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Depicting Collective Support on the Theatrical Stage: The Case of *We Are Hamlet*

Abstract

The article describes a unique theatre project recently implemented by an international team of directors, actors, and stage designers representing the Bremer Shakespeare Company, the Prague Shakespeare Company and the Ukrainian Vasyľko Theatre in Odesa. The project's product is a production titled *We Are Hamlet* that was performed in several European cities in 2023. Directed by Guy Roberts, *We Are Hamlet* examines, through the text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, what defines and makes possible the existence of human beings, despite their social, political, economic, educational, and even ecological differences. The discussed performance can be considered a conceptual statement, one made with the help of traditional artistic means but conveying meanings that acquire particular significance today. The production is analysed with recourse to the impact of

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media-broadcast images of the collective international support for Ukraine as a victim of the Russian aggression. The article looks into the artistic process itself, focusing on how the very idea of collective support is realised on stage through the so-called chorus atomisation.

Keywords: atomised chorus, role dispersion, 'collective' Hamlet, the Russia-Ukraine war.

On a rainy day in early April 2022, the then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (nicknamed ever since by many in Ukraine as *Borys Johnsonyuk*) walked down a hill to the main street in Kyiv. The scene seemed miraculous, as the Ukrainian capital had been besieged since the previous month by invading Russian troops. The sense of something extraordinary happening was enhanced by the fact that here was an official top-ranking representative of a state geographically so far away – and not even a member of the European Union that Ukraine had been longing to join. After all, the distance between Ukraine and Great Britain in terms of their political, economic, cultural, and other developments had always been significant. But now, by briskly going down the street called Luteranska, the head of the British government was shortening that very distance: his government was about to take the lead in creating an international coalition to support Ukraine.

A week after this miracle, the Ukrainian capital began to see an en-masse arrival of other political leaders and state officials of the highest calibre, in other words, the most influential foreigners coming to show support for Ukraine. For the following year and a half, public displays of solidarity with Ukraine as a victim of the aggression were a popular move that even helped some visitors improve their own political standing at home (Кацевич [Katsevich]). At certain moments – such as at the celebration of Ukraine's Independence Day on 24 August 2023 – the number of international guests would increase so that when photographed in group pictures they would form a solid support group, which appeared to be speaking, through however many different microphones, in one voice.

The parallels drawn between the gatherings of high-level foreign officials and what serves in the case of this article as a key element of a theatrical action, i.e. a chorus, spring to mind when we try to analyse how the emblematic messages generated by media during the Russia-Ukraine war have inspired the creation of a good many interesting works of art. For a while, the visual presentation of the international "chorus", featuring, irrespective of the domestic circumstances, almost always British and Polish state officials and politicians, was quite common. The images of collective support and other media-distributed "pictures from the war" seemed to be making a powerful emotional impression on Ukrainians. The Ukrainian common belief in joint support by foreign countries was strong enough for the same support to be often perceived as direct protection against Russia's bombing. Shelling

is something the enemy would ostensibly not dare to resort to in the presence of foreign diplomats. However, apart from influencing public sentiment in this way, such images also became a source of artistic solutions, including theatrical ones, created by performing collectives both in the country and outside it.

It should be noted that the impact made by the various media types on theatrical practices has a long and substantial research history, ranging from print media to social networks. In the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, this impact has also received considerable scholarly attention in recent times. In particular, researchers have observed that in the first months of the war, the Ukrainian theatre effectively assumed media functions by broadcasting in an artistic and yet still documentary manner information about what was happening in local towns and villages under Russia's occupation (Galats`ka 38–41). The new informational, 'media'-related side of theatrical performances also became significantly strengthened through the active use of images related to the war. In other words, the theatrical process involved creative "rearrangements" as a result of which the viewer seemed to be in the epicentre of events and witnessing how they were to unfold (Lavender; Veselovska 152–157), thus increasing the contemporary feel of the productions.

However, internationally made references to the war in that manner, through media pictures projected during a performance, seemed to work only for a relatively short period of time. An apt example of a media-oriented production is a German opera production of Sergei Prokofiev's *War and Peace* staged in Munich in 2023, which used the then-popular image of theatre as a wartime shelter. In the set design in Munich, one can recognise a photograph of early spring 2022, i.e. the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the photo, the stage of Les Kurbas Lviv Theatre is filled with people sitting or lying on make-shift beds. The scene is meant to depict a typical wartime shelter, and it obviously does so quite convincingly. However, the period during which many local theatres found themselves functioning in such a capacity had lasted for a few months at the most, not least because of a changing war dynamic. Pretty soon, with the general easing of the security situation, theatres were able to return to their primary function. Still, some other popular images and messages widely broadcast by the media continued to be used in theatrical performances outside of Ukraine, and perhaps the most visible of them were designed to underline international support for Ukraine.

