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Staging Henry James: A Memory

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When in the spring of 2013 Professor Mirosława Buchholtz was organizing a conference devoted to Henry James,¹ a team of actors from the Spinning Globe Theatre were invited to participate in the event by staging a play for its participants. As we would later learn, staging a play by Henry James was to prove a considerable challenge, but also an enriching experience for a company that specializes in the works of William Shakespeare.

The Spinning Globe was founded at the Department of English, Nicolaus Copernicus University in 2005 when Mr. Roger Williams, formerly Her Majesty's Inspector for Education, was invited to conduct a drama workshop for the students of English. The initial plan for the enterprise was to study a variety of acting techniques with the focus on such theatrical basics as breathing, voice emission, diction and the rudiments of stage movement, culminating with an open rehearsal of a play called *All the World's a Stage*. A compilation of famous scenes from Shakespeare's plays, *All the World's a Stage* was intended as instructional material for the young actors. It revolved around a loose central plot of a person passing through life, from birth to death. The anticipated finale was never to be achieved, however, largely due to the enthusiasm and ambition of the students fuelled by the charismatic Mr. Williams, an experienced acting teacher and director. As a result, the play was shown as a completed performance to an audience consisting of the Department of English staff, students, friends and families of the actors.

The final outcome of the cooperation with Roger Williams incited further support from the Department, and Roger Williams was invited to come to Toruń on a regular basis putting on annual Shakespeare performances with the group of students that came to

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¹ "Henry James: His Great Wars and Battles" Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland, 26–28 April 2013.

be known as The Spinning Globe, in honor of both William Shakespeare and Nicolaus Copernicus, the patron of the University.² In the following years, The Spinning Globe staged a selection of Shakespeare's famous plays: *Hamlet* (2006), *Twelfth Night* (2007), *Macbeth* (2008), *As You Like It* (2009), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2010), *The Taming of the Shrew* (2011), *The Tempest* (2011), *Romeo and Juliet* (2013), *The Merchant of Venice* (2014), *Julius Caesar* (2015), *Much Ado About Nothing* (2016), as well as a variety of contemporary plays: *Hysteria* by Terry Johnson (2011), *Woman in Mind* by Alan Ayckbourne (2012), *Summersoft* by Henry James (2013), and *The Grafton Street Barricade* by Jarosław Hetman (2016; also staged in 2004 as a seminar project).

Staging William Shakespeare with Polish students of English is demanding, nevertheless, it proves to be an attractive way to teach the young people not only the skills required for performing, but also, perhaps even more importantly in the academic context, skills and knowledge in the field of English literature. Working on contemporary productions has a different dynamic; relying on the enthusiasm and need for exploration, we allow students more freedom and space for self-expression. Preparing a play by Henry James was, to an extent, experimental, as we tried to combine the two approaches.

The first challenge was to select the play. *Guy Domville*, James's best known drama, could be seen as the most obvious choice, yet it is burdened with its initial reception, and therefore it seems controversial in terms of commemorating Henry James. Moreover, its length and complexity would involve heavy editing for the requirements of a conference program, which in itself does not serve the purpose of honoring a writer's legacy particularly well. *Summersoft*, which followed *Guy Domville* under a year later, posed none of the threats of its predecessor. The lightness of its humor and the presence of characteristic Jamesian themes, such as confronting the American with the European, the importance of nuance in social conduct, or marital careerism, made it an appropriate addition to the conference. Written as a curtain-raiser, it had the brevity and the bravado that suited the occasion.

Although meant to demonstrate the talents of one of the actors, *Summersoft* features a selection of interesting parts with significant comic potential. Chivers, the elderly, nearly deaf manservant who opens the play and sets its mood, is the prime source of amusement, but is quickly matched with the hilarious parsimony of Prodmore, the infantile idealism of Yule and the youthful naivety of Cora. The play is set in the eponymous Summersoft, a poorly maintained country estate inherited by Captain Yule but neglected for financial reasons. The inheritance itself proves to be burdensome for the young nobleman, because as opposed to his ancestors, he is not interested in preserving the family wealth for future generations. Instead, the Captain is preoccupied with a political struggle in defense of the working classes. In the process of helping the poor, Yule himself becomes impoverished, and his debts are bought out by Prodmore, who plots to match the young man with his daughter Cora. The adolescent girl has enjoyed all of the privileges money can provide, but lacks the status that comes with an aristocratic name.

