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Reflecting upon
Hamlet of Gliwice. The Rehearsal
or the Touch Through the Screen

The myth of Hamlet speaking his “(non)existential mantra” – the famous opening lines of his third soliloquy – provokes many reactions. Some of them call into being non-Shakespearean Hamlets in works of authors, who make a travesty of the original drama. Next incarnations of Hamlet still repeat the classical mode of pondering on the sense/value/essence of being by building the very fundamental question with the conjunction “or”. Sometimes those pseudo-Hamlets raise other issues to weight in their minds. One of the modifications of the original to-be-or-not-to-be-formula, which is discussed in this essay, turns the formula into an inquiry pertaining to identity. Pseudo-Hamlet, who asks whom to be, is the self-discovering protagonist of *Hamlet of Gliwice. The Rehearsal or the Touch Through the Screen*, a play written by Piotr-Peter Lachmann. Reflections of/upon the self become the leitmotif of this spectacle.

If a reflection was treated as an image given back from a reflecting surface, then the metaphorical transposition of such an act, would be the situation where an actor (the image) is impersonating someone else (the reflecting surface). If that “someone” was a self-searching, creative theatre director, poet, essayist and translator, Peter-Piotr Lachmann – whose biography made him “discover” *Hamlet* for the purposes of telling the story of his life – then the theatrical performance would be a reflective experience of the self. If the performance took place in Lachmann’s theatrical space, in his own Videotheatre “Poza” (co-managed with Jolanta Lothe), then the small stage would become the place of self-observation before the “greedy” eyes of the audience. And finally, if on December 17, 2008 there was me – the (re)viewing subject – sitting in one of forty-four chairs, in the back row, then on reflection, the present rumination on the last performance of *Hamlet of Gliwice* was possible.¹

Since 1985 the Lothe/Lachmann Videotheatre (LLT) “Poza” has existed as one of the most unusual theatrical experiments within the realm of Polish theatres. Its father-founder, Piotr Lachmann and mother-founder – the actress and wife of Lachmann – Jolanta Lothe, both aim at creating a multimedia theatre. Before watching the performance I did not realize how compatible and

¹ The very first performance of *Hamlet of Gliwice* was held in the ruins of The Miejski Theatre in Gliwice on September 17, 2006. Another first night of the so-called Warsaw version of the show took place on November 3, 2006 in Videotheatre “Poza”, located in The Szuster Palace (Warsaw).

synthetic might be the work of art coming out of different kind of material, that is out of recorded “there-and-then” scenes on videotapes and “here-and-now” scenes played by the actors. Double time and double space pervade each other, confronting diverse locations, breaking linearity and crossing the boundaries of live performance. Each performance of LLT “Poza” depends on three constituents of the play: dexterity of the director or the master of ceremony, proficiency of the actors and efficiency of media being used during the spectacles. It is noteworthy that the performance is also recorded by a camera. The following spectacle could not exist without its previous versions, its prototype(s), yet it is only the director who knows how to make archival recordings (also his memories) useful for the next show.

The spectacle begins with TV monitors being turned on, but for me it starts with the thought that the director is in close proximity to the audience, that he is near the stage as he adheres to an electronic console with a system for operating technical equipment. The presence of the master of ceremony – his half-visibility, his being there in the flesh – is part of the performance. Lachmann orchestrates from the background where he controls the working of media: TV monitors and videotapes, but he also carefully watches scenic reality. Lachmann’s *Hamlet of Gliwice* is constructed according to the same duality as director’s subjectivity: half-German (primal, by birth) and half-Polish (secondary, by grant). Dual character of the show is formed by the concurrency of two spatiotemporal realities, being exposed before the audience: actual performance taking place on stage and reality “existing” on videotapes and photographs. Reflections of the self remain on the surface during the whole show as do electronic devices tirelessly emitting images or sounds. Since the language of performances is dominated by sight, deciphering visual code means “burdening” images with special meaning.

