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Shakespeare's Plays in Pilsen Theatres

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Shakespeare's plays have been in the Pilsen repertoire since the end of the 19th century. There were many important developments in the theatrical productions of William Shakespeare's plays at the beginning of the 20th century and after World War II. Theatrical productions of Shakespeare's plays always reflected, in some aspects, the current political, economic, and cultural situation. Of all the Shakespearean performances that took place in the J.K. Tyl Theatre after 1902, the productions of Budil's *King Lear*, Hofbauer's *Macbeth*, Ševčík's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Burian's *Richard III* and *Hamlet* stand out because of their high quality and inventiveness.

This paper addresses the question of how Shakespeare's plays have been interpreted in Pilsen theatres since the beginning of the 20th century. The evaluation of stage performances which took place in the 20th century is extremely difficult and consists of a construction and reconstruction process based primarily on critics' opinions.

A systematic examination of the interpretations of Shakespeare's plays performed in Pilsen since 1902 is based on three factors that shape each particular interpretation: the producer's intention, the realization of this intention, and the spectators' perceptions of the realization.

In September 1902 the Municipal Theatre was opened. From its opening in 1902 until 1912 the Municipal Theatre was under the direction of Vendelín Budil, who was born in Prague in 1847. His frequent visits to the theatre as a child influenced his later artistic development. Budil joined a theatrical group organized by Pavel Švanda and soon became its leading performer. At the age of thirty-two, Budil decided to study the fundamentals of German theatre under Antonín Roll and this was a useful experience. The technique he studied is similar to Method acting later developed and improved by Konstantin Sergeivich Stanislavsky (1863-1938). For one year Budil conscientiously prepared himself for a career as a stage director. His first real opportunity came in 1902 at the Municipal Theatre. There he continued to improve as an actor and began to direct plays. During his 10 years in Pilsen, Vendelín Budil staged 11 of Shakespeare's plays: *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*

(1903), *The Tragedy of Richard III* (1903), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1903), *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1903), *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1903), *The Tragedy of King Lear* (1904), *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* (1906-07), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1907), *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra* (1909), *The Winter's Tale* (1910), and *Twelfth Night* (1911). He himself performed: e.g. *Richard III* (1903), *Macbeth* (1903), *Lear* (1904, 1908), *Brutus* (1906-07), *Falstaff* (1907), and *Sir Toby Belch* (1911).

Budil's method emphasized the psychological development of a role as well as the technical side of its presentation. Budil's performance of *King Lear* demonstrated an excellent grasp of Shakespeare's play and the deep psychological transformation in the character of the King from a slightly naive and loving father to a "foolish" old man. Stripped of the symbols of kingly power, Budil's Lear was forced to confront a cruel reality. Then Lear realised how he had been mistaken about his daughters. The picture of Budil's Lear reveals not only the state of the King's troubled soul but also the atmosphere of the play. Theatre reviews mentioned that Budil's approach to the role had been very touching, especially in the final scene (Nb 1904: 2). Budil's direction of *Hamlet* (1903) was partly influenced both by Ermete Zacconi (1857-1943), one of the interpreters of the Verist school, and by Josef Jirí Kolár's romantic acting style (1812-96). There was also much to be admired in Budil's production of *Julius Caesar* (1906-07). Budil's Brutus combined nobility and honest soul with a bit of arrogance. Budil's method that brought the psychological aspect of acting to the forefront was the primary source of study for many actors and directors. Among those using his approach were Jarmil Škrdlant, Zdeněk Hofbauer and others.

The period from 1912 to 1945 was full of instability and change. The theatrical approaches of particular directors of that period – Karel Veverka (1912-19, 1926-30), Josef Fišer (1919-22), Bedřich Jeřábek (1922-26), Ota Zitek (1931-43), and František Langer (1943-44) – coincided with the view that theatre should serve an entertainment function, so primarily operettas and "light and simple performances" were staged in Pilsen. However, it is noteworthy to mention that Josef Skupa (1892-1957), the founder of the Pilsen Puppet Theatre (1930) and the author of *Spejbl and Hurvínek*, was invited to work at the Municipal Theatre as a stage manager (1922-24). In the autumn of 1944, all Czech theatres were closed by the Nazis.

