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Reappropriations of Shakespearean History on the Post-Communist Hungarian Stage

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Abstract

The essay examines Hungarian theatrical productions of Shakespeare's history plays in the post-1989 period, pointing out the paradoxical qualities of the genre that can make these plays at once distant and foreign to non-British audiences. Nevertheless, these dramas' representations of political conflict and power struggles may also explain their adaptability to local socio-historical and political contexts. After an overview of the stage history of the chronicle plays on Hungarian stages, including possible reasons given for the noticeable popularity of certain works over others, this article also reflects briefly on the new attitudes to Shakespearean translation since the post-1989 period. The final section focuses on three contemporary productions of Shakespearean history plays, comparing and contrasting the way they make use of the early modern practice of doubling. Ways in which textual strategies are employed as well as how casting and scenographic choices infuse the dramas with political interpretations rooted in the here and now of the performances are also considered.

Key words

history plays, politics, *Richard II, Richard III, Henry IV,* doubling, translation, casting, costume design, scenography, Hungarian Theatre

The history play as a reflexive genre

Interpretations of Shakespeare's history plays may be particularly instructive as case studies to investigate the roles Shakespeare played in the Central European region in the post-Communist era. The dramas turn to English history in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which for their first audiences could still be considered the recent past. Any presentation of these past events is always firmly embedded in the present moment of their writing, creating a fascinating sense of temporal duality. Four centuries later, however, this past, with the chaotic political and legal entanglements of the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of the Roses, may seem all but forgotten. The historical periods that form the backdrop to Shakespeare's chronicle plays were extremely unstable and fluid even when considered within the overall context of English history, let alone when viewed from a temporally and geographically distant vantage point. Yet this instability might be another link to post-1989 Central Europe, a place and a time in which history was constantly being rewritten and reinterpreted, thus creating an atmosphere in which not only historical events but even cultural memories came to be ideologically implicated and in need of revision. During these three decades, the flexibility of history as narrative has become part of everyday experience in the region.[1]

Nevertheless, even if the intricate details of the power struggles around the English throne may not be well known to general audiences outside the British Isles, it is important to remember that even in Elizabethan times, history plays were always able to 'initiate a stimulating dialectic between the "pastness of the past" and the presentness of performance' (WALSH 2009: 35). This dialectic, as Peter Lake argues, 'enabled these plays to operate both as works of history, attempts to revive the past, to bring the dead to life before the audience's very eyes, and as political and moral commentaries of immediately contemporary resonance' (LAKE 2016: 43). As the present article argues, this seemingly paradoxical aspect of plays based on historical events is an enduring feature that allows the dramas to be used for thinly veiled socio-political commentary even at times and in places at a considerable distance from early modern England. While all of the productions discussed were staged in Hungary, they may be seen as representative of processes of reflection throughout the region. One of the productions considered, that of Andrei Şerban's *Richard III* in 2018, was even successfully transplanted the following year to Teatrul Bulandra in Bucharest.

In Shakespeare criticism, however, we might often notice how discussions of the history plays focus on representations of predominantly British (English, Irish, Scottish, or Welsh) nationhood (see e.g., HOLDERNESS 1991; MALEY and TUDEAU-CLAYTON 2010), sometimes in conflict or combination with each other or with continental opponents, primarily the French. However, these plays are rarely discussed in other national contexts, although performances of the histories have often functioned as vehicles to express local identities, or locally relevant politico-historical

1 I am indebted to Natália Pikli for pointing out this connection. Another possible link to the here and now may be found in the article in this collection by Anna KOWALCZE-PAWLIK, who discusses the ways post-memory of traumatic events may appear in the theatre.

realities in other parts of the globe. As described by Veronika Schandl (2009), this was certainly the case during the decades of Communism in the Central European region. Schandl emphasises how such political interpretations are not necessarily intended by the creators of the production: 'all it takes to make a production political is a social context in need of a political change [...] even productions not meant to be subversive could become so' (SCHANDL 2009: 16). As she demonstrates through the example of a 1955 *Richard III*, 'Although the political parallels were not stressed at any time during the performance, the audience instantly recognised the connections to an offstage reality' (SCHANDL 2008: 19). A similar socio-political undercurrent of a performance of *Julius Caesar* in the Katona József Theatre in 1994 is noted by Natália PIKLI in this collection.

