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## ***Hamlet* in Slovenia: From Myth to Theatre**

### **Introduction**

*Hamlet* is one of the very few works of the global literary canon that have been translated into Slovene more than once. There are four complete published translations of the play, as well as several adaptations. Each translator was an important figure in Slovene literature and/or literary translation, the translations were often widely discussed, and at least three of them marked the beginning and the end of an era.

*Hamlet*, and with it Shakespeare, truly arrived in Slovenia only about a century ago when the first complete translations were staged in the emerging Slovene theatres. But the play immediately engaged the Slovene expert public, who felt the wait had been much too long. Over the following decades it won over general audiences as well, to the point where it was called “a true Slovene folk play” by one of its translators, a leading theatre figure of his time. Although its almost mythological status dwindled to that of a mere classic after a while, it did, as a true folk play should, accompany the Slovene audience through all crucial periods in the recent history of the nation: it was the first play staged after World War I, the last before the theatres closed for World War II, it was on during the critical season of 1947/48 when Yugoslavia broke with the USSR, and again in 1990 just before Slovenia became independent.<sup>1</sup> At first it was known only to the German-speaking intellectuals; later, through several productions and translations, it became a part of the general knowledge of the population; and today its place is as a classic among other classics, which, as we shall see, marks a considerable decline in its status.

### **In the Beginning**

When Shakespeare wrote his plays, the Habsburg-ruled regions of today's Slovenia were undergoing the Catholic Anti-Reformation, and the only theatre was passion plays staged by the Jesuit monks in Latin. This situation remained more or less unchanged for the next century, but at the end of the eighteenth century, the first pieces on Shakespeare and his plays were written, beginning with Anton Tomaž Linhart, one of

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<sup>1</sup> Its place in the canon may not be the only reason why *Hamlet* made appearances at these junctures. It is, after all, a play about a national crisis, a state where “something is rotten”, a play about the legitimacy of kingly rule and illegitimacy of usurpers, ending in bloody massacre.

the leading Slovene intellectuals of the late eighteenth century and the author of the first theatre plays in the Slovene language.

The season of 1779/80 saw *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear* in the German Theatre of Ljubljana. Even though they were adapted versions, and in German, those performances did give the German-speaking Slovene public (high school students and intellectuals) an opportunity to become familiar with Shakespeare and his plays. The Slovene lands were briefly included in Napoleon's Illyrian Provinces from 1809 to 1814. After the French left the region, the German Theatre reopened, but Shakespeare disappeared from its stage for almost half a century, as the theatre favoured German authors.

In spite of that, all the leading authors and experts on the emerging Slovene cultural scene knew and wrote about Shakespeare. Liberals such as the philologist Matija Čop, the poet France Prešeren and the writers and theoreticians Fran Levstik and Josip Stritar wrote in favour of Shakespeare, while the more conservative writers were against such indecent theatre. The more liberal group, however, were the authors who shaped the emerging Slovene literature, and it is thought that at least Levstik (one of the most important literary theoreticians of the period) was strongly under Shakespeare's influence, which, according to some authors, even prevented the development of Slovene drama (Koblar 187).

Although those writers and theoreticians knew and respected Shakespeare, they did not try to translate any of his texts, apart from one unpublished attempt by Josip Jurčič, a protégé of Levstik and traditionally considered the first Slovene novelist. But in the second half of the nineteenth century there were many less prominent Slovene intellectuals who did. The first was a student from Maribor, Ivan Vrban-Zadravski, who translated and published the second scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. This was the first published translation into Slovene of any Shakespeare text. It was considered to be of good quality, but unfortunately the young translator died before he could translate anything else. Two of his high school friends, D. Šauperl and K. Glaser, also turned to translating Shakespeare, inspired by their English-teacher. Like Vrban-Zadravski, Šauperl died young, but before his death, he managed to finish a translation of *Hamlet* which would be performed in 1899. Glaser became a philologist specialising in Sanskrit, while he also translated most of Shakespeare's plays. Unfortunately, publishers and critics thought his translations were awkward and not poetic enough, and none of them was ever published or performed.