In 1945 the Pilsen theatre had an important task: to renew interest in theatrical performances and to attract a new audience. Naturally, the first postwar plays performed in Pilsen manifested a new-found freedom. However, the immediate postwar years, under the directorship of Jarmil Škrdlant (1945-48), were a partial return to the pre-war patterns which relied on already established Czech playwrights and theatre directors such as Jaroslav Kvapil, Alfréd Radok, Ondřej Sekora; Russian authors such as Simonov; and English dramatists such as William Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde.

The interpretation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* on January 22, 1946 under the direction of Zdeněk Hofbauer was not only a reflection of the postwar atmosphere but also a warning. The reviews of the performance were, in some respects, contradictory. A theatre critic of *Nový den* praised an appropriate choice of repertoire, but otherwise called Angelo "a prototype of the modern leader" (Elk 1946: 3).

In April 1948, a new director was named to lead the Pilsen drama company – Zdeněk Hofbauer (1948-53). He brought new concepts of repertoire and theatrical performance to Pilsen. Among his ideas were afternoon performances for students and working people. The situation throughout the early 50s was not simple; a theatre director had to comply with the public taste as well as the regulations of the ruling Communist party. Accordingly, Hofbauer built up a repertoire of new Czech plays, especially by Miloslav Stehlik (1916-94) and Antonín Zápotocký (1884-1957), devoted to the propaganda of revolutionary ideas, Russian drama, and so called Western plays by G.B. Shaw, E. O'Neill, A. Miller and W. Shakespeare.

However, he showed his true talent in 1949 when he directed Shakespeare's *Macbeth* which won him an excellent reputation. The performance contained topical political implications. Hofbauer's *Macbeth*, a fascist usurper, had only one goal: to gain power at all costs. Hofbauer emphasized *Macbeth*'s internal psychological development and made him fully responsible for his actions. Among Hofbauer's notable performances were *Twelfth Night or What You Will* (1950) and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1952).

Throughout the 50s an uncompromising form of socialist realism slowly became the norm. The plots of classical dramatical works were adapted and "modernized" in order to focus on social and political issues. Thanks to Zdeněk Hofbauer, the Pilsen drama company produced some outstanding theatrical performances and tried to avoid such a malign influence. In 1953, Luboš Pistorius became the head of the Pilsen drama company. He introduced Czech playwrights as well as Russian and foreign authors. During the years 1953-59 he staged five Shakespearean plays: *The Merchant of Venice* (1954), *Comedy of Errors* (1954), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1956), *The Tragedy of Othello*, *The Moor of Venice* (1957) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1958). *The Merchant of Venice*, using Erik Saudek's translation under the direction of Václav Lohniský, was staged one year after the trials of Rudolf Slánský and his supporters. In this respect, there is a possible analogy between Shylock and "the Jewish conspiracy" within the Communist party. Therefore, the 50s Shylock was a rather negative figure, representing betrayal that must be punished.

On the other hand, *Othello*, directed by Luboš Pistorius, asserted that human behaviour with all its positive and negative qualities must be portrayed. Thus, Othello (František Krahulík) was in many ways an honest and just man but liable to Iago's insinuations. Similarly, Iago (Vladimír Krška) was not interpreted as a mere villain but as an evil, unfair and highly ambitious man.

In the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* the director Václav Špidla did not concentrate on two innocent victims but on two rebellious young people. Their revolt against old customs and practices was unfortunately isolated and, therefore, hopeless.

In 1959, Václav Špidla took over as chief director. He continued the Hofbauer and Pistorius' theatrical traditions and realized the importance of putting the classics permanently at the centre of the repertoire. He staged Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1962), *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1963) and *Twelfth Night or What You Will* (1963).