The fundamental issue of support for Ukraine in its fight against the aggressor has been present more firmly on the Ukrainian stage since mid-2022. Several children plays based on fairy tales, where the animal characters personify one country or another, have been published and performed. Such productions would end with a demonstration of collective action in support of the victim; thanks to the very positioning of actors on the stage, such an act can be associated with a kind of chorus that teaches the young audience the relevant ethical lesson. As such,

the function of the chorus has once again become important to theatre – but not without help from the media, disseminating the joint photos of political leaders.

The creative purpose behind the chorus employed by modern directors does not fully correlate with the chorus's functions in classical theatre. In general, scholarly studies on the changes that have taken place in relation to the chorus's functions over the history of the European theatrical art are presently quite active and evolve into the two main schools of thought (Fischer-Lichte 347–361). The first one relates to the specifics of the chorus in performances that we call ancient drama (Zira), while the second one is about examining the choric functions that are not of ancient heritage (Maričić, Milanović 58–68).

According to Patrice Pavis, its usage in modern theatre is self-imposed and performs clearly different tasks:

The function of the chorus is not just, as in Greek tragedy, to comment on things and underline a conclusion, delivered in the authoritative voice of the author or the chorus members responsible for emphasizing a moral or political message. Rather, it is a sign of a 'community utopia' (as the director Heinar Schlee calls it). The individual's words are marked by all the protagonists, but also by the *mise en scène*, by the virtual installation on stage of the community of spectators, their collective gaze, their desire to come together as a group through the characters and the ethical or moral forces they represent. (Pavis, *The Routledge Dictionary* 182)

What Pavis notes as the peculiarities of the chorus functioning in the modern theatre is vividly manifested in many stage performances, and perhaps especially so by legendary French director Ariane Mnushkin. In her interpretations of classical texts, including those by Shakespeare, she creates a certain community of characters and endows it with the qualities of a chorus that enters into a controversy or supports a hero, as well as with the qualities of an active crowd that interacts with the audience and provokes the latter into thinking. However, despite the fact that it is through chorality that modern theatre discusses topical issues in the relationship between personality and power and pronounces important political slogans, the chorus in the form of a "cohesive group", according to Pavis, will not be able to play a critical role in such a discourse (Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre* 55). Quite possibly for the sake of any full-fledged discussion and demonstration of "collective self", it would be necessary to voice the personal opinion of individual members of the chorus. And what we may call an atomised chorus, something where each character has a distinct voice – as presented in *We are Hamlet* – becomes a format that convincingly represents the power of collective and individual principles.

The Shakespearean Atomisation of the Chorus

One playwright who employed and, at the same time, modified the chorus in his plays was undoubtedly William Shakespeare (Brennan 109–127). The consensus among researchers is that he personified the chorus via an actor responsible for the Prologue and Epilogue, or entrusted the chorus's functions to a Fool – in terms of stopping the action, interrupting a scene, reflecting on what's happened and anticipate what will come, but most importantly in creating a direct, unmediated, connection with the audience (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*; Greenblatt, *Hamlet*). The fact that in Shakespeare's works the chorus as a collection of performers can be embodied in one character can be seen not only in his playtexts, but also in the way they were used on stage. The best example of this in the history of Ukrainian theatre is Les Kurbas's stage interpretation of *Macbeth* in 1924, where the figure of the Fool becomes an important commentator on events (Makaryk 100).

According to some scholars and stage practitioners (Vygotsky 166–198), the personification of the chorus also takes place in Shakespeare's works where there is neither a Prologue nor a Fool. Most glaringly, such is the case in the iconic *Hamlet*, where researchers detect a whole range of chorus personifications and a stage implementation of the traditional chorus functions by individual characters (Kitto). For instance, Ophelia calls Hamlet "chorus" when she says: "You are a good chorus, my lord" (3.2.240), because he explains the true meaning of the play about the murder of Gonzago, which is in fact how the ancient Greek chorus would explain the meaning of events to the public in its own time (Arribas 1537–1558). Attention is also drawn to the hidden functions of Fortinbras acting as Chorus or Epilogue to the play (Vygotsky 166–198). But most often, the functions of the chorus as a bearer of common sense rely on Horatio, Hamlet's closest friend (Kitto). Horatio appears both as a luminary of the chorus and as the chorus itself, i.e. he performs several tasks at the same time, and also comments on the theatrical performance, through which the story of the murder of Old Hamlet, the late King and Hamlet's father, is told.