Prodmore's plan begins to crack with the arrival of Mrs. Gracedew, a wealthy American widow on a tour of Europe. A walking stereotype of an upstart American, before she appears on the stage, Mrs. Gracedew is introduced by Cora as an admirer of old abbeys, old houses and even old hospitals. Making her appearance, the widow expresses her fascination

² Such a name for the theatre was suggested by Jarosław Hetman.

with the “authenticity” of the poor English servant Chivers, a representation of her preconceptions of old Europe: slightly dilapidated but with a heritage lacking in the prospering, yet culturally unrefined United States. Her go-get attitude allows her to compensate for her shortcomings, as it is Mrs. Gracedew who gives Captain Yule a tour of his own house, explaining all the intricacies of its architecture and decor. As they speak, she reveals to be alien to the political divisions of Europe of the time. Neither a conservatist, like Prodmore, nor a liberal, like Yule, she is pragmatic and her opinions adjust to the circumstances. Through discreet hints, James signals Mrs. Gracedew’s growing affection for Yule, as he finally consents to marry Cora, ignorant of the fact that Cora is not willing to marry him. Upon learning that Cora’s heart belongs to Mr. Buddle, the son of a wealthy businessman from the neighboring Bellborough, Prodmore is furious. His rage is appeased, however, when he learns that Mrs. Gracedew is willing to buy back the mortgage on Summersoft for considerably more than it is worth. The play heads towards a happy ending with Captain Yule so grateful to his benefactor that he proposes marriage.



Mrs. Gracedew meets Chivers. Photo by Izabela Olewińska

Summersoft was staged in Toruń with the following cast: Chivers – Mikołaj Pawlak, Prodmore – Jacek Stopa, Cora – Wernika Czorniej, Yule – Karol Zejfert, Mrs. Gracedew – Marta Sibierska, the Visitors: Monika Boruta, Magdalena Łapa and Bartek Goszczyński. James specified the setting as “an old English country-house; which has the mark of extreme antiquity and of several very beautiful and curious architectural and decorative features. It shows [...] the fallen fortunes [...], but still contains some very charming and valuable old objects, domestic treasures, portraits, relics of the past.”³ These stage directions are both particular and, to a degree, vague: “extreme antiquity,” “curious architectural and decorative features,” or “relics of the past” did not provide us with much detail. They seem like interpretations of an image James had in his mind, rather than a description of that image. They add up to the impression of Summersoft’s splendor, which needed to be somehow – con-

³ H. James, *Summersoft*, 1895, *The Ladder*, accessed October 20, 2016, <http://www.henryjames.org.uk/summer/home.htm>.

cretely rather than symbolically – translated onto the stage design, creating at the same time a challenge for an amateur theater with a limited budget.

The solution came with the choice of the venue. The theater used the space of *Dwór Artusa*, a late nineteenth-century building in the heart of the city, with a Neo-Renaissance façade, Neo-Gothic windows, and ornamented rooms. Of course, it is architecturally far from an English country-house; still, it gave us the kind of splendor that we could build the impression of *Summersoft* on. The doors, the floors, the decorative wallpaper and wall paintings served us as a stage background, to which we had to add only a few key properties.

This kind of space, however, is hard to intervene in; instead, we had to negotiate with it. In one of the initial scenes, Yule and Prodmore discuss Yule's debt and Prodmore's taking over *Summersoft*. At one point in the text, Yule lights up a cigarette:

PRODMORE

[...] (*Encouragingly, patronizingly.*) Make yourself at home.

YULE

Thank you very much, Mr Prodmore. May I light a cigarette?

PRODMORE

In your own house, Captain?

