

STAGES AND PAGES: SHAKESPEAREAN ADAPTATIONS

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ABSTRACT:

ADAPTATION IS NOT A TERM SUGGESTING DERISION, MEDIOCRITY OR SUPERFICIALITY. THE POSITIVE VALUE OF ITS LATIN ORIGINS INDICATES THAT THE ONLY EXPLANATION IS A DEGRADATION OF ITS MEANING ALONG THE TIME. IN FACT AN ADAPTATION IS A PROCESS OF RECONSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO THE PROGRESS OF THE ORIGINAL SOURCE THROUGH ITS VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS. IN THE PARTICULAR CASE OF SHAKESPEARE, THE POSSIBILITY TO ADAPT HIS PLAYS, REGARDLESS OF THE MEDIUM OR THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND IS A CHANCE FOR THE MODERN SOCIETY TO REDISCOVER THE TRADITIONAL VALUES, WHICH BUILT THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL FRAME OF THE WORLD.

KEY WORDS: ADAPTATION, STAGE, CINEMA, INTERPRETATION, DRAMA, INTERTEXTUALITY

The ethical perception on the Shakespearean adaptations is no longer a categorization criterion, in a society that rediscovers the radical forms of human tolerance, accepting all the possible variants of gender manifestation, all the revolutionary political and cultural options, in a world where there is nothing more to say or to do. Given this total acceptance and recognition of the pure self with all the weaknesses and the darkness, all the modern and postmodern adaptations of the Shakespearean drama are a solution for the rediscovery of traditional values, without ignoring the contemporary preferences of the public.

Are the Shakespearean plays more attractive on the stages of the theater or the cinema?

We are witnessing an expansion of the influence and the domination of Shakespeare's drama within the theatrical art in both the show and the critical polemics. The authority of William Shakespeare as a man of the theatre and playwright is on the rise. His philosophy or aesthetics of the performance art and the theatrical art in general, becomes more and more interesting not only for the dramatic world, but also for professionals from different fields further surpassing the time or the era in which he lived and created. This intense interest for Shakespeare is particularly important to discuss in private, not in small circles, occasionally and not chaotic, but in an orderly manner, prepared, organised. All the more obvious it becomes that this interest is not coincidental, and neither perishable. It's like a "return to Shakespeare" to the indomitable theatrical art, a sort of post-Shakespearean age. This defines a cultural phenomenon that shows the dedication and the unfamiliarity of the works of William Shakespeare and Shakespearean terminology, as well as any media based on his works or any adaptation of the media of his creation.

What I found particularly intriguing and maybe the premise from which started this modest study have been many perceptions about Shakespeare and his theatre in the contemporary

context and the audacity to edit personally and maybe in an eccentric manner the Shakespearean work, the dramatic material with the risk of becoming outrageous, at the risk of being repudiated from the noble circles of Shakespearean theatrical interpretations. And here I refer not just to the ones who staged plays by Shakespeare – directors, because "outrageousness" of a representation is not always due to them, but I am equally referring to critics, playwrights, translators, who launch new hypotheses of interpretation, of reading through their essays, the drama analyses, new dramas and scenarios that they create or the translators new interpretations.

Shakespeare “is so flexible, so ambiguous, and so consistently funny. And just when you think you've got him, he slips through your fingers. His sympathy for, and understanding of, the basic passions of mankind is extraordinary” argues Peter Hall, founder and Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, who staged thirty-two plays of the Great Will.

The dramatic work of William Shakespeare is today extremely contemporary for all mankind. Beyond the beauty of its texts, it evokes the human experience in all its completeness and complexity about the past and the future, for the present. Another possible reason for the adaptability of his drama to the screen could be related to the fact that “a connection between touch and the field of emotions has always been established”¹. In other words, it is easier for the actor to transfer the emotion of the text to the ears of the spectator than it is for the writer to the reader. Shakespeare's dramaturgy encompasses the most important discussions over the acute problems of humanity today: abandoning the scale of values for the postmodernist theories, the negative implications of globalization, new forms of violence and the lack of interpersonal communication, family breakup, attacks against human nature, as well as intolerance towards sexual minorities, not to speak about the horrendous crimes of terrorism in all possible forms.

Can Shakespeare be considered our contemporary through the reinterpretation of his work?

Shakespeare is for all times, Shakespeare – our contemporary, Shakespeare – a contemporary mystery, Shakespeare for eternity and how many other phrases from whatsoever who validates the drama of William Shakespeare as being out of date for the theatrical scene, timely for the times in which we live, and which constitutes a challenging benchmark of true mastership, or audacity for creators.