In that period Slovene Theatre Societies (amateur theatre groups) began to perform theatre pieces in Slovene, but for various reasons – from the lack of money to the lack of talented directors and actors – they were unable to perform classic texts such as *Hamlet*, which Šauperl already in 1867 offered to the Drama Society of Laško, a small town in Slovenia. The first Slovene production of Shakespeare was *Othello*, performed by the new Slovene theatre in Ljubljana, in 1886. At the same time, the first articles appeared presenting Shakespeare and his plays to the more general Slovene public that did not have access to Shakespeare either in English (only very few individuals spoke the language at the time) or German. The articles presented Shakespeare's life and gave summaries of his plays (a scene-by-scene summary of *Hamlet* in the literary magazine *Zora* took five issues). Because of this, the general (literate) Slovene public knew about Shakespeare and about the contents of some of his plays years before they were performed, and Shakespeare gained recognition as a classic before the vast majority of his audience had first-hand experience of his work.

The first of Shakespeare's plays to be published was *Hamlet*, first as a book, followed two months later by a performance in the National Theatre in Ljubljana. The translator credited in the book was Ivan Cankar, one of the most important figures of Slovene literature, although at that time he was only in his early twenties and starting his literary career. Nevertheless, his name was popular enough for the publisher of the book to advertise the translation as Cankar's alone, although it has later been found that he had only modernized and corrected the then thirty-year-old translation by Šauperl. For almost half a century, he was believed to be the only translator of the play. Only the publication of his letters, and the research that investigated the clues found there (Cankar 41), defined Šauperl as the first translator.

### **Cankar's Translation: The Age of Passion**

After Christmas 1899, *Hamlet* was performed for the first time at the National Theatre in Ljubljana. The press was enthusiastic:

Tonight, Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* will be played for the first time. The main role will be played by the director, Mr. R. Inemann. It is certainly grand for our theatre to have accepted into its repertoire this glorious great tragedy, usually performed only on the greatest stages. The Slovene public will undoubtedly be capable of acknowledging the efforts of the Slovene management of the theatre, offering to its visitors a most varied program, taking into account all the different classes of this nation. ("Slovensko gledališče", 28 Dec.)

The reviews that followed a very successful first night in front of a full theatre were no less elated. They praised the theatre management for their courage, the director and the actors for doing a decent job with the play, and the public for showing up. A performance of *Hamlet* was not just another performance, it was a test for everybody involved – the actors, the director, the management, the public, and ultimately, the nation.

It is interesting that none of the reviews of the performance explains the contents of the play, which means that the theatre public was already then expected to know something about it – possibly because it had been explained in detail some thirty years before. The reviews did say a few words about the author, but not to explain him to the public, only to reaffirm his classical if not mythological status:

Many literary experts and scientists have tried to interpret and explain this proud and immortal work by the most brilliant poet that has ever been born from a woman. ("Slovensko gledališče", 28 Dec.)

To conclude these first reports we could say that *Hamlet* had been eagerly anticipated by the Slovene public, and warmly accepted when it arrived – a love affair which lasted for the whole thirty years until the next translation.

The second production was the first of several "fateful" performances that took place at historical crossroads for Slovenes. It was the first play performed in the reopened National Theatre in 1918, after the end of World War I, when Slovenia became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, soon renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The Slovene expert public was ashamed: Amid the trials of the war, the destruction of the state they lived in and the founding of a new state, Slovenes had completely ignored the 300th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death in 1916. In

1918 they repaid their imagined debt to the great dramatist, not only with the significant first post-war performance, but also with a paper by the most noted representative of Slovene naturalism, Fran Govekar. He was the one to express the nation's apology:

In April 1916, our soul was full of shame and anger. While the entire cultural world bowed to the memory of the greatest dramatic genius, we, Slovenes, were not there. We have read that the cultural value of a nation is judged in the civilized world by the knowledge about and the greatness of the Shakespeare cult in a given nation, and we had no theatre. Therefore, we rush to repay our cultural debt, the first gift of our reborn drama be to him who is alpha and omega of the modern world drama.  
(Govekar 27)

After the humble prostration came the supplication: Shakespeare, the author hoped, would help the Slovenes to establish themselves within the new country "as equal among the brothers of the free Yugoslav union" (Govekar 27). In the true spirit of Yugoslavism, *Hamlet* said his lines in Croatian, since he was played by a Croatian actor, Hinko Nučić. Apparently no adaptations whatsoever were made to either version (the Croatian of the lead actor or the Slovene of the remaining cast) which meant that parts of the dialogue did not agree in such basic grammatical categories as case or gender. This, seemingly, was more than the Slovene public could take, and while it did not dampen their enthusiasm over *Hamlet* and Shakespeare, the first cracks showed in the idyllic picture of south Slavonic love among brotherly nations:

Mr. Nučić played *Hamlet* in the Croatian language, for reasons already explained by the management. We do not under any circumstances object to hearing the brotherly Croatian language from the Slovene stage; from the point of view of the completeness, however, we must emphasize that the performance lost a great deal of the brilliant unity, of its intimate link with the audience, that Shakespeare's plays need in a much greater degree than most other theatre pieces. (Funtek 32)

