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Andrzej Wajda's Two *Hamlets* and One *Macbeth*: The Director's Struggle with Shakespearean Tragedy in the Changing Contexts of Polish History

Abstract

Andrzej Wajda is a renowned Polish theatre and film director, whose achievements have been recognised by theatre and film artists and critics all over the world (he has been awarded an Oscar). He has directed four versions of *Hamlet* and two versions of *Macbeth* (one for Polish television in 1969, the other for the Stary Theatre in Kraków in 2004). I propose to look at three productions to trace Wajda's evolution in his approach to Shakespearean tragedy: *Hamlet III*, scenes of which were first staged in the Royal Castle of Wawel in Cracow, and then at the Stary Theatre in 1981. It was a *Hamlet* which addressed significant Polish problems (Wawel being a symbol of Poland, its historical power, the seat of the powerful Jagiellonian dynasty).¹ The context of the production is also very significant: the time of the Solidarity festival, as it is now called in Poland (on 13 December 1981 martial law was introduced in Poland), so the performance could not help avoiding political issues. The director's next take at *Hamlet* (his fourth attempt) occurred in 1989, another critical year in the Polish post-war history; surprisingly enough, the production was not so much Poland-oriented or politically involved as the previous version; instead Wajda poses questions about the condition of theatre in Poland and anticipates a less pressing need for politicising theatrical performances in the years to come. His *Macbeth* in turn was produced at the time of Poland's engagement in the war on terrorism in Iraq; modern war of the 'civilised world' becomes a most significant frame for the production, but not the only one. The performance, showing the Macbeths as an elderly couple who are confronted with possibly the last chance to make a difference in their life, touches upon both getting old and a long-term marriage.

The aim of the paper is to look at three stagings of Shakespeare's major tragedies directed by Andrzej Wajda. The director needs no special introduction as he has shaped the European stage and world cinema for many years now. His reputation in Poland and abroad is well grounded therefore, critics and spectators have always looked forward to the productions he has brought to theatre treating them as theatrical feats and important commentary on contemporaneous problems. As it turns out, Wajda has used Shakespearean texts sparingly but often when he decided to

stage them the time of the premiere coincided with significant events in the Polish post-war history. This was the case of his two famous *Hamlets* (III and IV) from 1981 and 1989; also his *Macbeth* of 2004 was staged in a critical year of Poland's history after the 1989 transformation. Each time the director poses significant questions about the uses of theatre in a society at a crossroads, its political engagement and the necessity for it, theatrical aesthetics. Significantly, the three productions I intend to discuss in the paper have been staged at a very famous theatre: the Stary Theatre in Cracow, where Wajda has been working for many years and which has been functioning as one of the stages that could be termed 'national.'

Andrzej Wajda quite vividly reacted to the surprising, unexpected and rapid changes brought about in Poland by the *Solidarność* movement in 1980 and 1981. That was one of the reasons why he decided to shoot *Man of Iron*, a film that depicts the origins and formation of *Solidarność* [Solidarity]. The film provoked controversies among viewers and critics; as Joanna Walaszek observes, "the audience [...] found the film schematic, propagating ideology, even simplistic" (344). Wajda's political engagement in the so-called 'Solidarity festival' led him to reconsidering the issue of how to combine political commitment with artistic independence and freedom. *Hamlet* was considered by Wajda to be a permanent point of reference, which at a time of political turmoil helped find room for reflection and distance (Walaszek 344). However, there is no denying the fact that the groundbreaking political events of the years 1980–1981 affected Wajda's interpretation of the play, his casting choices and the choice of setting. The director first decided to stage scenes from *Hamlet* which he framed in the narrative from Stanisław Wyspiański's *Studium o Hamlecie* [Study of Hamlet]. Stanisław Wyspiański needs no introduction to a theatre historian: he was, alongside Edward Gordon Craig and Stanisław Przybyszewski, in the avant-garde of theatre visionaries, reformers and practitioners of the turn of the 19th century, who postulated that theatre be treated as a work of art. His essay on *Hamlet* is not only an interpretation of the play, a rewriting of Shakespeare's text (albeit read in a translation),² an innovative study of theatre but also points at *Hamlet* and Hamlet as very 'Polish' play and character.³ As Andrzej Żurowski observed with reference to Wyspiański's vision:

In Poland the subject matter of *Hamlet* is the core of what happens here and now. For the first time [Wyspiański] *expressis verbis* named the core and phenomenon of Shakespeare in Polish theatre, especially in the 20th century – the phenomenon of Polish Shakespeare, a sort of filter through which we think and experience in theatre, through which we talk about the Polish *hic et nunc*. (490)