More importantly, the 1955 *Richard III* at the National Theatre seemed to create a trend in Hungarian theatre productions, one in which authorities and censors[2] were offered a seemingly neutral and harmless text, while the on-stage reality of the performance added to or enhanced subversive elements resonating with the contemporary political context.[3] It is true that such subversive elements forcing (and allowing) audiences to read between the lines as well as all forms of 'doublespeak'[4] are more readily employed in societies ruled by oppressive authoritarian regimes where freedom of speech is limited, as artistic expression is seen as the only potential outlet for political commentary. The intentions behind such performances (and behind the regime's permission to allow such productions) were of course always complex, as Zoltán Márkus shows using the example of Hungarian productions of *Troilus and Cressida* (MÁRKUS 2006: 249). Yet, as Schandl notes, already by the mid-1970s a more daring young generation of directors began to see Shakespeare's plays not so much as instruments for direct political messages, 'holding up a mirror to contemporary Hungarian affairs' (SCHANDL 2016: 91), but, rather, as a means of deconstructing them. Critics increasingly expressed their desire for either 'openly political works' (Zappe quoted in SCHANDL 2016: 96), instead of indirect 'doublespeak', or expressed their admiration for those productions that 'offered no readings between the lines, no contemporary allusions, but rather embraced theatre for its own sake. This, thanks to the overpoliticised Kádárist theatre world, was indeed an unsullied and much welcomed approach' (SCHANDL 2016: 98).

2 Regarding negotiations of Polish theatre groups with state censorship organs, cf. CETERA's work in this collection as well as (CETERA 2017).

3 I am grateful to Kornélia Deres, who drew my attention to the inherent performativity of politics, which comes to life when embodied on the stage. Thus, censors were also forced to realise the need to review performances as well as playscripts.

4 For a more detailed discussion of the term in the context of subversive theatrical practices, see (SCHANDL 2016). It must be noted that while the origins of the term are only indirectly connected to George Orwell, the common practice of using intentionally ambiguous language that can convey subversive messages without raising the attention of censors is comparable to what Orwell defines as political language, in which 'there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims' (ORWELL 1968: 137), whether such language is used by state propaganda or by individual citizens and artists. This practice, flourishing under Communism, has come to be known as *doublespeak* throughout the region.

While these theatrical tendencies were not exclusively characteristic of performances of history plays and – as Alexander Leggatt begins his discussion of Shakespeare's political drama: 'There is, of course, political interest everywhere in Shakespeare' (LEGGATT 1988: vii) – it is still undeniable that the histories offer a nearly transparent screen that can easily reflect (even transmit) the lessons we should learn from the historical past. The interests of the genre often lie with questions of leadership, social conflict, oppression or subversion, themes that may in themselves be seen as explosive (and easily banned) under authoritarian regimes. However, the historical backdrop provides these themes with a distance that allows the language of doublespeak to work its magic through Shakespeare's words: pretending to talk about the past, while using the historical narrative as a mirror to talk about the present.

The history plays on Hungarian stages

After these tendencies in the latter decades of Hungarian theatre under Communism, one might wonder which old and new trends came to dominate Shakespeare performances during the post-Communist period. In the three decades between 1989 and 2019, within the legal frameworks of democracy, including at least a formally free media, such subtle and subversive communication might be seen as unnecessary.[5]

First of all, it is important to introduce some statistical data to determine whether any tendencies regarding the Shakespearean histories on Hungarian stages can be delineated. Although for several reasons it is impossible to provide completely reliable and accurate numbers, by relying on the production database of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute[6] some obvious trends can be noted. Some of the inaccuracies arise partly because a number of the productions of the *Henry IV* or *Henry VI* plays are registered as instalments of one sequence, while others appear as independent events. It is also possible that revivals of productions at a new venue or first performances at a festival are recorded as separate instances, not to mention the difficulties in categorising loose adaptations based on one or more original plays.