The Tragedy of Macbeth, under the direction of Václav Špidla using Otokar Fischer's translation, brought a new view of Shakespeare's tragedy. This performance could be said to have established a short, new era in the J.K. Tyl Theatre. Having eliminated the witches' scenes, Špidla made *Macbeth* (František Krahulík) fully responsible for everything he had done and turned him into a representative of military and political authoritarianism. During the performance *Macbeth* went through a development: from brave soldier to uncertain liar, only a shadow of his former self. The scenery designer Vladimír Heller reinforced the mood of the tragedy with simple costumes and decor. *Macbeth* appeared on a dark stage, made up of dark brown "floes" fighting with four men. His victory was confirmed by noisy cheering that came out of loud speakers. In this respect, a comparison can be drawn between the tyrant *Macbeth* and Stalin.

In 1963, Jan Fišer began to lead the drama company in the J.K. Tyl Theatre. He concentrated on two basic streams of repertoire, Czech and foreign playwrights. Fišer's primary intention was to build up a varied, but well-balanced, repertoire. Therefore, he introduced many new plays which, on the contrary, resulted in a rather eclectic repertoire. In 1965, the J.K. Tyl Theatre celebrated the 100th anniversary of the establishment of Czech theatre in Pilsen. Moreover, at the same time, 400 years had passed since Shakespeare's birth in 1564. Pilsen was well prepared for these important theatrical events. In January 1965, two

lectures on William Shakespeare took place in Pilsen, *Shakespeare in World Music* and *Shakespeare in Czech Music*. On December 4, 1965, the Chamber Theatre was opened.

In 1965, Oto Ševčík directed Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* using Jaroslav Kraus' translation. Similar to Zdeněk Hofbauer in 1948, the director concentrated especially on Angelo (Pavel Pípal). In the Pilsen performance, Angelo assumes his temporary power with honest intentions but his will is too weak to resist his physical longing for Isabella. Thus, he does not become her honest patron but a self-satisfied hypocrite.

In 1966, Shakespeare's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, under the direction of Oto Ševčík using Erik Saudek's translation, was performed at the Chamber Theatre. In the role of Falstaff, Lubomír Fišer presented a convincing figure of an incorrigible philanderer and a noisy, boastful man. Falstaff was convincing, especially through his ability to make a fool of himself. This approach gave the performance a new meaning: because only a wise person can laugh at his/her own mistakes.

At the end of the 60s, Czechoslovakia stepped into the period of normalization. The main features of the normalization programme were bureaucracy and the absolute power of the establishment and the effort to get rid of opposition and non-party intellectuals. This political situation was reflected in the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* (1970) under the direction of Oto Ševčík using Josef Topol's translation. Ševčík emphasized Romeo and Juliet's fight against society for their own self-realization. It is worth mentioning that Ševčík focused on the group of young people led by Mercuzio (Tomáš Šolc) who were "the leverage" of the performance. Being a counterpart of Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac, Mercuzio was always prepared to fight for truth and stand up for his ideas. This concept was supported by the new Topol's translation. Professor Zdeněk Stříbrný notes that, according to an old theatrical tradition, Shakespeare must have let Mercuzio die so as not to overshadow Romeo (Stříbrný 1958: 136). Ševčík's performance clearly showed his thorough grasp of the subject: his Mercuzio spoke words of wisdom only to cover them with jokes and irony.

In 1971, Oto Ševčík, who came to the J.K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen as a director in 1960, was promoted to the chief directorship. Ševčík intended to have a repertoire of Czech and foreign authors – such as Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky; German dramatists such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe; and English and American playwrights such as William Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, John Patrick and Neil Simon. Ševčík also put an emphasis on a high-quality ensemble and costume designers. The work of theatre artists was made more difficult in the 70s, however, because of the complete reconstruction of the main theatre building. Therefore, the Alfa Theatre had to be used as a second stage.