To bring back the early days of his life, the director relies on the story being told by two actors, Zbigniew Konopka playing young Lachmann/Hamlet of Gliwice and Jolanta Lothe as his mother/Gertrude, and short pieces of recorded past on the photographs and videotapes.² He uses the real body of the actor, the reflection of his self (the reflecting surface), to evoke the bygone years, dating back to 1935 when Lachmann was born in Gleiwitz (Gliwice)³.

² It is noteworthy that within the play, dramatis personae are referred to as HE and SHE, which remains unknown for the audience until they face the printed version of *Hamlet of Gliwice*. Lachmann intentionally uses HE and SHE as two basic identifying names, so that he could highlight the fact that the actors are not real, but ‘theatrical images’ of young Lachmann and his mother, that they are those who “are going to play” Piotr-Peter and the mother. The director observing himself being played by someone else is a pivotal element of this performance, one that builds a tension between identification with the image and distancing himself from the reflection.

³ Gliwice is one of the oldest cities of Górny Śląsk (Upper Silesia), contemporarily the industrialized region in southern Poland. The first historical record reveals that in 1276 Gliwice belonged to Poland. In the second half of the fourteenth century it was brought under the reign of the Czech king. It remained within Czech borders for over six hundred years until it became a part

German tenure of Gleiwitz and incorporation of the city into Poland changed its identity as well as people's sense of belonging. Lachmann participated in this traumatic transition. Gliwice/Gleiwitz is the special place, which is so condensed with memories that Lachmann might have easily become absorbed by manipulating them. And he does so by blending authentic autobiographical occurrences with fiction.⁴

His flashbacks are transformed by lapse of time, by the transformation that Gliwice went through, and by his own metamorphosis, which he describes as "pupation". This event influenced Peter, the ten-year-old boy, who until that time, was brought up in German tradition by his mother of Austrian origin. The mother figure is responsible for choosing her son's religious confession: first making him a Protestant and then at the age of ten – baptizing Peter in a Polish Catholic church. Lachmann remembers that day so intensively that he attributes the most important metamorphosis in his life to that particular day. It was no longer Peter, since the boy who came out of church was given a new identity and a new name – Piotr. *Hamlet of Gliwice* exposes the event by making an impression that the more often Lachmann observes his reflection on stage, the more reconciled with himself he becomes. Since a mature actor impersonates young Piotr-Peter, he sometimes mimics childish behaviour and speech (i.e. singing German songs, interspersed with German expressions) in a grotesque way. Most of the time he imaginatively incarnates the boy: his body, his gestures, his attitude towards life. Only once real young Lachmann appears on a huge cinematic screen in extreme close-up, in an old photograph. By reviving the child's image (on the photograph) and boyish perception (through Konopka's acting), Lachmann mirrors himself from the past. He allows the viewers to participate in the spectacle of the self-reflecting human, who finds himself being Polish in Poland (Piotr) and German in Germany (Peter). Since one part of him is always a stranger to the other; he remains on the crossroads every time he enters each land.⁵

The director decides to put his biography in the context of Shakespeare's most interpreted drama. He exploits the resemblance between Hamlet and himself: they share an unexpected loss of the father (Lachmann lost his at the age of four) and the mother's quickly commenced relationship with other men, simultaneously bringing a premature end to the period of mourning. To explain

of Prussian territory in the second half of the eighteenth century. After World War II Gliwice was incorporated into Poland. During its history, being in Polish, Czech and German hands, Gliwice underwent several transformations and finally in 1945 the city found its place within Poland.

⁴ One of the autobiographical events is revealed in an interview with Lachmann when he states: "I was born in Gleiwitz, for thirteen years I lived in Gliwice and in 1958 I went to West Germany. After the war I was ten." Lachmann returned to Poland after living in Germany for over thirty years (Torańska 2004).