Moreover, whether considering a performance of a Shakespearean drama, or a less faithful adaptation, or even a loose derivative inspired by Shakespeare, the level of textual fidelity is impossible to gauge. Without access to performance texts or promptbooks, the close examination of which was not a feasible option within the framework of this study, I had to accept the information regarding authors, titles, and characters listed on playbills in order to determine what could and could not be considered a production of a Shakespearean history play.

5 Ivona MIŠTEROVÁ discusses similar tendencies in her article in this collection with reference to the period after the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and later in the Czech Republic.

6 The numbers presented in the article are based on searches in both databases, at https://szinhaztortenet.hu/search and https://monari.oszmi.hu/web/oszmi.01.01.php?bm=1, accessible on the https://oszmi.hu/ website.

Although not without significance even in this context, it seemed safer to leave out of the statistics those unconventional adaptations that either combine characters and conflicts from several plays, or that mention Shakespeare merely as an inspiration or as one of several co-writers. There were at least four such experimental productions during the past three decades: *Empty the Jordan* (*Vigyétek ki az éjjelit!*, a direct quotation from Falstaff in *Henry IV,* Part 2, 2.4.33), was a graduate production at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in 2008 at the Ódry Theatre; *richard2nixon*, a one-act play written by Balázs Róbert Suda and Előd Pál Csirmaz partly based on *Richard II*; a monodrama version of *Richard II* adapted and directed by Tamás Réczei in 1992 for the Madách Theatre; and a production combining elements of *Richard II* and *Richard III* directed by László Felhőfi-Kis under the title *Richard III/II, or Butchers' Wares* (*III/II-es Richárd avagy hús- és hentesáru*) at the Jurányi Incubator House. (This venue itself suggests that this was an experimental fringe production: the Jurányi Incubator House opened in 2012 as an event-based venue that provides a rehearsal and performance space, administrative support, costume and design workshops as well as storage space for young independent theatre companies, visual and performative artists.) These loosely adapted, but openly Shakespeare-inspired productions might also be noteworthy as a phenomenon suggesting that the Shakespeare text, and Shakespeare as a canonical figure, are no longer treated with the reverence that had characterised earlier periods of the Shakespeare cult. More and more typically, the Shakespeare text – whether published in a literary edition, or only available as a newly translated performance script – is treated as raw material, as a jumping board, rather than the unchanged and unchangeable core of the production design. This stance is also in line with a claim that Kornélia Deres makes in this collection: 'a common feature' [of Shakespeare productions in the post-1989 period] is that the 'texts are becoming more and more open to changes, associations, and allusions' (see DERES: 106 in this collection).

But when we look at the productions that acknowledge only Shakespeare as their author, it appears that out of Shakespeare's ten history plays, three dramas (*King John*, *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*) were never performed in Hungary between 1989 and 2019. This leaves us with two productions of *Richard II*, 23 of *Richard III*, 7 of the *Henry IV* plays, and a single production of *Henry VI* Part 3 (under the title *This Sun of York,* or *York napsütése* in Hungarian, directed by Iván Hargitai at the National Theatre in Pécs, 1999) during the three decades following the fall of Communism in Hungary. This means 33 productions altogether, compared with 29 productions of the histories in the 1945–1989 period. In contrast, in the four and a half decades between World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the diversity of the history plays performed was considerably greater, including one production of *King John* and two of *Henry V* as well, with only 12 productions of *Richard III*, making *Richard III* the single most popular history play on Hungarian stages.