Therefore, there seems to occur a chorus atomisation that is at play in *Hamlet*, meaning a distribution of the chorus functions among several characters and a chorus dissolution. Viewed from a dramaturgical perspective, this would be an exceptionally innovative method, at least for the sixteenth- to seventeenth-centuries theatre. But it is also quite possible that the same method was important not only as a creative technique, but also as a way of conveying a specific meaning, which testifies to the disintegration of something as supposedly wholesome as a state, as in Shakespeare's famous "time out of joint" line (3.5.190). At the end of the day, it is as if through this 'dispersed' chorus, the play aims to demonstrate the absence of a common public cause and the disintegration of human relationships, in contemporary reality accompanied by a multi-media overload.

From *Hamlet* to *We Are Hamlet*

The chorus atomisation in *Hamlet* is also quite telling from the perspective of the representation of the early seventeenth-century political discourse. In the vast majority of stage interpretations *Hamlet*, the hero, is to appear as a lone figure, someone who independently, and victoriously enters into a duel with the repressive authorities. As the plot shows, only his friends Marcellus and faithful Horatio remain alongside *Hamlet*, whereas his classmates Guildenstern and Rosencrantz betray him at the very first turn. Contrary to the tradition of depicting *Hamlet* as a loner, the international project *We Are Hamlet* – implemented jointly by the Shakespeare Theatre in Prague, the Bremer Shakespeare Company, and the Vasyľ Vasyľko Odesa Theatre – offers a production that can be called a ‘collective’ *Hamlet*. The British director and producer, Guy Roberts, who is both the author of the production’s idea and its director as well as the actor performing Claudius, compares his own vision of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a tragedy about the confrontation with evil with a popular concept of modern political reality that is formed through the media. Accordingly, the production aims for a stage interpretation of the political formula used by the modern establishment – one best described as the ‘collective West’, a term that has become so salient and omnipresent in the course of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Guy Robert’s idea of the “collective” *Hamlet* is implemented by making his main character personify the joint actions of international forces resisting aggression. For this, Roberts creates a *Hamlet* of the global world, as it were, internationalizing this character as much as possible. Accordingly, he strips the performance of any local allusions or context. This shift is crucial given the tendency of our times to domesticate, if not politicize, Shakespeare’s tragedy on many a national stage by immersing it into distinct country-specific settings. Most likely, the director was tempted to interpret the play via the specifics of the raging Russia-Ukraine war – not simply as a locale for the conflict, but as a locus for action that impacts the entire world ‘out of joint’. However, as a reference to contemporary events, Roberts resorts to the image of the international chorus in support for Ukraine, led or at least fronted for some time (back in early-mid 2022), by the then-British-Prime Minister.

To enhance the effect of the “collective” *Hamlet*, Roberts utilises the Shakespearean principle of chorus atomisation among characters and distributes *Hamlet*’s spoken lines among the performers who exchange roles during the performance: everybody becomes *Hamlet*. Thereby, the director aims to spread the determination, responsibility, and – finally – defeat of the “collective” *Hamlet* among the majority of the participants in the play, both young and old, men and women. In effect, Shakespeare’s vision of the acting trade is also realised: the actors who come to Elsinore are said to be able to play everything from tragedy to comedy (3.2.390), the result being that the heroic *Hamlet* role can be played by completely different actors, with varying theatre experience, professional skills and schooling.

The role distribution among the performers accentuates not only the situation whereby anyone can become Hamlet and thus face the ultimate choice of whether to act or not to act in defence of certain values. In *We Are Hamlet*, this artistic method assumes a practical meaning, too, in that it allows for the plot to undergo substantive changes. Thanks to the effective character dispersion, Hamlet, the hero, can be shown in different states without resorting to theatrical tricks of the trade – such as make-ups, hairdos or costumes. Thus, spectators first see an excited hero who has just set foot on his native shore – the role assumed by the charming, almost statue-like actress Jessica Boone. Her character resembles the romantically inspired Hamlet, uncompromising and sincere in his feelings. After a few scenes in the conversation with Ophelia, the role of Hamlet behaving like a madman is taken over by an actor whose acting reveals a constant inner tremor – the lean Gregory Gudgeon, sporting long grey hair.

The main character role is passed on throughout the performance. At one point, Hamlet is played by the elegant German actor, Tim Lee, who is originally cast as Guildenstern, and at another, by the fragile Malaysian actress, Renee Lamari, who started out as Ophelia. The same role then goes to Taylor Napier (Laertes), Karel Hermanek (Rosencrantz), US and Czech actors respectively, and the bright German actress, Swea Auerbach, who appears in other scenes as Polonius. In each case, the actors have an opportunity to immerse themselves in another, opposite character: a lover, a friend, a rival or enemy, in order to better understand that character. The only person not playing Hamlet is Claudius, performed by Guy Roberts himself, who never loses his royal superiority and aplomb.

