

## Conference Report

### “Shakespeare Politically In/correct”

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It was professor Jerzy Limon’s idea to celebrate the anniversary of Shakespeare’s birthday not only with a birthday cake and a theatrical performance, but by bringing together Shakespeare scholars from all over the world and hold an intellectually challenging discussion on that special day. After a three-year break, due to Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns (the previous conference was an online event held in Polish on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020 - “Szekspir w czasie teraźniejszym (złożonym)”) Polish Shakespeare Association in co-operation with Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre organized a one-day conference titled “Shakespeare Politically In/Correct” which took place at the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre thanks to the courtesy of the director Agata Grenda. The hybrid format of the conference allowed people from all over the world to join in, making this truly an international event.

The organisers of the conference wanted to focus on the universal dimension of Shakespeare’s text, film and stage adaptations, and translations that may be problematic for the contemporary audience and readers for social and political reasons. Shakespeare in the context of political in/correctness, censorship, and contemporary politics were the issues that were of particular interest.

The conference was opened by the President of the Polish Shakespeare Association Professor Jacek Fabiszak who welcomed the participants and expressed gratitude to Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre and its director Agata Grenda for allowing the conference to take place at the theatre. The conference consisted of three parts: a keynote lecture, a session held in English, and a session held in Polish.

The key notespeaker, Dr. Imke Lichterfeld from Bonn University was introduced by Dr. Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik, Deputy President of PSA. Dr. Lichterfeld talked about the significance of casting in theatre and film, and, particularly, how colour-, gender-, race- and disability-casting may impact the reception of a performance. Staging Shakespeare creates a gateway for new casting choices which will be more inclusive and the adaptations constitute a great opportunity to question casting choices made both in the past and present. The lecture was very well received and inspired a lively discussion during Q&A session.

After the keynote address, a session held in English started with five presentations covering various topics. The first speaker, prof. Ronan Paterson from Tees-side University talked about using Shakespeare for political purposes in post-war Berlin by both the Allies and the Soviets in a paper titled "Berlin, Moscow and Cannes: Shakespeare, Soft Power and the Iron Curtain". Ronan Paterson provided the listeners with the historical background concerning the division of post-war Germany into sectors and how the political tension spread to culture and how both sides used cultural soft power to gain socio-political dominance.

The next speaker was Maria Sawicka from Warsaw University with a paper "'I Am a Jew.' יְהוּדִי נָא : Identity and Social Exclusion in the Multicultural World of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*", who presented an in-depth textual analysis of the play focusing on Shylock's language and the identity-shaping process. She also talked about Shylock's identity in reference to other Jews living in Venice, Christians, and the society in general. Moreover, the initial analysis became a starting point for the discussion on issues of cultural identity, perception of self, and one's place in modern society. Sawicka's paper reminded us of the significance of textual analysis, and how the method can still be revealing and inspirational.

The third paper "War - Violence - Religion in Theatrical Adaptations of *Macbeth* by Grzegorz Jarzyna, Agata Duda-Gracz, and Andrzej Wajda" was delivered by prof. Jacek Fabiszak and Anna Wołosz-Sosnowska from Adam Mickiewicz University. The authors focused on interpreting three adaptations of *Macbeth*, two theatrical and one television theatre performance, all of which appeared before 2020. Despite various aesthetic and staging choices as well as a diversity of settings (Duda-Gracz set her *Macbeth* in 11<sup>th</sup> c. Scotland; Wajda in a post-war, post-apocalyptic future; Jarzyna in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Iraq/Afghanistan during the war on terror) their common denominator was the perception of evil and violence as an unavoidable element of humanity, stemming from a reflection on the significance of religion in the human society. Particularly in the case of Jarzyna's and Duda-Gracz's *Macbeth* religion is one of the reasons for widespread violence, without providing any moral help, while Wajda in his production shows a world without religion, which, however, is not a world without violence and evil. The comparison of the productions was to draw attention to the relationship between religion and violence.

The next paper, "Caliban. Politically Incorrect: On Disability Representations" was presented by Dr. Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik from the University of

Łódź. She began her paper with a historical overview of representing Caliban since the 19<sup>th</sup> c. onwards: Caliban- slave, Caliban- animal, Caliban-non-human creature. On that basis Kowalcze-Pawlik moved on to interpreting Caliban in terms of inclusion and exclusion once the character is represented as the disabled and that his exclusion gains a new dimension as disability becomes new otherness. The examples used in the presentation came from *The Tempest* by Szymon Kaczmarek from Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre (2021) and *The Tempest* by Elizabeth Freestone from Royal Shakespeare Company (2023).

The final presentation in this session was delivered by Joanna Różańska from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Her paper “Shakespeare in Dubai – Be or How to Be?” sheds light on the position of Shakespeare on theatrical stages in Dubai and the Emirates, where socio-cultural arrangements concerning public display of affection make staging some Shakespeare plays (i.e. historical plays), which display nudity, problematic. The author took into consideration Dubai’s sociological structure and self-censorship imposed by artistic and theatrical circles. The paper met with a lively response from the audience.

The second session of the conference was delivered in Polish and focused, too, on many interesting topics and issues. The first presentation was given by Dr. Jan Grzanka who, deploying a philosophical paradigm, talked about Jacques Lacan’s seminal work on *Hamlet* in 1958-59 with a particular attention paid to characters’ desire(s). Following Lacan’s ideas, desire in *Hamlet* pushed everybody to make both good and bad decisions.

After the philosophical interpretation, Dr. Barbara Świąder-Puchowska turned the attention to theatrical adaptations of *Hamlet* since 1989 in her paper “The Prince of Denmark in ‘the New Poland’. *Hamlet* in the Polish Theatres after 1989”. Świąder-Puchowska provided a detailed overview of issues and themes which have recurred; she reflected on the popularity of the play and the political agenda that theatrical directors had when staging the play. In the recent years, the political dimension of the productions have not been so overt, which poses a question whether *Hamlet* has lost its “political edge” due to the transformation.

The next speaker, Bożena Pysiewicz from the Poster Museum in Wilanów, talked about theatrical posters from Shakespeare productions showcased in the museum’s collection. Her presentation “Shakespeare on the Poster” was about the posters that have been collected for over 60 years, from productions which have or have not been realized. In her presentation, Pysiewicz did not divide

the posters in terms of technique in which they had been made, but in terms of themes and interpretative elements which appear on them. She also discussed in greater detail works submitted to the competition organized by AMS Poster Gallery "Szekspir ∞" in 2016 and how the posters entered the urban domain of Polish streets.

The final paper of the conference, "Not in Front of the Kids! Censorship and Political Correctness in Literary Adaptations of Shakespeare's Plays for Young Readers", was delivered by Dr. Michał Pruszek who talked about the history of literary adaptations for children since the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today. Pruszek drew attention to the self-imposed censorship of the authors when the publications were directed at younger readers. The censorship encompassed altering delicate subjects of violence, abuse, and race.

The one day conference concluded with a heated discussion on the role of Shakespeare in contemporary Poland in particular and the world in general; issues such as socio-economic and post-pandemic situation, war in Ukraine, political vagaries were addressed. The variety of papers allowed the listeners not only to look into the past political (ab)uses of Shakespeare, but also reflect on contemporary ones. The issue formulated stated in the title of the conference "Shakespeare Politically In/Correct" has not been comprehensively and definitively discussed because it cannot be. The question of political in/correctness in reference to Shakespeare is open requiring further research. The conference constituted a significant voice in this ongoing investigation.