In 1972, Ševčík staged a performance of Shakespeare's *Othello* using Erik Saudek's translation. The aim of the performance was to show Othello (Miloslav Včala) as an ordinary man whose jealousy increased in direct proportion to Iago's lies. In contrast, the character of Iago (Jiří Samek) was, at first sight, completely inhuman: a sadist torturing his victims with great delight. Although he was highly immoral and evil, he was a man. Iago supported Ševčík's intention to persuade the audience that a man, no matter whether good or bad, was at the centre of all events.

On February 24, 1973, the première of *The Merchant of Venice*, under the direction of Ivan Šarše and translated by Erik Saudek, took place. As this comedy had not been performed in Pilsen since 1954, it was met with great expectation. Šarše charted a two level story of wealth connected with moral and humanist perfection, represented by Antonio (Miloslav Včala), and Shylock's (Jiří Kostka) wealth originating from usury. Thus, Antonio does business in goods and Shylock does business in money. From the present point of view, these business activities merge; however, in *The Merchant of Venice* they are separated and gave rise to many further contradictions between Antonio and Shylock. Kostka's Shylock implied

so many key emotions that he did not let the audiences make up their own opinions of this character.

One year later, in 1974, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, under the direction of Oto Ševčík and as translated by Milan Lukeš, had its première. Similar to Othello, Hamlet was no unreal hero, but a man looking for the truth. Hamlet's aim was to find out what had happened and punish the crime, but his need for revenge was only secondary. Alternating with Viktor Vrabec, Pavel Pavlovský played the role of Hamlet at the première on March 30. Theatre reviews did not mention Hamlet's madness, and, therefore, we can only suppose that this side of his character was restrained (Jpa 1974: 13, Mc 1974: 5, Mik 1974: 5).

On March 27, 1976, the première of *Twelfth Night or What You Will*, under the direction of Oto Ševčík and with Erik Saudek's translation, took place. Ševčík put an emphasis on the carnival atmosphere of the performance, so the scenery designer Jan Dušek changed the Pilsen stage into a circus arena where "harlequin" servants pushed a rack-wagon with Orsino, standing with his legs wide apart pretending to be Bacchus. Dušek's simple and purposeful scenery put in the foreground the main protagonists of the performance – Maria, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and their optimistic views of life. Ševčík's intention was probably to interpret the play inventively, stressing hidden meanings within the text. Therefore, Olivia languidly embroidered her brother's face, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew were brought on stage in a cart full of spigots, et cetera.

After more than 100 years, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, under the direction of Oto Ševčík and with František Fröhlich's translation, was staged. Concentrating on Coriolanus' relationships to people around him, Ševčík created a new, original performance. In the role of Coriolanus, Viktor Vrabec developed a multi-level spectrum of individual psychology. Vrabec' Coriolanus combined aristocratic nobility with tremendous arrogance. His sudden decisions unmasked his character as well as those of people around him. Therefore, Coriolanus was respected for his military abilities and hated for his contempt of ordinary people.

The performance of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1982), under the direction of Jaromír Pleskot and with Saudek's translation, was more traditional. The production was set in Elizabethan England with an emphasis on Renaissance story-telling. According to the reviews, the French doctor Caius (Tomáš Šolc) and the Welsh priest Hugo Evans were the main concerns of the performance. Therefore, the *Pravda* critic entitled his review *The Merry Men of Windsor* (Viktora 1982: 5). Being so active, vital and self-satisfied, Caius and Evans overshadowed Sir John Falstaff (Jan Gross). Gross's Falstaff was a ridiculous old buffoon, longing for adventure and experience, no matter whether it was wooing Mistresses Ford and Page or pursuing a really hazardous enterprise. According to the review, Gross' Falstaff seemed to have represented only a superficial figure.

