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Contrasting interpretations of Othello in the 20th century Russia: K.S. Stanislavsky and A. Blok

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CONTRASTING INTERPRETATIONS OF *OTHELLO* IN THE 20TH CENTURY RUSSIA: K. S. STANISLAVSKY AND A. BLOK

Abstract

In the first decades of the 20th century there emerged two theatrical interpretations of *Othello* in Russia which were never actualized 'on stage', but both appeared 'on page'. One of them belonged to Stanislavsky, a world-renowned stage director, and the other to Alexander Blok, a great Symbolist poet. Their approaches were the extremes: Stanislavsky developed his realistic method. Blok was overwhelmed with Shakespeare's symbolism.

Абстракт

Две крайности в интерпретации «Отелло» в России XX века: К. С. Станиславский и А. Блок

Третье десятилетие XX века в России было отмечено появлением двух прямо противоположных театральных интерпретаций «Отелло», которые никогда не были осуществлены на сцене. Одна из них принадлежит К.С. Станиславскому (свой план постановки шекспировской трагедии в МХАТе он вынашивал, находясь в Ницце); другая – Александру Блоку, выступавшему перед актерами Большого драматического театра в Петербурге. Станиславский развивает свои принципы сценического реализма, Блок в трагедии Шекспира видит символические смыслы мистерии.

Key words

Othello ■ Stanislavsky ■ Blok ■ theatrical interpretation ■ extremes ■ esthetics ■ plan ■ realism ■ psychological ■ historic ■ social ■ symbolism ■ mystery-play

Ключевые слова

«Отелло» ■ Станиславский ■ Блок ■ театральная интерпретация ■ крайности ■ эстетика ■ план ■ реализм ■ психологический ■ исторический ■ социальный ■ символизм ■ мистерия

After *Hamlet*, *Othello* has always been the most popular of Shakespeare's tragedies in Russia. In the course of the 19-th century its psychological interpretation prevailed. Actors, critics and writers emphasized Othello's passions. P.S. Mochalov (1800–1847), the greatest romantic actor, performed Othello (1828) as a lively passionate character, with convincing intonation and movement. He saw his hero's tragedy in crushing his faith in a beautiful creature he

loved. A.S. Pushkin (1799–1837) could see in Othello not only jealousy but also his noble and loving heart. M.J. Lermontov (1814–1841), an ardent admirer of Shakespeare and especially of his "Hamlet", took the plot of *Othello* for his drama *Maskarad* (1835–1836). The protagonist, suspecting his flawless and loving wife Nina of unloyalty, gives her poison. Nina's lost bracelet serves as proof of her fault, just like Desdemona's handkerchief. But the character of the protagonist reminds us to a greater extent of Hamlet's isolation in the hostile high society and his self-castigating in urging himself to action. He feels himself a sufferer and an avenger.

The end of the 19-th century was marked by a revival of public interest in *Othello* in connection with the renowned touring actors E. Rossi (1829–1896) and T. Salvini (1829–1916) in the title role. Both were appreciated by K.S. Stanislavsky who played Othello in the production of the Art and Literature Society directed by himself in 1896. Rossi seeing Stanislavsky in this role gave him his professional advice. But the young actor definitely preferred Salvini in the part of Othello for his psychological dynamic interpretation of the character. Stanislavsky was impressed by his naïve childlike simplicity which followed his fiery fits of anger and jealousy.

