

“A rose by any other name”. Contemporary Hungarian Shakespeare Adaptations on Stage and in Cyberspace

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Abstract: The essay is a survey of recent Hungarian Shakespeare adaptations. In the first part, the essay looks at adaptations that experiment with the Shakespearean text, yet they still market themselves as Shakespeare productions; while they keep most of the Shakespearean plotlines, they freely alter the structure of the Shakespearean texts, dismantle chronologies, shift language registers, and contextualize the plays in a contemporary Hungarian setting. Examples are Örkény Theatre’s 2019 *Macbeth* and *The Shaxpeare Car Wash in Kertész Street*. In the second part, the essay moves over to appropriations that are not straightforward rewritings of Shakespeare’s play; they use Shakespeare and the Shakespearean plotlines as cultural metaphors. The plays we discuss (Káva Cultural Workshop’s 2016 *Lady Lear* and Éva Enyedi’s 2018 *Lear’s Death*) both adapt *King Lear*, and strangely, they both appropriate the character of King Lear as a symbol to discuss aging in a contemporary setting. The final example the paper introduces is a Shakespeare burlesque, written by Zolt Györei and Csaba Schlachtovszky, that premiered at the Gyula Shakespeare Festival in 2021. The essay contests that although the play camouflages itself as a 19th-century melodramatic tragedy, using reflective nostalgia, it becomes a voice of cultural plurality, healthy self-reflexivity and subversion.

“Shakespeare is a 19th-century Hungarian author”, as the great Hungarian Shakespeare scholar, Kálmán Ruttkay used to say. His joking remark, however, did contain more than a grain of truth, since, indeed, for much of the 20th century, Shakespeare’s works were read and performed in translations that originated in the 19th or early 20th century. Trans-

lated by some of the most important poets of Hungary and canonized in the *Collected Edition of Shakespeare’s Works* in 1955¹, Shakespeare’s texts appeared for the Hungarians as poetic, yet somewhat aged. Even if these translations contained factual errors, or were almost illegible for theatregoers, changing them was considered a sacrilege.²

This long-upheld practice slowly changed after the 1990s, when theatres started to ask for custom-made re-translations of Shakespeare’s plays for their productions. Ever since then, most new Shakespeare translations in Hungary are commissioned by theatres, yet only a few of them, among others, poet and linguist Ádám Nádasdy’s translations, reach canonical status, and are taught in schools, too. All in all, the wider variety of texts available does influence productions to pick and choose, thus allowing for Shakespeare to be represented in textual plurality in 21st-century Hungary. This plurality also effected the surge of new Shakespeare adaptations that appeared in the past twenty or so years. Indeed, we can finally claim that today Shakespeare’s texts are “no longer treated with the reverence that had characterized earlier periods of the Shakespeare cult, [since] (m)ore and more typically, the Shakespeare text – whether published in a literary edition, or only available as a newly translated performance script – is treated as

¹ KÉRY László (ed.), *Shakespeare Összes Művei* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1955).

² See e.g. the controversies around István Eörsi amendments to János Arany’s *Hamlet* in 1983, in Veronika SCHANDL, *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-Regime Hungary: Shakespeare Behind the Iron Curtain* (Leicester: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 53–81.

raw material, as a jumping board, rather than the unchanged and unchangeable core of the production design."³

With all that said, it must also be remarked that the Hungarian theatre world has traditionally been extremely text- and literature-centered, both in production and in reception. It has not emancipated itself from the primacy of literary discourse and the postdramatic theatre that Lehmann describes, which questions the linearity of narratives, while stressing the "simultaneous and multiperspectival form of perceiving"⁴, is not integral to the history of mainstream Hungarian theatre.⁵ In a recent volume of *Theatralia* that concluded a two-year V4 project on the post-1989 Central-European reception of Shakespeare, several essays on Hungarian Shakespeare productions lamented this relative conservatism of the Hungarian theatre-world, and Shakespeare's reception in it.⁶ We agree with Kornélia Deres who noted that "(i)n the post-Socialist area, theatre aesthetics before, and even for years after, 1989 were highly dominated by realism, and as a consequence, a text-based

dramatic perspective influenced the routines of audience reception and interpretation" (...) therefore postdramatic theatre initiatives "have not been able to enter into mainstream theatre practice, or become recognized by critics"; they were introduced by independent companies, and remained in relative cultural isolation.⁷

This essay does not wish to dispute this statement, yet it wishes to argue that the Shakespearean adaptations of the past ten years have shown a slight change in these trends. The plays the essay considers are open to postdramatic experimentation, willingly challenge the hegemony of classical texts, and in some cases, they successfully reach broader audiences. The essay offers an overview of these recent Hungarian adaptations, while considering the means of textual and contextual alterations that were made, and the audience these adaptations wished to reach. Finally, the essay will seek answers to the question what Shakespeare was used for in these reworkings.

Shakespeare the contemporary

In the first part of my survey, I will look at adaptations that experiment with the Shakespearean text, yet they still market themselves as Shakespeare productions. Although they keep most of the Shakespearean plotlines, they freely alter the structure of the Shakespearean texts, dismantle chronologies, shift language registers, while recontextualizing the plays in a contemporary Hungarian setting.

