave the impression of danger and predatory instincts.

At first sight, Limr's Hamlet gave the impression of a harmless, seemingly self-absorbed man who, with the privilege belonging to fools to tell people the truth to their faces, struck everyone with precisely aimed words. Even in his feigned madness, he could not conceal, and probably did not even want to, a certain uncontrollability, provocativeness, and self-confidence. As a centrepiece, he permeated all the action on stage, whether he was actually present or not. From his words, the reactions of those close to him, and the actions of those who successfully or unsuccessfully feigned interest in the prince, the overall picture of all the members of the royal court was gradually put together like a mosaic. Pavel Pavlovský portrayed Claudius as a fratricide, intriguer, and a ruthless usurper of the royal throne. At the same time, however, he did not lack the representativeness of royal majesty and perhaps a certain amount of discretion and ingenuity to disguise his unscrupulous manipulative practices.

Fortinbras's tribute to the dead Hamlet (5.2.348–56) was omitted from the production, which essentially suggested a certain finality to the plot without the possibility of further continuity. It was as if the circle of events closed with Hamlet's death. The last words in Burian's production belonged thus to Hamlet, not Fortinbras. The elimination of Fortinbras's speech outlined, as mentioned above, a certain completeness of events without further continuation. At the same time, however, it raised questions about the eventualities of the further development of the Danish kingdom. The end of the production opened up an essentially unlimited space for reflection and contemplation. What path will the kingdom take under the new monarch? Will Fortinbras establish a just government, or rather a "strong hand," as his name suggests?

2.2 A Teenage *Hamlet*

A distinctive example of a Shakespearean reworking for adolescents is *Hamleteen*, whose premiere took place in February 2012 at the Alfa Theatre in Pilsen. As the title

indicates, greater emphasis was placed on Hamlet's uneasy adolescence and his search for identity than on his quest for justice and revenge. The most striking difference between the original play and the adaptation was the way in which Hamlet searched for his identity and identified himself as a member of various subcultures such as Scouting, punk and emo. The adaptation underscored the private dimension of the classic story and provided the audience with insight into adolescents' inner world including feelings, struggles, perceptions and wishes.

The production was characterised by a number of innovative elements. Shakespeare's tragedy was transformed into a musical farce, embedded in the present and imbued with sarcasm. There was often black humour in the parallels and consonances with Shakespeare's play. This purely Czech adaptation compressed Shakespeare's longest and perhaps most notorious play into three "phases," each representing a different subcultural identity. In this new Shakespeare paradigm, the old Hamlet was an enthusiastic Scoutmaster, who has transformed the Danish kingdom into a Scout camp, subject to strict military discipline, including regular morning exercises, earning badges (called little "beavers"), cleaning tents and grounds and wearing Scout uniforms with pride every day (Mišterová 2013, 70). Not everyone was happy with the status quo, of course, particularly Claudius, who tended to resist authority. His rebelliousness resulted in the improper completion of his assigned tasks and subsequent deduction of points. Although he tried to bottle up his feelings of anger, this affected his relationship with his brother, and he finally reached a boiling point. He aired his frustration and wrath towards the old Hamlet, of whom he was, moreover, jealous. However, despite his uncouth behaviour and not particularly pleasing appearance, Gertrude was attracted more to him than to her husband, who showed no interest in their marriage. Scouting, not his wife, had the elder Hamlet's full attention. Gertrude felt neglected and trapped. Her hasty second marriage was thus more understandable given that she was unhappy and wanted to enjoy life. Other Shakespearean characters also took on different statuses. Laertes was a homosexual, who was unhappily in love with Hamlet. Before he went West, he warned his sister against Hamlet's immaturity and egoism. Soon afterwards, he returned home, however, transformed into the Dead Man. Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, resembled debauched boozers, and Polonius was the manager of a disreputable house. Ophelia looked like an energetic girl for whom chocolate acted as an instant antidepressant, helping her to feel better.

The main focus of the performance was adolescence. It told the story of a youngster who tried to cope first with his father's passion for Scouting, and then with his

death. Hamlet's initial identification with Scouting was motivated and supported by his father. In this sense, the old Hamlet embodied authority and the moral principles to be followed. For the young Hamlet, earning a merit badge, which he proudly wore on his uniform, was the highlight of his Scouting experience. His subsequent punk and emo interludes underlined the intense emotional distress and alienation he experienced after the death of his father. Yet, he refused any offers of help and comfort from others who feared for his sanity. However, his suffering was not in vain. He finally realised that even his father had not been perfect and had had weak spots. It was exactly at that moment he attained maturity that he came to understand the truth about his father's death (and his fallibility) and his mother's happiness in her new marriage. Accepting the truth required, no doubt, great personal courage. If Hamlet was able to accept the truth about his parents and himself, then he was able to step into adulthood. Cured of his idealism (Scouting), rebellion against conventions and a new family structure (punk) and extreme sensitivity and introversion (emo), he found the *raison d'être* for his life and his true identity (Mišterová 2013, 72–73).