K.S. Stanislavsky returned to *Othello* by the end of his life, in 1929–1930. Staying in Nice, he worked at his staging plan of *Othello* for the Moscow Artistic Theatre and sent fragments of his plan to the actor L.M. Leonidov who was rehearsing the title role. But the actual director was I.J. Sudakov, who made a performance of his own. In fact Stanislavsky's plan had never been actualized. But it was published and thus preserved the imaginary spectacle of the Russian theatre genius for theatre history. It is a big opus, in which the founder of the MXT at the peak of his fame elaborated act by act, scene by scene and line by line the great tragedy which had by the end of the 19-th century marked the beginning of his theatrical career. The plan was followed by numerous drawings of the stage denoting the location and movement of the personages within the scenery. His interpretation of Othello remained mostly the same as it had been in 1896 when he himself played the role, but the frame of the whole was enriched with his true-to-life method. In his Othello he preserved switches between a childish trusting adoration of Desdemona and paroxysms of pain and despair. Othello's speech before the Senate was a kind of childlike plea. At the same time Othello showed his strong masculine character in dealing with his quartermasters. Characterizing Salvini as Othello, Stanislavsky compared him to "a Bengali tiger" and "an angry child", but to a great extent it was his own feeling of the role. His Othello differed from Salvini's in the general approach to the personage within the tragedy as a whole. He saw him as a historical figure acting within the concrete historical circumstances. He was sure that Shakespeare gained his fame not because he created human passions independent of

any time or place, but because he was precise in reflecting a particular time and place in his characters. Stanislavsky broke off the romantic theatrical tradition which had been preserved in performing Othello for decades, and declared that he was following the original Shakespeare, for he was convinced that "Shakespeare was life itself". His goal was to create the historic reality of a bygone epoch in the details of its everyday life, social contradictions and personal psychology. Aspiring to what he defined as "authentic Shakespeare", he meant to show on the stage not only the characters, but life itself with a diversity of colors, fragrances, sounds, with all its energy and atrocity which were in the real life of Shakespeare's times and served as a source of inspiration for the playwright. The tragedy created by Shakespeare according to the Renaissance theatrical canon Stanislavsky tended to transpose to *the new theatre method* elaborated by him for Chekhov's drama. His plan is a unique experience of an imaginatively constructed performance which has never seen the stage. Sudakov's spectacle in MXT was quite a traditional one, and even the talented actor Leonidov who was Stanislavsky's correspondent through the whole period of his work at the plan could not bring to life the maitre's recommendations.

The beginning of the 20-th century in Russia brought a new approach to Shakespeare and his theatre. The Symbolist and Post-Symbolist poets valued mostly the emblematic nature and poetic power of his drama. His images became the source of inspiration for their own poetry. A. Blok was captivated by Shakespeare from his very early age when in 1898 he participated in the domestic performance of *Hamlet*, and carried his admiration on through his whole life. *Othello* was one of the first Shakespeare spectacles in The Big Dramatic Theatre (Petrograd) in the post-revolutionary years when Blok was Chair of the Theatre Art Counsel (1919–1921). His speech to the actors interpreting this tragedy was later on published as an article under the title: "The Concealed Meaning of *Othello*". Blok was one of the first to see in *Othello* luminous symbolism and "concealed meaning" beneath the psychological drama of jealousy and murder. He saw a mystery-play halo over the leading characters: the "unimaginable radiance" of Desdemona's "inexpressible nature" and the dark fire of Iago's "luminescent interior". Blok was the first to say that "Othello" possessed "all the elements of a mystery-play". Blok's poetic imagination traces trivial happenings of earthly reality reflecting Christian mythology which appears to be the universal embodiment of human life's foundations. It helps him penetrate the "secret" mystery-play meaning of "Othello" through its manifold layers, historical, social, psychological, family and everyday. If Shakespeare strove to surmount the medieval scheme of the mystery-play, turning medieval *imagos* into Renaissance *characters* of flesh and blood, Blok as a Symbolist poet makes the reverse transformation back to the initial mystery-play fundamentals.

Desdemona is a representative of God's sphere which is light and fair, beautiful and true. It is explicated in the verbal imagery portraying Desdemona: "The *divine* Desdemona" (II, 1: 73); "*virtuous* Desdemona" (III, 1: 34); "thou young and rose-lipped *cherubin*" (IV, 2: 63); "O, she was *heavenly* true" (V, 2: 136); "the more *angel* she is" (V, 2: 131). Desdemona is in permanent contact with heavenly forces, applying to them for help and protection: "O, heaven forgive us! (IV, 2: 87); "heaven pardon him! (IV, 2: 135); "by this light of heaven" (IV, 2: 150); "Then Lord have mercy on me!" (V, 2: 57).

