

Adaptive Recontextualisations: *Hamlet* for the Here and Now, or Reappropriating the Canon

2.1 WHY RECONTEXTUALISE AND WHY *HAMLET*?

Radical performance often entails recontextualisation through adaptation. When drawing on great works of the past written in other languages, this process also tends to involve a hunger to retranslate or at least update existing versions, so that these works can gain maximum relevance to the present. Fuelled by enthusiasm, imagination and experimental curiosity, these endeavours often bring together a host of creative participants (playwrights, directors, translators, dramaturgs, actors, production design teams, etc.), and the processes and practices of translation and adaptation are intertwined with matters of spectatorship and reception. In this discussion, frequently laboured hierarchies associated with the question of fidelity in translation and adaptation are relatively absent, and reception is investigated in indigenous as well as transnational contexts. Looking at case studies where the source text is not only universally known but also translated to a language of lesser circulation, we are dealing with a very high likelihood of familiarity. In the wake of Linda Hutcheon's claim that 'adaptation *as adaptation* involves, for its knowing audience, a conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing',¹ I suggest that translations are perceived in a similar fashion by knowing audiences. Prompted

by Hutcheon's seminal research, I scrutinize the what, who, why, how, where and when of adaptation rooted in matters of translation as well as textual editing and mise-en-scène, inquiring into what exactly is being reconfigured in a particular adaptation, and consider the complexities of an adaptation's potential to appeal in the here and now.

Stage adaptations worldwide have a tendency to privilege the work of Shakespeare when addressing issues of topical concern. In many cases the reason for this, beyond the plays' artistic merit, is the cultural capital of Shakespeare. On the whole, Shakespeare is deemed beyond contestation and censorship; therefore staging Shakespeare with a radical agenda is also likely to be accepted as a legitimate venture, even if, at times, it is received with reservation or generates controversy. Through examples of radical performance using *Hamlet* as a point of departure, this chapter examines productions organically embedded into the spirit and concerns of the times in which they were produced. The case studies demonstrate that history is marked by practitioners and performances that stand in for the social, cultural, economic and political conditions of a given period, and stress that revisiting Shakespeare is highly compatible with the subversive. Created within the structures of publicly funded repertory theatres, and hence with a degree of accountability integral to their remit, these productions address the responsibility of theatre at a given moment in time, although they cannot be classed as being in the mould of traditional twentieth-century political theatre. Theatres in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Iron Curtain identified a sense of urgency in undermining the system from within, while for a publicly funded theatre in the increasingly globalized and commercialized post-unification Germany there has emerged a new-found need for interrogating neoliberal attitudes towards the operation of culture in society, and for declared affinities with the legacy of Brecht, Heiner Müller and the political left wing. As Hans-Thies Lehmann observes, German theatre is edging away from the apolitical stance of the postdramatic, and there is a growing tendency to 're-open dialogue between theatre and society by taking up more directly political and social issues', 'even if there are no solutions or perspectives to offer'.²

Despite a twenty-odd-year gap, these productions are united by the radicalism with which their directors approach the task of adapting a well-known play for contemporary situations. The directors belong to different generations and cultural contexts, yet Alexandru Tocilescu (1946–2011) and Thomas Ostermeier (born 1968) develop

their conceptual vision following a close reading of the dramatic source text, with a view to address the demands of spectators in the here and now. Ostermeier has often declared his affinities with the tradition of theatre in Eastern Europe, distancing himself from the German cult of the director as a genius, and highlighted the importance of craftsmanship, collaborative creation and of carefully labouring the source text.³ Both Ostermeier's *Hamlet* (Schaubühne, Berlin, 2008) and Tocilescu's *Hamlet* (Bulandra Theatre, Bucharest, Romania, 1985) are examples of theatre work where the artistic director is overseeing the moulding of the dramatic text as well as the staging process, and therefore they blend textual editing with mise-en-scène, as a dual instrument of adaptation. These productions are holding up a mirror to sometimes inconvenient truths, and offer a perceptive critique of social and political mores. In doing so, the directors claim considerable respect towards Shakespeare's work, despite displaying varying degrees of interest in textual integrity. Tocilescu made a strong point against censorship by staging the full script in an over five-hour production, while Ostermeier had the text trimmed down via a new contemporary German translation, on the basis of which he created an intermedial production to resonate with a young audience.

Both versions utilize Shakespeare metaphorically, and turn *Hamlet* into a vehicle to portray the status quo within society, underpinned by the directors' distinctive worldview and artistic vocabulary that ranges from representational theatre (Tocilescu) to an application of postdramatic principles (Ostermeier). Tocilescu reproduces the political as it appears in everyday life and establishes parallels between the Danish royal court and Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorial regime in 1980s Romania, and addresses the role of an outstanding individual (in this case the archetypal intellectual) as a socially and politically committed hero in communist society. This Hamlet is in direct conflict with a petty world, and is also emblematic for the opposition between the individual and the masses—a recurrent trope in the aesthetic of 1980s dictatorships.

Ostermeier, working after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Iron Curtain, is critical of Western capitalism in its excesses; however, this *Hamlet* of the noughties is not so much about representing the world outside theatre, but about addressing being disillusioned by a world governed by excess, where there are no clear allegiances anymore and where conspicuous consumption and the cult of celebrity is the new ideology. More importantly, this *Hamlet* gains

a political edge via its performance language, as to quote Lehman, ‘the truly political dimension of theatre has its place not so much in the thematising of politically burning subject matters [...] as in the situation, the relation, the social moment which theatre as such is able to constitute’.⁴ Ostermeier’s theatre is political insofar as it celebrates the theatricality of theatre and the desire to be other than one’s self; in true postdramatic fashion, it engages explicitly with the phenomenon of simulation onstage, as performers slip in and out of character with the full complicity of the audience. This rejection of dramatic illusion grants an unprecedented creative freedom to the postdramatic, and this is wherein its actual political edge resides.

Both Tocilescu’s and Ostermeier’s productions toured to Britain and, though hailed as innovative and enlightening by some, they had their share of reticent reception, being deemed alien to the so-called indigenous interpretation of Shakespeare. Controversy has not necessarily been motivated by the use of another language though: British audiences had been exposed to performances in Belarusian, Swahili, Polish, Japanese and Catalan, to name a few, which have failed to cause a stir. These versions of *Hamlet* proved unpalatable for the specific ways of appropriating and adapting Shakespeare, and it is precisely the persistence of such negative reactions that fuels the necessity for pleading the legitimacy of ventures conducted against the grain. As Deborah Cartmell rightly points out, instead of agonising whether a performance ‘is “faithful” to the original literary text (founded in the logocentric belief that there is a single meaning), we read adaptations for their generation of a plurality of meanings’, and consequently, ‘the intertextuality of the adaptation’ should become the ‘primary concern’.⁵ Heavily editing the play, Ostermeier’s version uses colloquial language and has a protagonist clad in a fat-suit (thus subverting the tradition of slender Hamlets), for which the director was advised that he could not bring it to an English-speaking audience as it was ‘not *Hamlet* how they consider *Hamlet* to be, and that it should be given another name’.⁶ Almost two decades earlier, Tocilescu’s stage version was also labelled as the ‘wrong’ take on Shakespeare. Its parallels with Romanian political realities were duly noted and even accepted—after all, Hamlet was still a ‘sweet prince’ of sorts—but the visual language of the production was almost entirely ignored, and thus the production ended up perceived as either impenetrable, unintelligible or simply irrelevant to a British audience.

