

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAVEL DRÁBEK ON  
TRANSLATING SHAKESPEARE IN THEORY  
AND PRACTICE

*Filip Krajník*

**PAVEL Drábek** is a preeminent Czech Shakespeare scholar, musician, theatre practitioner, author of several plays and (mini)operas, currently professor of theatre at the University of Hull, UK. As the author of a monumental volume on translating Shakespeare (not only) into Czech, entitled *České pokusy o Shakespeara (Czech Attempts at Shakespeare, Větrné mlýny publishers, 2012)*, we asked Pavel a few questions about the history of translating Shakespeare two hundred years ago and what it takes to translate Shakespeare now.

**FK: Ten years ago, you published a monumental volume on Czech translations of Shakespeare from the very beginning up until the early 21st century. What led you to researching this topic?**

PD: In 1996, the remarkable theatre director Eva Tálská (1944–2020) had an idea: to stage *King Lear* at the Husa na provázku Theatre in Brno. Tálská was also the founder and creative spirit of Studio Dům, a youth theatre company that worked side by side with Husa, under the auspices of the CED (Centre for Experimental Theatre). Studio Dům was a unique undertaking that raised an entire generation of theatre makers and scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s. It had several workshops or departments and each of them was led by a professional. I was a musician in the music department, playing the double bass and composing, working with Miloš Štědroň. As was characteristic of her ways, whenever Tálská worked on an idea, everyone around her by default also worked on that idea. So when she decided to stage *King Lear*, we were all involved. And Tálská didn't just stage Shakespeare's play with Husa, starring Jiří Pecha, she also included several of us from Studio Dům in smaller roles. Apart from playing the trumpet (which I am still unsure I ever could), I was also assisting with some background research, translating bits and bobs from Shakespeare's sources and reading English scholarship for her and her dramaturg Radan Koryčanský. I noticed that Tálská used E. A. Saudek's translation as a point of departure (and

that was the translation declared in the programme notes), but she also looked at J. V. Sládek's, Bohumil Štěpánek's and Milan Lukeš's translations, and composed her own version from them. That was new and I was intrigued.

But that wasn't everything. Studio Dům also worked on other by-product projects inspired by *King Lear*. I wasn't particularly keen on getting very involved, as I had had my share of touring with Studio Dům productions for several years and I felt the pressure of the final two years of my Master's looming large ahead of me. So one day, I had a serious word with Tálská and told her that I would be happy to continue writing music but wouldn't be able to get involved in any new productions because they were too time-consuming and I had my studies to tend to and all that. She heard me out – or I thought she did – and I walked down the stairs from her office when I was accosted by a strange man I had never seen before: “You! You are coming to my acting workshop!” he declared. I explained to him politely that this couldn't be, as I was a musician, not an actor, and was just leaving the theatre. And he snapped back: “Who cares! Get some proper clothes and I am awaiting you in the workshop!” So I became an actor, a co-author and pretty much also a producer in Hubert Krejčí's *commedia dell'arte* adaptation of *King Lear*. Hubert Krejčí (1944–2022) was one of a kind, and he taught me everything I know about making theatre. I spent the next three years touring our *Arlekino vévodou bretaňským aneb Král Leyr a jeho tři dcery neboli Zkamenělý princ* (*Arlekino the Duke of Brittany, or King Leyr and his three daughters, ossia The Petrified Prince*); two recordings of the show are available on YouTube. The show was a collage of *Lear*, of the anonymous *King Leir* play and the many chronicle stories I had read, as well as pretty much every other Shakespeare play that could be pillaged for dramatic loot. We worked with all available translations and whatever we couldn't find we wrote ourselves, with Hubert and Simona Juračková. Very importantly, we workshopped everything with the actors first. Writing something is all very nice, but unless it flies, it's no good. So if it didn't work on stage, we scrapped it. Over the three years we played *Arlekino* about 35 or 37 times, and no two shows had the same script: especially for me as the leading comedian figure, the text changed every night.

That's how I got hooked. During one of our endless discussions about Shakespeare, Hubert suggested – as he loved to do – that someone (meaning me) should collect and publish again the oldest translations of Shakespeare because they were the best. I was so foolish as to consider that idea seriously, and the rest is history.

