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Popular and Populist Shakespearean Transcreations in Central and Eastern Europe[1]

Abstract: The article discusses the variety of ways in which the terms "popular" or "populist" could be associated with postwar Shakespearean transcreations in the Central and Eastern European region, pointing out how performers and adaptors challenged the canonical, highbrow status of Shakespeare and used his oeuvre as raw material in experimental forms and genres. Following a discussion on the variety of socio-historical contexts which inspired noteworthy popular and/or populist reworkings in several Central and Eastern European countries, the article takes a more in-depth look at a few specific comic genres, particularly the burlesque and the cabaret in a theoretical framework, and concludes by examining post-1989 experimental theatre practices.

Keywords: populism, popular(ity), mainstream, Shakespeare, postwar theatre, cabaret, burlesque, experimental theatre.

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Introduction

Similarly to many other aspects of Shakespeare production and reception in Central and Eastern Europe, the various forms of popularizing Shakespeare's oeuvre varied from country to country, and also changed considerably from the immediate postwar period through later decades of communist rule, to the post-1989 period and the most recent decades. Whether Shakespeare was considered a popular author also depended on the willingness of political regimes and cultural decision-makers to employ his oeuvre in pursuit of their own agendas, or the creativity of performers and adaptors to use Shakespearean drama to showcase their own, often more subversive and critical messages. While it would be impossible to offer an exhaustive investigation into all possible ways Shakespearean transcreations have been associated with popular culture or made accessible to broader, more mainstream audiences, in what follows, we intend to look briefly at the history of Shakespeare performance, together with some common themes that characterize popular and/or populist manifestations of Shakespeare in the region. By using the concept of "transcreation," we emphasize that the diverse reworkings of Shakespearean source texts discussed in the article all necessarily involve creative forms of translation, not simply on a linguistic level, from the early modern English language to the modern vernaculars of the region, but often in terms of their medium, or the political and ideological message they carried as well. At the same time, the article also shows how performers and adaptors challenged the canonical, highbrow status of Shakespeare and his oeuvre, and instead of the traditional attitude of reverence towards the text and its author, used it as raw material in experimental forms and genres. In some instances, these appropriations altered characters' motivations or actions, or revised the denouements of plays, creating radical departures from the Shakespeare source plots, while also opening up the texts for exploration from new critical angles. Following a discussion on the variety of socio-historical contexts which inspired noteworthy popular and/or populist reworkings in several Central and Eastern European countries, the article takes a more in-depth look at a few specific comic genres, particularly the burlesque and the cabaret in a theoretical framework, and concludes by examining experimental theatre practices.

During the decades of communism, the fundamental irony of existence was tangible in everyday language use, with words like "freedom," "liberation," "friendship" and others meaning the exact opposite of their dictionary meanings. This also resulted in audiences' sensitivity to the power of doublespeak,[2] and an awareness of how the instability of the meaning of language could easily be used

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[2] For more details on doublespeak in communist Hungary, see Schandl "Doublespeak and Realism."

to explore the comic potential of any text. At the same time, the forced social elevation of the working classes—coupled by a suspicion towards the intelligentsia—in communism also had an impact on what was considered inevitable elements of cultural heritage, erudition, or general knowledge. Shakespeare therefore played a role in upholding the ideas of culture inherited from an earlier era, particularly for the intelligentsia and the middle or upper classes. At the same time, he was also propagated as the epitome of the working-class author whose interest in the whole range of social classes and groups made him appear exemplary in communist eyes – when presented in the right ways, as the next section discusses in more detail.

Shakespeare, for all the potential of his texts to represent subversive meanings, did not disappear from Eastern European theatres even during the Stalinist era—quite the contrary: classical authors were often seen as safe bets for theatremakers. "In Leipzig the most performed authors were Schiller and Shakespeare; in Kraków they were Fredro and Moliere" (Kunakhovich 54). When looking at the functions classical literature was granted in these years, we can observe that Shakespeare, together with other classics, played a dual role during the state socialist era: on the one hand, his oeuvre was used by artists to express dissent, hiding subversive content under the centuries-old dramatic text, while the regime was also using his work in a didactic attempt at providing the masses with closely controlled entertainment and education. In this sense, he was considered a safe author, appreciated both by the regimes and subversive theatremakers, his cultural prestige allowing his work to appear as everything for everyone at the same time, making him the popular author *par excellence* of the age.

For instance, within the context of East Germany, this recognition of the potential power of stage productions resulted in an extraordinarily active theatrical life, with a dense network of theatres. As David Ashley Hughes states, "The reason for this lay in the tension between a state that was eager to invest in theatre for ideological reasons (using socialist realism to promote its communist goals) and playwrights who, paradoxically, increasingly used the stage as a place to criticize the regime" (134). Within this context, Shakespeare's work and his position as a canonical playwright were equally recognisable and made use of by ideologues and contemporary authors. In this way, a critical, rather than comic, satire was staged only a few days after the June 17, 1953 revolt in East Berlin. Heinar Kipphardt's *Shakespeare dringend gesucht* (*Shakespeare where are you?* or in other translations, *Urgently seeking Shakespeare*) was "a clever satirisation of GDR bureaucracy and officialdom in the form of a plot about a provincial theatre's attempt to find, and then put on, a decent play on a contemporary theme. It proved a great success and Kipphardt was awarded a National Prize for it in the same year" (Childs 205). Such attitudes to Shakespeare as a universally acknowledged author whose prestige elevates his work above all, and who is

able to offer the best kind of entertainment, with the most immersive dramatic experience, can be found in productions in other countries as well. The 1966 Hungarian television comedy *Othello in Gyulaháza*[3] offers a similar example of a combination of a general belief in Shakespeare's cultural status, contrasted with the backward nature of the old style of provincial theatrical entertainment, and a more progressive desire for an ideologically acceptable cultural programme, which nonetheless founders on the rural backwaters.

Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare as a safe bet survived even the considerable cultural restructuring that was necessitated in most countries within the region after 1990. In Germany, for instance, the collapse of communism also resulted in a theatrical crisis, brought about by the convergence of "macro-economic, political, and social crises" (Hughes 133), as Hughes writes in his "Notes on the German Theatre Crisis," and "state subsidies to German theatres were cut back significantly, setting in motion a process of 'structural transformation' in the theatre world that became synonymous with theatre closures, the reduction of personnel, and financial consolidation at all levels" (133). In this atmosphere, the American-style profit-oriented business model became dominant, theatres' survival suddenly dependent on box-office sales. As a result, most German "theatres began planning their repertoires around entertainment, scheduling comedies and popular classics in order to fill seats"—and drama was "dominated by Shakespeare and Lessing, Goethe and Schiller, Kleist and Buchner, not to mention classic modernists such as Brecht/Weill and Durrenmatt" (Hughes 134). For an in-depth discussion of similar phenomena in post-communist theatre practices placed against the backdrop of the post-millennial socio-historical changes in Bulgaria see Sokolova and Stavreva (esp. 13-17), and in Romania, see Cinpoeş (esp. 187-198) and Modreanu (esp. 1-25).

Shakespeare has also remained a staple on the stages of other countries in the Central and Eastern European region, as it has been explored by authors of the 2021 *Theatralia* special issue on "Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity" (eds. Almási and Földváry), with articles by Müller, Pikli, Deres, Kowalcze-Pawlik, Reuss, Mišterová, Wild, and Földváry in particular addressing broader trends in the way Shakespeare was and has been employed by theatre-makers in the region. Beside local productions, Cinpoeş's article in the same issue discusses the role Shakespeare festivals have played since the 1990s—and the founding of the European Shakespeare Festivals Network, in 2010—in enabling mobility and exchange across the borders of countries from this part of Europe and beyond.[4] The controversial ways Shakespeare could be used for comic purposes are also exemplified by Konstantin Bogomolov's Russian adaptation entitled *Lear:*

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[3] For a more detailed description, see Földváry, *Othello Gyulaházán.*
[4] For more on festivals in the region, see Cinpoeş "'Shakestivalling' in the New Europe."

Comedy (2011), a production Maria Shevtsova describes as "political theatre through and through" (149), although without the counter-cultural intentions of an earlier generation of theatre-makers.

As this brief overview has made it clear, Shakespeare was associated with popularisation and populism in various ways, with some local variations, but we can also observe clear common trends across the region, mostly following the changing political climate in the communist and post-communist eras. The following section will discuss in more detail the dual and often contradictory functions Shakespeare played, at once popularized as a mainstream author, and employed by oppositional artists for expressing their subversive messages.

Mainstream Shakespeare and Its Double

While "the absence of solid study of 'Populist Shakespeare' as an early modern playwright" (Doty 9) continues to be bemoaned by critics, east of Berlin, this argument also needs articulating both in terms of its meaning in Central and Eastern Europe and in opposition to how popular / populist Shakespeare(s) have been defined in Anglo-American Shakespeare Studies. Post-1945, in a Europe divided, populist Shakespeare also made division of itself. On the one hand, the man and his work were recruited for the socialist project, a process which refashioned Shakespeare into the voice of the oppressed masses, socialist realist style. On the other hand, and in direct reaction, doublespeak and theatrically innovative Shakespeare claimed the "space" between the lines, at the fringes of public life, away from the spotlight and strict scrutiny of the communist regimes. In Central and Eastern Europe, mainstream Shakespeare and its subversive double co-existed, not always amicably.

That "Shakespeare's theater was a place where common people practiced political thinking" (Doty 9) was advocated in Central and Eastern Europe too, but with a difference. Officially, it was a critical stance commandeered by the states of the socialist Bloc with a double purpose: firstly, to claim Shakespeare, his work and legacy for the People's (socialist then communist) Party and secondly, to liberate these from the bourgeois, imperialist, dominating (capitalist) views of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. The "[b]y opposing, end them" method literally meant replacing, censoring, banning, or completely erasing previous national Shakespeare (hi)stories when they did not toe the line of the (Soviet) fashioned Bard. As Chris Fritter argues, "the discovery by major Left critics in the 1960s and 1980s of a populist Shakespeare, radical in critiques of power, effected curiously little impact" upon the "conservative construal of Shakespeare's politics." This remained the governing paradigm launched in the nineteenth century and re-asserted by New-Historicism and post-structuralism in the West (420). In the

