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Exploring Object Afterlives: *Ophelia*. *Subject Study* at the 28th Gdansk International Shakespeare Festival, 2024

Ophelia. Studium przedmiotu. Written and directed by Ewa Kaczmarek in collaboration with Helena Romanova and Patrycja Piwosz. Costumes and set design: Patrycja Pi Pa Piwosz, Music: Marta Knaflewska, Lighting: Marta Figurska, Cast: Ewa Kaczmarek, Helena Romanova, 26 July 2024, Wybrzeże Theatre, Malarnia Stage, 28th International Shakespeare Festival, Gdańsk, Poland.

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, the International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk has hosted a number of theatrical productions by Ukrainian theatres, including mainstream and fringe performances, some in collaboration with Ukrainian and Polish creatives. Among them was *Ophelia. Subject Study*, showcased at the festival's 28th edition.¹ The object-theatre performance with minimalist set design captivated the audience with its unique retelling of the story of the iconic Shakespearean character, earning the production

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1 <https://festiwalszekspirowski.pl/program-2024/ofelia-studium-przedmiotu-rez-kaczmarek-pi-pa-piwosz-romanova/>. Accessed 28 August 2025.



“Prospero’s Book,” the award from the Polish Shakespeare Association.² Using subtle means of expression, the narrative shared by the two female actors (Helena Romanova and Ewa Kaczmarek) linked Ophelia’s story to the tragedy of the ongoing war by highlighting the things (and people) that are usually overlooked and deemed irrelevant.

This modern feminist retelling of *Hamlet* began with the two female actors entering the stage, in conversation. Dressed in black and wearing heavy-duty green cleaning gloves, they brought in mops and buckets of water to clean the theatre after the main show, which had ostensibly already finished: the dim-lit stage was cluttered with clothes, the props still not removed. The centrepiece prop – a large pool decorated with greenery and flowers – a white bathtub, and a green basin evoked clear allusions to Ophelia’s drowning scene, just as much as the green T-shirt with a female portrait positioned above the pool like an altarpiece.

The exchanges between the cleaners initially focused on the mess and the violence of *Hamlet*, with Romanova speaking softly but critically about the differences between onstage and offstage violence. The casual opening immediately placed the production within the public debate about women’s labour and the invisible, underpaid work done in theatres, especially since one actress was Polish (Ewa Kaczmarek) and the other Ukrainian (Helena Romanova). This localised the performance even more: the witty dialogue highlighted both the heartache of those who were forced to become refugees as well as the difficulty of their life situation, as many Ukrainians fleeing the war were pushed into accepting the harsh and exclusionary practices of the Polish job market. While carefully mopping the floors and organising the untidy clothes, the actors playfully referred to the garments as the characters. At first, they treated them as objects to manipulate, bringing them to life as their puppets, and ultimately, they reconstructed the play, focusing it on Ophelia, represented by the greenish dress the pair fished out from the artificial pool in the middle of the stage.

Romanova, who had already spoken lyrically and longingly about acting, pretended to be the youthful Ophelia, first scolded in a hip-hop diatribe by her brother (yellow glasses and Bermuda shorts with suspenders) and Polonius (white clogs). The love letter from Hamlet doubled as a wedding veil, as it was written on a semi-transparent white shawl that Kaczmarek, in the role of Polonius, folded, thereby censoring it. Hamlet’s character was represented by three different objects: a mournful Elizabethan-style T-shirt (representing his melancholic and somber self), a pink T-shirt with red hands for eyes and a hand-painted psychedelic smile (symbolizing pretend madness), and one further outfit – a red T-shirt with a black

² Polish Shakespeare Association gives the award to a festival performance that offers a particularly compelling interpretation of a Shakespearean text. <https://towarzystwoszekspirowskie.org.pl/ksiega-prospera/ksiega-prospera-2024/>. Accessed 30 August 2025.

grin and blots for eyes, along with a set of red gloves (the prince as the raging, vengeful, authentic self). While slipping in and out of character, the cleaners deconstructed the play, ironically commenting on the action, and debated what Ophelia could have witnessed and been a part of, and what she was truly oblivious to, effectively centring Ophelia's narrative. The Polish actor underscored that Hamlet kept so much away from his lover, while the Ukrainian actress responded emotively to Ophelia's plight, making her character feel like a tangible presence. When Romanova entered the role of Ophelia despairing over the sad state of Hamlet, the Polish cleaner commented, still cleaning: "Her lines can be skipped just like nature's descriptions" (in Polish nineteenth-century novels – AKP) and then she animated Hamlet to manipulate two decanters full of water: these represented the Player Queen and the Player King in the *Mousetrap* played out and narrated through a theatre of shadows. In this re-telling of the *Mousetrap*, Hamlet did explain his plan to Ophelia, denigrating her over and over again as she mechanically repeated, "You are an excellent narrator, my prince," until the moment when, still talking, Hamlet killed Polonius.

Much stage time was dedicated to the abuse Ophelia suffers from other characters, who repeatedly belittled and humiliated her, also offering snide remarks in the style of a meta-theatrical commentary: "I understand the directors who didn't like this scene and tried to cut it, it's so embarrassing. You don't know how to show madness, Ophelia, you'd better watch Hamlet." This persisted until the final scene, which revealed not only their misogyny but also a toxically mean, narcissistic streak in Hamlet. When Ophelia screamed and called out for her mother, the cleaner playing Hamlet snapped in anger, "It's Gertrude's line. Your mother was not here, and this tragedy is also about that." Very ironically, this comment is indeed painfully accurate. The drowning scene was narrated by the Polish actress, again using a decanter and the bathtub, while Romanova kept draping the dress by the pool. This scene also drew critical commentary from the two cleaners, as Romanova's character accused Horatio of killing Ophelia – after all, he was supposed "Follow her close; give her good watch" (*Hamlet* 4.5.79). The sharp, bitter exchange culminated with Romanova's recitation of "to be or not to be," reworded to reflect Ophelia's experience.

The PSA jury awarded the production the "Prospero's Book" prize "for an emotionally gripping and intellectually profound reading of Hamlet once the Horatian filter has been removed, and for a formally sophisticated storytelling, in which water and decanters convincingly represent the struggle for power".³ The creative team's approach to the production was characterised by a bold, innovative aesthetic that seamlessly blended Shakespeare's text with a modern, visually

³ <https://towarzystwoszekspirowskie.org.pl/ksiega-prospera/ksiega-prospera-2024/>. Accessed 30 August 2025.

striking sensibility. The minimalist set design, combined with the strategic use of object theatre, light, and shadow, created an immersive atmosphere that drew the audience into Ophelia's harrowing emotional journey. The most significant framing device was the direct and indirect recollection of the war in Ukraine, which Romanova and Kaczmarek both addressed, especially at the beginning. Romanova's concise comments on blood and violence versus the artificiality of the main show stood in stark contrast with the subject matter of *Hamlet*: the raw experience of war does change how Shakespearean tragedy can be interpreted. The performance concluded with Romanova removing the dress again and placing it in the centre of the stage, while softly singing the Ukrainian folk song *Ne khody ulane* (Don't go, my lancer), whose narrative – suicide by drowning and the plant-like transformation of two lovers – aptly and mournfully reflected both Ophelia's fate and the plight of Ukraine.