Undoubtedly, the reasons for any drama's popularity are highly complex, and an increase in *Richard III* performances might also suggest a diminishing popularity for Shakespeare on the whole, since the lesser-known plays may simply disappear from theatres' repertoires, no longer having the power to attract Hungarian audiences. The

absence of *King John* is easier to explain – it has never been considered one of the masterpieces within the *oeuvre*, and is among the least popular works by Shakespeare even on English stages (see DAHLGREEN 2016). There are records of only four Hungarian productions of the play (1868, 1892, 1906, and 1970). Particularly since the 1970 Hungarian premiere of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's 1968 revision, which not only tightened the play's structure, but turned the distant historical events into a more explicitly contemporary story (it has been regularly performed on Hungarian stages ever since), Shakespeare's original *King John* has little chance of raising directors' interests.

Henry V, however, is clearly a different case, since in the English-speaking world, it is often ranked as one of the best-known history plays, directly after *Richard III* (see DAHLGREEN 2016), and it has even provided a number of phrases that have entered popular vocabulary, from 'we happy few' to 'band of brothers'. The credit for the text's popularity is clearly due at least in part to the two extremely popular film adaptations of the play. Laurence Olivier's rousing patriotic version was made in aid of the war effort in 1944 (see e.g., HOLDERNESS 1991: 82); and the release of Kenneth Branagh's film in 1989 'marked the beginning of a decade of unprecedented production of filmed Shakespeare adaptations in Hollywood' (FRENCH 2006: 64). Olivier's film reached Hungary as well (it is used as a point of reference in theatre reviews), and yet, during the nearly two centuries of recorded Hungarian theatre history, the play has been produced only twice. Both of these were parts of a history cycle, one in 1971–1975 covering both tetralogies in four instalments (*Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI*) and directed by János Sándor in Békéscsaba and Szeged; and another cycle in 1986, this time only with the second tetralogy (*Richard II*, *Henry IV,* and *Henry V*) in Várszínház in Budapest directed by Imre Kerényi and László Vámos. Surprisingly, neither of these cycles included *Richard III*, thus neither ensemble tried to capitalise on the popularity of the best-known history play. Apparently the story of the hunchbacked tyrant was seen as a separate political allegory, even as a tragedy, rather than a part of the Kottian Grand Mechanism that clearly informed history cycle productions (cf. BÉRCZES 1987: 21). The two productions of *Henry V*, however, seem to have passed without a significant impact, and reviewers confirm what seems evident in retrospect: Hungarian audiences find it hard to identify with a play that focuses on a community's belief in its own greatness along with the ability of its members to overcome individual differences in order to forge a victorious alliance against their common enemies. Both Hungarian productions were characterised rather by psychological interpretations, i.e., the image of a young leader who can see the error of his ways to rise above his fathers in greatness was simply portrayed as an unheroic and suffering everyman figure (cf. BÉRCZES 1987: 23), one whose story gained nothing from the complicated setting of medieval English history.

As we can see, even if the number of productions is not in itself sufficient to tell us anything meaningful about Shakespeare's role in social commentary, statistical data can still reflect general tendencies about dramas that critics and audiences find easier to identify with, and that seem capable of offering direct or indirect references to the socio-historical context. Out of the many factors that contribute to the impression of

a performance's contemporaneity, this essay looks at textual attitudes to Shakespearean histories on Hungarian stages, followed by reflections on potentially political interpretations of the casting decisions in three recent case studies.