2.3 A Fragmentary *Hamlet*

Beginning in 1992, the Pilsen theatre has been a host and co-organiser of the International Festival Theatre (Mezinárodní festival Divadlo). Since its establishment, a number of remarkable productions of plays by Czech and foreign playwrights has been staged. *Hamlet*, under the direction of the Lithuanian director Eimuntas Nekrošius, was produced in 1997.[18]

Eimuntas Nekrošius staged his productions at many theatre festivals, including Wiener Festwochen, Berliner Festwochen, Festival d'Automne, and Chicago International Theatre Festival. He was awarded numerous theatre awards, including the Grand Prix Bitef (1988) and the European Award for New Theatre Realities. During the Pilsen International Festival Theatre, he staged, among others, Pushkin's *Little Tragedies* (*Malé tragédie*, 1994), and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1997, translated by Aleksas Churginas) and *Macbeth* (2000). Nekrošius cast a non-actor in the role of Hamlet, a young Lithuanian singer Andrius Mamontovas (b. 1967), known throughout Lithuania for his songs of defiance and melancholy. Mamontovas, who captivated

[18] Eimuntas Nekrošius (1952–2018) was a Lithuanian theatre director.

audiences with his rock star image – involving a punk hairstyle, an earring in his ear and a denim outfit – portrayed a "rough and tumble" Hamlet in his acting debut.

Nekrošius's four-hour production was an impressive adaptation of Shakespeare's play, which was based on a loose grouping of symbolic signs and images that made use of real elements of nature, e.g., the rocking chair, on which the ghost of Hamlet's father was diligently rocking, caught fire and was extinguished by water that had been brought to the stage by the Ghost in the form of ice. Theatre reviews commented on the production quite enthusiastically:

> Nekrošius's *Hamlet* is concrete yet painfully literal. It is believable in the sense of physical pain, fear, and cruelty. Ice, water, fire, and ashes are not the expressions of the elements, they are authentic and real, it is these elements that cause the cold, the dirt, and the pain. Not to the characters who are being portrayed, but to the actors who play them. Every feeling, and every emotion is experienced bodily, on the bodies of the actors. Nothing is a mere sign; everything astonishes with its authenticity (Mezinárodní festival Divadlo 1997, n.p., translation by author).

The director stages his performances exclusively in Lithuanian with simultaneous translation and refuses to work with actors other than those who speak his native language. Communication is a key concept for Nekrošius, even though it is not a traditional verbal type. Nekrošius converts words into sensually concrete images and symbols, creating thus a specific language of denotations and connotations. His denotations are common objects and substances, such as a carpet, an axe, apples, and water, which in the overall context take on an almost magical meaning. However, individual denotations cannot always be assigned clear-cut meanings. The amount of connoted meaning depends not only on the audience's knowledge of Shakespeare's plays, but also on the director's intention to convey a certain degree of new message and the overall context of the production. The ambiguity, or, more precisely, multiplicity of connoted meanings is characteristic of Nekrošius, though, in some cases, it is rather difficult to decipher.

Nekrošius's production was quite demanding for the audience: it was performed in the director's native language, was mostly figurative and did not follow the exact line of Shakespeare's tragedy. The director only loosely combined certain scenes or only their fragments, with an eleven-member cast. Nekrošius's staging can be characterised as a suggestive and allusive adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy with a concrete idea, supported by remarkable acting performances and a captivating

visual design and music. However, for anyone who is not familiar with *Hamlet*, it may remain a sequence of disconnected and perhaps unconnected images.

Conclusion

The first *Hamlet* (1903) at the newly opened Municipal Theatre in Pilsen was a production by Vendelín Budil with Miloš Nový in the title role. Budil is to be credited with introducing Sládek's new translation, which was used for the first time in Pilsen. The production was marked by a romantic directorial approach enriched with psychological elements. *Hamlet* (1916), staged during the Great War on the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, reflected a strong anti-German sentiment, which resonated with the strong anti-German spirit of Kvapil's Shakespeare cycle presented in Prague in the same year. Hamlet thus became a symbol of the pro-Allied attitude of the Czechs. In the character of Hamlet, Bedřich Karen combined an intense emotional experience with pragmatic thinking. His acting style was influenced by Eduard Vojan's performance, which dominated the National Theatre in Prague at that time and was the climax of the Shakespeare festival. The inter-war *Hamlet* (1926) can be seen as an enrichment of the predominantly operatic and musical repertoire during Jeřábek's directorship. A significant innovatory element of the production was atmospheric lighting, which used colours to express emotions. Počepický's directorial concept was symptomatic of the increased depiction of the psychological and emotive states of characters, and Hamlet particularly came to the forefront. The normalisation *Hamlet* produced after a 48-year gap in 1974 invited the audience to build a deeper meaning behind the scripted lines. Pavlovský's/Vrabec's Hamlet was a seeker of truth and revenge whose pursuit reflected the contemporary situation of the forced restoration of the Soviet-like political and social system.

Burian's production in 2001 was the first post-1989 *Hamlet*. It was neither a simplification of Hamlet's story nor an answer to the questions that Shakespeare's play raises, but it asked questions itself and left enough room for the audience to rethink Hamlet's quest for truth and revenge. *Hamleteen* (2012), which was intended for young adults, followed Hamlet's journey from adolescence to adulthood, marked by his effort to establish his own identity by associating himself with various subcultures, which served as a self-defence mechanism for dealing with his father's murder. The guest Lithuanian festival production (1997) showed new and unconventional ways of adapting Shakespeare's play based on a free combination of fragmentary Hamlet motifs. Language became of secondary importance since the emphasis was placed on loosely connected visual images raising questions about the meaning of Shakespeare's tragedy and offering specific insights into Nekrošius's vision of the play.

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