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Bence Sarkadi

SHAKESPEARE ON THE PUPPET STAGE
THE REPRESENTATIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND LIMITS OF ADAPTATION
IN THE CONTEMPORARY PUPPET THEATER

SHAKESPEARE A BÁBSZÍNPADON
AZ ADAPTÁCIÓ REPREZENTÁCIÓS LEHETŐSÉGEI ÉS KORLÁTAI A
KORTÁRS BÁBSZÍNHÁZBAN

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Introduction

Exemplifying the success of Shakespearean adaptations to the puppet stage, the final four International Adult Puppet Festivals in Pécs, Hungary¹ were all about Shakespeare: in 2010 an adaptation of *Othello* by Hungarian company Stúdió-K received a prize; in 2007 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the Budapest Puppet Theater drew great attention; the grand prize in 2004 was taken by *Macbeth*, performed by the Puppet Theater of Grodno, Belarus, while at the previous festival in 2001, two performances of *Hamlet* (one by the State Puppet Theater of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, the other by Figurentheater Wilde&Vogel from Germany) and Czech Divadlo Drak's *Romeo and Juliet* were the most celebrated pieces. Owing to much research and careful selection on the part of the organizers, the festival in Pécs had managed to present a collection of some of the best examples of Shakespeare on the puppet stage, and may have thus repeatedly given an impression of a profusion of such performances. This impression would have been false, however, as puppet theater adaptations of Shakespeare were, in fact, just as scarce five, ten or fifteen years ago as they are today.

If one were to decide to see such a performance in Hungary today, (s)he would likely find no more than a single running production.² One would have to travel far and wide to see anything else – (s)he could buy tickets for *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* (by The Little Angel Theatre, the latter as a co-production with the Royal Shakespeare Company) as well as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (by Bristol Old Vic and Handspring Puppet Company) in London; *Romeo and Juliet* in Bucharest (by Tandarica Theater) as well as in Madrid (by Compañía Albero Teatro) and in Cali, Colombia (by Teatro Esquina Latina); and, if very lucky, may still catch an adaptation of *Hamlet* by Wilde&Vogel in Stuttgart, Germany³. The scarcity of such performances is further demonstrated by the fact that in the last decade, professional

¹ The festival was discontinued after 2010 due to a lack of funds.

² At the time of writing, the only running production of a puppet theater adaptation of Shakespeare is *Romeo and Juliet*, performed by Harlekin Puppet Theater, Eger (a production aimed at teenage audiences).

³ The list is obviously incomplete. There may be dozens of productions on show all over the world, however, very few of them are accessible to an international audience. Searching for such performances on the World Wide Web, in online and printed puppet theater directories or even through personal inquiries within the community of puppeteers yields very few results. Moreover, a large percentage of the performances one may find are adaptations for children, based on *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb (these, although undoubtedly interesting, not being the object of the present dissertation) rather than performances for adults based on Shakespeare's plays.

Hungarian puppet theaters and companies have brought but a handful of adaptations of Shakespeare to national or international puppet festivals: *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Budapest Puppet Theater - 2000, 2006), *Hamlet* (Kolibri Theater - 2001), *Twelfth Night* (Vaskakas Puppet Theater - 2002), *Macbeth* (Márkus Theater - 2003), *King Lear* (Atlantis Company - 2004), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Kolibri Theater – 2009) and *Romeo and Juliet* (Harlekin Puppet Theater, Eger - 2012) being among the most noteworthy.

The relevance of examining puppet theater adaptations of Shakespeare, then, is justified not by the abundance of such performances but rather by the critical acclaim they almost invariably received and receive.⁴ The fact that Shakespeare's plays can function remarkably well in a medium not primarily based on speech, but rather on design and movement (one of the most fundamental arguments of this dissertation) calls for an examination of why this should be so, especially in today's critical universe where the emphasis on the mediality of representation is growing continuously. The principal aim of the present investigation, therefore, is to show how the puppet theater is able to present Shakespeare. As it is emphasized throughout the dissertation, a *Romeo and Juliet* or a *Hamlet* cannot function in the puppet theater by simply substituting the actors with puppets. The puppet theater requires a different theatrical idiom with unique tools, methods and modes of representation, all of which is analyzed on the basis of the applicable and relevant semiotic critical apparatus, within the framework of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. I maintain that this critical and interpretive perspective of the dramatic theater – puppet theater interaction not only sheds light on the logic of representation upon which the opportunities of Shakespearean puppetry are based, but it can also make an important contribution to the understanding of the Shakespearean canon and the extraordinary survival capacity of the dramatic texts I scrutinize.