My first example, Örkény Theatre's recent, 2019 *Macbeth* is a production that, uniquely in Hungary, uses a text that incorporates all existing Hungarian translations, furthermore, director Ildikó Gáspár and dramaturge Barbara Ari-Nagy inserted archaic folk prayers as the witches' speeches, Shakespeare's *Sonnet 12* as Fleance's speech in act 2, scene 1, and *Sonnet 30* as Banquo's speech at the

³ FÖLDVÁRY Kinga, "Reappropriation of History on the Post-Communist Hungarian Stage" in *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity. Theatralia* 24, Special Issue, (2021): 239–253, 227.

⁴ Hans-Thies LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen JÜNS-MUNBY (Routledge: London and New York, 2006), 16.

⁵ Cf. DERES Kornélia, "Emerging postdramatic aesthetics and Shakespeare in Hungary", in *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity. Theatralia* 24, Special Issue, (2021): 105–119.

⁶ See e.g. DERES, "Emerging...", ALMASI Zsolt, "Textuality, Heritage, and Identity in Hungary: Contexts for the Interpretation of Szikszai's Insertion in *Macbeth*", in *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity. Theatralia* 24, Special Issue, (2021): 222–238.

⁷ DERES, "Emerging...", 107, 115.

banquet. This *Macbeth* that opened in Budapest in the studio space of Örkény Theatre in March 2019, repositioned the play into a museum.

The audience is led into a small theatre space where, in a glass cabinet, a replica of the Hungarian crown is displayed. A female guide repeatedly calls their attention to the fact that what they see is not the original, but a true replica that is almost as valuable as the original. Translated to the production, this sets the basic tone: what we are to see is not the original, yet in its true replica-form it could be as valuable as that. Tongue-in-cheek as this assertion seems, the Örkény *Macbeth* strives to place itself on the threshold between historical and contemporary, between museum and theatre, between illusionary and real. Throughout the play, the audience is given a running commentary by the four museum guards who also play the roles in *Macbeth*, on what they are about to see, often followed by ironic remarks on the play and the world it represents, effectively discarding all cultural relevance to the Scottish play. The characters comment on the play having too many foreign names to remember, they joke about the idea that Macbeth's name should be pronounced in an English, not a Hungarian manner⁸, and keep calling all the Scots who appear in Macbeth's court, younger Lennox⁹.

⁸ “GUARD NO. 3: Same place. Macbeth and Banquo.

GUARD NO. 2: Or Banquo and Macbeth...

GUARD NO. 4: Mecbeeeeth.

GUARD NO. 3: We're in Hungary, I can't even pronounce that. It'll work as Mákbet, too.”

All quotations from the play are from the play's promptbook. I would like to thank Ari-Nagy Barbara for sending me the final manuscript copy of it. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁹ “GUARD NO. 3: We're in Forres. On one of the corridors of the royal palace. A young Lennox and another young Lennox, very similar to him, converse.”

Besides this running commentary, theatrical illusion is also constantly broken by the inclusion of prompter, Éva Horváth, who has an active role in the play – e.g. when the witches wind up the magic circle and they switch off the light, she is called out to switch it back (GUARD NO. 3: Évi, light, we cannot see anything – ÉVI: Sorry.), or when Macbeth wants to know the end of the play, he walks up to her, tears the last pages from the promptbook, reads and then eats them.

Further dismantling the divide between theatrical and real, the banquet scene is played in the interval, with Lady Macbeth and Macbeth serving *pogácsa* (Hungarian salty scone) and orange juice to audience members, while singing a duet from the operetta *The Csárdás Princess*.¹⁰ Later the audience is transformed into the forest of Birnam, then a crowd demanding Macbeth's removal. The production ends with a quick repartee that once again creates then deconstructs the theatrical moment:

“GUARD NO. 3: Good is good again...

GUARD NO. 4: ... and bad should be bad!

GUARD NO. 2: Filth should clear up!

GUARD NO. 1: And dirt shall be no more!

GUARD NO. 3: Évi, the lights!”

The heavily cut and amended text of the Örkény *Macbeth* provides ample playroom for the four actors to also include improvisations, while creating an intertextual web of associations that allows the Macbeths' story to unfold, as well as the play to be linked to contemporary events, while also questioning the validity of classical plays in a modern context. The central image of the play, the replica of the Hungarian crown, immediately links the events to Hungarian history. There is further mention of Macbeth's move to Castle Hill that resembles the move of the Hungarian prime minister's office to Buda Castle. The porter keeps referencing contemporary political events in his speech, and

¹⁰ Composer: Emmerich Kálmán.

when Macbeth kills the guards, in Guard no. 1's purse a radio plays Viktor Orbán's famous 1989-speech he gave at the funeral of 1956-martyr, Imre Nagy. Finally, it is the audience members, who, acting as Macduff's soldiers, with whistles and stomping, must chase Macbeth away, thus actively taking a stance against his tyranny. But what I find interesting here is that the Örkény production opens up a path that combines endeavors of post-dramatic theatre, that is to be political in its mode of representation, while addressing issues of political and public nature. *Macbeth* has been a favorite of Hungarian theatres in the past ten years, yet this Örkény production is one that is the most experimental in its usage of the text and the visuality of the play, still, it is one that asks the most questions about the possibility of an artform – in this case theatre – to start a conversation about public issues, thus transporting the Shakespearean play to being our contemporary.