2.2 SHAKESPEARE AND CENSORSHIP: ALEXANDRU TOCILESCU'S ANTI-COMMUNIST *HAMLET*

Until 1989, theatre was one of the most coherent oppositional platforms against communist dictatorship in Romania, delivering survival strategies and instituting cultural resistance against a hostile and dehumanizing regime. Subject to increasing censorial intervention, theatre was more or less forced to continually imagine new ways of addressing issues of current concern, and reverting to geographically and historically distant material became the most frequent route. Translated works were, on the whole, less censored than indigenous writing; as a consequence, local 'intelligentsia [...] looked to world literature to express and preserve what it saw as eternal aesthetic and moral values', and posited translation as 'a vehicle for expressing alternative, if not openly oppositional, views'.⁷ By intertwining political and aesthetic concerns, and staging works from the Western canon in particular, theatre makers with an oppositional agenda were able to make the most of the cultural capital carried by the source material and thus hope to distract the censor. In theatre, censorial attention tended to concentrate on the play script and paid relatively little attention beyond the text, which contributed to the consolidation of *mise-en-scène* as a platform for effective creative freedom.

As Marian Popescu, one of the most influential theatre historians in Romania, contends, playwrights and directors had to accept that their work was required 'to be approved, changed in order to be performed. Censorship, just like everywhere in the Soviet area, was manifest at several levels: the text, the show, the scenography, the costumes, the music. Everything'.⁸ New work, including fresh translations of classics, was viewed as potentially dangerous especially after the landmark year 1971, when, after a state visit to China and North Korea, Romania's then president, the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, launched his infamous 'Cultural Revolution'. This was a long-term project to radically transform the country's cultural landscape from relative prosperity into a spiritual desert only sensitive to Party propaganda.

Bearing this climate in mind, I claim that Alexandru Tocilescu's *Hamlet* (Bulandra Theatre, Bucharest, 1985) is archetypal for the fraught relationship between text, performance, power and authority under communism. The production could only be created because it utilized a carefully selected target language version of the play, and the director succeeded in arguing for the legitimacy of his chosen dramatic

source text. Representatives of the Western canon have historically constituted the backbone of theatre productions in Romania, and in this sense the translation and adaptation of plays has played a crucial role in the construction of indigenous theatre conventions. Tocilescu's staging was clearly meant to be controversial and anti-establishment; however, by stressing that contestation was not an additional element of the production, the translation or the adaptation but was embedded in the original script—i.e., was intended by Shakespeare—the theatre obtained permission to stage the play. To circumvent censorial attention, Tocilescu had to significantly renounce claims to the originality of his directorial approach, solely crediting the Shakespearean dramatic text. Thus, instead of the dramatic text becoming significant as embedded in the conventions of its performance,⁹ a reversal of sorts had to happen and the performance, as a the outcome of this particular approach to *mise-en-scène*, needed to be concealed under the protective guise and authority of the dramatic text.

In this way, utilizing canonical works such as *Hamlet* has become a potent form of cultural resistance. As Worthen observes, performance 'is a way of interpreting ourselves to ourselves; performance of the "classics" necessarily threatens to become an act of transgression, in which the cultural tradition embodied by the work is forced to tell a new story'.¹⁰ Indeed, Tocilescu's production of *Hamlet* was populated by alter egos and doubles, set on a mirrored stage that not only amplified and distorted everything but also showed the cracks in the communist system.¹¹ It was considered the 'heaviest' Romanian *Hamlet* in the last quarter of the twentieth century, which arguably anticipated the historic events of 1989 and the subsequent disintegration of communism in Romania. Richard Eyre (who had considered directing this play in Romania) stated in *The Guardian* in 1990 that the 'public could read the end of the Romanian oppressive Communist regime in the play about Elsinore even before the events in real life started'; 'a play like *Hamlet* could speak distinctly to people, and the authorities were unable to prohibit staging this play just because it was Shakespeare's'.¹² Monica Matei-Chesnoiu claims that the production was the "thing" which activated the Romanians' moral sense and rectitude, helping them to take decisive action and pull apart the communist rule'.¹³ In Michael Billington's words, this was 'Romania's *Hamlet*, fashioned according to this country's political circumstances' and was a version 'impregnated with the atmosphere and politics of Ceaușescu's Romania'.¹⁴

Tocilescu's primary agenda for this production included the creation of a sophisticated and highly subversive performance text, but beforehand the creative team had to produce a Romanian version that would bypass the censor and yet allow the deployment of the director's artistic and political vision. In other words, the challenge was to make use of existing (and hence already acculturated) translations by way of a new adaptation that would form the basis of a radical staging and do justice to both Shakespeare and eighties Romania: 'The script had to resonate with modern times and satisfy stage necessities. Yet most of all, it had to comply with the subtleties required of any spoken discourse in the '80s: to communicate with contemporary Romanian audiences, while still evading the very alert censorship imposed by the regime on any text for performance'.¹⁵ Despite these efforts, the carefully prepared stage text was deemed unsuitable for performance throughout the official previews: on one level, it was perceived to be too current in its updates, therefore not Shakespearean enough; on another, it was seen as too overtly confrontational and offensive to the communist system in power. Ion Caramitru, who was cast as Hamlet and was one of few actors with celebrity status in the country at the time, challenged the committee: 'I will write to all the newspapers. You can't stop Shakespeare, or at least you can't be seen to. The whole world will laugh at you.'¹⁶ (Fig. 2.1) Marian Popescu contends that it was this final desperate gesture that secured the approval for the production, as even communist censors could not afford being seen as censoring Shakespeare.¹⁷

Tocilescu's *Hamlet* updated the translation with a sprinkling of contemporary phrases, clichés and puns, and though very meticulous in terms of maintaining Shakespeare's words, it was underpinned by continuous doubling. On the one hand, the highly wrought language utilized on stage was in sharp contrast with the degradation of the Romanian language in actual usage in the media and in everyday life. On the other, Nicoleta Cînpoeș demonstrates how some of the 1985 play text's updated aspects 'also produced a form of meta-linguistic resistance that referred back to the chained state of the language in eighties Romania'.¹⁸ A particularly striking example, Cînpoeș comments, was Hamlet's remark that 'There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark, But he's an arrant knave', which was rendered as 'Nemernicii ocupă *funcții* importante' [All knaves are in high *posts*]; a reference to the masses of apparatchiks pulling out all the stops for well-paid party sinecures. Another indicator of subversion in the updated version was Hamlet calling Horatio (with

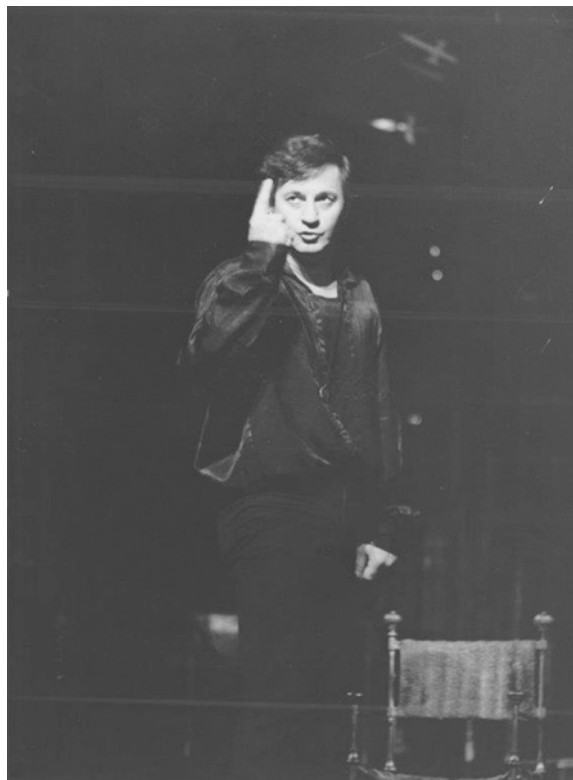


Fig. 2.1 Ion Caramitru as Hamlet © 1985 Bulandra Theatre Archive, Bucharest

whom he also shared a casual appearance, resonating with their intellectually dissident status) (cf. Fig. 2.2) a friend, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ‘comrades’,¹⁹ thus clearly aligning himself with Horatio but distancing himself from the pair on an ideological level. In socialist Romania, ‘tovarăş/ă’ (comrade) was the politically correct form of address (‘Mr./Mrs./Miss’ were considered bourgeois relics), and as used in the updated stage version, the term gained an additional dissident turn as it also meant overzealous party member or even informant.