The themes the dissertation examines are on the borderland of adaptation theory, theater semiotics and puppet theater studies. My position as a practicing puppeteer allows for a unique perspective in all three areas and I introduce this perspective in order to show how practical implications of creating an adaptation may shed new light on the established views of Shakespearean representation, views that traditionally have not incorporated the possibilities inherent in puppet theater

⁴ All of the productions mentioned in this introduction have appeared on the international festival scene and nearly all of them have received national and international awards.

adaptations. However, as it is my firm belief that theory and practice can and should serve one another, I not only reflect upon the ways in which practical experience may contribute to the critical discourse, but also aim to show, in Chapters 4 and 5, how a theoretical framework based in adaptation studies and semiotics can aid the creative process of staging Shakespeare.

I proceeded with the analysis in six chapters, each providing a different aspect of the theoretical background and the practical questions of Shakespearean adaptations on the puppet stage.

Chapter 1. Defining *Adaptation*

In Chapter 1 I define and contextualize the term most frequently used in the dissertation: *adaptation*. I begin the investigation by establishing how and why, in the context of a puppet theater performance of a Shakespearean play, the word *adaptation* is and should be used as opposed to a number of other available terms. It is shown that there is no other term that can refer to both a *process* (as involving reduction and emendation and transformation and recontextualization, all used in a creative way to produce a work of art) and a *product* (as an acknowledged, and thereby recognizable interpretation of the original). In explaining the *process of adaptation* in the specific context of staging Shakespeare in the puppet theater I argue that when undertaking such an adaptation, we must (1) look for and find those elements of the drama which make it relevant for our time and social environment and which can lead us to a new direction for presenting the play; (2) define and follow this newfound direction which differs but also stems from the traditions that take us back to the “original” and its origins, in order to produce a creative interpretation of the play; and (3) in following this direction transform, reduce and emend the play, within the limits of recognizability, to render it suitable for the medium of the puppet theater. Based on these three steps three questions serving as a framework for the process of adaptation are formulated. Thus, the questions to be answered by a director working on an adaptation of Shakespeare for the puppet stage, and consequently, the questions serving as the backbone of this dissertation are (1) WHY (‘why is such an adaptation justifiable and relevant’); (2) WHAT (‘what is the new direction the specific adaptation will take’) and; (3) HOW (‘how will the puppet stage lend new relevance

and actuality to the text and how will the play be suited for the puppet stage in light of the potential horizons of expectations of the audience’).

Chapter 2. Understanding the Puppet Theater

In order to later be able to answer the above questions, in Chapter 2 I provide some essential points of reference for the semiotics of the puppet theater. I first set out to explain the basic differences as well as similarities between the live theater and the puppet stage in order to, on the one hand, establish puppetry as an independent medium with its own rules and methods of representation and, on the other hand, demonstrate how the tools and methodology of puppetry can prove productive in the specific case of adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays to the puppet stage. As it is shown through the analysis of two productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, one on the live stage and the other on the puppet stage, the puppet theater has a variety of methods with which it can present a Shakespearean play, and which strongly set it apart from the traditions of live theater. As I explain, however, despite the innate differences between the two genres some live theater productions have recently started to borrow and learn from the tools of puppetry, as demonstrated by a number of mixed genre performances created by directors of the puppet theater as well as the live stage. Today there are examples of the live stage applying recognizable techniques of puppetry, and the success of performances employing the now shared tools of the two media provides a further insight into the ways in which puppetry and Shakespeare may be brought together to produce a successful adaptation.

Chapter 3. The words of *Hamlet*

Chapter 3 analyzes the practicability and relevance as well as the tools and methodology of three puppet theater adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In answer to the first question proposed in Chapter 1 (i.e. why new adaptations may be justifiable and relevant, and more specifically, whether presenting *Hamlet* without its text is a viable approach to staging an adaptation) it is explained that puppetry, owing to its unique methods of communication and especially to its ability to express complex notions without the use of speech, is capable of providing a medium for an interpretation based on the ‘phenomenon of *Hamlet*’ rather than on the dramatic text.