Wajda uses Wyspiański's text in twofold manner. First, as a comment on the new turbulent times and one's role in them, posing an eternal question: 'How to live in the new times?' (Walaszek 349). Second, as a formal subtext – Wyspiański's study is an episodic collage of his impressions of Shakespeare's play and its characters,

re-writings and 'translations,' etc. Likewise, Wajda's scenes from *Hamlet* are a theatrical essay on *Hamlet*, a sketch, both a final performance and a rehearsal (the actors did not have much time to rehearse the production; Walaszek 350).⁴ Wyspiański's text is of course also important for the discussion about the role, nature and function of theatre in contemporary world, a question that the director always raises in his productions.

Wyspiański's essay was, according to Walaszek, one of the 'texts' which influenced Wajda's approach to *Hamlet* (349–350). The other one, first postulated by Wyspiański again, is the architectural 'text' of the royal castle of Wawel in Cracow, especially its inner yard and arcaded galleries, which was so reminiscent of Elizabethan theatres. The site-specific location of the performance adds to its unstable, temporary and experimental nature, but it also and perhaps foremost emphasises 'Polish-ness,' Wawel being a symbol of political and military power of a country, which in Wyspiański's times did not exist. Wawel is a special place in Polish national mythology, so if Hamlet and *Hamlet* are to be used to think about Poland, then Elsinore must be moved to Wawel. Walaszek notes that Wajda did not try hard to change the set into Elsinore (349).⁵

Another important element affecting Wajda in this production (and also in the 1989 *Hamlet IV*) is Fortinbras and his army (in the performance literally marching into the inner yard from the outside). Fortinbras constitutes a power which threatens Elsinore and Denmark; in 1981 it was not difficult to imagine which (super)power could effectively thwart any democratic efforts in Poland. But Wyspiański (and Wajda) see more in Fortinbras than just an enemy of Denmark; for both, this character becomes an essential part of the tragedy, an important alter ego of Hamlet himself (Wyspiański complains that contemporaneous productions of *Hamlet* often dispensed with Fortinbras, 38).

Finally, Wajda decide to direct *Hamlet* in a specific local context – most of the actors from the Stary Theatre in Cracow whom Wajda cast in his performance had only six years before been rehearsing for a *Hamlet* directed by Konrad Swinarski, a production that had never premiered due to the director's untimely tragic death in a plane crash (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz, who read fragments from Wyspiański's essay, was to play Hamlet in Swinarski's production; Anna Polony – Ophelia in Wajda's version – was to be Gertrude, etc.). Swinarski's unfinished performance had become legendary, thus informing Wajda's production with yet another Polish, theatrical myth.

Andrzej Wajda continued work on *Hamlet* and staged the play in the Stary Theatre in Cracow (this time without additions from Wyspiański's *Study*). Polish history and tradition are evoked by means of painted cloth resembling the famous Wawel tapestries and numerous crowd scenes in which actors were grouped in such a way as to remind the viewer of Polish historical paintings, commemorating famous triumphs (Walaszek 353). Those scenes are highly ritualistic and ceremonial in nature, which contrasts with the lonely figure of Hamlet played by Jerzy

Stuhr. Wajda surprised critics and spectators by casting Stuhr as the Danish Prince as the actor's *emploi* had been rather unheroic. He was, in the opinions of many, unfit to play this role (Walaszek 357); yet, Stuhr, meta-theatrically "wrestling with the role" (Walaszek 359) convincingly created a character who was unfit to live in his world, incapable of handling the sudden burden of familial and political problems. In this way, Stuhr successfully became "one of us" in Wajda's words (357); one of the critics (Szybist) found Stuhr's Hamlet "our contemporary" and "a version of a contemporary Pole" (qtd. in Walaszek 351, 352). Stuhr tried to avoid simplistic political allusions; before the introduction of the martial law (13 December 1981), he "played so that one could feel Hamlet's strength. He felt equal to the King, he even felt superior to Claudius. [...] he was confident thanks to his integrity [...]. In March 1982 [...] Stuhr played differently, emphasising [political] allusions" (Małgorzata Dzieduszycka, qtd. in Walaszek 365).

Wajda, too, commented on the nature of theatre in his production, especially the interplay between acting and real life: the parts of the Players are performed by the same actors who played Claudius (Jerzy Trela) and Gertrude (Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska). In the mousetrap scene the actors wear masks and perform a dumb show. The director will address even more extensively the issue of what it takes to be an actor in his *Hamlet IV* (1989).