East, however, the only accepted form of Marxist criticism had a Leninist hue: riding high on Marxism's anti-capitalist stance, its Leninist offspring was as populist as it gets in the way it claimed to promote *vox populi* and freedom; in practice, it imposed democratic centralism and instated its sinister dictatorship of the proletariat (through single party rule). This model of the "new man" and "new world" was "borrowed" from the Soviet Union and put into practice across the Bloc. Like the "buy-in," the model's continuity was also enforced from the Kremlin, courtesy of the Warsaw Pact (1955-1991).[5]

When socialist realist regimes advocated for a popular Shakespeare (one *for* the people, *about* the people), they in fact recruited—what Walter Cohen calls—Shakespeare's "artisanal structure"[6] for their own ideological pursuit and worked hard to monopolize Shakespeare interpretation and dissemination. They also appropriated the loci for debates—stage, page and classroom. This type of appropriation took a wide range of forms. On the one hand, it consisted of commissioned translation projects, which in some countries ran parallel to existing translations while in other countries, they, perforce, replaced previous editions.[7] On the other hand, it comprised of theatre productions scrutinized and

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[5] Not only did communist regimes remain in power after Stalin's death (in 1953), but they grew increasingly extreme/ist despite their national colour: the Kádár regime (in Hungary), Ceauşescu's communist dictatorship (in Romania), the Czechoslovak Republic under Gustáv Husák, Zhivkov's communist rule (in Bulgaria), PZPR's Republic (in Poland), to name but a few, competed in communist zeal. For more on this topic, see Almási et al. "Shakespeare, Politics, East-Central Europe: theatrical border crossings" in the present volume.

[6] "Walter Cohen, whilst recognizing that the playing of kings by plebeians, strutting about a public stage, may produce 'the subversion of aristocratic and clerical superstructure by artisanal substructure,' nonetheless recuperates conservatism's philomonarchic bard." Chris Fitter, "Mock not Flesh and Blood / With Solemn Reverence:" Recovering Radical Shakespeare, *Literature Compass* 9/6 (2012): 420-430, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2012.00894.x, p. 422.

[7] These practices, however, were not uniform throughout the region. A new, ideologically approved translation of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* was state-commissioned in Romania (1956-1964) at the cost of excluding from the public domain previous translations especially by intellectuals who inconvenienced the regime. One such case was Dragoş Protopopescu's, founder of English Studies in Romania. His single-handed effort to offer Shakespeare plays in stage-friendly translations (1920s-1940s) was cut short: the last batch of manuscripts he submitted to the press before WWII disappeared, he was fired from his academic post at the University of Bucharest, and he eventually died in suspect circumstances. Poet Ion Vinea's translation of *Hamlet*, on the other hand, appeared in print in 1956 but signed by Petru Dumitriu, a name accepted by the regime; Vinea's authorship was restored as late as the 1970s. In Hungary, however, several of the canonical nineteenth-century translations (notably *Hamlet* as translated by János Arany) and some of the early- or mid-twentieth-century renditions were not replaced until practically the new

approved for performance, and of curtailing mobility (like teachers who were centrally assigned to schools, theatre and film graduates were contractually tied to theatres). Shakespeare in the classroom was also subjected to the compulsory Marxist-Leninist treatment.

This was a climate in which theatres, the press and the education systems went through enforced nationalisation, and thus entirely depended on state subsidy, and in which cultural expression was straightjacketed by increased censorship and imposed focus on "indigenous" production.[8] Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Central and Eastern European Shakespeare(s) migrated to the margins of the all-controlling centre set on the cultural reproduction of its own ideology.

To appear in the mainstream press and theatres, Shakespeare had to be on its best behaviour, though even there it retreated from "words, words, words," into less censorable languages. When staged, his plays used doublespeak and practised the "retheatricalization of theatre,"[9] metaphorical realism (which explored the visual, the musical, the physical, in its mission to evade/counter socialist realism), and "action design," i.e., "physical and psychologically functional" stage design and scenography that interacts with the actors in complex ways (as conceptualized and developed by Joseph Ciller in Czechoslovakia in the decade following the country's invasion in 1968).[10] What they all had in common was an active exploration of irony, seen as the (unspoken) contract between artistic expression and spectatorial reception. In a sense, all these theatrical modes were postdramatic Shakespeare *avant la lettre*. (These experimental modes of theatrical expression will be discussed in more detail in the final section of the article.)

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millennium. When new translations were commissioned, these were motivated by aesthetic or theatrical purposes, rather than ideological reasons. In Poland, perhaps paradoxically, new translations were not so much politically sensitive; rather, writers, poets, and intellectuals, translated single plays, until the "Jerzy S. Sito" era, who translated eight plays and the sonnets, and whose translations were critically acclaimed, together with the magnificent (but disputed) work of Maciej Słomczyński, who translated all Shakespeare's plays and sonnets.

[8] Repertories were churning productions of approved national playwrights and occasionally of accepted foreign dramatists. By the mid-1970s even productions of Shakespeare were no longer immune to banning. Nonetheless, there were considerable differences between individual countries within the region, similarly to the way translations were controlled in certain countries but not in others.

[9] "[I]n the art of spectacle, the desire to show everything in fact limits the spectator's possibility of using his imagination. The mastery of the theatre practitioner consists in […] suggesting a part, not disclosing the whole, thus leaving it up to the spectator's power of completion." (Ciulei, 1956: 55).