I argue that the play has been separated from the text itself, and thus consists not only of its written form, but also of all of those cultural connotations and images that we associate with the drama, as well as of our experiences of past performances and readings of the play. In discussing the specific adaptations I point out that while British puppeteer and mime artist Nola Rae's *Handlet*, a nonverbal performance using only hands and colored gloves, employs many of the well-established formulae of puppetry to produce a condensed version of the plot of *Hamlet* rather than reflecting on the characters or the nature of their conflicts; and the string marionette adaptation of the Bulgarian Plovdiv State Puppet Theater, while showing possible interpretations of situations, mainly emphasizes the absurdity of the drama; *Exit Hamlet*, a mixed technique production of German company Figurentheater Wilde&Vogel manages to effectively build an adaptation on the previously established 'complex phenomenon of *Hamlet*' in a largely nonverbal performance, using the tools and methods of puppetry.

Chapter 4. Adaptation in Action – designing and staging *Re:Hamlet*

While in Chapters 2 and 3, due to the obvious limitations of information about the *process of adaptation* in the specific instances, the focus of attention is on *adaptation as a product*, in Chapter 4 I extend the argument to incorporate the *process* element into the examination of a non-verbal, string marionette adaptation of *Hamlet*. In answering the second question formulated in Chapter 1 (i.e. *what* the direction of the adaptation will be) I address the challenge of the text, the issue of technique and the practices of design and movement in my own adaptation of *Hamlet*, entitled *Re:Hamlet*. The challenges of dealing with the text are considered based on the observation that the puppet theater can translate verbal metaphors to visual signs, and is better suited to present a play with the use of images and movement than with the use of the spoken text. In discussing the issue of technique, it is explained that owing to the unique way the string marionette creates the illusion of the object with life it is, among all types of puppets, the most recognizable metaphor for the human being. As such, the marionette it is an appropriate instrument for expressing some of the most fundamental themes of Shakespearean plays, such as power struggles, manipulation or being the victim of unavoidable circumstances.

In answering the third question proposed at the beginning of the dissertation (i.e. *how* puppetry can lend new relevance and actuality to the text and how the play may be suited for the puppet stage), I analyze the specific methods of staging in *Re:Hamlet*. Three scenes from the performance are shown as examples of the way the puppet theater can stage covert motifs of the drama, translate verbal metaphors and allegories to visual signs and emphasize the inner conflicts of the characters with the use of images and action. While I maintain that translating the play to the nonverbal sign system of puppetry is a practicable approach to staging Shakespeare, I also point out that there may be problems with the method when none of the text is used.

Chapter 5. Adaptation in Progress

After the treatment of the possibilities as well as the specific difficulties of staging Shakespeare in the puppet theater, Chapter 5 concentrates on those elements of the plays that seem to lend themselves most readily to the tools of puppetry. I propose a possible approach to creating a performance that, rather than attempting to stage a complete play, aims at designing scenes based on those elements of Shakespeare's world of images where the tools of puppetry offer original yet feasible solutions. Because the chapter presents possible staging techniques for both comic and tragic scenes, I propose several possible explanations as to why tragedies take an overwhelming majority in numbers over comedies in the repertory of Shakespearean adaptations to the puppet stage. As I explain, a number of elements inherent in tragedies, rather than in comedies, allow for a visual representation, some of these elements being the highly figurative and metaphorical language of tragedies; the dramatic tension of tragedies caused by a central character or conflict affecting everyone; and the impossibly difficult internal struggles of tragic heroes or villains.

Chapter 6. "See the Puppets Dallying" - the techniques of puppetry and film

In the final chapter I move away from the practical questions of puppet adaptations and broaden the focus of my investigation to show how the tools of puppetry may be applied not only on the live stage (as explained in Chapter 2) and on the puppet stage (as discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5), but also in one of the puppet theater's closest sister arts, the cinema. I highlight a number of important parallels

between the two genres by first providing an example of each technique of puppetry and then showing how *Prospero's Books*, a cinematic adaptation of *The Tempest* directed by Peter Greenaway, employs these techniques. The investigation of the tools of puppetry outside their usual context serves to demonstrate that this performing medium, while creating its own interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, can also inspire other genres to employ the specific tools of the puppet theater in their Shakespearean adaptations.