Andrzej Wajda's distance to and avoidance of politics can be seen in his fourth attempt to produce *Hamlet* from 1989, a most memorable year in world history, when the communist bloc in Europe fell apart. The premiere took place in the same month as the first semi-democratic elections for the Polish parliament after the second world war: June 1989, but Wajda had started working on the production already in late 1988, even before the Round-Table talks (negotiations between the communist authorities and anti-communist, barely legal, opposition) which began in February 1989 and paved the way to the elections. Yet critics, and rightly so, saw some political elements in the production – e.g. in the image of the Players resembling Polish actors who, protesting against the introduction of the martial law on 13 December 1981, refused to play on stage or screen and took on different odd jobs to survive or emigrated.

Instead of a politically engaged theatre, Wajda proposes that one consider the condition of the theatre itself, the nature of acting, the roles of theatre in the contemporaneous society, at the turn of the rather economically and politically disappointing 1980s. Such an approach is visible in the stage design, indeed the place where the action is located, and casting choices. Wajda staged his *Hamlet IV* in the Stary Theatre in Cracow again, but he rearranged the space of the theatre: the action is moved backstage, to a dressing room; it is also a place where the audience are crammed; the actors are playing close to the audience, as if they were in a close-up. On the other hand, casting Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska, in Wajda's opinion the best Polish actor at the time, irrespective of gender, was not revolutionary but certainly surprising.

The performance opens with the actress arriving at the theatre in modern clothing and changing to her costume: an Elizabethan doublet. At the end of the production she would hang the doublet on the back of a chair situated in front of the dressing table; Fortinbras, Hamlet's successor, would then take the doublet and put it on, thus becoming another incarnation of Hamlet. There is one more 'Hamlet' in the play: just before the play-within Horatio (Krzysztof Globisz), waiting for Hamlet, picks up a script lying on the dressing table and starts reading the 'To be or not to be' speech, in a way rehearsing it. In this way, Wajda seems to be saying that Hamlet's is everybody's condition and fate.

The performance appears, similarly to the scenes from *Hamlet* from 1981, to be like a rehearsal or a stage between rehearsal, preparation for the performance and a finished production. The fact that actors perform in the space of a dressing room, backstage, where they usually get ready for the stage appearance, emphasises the impression of a temporary performance. It is further underlined by Wajda's using the space of the stage proper, too: this is where Claudius holds his royal pomp, this is where the play within is located. Hamlet fully commands the space of the dressing room; it becomes 'real,' without pretence and lie. It is marked in acting and costuming – for example, when the Players arrive at Elsinore, entering the dressing room via theatre's backdoor, or entrance for actors, from the street, they wear ordinary clothes; when they play in the mousetrap scene, they don elaborate costumes and put on heavy make-up. Claudius, too, wears a rich historical costume. The spectator's perspective of the stage proper is that of Hamlet's: from backstage. Interestingly enough, Horatio is asked to watch Claudius's reaction using a most modern device: a TV screen located in the dressing room, which adds to the distance between the pompous, unnatural world of the stage and the humbler, natural world of the backstage.

In 1989, a most turbulent year in the Polish post-war history, Andrzej Wajda decided that Shakespeare's text can be used in order to ask questions about the present and future of theatre in Poland: how it is going to accommodate to a new world, to a new political, economic and social reality, to democracy and its glory and misery. This 'brave, new world' will be put to a test 15 years later, when Wajda will decide to comment on it reaching again for a Shakespearean text and staging it at the Stary Theatre in Cracow.

2004 was another special year in Polish history. It is linked with Polish accession to the European Union, which – together with Poland's membership in the NATO since 1991 – confirmed the country's aspiration to be a fully-fledged member of Europe and its western civilisation. Furthermore, since 2003 Poland had been a member of the military coalition occupying Iraq, which meant that Poland had been actively engaged in a war, war on terrorism, as the U.S. administration had it. Organised crime of the 1990s was still remembered, and in June 2004 Poland celebrated fifteen years of economic and political freedom, which was also an occasion to critically assess gains and losses.