The production utilized a hybrid of several existing translations, and the stage adaptation was a collective work *par excellence*: drawing on Romanian versions by Vladimir Streinu (1965), Ion Vinea (1971), Leon Leviţchi (1964) and Dragoş Protopopescu (1935), as well as additional



Fig. 2.2 Valentin Uritescu as Gravedigger, Marcel Iureș as Horatio, Ion Caramitru as Hamlet © 1985 Bulandra Theatre Archive, Bucharest

subversive contributions from the director, a number of actors, poets, various editions of the Shakespearean text in English, and a selection of German and French translations. Involving such a range of participants emerges as a utopian model for the symbiosis between intercultural, interlinguistic, intertemporal and intersemiotic transfers, and in practical terms bears the advantages of the Romanian theatre system: the long rehearsal period, the availability of participants (this has since become increasingly rare in market-driven Romania, too) and the possibility for the juxtaposition of the source text with various versions in different receiving cultures. The reception of Shakespeare has historically been mediated by German and French texts in the Romanian tradition, and by returning to versions in these languages and cross-checking them with the English original, the creative team responsible for the new *Hamlet* for the 1980s made a conscious decision to situate their work in the lineage of theatre history, on the one hand, and to forge a dialogue with then current international trends in the reception of Shakespeare, on the other.

Despite these positive aspects, disadvantages emerged from not commissioning a fresh translation.²⁰ The various Romanian versions were the work of literary scholars and poets who have not necessarily intended their translations for the stage. In order to iron out the imbalance generated by the intervention of so many contributors, the script was handed over to the prominent poet and translator Nina Cassian for standardisation and ‘Shakespearean polishing’ and then ‘returned to the director (Tocilescu) and protagonist (Ion Caramitru) for further negotiations with the stage interpretation of the play’.²¹ Ironically, Cassian’s standardising touch ended up being perceived as a hallmark of authorship, and in publicity materials, several reviews and publications such as the programme for the UK tour in 1990, the translation was incorrectly attributed to Nina Cassian alone. This suggests the fairly rare occurrence of collective authorship in Romanian dramatic practice but also the relatively high status of literary translators—a situation that differs from the Anglo-American tradition.

Tocilescu’s *mise-en-scène*, though critiqued for being too exhaustive, was not actually exposed as subversive and had an immediate impact on audiences. Few theatre-goers familiar with the conditions in 1980s Romania could overlook the production’s carnivalesque portrayal of life as theatre. As Richard Eyre recalls, Bucharest in the eighties had been harmed more by Ceauşescu than by the 1977 earthquake, and neglect and deprivation put their mark on the city: ‘Bugged telephones, the ever-present Securitate, the smug strutting arrogance of the Party’s apparatchiks, the friends who lowered their voices and looked about them before speaking, the fear of prison [...], the swaggering display of the privileges of the nomenklatura; in short, it was Elsinore.’²² Indeed, as most critics observe, the parallels between the production and Romanian life in the 1980s were crystal clear—a dictatorial regime, a nation under constant surveillance, a complex network of intrigue and undercover spying, not to mention the hordes of spineless party bureaucrats who would not shy away from anything, no matter how immoral, as long as it served their personal interests.

As Monica Matei-Chesnoiu points out, Tocilescu ‘bombarded the spectators with complex issues of power and the political theatre, the moral condition, thought and action, conscience, revenge, life as theatre, life and death, love and hatred, and the ambivalence of “to be” and “not to have”’.²³ In the eighties, Romanians were facing humiliating shortages in basic material supplies, in addition to being severely

curtailed in their freedom of movement and speech. Thus, Caramitru's Hamlet centred on an examination of the intellectual's historic mission, pondering on how to contribute to social justice and a fair exercise of human rights. He made it obvious that Claudius was the perpetrator of the crime, and his father's spectre might have equally been Hamlet's inner consciousness. In a move suggesting the perpetual repetition of history, the performance began with a pantomime of the final fencing scene, on a black mirror stage. The fight, however, was interrupted by a silhouette in black, which took a seat at the on-stage piano to provide live music that became an essential running commentary on the proceedings. Hamlet joined in playing the piano while receiving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and also played the flute on other occasions. Matei-Chesnoiu argues that this ongoing escape into music, together with the recurrent clown-imagery, prompted allusions to the dissident power of art. The proposition that art assumed a challenge against the communist regime was further emphasized by the participation of Dan Grigore, one of the most prominent Romanian concert pianists of the day, who appeared as the piano player. This integration of live music into the dramaturgy of the production thus had the role of a further adaptive filter that reconfigured Shakespeare's play to the conditions of the receiving culture, and subtly blurred the boundaries between different art forms and aesthetic practices.

Naturally, Romanian audiences would instantly recognize the production's undermining of authority through the pitch-dark opening (referencing regular power cuts), the monochrome stage set and the protagonists' defining qualities amplified to extreme (such as a tyrannical Claudius and Gertrude, a Polonius reeking of the secret police, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as the arch-apparatchiks, a naive Laertes coerced against his will in political machinations, Fortinbras as yet another dictator). However, Tocilescu had a more complex agenda than a simple correlation between Ceaușescu and Claudius, on the one hand, and his wife, Elena and Gertrude, on the other. Cinpoș insists that 'a straightforward "translation" would have been too facile for the censors to detect and ban', not to mention that Claudius's and Gertrude's crime pales in comparison to that of the Ceaușescus, and sees 'the 1985 production's achievement as exposing the cracks in the mirrors. The production's main business, to expose all readings—in its terms, all mirrors—as subjective, limiting and limited interpretations of *Hamlet*, was its most acute observation'.²⁴

On a textual level, the production refused to accept the overall validity of a single translation over others and fused them in a new adaptation; while on a visual level, it inhabited a black Perspex box set that automatically offered a subjective and multiple view of the world, distorting reality outside and obstructing what could be viewed inside it. Finally, in a move diverting from Shakespeare's text but entirely logical according to Tocilescu's directorial concept, the production also challenged interpretations of Fortinbras as a saviour by portraying him as yet another tyrant. Moreover, by having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern kill Horatio, Hamlet's alter ego, who could have been the sole candidate to carry on Hamlet's moral struggle, the production ended on a note of utter gloom and lack of hope.

