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The goal of my *mise-en-scène* was to read and show *Hamlet* anew, ridding it from all that has been added to it through the three hundred and more years that separate us from the time of its writing.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Shakespeare not only reflects the social, political and cultural discourses of a given society but also has a role in forming them.<sup>2</sup> At the same time this cultural exchange feeds back into a fuller understanding of the potential resonance of his work. As a case study for Shakespeare appropriations in Central and Eastern European culture that work within, and arguably to some extent against, the socio-political framework of the time and place, this paper re-evaluates Nikolai Akimov's scandalous production of *Hamlet* in 1932 at Moscow's Vakhtangov theatre with Dmitri Shostakovich's music. His words, quoted at the head of this article, are paradoxical in the sense that they suggest a return to the original: a claim, which hardly anyone in that audience would have believed was part of his intentions.
- 2 The period between Stalin's consolidation of power in 1928 and the first mention of Socialist Realism in 1932, is now frequently referred to as the Soviet Union's Cultural Revolution.<sup>3</sup> During this time proletarian groups were vocal in their critical attitudes and yet many theatre productions continued in the avant-garde spirit of the 1920s. With hindsight it is clear that a new era was ushered in by the Central Committee 23 April 1932 Resolution "On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organisations", which dethroned RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) and instituted artistic unions. No significant production of *Hamlet* took place in the preceding transitional period.<sup>4</sup> But in 1931 a new production was mooted that would turn into a controversial event in theatre history of the country, caught as it was on the cusp between one social-aesthetic paradigm and another.

- 3 Akimov's *Hamlet* has justly been described as one of the most notorious milestones in the history of Shakespeare theatre productions.<sup>5</sup> It was not just Akimov's controversial scenic solutions but also Shostakovich's extrovert music that contributed to this production being designated as a "Shakesperiment" with the music eventually garnering more praise than the production itself, and enjoying a notably more successful after-life.<sup>6</sup> The premiere, which took place on 19 May, marked the beginning of Akimov's theatre directing career – he had previously worked as a stage designer and artist – and at the same time the end of his collaboration with the Muscovite theatre.<sup>7</sup>
- 4 Born in 1901 in Kharkov (in present-day Ukraine), from 1914 Nikolai Pavlovich Akimov began taking drawing lessons in St Petersburg from various masters, including artists of the World of Art (*Mir Iskusstva*) circle.<sup>8</sup> "From early childhood I had chosen my profession irrevocably", he wrote. "I was to become a [visual] artist. I never had any intention of working in theatre. Later everything turned out the other way round."<sup>9</sup> From the first instance of independent work in the Kharkov Children's Theatre in 1922, he functioned "not just as an artist in theatre but as a theatre artist".<sup>10</sup>
- 5 The pre-*Hamlet* theatre career of Akimov can be divided into three periods:
1. 1922-1924: First works at the Kharkov Children's Theatre and arrival in Petrograd theatres; influence of leftist artists such as Nikolai Evreinov.<sup>11</sup>
  2. 1924-1926: Peripatetic activity as designer in Leningrad theatres, combining small theatrical forms (satire, improv, sketch) with academic ones, staging dramatic shows, even trying opera and operetta.
  3. 1927 to 1932: Recognised as a major theatre artist; invited to work for the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow, starting off as designer until his directorial debut with *Hamlet*.
- 6 Akimov's *Hamlet* was commissioned to celebrate the jubilee year of the Theatre, ten years on from the death of its founder Evgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922) and his most famous production, *Princess Turandot*.<sup>12</sup> Despite being loyal to Stanislavski's psychological approach, Vakhtangov, who had accepted the Revolution quickly and without reservation, was greatly influenced by Vsevolod Meyerhold's theatricality and anti-realism. Impressed by Roman Rolland's *Théâtre du peuple*, Vakhtangov set himself the task of giving art a sharper outline without falsifying its truthfulness to life.<sup>13</sup>

## Anatomy of a Scandal

- 7 Following the more Meyerholdian side of Vakhtangov, Akimov decided to distance himself as much as possible from the most notable recent production of *Hamlet* featuring Mikhail Chekhov, which had premiered at MKhAT II (Second Moscow Academic Art Theatre) in 1924.<sup>14</sup> In Akimov's conception, *Hamlet* was no philosopher. Played by Anatoly Goryunov, an actor mostly known as a comedian, he was a chubby, short, witty bon-vivant, a young man fighting for his right to be the King of Denmark. Thus the plot was emptied of its usual enigmas and instead focused on one main intrigue: the struggle for the Danish throne. Horatio's role was considerably strengthened to represent at once an image of the "eternal student", the failing intellectual and a caricature of Erasmus, whose words Akimov incorporated at some length. Acting as *Hamlet*'s double, Horatio joined him in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, turning it into a dialogue, in the course of which *Hamlet* tried on a papier-

mâché crown left over from the actors' rehearsal. The iconic Ghost scene was completely reinterpreted. Inspired by Erasmus's *Colloquies*, Akimov evoked a masquerade, where Hamlet pretends to be the ghost and Horatio helps him by making spooky noises with the help of a clay pot, by which means the two men try to attract more supporters for their cause. The dialogue between Hamlet and his father's ghost was hence turned into a monologue for Hamlet, in what is effectively a mirror image of Akimov's treatment of "To be or not to be".<sup>15</sup>

- 8 The character of Ophelia also underwent considerable transformation, eventually bearing little resemblance to the traditional pale figure as depicted in Pre-Raphaelite paintings or in the poems of Afanasy Fet or Alexander Blok. Akimov's Ophelia was a femme fatale who knew how to enjoy life. According to him there was no real love between her and Hamlet, and her main function was to spy on Hamlet and to report back to Polonius. Considering her madness and that of Hamlet unacceptable for the modern audience, Akimov tried to explain each of these phenomena in a more rational way. Hence Ophelia gets drunk at the court ball and drowns accidentally. For his part, Hamlet is only pretending to be mad, and he does so, for example, by wearing a saucepan on his head, holding carrots in his hand, and chasing boys and piglets in his nightshirt (Act II scene 4).
- 9 Even today, some of Akimov's decisions raise eyebrows.<sup>16</sup> Akimov's *Hamlet* is often quoted in the context of formalism and Soviet censorship, which is just one aspect appearing mainly in *later* criticisms and studies of the production.<sup>17</sup> Months before the premiere of the production, critics, Shakespeare scholars and Akimov himself had been debating whether there was any need at all for yet another production of *Hamlet*. Articles questioned the rationale behind returning to classics of theatre repertoire and recommended solutions to make them more appropriate for the proletarian audience.<sup>18</sup> Akimov himself pre-announced intentions that were in most cases in line with the critical consensus.<sup>19</sup> Thus there were high expectations of this production, which was widely considered to be an organised effort to bring Shakespeare back to "Soviet Reality". However, for several reasons, aspects of Akimov's concepts got lost in the process of realisation, contributing to the production's short stage life.<sup>20</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the premiere, the general feeling among critics was one of disappointment. This *Hamlet* had proved to be merely a "Shakesperiment", which, as it were, blew up in the laboratory.<sup>21</sup> But in order to understand Akimov's intentions more fully, we need to dig further back.