Similarly, contemporary and iconoclastic in the same vein, although with very different means are Péter Závada's adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Poet, musician, and playwright Péter Závada is the most prolific Shakespeare adaptor of the contemporary theatre scene. Most of his Shakespearean adaptations are basically retranslations of the plays into a contemporary idiom, laden with slang and slam poetry. (In chronological order these adaptations are: *As You Like It* – Kamra Theatre Budapest, 2016, directed by Dániel Kovács D., *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2017, Vígszínház, directed by Dániel Kovács D., *Love's Labours Lost*, 2017, Pesti Színház, directed by Péter Rudolf, and *Richard III*, 2018, Radnóti Theatre, directed by Andrei Șerban). Závada reshuffles scenes, renames characters, and relocates events, but in most of his rewritings he still keeps Shakespeare's plotlines. The essay will engage with *As You Like It*, Závada's first take on Shakespeare, as it is also a prototype of his subsequent works.

Závada's text is a rich tapestry of cultural references, from consumerism to classic literature, yet it mostly relies on and uses the argot of the Y and Z generations. Recognizing similarities between early modern theatrical language and slam poetry, Závada employed his knowledge of the latter to use twisted commonplaces as the building blocks of his playscript. Relying on Ádám Nádasy's already modern translation, and using much of it, this version of *As You Like It* wishes to approximate Shakespeare's plays to a young adult audience, and by doing so, it successfully annihilates the poetic layers of the text, too. This effort is consciously amplified in the production by Dániel D. Kovács's direction, that stresses physical theatre, meta-theatrical elements, and often operates with filmic solutions, thus introducing an enticing multimediality onto the stage. Props like a full-sized deer carcass, or hundreds of papers thrown over the stage strengthen the theatricality of the production, and invite audiences to create new, contemporary interpretative techniques to Shakespeare's plotlines.

Závada's latest adaptation, a version of *Romeo and Juliet*, entitled *The Shaxpeare Car Wash in Kertész Street*, a production directed by Viktor Bodó in 2019 for the Örkény Theatre in Budapest, goes even further. There, Závada used the Shakespearean text only as a starting, metatheatrical reference point, and the production was shaped by Bodó's strong directorial vision, as well as the improvisations of the actors. Although the audience can recognize the Shakespearean play, the plot is transferred into the dodgy 8th district of downtown Budapest, where rivaling gangs rule the streets. The play is no longer a romantic tragedy, but Romeo's bad drug-induced trip, in which he imagines himself in love with Juliet, who instead ends up with Paris. The disillusioned ending of the play is counterbalanced by the overall heightened atmosphere of the production, sometimes movie-like, sometimes melodramatic.

Viktor Bodó should here be mentioned as a co-author of the script, not only as the di-

rector of the production. Trained as an actor and a director, Bodó is one of the most significant contemporary Hungarian directors, who, since the dissolution of his independent company, Sputnik, in 2015, has mostly been working in Germany and Austria. Combining improvisations that he developed with Sputnik and the postdramatic traditions of German theatre, Bodó has developed a directorial vision that links him to the tradition of directors like Christoph Marthaler, Roland Schimmelpfennig, Luk Perceval, or Karin Beier. Reviews applaud his timing, his humour, as well as the associative framework of cultural and pop-cultural references in his productions that Kornélia Deres has likened to the aesthetics of *cool fun*.¹¹ His works also often include elements of trash and camp. The trademarks of his directorial style are his tendencies to tilt every comic situation towards the burlesque, the aim to break down teleological narratives, to demonstrate the failure of language as a communicative device, as well as to use intermedial scenography recalling filmic elements. His *Shaxpeare Car Wash* is also playfully and ironically self-reflexive, often with the aim to challenge the expectations of the viewers by questioning linear interpretations and traditional audience behaviour. The few occasions he was directing in Hungary since 2010, his productions can often be read as political satires, or at least commentaries about the current state of the country, for instance *Revizor (The Government Inspector, Vígszínház 2014)*; *Koldusopera (The Beggars' Opera, Vígszínház 2015)*; *A Krakken-művelet (The Krakken-operation, Átrium 2018)*. *The Shaxpeare Car Wash in Kertész Street* is no exception in this respect – here he taps into the petty underworld of downtown Budapest, the crimes, the drugs, and the parties.

The play that is set in an old carwash in Budapest's 8th district, consciously violates audience expectations on various levels. It is

¹¹ DERES Kornélia, “Szürreália emlékezete”, *Színház* 48, no. 4. (2016): 14–17, 16.

neither romantic, nor a tragedy, its logical narrative flow is constantly broken by gags and a loose web of associations that include music, films, slang, and subcultural references. It disregards the commonly perceived theatrical rules of conduct, since it starts in the foyer, and those who leave the auditorium in the interval miss a fiery sex scene between Paris and Lady Capulet. With all that said, however, the production, with a website geared towards teachers and high-school students clearly wishes to educate and integrate postdramatic theatre into an already existing curriculum, thus taking on a social role despite its iconoclastic stance.

Shakespeare the cultural metaphor

In the second part of the essay, we move over to appropriations that are not straightforward rewritings of Shakespeare's play, but they use Shakespeare and the Shakespearean plotlines as cultural metaphors. They both adapt *King Lear*, and strangely, they both tap into a contemporary theatrical trend, seen in recent British productions as well,¹² by appropriating the character of King Lear as a symbol to discuss aging in a contemporary setting.

