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To Be and Not To Be. At Once.
or Daniel Spinar, the Czech Director
Extraordinaire, Enters the European Stage

Стефанова Калина. Бути і не бути. Водночас. Або Даніел Спінар, чеський екстраординарний режисер, вихід на європейську сцену.

У статті здійснена спроба воскресити в уяві дуже незвичайну і надзвичайно актуальну постановку «Гамлета», представлену на Пльзеньському Театральному фестивалі, аби познайомити читачів з екстраординарним талантом та пекучою соціальною чутливістю Даніеля Спінара – молодого режисера Національного театру в Празі. У п'ятдесяту річницю з дня виходу видатної книги Яна Котта «Шекспір – наш сучасник» особливо помітно, наскільки згаданий «Гамлет» відображає запропоноване Коттом прочитання всієї п'єси та образу її протагоніста – як образу, що не визначається лише певною ситуацією, який за будь-кого ходу подій продовжує сумніватися, який “приймає щось, але водночас бунтує проти цього” – і нібито робить при цьому крок уперед.

Ключові слова: «Гамлет», Даніел Спінар, Ян Котт, конструктивна деконструкція.

If you've ever felt like in a dead-end, pressed by absurdities, callousness, circumstances, by the fact that the situation is “as it is”, if you've ever stridden the streets with a feeling that this is not your own reality – that you are as if an invisible beggar at the corner of the world and people's glances go through you, while your call for help doesn't get out of your throat, as it happens in dreams – if you've ever

wanted to close the door of this hostile reality from the outer side.... OK, let's say all this doesn't apply to you personally; yet, if you happen to know people standing at the edge of hope and if you do care about them, then this is your *Hamlet*. Their *Hamlet*. Mine, for sure.

For a long time, at the top of my own rank-list was *Hamlet* of Korsunovas and I still can't get enough of his mirrors for souls – despite on a DVD already. And with my eyes fixed on them, I keep on asking myself, together with all his characters, *Who Are You?*, in waiting for the invisible world's echo to send an answer. The most esoterically philosophical *Hamlet: Hamlet* as a revelation. I still watch in rapture the most earthily sensuous *Hamlet* too – of the other great Lithuanian, Nekrosius. And exactly as the first time, 15 or so years ago, I stiffen with horror and cold when the Ghost rubs Hamlet's bare feet with a big piece of ice, so that he learn the ugly secret with his flesh and spirit alike. I also adore Ninagawa's Japanese *Hamlets* (6 altogether) that dwell at exactly the opposite pole – of exquisite beauty and Asian fines. Unforgettable do I find the first *Hamlet* of the Polish JanKlata too – in a Gdansk dockland and in its very sea rather than in a theatre...

Hamlet has opened my eyes, made me think, suffer, discover myself in it, it has made me feel not alone at the crossroads of the big choices in life... It has never made me cry, though. It happened for the first time now, during the final scene of *Hamlet* of Spinar. And which is even more amazing, I get to cry every time I watch its recording, months after I saw it alive in Pilsen, at the Theatre Festival there. This is the most forlorn, the loneliest, and yet the bravest Hamlet. A Hamlet, who manages to overcome his woes, his utter desolation, and transform his foretold doom into an unexpected victory. A Hamlet, who makes a choice different from that of all other Hamlets so far, because he dares to combine *To Be* with *Not To Be*, thus solving the riddle of the

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eternal dilemma. This *Hamlet* is not merely very topical, it is *urgently* topical. Like a call for help. Due to the sense of emergency of the state of the world it depicts, i.e. of our world today.

The beginning of the show is not promising of such depths. Although it's exactly our world that we immediately get to see. As if, though, only with its superficial features and clichés. Horacio takes a photo with his mobile. An easy guess: the Ghost is in the lens. Then the curtain rises and we see the entrance of an old castle-cum-museum. In a big glass-case are the usual props of the play: swords, a skull, a set of knight's armor – from 13c., a sign says. From behind a lit glass door the voice of Claudius solemnly announces his marriage with Gertrude. They enter, clad in nowadays shades-of-gray clothes and followed by paparazzi, and, along a red carpet, climb a staircase leading to the frame of a portal, where they pose for more photos. After a champagne-and-cocaine party, the lights dim out, turning people into silhouettes and the portal into a screen where they disappear. Only Hamlet stays on fore-stage, squats in a spotlight and whispers in a mike his first soliloquy, then lies in a chalk-drawn corps-figure. Enter Ophelia and the frenetic-sex-for-consolation film cliché follows. Then Horacio shows Hamlet the photo of the Ghost, Ophelia teases Laert with a stack of condoms found in his luggage, Horacio and Hamlet fence with swords (from the glass-case), playfully exchanging the lines *What's the Time?* and *Time is out of Joint*; which leads to smoking of a real joint.