⁵ In my essay I do not discuss the problem of Polish-German relations, including World War II and its aftermath. Lachmann analyses the controversial issue in an interview "Trzeba odbudować europejski mit Warszawy". See <http://www.teatry.art.pl!/rozmowy/toem.htm>.

her actions, Lachmann portrays the mother/Gertrude as the woman, confessing before her son:

SHE
 My little Hamlet
 you complain about your mother you want to tell on her
 to the far front that she sleeps
 around
 it is for you my little
 only for you
 but you will understand it later
 or maybe never. (2008: 31)⁶

Both Hamlets' mothers suffered the loss of their husbands. It led Shakespeare's Gertrude to a "hasty remarriage", whereas Lachmann's mother, raped by Soviet soldiers in 1945, became involved in sexual relationship with many men, whom Lachmann refers to as "step-fathers". Lachmann, like Hamlet, notices that his mother was not mourning her husband, therefore his grieving was never properly acted out.

Young Peter grew up without his father, whose disappearance influenced and distorted recollections pertaining to the boy's real relation with him. Instead, there are only scraps of Lachmann's associations with his father, which are to be found in various interviews Lachmann gave.⁷ Like Hamlet, Piotr-Peter is bearing a heavy load resulting from the fact that his father haunts him. Lachmann communicates that he is still troubled by the ghost's appearance although it never literally haunted him: "He was a mystery to me. He existed in me in the form of fear in little Hamlet, who was burdened with guilt, before whom the father's ghost might suddenly appear and demand a deed, which would be a retaliation for his death and revenge the mother's disgrace" (Torańska 2004).

An important analogy between *Hamlet* and *Hamlet of Gliwice* relates to fear of the father, to his contingent revengeful demands. For this reason, perhaps the director decides to write his play as a dialogue with the mother since her "resurrection" seems less terrifying (if not even comforting) than speaking directly to the father. If he wanted to take revenge on those who raped his wife

⁶ All translations from Polish are mine.

⁷ "The father was the first league player. He played in Preussen Zabór, and then in Vorwärts Rasensport Gleiwitz. One day he had to choose between football and school exams. He chose the first and I have an impression that he felt unfulfilled because of that. [...] In 1941 he had to wear his military uniform. First he was sent to France, where he played football in a military team. After that he was sent to Stalingrad. I read the letters that he sent from there to mother (he was an excellent writer). The worse it got, the more he believed he could escape from this pandemonium and be back to idyll in Gliwice. He did not manage. He perished. Never have we found out what happened to him. There was no mourning. For some time the mother believed he would be back" (Wielński).

and the others who slept with her, he would have asked his son to “wash away” the mother’s disgrace.

Perhaps the most tragic motif of *Hamlet of Gliwice* reveals the fact that the mother’s body was violated, objectified and profaned. In *Hamlet of Gliwice*, it is SHE, who describes the scene of rape by making a comparison to slaughtering of a cow. While Lachmann’s mother is imagined as the cow of Gliwice, “the butchers” are men of different origins: Russian, German and Polish. Nowhere in the play is the vocabulary more “fleshy” and dehumanizing than in the scene of butchering and then eating the body of the cow. The metaphorical language presents a scene of hungry men feeding on the meat of a cow. It is worth pointing out that the director deals with this traumatic event by placing it on the monitors. On the screen the audience sees a woman – Jolanta Lothe wearing the head of the cow. She delivers the lines in a very intense and poignant manner as to pour out the real sorrow and pain of Lachmann’s mother. The cow of Gliwice remains alone during her speech; there is only her left in a deserted courtyard of the Hotel Diament in Gliwice. By portraying the mother as the cow and setting this scene on the ground of Gliwice, the viewers get access to some images, filling Lachmann’s head, images which helped him to deal with his mother’s disgrace.⁸

In *Hamlet of Gliwice* the actress playing the mother brings into light recollections, which the author of the play prescribed for this character. Lachmann’s conjectures on his mother’s attitude towards memory are very clearly presented in the play. The description suggests she does not approve of her son’s persistent activation of memory:

SHE

Oblivion is salvation.