¹² See e.g. Ian McKellen's recent portrayal of Lear, Akbar ARIFA, “Ian McKellen's Dazzling Swan-Song weighted with Poignancy” *The Guardian*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jul/26/king-lear-review-ian-mckellen-duke-of-yorks>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022, or Glenda Jackson's thoughts on her gender-bending Lear: Terry GROSS, “Glenda Jackson on Playing King Lear: Gender Barriers 'Crack' with Age”, an interview with Terry Gross, NPR, April 23, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/23/716305342/glenda-jackson-on-playing-king-lear-gender-barriers-crack-with-age>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

*Gabi néni*¹³ had a stroke

The first production, an interactive theatre project by the Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Workshop) from 2016 entitled *Lady Lear*, rewrote the Shakespearean plot as a parable of a typical Hungarian family, where the aging mother's illness challenged the independence of her three sons. Using *Lear* as a cultural symbol of parents/authority figures, who, despite their physical weakness, wish to control the lives of their children/subordinates, the play confronted audiences in dialogues initiated by the actors to discuss how they would react in a similar situation, thus addressing the problem Western countries all face: that of an aging society. It asks how long we are expected to take care of our parents, how much of a personal sacrifice we should be willing to make to help them.

The fictional Lady Lear of the play, a former leader, not of a country, but of a school choir, a widowed mother of three boys, got a stroke that left her paralyzed on one side. In the course of the play her boys and her only grandson try to resolve the crux this situation has brought into their lives. As the ensemble website indicates, it is "a crap of a situation with a capital C, served with lots of bittersweet humor."¹⁴

As it is clear from this short description, this adaptation of the Lear theme is a domestic version of the play, where "the main emphasis is on family dynamics"¹⁵. It primarily addresses a social concern many of us re-

¹³ In Hungarian, every elderly woman is called 'néni', which roughly translates as auntie, while every elderly man is called 'bácsi' that roughly means uncle. Both terms can be used with family and Christian names as well.

¹⁴ <https://kavaszhaz.hu/lady-lear-en/>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

¹⁵ For similarly angled adaptations see Christy DESMET, "Some *Lears* of Private Life from Tate to Shaw", in *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, ed. by KAHAN, Jeffrey, 326–350 (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

fuse to face, the aging of our parents. Indeed, in Goethe's understanding of King Lear's figure¹⁶ it challenges the audience to grasp "the sad commonness of the (Lear) experience rather than providing the rarified emotional distinction craved"¹⁷ by many. This, as Peter Conrad convincingly argues, is what the play itself teaches, by doubling the fate of Lear with that of Gloucester's. In this sense "every old man is a deposed king"¹⁸, even if in this case she happens to be a woman (but more of that later). This commonality is what ultimately enables the play to engage the audience in conversations during the two "openings" the production accommodates.

The play light-handedly molds some themes from *King Lear* to fit the scope of the project – Gabi néni, the mother, starts out from her own flat with her youngest son taking care of her, then slowly loses all aspects of comfort she enjoyed in that first situation. She temporarily must reside in her second son's apartment, where her pregnant daughter-in-law is disgusted by her "old person smell", and where she is stranded in the living room, as Lear on the heath, naked, since she is unable to put her dress on again alone. Gradually all three sons of hers cease to care for her, and as a final blow, her doctor, one of her former students who admires her for her energy and vitality, refuses to administer her a self-inflicted death by sleeping pills. In the penultimate scene of the play, it is her grandson who tries to keep her spirit alive,

¹⁶ "(e)in alter Mann ist stets ein König Lear", Johann Wolfgang GOETHE, *Zahme Xenien*, in: *Gedichte*,

[http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Gedichte/Gedichte+\(Ausgabe+letzter+Hand.+1827\)/Zahme+Xenien/Zahme+Xenien+3](http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Gedichte/Gedichte+(Ausgabe+letzter+Hand.+1827)/Zahme+Xenien/Zahme+Xenien+3), last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

¹⁷ Peter CONRAD, "Expatriating Lear" in *To Be Continued*, 95-152 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 97.

¹⁸ CONRAD, "Expatriating Lear", 98.

only to witness her second stroke,¹⁹ which leaves the family with “the worst that is yet to come.”²⁰

Nevertheless, very differently from *King Lear*, the boys in *Lady Lear* are not simply male versions of Lear’s pelican daughters – even if communication is not their forte, they still try to help. When they fail on their own, they are willing to hire a full-time nurse to assist their mother, or look for a well-established nursing home. Their mother, who claims that caring for her is *their* job, immediately turns these ideas down with pain and disgust. What she does not realize is how much, similarly to her, her sons are also determined by their particular life situation they cannot escape: the oldest lives abroad with his second family, and apart from regular money transfers and Skype calls with his son from his first marriage, he cannot leave his new life and family for longer periods of time. Her second son has just started his own family, and his wife – who fails to see herself as a prefiguration of her mother-in-law – is not willing to share the last months of her pregnancy with Gabi néni daily. Her youngest boy still lives at home, but has finally, after many years of failure, found a job he likes – he becomes a tour sound technician, a work that leaves him much less time at home.