Only four years later, *Hamlet* was back. This time all characters spoke Slovene throughout the play despite the fact that the director was again a Croatian, and the success was overwhelming. The play remained on stage for seven years until its last performance in the season of 1927/28, all the while gaining popularity to the point where Oton Župančič, a poet, dramatist, translator and the artistic director of the National Theatre, proclaimed *Hamlet* "our best folk-play" (Župančič 116). The general attitude that can be gleaned from reviews and other accompanying texts was no less religious than before. This is how the director described the ensemble's attitude to the play they were performing:

The dream of every actor is: to play *Hamlet*, the dream of every director should be: to direct *Hamlet*. And a dream it remains forever, even though it is played, directed, performed [...] Never in my career have I seen the mental region expanding every day, new ideas, problems arising every day [...] But with *Hamlet*! And this is what I call the beauty of depth, not to

say exhaustion. And in all this greatness there are moments a person comes to love – to love passionately. (Šest 40)

This decade of extreme popularity was also the time for *Hamlet*, our best folk-play, to venture outside Ljubljana for the first time. In 1925, it was performed in the National Theatre in Maribor, but the experiment was unsuccessful. While the critics did not object to the text itself, they objected to the cast, which apparently gave an unsatisfactory performance, and to the public, which was not adequately moved. In short, all those involved were deemed not mature enough for Shakespeare.

Only six years later, *Hamlet* was back in Ljubljana, but in a changed form – with a new translation, a new director, a new public and a slightly less elevated accompanying discourse. The first period, with its passion, its pathos and the first translation, finished after the last performance in 1928. The public felt they had had enough of Hamlet, of Šest (the director), and of Cankar, and looked for something different.

### ***Hamlet in the Hands of a Poet***

While Cankar had been a rising star of Slovene literature when he tackled Hamlet, Župančič was, at the time when he published a new translation, a well known and well respected poet, dramatist and literary translator, and an authority on literature and theatre. This meant that the new translation was widely discussed by the reviewers and the audience, thrilled not only by a new, modern translation (which was, however, deemed less poetic than the first one), but also by the fact that they were seeing a new performance directed by a new director. Within two weeks of the opening night, the translation gained the title of “magnificent” (Koblar 59), and it remained so for many decades – until the 1990s.

Judging by the reactions of the press, the relationship between *Hamlet* and the Slovene audience was slowly and subtly changing. The audience was as enthusiastic as ever about the great dramatist and his play, but the reviews became gradually less elevated, the discourse became more artistic, poetic, and less religious and mythological:

After a long journey through the mountain of scholarly literature [...], I returned, exhausted, to the source itself and gladly realized that the text itself is the most beautiful, the deepest and the most valuable source for the actor, and for the director, his most valued encouragement and his most reliable signpost. The text itself has remained, and will remain, what it has always been: simple, never ending, all-encompassing, and never totally exhaustible. (Debevec 60)

During the period till the end of World War II the famous words by Župančič, that Hamlet is our best folk play, were endlessly repeated in every text about *Hamlet*. They proved that there was a special relationship between the Slovene audience and *Hamlet*, and consequently, that the Slovene audience was a part of the civilized world, if not even above it. One of the signs of this special relationship between *Hamlet* and the audience was that it was the last play performed before the theatres closed because of World War II. The play opened in October 1941, and the critic sought in the text consolation and encouragement for himself, the audience and the nation that found itself divided between three more or less hostile countries:

More than any other work of art from the vast treasury of the world drama, "Hamlet" is suitable for prompting the complicated reckoning with themselves of every individual, and maybe also of the community, at the crossroads of life. Because in "Hamlet" all sides of life are intensified, everything is experienced to the limit, everything is inspected completely and shows itself in the light of the inner fire, as given to the inspection of the genius. Only beside such surreal personality, our smallness, but also our tragic grandeur can be seen, together with all the so called wisdom, that, as Shakespeare says, has no idea of too many things in heaven and earth.[...] And if the catharsis of this tragedy cleanses and illuminates the particularly wretched man of today, stumbling under the gray sky of a great time, then Shakespeare's dark confession achieved its aim this time. And – "the rest is silence." (Borko 125)

The silence lasted until the end of the war, after which the audience found itself in a different country yet again: The Kingdom of Yugoslavia had now become a Socialist Federal Republic. The first years in the new social order were apparently not the right time for *Hamlet*, but then came the all-important year of 1948, when the country broke away from Stalinism, which caused a serious crisis in the new and vulnerable society, and cost many people their lives and freedom. But it also caused a major shift towards intimism in art and literature ... and called for a new performance of *Hamlet*.