**What has changed in the field of Czech translations of Shakespeare (or perhaps translation of Shakespeare in general) since the volume's publication?**

This is a big question and I can answer only in part. Since 2012, when my book eventually came out, there have been a number of university students taking Czech

translations of Shakespeare as their topics for essays and diploma theses. I am not claiming full credit of course. Jiří Josek (1950–2018) and especially Martin Hilský have become something of a celebrity in their own right, so the topic gained traction and attracted a lot of interest. I would like to think that there has also been a shift in understanding of what theatre translation is, not just of Shakespeare but of other playwrights, namely the classical ones. The ongoing project on “English Theatre Culture 1660–1737,” which you lead, is in many ways a continuation of this interest.

As for translation of Shakespeare in general – that is, outside Czech academia – the field is very different to what it was a decade ago. This is especially due to the decolonisation of Shakespeare studies, to the indefatigable work of international Shakespeareans (impressively active in Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Germany, France, Italy and Spain, to name just a few nearby countries), and the realisation that “Shakespeare in translation” is so much more interesting than the beaten path of “Shakespeare the national poet.” There is an immense amount of liveness in translated Shakespeare – at least to my view. Staging the original English Shakespearean text is all nice and good but how many times would you like to see a ground-breaking *King Lear* or *Romeo and Juliet* delivering the same old words, no matter how much you loved them? Things are changing. Even the leading brand, the Arden Shakespeare, has launched two new series dedicated to Global Shakespeare Inverted and to Early Modern German Shakespeare, both including translation of Shakespeare as their key subject area. I am sure we haven’t seen the end of it yet.

**The first translations of Shakespeare into Czech appeared in the late 18th century. Compared to other European nations, is that early or late? Were there any special circumstances that inspired the first translation efforts in the Czech Lands?**

The earliest retellings of Shakespeare in Czech come from 1782, and the earliest surviving play script (K. H. Thám’s *Makbet*) was published in 1786. This is comparatively quite early. When the complete works were translated by the Museum team, between 1853 and 1858 (though it took until 1872 for all of the plays to get published), this was the first complete translation in any Slavic language.

But this question is less interesting for the competition of who comes first, but rather for the intensity with which Shakespeare’s works entered the culture. And that had happened much earlier and without Shakespeare’s name attached to it. English actors toured central Europe from at least as early as the 1590s. They certainly performed in Prague in October 1602 and then passed through the Czech lands

on several occasions, certainly in 1607. (We even hypothesised about this speculative visit to Jindřichův Hradec in our opera *Pickelhering 1607 aneb Nový Orfeus z Bohemie.*) English actors performed in Jägerndorf (today's Krnov) in 1610 and played a key role in establishing Czech theatrical culture as we've known it ever since. Whether any of the plays were Shakespeare's or adapted from Shakespeare is moot. Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, Philip Massinger, William Rowley and James Shirley are more likely as the front runners in seventeenth-century central Europe, but *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear* were certainly on the repertoire, if not during Shakespeare's lifetime, then shortly afterwards. The fact that these plays were performed in early modern German is just a matter of historical accident. I wouldn't personally give much weight to Czech-language nationalism. That would be anachronistic, foolish and myopic. And potentially dangerous.



*České pokusy o Shakespeara* by Pavel Drábek charts the history of translating Shakespeare in the Czech Lands from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century up until the turn of the millennium.

When the plays were finally translated into Czech, this went hand in hand with the emancipation of the Czech language in the Josephinian reform era of the 1780s, and the publications were clearly aimed at a Czech language population living in towns outside of Prague. So the question is not just historical and nationalist, but also demographic.