Shakespeare speaking our language

As everywhere outside the English-speaking world, Shakespeare speaks the local vernacular on Central and Eastern European stages, and therefore the various attitudes to translations employed by theatres provide a useful point of comparison. This inclination to translate the texts again and again characterises the whole region (with several essays in this collection referencing the various translation-related trends in practically all national contexts), and it might be rooted not so much in a lack of respect for a sacrosanct text, as a desire to mould it to our own liking. The Hungarian Shakespeare canon has been established through several generations of translations beginning with the earliest attempts at the end of the 18th century (see also MÜLLER in this collection). The canon was established through the work of major Hungarian poets in the mid-19th century,[7] followed by revisions and renewals first in the interwar period, then in the mid-20th century. Collected editions of Shakespeare's work still include many of these earlier translations from the early or mid-20th century, but a relatively recent trend has been observed in theatres' commissioning completely new translations for their productions. Directors and dramaturgs (and sometimes lead actors) attempt to revise or edit, or even newly translate the plays (see the essays by ALMÁSI, MÜLLER, PIKLI in this collection). This tendency seems to be gaining ground, but it is still important to acknowledge the diversity of approaches that characterises contemporary theatrical texts: some directors choose to rely on a published and canonised text, sometimes even going back to a 19th-century version and either editing it, or allowing the dramaturg and the actors to shape it to their liking during the rehearsal period. This includes textual insertions (see ALMÁSI in this collection), or treating the text as simply a starting point (see DERES and REUSS in this collection) that can be moulded as the occasion arises.

The two *Richard II* productions staged between 1989 and 2019 use György Spiró's new translation commissioned by Shure Studio for their 2008 production, subsequently published in 2009. As opposed to the majority of previous generations of poet-translators, Spiró is predominantly a dramatist and prose writer. He is, however, also a theatre professional, an academic and theorist, having worked as a dramaturg and as a director for various theatres over the past decades. As he indicates in an interview, he was originally asked to be the dramaturg of the production, editing one of the earlier translations, but when he found both of them unworkable, he felt compelled to do a translation himself (SZELE 2009). His translation follows the Shakespearean form of iambic pentameters, and can be regarded as a conservative and textually faithful rendition,

7 For a survey of early institutionalised Hungarian Shakespeare translations, see (DÁVIDHÁZI 1993; MINIER 2017).

albeit one noticeably fresher in diction and vocabulary than the previous version of the text translated by György Somlyó and first published in the 1948 collected works. The contemporary feel of Spiró's version is appreciated by critics as well (see GABNAI and HODÁSZI 2020: 21–22).

A new translation of *Henry VI* Part 3 was another theatre commission by the National Theatre in Pécs for a 1999 production (not discussed here). Since poet and translator Szabolcs Várady did not accept the task, the commission was offered instead to András Imreh (VÁRADY 2008). Örkény Theatre also commissioned a new translation for their 2017 production of *Henry IV*, with poet and academic Ádám Nádasdy, the most prolific contemporary translator of Shakespeare, who provided the theatre with a translation for both parts of the text, which the theatre's dramaturg Barbara Ari-Nagy condensed into a single play. Nádasdy's translation methodology as described in detail in the preface to all of his scripts is well-known. He seeks to combine a reasonable level of formal fidelity with a neutral and contemporary text, consciously trying to steer clear of archaic or mannered poetic clichés that render so many earlier translations useless on the contemporary stage.

Finally, the example of *Richard III,* by far the most popular history play on Hungarian stages, shows combinations of various trends in earlier and contemporary Shakespeare translations. On the one hand, the position of the canonical 1947 translation by poet and translator István Vas is still dominant, as it is clear from the fact that even the most recent production directed by Romanian-born American Andrei Şerban at Radnóti Theatre relies on this version as its basis. The text, however, was heavily edited by Şerban and his Romanian co-director Daniela Dima, neither of whom speak Hungarian, therefore they asked Péter Závada to translate their script into Hungarian. Závada combined passages from the Vas translation with his own phrases and added multiple references to the current contemporary socio-political reality.[8] It is clear from the performance text, and even from the promotional videos available on the theatre's website[9] that the text continued to be shaped during the rehearsal period, with the director (and presumably other participants) inserting further elements whenever they felt that the production required it. This is obviously a practice not uncommon in any theatre, especially with brand new translations. Şerban's *Richard III* was incidentally a production with highly overt and explicit socio-political references, although the text kept changing during its run, adding references to the local governmental elections and other actual recent events. The production was in fact cited by László L. Simon MP, former Secretary of State for Culture, as an outrageous example of how the liberal left-wing oppositional voices make critical references to the political leadership (SAJÓ 2019). Still, the first reviews all referred to the performance as 'crisp and eternal without centrally sanctionable references to current affairs' (GABNAI 2018).