Iago is a demonic figure, who, in A. Blok's words, "is burning with dark fire", surrounded by "black radiance": "Iago is animated by dark forces; the world is constructed so that dark forces cannot but enter the stage in the mystery-play; <...>. It is the devil who awakes chaos" (388, 389). Blok's approach accords with the Romantics' interpretation of Iago as the embodiment of Evil (S.T. Coleridge, W. Hazlitt, Ch. Lamb). At the same time Blok anticipates the later scholars' interpretations of Shakespeare's tragedy and their conclusion: "Iago is a devil, not a man"[1]. With Iago critics seem torn between the poles of psychological analysis and "theatrical convention": Iago is an identifiable symbolic Vice with the appearance of a realistic character. Coleridge thinks him to be a figure of "motiveless malignity". M.E. Mooney defines Coleridge's view as a psychological approach at the cost of Iago's "theatrical lineage"[2]. The theatrical background is taken into account by A.C. Bradley and B. Spivack[3]. More definite in his perception of Iago is R.B. Heilman. His argument is that Iago's surface psychology conceals a deeper symbolic nature. A diabolic personality "emerges from the multiple folds of humane seeming"[4]. The imagery of diabolic and other masks in "Othello" is the principle subject for study in S.L. Bethell's article[5] and in the books by A.P.Rossiter[6] and M. Rosenberg[7]. M.E. Mooney argues that Iago is turning from a character into a symbolic figure in the course of the play: "His symbolic nature is not visible, and his morality persona is subordinate to his realistic portrayal. No wonder analysis of his character follows a psychological path. <...> His egocentricity and hypocrisy are

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[1] Heilman R.B. *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in "Othello".* Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1956, p. 43.

[2] Mooney M.E. *Location and Idiom in "Othello" //* Othello: *New Perspectives,* ed. V.M. Vaughan and K. Cartwright (London; Toronto, 1991), p.126.

[3] Bradley A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy.* L.: Macmillan and Co., 1904; Spivack B. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil.* N.-Y.: Columbia University Press, 1958.

[4] Heilman R.B. *Magic in the Web,* p.99.

[5] Bethell S.L. *Shakespeare's Imagery: The Diabolic Images in "Othello" //* Shakespeare Survey 5 , 1952, pp.62-79.

[6] Rossiter A.P. *Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare's Lectures.* Ed. G. Storey. L.: Longmans, 1961.

[7] Rosenberg M. *The Masks of "Othello".* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961.

component parts of his psychological makeup <…>. Iago does not immediately reveal himself as a Vice figure. <…> only at the end is Iago's symbolic dimension apparent to all"[8].

Nevertheless the critics made no attempt to look at the three leading personages of Shakespeare's drama in the realm of a mystery-play. It was Blok who first saw the metaphysical embodiment of Good and Evil, Angel and Devil underneath the realistic surface of the opposite figures of Jago and Desdemona. Othello's movement from one to the other is not so much the outer movement from Good to Evil as the inner movement from the "fair" part of his soul to the "foul" one, which is disbelief, jealousy, blindness, hot temper, cruelty and so on. At the beginning Othello's black complexion is opposed to his "fair" soul, and later his black skin becomes the symbol of the devilish "foul" of his human nature, ready to believe the worst and easily seduced or deluded. He doesn't see the deceiving mask on the face of "honest Iago" and takes for a mask Desdemona's innocence and sincere love. Othello's perception of a guilty Desdemona is a joint creation of Iago and Othello. It wouldn't have arisen in Othello's mind without Iago's help, but Iago could not have created it without Othello's predispositions. By the end of the third act Othello turns into the figure of darkness, invoking "black vengeance, from the hollow hell" (III, 3: 447). He now speaks in Iago's idiom. Once Othello's "fair warrior", Desdemona is now a "fair devil" and a damnable "lewd minx" (II, 1: 180; III, 3: 479, 476). R.B. Heilman's analysis of action and language in "Othello" hints at the "technique of infiltration" by which Iago "flows" into the Community of the play[9]. M.E. Mooney agrees that Iago often "stages" and provides interpretative commentaries on the events. In fact he is a concealed conductor of the other characters' reactions and behaviour[10], which is another manifestation of his diabolic ability.