Although far less of a dragon than Lear, the play shows Gabi néni as temperamental and outspoken, with rather harsh opinions of her sons. According to the list of characters, she is supposed to be a 78-year-old retired music teacher, yet the play itself presents her as someone much older, something of an anachronism. She is given a gray wig and a home dress (“otthonka”) – a usually 100-percent nylon piece of clothing that was

¹⁹ As the doctor explains it was an atrial fibrillation, but the consequences are the same for the family.

²⁰ This is the final sentence of the play, spoken by the middle son as a conclusion to previous events.

popular among women as loungewear in the 1970s, but is rarely worn today.²¹ Her taste of food is also rather conservative, she only eats traditional Hungarian food, mostly from warmed up tins, is baffled by take-away pizza, and is proud of her family’s secret “pogácsa” recipe. These characteristics are the source of most of the bittersweet humor the play’s website promises, but they age Gabi néni unfavorably, making her closer to 98 than 78, and a thing of the past, almost a caricature.

What complicates her portrayal even more is that although the play’s title promises us *Lady Lear*, she is played by her three sons, who take her role one after another. A choice applauded by all Hungarian reviews as an ingenious doubling that foreshadows the future fate of the sons, it is, at the same time, a decision that did significantly change the gender relations of the play. While *King Lear* does give spectators the image of an old man, frail and weak at times, *Lady Lear* deprives the audience of seeing an elderly woman on stage. When the middle son clumsily tries to undress then redress his mom, it is a middle-aged male body on display that we see. When the grandson readies to give a pedicure to his grandma, it is giant male feet we see soaking in a bowl of hot water. The annihilation of a fragile elderly female body on stage, and the extinction of an actual female voice deprived the play of the connotations the gender switch the title promises would have brought along, the associations one has with the body of one’s mother. This is an especially problematic change, since it is a production that very much relies on audience reactions.

Due to the naturalistic acting style present all through the production, the image mediated by the boys, while recalling early modern practices, is primarily masculine, distancing the idea of a mother from the audi-

²¹ See slideshow here:

<http://kollokvium.figura.ro/play/en/18>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

ence. Whereas Lear's journey is a passage during which he must grapple with his own femininity, Lady Lear here is prevented even from showing her femaleness. Although still there in the playscript²², on the stage, she is absent. Similar to how her boys decide her fate, the production also deals with her without giving her an actual presence.

Lear bácsi is dying

The second production the paper intends to introduce is a two-person play entitled *Lear's Death* that premiered in the studio space of the Miskolc National Theatre in 2018. While *Lady Lear* repositions the Shakespearean plot into a wider contemporary social setting, this production digs into the personal psyche of an aging Lear. Accompanied by his Fool, the play follows "Uncle Lear" through several stages of self-investigation ending in his death.

Lear's Death is a play with no linear plotline, it is series of scenes, linked by loose association and the two characters that perform them: Lear and the Fool. Lear plays himself, while the Fool takes on several roles: he becomes Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, Death, James the butler, and, of course, Lear's Fool. In a short paper it is nigh impossible to do justice to the manifold connotations the play unlocks, so the essay merely attempts to introduce a few aspects to be able to discuss the gender dynamics of the play.

Lear's Death is, first and foremost, a journey into Lear's psyche. It starts with the sentence: "I don't want to die!"²³, and ends with Lear's death and him concluding: "There's! Nothing! Wrong! *Va bene!*" It is a journey of

²² The playscript is available here:

http://szinhaz.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kava_Lady_lear_2017_marcus.pdf, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

²³ ENYEDI Éva, *Lear's Death*, trans. by Philip BARKER, MS, 2.

self-confrontation, of self-annihilation, and personal growth; a journey towards the acceptance of death. In a whirlwind ride of scenes, full of grotesque and farcical situations – at times hilariously macabre or tearfully honest, the two actors who play Lear and the Fool discuss aspects of Lear's death.

Secondly, the play is a metatheatrical tragicomedy, a commentary on Shakespeare in performance. As if it wanted to show arm-chair critics complaining about the inability of theatrical productions to display a plethora of interpretations one can ponder about in the quiet of one's mind with a glass of sherry in hand, the production gives spectators just that. We first see Lear on the heath, being investigated by the Fool, sometimes more his executioner than his companion, then he becomes a whining old man in a chaotic Hungarian hospital with the Fool forcing him to swallow all the medicine he ground up in a mortar while singing a botched-up version of the song *Brazil* about the lure of death. Later, he morphs into Szabolcs, the Leader, the hero of the first Hungarian translation of *Lear*, who, in turn becomes the actor playing Lear, Attila Harsányi himself, disclosing his own innermost feelings for his mother, only to transform into Lear again seemingly dead, but alive enough to listen to his eulogy. The list could go on. It is a dance macabre across a modern version of Hell that contains circles of burlesque halls, cabarets, or for that matter, a Jerry Springer-like tabloid talk show that hosts the play's mock-trial scene.