Andrzej Wajda had not directed *Macbeth* since 1969, when he shot a television version of the tragedy. Furthermore, the Stary Theatre had not staged this play for 103 years! (Gruszczyński). At the same time, Wajda's *Macbeth* was one of as many as five *Macbeths* that were either continued or premiered in 2005. Wajda's production was a long-awaited one and many critics found it disappointing. Yet, one cannot but notice that the director had decided to stage Shakespeare because in his eyes the 'time was ripe.' Like in the previous cases, he surprised the viewers with his casting choices and toning down the political appeal of the production by continuing to pose questions about the condition and role of theatre in Poland.

The play is overtly theatrical. It is signalled in the construction of the stage design, costuming and properties. As Roman Pawłowski observes, theatricality in Wajda's production is constantly highlighted: characters dressed in counter-terrorist black uniforms wield swords instead of guns; this anachronism emphasises the nature of the swords as mere theatrical properties; a soldier shoots at Macbeth's castle with a sports bow etc.; stage hands wear uniforms and balaclavas; but perhaps what strikes the viewer from the very beginning are the grey boards on the floor of the stage (Majcherek) and the matching, employing shades of grey and black, minimalistic stage design: "In the economical, almost ascetic mise-en-scène by Andrzej Wajda and Krystyna Zachwatowicz there are no castles or palaces, no court, no ceremonial coronation costumes. The action is set in a grey-black, plain void" (Guczalska). In this way the director gives room to acting and Shakespeare's lines, in a new depoeticized and modernised translation by Antoni Libera (Pawłowski). The translation fits the deprivation of the performance of the spectacle on the one hand, a move towards theatrical minimalism and economy; on the other, it matches the nature of the protagonist and his wife.

Macbeth (Krzysztof Globisz) and Lady Macbeth (Iwona Bielska) surprise the viewer with their age – they are middle-aged, clearly getting old, instead of young upward mobile people that the Macbeths are more often associated with. Ambition is certainly not a trait one would credit them with. Joanna Derkaczew observes that they are mature and tired; "Andrzej Wajda explained his casting choices in the following way: I understood that Macbeth and his wife are mature people. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth murder people because for them it is the last chance to have their piece of the pie and they will do their best to have it" (qtd. in Guczalska). Many other critics emphasise their ordinariness, their being so unexceptional (cf. Miłkowski 2005, Guczalska 2004, Majcherek 2004). In Wajda's vision, the couple look back at their life and their achievements and find themselves lonely, without children (it is too late for them to have any). Guczalska notes that "in the performance the protagonists do not enjoy at least one moment of triumph or fulfilled dreams. Having gained the crowns they sit lonely, imprisoned in the recess of the grey wing." As Baniewicz soberly remarks "in the feast celebrating the gaining of power only [Macbeth's] three companions take part, while the servants remove the remaining empty, unnecessary chairs."

The Macbeths live in a world in which success is suddenly measured by different standards and in which their generation gives way to younger, more energetic, more resourceful, brilliant people. They are elderly and fat, whereas Duncan is young and handsome and has two young and handsome sons. The Macbeths see their life as a failure; Piotr Gruszczyński called them “provincial losers.” Wajda in this way portrays many Poles who began to shape their lives and careers in the communist times and then had to adjust themselves to the new political and economic system, which inevitably led to a disillusionment, estrangement and desperate attempts to catch up with and conform to the new style of living, to look younger (Macbeth's grey hair is clearly died black). “This is ‘No country for Old Men,’” Wajda seems to be saying, “this is no country for middle-aged ordinary Poles.” It is a very bitter image because the Macbeths do not fit into the role of new heroes. They are utterly unheroic and the evil that overpowers and consumes them is not that of a repulsive monster or a genius master-mind, but ordinary: “the philosopher Hannah Arendt once spoke about the banality of evil. In Wajda's *Macbeth* evil is not so much banal but primitive, low and, like an ugly disease, it eats away everybody without exception. Hence Lady Macbeth (Iwona Bielska) and Macbeth (Krzysztof Globisz) are stripped of tragic dignity and royal grandeur. Truth to tell, they behave as if they were a mob couple from Wołomin”⁶ (Majcherek).

Krzysztof Globisz playing Macbeth was an unexpected casting choice on Wajda's part not only because of his age, but also due to his acting reputation, *emploi* and rather good-natured looks. Tomasz Miłkowski (2005) notes that “Globisz's [as Macbeth] [...] looks and *emploi* [designate him] as a good-natured and decent character rather than immoral and murderous [...]” which is also echoed by Łukasz Drewniak's observation that the actor “plays against his looks.” Wajda's decision may resemble here casting Jerzy Stuhr in the part of Hamlet in the 1981 production, also found strange and contested by many critics (less so than casting Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska as the Danish Prince in *Hamlet IV*). Less controversial is in this respect the choice of Iwona Bielska as Lady Macbeth. As Elżbieta Baniewicz notes, “[t]he basic motif for her [Lady Macbeth's] role are her complexes. She is an elderly, childless woman who seizes the last opportunity to make her life meaningful.” The relationship between the couple is no longer (as can be expected) based on a vehement passion, fuelled by sexual desire. Instead, Lady Macbeth seems to baby her husband, when necessary hugging him close to her large breasts or chiding and slapping him.

