

Maja Kleczewska's *Hamlet* as a Mirror of Contemporary Poznan and Poland

Anna Wołosz-Sosnowska,

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań and Polish Shakespeare Association

Abstract: *Hamlet* is a timeless play, which has been inspiring artists - actors, directors, film makers as well as writers, for over 400 years. The beauty of language, but also the universality of the topics such as revenge, betrayal, struggle for power, love, as well as the role of theatre are the reasons why *Hamlet* is still so contemporary. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's plays reveal their full potential when they are staged, but staging *Hamlet* in the 21st century in Poland, in Poznan is connected with the question 'why?'. What is the reasoning behind staging this Elizabethan play today? Nowadays the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, both on stage and on screen, are not without a reason; the already mentioned universality transforms itself into a comment on socio-political situation. In the play itself, Shakespeare refers to the theatre-mirror metaphor which comments on the reality.

By staging *Hamlet* in Teatr Polski in Poznań (2019) Kleczewska touched upon many contemporary problems of Poznań and Poland. She collected and commented on the anxieties and issues with which we tackle. Multiculturalism, Ukrainian immigration, multiple languages on the streets, feminism, the role of culture are just few topics touched by Kleczewska in the performance, but also topics which make the audience consider their place within the socio-cultural space. The aim of the paper is to indicate and analyse in these elements which occur in the performance.

Key words: *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, Maja Kleczewska, Poland, theatrical performance, women, multiculturalism

Hamlet is a play which touches upon numerous problems and issues, such as power, vengeance, honour, family, but also the function of art and the role of theatre. Jan Kott in *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (1974) drew attention to the timelessness of the play by famously stating that "[w]hat matters is that through Shakespeare's text we ought to get at our modern experience, anxiety and

sensibility” (Kott 1974: 58). Every attempt to stage a Shakespearean text should find a key to interpret the play and to draw the audience, and pique their interest, a key which will help the audience read, and later interpret, the director’s intensions. In Act 3 Scene 2, Hamlet welcomes the actors who have just arrived at Elsinore and expresses his opinion on the role of a theatrical play, he instructs them how a performance should look and indicates the ephemeral nature of acting and the theatre.

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance – that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing whose end both at first and now, was and is to hold as ‘twere the **mirror up to Nature** to show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it makes the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of which one must in your allowance o’erweigh a whole theatre of others. (*Hamlet* 3.2, 17–28)¹

The mirror metaphor which was used by Shakespeare in reference to the role of the theatre, was the metaphor also later adopted by Kott, “[f]or *Hamlet* cannot be played simply. This may be the reason why it is so tempting to producers and actors. Many generations have seen their own reflections in this play. The genius of *Hamlet* consists, perhaps, in the fact that the play can serve as a mirror” (Kott 1974: 57). He also claims that it is impossible to stage all the *Hamlets* that exist in the play, all the themes, plots, and motifs; the play is a sponge, which absorbs the issues and problems of the contemporary world and through a performance reflects on it. Both metaphors, of the mirror and the sponge, burden the director, the actors with the responsibility to include contemporary concerns into the performance and reflect on them, and the role of the audience is to recognise and interpret them.

Every theatrical performance of *Hamlet*, and any other Shakespearean plays may raise a question whether a play from the beginning of the seventeenth century is able to comment on the contemporary socio-political situation in Poland and Europe and what the reasonings are to stage the play today. All these

1 Emphasis mine.

questions also come to mind while experiencing Maja Kleczewska's *Hamlet/TAMJET* staged by Teatr Polski in Poznań.² The story about the Danish prince functions as a cover, as it can bring together many of the current issues and comment on them. Kleczewska did not base her performance solely on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but she also reached for Heiner Müller's *HamletMachine*, which on one hand may suggest the insufficiency of the Shakespearean text today, but on the other hand enriches the text and may also be used in the performance to hint a potential metatheatrical dimension.

The performance begins with a collectively sang, or rather cried out, words "I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and spoke with the surf BLABLA at my back the ruins of Europe ... My drama will not happen anymore," the words become a key to interpreting the performance as a commentary on the end of Europe and its cultural downfall. Müller's text also constitutes a frame; it is a beginning and end, which are not clearly marked here. The performance is always played twice with a smooth transition from one into another, with the confused audience not knowing whether they should leave. Here the beginning and end merge, the end becomes the beginning of something new. Kleczewska's *Hamlet/TAMJET* performance is about the doom of the Western world and downfall of its culture, hence the evoked confusion intentionally draws attention to the ease in which 'the end' – either of the performance or the world – can elude.