Besides the virtuoso performance of the two actors (Attila Harsányi as Lear and Krisztián Rózsa as the Fool) there is a video screen showing flashing images or extra scenes²⁴, as well as the monologues the two actors improvised into the text that all add to the overt metatheatricality of the play. So does the live accompaniment of music and

²⁴ Like that of the two hilariously confused murderers, also played by Harsányi and Rózsa, who discuss whether to blind, castrate, or simply kill Lear and Cordelia.

effects by Ákos Varga Zságer, who remains on stage throughout the production. While *Lady Lear* wished the audience to internalize the events they were watching, *Lear's Death* continuously distances viewers from Lear's vicissitudes on stage. Frailty and death are depicted here as “concepts that are incomprehensible, that are only to be reflected upon with the help of an adequate toolkit.”²⁵

While displaying a vast array of interpretational possibilities, the play also reflects on its own idiosyncrasy. In several asides to the audience, the two actors debate how this production fails to present the “famous royal costume drama from the pen of the greatest of all playwrights, the Bard of Avon.”²⁶ They discuss what tricks it would take to gain “serious professional recognition, critical acclaim, if not the occasional invitation abroad”,²⁷ and in an interlude entitled “Long Live Youth – Festival Interlude”, they satirize the backward theatrical hierarchies of the country's theatres.

Yet, at the bottom of this metatheatrical extravaganza, at the core of Lear's quest for the acceptance of death, is Lear's struggle with his daughters. Although the three daughters never appear in person on stage, they are recalled and are played by the Fool from the first scene to almost the last. They are evoked in their father's curses,²⁸ pre-

²⁵ ALMÁSI Zsolt, “A halál geometriája”, *prae.hu*, accessed: 31 August, 2022, <https://www.prae.hu/article/10829-a-halal-geometriaja/>

²⁶ ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 12.

²⁷ ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 16.

²⁸ I was a great king! I had three daughters! Now here I am whimpering like a miserable worm! (...) But how could they be so vile? I gave them all I had! I raised them alone. Do you know how much Goneril ate when she was little? Her nappies always full of crap! You know how much nappies cost? (...) I always had to buy new clothes for Regan, and games, and a horse, and a blackamoor! Their mother was to blame, always spoiling them

presented as relatives who never visit their father in the hospital, appear as speakers of Lear's eulogy who lie to put him in a favourable light, portrayed as rather simple creatures with broad countryside accents who dis their father in front of the TV cameras, but are also seen as victims of child abuse (Cordelia), and finally as the ultimate source of consolation. As if a magic mirror would have refracted the chronological events of *King Lear* into myriad pieces that display to us all the viewpoints of the characters, we also hear Goneril's and Regan's woes and Cordelia's aches besides Lear's laments. Since no single narrative can do justice to Lear's journey, we get all of them.

We are in Lear's head; therefore, everything is uttered in a male voice – all three daughters are played by the Fool, and although their portrayal, their tones change from scene to scene, they are ultimately all mediated through the Fool's persona, a male presence. To complicate matters more, the production plays with the similarity of the two actors so often (their faces are morphed into each other on the video screen, and even the poster of the production uses this image²⁹) that they seem to be just two faces of the same person, two voices of the same experience. As if their roles could be reversible, their lines could be uttered by the other, their roles could be switched, if one wished so. Consequently, the Fool can also be read as a projection of Lear's mind, or vice versa, an interpretation that questions the validity of the daughter's utterances even more.

However, no matter what the ultimate source of these two voices is, it is only when they become harmonious, in a somewhat

till the day she died! And I was an idiot! Having them taught, and they were girls! I thought they'd be grateful and take care of me when I got old and sick! But they're beasts! My God, what will happen to me when I get sick? ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 2.

²⁹ <https://mnsz.hu/eloadasok/single/734>, accessed: 31 August, 2022.

classical reconciliation scene between Lear and Cordelia, that Lear's journey nears its end. When the antagonism, the continuous bickering between the Fool (also as Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia) and Lear subsides and they mutually forgive each other, is Lear finally ready to die. It is first Lear who asks for Cordelia's forgiveness:

LEAR: Thank you! You must put up with me. I was cruel to your mother and didn't give a shit about you three. I only cared about gaining more and more power. I got everything. Flat, property, car, country! I got new kidneys, a new liver, a new face. I didn't want you to have the kingdom. I didn't trust any of you. You are too good-hearted. Goneril's stupid. Regan's greedy. Or vice versa. Regan's stupid and Goneril is greedy. I'm always mixing them up. I wanted to be king even after my death. Please forgive me for everything. I am an old fool. Senseless. I had no sense. Pity.³⁰

Replying, Cordelia admits that she was stupid to compare her love for her father to salt³¹. They embrace and plan to stay like that forever. Everything seems to be ready for a celebration.

A festive dinner follows, a burlesque-take on the classic drunk butler routine,³² a reconciliatory banquet, or a wake – for Lear who is finally ready to die. The Fool, who, this time, plays James, Lear's butler, seats an impressive circle of guests at the table: Goneril, Regan, a guest called Albany-Cornwall-Kent-

³⁰ ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 20.

³¹ The play continuously uses the Hungarian folk tale motive of the youngest daughter loving her father as much as people love salt instead of the lines from *King Lear's* love scene where Cordelia says "Nothing".

³² See:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8xPhU5132l>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

Burgundy-Frank, Mr. Trump, Mr. Bean, Death, and finally the filthy, smelly, diabolical Poor Tom, a.k.a. Edgar Gloucester. As a mocking summary of all the previous scenes, the Fool speaks all the lines of the guests and drinks their drinks. As he gets more and more inebriated, Lear keeps asking him where Cordelia is. But she never arrives. After the final dessert course James/The Fool faints/dies so it takes the onstage musician, Zságer, to announce that Cordelia has died and will never come.