Memory is a disease. And you are a mnemopath. Like Hamlet.

HE

Me, a mnemopath? Memory is my only morality.

SHE

You are sick with memory. We are in the twentieth-first century.

All your dilemmas stayed there, in the twentieth century, which along with the previous ones, runs away into a dark channel, where only experts in history look into.

HE

History. There is no history. But our histories are left.

SHE

Your histories. Your hysteria, son. (26)

⁸ The audience should be aware of the fact that both the director’s and his mother’s memories are presented in the way Lachmann remembered and recreated the past. He constructs both his own perspective and the perspective from which his mother might have perceived.

Similarly to Gertrude, in Lachmann's play, the mother attempts to understand Hamlet's inclination to remembering and working through the childish trauma. Not only does she have another standpoint on remembering, but the lines suggest that it is Hamlet's hyperactive thinking that does not let him erase "histories" and creates unnecessary "hysteria" instead.

The choice to exploit particular motifs of *Hamlet* in re-inventing Lachmann's story is connected to the reflection of the violated, split and undefined identity of the tragic hero, which the director finds in himself. In the programme of the spectacle he admits that they both share the experience of tyranny and trauma of memory. His mother's fate resembles that of Gertrude, and his absent father echoes the ghostly figure of Hamlet's father. Lachmann finds tragic traces of Hamlet in himself. But above all, Lachmann's play is a parody of *Hamlet*, so the fundamental and serious questions become travestied and altered. In an interview conducted by Małgorzata Zawadka, he states that his spectacle is "a subverted and inverted *Hamlet*" (2008a: 111). "To be or not to be" turns into the question concerning one's identity. Lachmann devotes a few lines in his play to this problem, in the discussion between He and SHE:

HE
 To be or not to be
 The German
 The Pole
 The Greek
 Zorba
 The Fat
 The Cock
 Or otherwise
 To be or to have
 SHE
 Or not to have
 And not to be
 HE
 no
 not to have
 and to be
 or only to have
 or only to be
 to be is to have
 no, it does not have
 sense. (2008: 29-30)

What Shakespeare wrote on the subject of the sense of (non)existence becomes altered and applied to another issue by way of travesty. Not only "to be or not to be" is not the fundamental question, but Lachmann's protagonist trifles

it in a subversive manner. Instead of pondering on the essence of life, he (later in the play) focuses on interrogating his father about his military past in Wermacht. He wishes to know whether his father were the torturer or the victim, whether he, a mature Piotr-Peter, should feel responsible for his nearest ancestor's criminal past or should he "leave it to heaven" and thus let these recollections free. Lachmann's fear of his father results in writing the play in which the father never speaks, he literally does not say a word – he does not give any answers. Yet, the presence of a ghost pervades many dialogues in order to keep the father figure alive in memory, to position Piotr-Peter towards his "broken" childhood and its repercussions.

The last scene explains what "the touch through the screen" means. It pertains to the contact with Lachmann's mother who comes from the world of deceased to talk with her son, to reckon with the complicated past. She wishes her son touched her through the screen, invisible yet separating. It suggests oscillating between proximity and remoteness. What needs to be underlined is the place – the island, where the mother speaks from in the last scene. It symbolically denotes separateness and otherness – something foreign, yet something that could be reached. Lachmann's/Hamlet's mother extends her hand and the son stretches out his as they attempt to connect through the screen. Belonging to different realities is presented as making contact through "the touch through the screen," the touch full of understanding and love. The whole play turns out to be a dialogue with those who are gone, with the past. The screen also becomes a way to another reality where the recollections of the dead live. It also refers to watching reality behind the TV monitors – places of Lachmann's childhood in Gliwice – to which the audience is invited during the performance.