Among those playing the role in *We are Hamlet* are also Ukrainian actresses engaged in the project: Olena Zavhorodnya, whose main stage role is that of Gertrude, and Alina Katrechko who is remarkably flexible and impersonates both Ophelia's double and her soul: with smooth and impetuous movements of her body and arms, Alina conveys the state of Ophelia's restless soul. One should not fail to mention the mobile Vera Timofeeva with her otherwise eccentric treatment of the Gravedigger: because of her dress and funny cap, and with a small shovel in hand, she looked like a character in the open-air performance given by a folk theatre. In the production, these actors without substantial acting background are presented on an equal footing with experienced, media-recognisable German, British, and American actors. Just as much as them, they come ready and equipped to experience a share of Hamlet's responsibility as the one that opposes the oppressor. These Ukrainian actresses assume or do not assume the role of Hamlet – but the roles they play are much more substantial than the relative significance of their respective characters for the plot of *Hamlet*. At the end of the day, it is Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war and Russian shelling who inspired Brits and Germans to create *We Are Hamlet* in 2022 and thereby demonstrate, as a response to the brutal Russian aggression, a common moral imperative.

The Hamlet Coalition

Guy Roberts, a supporter of text-oriented theatre, focuses in his directorial approach on actors' speech, articulation and intonation, essentially leaving other artistic means to enhance the impression of what is heard. However, in *We Are Hamlet*, he does make a calculated choice to include phrases in German, Czech, and Ukrainian. This is not just a gesture, a tribute to political correctness, but rather a way to emphasize the potential of other, non-Shakespearean languages and highlight the significance of a polyphony of languages in a great cultural community. That is why, as a director, Roberts requires from the performers a special ability to speak Shakespeare's words from the stage, and communicate through them, while conveying the meaning of events with eloquent aphorisms, whereas, as an interpreter, he constantly extrapolates the playtext of *Hamlet* to make it speak to modern times and, more specifically, deeds of the international community.

For these purposes, the director conceptually employs a multi-layered system of signification and (literal) reflection in the performance. Framed mirrors that double and even triple reflections of the events are installed on the stage. These reflections work on different meaningful levels: by seeing oneself in the eyes of someone else, one understands one's own personality. Similarly, actors play with doubles of their characters, while mirror effects cut through the darkness and whimsically break the stage space into segments. The character enters into a dialogue with his character's double, which resembles communicating with his own reflection in a mirror. The mirror effect also works in a scene with a ghost, when everyone present seems to freeze in the middle of their frames, thus receiving additional support from their own mirror images. Therefore, it is as if the direct and numerous reflections allow the collective Hamlet(s) to show the effectiveness of multiplying the efforts of many that lead to a real community.

The very idea entailed in the mirroring and playing with reflections/doubles as a means of community-building is made abundantly clear. All this might not have proved so convincing had it not been for the participation of the Ukrainian theatre from Odesa in the project. Essentially, *We Are Hamlet* tells the audience that there is a Hamlet coalition which unites representatives of different countries and continents in one common cause – to defend the principles of humanity in the world 'out of joint'. The Hamlet coalition proposed by Roberts contradicts the plot of Shakespeare's tragedy, since in the play everyone eventually leaves Hamlet and does not necessarily 'tell [Hamlet's] story' as his last words plead with Horatio. But in the global world, lone heroes are more likely to be seen as icons capable to garner wide international support, moral and material.

Conclusion

For a modern viewer, actor and director, *Hamlet* may well be but a source of witty sayings, possibly commenting on almost anything, including war, elections, or even the loss of loved ones and hopes for a better future. The recent retelling of Shakespeare's play in *We Are Hamlet* is more than that. Conceived and carried out as an international project that toured around Europe, the production resonates with one of the most pressing concerns of today: how to create and sustain a collective identity. Through such artistic means as chorus atomisation and role dispersion, as well as complex solutions in stage design, *We Are Hamlet* presents and debates highly relevant concepts of consolidation, international aid, and mutual support. Importantly, the message conveyed by *We Are Hamlet* is not what it may seem when used as much-stocked headline phrases by media and journalists. It is formulated and communicated as a result of the deep exploration and rethinking of classical theatrical forms and methods. Yet there is also a vital reverse process, in the effective extrapolation of modern ideas about the global world to the early modern text. This is what makes *We Are Hamlet* work as theatre that will hopefully be shown in Ukraine, where it has not yet been shown due to security concerns.

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