Othello is cast into darkness, unable to see or understand what is going on. He is "As ignorant as dirt" (V, 2: 165). When he learns what he has killed he executes himself as the only fitting judgment on his act. He kills the devil in himself, imagining how he will be persecuted in the inferno: "Whip me, ye devils…" (V, 2: 278–281). Emilia on discovering the murder of her mistress, calls Othello "a devil": "O, the more angel she And you the blacker devil!" (V, 2: 131–134). Othello identifies himself as the "base Judian" ("base Indian" in The Quarto) who "threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe". This image suggests the idea of a primitive savage who picks up a pearl and throws it away not knowing its worth. **Othello actually commits his judgment on himself, killing the body, but restoring the soul. There is another scene of judgment by**

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8   Mooney M.E. *Location and Idiom…,* p.132.
9   Heilman R.B. *Magic in the Web,* p.45.
10   Mooney M.E. *Location and Idiom…,* p.121.

the end of the tragedy, a truly just judgment on Iago. In connection with the repeated motif of judgment we must not forget the scene of judgment of the Venetian Senate on Othello and Desdemona in the first act. These three "judgment" scenes mark the culminating points in the tragedy and remind us of this important structural feature in the mystery-play.

Thus, "Othello" is not a pure family tragedy as many critics, scholars, actors and spectators thought. Its symbolism is manifold and is rooted in the medieval mystery-play. This approach allows us to see more clearly the conflict of the tragedy, which is in the soul of Man (Othello), placed between God and Devil (Desdemona and Iago). He is affected by these two and at the same time they denote the opposing ends of his own soul.

Yet one can hardly agree that Shakespeare's Othello is a medieval mystery-play schematic "imago" and not a real man of flesh and blood, an African Moor placed historically amidst the European whites. His blackness bears the symbolic meaning which is approved in the course of the play, and at the same time it explains his origin, his historic and social situation. His love for Desdemona is not only symbolic as love for Good, but a real African manly passion for a woman. He is great in all his feelings and actions, in his belief and disbelief, his love and his jealousy, his tenderness and his rage, his blindness and revelation. He is punished and justified at the same time. Jago is not a pure Evil, he is an evil man, treacherous by nature, full of earthly envy and jealousy. The concealed mystery-play pattern is translucent through the physical and psychological substance of the tragedy and does not deprive it of its lifelike realism or psychology, nor its historical and social contents, but makes its underlying morality and philosophy more striking.

Stanislavsky's interpretation was the ultimate point of the realistic tendency in staging *Othello*, with an accent on concrete historical personages and circumstances. Blok emphasized the interaction of the "eternal" and "eternally actual", appearing in any epoch and in any corner of the world, something which can be observed right now "in the street" (А. Блок: 386). He says that in "Othello" everything "monstrously resembles everyday life" (А. Блок: 388). The Russian poet rejects "the naturalistic approach" and prefers the "romantic" one (А. Блок: 386). The latter is more fruitful because it helps to reveal the mystery-play background capable of bringing the spectators to the anticipated "catharsis", or "purgation" (А. Блок: 389). Blok is exact and subtle in defining the mechanism that blends a lifelike character and its symbolic halo. He also discovered the source and nature of Shakespeare's theatrical symbolism, its genesis and etymology, its organic links with the medieval theatre which was still alive in Shakespeare's time. Thus, Blok's interpretation of Shakespeare's tragedy contributed much to Shakespeare studies, although his approach was not developed in later research in Russia. Nor has it ever been experienced on stage.

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