Hamlet of Gliwice might be also presented in a condensed form, that is, on the brochure promoting the performance (see fig. 1), where an interesting facial image appears. Some fragments of the face-like shape emerge from the superposition of the black letter H on the grey structure, which creates the contrast between these two colours and renders certain parts of the form recognizable. At first glance the picture is hardly decoded. Only after a careful examination of the picture the reflection of certain parts of the face: the nose created by the grey elements and the mouth which is formed by the horizontal line of the letter H, emerges. The same letter might be perceived as if stuck in a throat, as if somebody was trying to utter a word beginning with H. Is it *heimat*, Hamlet, or maybe Hitler? The letters might be treated as the building material for words, then the words – as the structure for the character.⁹ Eyes are absent from the image as if their presence was dangerous, as if to prevent oneself from looking into them. What becomes visible is probably the representation of

⁹ Some interpretational clues were suggested by the author of the poster and the brochure's front page, Wiesław Rosocha. The only source for these materials is my private correspondence with this Polish poster-designer.

Lachmann's/Hamlet's/the Ghost's face or rather some geometrical fragments that "build" this image – the reflection of/upon the self, which the director exposes to viewers.

Patchworked identity results in a specific way of composing the play, in which the pieces belonging to different times are sewed together. The author of the play is responsible for the whole composition of the performance. The director pinpoints his attitude towards the spectacle, stating that "theatre enables to intensify one's own fate" (Zawadka 2008b: 110). When he observes the reflection of himself, being acted by Konopka, the character on stage is more than Lachmann. Konopka, of course, could never physically resemble Lachmann – the boy, thus the reflection has to be understood symbolically. Simultaneously, the director reflects upon his self through watching somebody's else way of "performing" him. The words in the performance are also not exactly his own. In certain parts of the text he uses very short quotations from *Hamlet* and from *Obora, Gwiazda i ciąg dalszy* by Helmut Kajzar, a Polish playwright, essayist and the first husband of Jolanta Lothe.¹⁰ All in all, different materials used in Lachmann's play form a fascinating piece of theatre – a distinguishable and decorative pattern, whose perceptual aspect makes it worth being viewed more than once.

¹⁰ For further details, see Kwapisz 513-537.

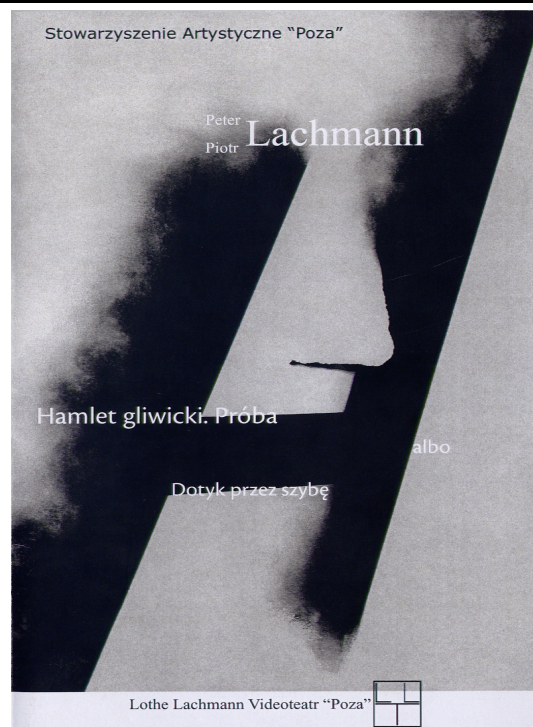


Fig. 1. The poster and the front page of the brochure promoting *Hamlet of Gliwice*, designed by Wiesław Rosocha.



Fig. 2. Jolanta Lothe as Gertrude, Zbigniew Konopka as Hamlet of Gliwice (young Piotr-Peter Lachmann on the photograph). Photo available online at <<http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/31723.html>>.

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