## Immediate background

- 10 Prior to the premiere of his *Hamlet*, Akimov outlined his plans and the details of his approach in a series of articles in the national press.<sup>22</sup> Here he argued that since the appearance of *Hamlet's* text, each era had interpreted this work in its own way, consciously or unconsciously using the play as a mirror to reflect the ideology of its time. And he announced that "the goal of any production of *Hamlet* in our days is to liberate it from such prisons". The most dangerous of these prisons was, according to Akimov, the problem of "Hamletism" which he believed to have been superimposed on Shakespeare's play by the Romantics of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and by Goethe in particular. Akimov noted that the birth and development of "Hamletism" ran parallel to the development of bourgeois ideology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. "This historical process,

however interesting and educational it may be, does not relate to our specific task of staging Shakespeare's dramaturgy". His goal was accordingly to better understand and interpret "the Shakespeare of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and not the Shakespeare of the 19<sup>th</sup>".<sup>23</sup> If the working material in the 19<sup>th</sup> century consisted of Hamlet's philosophical monologues, "our material is the holistic dramatic work of Shakespeare".<sup>24</sup>

- 11 Referring to the more recent productions of *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre by Stanislavsky and Gordon Craig in 1911 and at MKhAT II, starring Mikhail Chekhov in 1924, Akimov identified their basis in "idealistic philosophy", which focused on "the battle of Spirit and Matter". Akimov granted that, "it is not surprising if the symbolists, the idealists or the mystics didn't use sociological analysis of *Hamlet*. But it will be most outrageous if we in 1932 were to do things the same way as our predecessors". So instead of a "war of symbols and sources", he conceived *Hamlet* as a realistic work about the life of real "living people of the 16<sup>th</sup> century".<sup>25</sup>
- 12 At the same time, he predicted that Hamletism and its attendant mysticism and other "falsifications", were by then so deeply rooted in the audience's sub-conscious that *his* more authentic *Hamlet* would paradoxically appear "false". Akimov concluded that "in our time we should approach the question of interpretation of this work using dialectical materialism", which was according to Stalin "the world outlook of the Marxist Leninist party".<sup>26</sup>
- 13 For Akimov Hamlet was "a highly developed, healthy, optimistic young man whose jokes sparkle throughout the five acts of the play [and who] dies while trying in vain to combine his advanced theories with feudalism in practice" in the society of his time. Akimov summarised his task as: "a creative interpretation of *Hamlet* using methods and devices of our theatre, considering the concrete situation of Shakespeare's era."<sup>27</sup>

## Text, translation and adaptation

- 14 Akimov's claims for, in effect, a fusion of authenticity and contemporary relevance went further. Regarding the problem of translating Shakespeare's play into Russian, he maintained that previous translators, too, had served the ideology of their time, and that by adapting rather than translating accurately they had often taken part in the process of falsification. He illustrated this point through examples from "Belinsky's Apocrypha",<sup>28</sup> claiming that the new translation by Mikhail Lozinski<sup>29</sup> used for his own *mise-en-scène*<sup>30</sup> was "the first exact Russian translation both in form and artistic values",<sup>31</sup> and that "it depicts the character of Shakespeare's language without the usual artificial varnish."<sup>32</sup>
- 15 As for the presence of lines by Erasmus of Rotterdam,<sup>33</sup> this can be explained by Akimov's intention of consciously freeing the play from Hamletism in favour of Humanism, the worldview centred on human agency rather than on the supernatural, dogma and, in more Marxist terms, social rankings. It was for the purposes of defending this conception, among other things, that Akimov turned to what he considered the essence of Elizabethan tragedies and their topicality, describing Hamlet as a "humanist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, well ahead of his time, an individualist dying within his feudal surroundings".<sup>34</sup> In general, he explained, on behalf of the Theatre, "We try to re-evaluate the play in relationship to the philosophy of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: that is, 'humanism' with references to Erasmus's 'Colloquies'."<sup>35</sup>

16 Akimov's unconventional treatment of dramatic text could also be seen as a continuation and a toned-down version of Meyerhold's dictum of the 1920s, which went as far as suggesting that "a play is simply the excuse for the revelation of its theme on the level at which that revelation may appear vital today."<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere Meyerhold responded to accusations of "mutilating the classics" by explaining that "from each work we extract the scenario, sometimes retaining isolated moments of it. But isn't this just how those dramatists worked who since their deaths have become so revered?"<sup>37</sup> The most coherent realisation of all Meyerhold's concepts came in his tackling one of the most canonical texts of Russian literature, Gogol's *Inspector General*. Altering Gogol's original text and even adding to it, Meyerhold created an extended version of the play that included added characters, pantomimes and *tableaux vivants*.<sup>38</sup> Thus, through his methodology, "the play-text was taken from the realm of the dramatic into the realm of the theatrical."<sup>39</sup> In 1926 such interventionist productions could command a degree of comradely support. However, the evolution of the cultural climate from then until 1932 meant that Akimov did not receive such backing for his untraditional treatment of *Hamlet*, and least of all from Meyerhold himself.

## Meyerhold against Akimov's *Hamlet*

17 For Meyerhold, the dream of staging *Hamlet* was a leitmotif of his entire career, never to be realised.<sup>40</sup> However, the constantly changing nature of his numerous references to the play reveals the evolving nature of his approach to *Hamlet*, and to theatre in general. On the other hand such inconsistency in Meyerhold's concepts may also be understood as a result of the changes in the politico-cultural climate of the time and the artists' obligations to manoeuvre accordingly.