**For Czechs, Shakespeare has become an adopted national poet of a kind. To what extent have translations into Czech contributed to this status of his? Or was it rather Shakespeare's rising status in England and Continental Europe that made translating his works such a prestigious effort over the years?**

Shakespeare has become an adopted national poet for every other culture, together with the illusion that that culture's relationship with Shakespeare is unique. Resurrected during the Enlightenment era, Shakespeare became the perfect mouthpiece for an aspiring culture. We can find analogies of Czech Shakespeare in many countries, earlier or later: in Germany, in France, in Spain, in Italy, in Hungary, in Poland, in Romania, in Bulgaria... Cultivating a national Shakespeare was the sign of a phase of cultural maturity. This is not to sound cynical about it, but national Shakespeares were a much-discussed topic of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the stories are almost identical wherever we look. Shakespeare becomes the go-to metaphor to voice aspirations that can't be spoken aloud. At the same time, befriending and adopting Shakespeare as a national poet has had a bit of intellectual snobbery about it, as if to signal: "Look, we also belong to the cultivated, progressive, enlightened West. We are in the civilised club now!" If we look at the historic details of such pronouncements and such ambitions, we find fascinating things. But these tell us less about Shakespeare than they do about the culture that produced them. (A recent book by Peter Marx, *Hamlets Reise nach Deutschland*, is a wonderful analysis of this process in the German context.)

**Since the late 19th century, translating Shakespeare into Czech has been connected with efforts of strong single persons from theatre, literary or academic spheres: Josef Václav Sládek at the turn of the 19th century, Erik Adolf Saudek in the mid-20th century, Jiří Josek and Martin Hilský at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. You, however, have been calling for a collaborative approach to translating Shakespeare. What is the difference between these two methods when it comes to the final product, that is, a translation of a Shakespeare play?**

I am not sure we can speak about two methods. I would personally see the two approaches as characteristic of their era. Sládek ended up translating on his own because Jaroslav Vrchlický and Eliška Krásnohorská had given up. The three of them had agreed to translate Shakespeare anew between them. Krásnohorská delved into *The Tempest* but abandoned the effort, allegedly because she was too shy to translate the indecencies. Vrchlický made a pass at *Hamlet* but "his creative spirit" (period witnesses tell us) "was too free to be subjected by the strict discipline of Shakespeare's play." In other words, Vrchlický wasn't as confident in English as he was in Romance

languages and he couldn't compare with others who were much more rigorous in their knowledge of English. Such as Sládek, who spent several years in the United States of America, lying low after he attracted the attention of the Austrian police during his revolutionary proclamations of 1868. In other words, that translation was also supposed to be a team effort, as had been the case of the generation before (the Muzeum translation). Unfortunately, the myth-making of public intellectuals turned Sládek into a solitary, suffering genius and set a precedent for the generations to come.

In the 1920s, Bohumil Štěpánek teamed up with his schoolmate René Wellek and decided to translate *Hamlet*. Štěpánek, like Vrchlický, was a francophone philologist, while Wellek studied English. This was a team effort, but the self-effacing Wellek edited himself out of it. Štěpánek then went on translating some 34 plays. Saudek, who was another of his schoolmates, then burst in with his *Julius Caesar* in 1936, and what followed was an embarrassing story of jealous rivalry and land grabs from Saudek's side. Štěpánek was living in Paris at the time and had little idea that Saudek was ruthlessly getting rid of him as his rival. This trite ethos continued throughout the next twenty-five years. It was only with the advent of the new generation – Zdeněk Urbánek, Václav Renč, Jaroslav Kraus and the unfortunate František Nevrla – that Saudek's cult started to wane.

In about 1997 I asked Milan Lukeš (1933–2007) why he and others didn't publish more new translations of Shakespeare in the 1970s and early 1980s. He surprised me with his reply: "Out of solidarity with Stříbrný." Zdeněk Stříbrný (1922–2014) was a leading Shakespeare scholar. He had worked with Saudek as his editor and collaborating scholar, but he was also the one to recommend Urbánek's groundbreaking *Hamlet* in 1959 – much to Saudek's anger. (The story goes that Saudek was furious when he found out. "Madam! Madam! Jesus! Come over here quickly," Saudek's housemaid is said to have shouted. "Mr Saudek is murdering young Mr Stříbrný!") Václav Renč and Kamil Lhoták would both send the first versions of their Shakespeare translations to Stříbrný too. But then, after 1968, Stříbrný was kicked out of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University and taught English as a second language somewhere in a mathematics institute, and wasn't allowed to publish. And Lukeš said that everyone else refused to publish Shakespeare out of solidarity. If Stříbrný can't, then we won't. That remained the case until the thawing around the Perestroika years of the early 1980s.