And it's here where Spinar does his first extraordinary move which catapults the show into a new level: the lights blink, the door opens on its own, Hamlet falls on the floor in convulsions – an effect of the drug or possessed by the Ghost? – and starts talking with another voice; then, still in delirium, goes to the glass-case, writes with blood on it, and

when he's back to his senses, with Horacio, they read his Father's message there.

This interpretation of the meeting-with-the-Ghost is not only a 100% original; it so naturally springs out of the action, i.e. out of our very own world, that every element of made-up-ness, a usual trap here, is fully and very naturally eliminated. Also: if we have so far watched a *Hamlet* disguised in today's clothes, i.e. a piece of theatre trying to make a known story look new, from now on everything happens as if it were for the first time, here and now, the people on stage are our contemporaries, and the superb Patric Dergel is the warmest, the most moving and the least abstract Hamlet I've seen – a Hamlet who could indeed be one of us.

This authenticity exuded by the story is a major achievement of Spinar. He's left in the glass-case not only the historical props but everything else that over the time has become the *Hamlet* canon, alienating the play from us in one way or another, and has instead brought out of it what makes Shakespeare great – that he's life itself. Thus Spinar manages to fend off any detachment between us and the story; it becomes 3D in the sense that it soaks into us and we feel like being a part of it.

There's no time for detachment anyway: the action moves headlong – the show is only 2 hour long! This, however, does not translate into superficiality or a fragmentary-like structure. The reason: Spinar is a virtuoso of the theatre montage. He applies it in a very bold, yet unobtrusive manner (a rare couple).

For assembling the pieces he uses cinematographic, visual “bolts”: the scenes and the characters come out of or melt into “screens” – of the stage ramp, the portal, the lit glass-cases; the action at times gets into slow motion, while the fading away of the silhouettes is at times like fast forwarded. All the same the characters are fully truthful, i.e. the acting is psychologically realistic, even when Hamlet or

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Claudius, with a mike and facing us, say their soliloquies, there's not a second of detachment from the role.

Another perfect “glue” Spinar uses to make the montage smoother and homogenize the show's texture is the music of Peter Wajsar: short, at times hardly audible, piano or string accords in combination with suspense type of a soundtrack, also very quiet at times, yet with a strong impact – like a thin mist coming in waves that gives a mysterious edge to everything it envelops.

Finally, Spinar's montage is based on a radical, yet strikingly successful editing of the text (another rare couple!). Apart from adding scenes, he cuts others (the one with Ophelia as a bait), or reworks them (in the Mousetrap there are no actors and the court itself reads the play, directed by Hamlet). All this is not at the expense of the story, though. It remains remarkably integral and an effect intact.

It's because Spinar is a virtuoso of one more thing: the constructive deconstruction of the text; which ranks him in the league of directors like Alvis Hermanis. (Thank God, it seems like the so called post-modernism is steadily getting out of the deconstruction-for-the-sake-of-deconstruction phase.) *Hamlet* is not a parade of “different-ness”, of unusual means of expression. There's no ostentation in it, no pretentiousness, no snobbishness – one more similarity with Hermanis. Then: not only is Spinar strict about keeping the homogeneity of the story but he tells it very emotionally too. No doubt is being left about the departure point in his work: his holding dear of the human being in principle and his pain for our woes. He tells us the story of Hamlet because via it he can talk about us, himself, our mutual world – another similarity with Hermanis and his credo that “what's important for a theatre-maker is not so much to be interested in theatre as much as it is to be interested in life.”

By “compressing” the story without destroying its wholeness and its inner laws and by making it feel palpably

our own, Spinar achieves a special density, a new level of the intensiveness of its impact. Thus his show only looks chamber, while its effect is large-scale in terms of the depth and nature of the problems on focus. An example of this so to speak “emotional compression” is the cutting of the grave-diggers scene and transferring its key lines to Ophelia in a dialog with Hamlet – another remarkable move of Spinar!

The very madness of Ophelia is totally different from the usual and has literally an overwhelming effect. This is not the lovely, adorned with flowers girl who meanders and sings in a lost manner and whose drowning even gets often presented as mere beauty. Her madness here is ugly and scary because – again! – it’s very truthful. Half-naked, in an oversized man’s jacket and with a lipstick-smear on her face, Ophelia looks like a homeless whore from the nowadays streets, who together with her mind has lost any control over herself. The contrast between this creature and the free, full of life girl from the beginning puts a lump in your throat. And her end consists of two scenes which are unforgettable.