In the late 80s, the J.K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen went through some changes; in 1988 Oto Ševčík left for Brno and Lída Engelová went to Ostrava. However, the dramatic ensemble of 1985-90 was well-balanced and well-organized.

In 1988, Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* had its première, under the direction of Oto Ševčík using Jaroslav Bílý's translation. The aim of the performance was to show speech as a possible tool of manipulation, a misinterpretation of reality, and a moulder of public opinion. In his production, Ševčík connected three narratives with a reflection on the sense of life and the ethics of truth.

On October 22, 2000, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, under the direction of the Lithuanian Eimuntas Nekrosius, was performed at the J.K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen. Nekrosius approached *Macbeth* in a new way. He began by working out a complex symbolic scheme including seven apples, two apple-trees, axes, a copper kettle and an old carpet. As a result, he created an abstract adaptation in which he was able to use a lot of abstract patterns. He used only ten

actors, and kept most of them on stage the whole time. Nekrosius invented new images of the witches (Viktorija Kuodyte, Margarita Ziemelyte and Gabrielia Kuodyte), as young sexy women reading Macbeth's future from a kettle and watching the action on stage from huge wooden joints, swinging to and fro as if they were ticking Macbeth's time away. Nadezda Gultiajeva designed simple, quite modern costumes underlying Nekrosius' directorial decision to portray Macbeth as a farmer rather than a brave soldier. Marius Nekrosius made a special backdrop, avoiding all suggestions of a definite time period or place but, on the other hand, implying that what happened to Macbeth might have happened to anyone. Nekrosius' tragedy culminated in the final scene when Macbeth (Kostas Smoriginas) showed his full understanding of his own guilt. Then, having symbolically cleansed himself of his sins, he died at the witches' hands. Nekrosius presented a fragmentary adaptation of *Macbeth*, full of symbols, metaphors and allusions. Sometimes the performance tended to be too symbolic. Therefore, someone who had never seen or read Shakespeare's *Macbeth* might have had a great deal of difficulty understanding what was going on on stage. The production, performed in Lithuanian, took nearly four hours with two interludes.

In December 2001, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, The Prince of Denmark*, under the direction of Jan Burian using Martin Hilský's outstanding translation, had its première in Pilsen. Jan Burian created a tragedy of murder and revenge. Hamlet was performed by a young actor Viktor Limr from the Mladá Boleslav Theatre. Hamlet, looking for the truth about his father's death in an atmosphere of suspicion, was the central figure of the performance. In the opening scene the audience could grasp the paranoia haunting Elsinor. Viktor Limr's Hamlet, a young lively man full of high ideals, was confronted with the reality of authoritarian monarchy represented by Claudius (Pavel Pavlovský). Hamlet's mourning of his dead father was highlighted by his black suit, which made him look different and separate from the other members of the court. On the contrary, Claudius and Gertrude (Monika Švábová) were dressed in red, signifying the sin of their incest-like marriage and implying Claudius' crime. Hamlet's performance encapsulated a whole variety of emotions – love, sorrow, isolation, desire to find the truth, and revenge. Claudius was not a scheming villain, but a smooth ruler, an eloquent speaker and a stately man, so that it was no wonder Gertrude fell in love with him. Švábová's Gertrude was a true queen, serious and cold. Her emotions seemed to melt in the final scene when Claudius' evil deeds came to the surface. Jan Burian managed to treat Martin Hilský's translation with respect and show personal tragedy in the background of power. The only things the audience might have missed were Fortinbras' final words about Hamlet.

Shakespeare's plays have been in the Pilsen repertoire since the end of the 19th century. There were also many important developments in the theatrical productions of William Shakespeare's plays, especially at the beginning of the 20th century and after 1945. Of all the Shakespearean performances that took place in the J.K.Tyl Theatre after 1902, the productions of Budil's *King Lear*, Hofbauer's *Macbeth*, Ševčík's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Burian's *Richard III*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* stand out because of their high quality and inventiveness.

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