At the same time, another recent production of *Richard III* discarded the Vas translation altogether; born in 1992, actor Miklós H. Vecsei first appeared as dramaturg and

8 I am indebted to Natália Pikli for this information.

9 See http://radnotiszinhaz.hu/repertoar/lll-richard/.

editor of the text on the playlist of a 2016 *Gyula Festival* performance. A year later, he is mentioned as a translator and reviser/editor of the play in another staging, with both productions directed by Attila Vidnyánszky Jr, another rising star of Vígszínház [Comedy Theatre]. What I found significant in their involvement in the textual preparation as well as the direction and performance of the play is that the very same practice used to characterise 19th-century productions. In those days, iconic and charismatic individuals, often the star actor-directors which were the magnets for audiences, also took pains to shape the playscripts to their liking, not simply as editors or dramaturgs, but even as translators.

(A)political casting, (a)political doubling

Finally, I would like to take another, closer look at three of the most recent Hungarian productions of the history plays that I had the opportunity to attend within the past two years. *Henry IV* was put on at the Örkény István Theatre in 2017–2019, with the two parts condensed into a single play directed by Pál Mácsai. *Richard III* opened at the Radnóti Theatre in February 2018 in a production directed by Andrei Şerban and Daniela Dima.[10] Finally, the most recent production was *Richard II*, which opened in December 2019 at the Pesti Theatre, the chamber venue of Vígszínház, directed by Gábor Tompa. Comparing these productions, we can highlight similarities in visual style, textual strategy, scenic and costume design, even the use of the theatrical spaces. A number of undeniable trends must also be noted, for all the essential differences among the productions. Firstly, the choice of plays (*Henry IV* vs. *Richard III* or *Richard II*), together with the difference in the level and amount of explicit topical references hints at the different political stances of individual theatres, along with the dissimilar interpretations of the role of theatre in representing or directing public opinion. What seems certain, however, is that no theatre performance (or audience) has trouble identifying medieval English history with contemporary Hungarian political life. The role of Shakespeare in Hungarian and regional identity is not unlike the way Shakespeare is seen throughout the Central European region, as several essays in this collection testify. At the same time, the style and subtlety of these references vary, typically in line with the general ideological-political stance represented by the individual theatres themselves.

The three theatres at which the plays were put on represent a rather broad range of political attitudes and theatrical styles, ranging from the politically independent, critical-intellectual to the broadly entertaining and the openly politically-opposed. The choice of actors was equally significant in each case, signalling to audiences what kind of attitude and even what kind of story to expect. The Örkény Theatre's *Henry IV*,

10 Interestingly, the performance was then also staged in Bucharest's Bulandra Theatre, opening in March 2019, using the same costume and stage design, but the script's political references were actualised and localised to the Romanian situation (see https://fnt.ro/2019/en/richard-iii-by-w-shakespeare-bulandra-theatre/).

which relied on doubling not simply for the pragmatic reasons which might have been behind the Elizabethan practice, used this technical solution to enhance the parallel structures of the plays' two worlds: the royal court and the underworld of Eastcheap. The key role in this consciously mirrored double world was given to Imre Csuja, an actor predominantly known for comic roles (e.g., Trinculo in *The Tempest*, and Polonius in *Hamlet*), a name and a face recognisable by considerably broader audiences than the primary target spectatorship of a Shakespearean history play might be. Csuja played both Falstaff, a role for which he seemed a natural choice, and Henry IV, which was envisioned with some apprehension by critics and scholars before the show opened. Thus his casting, although supported by the director with reference to György Spiró's study on doubling (SPIRÓ 1997), can be considered both traditional (even typecasting) *and* against the grain. In the end, Csuja displayed such a scope of comic and tragic depths in his double characters that critics and audiences were equally swept away, and the roles brought him the Miklós Gábor Award for the 2017–2018 season's best Shakespeare performance. Csuja, however, is not an actor identified with a political stance in the same way as Róbert Alföldi is as the choice for the title hero in Andrei Şerban's *Richard III*. In the Örkény performance, the personal fame of each and every actor is, if not overshadowed, at least blended together with the theatre's own position in contemporary Hungarian cultural life. Örkény is one of the few theatres in Budapest that tries to resist compromising their critical views for the economic necessities of survival in the form of subsidies from the central or local governments, nor for ticket sales. The cast of Örkény boasts several well-known names, but they are also recognised as a theatre ensemble with a shared vision, rather than a group of individuals with star aspirations.