The final script used as a basis for the production preserved the complete text of the 1623 Folio, and led to an over five-hour performance. This in itself constituted another victory over censorship and an act of subversion, because such a lengthy evening at the theatre carved into time normally spent on compulsory ideological indoctrination. The length of the production was never queried in Romania, but it needed editing for touring. Thus, for instance, the 1990 UK tour (at the Royal National Theatre in London) was only able to accommodate a trimmed version at just over three hours. Despite generally positive reviews, for critics such as Milton Shulman *Hamlet* in a non-familiar language was the root of the problem: only 'pseuds [would] claim that it is possible to be elevated by Shakespeare spoken in gibberish. [...] Deprived of its sublime verse and profound thoughts, *Hamlet* has to be judged either as noisy mime or as visual exercise'.²⁵ If anything, Shulman's comment reaffirms the continued need for pleading the twinned causes of translated theatre and experimental staging approaches. Despite the best efforts of scholars in translation, adaptation as well as in theatre studies, the obsession with fidelity is far from being toned down in theatre criticism. Such comments intimate that no artistic product can be truly appreciated beyond the historical, cultural and linguistic context in which they were generated, and that there might be specific norms in operation when an established work gets presented in a foreign version in the source culture. As Thomas Leitch rightly observes, 'the basis for the assumption that literary texts are to be valued for an originality that adaptations lack is clarified by considering the apparently exceptional case of William Shakespeare, nearly all of whose plays are adaptations, often to a new medium, of earlier material', and the originality of Shakespeare can be found in 'his seeing the artistic potential of inert source materials'.²⁶

Judged by Shulman's reactions, the Romanian production—as an adaptation of Shakespeare—failed to be the *Hamlet* Shulman wished to see, and thus he opted to disregard it as a legitimate version. Shulman's comment, however, would benefit from a reading through the prism of Patrice Pavis's claim: when the source text is 'archaic or classical', 'the translation will be more readable for a target audience than the source text (in the original language) would be for the same audience'.²⁷ Pavis calls attention to the paradox whereby 'Shakespeare is easier to understand in French and German translation than in the original, because the work of adapting the text to the current situation of enunciation will necessarily be accomplished by the translation'.²⁸ In this reading, Shulman's frustration is no longer oriented at a particular version of Shakespeare but at the perceived luxury foreign cultures enjoy in being able to legitimately update and hence adapt Shakespeare through regular interlinguistic, intercultural and intertemporal translation.

In addition, Shulman's problem was not that he did not understand Romanian; his supposed familiarity with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* together with the English surtitling should have helped him to overcome feeling 'like a blind beginner fumbling through the play in Braille'.²⁹ His setback, I argue, was a lack of knowledge concerning the post-war political history of Romania, but more importantly, a lack of desire to engage with the complex performance language of the production. As Julie Sanders contends, 'political awareness, and even complicity, is frequently required on the part of the reader or spectator receiving the recreated text or performance'.³⁰ In this case, the Romanian adaptation of *Hamlet* offered ways to subvert the dominant ideologies which have governed the performance tradition(s) favoured by the source culture, and the adaptive and dramaturgical choices developed in response to Shakespeare have led to such a transformed performance text that the latter ultimately clashed with Shulman's own knowledge of the play. Foreign or even indigenous spectators were not expected to pick up on all hints to Romanian life under Ceaușescu's regime (such as Paul Goma standing up against Ceaușescu in 1970, or Doina Cornea's 1982 letter to Radio Free Europe—'Letter to Those Who Haven't Stopped Thinking') but rather invited to spot the archaeology of dissidence that the production was trying to map. Tocilescu's *Hamlet* was not restricted to Romanian audiences to decode and/or appreciate; however, for them, its courage and commitment had an additional personal dimension that, for Western viewers, had no immediate resonance.

2.3 A *HAMLET* FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM: TANTRUMS AND DISAFFECTION AT THE SCHAUBÜHNE (2008)

Turning to the canon often constituted the sole avenue for the deployment of radical political and artistic visions in the communist 1980s; however, for contemporary directors in Western Europe there is no prerequisite to operate with such restrictions.³¹ Potentially any play from any era can be staged, yet the dominant pattern tends to be a strong focus on new writing in addition to the regular presence of classics. In the case of Berlin's Schaubühne, lead since 1999 by Thomas Ostermeier, the introduction of bold stagings of British in-*yer-face* theatre, authored by the likes of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, led to the theatre being patronised in unprecedented numbers by young audiences. In parallel with this—and partly to counteract the popularity in German theatres of contemporary plays—Ostermeier has become increasingly obsessed with classics: Ibsen, Büchner and, indeed, Shakespeare. He contends that the 'anger, the desperation, the longing for beauty, the longing for another world' that underpins Shakespeare is also to be found in Büchner, Edward Bond and Sarah Kane; and he approaches canonical texts 'through the lens of Sarah Kane', aiming to shake up the conventions of theatre making and spectatorship.³² Thus, Ostermeier's primary goal is not to offer modern takes on classics, but an interpretation of the society in which he lives, in a similar longing to pin down the truths of life that fuelled Kane's work. As he himself declared, he aims to 'understand more about the complexities of things going on in the world', alongside 'the complexity of human relationships'.³³ In this sense, he seeks to 'retrieve the core of human life within the play' and 'show via a play some of the contradictions that exist in contemporary society',³⁴ preoccupations that situate him as much of a social and political commentator as a theatre director.

For the latter, the director has been frequently critiqued in his native Germany, where the predominant aesthetic privileging fragmentation and discontinuity pushes his work to the periphery of fashionable norms, despite overwhelming international acclaim. As an exiled artist of sorts, to use Georges Banu's term, Ostermeier does not shy away from the ever-deepening rift between his own form of theatre making and the current institutional opinion in German theatre.³⁵ He follows an 'inductive approach' in his work, through which the '*Stoff* of the playtext and the present (of director, actors, audiences) communicate'.³⁶ In his view the

very purpose of *Regie* is ‘to stage a play in the present’, and the production’s aim is to ‘fill the dramatic situation (*Spielsituation*)’ with contemporary life and actions; which is why presenting Hamlet ‘as a spoilt brat [...] is only possible on the back of our own time’, and staging a play becomes ‘translating literature into a dramatic process (*Vorgang*) that happens in the here and the now’.³⁷ Moreover, the director also aims to ‘bring to life the dramatic situations scripted by the playwright in a way that addresses, engages and entertains the audience’; however, he highlights that the scripted text constitutes about ‘twenty per cent of the story’, and as a director he is committed to ‘the full hundred per cent of his or her imagination’.³⁸ In other words, Ostermeier’s directorial agenda is not motivated by a self-indulgent aim for modernisation, but by a desire ‘to ensure that the playwright’s words are understood’ and the Schaubühne production is a realization of the ‘circumstances, of the dramatic situations and of the *Stoff* that Shakespeare created [...] in a way that it speaks to a twenty-first century audience with the same urgency and immediacy that Hamlet related to the audience at the Globe in 1602’.³⁹ This is the reason why not commissioning a new translation and adaption is unthinkable for the director when staging historically distant plays. As Ostermeier reminds us, Shakespeare himself rewrote earlier texts, so revisiting his plays brings us actually closer to Shakespeare’s practices and prevents simply taking on board the interpretations put forward by earlier translations.⁴⁰

Departing from this declared compulsion to address the present, Ostermeier turns to *Hamlet* as a framework in which to place his urgent analysis of contemporary concerns. His radical version, achieved through textual adaptation braided with further cultural adaptation deployed through the directorial process, is underpinned in my reading by the aesthetic of the postdramatic, although this *Hamlet* engages too much with the world outside theatre to qualify as a case of pure postdramatic theatre. Ostermeier’s work is viewed, with equal validity, as an instance of neorealism in the theatre—an interpretation the director also welcomes. According to Ostermeier, conflicts in contemporary society have become so acute lately that drama returned with a vengeance into everyday life, and theatre has a mission to reflect this; therefore, it needs to branch out from a predominant focus on the postdramatic as practiced in the 1990s and 2000s, onto a neorealist terrain.⁴¹ Ostermeier considers theatre an art form perfectly suited to the exploration of conflict, and in his view it conveys, by definition, a firm attitude and constitutes a platform

for genuine freedom.⁴² London's Barbican, where the production toured in 2011, rightly drew attention to the fact that this was an innovative adaptation of Shakespeare's classic that favoured irony, immediacy and physicality, and duly contextualised the production within the realms of political intrigue and corruption.⁴³