After Polonius murder, the museum-castle has been set on fire, all saved objects are piled up and in the big, lit glass-case has forcefully been placed Hamlet – also mad in an ugly way, in white long underpants and under-vest, preposterously smiling and licking the glass. There’s one more lit glass-case too – short and long, like a coffin, with a text “mortal remains” on it. Instead of them, Ophelia is in there: sitting with bare legs wide apart and dirty hair hanging in front of her face, she digs the remaining dirt. “Whose is this grave?”, asks Hamlet, getting out of his “madhouse.” “Mine”, she answers. While the well-known dialogues goes on, he sits next to her and, like small kids, they start throwing dirt at each other, and only when they jump and she tosses her hair backwards, he realizes who she is. The feeling that he’d vomit because of the shock is physically palpable. He goes back and the two glass-cases, with the two exponents of

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despondency in them, remain the only lights in the dark. A little later, while Hamlet says the lines about the river and the willow, she bends over her glass-case, draws and lies on her back – already for real in her grave. Rapidly follows the funeral scene: in a slow motion and in a mist the court enters, clad in black and with black glasses, Laert also lies in his sister's grave and, when Hamlet comes, they start fighting – as if the slow movements of the alive is how Ophelia's soul sees our world while drifting away from it.

“Today's young people are not prepared for [the present day], and when they meet reality head on, it takes them to the edge of madness, – writes the Czech critic Richard Erml. – The whole of Spinar production is about this moving border. Hamlet is not feigning his madness, but gradually succumbs to it like a desperate emigrant, who, trying to escape to freedom, plunges into the border marshlands... And what about the mad Ophelia...? The very image of madness. I've seen dozens of Ophelias, but Zuzana Onufrakova has to be experienced – at your own risk...”¹

It turns out that things considered for a given today and, thus, for a prerequisite for success – like quick reactions, ease in working with the attributes of modernity, freedom of behavior – do not help much when one is to face the tests of reality. And although the focus of Spinar may well be on the young, I think this is valid for everyone who can not or does not want to unconditionally abide by the “rules” of today's reality.

This is another of this director's main topics: the faceless grayness that calls the shots behind the tempting glamour of success and that mercilessly imposes its “right” whenever something or someone do not fit in the scheme (here people with the looks of body guards place Hamlet in the glass-case-cum-madhouse) – a contemporary version of

¹ *Erml R. Raflex*, as quoted by the program of the Pilsen Theatre festival, 2014, p. 84

the Big Gray Nothingness of Michael Ende. This theme is on focus in another brilliant show of Spinar which I saw in Pilsen, *Bel Ami* (after Maupassant), where the main character's climbing of the social ladder is presented as a series of literal snap-shots and photo-sessions, taken by a photographer who is also the narrator, and the gray is ubiquitous and crashing everything along the road.

While in *Bel Ami*, though, the contemporary Georges Duroy coincides with the superficial-new-generation cliché (to a great extent with a comic slant), in *Hamlet* the main characters of Spinar (himself 35) are profoundly sensitive people who are not ready to make compromises with their conscience and accept the absurdities of the system. In their attempt to escape from these absurdities they try the usual sanctuaries – of the drugs, sex and solitude. And, yes, some of these sanctuaries do dwell near the border of madness. But, I dare not fully agree with the Czech colleague – the young people of Spinar are at that border not because they can not cope up with reality in principle. What they are not willing to do is accept it being distorted. They intuitively sense that a reality where black is called white is a substituted reality, i.e. a false one in the sense of 1Q84 of Haruki Murakami, and they try to not partake in this ugly theatre.

Hamlet goes even one step further.

I'll take the liberty to quote the remarkable lines of JanKott, the Polish critic considered to be the most influential one on the Bard's production history since the publication of his pivotal book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* in 1964: "Hamlet is a great scenario... This scenario is independent from the characters; it has been devised earlier... The scenario dictates the actions of the *dramatis personae*, but doesn't dictate the motives underlying the actions, i.e. the psychology. This is true of life as well as of the theatre.... *Hamlet* is a drama of imposed situations, and here lies the key to modern interpretations of the play. The King, the Queen,

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Polonius, Rozencrantz and Guildenstern have been clearly defined by the situations... Claudius does not play the part of a murderer and a king. He *is* a murderer and a king... It is different with Hamlet. The situation does not define Hamlet, or at any rate does not define him beyond doubt. The situation has been imposed on him. Hamlet accepts it, but at the same time revolts against it. He accepts the part, but is beyond and above it...”²