[10] See more in Dennis Christilles and Delbert Unruh, "The Semiotics of Theatre Design," *Theatre Topics*, 6.2 (1996): 121-41.

Shakespeare's double did its undercover work elsewhere. Subversive stage productions took place away from the capital cities (in provincial towns), away from the main stages, in studio spaces, in Theatre Institutes' final exam productions, and other unconventional venues and settings. Touring companies and theatre collectives deliberately traded (or were these scrutiny-avoidance tactics?) ample spaces and excellent facilities for mobility in order to popularize *their* Shakespeare and theatre in general. Teatr Ziemi Mazowieckiej, for example, covered around 100 locations in the Polish region whose name it bore, with 123 productions between 1955 and 1976—5 of which were Shakespeare plays, all staged before 1970.[11]

Regular touring schedules, regional festivals, heavily scrutinized cultural exchanges within the Bloc, such as large-scale conferences and training opportunities in Russia (in the '60s), Bulgaria and Romania (in the early '70s), Poland (in the '80s), were also means of popularizing Shakespeare. They were big attractions, Don Rubin recalls, "not so much because of the official events […] but because of their hidden *samizdat* work."[12] Some "artists […] connived with tyranny"—as Ian McKellen recalls while touring the Bloc with Peter Brook's *Dream* in 1972. Others worked hard to subvert it, whether with big gestures or small, daily acts of chipping away at the Wall. Repercussions for defying the ideological norm ranged from banned productions, disciplinary moves to small town theatres, demotion from managerial roles and diminished professional responsibilities (directors only allowed to work on scenography or costumes), to outright denial of the right to practice. The latter led sometimes to clandestine work, as was the case of Pavel Kohout's "Livingroom theatre" that took *Macbeth* to living rooms in Prague; at other times, to expulsion/self-exile, the ultimate solution in a system in which it was illegal to be unemployed. This was the case of many directors and writers from the Bloc, among whom were Liviu Ciulei, Jan Kott, Vlad Mugur, Yuri Lyubimov, Andrei Şerban. The more relaxed periods (which varied in time and title, from "thaw," to "normalisation" and "glasnost," depending on the country), tolerated "'official' confronters— artists who were "allowed" to do their experimental and/or confrontational work right out in the open without apparent state approval, and sometimes even with state support."[13] This was the case of Taganka Theatre and the Gardzienice

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[11] *Much Ado* (1956-57), *Cymbeline* (1960-61), *As You Like It* (1962-63), *Romeo and Juliet* (1967-68), and *Othello* (1969-70). Incidentally, Shakespeare ceased to be staged after Wanda Wróblewska, co-founder of this theatre—following her departure from the Warsaw NT—and director or co-director of all five productions was dismissed.

[12] See more in Don Rubin*, "Staging Postcommunism: Alternative Theatre in Eastern and Central Europe After 1989* – Review." *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques* 21 (2022). 18 Dec. 2023. https://www.critical-stages.org/21/staging-postcommunism-alternative-theatre-in-eastern-and-central-europe-after-1989/.

[13] *Ibidem.*

collective; of influential Polish auteurs such as Jerzy Grotowski and his Laboratory Theatre in Opole and then in Wroclaw, or Tadeusz Kantor and the Cricot 2 Theatre in Krakow; of theatre collectives in Hungary such as Apartment Theatre at Dohány Street or Kovács István Studio in Budapest; of Theatre on the Balustrade and the Semafor Theatre in Prague, Goose on a String Theatre in Brno, and the On Korzo Theatre in Bratislava, in the former Czechoslovakia.

Similar subversive modes were employed in writing, whether in critical studies that went interdisciplinary (Shakespeare and computers, Shakespeare and psychology) when not staying firmly grounded in the early modern milieu for safety. Neither red nor dead, original work—which was mired by censorship when not banned altogether—acknowledged Shakespeare as its creative springboard. Such transcreations offered, from their titles, a nod to Shakespeare's subversive role in the Bloc—as in the case of Eugene Ionesco's *Macbett* (1972), Heiner Müller's *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977) and *Anatomie Titus Fall of Rome Ein Shakespearekommentar* (1984), or Marin Sorescu's *Cousin Shakespeare* (written before 1989, but published in 1992), whose character muses on how "we're all stumbling, caught up in the same play we're striving, again and again, to rewrite."[14] This practice continued in the post-1989 New Europe but grew doubly explicit. It has been engaging in dialogue both with the communist period and with the Shakespeare(s) of that period. The resulting meta-contextual and meta-theatrical layering is readily evident in the work of established playwrights, such as Alina Mungiu Pippidi,[15] Matei Vişniec,[16] András Visky[17] and Radu F. Alexandru,[18] but less so in the work of younger writers-practitioners, such as Jakub Snochowski,[19] whose transcreations are more attuned to global identity, and ecological and neo-liberal concerns.

While there was relatively little physical mobility for theatre-making within and across the national physical borders for countries in the region before 1989, forms of mobility and border-crossing that circumvented ideological constraints and institutional restrictions thrived. Broader tendencies include Shakespeare transcreations on Central and Eastern European stages that repositioned characters, adapted the endings of plays, and departed from the known Shakespeare plot, etc., offering new critical angles of exploration and theatrical modes and genres—as the following two sections in the present article showcase. Post-1989, there is marked migration from previously staged Shakespeare plays (either heavily censored or subversively politicized) to the

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[14] Marin Sorescu, *Vărul Shakespeare* [*Cousin Shakespeare*] (translated by Nicoleta Cinpoeş).