And yet Macbeth is no coward; he is a brave soldier, skilled in the art of war and man-to-man combat (he easily overpowers Young Siward and practically lets himself be killed by Macduff). Wajda actually shows a world which is war-ridden: this is signalled by characters wearing black uniforms and bullet-proof vests (associated with commando units), servants (and stage hands) dressed too in such uniforms and balaclavas, the walls of Dunsinane being formed by semi-transparent, rectan-

gular shields of Macbeth's guards looking like anti-riot police, etc. But the most striking sign is the monochromatic set (as Wajda himself remarked: "The world is reduced to a cold climate marked by a few shades: black, grey, blue," qtd. in Derkaczew) and especially the numerous black plastic bags with soldiers' dead bodies and marking the 'battle landscape' in the opening and ending of the production:



Out of these bags, the Witches emerge (and this is where they vanish after meeting Macbeth and Banquo), dressed, too, in black plastic bags, with bandaged heads and breasts. In this way, they are also casualties of war, they literally haunt Macbeth's conscience. Interestingly enough, war (or its bloody outcome) is so omnipresent in the production that the black bags are raised above the stage where they remain forming a weird and menacing forest (an omen of the Birnam Wood?), which is lowered onto the stage again at the performance's close, with the Witches appearing again and speaking the lines from 1.1. The cyclical presentation of war reinforces the message of the war's inevitability and pervasiveness. Wajda of course thus relates to the Polish engagement in what was euphemistically called a 'military mission,' and which turned out to be a real war, one which was not defensive, which ran counter to the Polish national myths. Furthermore, by deploying black uniforms of commando forces Wajda reminds the viewer of world-wide terrorism, which may be lurking just around the corner (see Niebudek).

Andrzej Wajda's *Macbeth* constitutes an interesting phase in the director's constant search for answers about the condition of theatre in the changing reality, its engagement in the social or political affairs, the degree of its topicality, etc. These issues were raised by the director back in 1981, when he staged *Hamlet* twice: in the space of the Wawel castle, using a text which was a combination of Shakespeare's lines and Wyspiański's essay, and then in the Stary Theatre in

Cracow. The productions had to, willy nilly, respond to the turmoil caused by the Solidarity movement, even considering Wajda's reservations about the political engagement of the theatre. These were more pronounced in another critical year: 1989, when the director again decided to stage *Hamlet* in the same theatre, not on the stage proper but in the cramped space of the dressing room, with Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska as the protagonist. In all three cases, Wajda finds Shakespeare as an important, stable and reliable cultural text and lodestar, which significantly helps to pose questions about the changing reality, also theatrical one.

Notes

- 1 Actually, Jan Klata, when he chose the Gdańsk shipyard as the location for his *H.* referred in this way to Wajda's *Hamlet III*.
- 2 As Wyspiański himself writes in the study: "Since I can't speak English, it is a foreign language to me" [Gdy po angielsku nie umiem i język angielski jest mi obcy] (2000, 84), he uses a 19th century translation by Paszkowski and then "translates" scenes from it into his own version of *Hamlet* (he does use the term "translate" with reference to his treatment of Paszkowski's rendering of the English original into Polish).
- 3 "In Poland the mystery of Hamlet is this: what is in Poland – to think" (Wyspiański 2000, 84).
- 4 It is perhaps far-fetched but Wajda's idea to direct scenes from *Hamlet* in a non-theatrical location (the Wawel castle in Cracow) will later on be echoed in his directing scenes from Shakespeare in Gdańsk's historical street, Długi Targ, for the Theatrum Gedanense Foundation in 2009 to celebrate the laying of the cornerstone for the future Shakespeare theatre (which was opened in September 2014).
- 5 Jan Klata, when directing his *H.* in 2004 and setting it in the Gdańsk shipyard alluded, too, to Wyspiański's *Study of Hamlet*.
- 6 'Wołomin' (the name of a town near Warsaw) was how one of leading Polish mob gangs notorious especially in the 1990s was dubbed.

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