YULE

That's just the question – it seems less my own than before this grim vision of it! (*Then, as he lights and begins to smoke a cigarette, offering one also to PRODMORE, which PRODMORE takes.*)⁴

Due to the safety regulations, we were not able to light up a cigarette on stage. Thus, our Yule took it out, asked Prodmore the question, but, despite his answer as if in the affirmative, he had to hide it back in his pocket. This seemingly minor change that we were forced to introduce shifted the sense of the whole conversation: Yule became even more passive and pathetic than James designed him to be, and his situation gained an even more bitter, tragic tint. The sense of a little solidarity between the two characters that share a smoke, the bridge over their political and social differences that James built between them was gone.

Our production of *Summersoft* was not only about negotiating with the space, but also about negotiating with the text. The theatre constantly struggles with the challenge of adapting English texts to the needs of our audiences, most of whom are Polish and speak English as a foreign language. *The Spinning Globe* performed *Summersoft* twice, for two very different audiences. First, the production was attended by James scholars and the audience was able not only to understand the text fully, but also to recognize certain elements of style that are distinctive of James's fiction, his characteristic themes, and most importantly, the playful use of convention that was a source of humor. Second, as a part of the Toruń Art and Science Festival, the show was open to the public, and the viewers were inhabitants of Toruń and university students; some academics from various fields attended. These spectators were largely unfamiliar not only with *Summersoft*, but also often with the works of James. As a result, without contextual points of reference, they relied entirely on what

⁴ Ibidem.

was before them. These viewers varied in their command of English. In view of these limitations, we tried to incorporate slapstick humor into the performance.

With the Festival audience in mind, some “simplifications” were unavoidable, other alterations were made for the sake of the authenticity of the actors’ delivery. Some of the lines – especially Mrs. Gracedew’s raving about the house – did not come out quite naturally. They were verbose and complex, with clearly marked emphasis, many interruptions and interjections, parallelisms, and a lot of subtle word play. To make Mrs. Gracedew as “American” as possible and keep her lines loud and fast-paced, but at the same time understandable, we had to delete or re-shuffle some of them. Below, we present a sample passage after alterations (all the elements added are in bold):

MRS GRACEDEW

[...] Why do you make such a fuss about changing your politics? If you’d come to Missourah Top you’d change them quick enough! What do politics amount to – compared with *religions*. Parties and programmes come and go, but a duty like *this abides remains*. There’s nothing you can break with that would be like breaking **what you’ve got here**. The very *word’s* a violence – a sacrilege: your house is a kind of altar! You *must* have beauty in your life – that’s the only way to make *sure* of it for the life of others. Keep leaving it to *them others*, and heaven knows what they’ll *do* with it! Does it take one of *us* to feel that? – to preach you the *truth*? Then it’s good we come *over*, to see what you’re about! We know what we *haven’t* got, and if *you’ve* luckily got it, you’ve got it also for *us*. You’ve got it in *trust*, and oh! we have an *eye* on you. You’ve had it so for *me*, all these dear days, that, **To** be grateful, I’ve wanted to *do* something. (*Pleading*.) Tell me now ~~I shall have~~ **I’ve done** it – ~~I shall have~~ **I’ve** kept you at your *post*!⁵

Such slight shifts made the lines more natural: both in the sense of our delivery and their clarity for the audience. Our negotiations with the text included also an instance of deliberate disregard of it. In the scene in which Chivers shows the visitors around Summersoft, James exposes him as incompetent or even incomprehensible, providing the party with inaccurate information about the site. In our version, the actor portraying Chivers did not learn those lines on purpose, to talk even greater nonsense than the original servant. This, in turn, made it more natural for Mrs. Gracedew to interrupt him and actually take over.

To meet the needs of the younger members of the audience, especially during the second performance, we tried to contemporize the interactions between the characters. We were looking, for instance, for more modern forms of flirting between Mrs. Gracedew and Yule, to make the developing bond between the two recognizable to those who may not have inferred it from the word play or subtle cues in the text. Thus, when Mrs Gracedew comments on Yule’s family portraits (“observe the family legs”⁶), she “eyes” him up and down in a way which is now almost a convention. To stylize Yule as an activist-like figure, which would be more familiar to our audience than “a rabid reformer” of the late nineteenth century, we dressed him in a contemporary, Greenpeace-like, army-style jacket and made him switch his aristocratic accent into cockney while speaking about his war against “injustice and privilege.”