18 In 1927 he imagined for his *Hamlet*: "casting directly two actors for the role of Hamlet. Thus, one Hamlet will be playing one part of the role, and the other actor the other part." This would have produced a striking anticipation of Akimov, at the point where, in Meyerhold's conception, "one Hamlet starts reciting 'to be or not to be', and the other Hamlet interrupts him and says: 'But this is my monologue', and burning in anger, the other says: 'Well, I'll just sit and eat an orange while you continue.'"<sup>41</sup>

19 Despite having recently advocated such far-reaching potential alterations, when it came to Akimov's production, Meyerhold took offense and accused the *mise-en-scène* of eclecticism: "I love the Vakhtangov Theatre", he declared in a speech at the Theatre Workers' Club on 26 January 1933, "but their latest, especially *Cowardice and Love* (*Kovarstvo i lyubov*) and *Hamlet* scared me. Eclecticism is the easiest thing. [...] *Hamlet* is shifted from the point at which Shakespeare had put him. And the result is a mess."<sup>42</sup>

20 On 21 May 1934, during his lecture on theatre at the "Intourist" seminar, Meyerhold returned to Akimov's production, using it as an example of an unsuccessful remake of a classic:

The most unfortunate example of this [remaking], in my opinion, is *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov theatre. This is to such an extent "Not Shakespeare" that there is already nothing remaining of Shakespeare. [...] It would be so much more interesting if we directors, when facing the question of classics, started to produce them without making any alteration. At the same time, we can show them in a new way.<sup>43</sup>

By this stage, “Meyerholdism” (*Meierkholdivshchina*) had become almost synonymous with reckless interventionism and experimentation in production. But Meyerhold himself had evidently moved his position, whether out of conviction or expediency, or perhaps a bit of both. Indeed his comments on Akimov’s *Hamlet* are close to those in his famous self-defence in 1936, “Meyerhold against Meyerholdivshchina”, but quite different from his earlier writings and remarks on his attempts at producing *Hamlet*. Above all his suggestion of leaving the classics unaltered is the exact opposite of his own previous practice, as evinced in his production of Gogol’s *Inspector General*.

## Internal debates

- 21 What Meyerhold and the critics were unaware of was that they were only seeing Akimov’s production after it had been extensively discussed, altered and abbreviated by the Theatre, subsequent to many rehearsals and particularly the discussions following the dress rehearsal on 19 April 1932. Taking place over two days, these discussions were attended by members of the crew and cast, and Akimov himself. The accounts of these sessions kept at the archive of the Vakhtangov Theatre reveal invaluable information on details of the *mise-en-scène* and its practicalities, on major concerns of the production team about certain aspects of the show, and on Akimov’s justification of his choices.<sup>44</sup> Reading between the lines, we can glean from the debates something of how Akimov’s production was meant to be, had it not undergone such trials. It transpires that it was not Akimov’s eccentric interpretation of *Hamlet* that caused the main concerns for the production team – perhaps apart from his interpretation of Ophelia, which was flatly deemed “non-Shakespearean”.<sup>45</sup> What worried those present at the debates were: Akimov’s manipulation of Shakespeare’s text; the interpretation of Ophelia; the logical continuity of certain elements such as the clay pot used to evoke the ghost; and the overall length of the production (over five hours) and related logistics. Elsewhere, the directorial team was accused of turning *Hamlet* into *Richard III*, by concentrating solely on his thirst for power.
- 22 Such debates resulted in a production that was definitely shorter, but the cuts meant that it had lost many brilliant scenes and important themes, such as various chase scenes that had given it a special flavour. It was only natural for some critics to complain that “in general the architecture of the composition of the play was destroyed”.<sup>46</sup> But the blame should not have been laid at Akimov’s door alone.

## Aftermath

- 23 So far as the Soviet press of the time goes, one reaction was common: no critic seemed to agree with Akimov’s claims of liberating *Hamlet* and reviving Shakespeare’s concept. The general tone of the critical reception may be judged from such observations as:

Hamlet is reduced to the ranking of a throne seeker and adventurer, admittedly also interested in exact science. [...] Everything is allowed and is legal. Machiavellianism – political theories of Italian Renaissance plotters.<sup>47</sup>  
Akimov has preferred a Hamlet who is unthinking and unreflecting. [...] Akimov’s directorial idea derived from ‘topsy-turveydom’. It was from the start an idiosyncratic academic ‘reductio ad absurdum’. Shakespeare is reduced to absurdity.”<sup>48</sup>



She [Ophelia] languishes in high sensuality. That's it. Is there really nothing else to say about her?<sup>49</sup>

What everyone seems to have forgotten, or simply ignored, was the conditions set by the Theatre repertoire committee (Repertkom) in 1931, when discussing and commissioning the production of *Hamlet* for the anniversary season of the Theatre. As Akimov himself later explained, at the time when his *Hamlet* was in progress the agenda had been very different from the time of the premiere: no rich person or royalty could possibly be a positive hero, and depicting the ghost as a metaphysical creature would also cause concerns. According to Akimov, his changes and interpretative choices made it possible to stage a tragedy of Shakespeare at a time when it was not on top of the authorities' list of priorities.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, what Akimov did was largely working towards the objectives set for him at the time. Of course within a year much had changed in the cultural and political climate of the country. In fact the Central Committee's decree "On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organisations", promulgated barely a month before the premiere, proved to be crucial in determining later views on the ill fate of the production.<sup>51</sup> The reception of Akimov's *Hamlet* was not merely reactive to the problematic mixture of the director's conception and his realisation of it, but it was also to a degree prescribed. Had the production been staged at the time of its conception in 1931, it would most likely have had very different resonances for critics and public alike.

- 24 *Hamlet* was shown in Moscow for only a single season in 1932/33.<sup>52</sup> Yet its shadow followed Akimov throughout his life. In the gathering of artist workers discussing the 1936 *Pravda* article, "On the fight against formalism", Akimov reminded participants that apart from *Hamlet* he had worked on 86 other productions, 19 of them following his doomed *Hamlet*, yet he could not redeem himself from the stigma of formalism as a result of his rendering of Shakespeare's tragedy.<sup>53</sup>
- 25 Even so he was clearly not ready to step back and admit to his mistakes. In 1936 he published an informative essay outlining his reading of Shakespeare's tragedy and his reasons for considering his interpretation more genuine and closer to the "Bard's" intentions and to Elizabethan traditions than traditional *Hamlets*.<sup>54</sup> What was even more curious was that this directorial explication was published in the *annus horribilis* for artists, when most had to either stop creating or reconsider their former works to self-censure or pay the price.
- 26 And this was not to be the last time that Akimov's *Hamlet* was exhumed. In 1943, the Shakespeare Cabinet of the Soviet Union, headed by Mikhail Morozov,<sup>55</sup> returned to this production in a discussion session in the presence of Akimov and certain artists from the production, as well as other Shakespeare scholars. The stenographic notes from this session have been reproduced by Marina Zabolotnyaya.<sup>56</sup>
- 27 The participants considered it their prime role to discuss Akimov's "mistakes" and to draw important conclusions that could then be useful to any new artist attempting an interpretation of Shakespeare's works. All this seemed much calmer and more constructive than the harsh critiques at the time of production. Even the question of formalism was dismissed, with the explanation that a work would be formalist if it had no content or goal, whereas Akimov's intentions, however wrongheaded they might have been, were crystal-clear: namely to depict the struggle for the throne of Denmark.
- 28 The discussions inevitably turned into interrogating Akimov himself, leading to what he described as a "Galileo moment", when he was expected to admit his mistakes. In his



defence, he insisted that if he had concentrated on the intrigue of struggle for the throne, it was mainly to avoid being accused of formalism, which he nevertheless was. Insisting that due to cuts and inevitable changes he did not manage to realise all his goals through the production, he announced his wish to stage *Hamlet* again, once the previous production had been finally shelved. Perhaps the reason why Akimov never did realise that dream is he understood that however different a new production of *Hamlet* by him would be, it would always be in the shadow of 1932.