Kleczewska's theatrical performance is very rich semiotically and at times even over-saturated with signs and meanings for the audience to be able to notice and understand them all. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to discuss all these elements, hence only three aspects will be analysed in the present article. Although all three are quite overt and straightforward, they still seem to require further scrutiny. These elements are: the location of the performance in the Stara Rzeźnia in Poznań, the depiction of female characters, and the multicultural dimension of the entire performance. The analysis of these issues will be set within a larger socio-cultural context and conducted with recourse to theories of performativity.

Most reviewers pay attention to the location of the performance, namely staging the play, the theatre building, and (re)creating the Elsinore castle in the Stara Rzeźnia in Poznań.³ Mike Urbaniak (2019) states that the "post-industrial

2 The premiere took place on 7 June 2019.

3 Although the Polish place name Stara Rzeźnia is used in this article, it seems important to provide its literal translation as it is quite telling, namely the Old Slaughterhouse (or the Old Abattoir) in Poznań.

and hypnotic space of the Stara Rzeźnia creates, for all intents and purposes, half of the performance.”⁴ Further, Gruca (2019) adds that the building from the beginning of the twentieth century, impressive in its own right, has a particular ambience. Reviewers such as Ostrowska (2019), Wittchen-Berefkowska (2019) and Obarska (2019) also noticed that the director used a gimmick in the form of headphones, by means of which the audience experienced the performance. Both the venue and the headphones are elements which the reviewers immediately associated with the Malta Festival⁵ and the Silent Disco, an inseparable event of the festival. However, the comparison seems to be quite a simplification, which takes away the seriousness of the performance, especially when its main theme is taken into consideration, i.e., the fall of European values. Naturally, on one hand the choice of the venue outside of Teatr Polski made the performance more attractive and contributed to its commercial success, but on the other hand staging *Hamlet* outside the theatre building meant acquiring additional meanings. Kleczewska is not the first director to stage a Shakespearean play outside the theatre building. The better-known examples in Poland are *H.* by Jan Klata (2004), which was staged in a shipyard, and Grzegorz Jarzyna’s *2007: Makbet* (2006) staged in an abandoned factory. Each of these examples treats the theatrical space not as an insignificant element but as a meaningful and semiotically charged one. In both cases, these spaces provided an integral and interpretative element, contributing to their success, hence it is impossible to perceive staging *Hamlet/TAMJIET* in the Stara Rzeźnia only in commercial terms.

The building of the Stara Rzeźnia, located close to the city’s Old Town, opened in 1900 and until the mid-1990s it was a working slaughterhouse. Despite its architectural beauty, it was a place where animals were killed and, although it was later adopted for cultural events, it has not been fully renovated or restored. As Howard (2019: 4) states, “a space is a living personality with a past, present and future. Brick, ironwork, concrete, wooden beams and structures, red seats and gilt and decorated balconies all give a building its individual characteristic.” Although Howard mainly has a theatre building in mind, it is also possible to refer this idea to any theatrical space, and its past and present affecting both the audience and the actors. The scenography by Zbigniew Libera follows this

4 All translations from Polish mine.

5 Malta Festival Poznań, previously known as Malta International Theatre Festival has been held since 1991. Apart from theatrical performances the program often includes, exhibitions, concerts, and quite often a silent disco party.

line of thinking; he adopts the state of building and uses it as a background for the performance, the walls with falling off plaster and a few remaining tiles from which blood could have been easily washed off, were covered with red carpets, which could actually resemble blood.

A slaughterhouse is a place which a society wants to repress from its collective consciousness, because it is a place where animals, living creatures, are transformed into food produce. *Hamlet* is a play with a tragic and bloody ending involving multiple victims, that is why staging it within the walls of a slaughterhouse should evoke anxiety and uneasiness in the audience. It is not about equaling human suffering with that of the animals, but about bearing in mind that Kleczewska is presenting her vision of the end of Europe, and the treatment of animals in the contemporary world can be one of the causes for its downfall. The popularisation of ecological ideas (which include dietary choices, i.e. reduction of meat consumption) and wide-spread environmental protection, as well as eco-criticism, are among the discussed issues concerning the future of the Europe and the world. A slaughterhouse can symbolise the fall of the protagonist and the characters as well as the fall of Western civilisation due to the mistreatment of animals.