Shakespeare has become a brand, a trademark that suits any theatrical season. Chosen especially by important directors or those on the rise, with a reputation of young filmmakers as Thomas Ostermeier, Oskaras Korsunovas, Felix Alexa, but also by titans of the scenes such as: Peter Brook, Eimuntas Nekrosius, Lev Dodin, Declan Donnellan, Robert Wilson, Silviu Purcarete, Andrei Șerban, etc., and critics alike, theatre critics as: Stanley Wells or Paul Edmondson, shakespeareologues as William Poel, Jan Kott, John Elsom or Andrzej Żurowski, who compete more and more in the (re) discovery of the "real" Shakespeare. We find Shakespeare immortalised everywhere and anywhere, on the important scenes of the world or in the small workshops, in ambiental spaces or in cabarets, in the Papal palaces or on the ancient ruins of the world. We meet him more and more often nowadays on stage productions in the company of other playwrights of his time, older, newer, more contemporary, classical, forming valuable alliances or cheap, gaudy meant to shock the public and nothing more.

¹ Manasia, Mihaela, *The biological systems and perception verbs*, Annals of the “Constantin Brancusi” University, Letters and Social Science Series, 1/2016

Shakespeare has been transferred to stage for centuries, but in the same time his work requires to be rebuilt. No Shakespearean representation can be considered inappropriate or timeless, it is the stage director's vision that can be valid or not in terms of interest, concerns and needs of the public. No study about the creation of the dramatic act during Shakespearean times is superfluous. In particular, the European scene is in a continual competition to find new answers to the old Shakespearean questions. The study of the evolution of Shakespearean performances in the 20th century, and it appears that in the 21st century, also reveals a simple truth, the connection to William Shakespeare is in constant metamorphosis and that even more as the reality of our days gives Shakespeare incessantly new arguments. All, directors, critics, playwrights, theatre festivals managers have only one aim, to develop the myth of Shakespearean drama. This generates unique experiments justifying the development of the theatrical art.

“Adaptation” and “appropriation” can involve a natural progress against the original, which is only a general principle which does not always come true. These terms imply: recontextualization, transformation, re-creation.

Shakespeare’s words have been rewritten and remade through a wide variety of cultural means such as: translation, parody, theatrical or cinema adaptations. In the majority of these cases, the question arises whether the adaptation or the appropriation is faithful to the original meaning of the text. This way the reader or the viewer faces a permanent transformation of the original plays.

The conflict between the Shakespearean text and its various interpretations, materialized on stage or on the screen, opens a discussion of cultural re-creation, exploring ideas such as: intertextuality, cultural politics, the relations between literature and theatre or between the artistic activity and its critique.

Another aspect which needs to be considered is how these appropriations and adaptations use Shakespeare and the impact of these variations in the modern world. Tragedy is a literary genre easy to adapt because it represents “the terror in human experience”¹ Shakespeare and his characters sell everything from fishing equipment to candy. Popular television shows and movies have been inspired by Shakespeare’s plays. This way, adaptations produce a retroactive transformation of the original, as it is used and understood in specific contexts and instances of communicative interaction.

The origin of adaptation can be traced back to the Plato term *mimesis* analysed in relation to *diegesis*. This initial approach puts in balance the art capacity to restore the positive model of reality in an authentic manner. Plato’s vision that art is the representation of nature, of good, beauty and truth is enriched by Aristotle’s view. The classical philosopher points out the idea that a work of art can be built on the basis of symmetry, it implies a certain redesigning of reality, as it gives the artist an unique opportunity to frame the world and purify the negative elements. The process of adaptation or *mimesis* in Aristotle terms makes reality more comfortable, although we will get to the conclusion that the evolution to modernity proves the contrary. Later adaptations are meant to show the dark side of human nature, with no curtains, meaning to purify the reader or the spectator after a process of painful confession. If Aristotle draws a clear line between reality and *mimesis* explaining that without it there can be no *catharsis*, meaning no purification through art, for modernity that line disappears. *Mimesis* or adaptation and reality have to be as similar as possible. There can be no *catharsis*

¹ Curelar, Mirabela Rely Odette, *Psychological and mysterious matters existing in the short stories of I. L. Caragiale*, Annals of the “Constantin Brancusi” University, Letters and Social Science Series, 1/2016

without a sincere and a daring exposure of the most hidden and denied human nature weaknesses.

It is obvious that the two coordinates *when* and *where* have an essential role for the creation and afterwards for the reception of any sort of adaptation. Cultural globalization is another phenomenon that has a great impact on this process. Linda Hutcheon studies this correlation in her book, *A theory of adaptation*, highlighting the idea of transcultural adaptations. Cinematic representations depend more than the literary and theatrical forms of artistic creations, on the political and cultural mutations inevitable in the process of globalization.