Conclusion

As proposed in the introduction, I take advantage of my position as a puppeteer to show, throughout this dissertation, how practical implications of creating an adaptation may shed new light on the established views of Shakespearean representation and to reflect upon the ways in which practical experience may contribute to the critical discourse. In order to achieve this aim I establish an extended definition of adaptation based on the specific requirements of the adapting medium; explain the fundamental difference between the semiotic properties of the puppet and the actor and, in doing so, demonstrate the basic properties of the semiotics of the medium of the puppet theater in order to show what sets it apart from the live stage; identify a set of tools and methods that originate from the puppet theater but which are now also employed on the live stage in adaptations of Shakespeare; provide an understanding of the differences in the properties of Shakespearean tragedies and comedies in view of the tools of representation of puppetry; describe specific ways in which the puppet theater employs its semiotic, aesthetic and dramaturgic characteristics in Shakespearean adaptations; and present a perspective in which puppet theater adaptations of Shakespeare may be viewed as part of the canon of Shakespearean representations.

In addition to my aim of expanding the possibilities of the investigation of Shakespearean representation, I also propose to offer a reference for the practice of creating Shakespearean adaptations for the puppet stage. This I achieve by providing an insight into the process of a number of adaptations and suggesting guidelines for a procedure for staging, based on a theoretical framework of adaptation studies and semiotics. I propose, specifically, that the success of a puppet theater adaptation of Shakespeare primarily based on design and movement will depend on the creators'

willingness to follow through with the steps of adaptation (as described in Chapter 1); their resolve to build the performance on a firm understanding of the basic tools of puppetry (as explained in Chapter 2); on their ingenuity in finding the subtext behind the text by recognizing the “original” itself as an intertextual combination of traditions and inventions (as argued in Chapter 3) and; on their ability to effectively apply the method of translating the dramatic material into the nonverbal idiom of the puppet stage (as proposed in Chapters 4 and 5).

Every play presents new problems and each instance of analyzing or creating an adaptation offers new perspectives. It seems that while an investigation based on the dual viewpoint of theorist and practitioner can provide valuable insight into the principles and practices of the medium, no simple answers are to be found where the representational perspectives and limitations of staging Shakespeare in the puppet theater are concerned. Yet, whether aiming to establish a theoretical context or propose a practical framework, one would like to believe that understanding the problem is at least half way toward devising a solution. The words of Vincentio, the Duke of Vienna, in *Measure for Measure* seem reassuring enough: “all difficulties are but easy / when they are known” (4.2.222-23).⁵

⁵ William Shakespeare. *The Complete Works*. The Oxford Shakespeare, ed. W. J. Craig. London, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1911.

Performances discussed in the dissertation:

- 2000 *The Tempest* (Budapest Puppet Theater, Hungary)
- 2001 *Romeo and Juliet* (Divadlo Drak, Czech Republic)
- 2001 *Hamlet* (Kolibri Theater, Hungary)
- 2001 *Hamlet* (Figurentheater Wilde&Vogel, Germany)
- 2001 *Hamlet* (State Puppet Theater of Plovdiv, Bulgaria)
- 2002 *Twelfth Night* (Vaskakas Puppet Theater, Hungary)
- 2003 *Macbeth* (Márkus Theater, Hungary)
- 2004 *The Comedy of Errors* (California Shakespeare Theater, USA)
- 2004 *King Lear* (Atlantis Company, Hungary)
- 2004 *Macbeth* (Puppet Theater of Grodno, Belarus)
- 2006 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Budapest Puppet Theater, Hungary)
- 2008 *As You Like It* (Marionettentheater Dagmar Horstmann, Germany)
- 2009 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Kolibri Theater, Hungary)
- 2010 *Othello* (Stúdió-K, Hungary)
- 2011 *Romeo and Juliet* (Tandarica Theater, Rumania)
- 2011 *Hamlet* (Bence Sarkadi, Hungary)
- 2012 *Romeo and Juliet* (Compañía Albero Teatro, Spain)
- 2012 *Romeo and Juliet* (Harlekin Puppet Theater, Hungary)
- 2013 *Romeo and Juliet* (Teatro Esquina Latina, Colombia)
- 2014 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Bristol Old Vic and Handspring Puppet Company, United Kingdom)
- 2014 *Macbeth* (The Little Angel Theatre, United Kingdom)
- 2014 *The Tempest* (The Little Angel Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company, United Kingdom)

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