Interpreting *Hamlet/TAMJIET* through the prism of its performative space is ephemeral and changeable, as the staging space changes. After the Stara Rzeźnia had stopped operating as a slaughterhouse, despite its decay and devastation, it became a venue for cultural and artistic events. This transience and passing, and to some extent the downfall, has been enhanced by the fate of the Stara Rzeźnia, which has since been demolished and replaced by a housing estate, although some architecturally beautiful elements of the original buildings are to be preserved.⁶ It is also possible that *Hamlet/TAMJIET* was among the last, if not the very last, plays performed there. Recalling Howard's words about the past, present, and the future of the staging space and their interpretative impact, comparisons with the play's ending come to mind. The demolition of the Stara Rzeźnia resembles the metaphorical demolition and decay of Elsinore, i.e. Europe. A collective and colonising Fortinbras, who is more of an idea or construct than a single man, appears, and it is he/they who is/are to create the world anew on the ruins of Elsinore.

⁶ Fortunately, despite an initial uncertainty the performance can still be performed in the Stara Rzeźnia after the initial demolition works were completed. In August 2020, *Hamlet* was staged there as before, but with a few changes.

By leaving the traditional framework of a theatre, with its clear division into the stage and the auditorium, and staging the play in the post-industrial space, Kleczewska has also altered the dynamics of the performance and its reception; the clear division between the actor and the spectator has become blurred. The multiple plots simultaneously taking place turn the audience into a voyeur, somebody who not only observes but is observed, who listens through the headphones but is also listened to, eavesdropped on, and spied on. The performance does not draw any clear-cut borders where the spectators can walk or sit; they follow their own chosen path, a plot or an actor.

Erika Fischer-Lichte in her studies on the phenomenon of performance notices that a performance “consists of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. Performance, then requires two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, to gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime. Their encounter – interactive and confrontational – produces the event of the performance” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38). But in Kleczewska’s case the co-presence or coexistence is not passive, as she allows a certain degree of freedom and expects the spectators to be active and, only to a point, interactive. In *Hamlet/TAMJIET* the viewers are an integral element of the performance, as they are responsible for creating the performance to some extent, no matter how clichéd this sounds. The actors at times need to be more aware of their surroundings and the position of the audience and their reactions.

A good example is Gertrude’s bedchamber (where the closet scene takes place) or the throne room, where the viewers can approach the actors closely or even sit with them at the same table just to strengthen the experience. The story is linear but the particular plots happen at the same time in various places of the theatrical space, hence the audience is charged with greater responsibility to create meaning and to work out their own manner of reception; free will becomes one of the constitutive elements of the performance. The audience members are not limited to passively sitting and observing the events; they are able to follow the actors as they move around, or sit in many spots to observe the actors, other viewers, or just watch the events from throne room that are broadcast on screen. There is not just one manner of experiencing, consuming, and reacting to the information and the play, much like the contemporary world. In today’s overstimulated society, every single person is responsible for determining whether a piece of information is true or fake; one has to question and ask rather than blindly follow the crowd and *Hamlet/TAMJIET* depicts this well.

Despite the initial feeling of loss, the viewers quickly adapt to the new situation and make the best of it. What is experienced and seen is quickly documented, photographed and posted on social media as proof that the experiences have really taken place. Similarly, with *Hamlet/TAMJET* Teatr Polski from the beginning encourages taking pictures and making films to post them on Facebook and Instagram. Naturally, on the one hand this is a form of marketing, however, on the other hand it reflects the way contemporary audience members consume and react to a performance, something Kleczewska indicates quite clearly.

Staging *Hamlet/TAMJET* in the Stara Rzeźnia is connected with one more characteristic element, namely performing chosen scenes and events as well as the entire performance on a loop. The consequences of the loop are twofold. First, it allowed the audience to (re)experience a greater number of scenes sometimes non-chronologically, it also created the impression that actors at times function on autopilot, going round in circles and repeating the same phrases. Second, the play ends suddenly but immediately it starts once again from the beginning, which confounded the audience; for some the performance did not have a clear beginning, whereas for others there was no clear ending. The loop, or routine, brings to mind the contemporary experience of culture, especially TV, which is often based on reruns of films, series, and even sporting events. The contemporary viewer, just like the audience during Kleczewska's performance, may feel at a loss and at times does not distinguish a new program from a rerun.