Róbert Alföldi, who plays a mesmerising Richard III in a production at the Radnóti Theatre, is a star whose reception is much more divided along ideological lines. His talent is unquestioned, yet as a well-known queer actor-director who has long been an outspoken critic of the current conservative socio-political regime, his support base is almost directly identifiable with the urban liberal opposition to the government. In between shorter or longer periods of freelance work, he spent nearly a decade as the actor-director of the Comedy Theatre in the 1990s, then two seasons at the newly established independent Bárka Theatre, followed by five years as the head of the National Theatre, stepping down amid much controversy at the end of his term in 2013 (see e.g., CSÁKI 2013: 275–90). Alföldi's replacement was Attila Vidnyánszky Sr., a director who openly declares his support for the current, conservative-nationalist government. Alföldi is not a member of the Radnóti Theatre, and although the production showcases the talent of the Radnóti troupe, among them several established and recognised senior members of Hungarian theatrical life, the whole production was organised around him; in fact, both the choice of this role and his choice of director was a birthday gift for Alföldi that the Radnóti Theatre made happen. Nonetheless, simply by virtue of casting him in this role, the production declares itself as a politically aware one, although most critics agree that 'occasional winks to the contemporary Hungarian audience are overshadowed by more general concerns' (PIKLI 2018), and that Şerban hides 'the political content behind the text instead of saying it out loud' (ALFÖLDI

2019). As the editors of *Színház* [Theatre] magazine acknowledge, critics seem to be in agreement that Şerban's *Richard III* is an important production, even if it divides its audiences (see SZÍNHÁZ szerk. 2018).

The most recent production, *Richard II* at the Pesti Theatre, the chamber theatre of the Comedy Theatre, also relies on the star power of another generation: the youngest stars of the Budapest theatre world. Miklós H. Vecsei is the blue-eyed, blond, baby-faced star featured in a musical version of Ferenc Molnár's *Paul Street Boys*, a Hungarian children's classic that has been a sold-out running success for five years, with over half a million viewers to date. Vecsei's soft-spoken romantic lyricism is made much use of in the Shakespearean role as well, in which he is supported by another rising star, Attila Vidnyánszky Jr., the Comedy Theatre's most recent, though somewhat controversial Hamlet. As opposed to Örkény's cast, and particularly Alföldi, both Vecsei and Vidnyánszky are well known for their conservative backgrounds, therefore it should be seen as unsurprising that this performance contained no elements which would openly criticise the political establishment. One review published in the conservative daily *Magyar Nemzet* [Hungarian Nation] makes it clear in its title already: 'Without actual politics' (OSZTOVITS 2020), implying that by focusing on the universal qualities of the play (the psychological drama of the complex relationship between Richard and Bolingbroke), the director has created something more timeless. However, other critics are less enthusiastic, and mention the absence of a central concept, a slow pace which has been characterised as inducing stupor, if not boredom, which cannot be dispelled even by occasional sparks of talent and vision (GABNAI and HODÁSZI 2020: 21–23). Interestingly, the reception of the production seems to be the opposite of Şerban's *Richard III*: while audiences love it, reviewers are divided. Centred around the twin stars of Vecsei and Vidnyánszky playing Richard and Bolingbroke, the production becomes a story of the disillusionment of the younger generation, who are aware of the corruptive influence of political power but are unable to effect any changes. Nonetheless, the power of the production seems to be in the performances of its young stars rather than a strong directorial concept or any political relevance.