Ostermeier commissioned a fresh German translation of the play, from his frequent collaborator and (at the time) Schaubühne dramaturg Marius von Mayenburg, and together they produced a highly trimmed stage script, with several plotlines and characters removed, that in performance runs under three hours with no interval. In Ostermeier's view, 'every generation writes its own Shakespeare, because [...] every *Zeitgeist* communicates with it in a different way', and he collaborates with Mayenburg because he attempts to be 'as truthful as possible to the meaning of the text'.⁴⁴ Consequently, they made a deliberate choice not to use verse when translating Shakespeare, because German words tend to have more syllables than English ones, and they felt that being forced to concentrate on rhythm and rhyme would undermine some of the sense inherent in the text. Ostermeier notes that from a dramaturgical point of view Shakespeare's plays pose problems for contemporary audiences: they are 'much too long, [there are] too many plots [...]. Hamlet is [...] the worst-made play. But genius.'⁴⁵ This new irreverent and funny version not only chimed with its modern audience but also invited a fresh engagement with Shakespeare and theatre as an art form, making the audience experience a wide spectrum of sensations from uncomfortable to perplexed and mystified, but above all engaged and drawn into the flow of the performance. As Ostermeier contends, translations can 'rewrite how people talk. [...] English audiences don't understand when they hear the lines on stage for the first time. We don't have this problem. That's my overall and highest aim when I'm doing Shakespeare: to have a translation where you understand every line.'⁴⁶

The main changes engineered by von Mayenburg in his German version thoroughly de-poeticize Shakespeare's dramatic language, institute vulgarity as a legitimate mode of behaviour and perception, and destroy any hint of theatrical illusion, drawing attention instead to 'the tension between the dramatic character and the actor playing the character'.⁴⁷ Thus revealing the mechanisms of theatre making, Ostermeier exposes various crises in society, and his predilection for theatricality is often realized through a deployment of obscenities, aggression and violence. Mayenburg's snappy and suggestive translation creates an opportunity

for Hamlet to publicly mull over his mother's obsession with sex; while Polonius describes Hamlet to Claudius as a 'depressive' figure, who displays such modern-day symptoms as 'lack of appetite, sleeplessness, exhaustion and dizziness'⁴⁸—thus offering an accurate and up-to-date diagnosis of contemporary ailments typical for an affluent society. This ambition to make the play understandable on a textual level is paralleled by the production's carefully chosen performance language. This *Hamlet*'s aesthetic is heavily indebted to postdramatic theatre in its essentially fragmented structure (there is no climactic point in the production; even Hamlet's iconic monologue has been uprooted), its ongoing celebration of the artifice of theatre, its experimentation with form and genre, its integration of intermediality, its body-centredness and its constant blurring between performer and audience fault lines. Audience participation or involvement is a constant, either via direct engagement or, more often, indirectly, for instance 'by being confronted with thoroughgoing indeterminacy of meaning of what happens or what is said on stage'.⁴⁹

As David Barnett argues in explicating Lehmann, the postdramatic 'proposes a theatre beyond representation, in which the limitations of representation are held in check by dramaturgies and performance practices that seek to *present* material rather than to posit a direct, representational relationship between the stage and the outside world'.⁵⁰ Indeed, Ostermeier pertinently contends that 'there are no more coherent narratives, because there are no more acting subjects that could be properly identified, I can't build up any dramatic action'.⁵¹ Consequently, as a director Ostermeier needs to reflect a world in which the relationship between cause and effect is often unclear, and in which tracing responsibility verges on the impossible. The Schaubühne marketed the production by focusing on the actors' constant changing of roles, making the defining point that 'Hamlet's progressive loss of touch with reality, his disorientation, the manipulation of reality and identity are mirrored in the acting style, which takes pretence and disguise as its basic principle'.⁵²

Ostermeier offers his audience a diet they are all too familiar with from their own daily lives: a mash-up of reality and TV games shows, video recording and projection, references to the world of showbiz and the circus, accompanied by the ongoing consumption of fast food and drinks straight out of their packaging, all to the tune of contemporary pop music orchestrated by real-life DJ Lars Eidinger (Hamlet). As Ostermeier notes, this kind of mixing up is 'true to Shakespeare's intentions', as he was also collating his heterogeneous material from several pre-existing

sources presented in a broad variety of styles in order to address concerns of his present.⁵³ In the Schaubühne's *Hamlet* Claudius confesses his crime in the style of live TV chat shows, and Hamlet/Eidinger interacts directly with the audience, urging them to chant with him or to volunteer their contribution, such as naming the play-within-the-play or how evil Claudius looks. This space for experimentation and improvisation is licensed in principle by Ostermeier as part of their 'deal' ('Verabredung'),⁵⁴ and as Gerhard Jörder observes, Eidinger embodies the paranoid madman really well, and, due to his love for improvisation, he finds it often difficult to revert into the scripted role.

For Ostermeier, following his training at the Ernst Busch Academy of Theatre in Berlin under predominantly East German mentors, the problems and conflicts under scrutiny are by definition sociological and not psychological, and his inclination is to look at society in its broader context. Ostermeier reveals that his ultimate directorial approach is 'to be honest with the writer, with the text, and get to the core of the play', and in this sense he considers himself a 'conservative' director.⁵⁵ He locates the actor's body at the heart of his directorial process, and considers that emotion should be visible in concrete action and not in psychological mannerisms. This theatre 'generates its effect of realism precisely because it is not predicated on realistic aesthetic devices': an Ostermeier production is conceived around rhythm and music, and it has been rightly pointed out that he 'approaches theatre as if it were an avant-garde musical score'.⁵⁶ Doubling his intention to point out the relevance of Shakespeare's plays to our times with laid-back humour, he makes *Hamlet* profound and entertaining at the same time. This is a version of *Hamlet* where the audience is encouraged to interact with the performers and to reward their jokes with laughter, thus inviting a relaxed pattern of spectatorship in terms of canonical drama. Arguably, Ostermeier's *Hamlet* constitutes a trans-generic form as it refuses to conform to traditional genre markers, and what has been written as tragedy by Shakespeare is played, at least in places, as comedy. This is rooted in the postdramatic's concern with troubling our expectations of how to interpret a text, and its rejoicing in the disruption of the hierarchical order: generic and political alike. Moreover, as Lehmann states, 'dramatic form and dramatic theatre of representation are becoming problematic as a support for tragic experience' which 'can take place only if (and to the degree that) the aesthetic articulation is crossed out by an *interruption* and caesura of the sphere of aesthetic representation'.⁵⁷

This approach reflects Ostermeier's perception of theatre as a space for playful exploration and not of intellectual pursuits: a defining directorial skill for him is the ability to 'translate the abstract dramaturgical ideas of the playtext into sensuous and vivid prompts that ignite the actors' imagination and initiate the actors' play'.⁵⁸ Attracted by Eisenstein's and Meyerhold's ideas, Ostermeier sees theatre as a montage of attractions, akin to the world of the circus, in which something unexpected can and should happen at any point. Emerging from a socialist tradition in the lineage of Brecht and Heiner Müller and following their ambition to make a difference in society (despite rejecting the term 'political theatre' with reference to his work), Ostermeier's social and political commitment is manifested through reminding a predominantly middle-class audience about their flaws and pettiness, and in this way hoping to make them more responsible for the consequences of their actions. Ostermeier's theatre has been interpreted as one of the most pertinent commentaries on post-unification Germany; however, he prefers to dissociate himself from a nation-building agenda and welcomes reception in terms of broader discussions on global politics: 'As globalisation globalises economic interests and markets, it also globalises problems coming from globalisation'.⁵⁹

Ostermeier's *Hamlet* was conceived as a high-profile, internationally relevant production; it was commissioned for the Avignon Festival where Ostermeier was an Associate Artist,⁶⁰ and has toured the world as a signature production for the company. This reflects the reputation of the Schaubühne and its artistic director as one of the major export hits of German subsidised theatre, despite frequent criticism in Germany for the enhanced attention granted to realism and for clearly highlighted convergences with the real world and its topical concerns. Preoccupied with *Augenblickkunst*, Ostermeier is on a quest for the art of the moment, in the sense that he is looking for the truth inherent in the theatrical moment.⁶¹ Ostermeier chose to direct the play to counteract the frequent representation of Hamlet as an idealist in a corrupt world, and his protagonist is an obnoxious and impulsive anti-hero who is unable to break out from his dysfunctional family, a stand-in for a political system out of kilter. Gerhard Jörder declares him *the* Hamlet of our days—a fucked-up selfish narcissist, and Ostermeier concurs, emphasizing the former's utter disinterest in politics together with his ceaseless exhibitionism on social media.⁶²