When Martin Hilský and Jiří Josek established themselves as the two prominent Czech translators of Shakespeare, the culture wasn't very open to dialogue and the collaborative mode. We are talking of the 1990s and the early 2000s. This was the age of strongman politics – or we should perhaps say the politics of solitaires.

I believe we have arrived at a time when the collaborative mode – a creative and rigorous scholarly dialogue – is much more welcome and also has much more to offer us than the well-tested approach of translator solitaires.

**Your volume ends with a vision of the new future generation of Shakespeare translators. Your proposed criteria for this new generation are quite broad, ranging from fundamental cultural, social and philosophical changes, to typological changes in actors themselves. Do you see now, a decade later, any development along these lines towards a new translation dramaturgy?**

I certainly do. We work with a number of colleagues now on translations of English Restoration plays. We debate and disagree, but also listen to one another and refine our understanding of the plays and the translation problems. We also work with theatre practitioners – dramaturgs, directors, actors, voice coaches – and these debates all impress themselves on the translations and make them better.

We have also started treating Shakespeare to this. You have yourself translated *Hamlet* – and there were about seven or eight different people who have read your early versions and made suggestions. I have translated the first quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* and in my case the collaboration was more closely with the creative team staging it. In completing the translation for book publication, I would like to ask colleagues for their input too. The Větrné mlýny publishers are launching a new series called William, in which we will be issuing these new translations of Shakespeare. Krajník's *Hamlet* is coming out any day now, in June 2022, as I write these words.

**For various reasons, the image of a translator of Shakespeare in Czech society is, first and foremost, one of a scholar, ideally an elderly university professor. What skills or qualities should a translator of Shakespeare in your opinion have? Is the association with the academic environment really necessary?**

This is a tricky question. On the one hand, I wouldn't like to say what skills and qualities they *should* have. There are even amateur translations of Shakespeare – and while I personally don't take them seriously as translations, they have their purpose and they make things more interesting. On the other hand, I have very particular ideas of what I would like a translator of Shakespeare to have so that our efforts are complementary and mutually enriching in the same purpose. That purpose is *making beautiful new theatrical translations*. To that end, I think a translator should first and foremost have a sense of theatre. A friend of mine once said that if you've never weed in your pants during a show out of sheer joy, you shouldn't make theatre. For me this is a metaphor for the measure of what theatre can do as an experience – individually, socially and culturally. Beauty is part of this, but also an acute awareness of how theatre relates to the world we live in.

If I were to bring it down from the metaphysical cloud and speak of individual skills, qualities and competencies of an ideal Shakespeare translator, then here is my top five:

1. a refined mastery of the target language;
2. a certain musicality in working with breathing and rhythm;
3. a solid knowledge of the drama, literature and theatre of Shakespeare's time, including the practicalities of early modern theatre making;
4. a solid knowledge of the drama and theatre throughout history up till now, because that's the arsenal of the translator's dramatic ammunition;
5. an inquisitive mind that doesn't settle for routines and methods.

**If you were to write the final chapter of your book now, what would your image of a new generation of translators of Shakespeare into Czech look like? And are there any parallels for it in other national or language cultures?**

I would like to think and hope that the new generation of Czech translators of Shakespeare will be an open and collaborative culture that offers a variety of approaches. And I hope that individual approaches won't close the options down but engender new creativity. We have seen quite a lot of complacent stagnation in Czech theatre, drama and literature in the recent two decades, and too much assuming of old established epistemological securities. Too much playing it safe. The same is true of the translation of the classics over the last half a century. When it comes to Czech Shakespeare, apart from a few outliers, the foundations of the field have remained pretty much unchanged since the late eighteenth century and August Wilhelm Schlegel's Romantic pomp of seeing something sacred in every syllable of Shakespeare.

As for parallels elsewhere, that's a more difficult question. Collaborative and team translation is certainly a current issue, but Shakespeare seems to be holding firmly onto positions. It seems to me there is a bit of fetishism in being a Shakespeare scholar and a Shakespeare translator: I converse with a deity. But that shall pass soon, I hope, and a more open approach will gain momentum.