Not only does Spinar’s Hamlet revolt against his role but he literally refuses to play it fully out. The final scene, where that happens, is a masterpiece. I say this without any doubt: a real masterpiece! In the lit glass-case, now in the middle of the stage, Hamlet is with Horacio. “I’m not mad,” he says, takes a sword, solemnly opens the doors and gets out into the dark. With his back to us, he takes off his clothes, while the rest of the characters get into the glass-case. Then, being just a silhouette already, he lifts up the sword, as if giving a sign “Begin!”, and the three-dimensional people from within start pronouncing the lines describing the duel, while Bobby Vinton’s song *Mr. Loney*, hardly audible, starts resounding. The song stops for a while, while the lines go on, with Hamlet almost motionless, then it rises up and, after Horacio pronounces Hamlet’s words “I die, Horacio”, the last refrain powerfully fills in the whole space on its own: “Now I’m a soldier, a lonely soldier/Away from home through no wish of my own/That’s why I’m lonely, I’m Mr. Loney/I wish that I could go back home.” After the final accord the sword slips off of Hamlet’s hand, he goes to the glass-case, caresses it and says, “The rest is silence.”

It turns out it is possible for the “scenario” not to be fully implemented (*complied with/obeyed*) and for Hamlet to reject to play that part of his role which would turn him into a pawn in one of the bloodiest final scenes. It turns out that the

² Kott J. Shakespeare Our Contemporary, Methuen, 1965, p. 52-55.

taken for granted “great mechanism of history”³ and its implacability could be defied and Hamlet could get out of the claustrophobic, bloody madhouse into which the world is invariably being turned by the “scenario” and in which so many young people, Hamlets, are forced again and again to play a role imposed on them.

It turns out that in that case the “scenario” will only resound out loud, i.e. will be boiled down to “words, words, words”, and Hamlet will in effect outwit it, i.e. he will so to speak defeat it. In brief: it turns out there is a way out of what seems and has always seemed like a dead-end – both in theatre and in life – and that Hamlet can choose not only his motives but his actions too – at the most decisive moment at that: when it’s his turn to shed blood and thus continue the vengeance’s vicious circle. It’s exactly then when he can choose the most difficult step – the step aside – so that the anger and the blinding rage do not get hold of him and his soul be saved.

Of course, this scene could be interpreted in another way: solely as a *Not-To-Be* choice – Hamlet chooses to get out of this world because of the maddening impossibility to oppose the absurdities, i.e. to cope up with reality. As *Mr. Lonely* song goes: “Oh, how I wonder, how is it I failed.” Helplessness, despair, closing of the doors of the hostile reality from the outer side... “To die: to sleep/ No more; and by a sleep to say we end/ The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks/That flesh is heir to...”

But this show – I’d so much like to believe – is not only about despair but also about the possibility for one to overcome even the utter hopelessness, and the strength needed for this. And maybe it’s also about what freedom is and that it may as well be even in allowing the very thought

³ ditto.

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that not everything is a “scenario” – that the “scenario” is not destiny, that it only imposes for being destiny.

The choice of Spinar’s Hamlet, for me, is not an escape from the world but rather a sort of dissociating from the system that presents and imposes the “scenario” as the only possible way of living. And this choice is an expression of strength since Hamlet makes it *for the sake of* the world. He bids farewell to the world through the glass-case with such palpable sorrow that even without uttering a word, with his back to us and being nearly just a silhouette, he makes us feel as if something is torn from our own flesh and soul – as if we ourselves are parting with life. And standing between here and beyond, with his hand still caressing this world, he chooses to fight for it from the “other side”, together with the spirits of his father, Ophelia, Laert – maybe in the very same way, as it happened with him – getting into the bodies of the young and through their own mouth, when they drift in the drugs’ beguiling refuge, to reveal them the truth. Before the “scenario” makes them believe in the false axiom that it is destiny itself.

I think Hamlet’s decision for this choice is born during his meeting with Ophelia in her future grave. It’s there where, together with the horrifying realization as of who that creature is, he also realizes that he could revolt *against* the “scenario” and fight *for the sake of* the world only if he were to cut himself off the “scenario” and the world alike because all the escapes within them are illusionary. That’s why he stops pretending he’s mad. It’s exactly there where he gets aware of one more thing too: that he has to cut himself off the world body and soul alike because in these other escapes the body and the soul are in dissonance. And as it happens with Ophelia, his soul too in a way leaves the world before his body does and only observes what happens to the body without going through this in an earthy fashion. It’s as if his

soul, from aside, watches the last scene of its life in this earthy costume.

But may be... may be this show has nothing to do with metaphysics and Hamlet and we have watched a story that has started on Horacio' mobile phone and then has jumped from one "screen" to another, ending up in the shining LCD TV of the glass-case which in the final moment looks like a lift between the worlds – a TV where all the characters and everything else would fade away with the dimming off of the lights.

No matter how we would read this *Hamlet*, what's important is that it allows all these – and may be more – interpretations. And what's important is that all of them have one thing in common: a desperate, yet full of hope SOS. Not so much in the classical sense of *Save Our Souls*, though, but rather meaning *Save Our World* – for the sake of our souls.