[15] See her *Emancipation of Prince Hamlet* and *The Death of Ariel* (1997).

[16] See his *Richard III Will Not Take Place* (2001).

[17] See his *Juliet* (2002).

[18] See his *Gertrude* (2012, with its world premiere in 2023).

[19] See his "In the cauldron boil and bake an owlet's wing" (2022).

margins of the Shakespearean canon, where less or never performed plays provided an interpretive clean slate, and increased theatrical mobility, both in an institutional and a geographical sense, which opened up Shakespeare for exploration and experimentation. These ranged from trying new technologies, starting independent or collaborative ventures, free-lancing, to establishing regular exchanges and Shakespeare festivals that sped up the process of catching up with the world and sharing own practices—as the final section argues.

Burlesqued Shakespeare

When discussing modes in which Shakespeare in performance becomes the tool of subversion, the Shakespeare burlesque (as well as cabaret, this article argues) is a genre that cannot be left out, especially since it has always been a genre of the popular kind. The Shakespeare burlesque was created in response to the Licensing Act of 1737, which forbade illegal theatres from performing spoken drama, in nineteenth-century London. Since most of the English dramatic repertoire fell under that category, London theatres exploited the loophole by turning classical plays into operettas and burlesques, or sung drama. The burlesque, invented out of necessity, quickly became a popular artform that appropriated Shakespeare's plays, too.

A burlesque is, by definition, the absurd impersonation of a serious work of art that contains several puns and contemporary allusions. As such, it shares some affinities with cabaret, especially topicality. It features visual jokes, cross-dressing, and is performed in ostentatious clothes among lavish stage machinery. Shakespeare burlesques used a condensed version of the plays' plots, converted iambic pentameter into rhyming couplets, and turned soliloquies into popular songs. As a transgressive theatrical practice (like cabaret, to an extent), it railed against the extremely realistic contemporary theatrical approach to Shakespeare, attacked scenic illusionism, and overall, it wished to overthrow authentic productions' claim of authority (Schoch 4).

According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is distinct from burlesque and travesty in that parody excludes mocking whereas travesty and burlesque embrace it (40). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that travesties and burlesque were rare in Stalinist theatres, where satire was expected to celebrate successes, criticize from the inside, but refrain from mocking the new Socialist state and its achievements in art. Humour is an antagonistic genre that cannot flourish when needed to be pro-power, therefore the first satires, travesties and burlesques appeared on Eastern Bloc stages only after the Khrushchevian turn, post-1953. Shakespeare's works were no exception from this rule.

All public satirical discourses were strictly regulated under Socialism because they were seen as both a danger to accepted public discourse and

a powerful tool for propaganda. Christie Davies provides three insightful categories for how humour manifests in Socialist states. First, the elite frequently humiliates state foes with brutal scorn. Secondly, professional humorists use "centrally controlled, tendentious, sometimes aggressive, sometimes admonitory, published" or staged ridicule to further official propaganda. Finally, "massive spontaneous ridicule of [the] rulers" can be found in jokes, anecdotes, and subversive performances (Davies 2). What follows is a retrospective look at how burlesque (and, to a lesser extent, cabaret) appeared in both centrally controlled and spontaneous or decidedly subversive forms on the stages of the Eastern Bloc before 1989, also emerging in ways that would engage with or challenged the accepted norms of doublespeak.

Several productions adopted the technique of burlesquing a Shakespearean play. Returning to the original premise of 19th-century burlesques, they regularly called Shakespeare's authority as well as the authority of mainstream theatrical performances into question. [20] In the 1960s and 1970s, comedies, particularly problem plays, became popular targets for burlesque tendencies. David Esrig's 1965 Romanian *Troilus and Cressida* was a burlesqued take on official propaganda, while János Sándor's *Measure for Measure* in Debrecen, Hungary, in 1976 contrasted the dark tones of the court with a "boisterous outspoken atmosphere of jocularity, burlesque and slapstick comedy" (Cs. Nagy 10), to convey a political message about the impossibility of change in immoral societies on and offstage. The burlesque form, however, was also used for opposite purposes—that is to distance a play from political undertones and render it a commentary on modes of theatricality and performability. For example, Péter Valló's 1976 *The Taming of the Shrew* in Szolnok, Hungary, set the action in the historical heydays of Hungarian travelling companies, and used clown antics and lengthy burlesque sequences to mimic the theatrical modes of the time. The production avoided remarking on the political problems raised by the play, instead directing it as a love story about two people who had to learn to let go of their pride and be open to each other. Valló went directly against the norms of contemporary Shakespeare performances by choosing the genre of 19th-century burlesque and folk play and refusing to take an ironic stance on the plot.