This Hamlet is trapped in an inadequate situation, of which he is fully aware from the outset, yet he mainly invests this agency towards getting embroiled in a succession of slapstick numbers and the enjoyment of the collusion with his only genuine ally, the audience. He turns mad and feigns madness at the same time, because of his dissatisfaction with the world and his own self, and his lucidity merges into madness because being out of control is the sole way of coming to terms with a world devoid of moral values. To put it differently: ‘madness [...] is a way of boycotting the real’.⁶³ Ostermeier’s Hamlet understands that there is no hope for salvation (via Fortinbras or any other way), and the only way to put an end to this cycle of decay is via death all round. In his production at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin in the 1990s, the legendary German playwright and director Heiner Müller turned Fortinbras into a champion of extreme capitalism. Today, there is less of an actual divergence between political platforms, and Fortinbras cannot represent a genuinely new regime that will actually change things for good. In the context of German theatre history, Müller’s stage version set the standard for artistic experimentation, being the first to make *Hamlet* less of a celebrity vehicle—as it tends to be in the English tradition—and more about the play’s political themes. Ostermeier claims that he wanted to take Hamlet to task for not choosing action over contemplation and analysis, as we are also constantly analysing social injustice but are generally incapable of action.

Ostermeier stated in his manifesto at his takeover of the Schaubühne that theatre ‘can be a place for society to gain consciousness’, and for that aim ‘we need a contemporary theatre [...], a new realism’ which is not ‘the simple depiction of the world as it looks [...], it is a view on the world with an attitude that demands change’.⁶⁴ Yet he insists that he does not believe in theatre as a political event, mainly due to the fact that ‘we live in entirely apolitical times’; therefore, his work could be best described as “sociological theatre”: theatre as a laboratory in order to observe human behaviour in society’.⁶⁵ Directing a play starts the moment a connection is established between a play and daily life, and subsequently all work, including commissioning a new translation and/or adaptation, is channelled in this direction. As Georges Banu observes, Ostermeier’s work is situated between the realms of civic and personal implication,⁶⁶ and his productions are rooted in a directorial vision that seeks a reflection of contemporary concerns in pre-existing dramatic material. His theatre helps to politicize spectators by attempting to

engage an often young audience with ongoing issues of their time, yet this does not mean that Ostermeier expects theatre to start a revolution, rather that he treats it as a forum for observing human behaviour.

Significantly, the production's reception has varied broadly from place to place, with audiences picking up on country-specific concerns. So whilst for German viewers Eidinger's Hamlet may appear as an apolitical madman, for spectators in West Jordan he embodies an invitation to ponder on whether/when to take revenge. Indeed, Ostermeier's staging makes multiple simultaneous readings possible: when presented with a seemingly disaffected Hamlet that literally falls flat into the heap of soil that constitutes the set, for instance, audience members are treated to a moment of slapstick comedy, yet at the same time they are also instantly reminded of the murkiness of contemporary politics that contaminates everything, are confronted with witnessing situations of abandon and out of control, and are given licence to experience excess on all possible fronts.

Scaling the cast down to only six performers—five male and one female—Ostermeier places the exploration of meta-theatricality at the core of the production. The same actress is cast as both Ophelia and Gertrude—distinguished by adding and removing a blond wig and celebrity-style dark sunglasses. Ostermeier comments that Hamlet's mistake is that he doesn't see the difference between Ophelia and his mother. He finds that he cannot trust his mother any longer, and then extrapolates that he cannot trust any other woman either. Thus, he punishes Ophelia for his mother's deeds and, Ostermeier insists, this 'is something that a lot of men do—they mistake the woman they love for their mother'.⁶⁷ Conflating Ophelia and Gertrude is, of course, a bold directorial decision leading to a multiplicity of potential interpretations. Arguably, in this respect the production did not stay true to its source text, yet as Boenisch argues, the sense and energy provided by Regie give classical plays a 'speculative truth' contingent on a specific 'triangulation' of text, performance, and audience.⁶⁸ In lieu of thinking about Regie as being disloyal to its precursor text, it is perhaps useful to consider how Regie invites audiences to rediscover themselves in and through it. For, as Boenisch rightly claims, this constitutes 'the central paradox of Regie': by outperforming a text, Regie does not abandon or denigrate but actually reinvents and regenerates, and does this with a view to energize the very way audiences perceive the world.⁶⁹

In Ostermeier's *Hamlet*, on the one hand, opting for the same performer to embody both Ophelia and Gertrude conveys a strikingly anti-feminist message, as it seemingly suggests that only the Madonna/whore dichotomy is available for contemporary women to identify with. Such a reductionist approach to gender roles is arguably more shocking for a contemporary audience than any other aspect of the *mise-en-scène*, including male nudity, sexual abuse and heavy editing of Shakespeare's text. On the other hand, casting the same performer as Ophelia and Gertrude can be seen as another case of successful doubling—and separation between character and actor playing a role—without additional emphasis on gender, and in this way it has the function of further highlighting the overt theatricality of the production. Since performers change characters so often and so quickly, Hamlet is unable to recognize anybody and keeps interrogating the truthfulness of the discourses he is exposed to. These frequent identity shifts also underline Hamlet's schizophrenic state and allude to the ambivalence of contemporary mankind, oscillating between madness and reason. All characters wear masks of sorts because everybody plays another part at some point or other in the performance. But while Hamlet recurs to acting in order to uncover the truth, the other characters act to conceal it.

Hamlet only plays himself, apart from 'The Mousetrap' scene where he takes on the role of an actor playing a role. He changes character in full view of the audience, removing his fat-suit—a marker of his inertia and self-indulgence—and thus becomes the trim Lars Eidinger, the actor, ready to embody a new character. After playing the role of the Player Queen (in suspenders, black lace panties and thigh-high stockings), he puts his fat-suit back on and asks one of the other actors to zip him up—thus, calling additional attention to his overt onstage transformation and to the explicit differences between the actor's and the character's respective bodies. All along, he is engaged in a discussion of the performance that has just taken place with his mother/aunt and father/uncle, situating himself as a commentator on the events he has also engineered/directed and performed in. In this way, nothing is projected or perceived as a secret. Actors and audience share the act of being made aware, acknowledging adapter and translator von Mayenburg's point that they put a mask on every evening and they play the role they have to play, as it is all just theatre, and yet also reality. Overtly calling attention to the idea of illusion in theatre, the production uses a hose for creating rain

and ketchup for blood, and there is no instance in the entire production that conceals the fact that it is a simulation.

Ostermeier's production strives for visual feats and offers memorable spectacle scenes. 'The Mousetrap' scene is a case in point, which could be classed as an autonomous piece of live art. Hamlet, shedding the physical constraints associated with his character, transforms into a potentially neutral performer, who then engages with the performer previously playing the part of Horatio, covers him in clingfilm and pours tomato juice-cum-blood and milk down his constrained body. The production opens with the full cast smoking and drinking at a table behind a gold screen-cum-curtain. This tableau is held for the entire duration of the spectators' taking their seats in the auditorium, and then morphs into the funeral and wedding banquet scenes. Remnants of cheap consumer goods (cartons of tomato juice and milk, beer cans, plastic cups and plates) are abundant throughout, chiming with the tone of the improvised dialogue with the audience (some of the chanting Eidingers propagated in December 2013 included 'we want to party/we want some pussy'). The chain curtain—separating front and backstage yet see-through—offers an ideal opportunity for spying. Unstable, just like the protagonist's mental state, it is also the ultimate surface for Hamlet's video projections. Ophelia's death is another visually stunning scene, reminiscent of David Lynch films; the drowned Ophelia is wrapped in a large see-through plastic sheet, which is then filmed and projected on massive scale onto the chain curtain, offering perhaps the production's most moving commentary on contemporary tragic.