Another essential issue in the case of screen adaptations regards the advantages of technology and mass communication that lead to innovation and the most spectacular and unexpected examples of Shakespearean adaptations. The film director enjoys far more possibilities to make a Renaissance hermetic text pleasant and appealing for the taste of the contemporary viewer.

Intertextuality is the factor that leads to the development of this permanent process of recreation. The opinion of Roland Barthes according to which any written text is nothing else than the result of all its inspiration sources, extended to the level of theater performance, opens the exploration of the second part of this thesis. The list of Shakespearean stage adaptations, from this chapter of the thesis shows from the starting point of this analysis that the writings of this complex author arouse the interest of writers from all cultural spheres. The chronological factor is the proof that Shakespeare has built an entire history in the domain of artistic creations all over the world. Michael Bristol compares his cultural success with the one recorded by The Beatles or by Elvis Presley. This incontestable popularity converts him into a contemporary author.

The exploration of several examples from this cultural area proves that the popularity of Shakespearean drama among the modern theater directors is due to the main topics that he touches in his works, generally related to the individual typology. This could be the explanation for the adaptability of his plays in modern creations feminist, post-colonial, historical or queer. The Shakespearean work can be read differently by theater producers who find various interpretations for his lines.

We have tried to find answers for the possible questions that a modern theater producer could ask himself when trying to adapt one of the Bard's plays. These are very intriguing because of the anticipations of the modern public. The main difficulty that any stage director can encounter in such a challenge regards the limited possibilities to respect the original text and in the same time to make it suitable for his audience. The conclusion we found is that this dilemma cannot be solved than through minor or sometimes even radical changes brought to the source of the adaptation.

Another important conclusion of the research on this topic is that the political and social context is essential not only for the understanding of the Shakespearean work, but also for a clear perception of the contemporary adaptations. For instance, knowing that Heiner Müller wrote his adaptation *Hamletmachine* at a time of political struggle, influenced by his revolt against socialism is a crucial criticism criterion. Another example is *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Bertolt Brecht that hides behind the lines clear insinuations to the Nazi regime. Besides the importance of the context, the director's personal interests and options on simple human issues or his preferences regarding the elements building drama are vital factors that guide the plot of the adaptation. An example for this argument is an adaptation by the Polish director Warlikowski, *The taming of the shrew* in which he denies the option of the happy ending, adding an intriguing question mark at the classical final question: *and lived happily ever after*. His originality stands in this uncertainty that marriage could be the happy ending.

Another innovative alteration that he brings to his Shakespearean adaptations is giving the spectator the possibility to leave or to stay till the end of the plays *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*. The audience can also decide whether the representation should be performed until the end or not. Giving these options to the public, empowering the person who receives the message of the drama to make such crucial decisions, he may be fulfilling one of Shakespeare's own dreams.

To highlight in clear examples the role of the theater producer and the alterations or modifications brought to the original Shakespearean drama by the adaptation process, we have chosen some of the most popular plays and their transpositions to the stage.

For *King Lear* we have analysed *The History of King Lear* by Nahum Tate and *Lear's Daughters* by The Women's Theater Group. Both of them bring radical variations to the original texts. Tate chose to create a happy ending leaving Lear alive, which transforms the entire message of the play, whereas in the second example the public deals with the material absence of the father from a female dominated play that focuses on issues of ethnicity, class and gender.

The Public is a modern adaptation by Federico Garcia Lorca of the most popular romantic story *Romeo and Juliet*. The modern dramatist chose to rebuild the story transforming it radically. In his version the two lovers don't die together, Juliet understands after Romeo's suicide that her death would be meaningless and therefore she prefers eternal loneliness instead of death. The play also focuses on homosexual repressed feelings and feminism. On a lexical level, Lorca uses a poetic theater through the use of an allusive language, a fragmentary structure and allegorical questions.

Another example from this chapter is Bertolt Brecht's adaptation of *Richard III* called *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. The dramatist depicts in his version real characters, highlighting Richard III whose counterpart in real life is Hitler, the anti-hero of World War II. The parallel between the endings of the two variants of the same story brings to light the conclusion that modernity can change the structure and the message of the Shakespearean drama, keeping the standards of the literary value and originality in the same time. If Shakespeare ends his play in a spirit of resignation in front of the inevitable destiny, Brecht ends in revolt, calling for action, asking his audience to meditate on the subject of the play and to find possible solutions.

A representation focalizes on image and sound effects. Besides the general option of the public for a cinema representation and not for the written text, thanks to the comfort induced by the screen, this kind of adaptation is the most popular nowadays thanks to the television modern technique.

All in all, comparing the Elizabethan drama to the modern cinema, we can deduce that there are major differences between the two. As we saw before, in the Elizabethan theater there is a direct implication of the spectator in the development of the performance, whereas in the cinema adaptation the spectator can perceive the message of the play through a single angle, the perception of the film director.

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