The depiction of women, Gertrude and Ophelia, in Kleczewska's *Hamlet/TAMJET* is another significant and semiotically charged element. Both characters often function in opposition to one another; youth and maturity, idealism and realism, innocence and guilt. The director has cast the female characters in a very interesting way, still preserving the contrast, but also drawing attention to the perception of women in the 21st century. Gertrude, played by Alona Szostak (a Russian by birth), has been presented as a beautiful and sensual woman, dressed in a long white gown, coquettish towards both her son as well as husband. Her exterior and interiority contradict, her white dress suggests her purity and innocence but her behaviour does not support that perception. Despite her strong position and influence in court, Gertrude-queen seems bored with everything that surrounds her; as a result, she drinks and a wineglass becomes her inseparable companion. Power and influence seem to overwhelm her, alcohol functions as a stress-release, but also leads to situations in which the limits of ridiculousness and impropriety are crossed.

The “Mousetrap” illustrates this behaviour well; she sits among the audience members and comments loudly and crudely the events on stage, thereby disturbing everybody around her. Domagała (2019) has noticed that Gertrude has been presented as a “cheated woman/object, who was used by her brother-in-law as a tool to gain power, and now drowns her resentment and humiliation in alcohol. In the “mousetrap” scene she behaves like a spoilt film star only so that she can show her son her aching and suffering heart just few minutes later.” Gertrude is exposed to the public view, and as a public person the public/audience has their own expectations towards her regarding her conduct and image – here Gertrude can be compared to politicians’ wives, which should be seen but not heard.

Gertrude is aware of the expectations which her subjects have of her, hence she attempts to control it, but her public image when seen with Claudius is different than in her private life with Hamlet. She creates two images of herself but alcoholism and lack of control and good manners, which stem from the inability to deal with power or from sensing her impending end, shatter the images. Gertrude-mother appears to be different from the public image; she does not emanate confidence anymore, which manifests itself in her language. The language of the court and in public is Polish, whereas in private she turns to Russian/Ukrainian (she mixes the languages constantly), especially in contact with Hamlet. It sounds as if they use a secret language that only they can understand, which hints at their intimate relationship. Hamlet in the performance suffers from the Oedipus complex, fuelled by Gertrude herself, which has an unexpected outcome with Hamlet raping her. Kleczewska depicted Gertrude as a complicated character full of contradictions and burdened with expectations with which she is not able to deal. The external beauty and social position, which in the times dominated by social media, celebrity oriented-media and the celeb-ritization of politics, are highly valued.

Ophelia (played by Teresa Kwiatkowska), constructed in opposition to Gertrude, differs significantly from the typical depiction of Ophelia as a young, beautiful and slim(!) girl. In an interview Kleczewska and Chotkowski, the playwright, justify their vision, “we wanted to challenge the stereotype of an ethereal Ophelia – a little girl, Hamlet’s victim. Maybe Ophelia has been involved in court intrigues, or maybe she has been suffering from a disease for a long time and she just made up Hamlet’s letters, or maybe she never was seduced and abandoned?” (Liszewska 2019). Ophelia, due to her age and appearance,

similarly to Horatio⁷, because of his disability, does not fit into society, where the greatest value is outer beauty. At one point, even Gertrude ridicules her plump appearance and talks to her as if to a child. As a result, she experiences physical and psychological violence; she is excluded and rejected from the society of Elsinore, which contributed to her mental decay and madness.

In an interview Kleczewska observes that “women at a certain age are denied love and sexual desire, for which, just like Ophelia, they pay a high price. We wanted to claim the 60+ people’s right to love, our Ophelia is courageous enough to fight for herself” (Liszewska 2019). Kleczewska draws attention to 60+ people and their right to love, but in the performance, it is also the love to a younger and good-looking man. The mismatch, in age, looks and position, seem to shock the most, as contemporary society is judgemental, especially towards the weaker and those who do not fit the majority. Kwiatkowska’s Ophelia reveals her tragedy in the madness scene, when she appears in a white wedding dress with a tacky “I love you” written across it. She walks around the audience, accosts them and gives out the non-existing or invisible flowers, until then Ophelia was socially invisible herself, it is her madness and “inappropriate” behaviour that make her noticeable. No longer is she ethereal and invisible when walking to the table in the Throne Room, her madness finally gives her courage to become an independent and somewhat wild woman, who has been until that moment unappreciated and overlooked. Unfortunately, the act of rebellion leading to madness occurs too late to change anything. Ophelia dies on that table as if sacrificed by Claudius and Gertrude for society’s clear conscience.