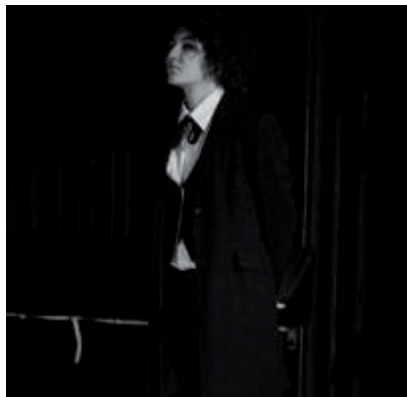
⁵ Cf. *ibidem*; italics in the original.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

At the same time, we had to be careful not to overdo the contemporizing, as we wished to satisfy also the scholarly audience. We were not able to create authentically looking nineteenth-century costumes; we wanted, though, to make our actors look as if from another era, be it an imaginary one. We used clothes of as old-fashioned a cut as possible, added bow ties, vests, vintage necklaces, a string of pearls, and flat caps.



Captain Yule and Prodmore discuss the future of Summersoft.
Photo by Izabela Olewińska



The Visitors to Summersoft. Photos by Izabela Olewińska

The two most overdressed characters were certainly Prodmore and his daughter: the symbols of the old England in a frock coat and a bouffant red dress.

While balancing between the expectations of the two different audiences, we also aimed at taking them by surprise. *Summersoft*, especially for the experts on James, is in a way predictable: they know more or less what will happen, and all the plot twists are introduced merely by means of dialogues. We decided, against James's detailed directions, to breach this tendency with a number of physical actions that are not included in the original text. Thus, the penultimate scene, the rendezvous between Mrs. Gracedew and Yule, was supplemented with a near-kiss, spoiled by the sudden entrance of Chivers. In the scene in which he smashes the "rare old Chelsea pot" that Mrs. Gracedew set her sight on, we decided to actually break a piece of porcelain. The actor playing Chivers did not tell the rest of the cast

when exactly he was going to do it, so both Gracedew's and the audience's surprise was authentic. So were the little pieces of the pot that travelled to all the corners of the stage and down at the audience's feet.



Cora in the red dress. Photo by Izabela Olewińska

These alterations and additions to the text allowed us to transform *Summersoft* into a piece easier to decipher – and digest – for the regular audience, preserving its subtleties that satisfied also the expectations of James connoisseurs. At the beginning of the adapting process it seemed a challenge more than anything else, but during the process the drama turned out to open up many possibilities. We could acknowledge them only by altering and adding, which eventually made us appreciate more the material we were working with. For James's one-act comedy, although light and entertaining, does speak about a number of interesting social phenomena of the time. Yule, for instance, represents an interesting egalitarian shift within the aristocracy that can be connected to such transformations as these that later would lead to, for instance, the Soviet Revolution in Russia. James exposes the naivety of the Captain's idealism and anticipates the poor outcome of his efforts, had it not been for the marriage with Mrs. Gracedew. The soothing appearance of the American on the European stage itself seems like an uncanny prefiguration of Europe's history that Henry James would never witness. Mrs. Gracedew, apart from embodying a number of stereotypes about Americans for comical purposes, with her pragmatic approach to the tensions between left and right wing politics, is like a breath of fresh air. Her go-get attitude exposes the flaws of both Yule's impracticality and Prodmore's empty ambition. Of course, her fascination with everything that is old is an amusing comment on the American struggle for a history, but her knowledge and appreciation of European history is undeniably laudable.

In terms of literary quality, Henry James's *Summersoft* is unquestionably surpassed by his prose, which has entered the canon of American literature. Nonetheless, it should not be perceived as second-rate simply because James wrote excellent fiction. We would rather propose it as an interesting form of entertainment to the James connoisseur, or an amusing tidbit to the literary scholar and lighthearted lesson of literary history to the general audience. To the admirer of James's talent it is reassuring that after the failure of *Guy Domville*, he could, if briefly, return to write for the stage showing such a sense of humor.