All three productions therefore had popular appeal but relied on very different types of attraction, and although I (along with most critics) believe that the staging of *Richard III* was the most openly political, its target seemed more transitory. Örkény's *Henry IV* displayed very similar strategies to the doublespeak that energised Hungarian theatrical life under the Communist regime, and *Richard II* seemed most intent on a psychological, rather than socio-historical realism which was moving and easy to identify with, without obvious political overtones or a real connection to either the historical narrative or the contemporary setting. Nonetheless, all three productions made it clear that these plays have lessons to teach us about the nature of power, shifting allegiances, loyalties and betrayals, and the personal price one always has to pay for any high social position.

One important formal element that characterises all three productions is the practice of doubling, which became common in Shakespeare's time, but had not seemed to catch on in Hungary before. Nonetheless, these productions relied on doubling not

only in minor roles (with the exception of *Richard II*), but also in major and even central roles in ways that force the spectator to take sides and consider the implications of the use of this stage device. Both Örkény and Radnóti employ gender-blind doubling, and particularly Örkény's *Henry IV* relied in its interpretation on the doubled protagonists' embodiment by the same actor, Imre Csuja, but practically the whole cast appeared in roles on both sides of the social divide. In the Radnóti *Richard III*, the most striking performance came from Zsolt László, who plays not only Queen Margaret and the young Prince of Wales, but also the Scrivener, who appears as William Shakespeare himself. Eliza Sodró, who plays Lady Anne also appears as the young Duke of York, and while both examples are cross-gender doubling, in neither case is the crossing of gender divides as striking as in the examples of the Czech *Romeo and Juliet* discussed by Ivona MIŠTEROVÁ in the present collection. Here, the young princes have not achieved their full adult sense of masculinity, and since they never will, the play denies them any other status than that of children. Queen Margaret never displays softness or femininity, with this production emphasising only the monstrous sensibilities in the Shakespearean text. In *Richard II*, the doubling is again meaningful: by diminishing and blurring the personal features of several minor characters, the production 'underlines their insignificance' (OSZTOVITS 2020). At the same time, it also emphasises the psychological drama of the two central characters, 'directing the viewer's attention to the relationship between the two young men, the reigning and the future king' (OSZTOVITS 2020).

Another important element that can enhance the contemporary feel of a performance as well as create an atmosphere of topicality are the visuals in terms of costume and scenic design. Scenographic choices are able to root a production in a past or present socio-historical or political moment, and whether or not the costumes emphasise the show's relation to the everyday are equally meaningful. It therefore cannot be an accident that all of these productions are set with minimalist stage designs, using modern costumes, often with modern equivalents of social markers, and sometimes with a few hints at the play's early modern origins, as with the use of Elizabethan ruffs in the *Richard III* production. Richard III's reptilian snakeskin suit is just as significant as Queen Elizabeth's fox fur in characterising their wearers; the chains and raincoats that replace the military garb in both *Henry IV* and *Richard II* make it clear that words can be just as lethal as swords in political battles. Örkény's *Henry IV* even replaces the royal crown with a simple badge on the king's lapel, which is quite easy to (mis)take for a beer cap, as in the tavern scenes. The simple contemporaneity of these minimalist designs, I believe, makes it impossible for the spectator to find a safe and sterile historical interpretation for any of these productions.

I am convinced that in this part of the world, Shakespeare is, has always been, and continues to be, political. Yet it is also evident that Shakespearean theatre's political meaning making is dependent on a complex amalgam of factors. The way Eastern and Central European stages continue to rely on his texts to express controversial, changing, and sometimes even self-contradictory meanings during these decades when his global cultural position might seem to be in question is one of the strongest proofs of his continued relevance.

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