- 29 Whether Akimov could have deviated so far from the anticipated self-criticism had this meeting been held in 1948 or immediately afterwards, is doubtful. In the years of The Great Patriotic War creative artists were enjoying relative freedom, due to the troubles of war and the over-riding need for boosting the morale of the war-stricken nation. Accordingly, despite some more or less harsh criticism, the overall outcome of the Shakespeare Cabinet's 1943 session can be regarded as the first general retrospective survey of Akimov's *Hamlet* to concede its artistic values and its importance as a landmark in Soviet theatre history.
- 30 If time was a healer for Soviet critics, for their western colleagues distance seemed to lend enchantment to the view. They at least seemed to notice many more positive aspects of Akimov's production in the reviews following the premiere. Today it is almost inconceivable that a Soviet production of a Shakespeare's tragedy by a newcomer at a young theatre, which could be considered Moscow's number three theatre at the time,<sup>57</sup> should have attracted such global attention. Nevertheless, Akimov's *Hamlet* found its way to the international press, including Danish, German, American and English publications, and it was generally viewed as at best a breakthrough masterpiece and at worst an interesting and unusual event.<sup>58</sup>
- 31 One reason why many Western critics admired Akimov's *Hamlet* had to do with its counterbalancing the contemporary trend to consider the play mainly as a vehicle for the star actor of the title role: a trend that still reins to the extent that many productions are merely known by the name of the lead actor (e.g. Cumberbatch's *Hamlet*, David Tennant's...) while the directors are often side-lined. By contrast, Akimov's *Hamlet* was not just "the principal boy continually pursued by the spotlight, but a man among men".<sup>59</sup> All this contributed to Richard Watts Jr from the *New York Herald Tribune* describing the production as "the best show in Europe".<sup>60</sup>

## Shostakovich's Music and its Reception

- 32 If Akimov's *Hamlet* as a whole had a mixed reception, critics were unanimous on one aspect: that Shostakovich's incidental music was excellent. Even *Krokodil* could not help but praise it: "The composer Shostakovich leaves me in a very stupid situation as a critic. You see, when one writes for a satirical journal, one is supposed mainly to tell people off. But Shostakovich has composed such music that there is simply not a single fault with it. Amazing music!"<sup>61</sup>
- 33 Other critics were not much different in preferring Shostakovich's "magnificent" music to Akimov's staging. The harshest words directed at Akimov were probably those of Pavel Markov,<sup>62</sup> who complained that "At times it seems that the production is preventing us from hearing Shostakovich's music, let alone Shakespeare."<sup>63</sup> In this article Markov admitted to having detected brief echoes of Vakhtangov's theatrical credo, not through Akimov's production but thanks to Shostakovich's music: "Only a

few times, during the long duration of the show, could Vakhtangov's principles be felt in it, and almost always this perception was caused not by the director's interpretation nor by the actors' skills, but by the music that Shostakovich composed in the teeth of Akimov."<sup>64</sup> By pointing to contradictions between Shostakovich's music and Akimov's production, the critics were no doubt responding to the problematic relationship between the incidental music and the actual play.

- 34 Do these contradictions mean that Shostakovich's music simply overpowered Akimov's production and thus did not comply with the traditional subordinate function of incidental theatre music?<sup>65</sup> Or were they perhaps a result of lack of communication and close collaboration between the two artists? To this day, no document has emerged to prove that Shostakovich composed his music with any detailed knowledge of Akimov's interpretative solutions.<sup>66</sup> Akimov and Shostakovich may well have elaborated their approaches at least to some extent independently, contributing to the apparent divergence between their readings. Even so, the little we do know about the background to Shostakovich's score helps us to better understand its specific qualities and its relationship to the actual production, whether or not it was worked out through telephone conversations, meetings, or even letters that are now lost.
- 35 A study of the score and Shostakovich's subsequent incidental music in conjunction with his other contemporary opuses reveals several instances of the composer's reusing of his own material. The recycling of musical material between different productions and between his theatre music and other genres suggests that many of his ideas were in fact generic rather than specifically intended for a particular character or scene. This may have been a result of onerous working conditions and strict deadlines dictated by the theatres, to which Shostakovich reacted in his famous "Declaration" article in 1931 (see below); but it also illuminates the composer's "cool-headed grasp of the way the same music could bear different meanings in different contexts."<sup>67</sup> At any rate, for Shostakovich in his twenties, composing incidental music offered an opportunity to try his hand at diverse styles and aesthetic orientations, as well as to test out musical ideas from more ambitious ongoing projects, including most notably, his second opera, *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* (1930-1932).
- 36 This was Shostakovich's first working encounter with Shakespeare, but it would be far from the last. It is curious that in 1929, replying to a questionnaire, the young Shostakovich had admitted to a dislike for Shakespeare's work;<sup>68</sup> however, this was before he had engaged with any of the playwright works as a composer. The 1932 *Hamlet* seems to have left its mark, since from this point on he would return to Shakespeare at regular intervals during his career. Conceivably it may even have been an intimation of the director's untraditional and eccentric approach that tempted Shostakovich into this collaboration, despite his earlier ambivalence towards Shakespeare and theatre music in general.
- 37 In November 1931, Shostakovich had published an extraordinary manifesto in the journal *Rabochiy i teatr*, entitled "Declaration of a composer's duties", attacking the state of music in the theatre world, and denouncing all his own theatrical and film music.<sup>69</sup> Although he promised to fulfil his contract to provide incidental music for *Hamlet*, he vowed to return the advances and cancel contracts for any other incidental music and to reject all future theatrical commissions for the next five years.<sup>70</sup>
- 38 The fact that Shostakovich went ahead with *Hamlet* is easy to trivialise. It has been speculated that he had already spent the advances paid by the theatre, or that it was

difficult to escape Akimov's "convincing charm".<sup>71</sup> But one might equally propose that *Hamlet* appealed to him as an excellent opportunity to set an example of how incidental music might actually resist total "subordination to the theatrical institutions".