Shakespeare also provided a rich source for artistic inspiration, and burlesque rewritings appeared all over Eastern Europe. In Poland, the Warsaw-based STS[21] theatre group in 1954 premiered a program entitled *The Simpletons* that featured burlesqued fragments from the artisan scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As Cioffi comments, "[b]y identifying themselves with Shakespeare's simple craftsmen, the members of STS were trying to identify

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[20] Challenging and undermining authority is, too, the effect of cabaret shows.
[21] Studencki Teatr Satyryków, a cabaret show.

themselves with common sense, as opposed to the elaborate rationalizations, rhetoric, and absurdities of the Stalinist system." (28) In the late 1940s, Konstanty Idelfons Gałczyński ridiculed contemporary politics in his theatrical miniature *Hamlet and a Waitress*[22] while also questioning the legitimacy of the Hamletian example. *Hamlet* was also an inspiration felt apt to depict Yugoslavian Socialism in Ivo Brešan's *A Performance of Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja*, a play in which burlesqued, chastushka-style rewritings of the play cast a critical shadow on Socialist realist literature and the idea of "new culture." In Czechoslovakia Ivan Vyskočil's *Hapdráns* in 1980 condensed the action of *Hamlet* into 20 minutes to be presented by kitchen utensils, while in Bulgaria, admittedly, with more sombre tones, Yordan Radichkov's *Image and Likeness* (1986) transformed *Richard III* into a satirical mirror image of contemporary Bulgarian politics.

In Hungary, the state-supported political cabaret theatre, Mikroszkóp Színpad opened its gates in October 1967 with a burlesqued *King Lear*, entitled: *Lear or the Youth*. The play exhibits all traits of the state-controlled political humour propaganda, since it features characters reminiscent of "old apparatchicks" (Gloucester), who need strict guidelines to be able to function, of contemporary politicians (Lear), who cannot make up their mind whether to centralize or decentralize, and of beatnik youth (Cordelia, Regan, Goneril and Edmund), who wish to take the reins from their fathers and are visibly disgusted by the world they live in. Never questioning the legitimacy of a Socialist regime, the production criticized only the execution of the grand idea, a tactic Kádár-regime Hungarian political satire often resorted to. Highly metatheatrical both in text and in cast (e.g., Lear was played by the former manager of the National Theatre of Budapest, Tamás Major), the play also commented on diminishing standards of literary and theatre criticism, as well as on Shakespeare's weakening status as a cultural icon among the younger generations.

With the change of the regime, the satirical tone of the Shakespeare-burlesque (and cabaret, as this article posits) did not disappear from Eastern Europe. Often mistaken for postdramatic productions, these burlesques make heavy use of nostalgia, the importance of which Richard Schoch summarized thusly: "(h)owever much it attacks dominant cultural practices, the Shakespeare burlesque always implies—indeed, sustains—a nostalgia for a culture which would no longer need to be attacked if only it were properly performed. Yet […] it is the burlesque's bitter irony never to bring into being the culture which it can only imagine." (19) It is this nostalgia that sets the burlesque aside from other Shakespeare adaptations and makes the burlesque all the more topical. In 2004, Hungarian director Sándor Zsótér transformed *Hamlet* into a burlesque to

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[22] First printed on 11 April 1948 in the weekly magazine *Przekrój* (No. 157 (15/1948).

comment on the inadequacy of contemporary theatres to perform the play.[23] Zsolt Győrei and Csaba Schlachtovszky, two Hungarian literary scholars turned playwrights, call upon the nineteenth-century genres of melodrama and tragicomedy to jab at Shakespeare, contemporary theatre practices, Hungarian literature and everything in between in their two plays: *Bem, the Galician of Debrecen* (2002), an *Othello* burlesque in the style of a melodramatic Trauenspiel, and their *Hamlear* (2021), a burlesqued spin on both *Hamlet* and *King Lear.* Although both plays camouflage themselves as nineteenth-century melodramatic tragedies, they are voices of cultural plurality, healthy self-reflexivity and subversion, and as its historical antecedents, a norm to which transgressive theatrical practices can revert to.

In Ukraine, Les Podervianskyi, the "enfant terrible" of the literary scene, mocks the Soviet appropriation of Shakespeare's image and his characters in two Shakespeare-based burlesques—*King Liter* and *Hamlet, or the Phenomenon of the Danish Katsapism*. According to Moskvitina,

> In Podervianskyi's versions, licentious homosexual Claudius is smashed by a constantly drunk Hamlet, and incestuous promiscuous King Liter is involved into political intrigues against Yorick, who turns from a joker into a political leader of the English nation. (…) The Ukrainian playwright refers to the Bard's dramatic canon not for the sake of pure entertainment, but in order to flag the most painful points of the Soviet society and to overcome this traumatizing experience with the help of rough but effective tools—pornography, brutality, lavatorial humour, and foul language which proved to be powerful underminers of the official totalitarian narrative. (137, 141)

This subchapter, through a few select examples, wished to highlight how Shakespeare burlesques under Socialism utilized the duality of Shakespeare's popular status, both by taking advantage of the popularity of the plays and by questioning their authority. Furthermore, it also wished to show that the popularity of the Shakespeare-burlesque did not fade after 1989, since, by emphasizing the nostalgic hues imminent in the burlesque, it remains a strong choice when theatre practitioners aim to comment on the past and the present.