Mud, dirt and soil become aspects of a continuum that provides an overarching metaphor for the production, epitomizing both playground and grave. The stage is covered in a layer of earth, and the first actual scene (following Hamlet's first delivery of his famous monologue which is relocated to the beginning of the performance) is a burial pantomime performed by a gravedigger, as the main protagonists look on in the rain produced by a backlit hose spraying water over the mourners. This excruciatingly long opening scene—reminiscent of durational performance—tests the limits of audience tolerance from the outset, and establishes another parallel with the conventions of live art. It is also stunningly choreographed, and while it operates as slapstick comedy, playing for laughs (the gravedigger frantically scatters soil onto the coffin before remembering that, according to tradition, the mourners should symbolically throw the first handful, so he jumps into the grave

to scoop the soil out), it also engages the audience through its solemnity. Characters commune with the earth; for instance when Claudius reaches out to Hamlet, the latter opts instead to fall, face first, into the pile of earth covering his father's grave. This is a sign of loss and mourning—a clear statement of his allegiance in terms of father figures, but is also a literal descent into mud that doubles as a metaphorical one, as incest and corruption engulf the royal court under Claudius. Hamlet putting soil in his mouth is also emblematic of his regressive nature; he is portrayed as an eccentric, big spoiled child, an ambiguous adolescent rebel, with nothing romantic in him. Among his influences Ostermeier cites British artist Damien Hirst, whose diamond-encrusted skull reminds of the set for *Hamlet*, composed of earth and a gold-beaded screen, both, the director indicates, capturing 'the contrast between vanity and death'.⁷⁰

Lars Eidinger points out that in his view Ostermeier is at his best when he 'dares to work with extreme reduction', and in *Hamlet* the defining avenue for the narration is the earth that envelopes the set, which challenges the actor to explore multiple interpretive possibilities.⁷¹ The mostly organic materials used in Ostermeier productions are chosen with utmost care, displayed in an architectural set designed by regular collaborator Jan Pappelbaum. This is rooted in the director's belief that scenography is an equal partner in the creative process. The production takes advantage of the monumental scale offered by venues such as Avignon's Palais de papes or London's Barbican, and designer Pappelbaum utilized an enormous moving frame holding a beaded curtain made of long gold chains, allowing for dramatic entrances and the regular projection of film captured by Hamlet's invasive hand-held camera. Octavian Saiu notes that Ostermeier juxtaposes earth and recording equipment, the elemental and the technological, as two opposing facets of being, and it is this schizophrenic tension between contradictory parallel universes that eventually leads to Hamlet's demise.⁷²

Yet this video-cam technique also allows Hamlet to cope with the witnessing of events, and is used to unravel the mechanisms through which everything and everybody can be amplified to larger than life scale. Images are projected onto a gold curtain, while we simultaneously look through it to spectate the live action being deployed on the stage behind it. These two levels of performance, live and mediated/mediatized, however, can trigger different connotations and interpretations: if one

only concentrates on the live performer on stage, Judith Rosmair/Lucy Wirth wearing dark glasses appears as a woman with an undefined age, but the (simultaneously) projected video image of her hugely magnified face—reminiscent of cinematic as well as painterly techniques—references current tabloid images of celebrities beleaguered by the haunting paparazzi.⁷³ In live performance, Urs Jucker is first and foremost Claudius; however, when filmed images of him also playing the ghost of old Hamlet are projected onto the screen—especially in the closet scene—he excels at rendering the haunting quality of Old Hamlet’s ghost, which is then juxtaposed to the seediness and moral corruption of Claudius.

The production’s opening image is Hamlet reciting his iconic monologue with his face blown up so large that only his eyes and nose can be squeezed onto the screen. This moment visually forecasts the subsequent separation of the actor’s body from that of his character, but also resonates with the notoriety of the lines which have taken up an independent life of their own, being used to such an extent outside the context of the play that they have become devoid of meaning. ‘To be or not to be’ are the first words spoken in the performance; however, instead of being glorified they are made insignificant by a soft spoken Hamlet, squatting behind the bead curtain, ignoring both audience and onstage cast, and filming himself. His focus is the creation of a document through which he can witness the events taking place, and by opting to film himself, and later on the other guests at the table, especially his mother (thus offering a tableau of the entire cast), he draws attention to the importance of perspective. Since the production deliberately uses a transmitter with bad and noisy signal, the streamed images come across as fairly dark and rough, thus helping to interrogate the question of Hamlet’s madness as well as reiterate the idea of chaos in a world out of joint.

As for Hamlet’s most famous lines, they are repeated twice more in the production, in instances different from Shakespeare’s original text. Hamlet warns the audience in an aside that he has a monologue to deliver; and the speech, rather than uttered with romantic solemnity, is delivered with contempt: Eidinger simply gets through it while standing on a table, drunk, no skull in hand, just with a plastic crown placed upside down on his head. This grotesque ritual is simultaneously an act rooted in the ‘relational aesthetic’ between audience and performer, which reiterates the political facets of the production rooted in the

postdramatic, and suggests with Lehmann that ‘a future of genuine tragedy—not a museum of tragedy—will be found only in such performance practices which undermine our melodramatic way of perception within or without the frame of classical theatre. In this way the future of tragedy will be political or it will not be’.⁷⁴

Hamlet’s madness is a reaction to the frantic change of pace in which the world emerges around him; occasionally; however, he also transcends his staple manifestation of disaffected youth. He has a moment as a would-be pop star after ‘the Mousetrap’ scene, and has ongoing interactions with the audience as an actor playing the role of Hamlet (also in foreign languages when touring). In fact, Eidinger even integrated genuine accident into the fabric of the performance. When he smacked his head into a pillar, a dialogue with the audience ensued in which he asked whether he should continue and when urged to so, he did despite the obvious pain and bleeding. It is unclear whether it was him who did not want to stop or the audience pressured him to continue, but, on the whole, performances have become slightly longer as Eidinger has settled in his role and developed a taste for this interaction. Ostermeier references Polish director Krystian Lupa’s metaphor of the actor dancing with their character, and indicates a parallel convergence between Erdinger and Hamlet, with at times one, then the other in the foreground.⁷⁵

Indeed, what we are actually witnessing here is none other than the power and fascination of performance, together with an examination of what might be defined as real versus theatrical in performance. According to Lehmann, in the postdramatic theatre of the real ‘the key point is not the assertion of the real as such [...] but the disconcert that occurs through being unable to establish whether one is dealing with reality or fiction. Both the theatrical effect and the effect on consciousness derive from ambiguity’.⁷⁶ Thus, as Brandon Woolf explains, the postdramatic ‘gets us closer to the “real” than the dramatic could ever dream’, yet it ‘must also resist the “real” and refuse the status quo in order to preserve its critical, and thus, political edge’.⁷⁷ As Ostermeier contends, one cannot stage Shakespeare without acknowledging that the audience’s presence is ‘part and parcel of the characters’ situation’, and it is this that constitutes a link to the postdramatic as theorised by Lehmann, whereby ‘the dominant dramatic situation is replaced by the dominance of the performance situation’.⁷⁸