## ***Hamlet*: Music and Drama**

- 39 Shostakovich's music to *Hamlet* was and remains the finest example of his theatre music.<sup>72</sup> However, it is often assessed in isolation from the production itself, most analysis being based on the musical material from the orchestral suite which the composer derived from his score and which has entered the concert repertoire.
- 40 Due to the lack of dramaturgical study of the music and production, and indeed the paucity of established theories for analysis of incidental music in general, even considered in its theatrical context, Shostakovich's music is described as closer to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* than anything else in Akimov's *mise-en-scène*. This notion was first implanted by Yury Yelagin, a member of the Vakhtangov Theatre orchestra who emigrated to the West after the War, and who published his memoirs in English in 1951: "The music Shostakovich wrote for *Hamlet* was magnificent. Though it was very modern, it came closer to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* than anything else in Akimov's production."<sup>73</sup> There is some truth in this observation. But the glaring mistakes that Yelagin makes while describing the music and its respective scenes indicate that his memory was, to say the least, fallible.<sup>74</sup> In fact, Akimov's untraditional interpretation of the tragedy is directly reflected in Shostakovich's music in several respects, not least in Shostakovich's equally unusual choice of cabaret genres for several numbers, including one of Ophelia's songs.
- 41 In support of Yelagin's observation, the 60 or so musical numbers of the piano score kept at the Vakhtangov Theatre archive are more or less divisible into the four categories Christopher R. Wilson lists as typical musical cues for incidental music to Shakespeare's works: stage music, magic music, character music and atmospheric music.<sup>75</sup> In this way, all the fanfares, processions and transitional numbers belong to the category of stage music, while Ophelia's songs and the gravedigger's are "character music". Wilson argues that "'atmospheric music' is the most subtle of the four categories, because it is concerned with such intangibles as mood, tone and emotional feeling, and because it may involve changes from suspicion to trust, from vengeance to forgiveness or from hatred to love."<sup>76</sup> So it comes as no surprise that those numbers from Shostakovich's score which could be designated "atmospheric" often belong to another category as well, and that it is by adding extra musical layers that the composer gives them subtle undertones, thereby musicalising the intangibles listed by Wilson. For example, "Hunt" is a "stage music" (quasi-onomatopoeic), which at the same time underlines Ophelia's betrayal. The absence of "magic music" from Shostakovich's score again weighs against Yelagin's claim, in that the composer in this respect was closely following Akimov, who had omitted the ghost and any other supernatural features.
- 42 In general Shostakovich's music to Akimov's *Hamlet* marked a new stage in Soviet/Russian Hamletiana, not least by tackling those aspects of Shakespeare's tragedy that seemed inaccessible for music in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically its irony. In her study of Shostakovich's music for Akimov's *Hamlet*, Elena Zinkevich points out that this was a task that Tchaikovsky had famously declared impossible: "Music cannot find the means

to reveal the irony that is hidden in the words of Hamlet."<sup>77</sup> However, it should be pointed out that the context of Tchaikovsky's remark had to do with his first encounter with Ambroise Thomas' 1868 opera, *Hamlet*. Furthermore, Tchaikovsky was referring to Hamlet the hero rather than the play.

- 43 A few so-called illogical outcomes of the show that were severely criticised could arguably have been avoided had the score been different in its characterisation. As we have seen, the scene of Ophelia's funeral, for example, struck the critics for its overwhelming tragedy, which one would assume as normal for a traditional production, but which is quite irrational if Akimov's depiction of Ophelia and her loveless relationship with Hamlet is followed to its logical conclusion. However, most critics, while praising the magnificent "Requiem" composed by Shostakovich for this scene, failed to see – or at least to comment on – how this and the Funeral March at the beginning of the play resulted in a much darker perception of the scene than Akimov seems to have intended.
- 44 Irrespective of the effect of Shostakovich's music working at times contrapuntally to Akimov's scenic solutions, the convergences and divergences between the setting and its music reveal each artist's creative obsession at the time: securing a career as an independent and self-sufficient theatre director in the case of Akimov, and ongoing work on the opera, *Lady Macbeth* in the case of Shostakovich.
- 45 Hence, and probably because he was trying out the musical ideas for his opera, Shostakovich's most compelling disobedience of Akimov's conception lay in his choice of style. Unlike many productions of *Hamlet* at the time, where the events of the play take place in the Middle Ages, Akimov had decided that it was more logical to place the tragedy in the time of Shakespeare himself. Shostakovich, however, did not follow suit, but instead incorporated cabaret genres such as cancan, tango and galop in an uproarious updated-Offenbach style. As Richard Taruskin observes, it was especially the latter genre that was used extensively in *Lady Macbeth* to dehumanise the characters surrounding the heroine in an attempt by the composer to justify her evil deeds.<sup>78</sup>
- 46 Again in accordance with his sympathetic reading of the otherwise monstrous heroine of Nikolai Leskov's novella, *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Shostakovich seems to have identified common traits between her and Ophelia. These are revealed musically through similar motifs sung by the two women in similar situations, and through the universalised state of tragedy depicted in the "Requiem" accompanying Ophelia's funeral. Here too Shostakovich apparently follows Shakespeare more closely than does Akimov, since in the director's interpretation Ophelia's death was by accidental drowning, following her drunkenness during a court ball. Shostakovich's music, composed as a free interpretation in the style of early music, develops from mourning to a depiction of the inevitability of tragic fate. However, it is Akimov's interpretation of Ophelia as a passionate, sensual and lustful woman which permitted Shostakovich's assimilation of her to the heroine of his opera in the first place; a more traditional reading of Ophelia as the symbol of purity and innocence would have not allowed such representation. In the case of the opera, Shostakovich was his own master, which meant that there was no question of disharmony in the conception, other than between his view and that of Leskov's original.
- 47 In general, apart from drawing on his extensive experience with music for the theatre, Shostakovich's incidental music to *Hamlet* provided him with a laboratory in which to

try out aspects of his still evolving musical language. Being a young composer, and despite the fame that had to some extent already been thrust upon him, Shostakovich's musical language at this time was not yet fixed and secure. Contact with 'big' personalities in related artistic fields, such as Grigori Kozintsev, Akimov, and not least Meyerhold, was crucial in defining his musical persona (or, it might be said, his multiple personae). At this point in his career it could be argued that his concerns were not so much social criticism as how to place himself as modern, individual and at the cutting-edge of artistic developments. The development of his experiments from the 1932 *Hamlet* is not only reflected in his later Shakespearean works, and especially Kozintsev's 1964 film, but also in his symphonies and, more immediately, as we have seen, in his second opera, *Lady Macbeth*. By composing a self-contained music for *Hamlet*, which, as one of the critics of the time over-optimistically put it, would "definitely find its way into the symphonic repertoire,"<sup>79</sup> Shostakovich stuck to his manifesto of not submitting to the instructions of theatre directors. Could we perhaps go further and say that in avoiding compromises and following his inner light, Shostakovich composed music that was simply "too good" for the production, and hence inadvertently exposed the latter's shortcomings?