Cabaret Shakespeare

As observed in the discussion of burlesque Shakespeare, the genre is quite similar to cabaret, though the latter has its own distinctive features. Modern cabaret began in France and flourished in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, but has not been acknowledged as a distinctive genre until more

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[23] See more in Schandl "So Berattle the Common Stages."

recently. Patrice Pavis, in his *Dictionary of the Theatre* (English translation: 1998) does not provide a separate entry for the cabaret; instead, he prefers to call it "café theatre," thus treating it as fully-fledged theatre rather than its offshoot. His definition does not differ much from how other scholars, theoreticians, and historians alike, describe cabaret:

> Café theatre is not a new dramatic genre, nor does it utilize an original kind of stagecraft or space (drinks are not necessarily consumed during the show). But it is the result of a series of economic constraints that impose a rather uniform style—the stage is too small, limiting the number of actors to three or four and establishing a very close relationship with a house holding fifty to one hundred spectators. The two or three shows a night are necessarily short (fifty to sixty minutes) and depend largely on the (often comic) performance of the actors, who are "tragically" invited to take the financial risk of sharing the takings with the owner of the theatre. The scripts are often satirical (one-(wo)man shows) or poetic (montage of text, poems or songs). (Pavis 42)

Lisa Appignanesi (6) emphasizes the special nature of the close relationship between the actors and spectators which, "in the ambience of talk and smoke"[24] is "one of both intimacy and hostility, the nodal points of participation and provocation." She further highlights one of the key features of cabaret which she terms "dissent—whether of the kind that champions formal ruptures with artistic tradition,[25] or the kind that urges social or sexual rebellion." Finally, another crucial aspect of the cabaret is the liminal status of the actor/character: "the performer remains a performer" engaged in a "lively, witty repartee… [with the] audience" (Appignanesi 6).

Likewise, Fleischer (212-213) in his unique theoretical model of the cabaret treats the performer as a liminal construct between the empirical person and quasi-fictional actor/character in the event which makes the performance self-reflexive and avoiding illusion. He augments Appignanesi's political engagement of the cabaret by observing that the aim of manipulation is the spectator and their ways of thinking (Fleischer 303), which makes it akin to the burlesque. Cabaret aims at shattering stale cognitive patterns of the audience; it does not affirm, its message is ultimately disavowing, negating and questioning.

Such manipulation can be (best) achieved when the relationship between the performer and spectator is direct and unmediated, when both parties are actively engaged in the event (naturally, it is the performer who initiates,

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[24] Or what Piotr Skrzynecki, the founder and leader of the Polish legendary cabaret Pod Baranami (Under the Rams) called in this context the bar, or access to alcohol (Kiec, 2014: 12-17).

[25] Like the burlesque of the 18th and 19th centuries.

controls and executes to the highest degree the exchange).[26] This kind of relationship is impossible to establish when it comes to television shows which the viewer watches from a spatial and often temporal distance. This does not mean that television cabaret is not possible as, on the one hand, television is often characterized as an intimate medium (Newcomb 615), watched at home by a small number of people (an equivalent of a café?). On the other hand, cabaret shows may be televised with a live audience watching them in the studio or a café or another location. Writing about television cabaret in Poland, Izolda Kiec manages to identify some sort of intimacy and direct contact with the audience in the case of Olga Lipińska's TV show called *Właśnie leci kabarecik* [The little cabaret is on air now]:

> Olga Lipińska in her cabaret shows transforms the television set into a private, indeed intimate space.[27] The convention of theatre within theatre (modified as cabaret within cabaret), already deployed and tested by the Elderly Gentlemen's Cabaret, makes the relationship between those on the stage and those on the other side of the television screen very close. Mr Wojteczek (Pokora) [a character in the cabaret played by the actor Wojciech Pokora], who in one season of the show is a homebody who spends time in front of the TV set, in another season becomes the director of the cabaret. This is a classic cabaret trading of roles: the spectators with the artists (and the other way round since the only audience in this weird theatre are the artists themselves watching the performance of their fellow artists with astonishment, disapprovingly, seldom admiringly). By doubling the stage and auditorium, Lipińska did not forget about the wings, dressing rooms and … the bar, a constitutive element of any real cabaret! (194-195; translation from Polish: JF)

What strikes one in this passage is how close this description of Lipińska's cabaret comes to the nature of television theatre, a hybrid genre which focuses on providing space for the dialogue, or the verbal plane (Limon, 2004: 88; 2008: 21), thus emphasizing the psychology of the characters, often framed in

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[26] As Jana Wild observes, "This directness of exchange, as well as verbal sophistication were the main features of the legendary Slovak cabaret duo Lasica + Satinský, who, in their dialogue *Hamlet* (1968), presented the mocked and travestied version of the tragedy otherwise being taken all too seriously in Slovak theatre. While breaking the highbrow by the lowbrow, they joined the seeming naivety with cultural/political criticism. In 1978, after nine years being banned from the theatre for political reasons, the duo was cast as Nathaniel and Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*; allowed to rewrite Shakespeare completely, they presented their own Dadaistic dialogue and became the ultimate stars of the whole rather weak production." (Personal communication, 13 June 2023)

[27] Kiec rightly emphasizes that what occurs here is a theatricalization of the set, hence her conscious use of the term "stage."

close-ups. Consequently, the space is non-definite, amorphous, and intimate. Furthermore, Kiec confirms the metatheatrical, or "metacabaret," dimension of the production, which is in tune not only with television theatre, but television Shakespeare as well (cf. Huertas-Martín 81). Lipińska's television cabaret promotes "dissent" with, on the one hand, the form of television theatre (and it can be generically classified as one), challenging its limits and tradition; on the other, with the political and social conditions of the drab social realism of the turn of the 1970s. This aspect of the cabaret's subversive nature was one of the reasons why the show was so popular, especially in the 1980s. It is also the reason why it was tolerated by the communist authority and regularly shown on public television, thus performing a cathartic function for the sentiments of widespread dissatisfaction. One is not surprised, then, by Lipińska's television adaptation of Ivo Brešan's blatantly anticommunist *A Performance of Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja*, in 1985, at the height of the popularity of the cabaret. The production, with performers from the cabaret, is a biting comment making Shakespeare populist.