**You yourself made a new translation of *Romeo and Juliet* that premiered last year in Slovácké divadlo in Uherské Hradiště last summer. What was your dramaturgical approach to your work and how would you say your translation differs from others that are still regularly staged?**

Lukáš Kopecký became the artistic director of Slovácké divadlo and wanted to start the new season with something fresh. So he asked me for a translation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because of time and also because of his willingness to risk artistically,

we agreed on the First Quarto version, which is shorter and much more comedic in its tempo and its situations. Lukáš and I had worked together on a number of occasions. He had directed two of my radio plays – *Princ Mucedorus a princezna Amadina* (2017), which is a loose translation of the anonymous Elizabethan tragicomedy *Mucedorus* (first printed 1598); and then *Košice 1923* (2019). He had also directed a cycle of mini-operas for the Ensemble Opera Diversa called *Grobiáni* (Tricksters, 2019), which we had conceived with Hana Hložková, our dear friend and genius dramaturg. The individual stories of the *Grobiáni* cycle were inspired by early modern English jigs. The piece I wrote with Ondřej Kyas, *Dorotčiny námluvy*, is an adaptation of the jig *The Wooing of Nan*.

From that point of view Lukáš and I were an old team. For *Romeo and Juliet* we agreed that we would go for the down-to-earth poetry and strip the story of the anachronistic Romantic veneer it has acquired in the popular imagination. I am reductive now but we went for blind passion, helplessness and the chaos the play stirs up. Some of the humour and raunchiness of our *Romeo and Juliet* had found its way from *Mucedorus* and from the *Grobiáni* cycle.



From the production of *Romeo and Juliet*, trans. Pavel Drábek, dir. Lukáš Kopecký (Photograph: Marek Malůšek).

On a textual level, my approach was different in that I tried to follow the rhythmic movements of Shakespeare's play, rather than a strict blank verse. Shakespeare's

verse is rather irregular – an incomplete line here, an oddity there. I noticed that each persona tends to have different speaking rhythms. So for instance Old Capulet often speaks in a combination of tetrameters and trimeters, rather than in regular pentameter. That brings along a certain weight and tempo-rhythm. It marks Capulet's age. For me, this visceral quality is more important than some psychological consistency or stylistic finesse. When Capulet gets angry (and he does so quite easily), he snaps using very down-to-earth words and makes himself heard in no uncertain terms. Similar things are true with other characters, and I hope that this is a feature that gives the play a different quality in performance.

**As a translator, would you say it is easier or more difficult to translate a play that most of the audience members know in some form, have possibly read it more than once and remember some of the most iconic passages?**

I think it's different, not necessarily easier or more difficult. It will just get more attention. Everyone is curious what you'll do with it. I understand that some translators may be awed by the prospect of retranslating a famous passage. I enjoy it: the drama of the job lies there. Also, we are talking about the theatre, and a bit of provocation is healthy: it calls a rush of blood to the system and everyone in the theatre becomes more alive. And that's good, I think.

**Do you yourself have any favourite translation or translations of Shakespeare's play(s) and why?**

There are three Czech translations of Shakespeare that I particularly like:

1. Prokop Šedivý's *King Lear* of 1792. An unknown gem that I would like to see performed on stage: powerful lines written by an experienced theatre maker.
2. Antonín Přidal's *Othello* (1981) for its harsh and raw poetry that gives this play an uncompromising verve.
3. And, Alex Koenigsmark's version of *Troilus and Cressida* (1979), which was initially going to be called *Do postele s Kressidou* (To bed with Cressida), but the censors wouldn't have it. It was published later as *Noc s Kressidou* (A night with Cressida). Koenigsmark's is perhaps the most remarkable translation for me: he wrote it for the director Ivan Rajmont (1945–2015), to whom I owe a lot. Koenigsmark didn't translate literally. He took the structure of the dialogue and rewrote the lines. So, a scene in Shakespeare would have 15 speeches by 3 different speakers about a certain incident. Koenigsmark would keep this structure (15 speeches by 3 speakers), just use different words to write the dialogue about the incident. This is translation as theatrical reconstitution.

*Filip Krajník*

I find all three very inspiring and hope that they'll attract theatre makers to do something with them – or with their kind of creative translation.



Professor Pavel Drábek (Photograph: Marek Olbrzymek).

Filip Krajník, Masaryk University  
filip.krajnik@phil.muni.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