## Scope for Interpretation

- 48 Perhaps the only way to test this hypothesis would be a reconstruction of the entire production. But such a project faces almost insuperable difficulties. For one thing, the order of musical numbers and scenes could only be worked out by employing several previously unresearched archival materials, and recreating – as closely as possible – what the May 1932 audience would have seen. Such an order would necessarily be different from the one suggested by Gerard McBurney for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra's recording of the incidental music, which in cases of doubt follows Shakespeare's text rather than Akimov's manipulations of it. However, surviving documents would still need to be cross-referenced with eye-witness reports – themselves to some extent problematic – which suggest that certain last-minute changes were made in the choice of scenes and music.
- 49 Studying Shostakovich's score in isolation from Akimov's production as a whole is of course a distortion; similarly, as shown above, it is impossible to evaluate the critical reception of the production without taking into account the effect of Shostakovich's score for each scene and character, as well as the structure of the production and the political and social climate of the time.
- 50 Since its reported disappearance from Russian stages between 1762 and 1809 because of the parallels between the tragedy's plot and the murder of Peter III leading to the reign of Catherine the Great, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been considered, especially in Eastern Europe and Russia, as a politically charged tragedy.<sup>80</sup> In this vein, and especially in the Soviet era, productions of this play have often been read and understood as political commentaries. Akimov's production has raised many such speculations, especially among Western scholars. These theories vary from Simon Morrison's reading of it as a direct allusion to the power-struggle of the 1920s leading to Stalin's accession,<sup>81</sup> to Akimov's supposed efforts to comply with the nascent socialist realist doctrine, as suggested by Boika Sokolova.<sup>82</sup> However, certainly by comparison with such productions and adaptations of *Hamlet* as Yuri Lyubimov's (1970s) and Sergei

Slonimsky's opera (1991), that of Akimov made a relatively passive and generalised political statement on historical and political events, rather than a direct or contemporary one. If anything – again to echo Taruskin's controversial reading of *Lady Macbeth* – by concentrating on the positive impact of a hero in something akin to the class struggle, Akimov's *Hamlet* could be read as affirming the concept of epochal change as outlined by Marxist dialectics. In a more aesthetic vein, the visual and musical treatment of the subject by Akimov and Shostakovich proved that on the eve of Soviet cultural “Perestroika”, it was still possible to look at Shakespeare through contemporary eyes yet at the same time to stay loyal to the “Bard” – or at least to believe in that possibility.

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## NOTES

1. Nikolai Akimov, “O postanovke ‘Gamleta’ v Teatre im. Vakhtangova” [On the production of *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov Theatre], *Teatralnoe nasledie* [Theatre heritage], Leningrad, 1978, Vol. 2, p.119.
2. I should like to thank Dr Yan Brailowsky and Professors Evgeny Dobrenko, Michèle Barbe, David Fanning and Irène Makaryk for their invaluable help. I am also grateful for the service and assistance provided by RGALI (Russian State Archive for Arts and Literature), Shostakovich Archive and Vakhtangov Theatre Archive, as well as for the generous financial support of the Conseil régional d’île de France (MOBIDOC) and Santander Research Mobility Award.
3. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978.
4. See Laurence Senelick and Sergei Ostrovsky, *The Soviet Theatre: A Documentary History*, New Haven, Yale University, 2014, p. 272.
5. Almost every study or mention of this production describes it as a scandal or at least as a controversial production.
6. T. Rokotov, “‘Sheksperiment’ realisticheskogo teatra” [The Shakesperiment of a realist theatre], *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 19 April 1936. The term was applied by Rokotov retrospectively, in the course of a review of a new production of *Othello*.
7. Nikolai Akimov, “Otrivki o nenapisannoi biografii” [Excerpts from an unwritten biography], in N. Akimov *Ne tol’ko o teatre* [Not only on theatre], Leningrad, Iskusstvo, 1966, p. 346.
8. Alexander Bartoshevich, *Akimov*, Leningrad, Teakluba, 1933, p. 23.
9. Akimov, “Otrivki o nenapisannoi biografii”, *op. cit.*, p. 345.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Bartoshevich, *Akimov*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
12. For more on the history of the Theatre, see Nick Worrall, *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage: Tairov-Vakhtangov-Okhlopov*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 102.
13. Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Traditions and the Avant-garde*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 52-53.
14. For more on Chekhov's *Hamlet*, see V. Ivanov, “MKhAT vtoroy rabotaet nad ‘Gamletom’. Gamlet - Mikhail Chekhov” [The MKhAT II is working on *Hamlet* – Mikhail Chekhov as Hamlet], in A. Anikst, ed, *Shekspirovskie chtenia*, 1985, Moscow, Nauka, 1987, p. 216-243.