Conclusion: Popular Culture and Experimental Theatre Practices

As both burlesque and cabaret can be examined as potentially subversive genres of theatre, in the conclusion it is worth looking at how experimental theatre performances inspired by Shakespeare's works (Bennett 13-27) are connected to popular culture after 1989 in Eastern and Central Europe. We can identify two major approaches, the first of which can be described as a conscious reflection on, and a playing with, the traditions of popular theatre forms. From an aesthetic point of view, this category—following Tom Gunning's well-known term *cinema of attractions* (381-388)—embraces examples of the theatre of attractions with an unambiguous focus on visuality and physicality. The second category is characterized by using new media tools, genres, and environments, including film, video, smart phone, VR, or augmented reality. These examples usually cover multi- and intermedial theatre forms (Mancewicz). Before examining these two groups, we will briefly consider the historical context of experimental theatre in the region after 1945.

During the decades of state socialist times, controlled and supported theatre institutions, representing (socialist) realist aesthetics, were parts of the so-called first public domain "held together by an ideological project, the creation of a socialist consciousness" (Cseh-Varga and Czirák 2). Parallel to this, the second public sphere included those actors who, either willingly or unwillingly, for a long or a short time, were excluded from the first controlled sphere. Experimental aesthetics were in most cases to be found in the second public realm, including youth clubs, university theatres, culture and community

houses, and semi-private spaces such as apartments (Fürst). These venues served as places of dissent, where new politics of perception were often intertwined with aesthetic and structural criticism of institutional and professional theatre practices (see Havasréti; Szkárosi).

Artists of the second public sphere challenged the conventions of realism, offering non-linear dramaturgy, body-based performances, and audience-actor interactions—as the earlier section on "Mainstream Shakespeare and Its Double" illustrates. However, after 1989 new possibilities arose in the region in terms of aesthetic innovation, both in established institutions (or so-called stone theatres) and by independent collectives or amateur groups. In this era, popular culture manifested itself increasingly through the dynamics of a rising media society, however, various remains of state-controlled mass media influenced how artists handled the new social experience. Emerging forms and genres of mass media also played relevant roles in apprehending reality as a network of fragmented, non-linear, and non-transparent perspectives. Within this context, popular culture often connected to new technological and medial networks, which influenced the dramaturgy, visuality, and even the topics of theatre productions.

Many innovative pieces in the region were based on the idea of staging multi- or intermedial relations by applying the various aesthetics, conventions and technologies of media forms, predominantly different genres of popular film. These productions often made use of spectacular or well-known elements and scenes from genre films on Shakespearean dramas (Földváry, 2020), or they integrated media technology into the performance. In Hungary Viktor Bodó's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Sputnik Shipping Company in 2008, Daniel D. Kovács's *As You Like It* in 2016 with Katona Theatre, or Attila Vidnyánszky Jr.'s *Twelfth Night* with Sztalker Group in 2019 are recent examples of this category. In addition, the rise of audio media seems to also be at the forefront currently, as indicated by a 2017 production by Polish director Grzegorz Bral with A Song of the Goat Company entitled the *Songs of Lear*.

Furthermore, experimental Shakespeare productions in the region have shown another distinct feature, a denarrativized form of theatrical thinking, going back to the long tradition of popular theatre genres. Various historical forms, such as vaudeville shows, music halls, circus performances, spectacles or entertainments at fairs shared an important dramaturgical characteristic, a series of attraction-based scenes. This also characterized early cinema which, according to film historian Tom Gunning, can be described as a form marked by a "harnessing of visibility" and an "act of showing and exhibition" (Gunning 381). Based on Gunning's terminology, we can identify the (re)emergence of the theatre of attractions. Within this category, the dominance of visual dramaturgy as well as exhibited attractions gave rise to a non-linear, image-based theatrical language and an acting style of new virtuosity (Brandl-Risi). This embraced

examples such as choreographer and director Sonja Vukicevic's 1999 *Midsummer Night's Darkness* or 2006 *Circus of Histories* in Serbia, director László Hudi's 1996 *Romeo and Juliet* with the Moving House Company in Hungary, or Polish director Maja Kleczewska's 2012 *Macbeth* at the Globe Festival.

It is also worth noting that the above-mentioned examples and categories share common features with Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theatre aesthetics (16–28), where the role of the text begins to morph from a basis or origin of a future theatre production into a material open to subjective interpretations, or to instances of free dialogue with other textual and medial forms. As a result, Shakespeare's oeuvre in connection with popular culture is increasingly interpreted and staged as a reaction to the everyday experience of living in an immersive multimedial environment, which results in the negation, or at least dissipation, of linear and teleological modes of storytelling, perception, and representation.

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