This utterance turns the banquet retrospectively into an unplanned wake for Cordelia, too. Her death, as in Shakespeare's play, happens offstage, and is only reported by outsider onlookers. She is given no final words, no tragic treatment. If she was projected onto the stage through the Fool's words, then her death is rather farcical – a drunken stumble and a stunt-like fall. Yet, the void that her absence created during the dinner lingers there in the final scene of the play, too. Instead of the pieta we are accustomed to at the end of Shakespeare's play, here, in the last scene, we can see an old man agonising *with* and later *on* a stool – Cordelia's empty chair – that represents Cordelia, or more specifically, her absence.

Lear's dearest daughter, who has previously been mediated through the Fool, is ultimately objectified as a stool, similar to those that stood in for her older sisters in Shakespeare's mock trial scene. Her role here, however, could not be more different. Her presence in absence is the final push Lear needs to be able to die. Although the play asserts that dying is a lonely act, Cordelia's nothingness, her non-attendance is vital for Lear's acceptance of death.

Similarly to *Lady Lear*, *Lear's Death* also interprets *King Lear* as a story told from a male perspective, in which female viewpoints can only be mediated through authoritative male voices. Yet, while *Lady Lear* wishes to camouflage this absence, in *Lear's Death* this marked void is interpreted as presence. This reverberates in the final text

of the play, a poem by Lajos Kassák, recited in Lear’s voice: “Who’s gone is gone, said my mother, never grieve over wayward souls. / Who’s gone is gone, say I as well, but at the same time I feel profoundly / those once with us can never leave us completely.”³³ With these words Lear climbs back to the Fool’s shoulders, and the cycle starts again.

Shakespeare, the 19th-century Hungarian

The final example the paper introduces is a Shakespeare burlesque, written by Zsolt Györei and Csaba Schlachtovszky that premiered at the Gyula Shakespeare Festival in 2021. The Shakespeare burlesque is a genre that had its heydays in nineteenth century London, and was born out of necessity, as a reaction to the Licensing Act of 1737 that prohibited illegitimate theatres from playing spoken drama. Since most of the English dramatic repertoire fell under that category, using the loophole ingeniously, London theatres transformed classical plays into operettas and burlesques, that is, into sung drama. The burlesque that was invented out of need quickly became a popular artform that appropriated Shakespeare’s plays, too.

By definition,³⁴ a burlesque is an imitation of a serious work of art in a grotesque style, laden with puns and contemporary references. It uses visual gags, crossdressing, and is performed amidst over-the-top stage machinery in extravagant costumes. When it comes to Shakespeare, the burlesque uses the reduced plot of the Shakespeare classics, reverts iambic pentameter into rhyming couplets, transforms soliloquies into popular songs, yet most importantly, it acts as a cultural authority. As Richard Schoch convincingly argues,³⁵ the Shakespeare burlesque

did not wish to attack Shakespeare per se, it rather criticized contemporary cultural practices that revered Shakespeare unconditionally. It railed against the extremely realistic contemporary theatrical approach to Shakespeare, it attacked scenic illusionism, and overall, it wished to overthrow authentic productions’ claim of authority. Its metatheatricality and self-reflexivity helped the burlesque to style itself as “the norm to which transgressive theatrical practices should revert.”³⁶

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between iconoclastic postmodern theatrical tendencies and the burlesque, since “(h)owever much it attacks dominant cultural practices, the Shakespeare burlesque always implies – indeed, sustains – a nostalgia for a culture which would no longer need to be attacked if only it were properly performed. Yet (...) it is the burlesque’s bitter irony never to bring into being the culture which it can only imagine.”³⁷ It is this nostalgia that sets the burlesque aside from other Shakespeare adaptations, and it is this nostalgia that makes the burlesque all the more topical, too, since, as cultural theorist, Svetlana Boym asserts: “(t)he first decade of the twenty-first century is not characterized by the search for newness, but by the proliferation of nostalgias that are often at odds with one another. Nostalgic cyberpunks and nostalgic hippies, nostalgic nationalists, and nostalgic cosmopolitans, nostalgic environmentalists and nostalgic metrophiliacs (city lovers) exchange pixel fire in the blogosphere. Nostalgia, like globalization, exists in the plural.”³⁸ Boym differentiates between restorative and reflective nostalgia, where the former sees itself as truth and tradition,

³³ ENYEDI, *Lear’s Death*, 29.

³⁴ Stanley WELLS (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques* Volume 1 (London: Diploma Pres Lund 1977), xiv.

³⁵ Richard SCHOCH, *Not Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), 65.

³⁶ SCHOCH, *Not Shakespeare*, 4.

³⁷ SCHOCH, *Not Shakespeare*, 19.

³⁸ Svetlana BOYM, “Nostalgia and its Discontents”, *The Hedgehog Review* 2007, Summer, <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents> last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

while building on the sense of loss of community and cohesion, and offering a comforting collective script for individual longing. The latter, reflective nostalgia, on the contrary, calls ultimate truth into doubt, since it thrives on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging, and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. It is the interplay of these two kinds of nostalgias that energize the burlesque and set it apart from postmodern parodies.