Finally, one of the most overt elements of the performance is its multicultural nature, due to the multinationalism of actors who speak numerous languages during the play. A case in point is casting Roman Lutskiy, a Ukrainian actor, as Hamlet (Polish media constantly Polonize his name – Łucki).⁸ The performance is multilingual and multicultural, allowing Kleczewska to disturb the image of Poland (and Poznań) as an open and tolerant society, thus revealing or shedding more light on its prejudices. Poland is no longer linguistically, ethnically, and nationally homogenous, although conservative or right-wing Polish

7 Horatio in the performance looks like Stephen Hawking, the brilliant physicist. He moves in a wheelchair, and due to his difficulty with speech, nobody listens to him or pays him any attention.

8 After the performance some audience members leaving the theatre were heard saying that the actor playing Hamlet was handsome but it would have been better if he were Polish, which is telling as far as the Polish attitude towards multiculturalism in culture is concerned.

politicians would like to believe otherwise. By casting actors of different nationalities, Kleczewska attempts to mirror the social composition in Poland, with Ukrainians and other nationalities living next to Poles. Although she does not address the issue explicitly, the director challenges the perception that foreigners are cheap labour rather than highly qualified workers, experts, and artists who can enrich society both culturally and linguistically.

Hamlet mixes languages and experiences (code switching between Polish, Russian and Ukrainian); his language highlights his isolation and, despite the attempts to find common language with the people around him, he remains misunderstood both in terms of language and the values he follows. Kleczewska wanted to draw the attention to multilingual society and families, like in the mentioned closet scene between Gertrude and Hamlet when suddenly they switch to Russian, making themselves less understandable to the audience. Multilingualism should be perceived as an enriching element for any society rather than a factor that isolates and stigmatises. Interestingly enough, despite the Ukrainian language being widespread in Polish streets and used by immigrants, it is still a language not learnt by many people, hence it may have evoked the feeling of uneasiness and confusion in the scene when the languages were mixed. Nevertheless, multinationalism present in the performance should not be perceived as something extraordinary and unusual but as a normal state of affairs, one which only reflects the social situation.

Another indication of multiculturalism in *Hamlet/FAMJIET* is Fortinbras, which is a collective, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural construct, rather than a single person, and is derived from non-European cultures. Fortinbras, or the name Fortinbras(es) would be more suitable, is inclusive and diversified, played by a Hindu, Mandara Purandare, a Senegalese, Gamou Fall, and Flaunette Mafy from South Africa. The triumphant invasion of these cultures is possible due to the downfall of European values. Fortinbras(es) who come(s) from Africa and Asia is/are depicted as a collective invader and coloniser of the debris of Europe, whose cultural collapse is connected with Claudius' and Hamlet's death. However, in Kleczewska's performance the end is not final but it is a beginning of the new. The invaders do not destroy Europe, it was done without their involvement, they wait to create the world anew once it had been destroyed, nevertheless their impact is not destructive in nature. In this way, immigrants need not be perceived as the ones responsible for the destruction of one's culture.

Unfortunately, instead of being open to various cultures and perceiving them as an enriching element, the increasing nationalism and racism in Europe

often treats “aliens” as people who come from subordinate and worse cultures and a threat. Interestingly enough, this also reveals the weakness of European culture, one that can collapse without outside intervention. Although it seems that Fortinbras(es) colonise Europe, they appear only after the death of all the characters who would have been able to see the destroyed Europe. The colourful entrance of Fortinbras(es) full of noise and music is a promise of renewal and creation rather than destruction.

Kleczewska followed Kott's words and created a performance for our contemporary times, one that addresses significant current socio-cultural issues of Poland, and one that moves the audience and makes them think. The performance itself, together with the performative space of the Stara Rzeźnia, is multifaceted with numerous meanings and interpretations. Staging the play outside of the theatre building was not only a commercial decision contributing to its success but one that added new meanings. Both the history and the future of the Stara Rzeźnia can be viewed as factors which become interpretive signs. The vision of modern women, their position and perception in society and the media are issues also addressed in *Hamlet/TAMJIET*. Kleczewska has attempted to break with the conventional approach towards and categorisation of Gertrude and Ophelia, thereby showing their complexity. The multiculturalism of the performance is visible even in its title, *Hamlet/TAMJIET*, but also in the casting and language that is used. Although reviewers claimed that it is a play about the end of Europe, it does end on an optimistic note with the arrival of Fortinbras(es), who marks a new beginning, literally of the performance (which is looped) and metaphorically for culture and society.

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