15. Aspects of the scenario detailed in this paragraph and below are widely attested. See also the production book in RGALI (Russian State Archives of Literature and Arts), fond 2737, op. 2/1.
16. The theatre historian Konstantin Rudnitsky rather unguardedly suggests that “Akimov’s production more than anything else resembled a parody of *Hamlet*”; and musicologist Gerard McBurney, in a survey of Shostakovich’s theatre music, agrees with Rudnitsky’s hypothesis regarding the failure of this production: “it was simply too late for its own time”. McBurney even suggests that “Akimov’s clunkily obvious intention was to turn *Hamlet* on its head.” Both studies compare Akimov’s *Hamlet* to Meyerhold’s theatre productions in the 1920s, ignoring this latter’s negative reaction to Akimov’s *Hamlet*. See Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 270; and Gerard McBurney, “Shostakovich and the Theatre”, in Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 166.
17. See for example Martin Banham, “Nikolai Akimov”, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 13.
18. “Al. K-ov”, “‘Byt ili nye byt’ Postanovki ‘Gamleta’ v teatre imeni Vakhtangova” [To be or not to be a production of *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov Theatre], *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 13 May 1932; A. Kut, “Nuzhno li stavit’ ‘Gamleta’? Mozhno li perekinut’ most ot ‘Gamleta’ do sovremennosti?” [Should we stage *Hamlet*? Is it possible to build a bridge from *Hamlet* to the present day?], *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 12 May 1932.
19. Nikolai Akimov, “Shekspir, pročitanni zanovo. O ‘Gamlete’ v teatre im. Vakhtangova” [Reading Shakespeare anew], *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 11 May 1932.
20. Akimov’s *Hamlet* only survived one season in Moscow. In my personal exchange with Marina Zobolotnyaya, she, probably referring to Yuri Yelagin’s memoirs, claims to have interviewed participants in the production’s tour to Leningrad in 1933.
21. For one of the clearest statements of a perceived gap between conception and realisation, and a reminder of Akimov’s promises and their outcomes, see Iuda Grossman-Roshchin, “Strashnaya mest” [A terrible revenge], *Sovetskiy teatr*, No. 6, 1932, 7-11.
22. “Doklad N. P. Akimova o tragedii V. Shekspira ‘Gamlet’” [N.P. Akimov’s presentation on Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet*], Vakhtangov Theatre Archive no. 526, Svyazka no. 22, op. 1, March 1931. Several versions of this article survive in this archive and at RGALI, fond 2737, op. 2.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Akimov, “Shekspir, pročitanniy zanovo”, *op. cit.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Joseph Stalin, “Dialectical and historical materialism”, in *Problems of Leninism*, Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1976, p. 835-873, here 835. In the course of this lengthy essay, first published in 1938 Stalin traces the origins of the terms to Marx and Hegel and identifies them as pertaining to Marxism-Leninism only.
27. Akimov, “Kak teatr im. Vakhtangov stavit’ ‘Gamleta’”, *Izvestiia Moskva*, 26 March 1932.
28. Akimov was alluding to Vissarion Belinski’s 1838 essay embracing Nikolai Polevoy’s translation and Pavel Mochalov’s rendering which became a milestone in Russian perception of the play.
29. Lozinski’s translation was published for the first time a year after the premiere of Akimov’s production. For more on particularities of this translation and other Russian translations of *Hamlet* see Aleksei Semenenko, *Hamlet the Sign: Russian Translations of Hamlet and Literary Canon Formation*, Stockholm University Press, 2007. For details of Lozinski’s system. see Eridano Baccarelli, “O perevode Bozhestvennoi komedii Lozinskim. Sistema ekvivalentov” [On the translation of *The Divine Comedy* using Lozinski’s equivalent system], in *Sravnitel’noe izuchenie literature: Sb. Statei k 80-letiu M.P. Alekseeva* (Comparative literature studies, collection of articles marking the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of M.P. Alekseev), Leningrad, Pushkinski dom, 1978, p. 315-323.



30. According to Semenenko all Soviet translators had access to different versions of Shakespeare's text (F, Q1, Q2) and Lozinski "most likely used some old 'combined' editions, for example, Edward Dowden's 1899. Both Lozinsky and Pasternak, translated the bits that are missing from F but exist in Q2 and also preserve the lines specific to F only." (From my personal exchange with Alekse Semenenko, 26/08/2015)
31. Akimov, "Kak teatr im. Vakhtangov stavit 'Gamleta'", *op. cit.*
32. Akimov, "O 'Gamlete'", *op. cit.*
33. Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466-1536), often known as Erasmus of Rotterdam, or simply Erasmus: Dutch Renaissance humanist, priest, social critic, teacher, and theologian.
34. Akimov, "Shekspir, pročitanniy zanovo", *op. cit.*
35. Akimov, "Kak teatr im. Vakhtangov stavit 'Gamleta'", *op. cit.*
36. Meyerhold, "Meyerhold o svojom Lese" (On my Forest), *Novy zritel*, no. 7, 1924, p. 6.
37. Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 171, originally in *Vestnik teatra*, 1920, no. 72-73, p. 8-10.
38. For a bibliography of some of the literature on Meyerhold's *Inspector General* see Sergei Danilov, *Revizor na stsene [The Inspector General on the stage]*, Leningrad, 1954.
39. Silvija Jestrovic, "Theatricality as Estrangement of Art and Life in the Russian Avant-garde", *SubStance*, no. 98/99, 2002, 42-56.
40. Nikolai Volkov, *Meierkhol'd*, Moscow and Leningrad, Akademiia, 1929, p. 26.
41. Stenographic report from Meyerhold's 1927 speech at the Great Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonia, TsGALI, Fond 998, op. 1/646.
42. Published as "Vs. Meierkhol'd, Put' aktera" (Vs. Meyerhold, the actor's path), *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, No. 10, 26 February, 1933.
43. Stenographic report, TsGALI, Fond 963, opis 1/46.
44. Stenographic report of discussions, 19 and 21 April 1932, Archive of Vakhtangov Theatre, Moscow, Fond 22, opis 1/530.
45. *Ibid.*
46. "Perviy disput o 'Gamlete' v teatre Vakhrangova" [The first discussion of *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov Theatre], *Literaturnaya gazeta*, No. 25, 5 June 1932.
47. Ilya Berezark, "Avanturist i gumanist" [Adventurist and humanist], *Rabis*, No. 16, 1932, p. 7.
48. Pavel Markov, "'Gamlet' v postanovke Akimova" [*Hamlet* staged by Akimov], *Sovetski teatr*, 7-8, 1932, p. 15-18.
49. Iuda Grossman-Roshchin, "Strashnaya mest", *op. cit.*, p. 8.
50. Marina Zabolotnyaya, "Obsuzhdenie akimovskogo 'Gamleta'. VTO. Kabinet Shekspira, 29 sent. 1943 g" [Discussions of Akimov's *Hamlet*], *Mnemozina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka*, Moscow, VTO, 2004, p. 415.
51. See Rudnitsky, McBurney, *op. cit.*
52. Personal conversation with Maria Zabolotnyaya, November 2013.
53. Stenographic report from meeting of art workers (*rabotnikov iskusstv*), 9 April 1936, RGALI, Fond 962, opis 3, d. 80, 34.
54. Akimov, "O postanovke 'Gamleta' v Teatre im. Vakhtangova", *Op. cit.*, p. 119; and Akimov, "O postanovke 'Gamleta' v teatre im. Vakhtangova v 1932 g." (On the production of *Hamlet* at Vakhtangov Theatre in 1932), in *Nasha rabota nad klassikami*, Leningrad, Leningrad. Rezhisserov, 1936, p. 125-168.
55. Mikhail Morozov (1897-1952), Soviet Shakespeare scholar and theatre critic.
56. Marina Zabolotnyaya, introductory article to "Obsuzhdenie akimovskogo 'Gamleta'". VTO. Kabinet Shekspira, 29 sent. 1943 g", *op. cit.* p. 393-396.
57. With MKHAT and Stanislavsky/Nemirovich-Danchenko as numbers one and two; the Vakhtangov Theatre was relatively young at the time.
58. Ivy Law, *Moscow Daily News*, 24 May 1932.
59. *Ibid.*