Györei's and Schlichtovszky's burlesque, *Hamlear*³⁹, as its title indicates, is a burlesque of both *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. The authors, well-versed in 19th-century Hungarian literature, transfer the events of the plays to the medieval past, yet use the 19th-century genre of a melodramatic tragedy to do so. The first act of the play is a burlesqued version of *Hamlet*, with Hamlear as its title character, while the second act is a *King Lear* persiflage, where Hamlear returns as a twisted Lear character, who adores his smallest, but wicked daughter, Cordelia, yet detests his two elder, honest daughters, Goneril and Regan. These plotlines are crafted in the vein of John Poole and classical Shakespeare burlesque, however, with a Hungarian touch, since they use the language of the classic Hungarian Shakespeare translations of János Arany and Mihály Vörösmarty. Indeed, the play once again asserts that Shakespeare is a 19th-century Hungarian author. *Hamlear* is written in iambic pentameter, uses heroic couplets at the end of the scenes, and quotes Shakespeare at length, although these quotes are often recontextualized; something is rotting in the state of Denmark, since it is likened to a headless fish, Hamlear's jacket is undone, his stockings are unfastened, since he had been drinking all night, and there are more things in heaven and earth than missed kindergarten recitals. In true classical bur-

³⁹ *Hamlear* is their second Shakespeare burlesque, the first is entitled *Bem, a debreceni gács* (2002) [Bem, the Galician of Debrecen], and is an *Othello* burlesque.

lesque style, Hamlear becomes an anti-hero (he is described by Polonius as a "melancholic snotbag"), who, as it turns out, has murdered his father and is responsible for most of the tragedies in the play.

Highly metatheatrical, *Hamlear* is a parody of classical theatrical clichés, too. Old Hamlear's full armor is ridiculed the same way as Hamlear's drive to constantly soliloquize, or the forced tragic ending when bodies must cover the stage. Contemporary theatrical tendencies are also mocked: Hamlear is a pretentious experimental director, ("As a writer-director I imagine a strong, alternative and groundbreaking space, where stage and auditorium melt into each other, and my actors enter through the audience."⁴⁰), while his daughters, Goneril and Regan imagine him as a utopistic theatre manager, who, while experimental, is also caring and insightful:

"REGAN: He was guiding his nations,
As masterly as a director of a theatre
troupe,
Who would give his life for his col-
leagues.

GONERIL: Who provides all the actors
with roles

Tailored to their temperaments and,
touching their souls,
He uncovers the hidden motives of the
heroes,
He instructs and directs with sophisti-
cation.

REGAN: In the name of holy artless-
ness...

GONERIL: Yet in an alternative and
transgressive fashion...

REGAN: Therefore, he is followed by
loud applause wherever he goes."⁴¹

⁴⁰ GYÖREI Zsolt, SCHLACHTOVSKY Csaba, *Hamlear, a dán királyfiból lett brit király*, (Budapest – Gyula: Gondolat Kiadó – Gyulai Várszínház 2021), 47.

⁴¹ GYÖREI, SCHLACHTOVSKY, *Hamlear*, 86.

The play jabs at burlesques as well, when characters comment on how some jokes and songs can hide bad acting: “Why don’t we write a musical comedy instead? Two-three funny songs and no one will notice that Laertes laughs the whole play to pieces.”⁴²

Hamlear, however, has a more direct Hungarian connection, too, since a non-Shakespearean character, Bánk Bán, hero of the most famous Hungarian tragedy, also appears in the play. As a friend of Hamlear, he is instrumental in delivering a fatal end to Claudius and Getrude, and is also the only survivor of the Lear-related calamities of the second act. His character allows the play to reflect not only on theatrical and Shakespearean clichés, but also on Hungarianness, and on the validity of classic Hungarian literature. Moreover, Bánk’s running commentary on the events allows the play to ridicule certain aspects of national restorative nostalgia that regards the mythic past of Hungarian history as superior to all European cultures. Yet, by inserting Bánk into the *Hamlet-Lear* play, the burlesque also asserts that he is a tragic hero of the same magnanimity and posture as Hamlet and Lear. Indeed, although an underdog and an outsider at first, Bánk emerges from the double tragedy as the ultimate hero, king of England and Denmark. In the tone of playful reflective nostalgia, the play thus gives us the fulfilment of a national myth in which the Hungarian hero does, after all, triumph over the rest of Europe.

As a text, *Hamlear* takes itself seriously, it indulges in the peculiarities of the 19th-century theatrical language and tradition it invokes, and frolics in the mesmerizing variety of cultural references it uses and abuses. Although in its structure it resembles a classical play, yet, I wish to argue that with its innate playfulness that is the burlesque’s own, it can challenge teleological narratives, can show diversity and multi-perspectives. Although *Hamlear* camouflages itself as a

19th-century melodramatic tragedy, it is a voice of cultural plurality, healthy self-reflexivity, and subversion, and as its historical antecedents, a norm to which transgressive theatrical practices can indeed revert to.

Conclusion

This short survey of Hungarian Shakespeare adaptations of the last decade hoped to show that, despite the relative conservatism of the Hungarian theatre scene, there are voices that advocate postdramatic ideas. Artists who openly experiment with narrative structures, metatheatricality, and intermediality, yet are equally interested in entering a social, cultural dialogue about literature, about theatre, and about that 19th-century Hungarian author, William Shakespeare.

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⁴² GYÖREI, SCHLACHTOVSKY, *Hamlear*, 42.

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