Ostermeier presents Hamlet as an eternal, self-obsessed adolescent, whose initially feigned madness becomes real. This Hamlet is not an

existential philosopher or romantic dreamer but a spoilt brat, unable to find his place in this world, who is fully capable of aggression and violence (he shatters the wedding banquet in an outburst; at Ophelia's funeral he attacks Laertes in a spurt of jealousy) yet he stops short of murdering Claudius and thus very deliberately breaks through the cycle of revenge. For Ostermeier Hamlet is 'called upon to offer resistance in a political situation', and it is his breaking the cycle of violence, rather than opting for overt confrontation, that epitomizes radical emancipation. This approach is also rooted in a longing 'to get rid of the mission' that the director describes as the 'Hamlet-sentiment' of his (late 1960s) generation, due to the enormity of the undertaking and the knowledge that one would be simply unable to succeed to save the world governed by market rules and conspicuous consumption.⁷⁹ This is why Hamlet becomes genuinely mad—'and this is no longer a vision but a point of view'—finding himself in total physical and psychological isolation, as at the end he steps out alone in front of the curtain and announces that 'the rest is silence'. This is one of the very few intimate moments in a production dominated by brashness and irreverence. It firmly acknowledges Hamlet's inability to act, through which Ostermeier indirectly conveys his share of responsibility for the state of chaos, and we are left with an image of madness zooming in as a commentary on a mad world.

2.4 CONCLUSIONS

Working within the framework of the subsidised repertory system in socialist Romania and contemporary Germany, respectively, Alexandru Tocilescu and Thomas Ostermeier share a strong public accountability, whilst having the privilege of flexible creative time and being able to rely on a regular ensemble. In terms of status, the Bulandra Theatre and the Schaubühne belong to the cultural elite in their countries, with productions regularly invited to the international festival circuit. From this position of artistic prestige and responsibility, Tocilescu and Ostermeier address their unique social, moral and political concerns within the context of *Hamlet*, and invest Shakespeare's text with up-to-date contemporary references. Confirming the continued validity of Jan Kott's thesis that Shakespeare is our contemporary, *Hamlet* remains emblematic for constantly changing yet highly topical preoccupations, while the protagonist's inquisitive mind epitomizes the ultimate corrective force to

regimes steeped in totalitarianism, on the one hand, and excessive consumerism and globalization, on the other.

With an agenda of staging a balance between indigenous and canonical drama, for both theatres and practitioners the question of translation and adaptation constitutes a central preoccupation; Tocilescu's 1980s *Hamlet* production had to concentrate on keeping censorship at bay, while Ostermeier's relatively recent version attempted to breathe new life into an overexposed classic. In Tocilescu's case, opting for the full text was seen as an act of defiance because it provided a release, for actors and audiences alike, from daily chores and ideological indoctrination under the arguably darkest socialist dictatorship, while for Ostermeier paring down the text was seen as a sacrilege and against the basic conventions of staging Shakespeare. Controversy of sorts appeared also because the language was felt to be too casual and contemporary (for Ostermeier and, occasionally, for Tocilescu) or it was too historically distant and enshrined in the canon (for Tocilescu).

In pre-1989 socialist Romania, theatres favoured laying claims to Shakespeare to pursue a route for political contestation. Thus, censorial intervention could be curtailed and a platform for cultural resistance became available. This was also often aligned with an agenda of anti-Soviet statement and artistic experimentation, the figure of Hamlet emerging as an Ur-intellectual engaged in a critical discourse on nationhood. *Hamlet* was the play famously vetoed by Stalin (the parallels between Elsinore and the Kremlin being perhaps too obvious, not to mention Claudius usurping the throne as Stalin did Lenin's leading role)—and subsequently staged with a double meaning in Romania: using the anti-Soviet excuse it became Romania's anti-communist choice text *par excellence*. The translations utilized as a basis for these productions were carefully chosen both to keep censorship at bay (and this meant significant loyalty to the source text) and to offer versions as relevant to the present as possible via contemporary references that would remain fairly invisible to the censor. These updates would become key links in activating the productions' subversive mise-en-scène, which were significantly downplayed in the process of seeking approval for the productions, yet instantly gained audience approval in performance. In this way, Tocilescu's *Hamlet* has become emblematic not for its respectful treatment of literary sources but for reinvesting these with new identities through his courageous nostrification of Shakespeare. Creating perhaps the ultimate Romanian *Hamlet* for the eighties, Tocilescu denounces

communist dictatorship and calls attention to the isolation of Romania behind the Iron Curtain, victim of a hostile totalitarian regime and nationalist excess.

Ostermeier's *Hamlet*, by contrast, is a thoroughly contemporary project both in its language and directorial strategies. It attracted an unprecedented young following due to its intermedial qualities, and featured an adolescent tantrum-throwing talk-show host who did not have a modernist agenda of redemption but who blatantly embodied the fallibility of his generation. This Hamlet is in the mould of Sarah Kane's Hippolytus in *Phaedra's Love*, who is incapable of genuine emotion or action. Instead, he is an observer and documenter of contemporary mores, not in the least through the constant intrusion of his camcorder with which he records everyone's actions, his own included. Capturing images references contemporary society's excessive preoccupation with celebrity as well as our obsession with the self, but also points to surveillance through omnipresent CCTV cameras and a resulting sense of persecution. As these images are then instantly blown up and streamed live onto a large screen, behind which the actual live action continues to be deployed, live and mediatised performance continues to exist side by side, and invite a discussion on the modes and potential of performance. As a handful of performers slip in and out of all the parts, in full awareness of the audience, this *Hamlet* also invites a reflection on identity, simulation and theatricality.

In sum, Tocilescu and Ostermeier create long-lasting theatrical interventions that accurately document history at a given moment in time, and powerfully interrogate inconvenient truths and situations that have the impact of at least troubling their acceptance if not also eroding their causes. In so doing, they deploy innovative ways of adapting and appropriating *Hamlet* for the contemporary stage, illustrate convincing ways of Shakespearean recontextualisation beyond—and, to a degree, in opposition with—the British tradition, and argue for the validity of transforming and indigenizing the canon.

NOTES

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31. My article 'Re-Routing *Hamlet*: From the Canon to Consumer Culture', sharing a number of concerns with the section on Thomas Ostermeier's *Hamlet*, is included in the collection *Adapting the Canon*, edited by Ann Lewis and Silke Arnold-de Simine (forthcoming from Legenda, 2017).
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60. *Hamlet*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier, translated by Marius von Mayenburg. Music: Nils Ostendorf, Costume: Nina Wetzels, Video: Sebastien Dupoc, Lighting: Erich Schneider. Cast: Lars Eidinger (Hamlet, Player Queen), Urs Jucker (Claudius, Ghost), Judith Rosmair/Lucy Wirth (Gertrude, Ophelia), Robert Beyer (Polonius, Osric), Sebastian Schwarz (Player King, Horatio, Gravedigger 1, Guildenstern), Stefan Stern/Franz Hartwig (Rosencrantz, Laertes, Gravedigger 2). It was coproduced by the Hellenic Festival Athens and the Avignon Festival in 2008. Premiere in Athens: 7 July 2008, premiere in Avignon: 16 July 2008, premiere in Berlin: 17 September 2008. I witnessed this production at the Barbican in London in 2011, and also in Berlin in December 2013. A filmed version of the production staged at the Festival's most prestigious venue, the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes, was aired on 19 Jul 2008 on the French–German cultural TV channel, ARTE.
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 73. The link with celebrity culture was further amplified by the insertion of a Carla Bruni song: after the funeral, Gertrude dedicated a song by the (then new) wife of then French president Nicolas Sarkozy to her own new husband, Claudius. This connection to the Sarkozys was picked up in the French press as a contemptuous comment on French mores, since both Bruni and Sarkozy have had several previous partners and got together rather hastily before his divorce was fully finalised. Looking back on this aspect from the vantage point of almost a decade, it now appears as a more general reference to the transience of love and lust.
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