60. Richard Watts Jr, *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 June 1932.
61. Anon., “V plane i razreze” [In the plan and the cut-away], *Krokodil*, No. 17, June 1932.
62. Pavel Markov (1897-1980) was a theatre critic and head of literary section of Moscow Art Theatre.
63. Pavel Markov, *O teatre*, Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1977, Vol. 4 (diary of the theatre critic: 1930-1976), 67, orig. pub. “‘Gamlet’ v postanovke N. Akimova”, *op. cit.*
64. *Ibid.*
65. For a rare study of theories of incidental music, see Kim Baston, *Scoring performance: the function of music in contemporary theatre and circus*, unpublished PhD dissertation, La Trobe University, 2008.
66. The two short letters that survive from the correspondence between these two men only reveal that Shostakovich started the composition quite late, due to his being overloaded by other projects, as he put it.
67. McBurney, “Shostakovich and the Theatre”, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
68. Roman Ilich Gruber, “Responses of Shostakovich to a Questionnaire on the Psychology of the Creative Process”, in Laurel Fay, ed., *Shostakovich and His World*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 31.
69. Shostakovich, “Deklaratsiia obiazennosti kompozitora” [Declaration of a composer’s duties], *Rabochiy i teatr* No. 31, 20 November 1931, p. 6.
70. Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 64.
71. Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 128.
72. For a recent sympathetic survey of his other contributions in the field, see McBurney, “Shostakovich and The Theatre”, *op. cit.*
73. Yuri Yelagin, *The Taming of the Arts*, New York, Dutton, 1951, p. 35.
74. One such mistake, concerning the instrumentation of the recorder scene (which featured a parody of Alexander Davidenko’s march “Nas pobit’ khoteli” [They wanted to beat us]), is pointed out by McBurney. However, McBurney fails to notice Yelagin’s further mistake regarding the placing of this music, which was in fact originally to accompany the Hamlet and Rosencrantz scene rather than the recorder scene. One explanation could be that that the Hamlet and Rosencrantz scene may have been excised before the opening night and its music incorporated elsewhere.
75. Christopher R. Wilson, “William Shakespeare”, in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, eds., *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, London, Macmillan, 1992, Vol. 4, p. 338-347.
76. *Ibid.*
77. Pyotr Chaikovskiy, *Polnoye sobraniye sochinenii*, Vol. 2, Moscow, Muzyka, 1977, 301, quoted in Elena Zinkevich, “Muzyka k pervomu ‘Gamletu’” [Music to the first *Hamlet*], *Sovetskaya muzyka*, No. 5, 1971, p. 96-98.
78. Richard Taruskin, “The Opera and the Dictator: the peculiar martyrdom of Dmitri Shostakovich”, *The New Republic*, 20 March 1989, p. 38-39.
79. E. Galski, “Muzyka k ‘Gamletu’” [The music for *Hamlet*], *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 27 May 1932, No. 24.
80. Eleanor Rowe, *Hamlet: a Window on Russia*, New York, New York University Press, 1976, p. 13.
81. Simon Morrison, *The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 82.
82. Boika Sokolova, “Between Ideology and Religion: Some Russian Hamlets of the Twentieth Century”, in Peter Holland, ed., *Shakespeare Survey Vol. 54: Shakespeare and Religion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 147.

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## ABSTRACTS

When in 1932 the young theatre artist Nikolay Akimov made his directing debut with *Hamlet*, nobody expected to witness one of the biggest scandals of Russian/Soviet theatrical history. Akimov's production for the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow had every element of the famously controversial style of Vsevolod Meyerhold (Russia's Bertolt Brecht), including an apparently irreverent score by the equally young Dmitry Shostakovich. Yet even Meyerhold criticised the show severely. With Ophelia portrayed as a drunken prostitute, and Hamlet as a short, fat comedian, it is hardly surprising that critical opinion should have been sharply divided, agreeing only that Shostakovich's music was the best thing about the production. Over the years Western views – without the benefit of access to materials in Moscow's theatre archives – have become rigid and reductionist. As a case study for Soviet appropriation of Shakespeare, this paper suggests an understanding of Akimov's intentions more grounded in documentary evidence, not least in relation to the socio-political and cultural climate of the time and to Shostakovich's music, which, paradoxically, may have been too skilful for the good of the production.

Lorsqu'en 1932 le jeune artiste Nikolaï Akimov fit ses débuts comme metteur en scène en montant *Hamlet* de Shakespeare, personne ne s'attendait à l'un des plus grands scandales de l'histoire du théâtre russe/soviétique. La mise en scène d'Akimov au théâtre de Vakhtangov de Moscou avait tous les éléments typiques des œuvres de Vsevolod Meyerhold (le « Bertolt Brecht russe »), y compris une musique de scène excentrique et apparemment hors sujet du jeune Dimitri Chostakovitch. Pourtant, même Meyerhold critiqua sévèrement cette « Shakespérience » d'Akimov. En réinterprétant Ophélie en prostituée et Hamlet en bon vivant, la mise en scène d'Akimov suscita des réactions partagées de la part des critiques. Cependant la musique de Chostakovitch fit l'unanimité. Sans bénéficier d'accès aux documents d'archives, les études occidentales de cette mise-en-scène sont souvent réductionnistes et rigides. Dans cette communication, en m'appuyant sur les sources primaires et les matériaux des archives et en se tenant compte du contexte politico-culturel de pays soviétique, je cherche à mieux comprendre les intentions artistiques d'Akimov pour son *Hamlet* et à souligner les points de convergences et de divergences avec la musique de scène de Chostakovitch. Enfin la question se pose de savoir si une musique de scène, dont la fonction est d'accompagner un spectacle, peut le desservir par sa qualité même.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Akimov Nikolai, Hamlet, incidental music, Meyerhold Vsevolod, music, Russian translations, Shakespeare in the Soviet Union, Shostakovich Dmitri, Soviet theatre

**Mots-clés:** Akimov Nikolaï, Chostakovitch Dimitri, Hamlet, Meyerhold Vsevolod, musique, Shakespeare en russe, Shakespeare en Union Soviétique, théâtre soviétique

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