In the time after World War II, and throughout the 1960s, *Hamlet* was a regular guest in the Slovene theatre, this time not only on the National Stage in the capital, but also in other cities, and with more success than the unfortunate attempt in Maribor in the 1930s. In accordance with the ruling ideology, *Hamlet* spread out from Ljubljana, to a mass audience, and the Slovene minority that remained outside the new country: *Hamlet* was performed four times, twice in Ljubljana, once in Celje, and once in the Slovene Theatre in Trst/Trieste in Italy.

The focus of the expert audience changed completely after the war. Before, they had focused on the relation between Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, art, the audience, and sometimes the nation. Now, the focus was on the adaptation of *Hamlet* to the new ideology. The critics looked for the new, historical Hamlet, emphasized the importance of minor characters, especially those of non-royal descent, the struggle between social classes, and similar. Although the attitude of the reviewers to the play and its author remained respectful, the mythological period in Slovene reactions was undoubtedly over, and the historical period began, sometimes with unusual results. This next review is typical of the period, with its combination of respect for the canonical text and obvious discomfort because of its feudal origins:

Shakespeare stands on the brink of an era that we call the bourgeois: the first bourgeois revolution was winning in Holland, and there were preparations going on for the second in England. Those who fought in both of them, or helped in the preparations, were people of great passions, they had a strong feeling for their own interests, and were therefore cunning and cruel. Two worlds found themselves in a fierce struggle. One of them was doomed to perish already – feudalism – and the other – the world of bourgeoisie – was getting ready to conquer the continents, despite the wigs

still sitting on their heads, despite their wearing togas, and appealing to god and an eternal justice. (Onič 126)

Ironically, it is not recorded what the ordinary theatre-goers thought about this new focus of the expert public, as they largely disappeared from the reviews. But if we judge from the performances' success, audiences went on liking and enjoying *Hamlet* and largely ignored all the ideological pap that was written in connection with the play.

After this excursion into history, *Hamlet* left Slovene stages for about a decade. There were no performances in the professional theatres between 1968 and 1981, possibly because everybody was rightly embarrassed about the output of the previous decades. The 1980s were, however, another historically interesting period of Slovene history. The death of Tito (as nearly a king as possible under Socialism) in 1980, the lack of a suitable successor, and the resurgence of national grievances, left Yugoslavia nearing its expiration date. And so *Hamlet* returned. This decade completes the descent of Shakespeare and *Hamlet* in the eyes of the Slovene public – from a godlike work of art into a classic work of world literature among other classics. The play was no longer staged as a test of the nation's mettle, the historical/ideological focus had thankfully disappeared from critical discourse, and the relation between the Slovene audience and Shakespeare entered a new phase – an artistic one. The critics concentrated on the individual performances (one review was dedicated entirely to the lead actor's performance as Hamlet), and on their own interpretations of the play.

Since the play had been a vital part of the Slovene canon for so long, the audience had long been expected to know roughly what the play was about, and to be aware of the general consensus that it is a masterpiece. But in the 1980s, critics made new demands on the audience. *Hamlet's* public was suddenly expected to speak English. Many texts of this period are dotted with English quotations, most usually from *Hamlet*, but not always. The next example shows that the expectations of the audience's knowledge had become much higher since the last performance in 1968:

Peter Boštjančič plays a very sensitive Hamlet, unable to hide the romantic components of this popular renaissance hero, but then it is not only “*of an age but for all time*” (if we are to trust Ben Jonson), but we nevertheless understand at once that he does not have any illusions anymore.  
(Vurnik; emphasis marks English quote in original)

As we can see, the audience is not only supposed to speak the source language of the text, but also to have a certain knowledge of its culture. These reviews also open a new trend in the reception of the play that would continue through the 1990s into the new millennium: the return to the Britishness of *Hamlet* – in terms of language, culture, author, theatre. Half a century after it had been dubbed “our best folk-play” and after spending decades entangled in the ideological struggles of the target culture, *Hamlet* was finally returned to its source culture.

### **Shift to the Subversive: *Hamlet* in the 1990s**

The 1990s began spectacularly with the end of Yugoslavia and the beginning of independent Slovenia. Also, the early nineties saw two new translations of *Hamlet*, the first in 60 years, and two new productions on the Slovene stages. First in 1989, and then again in 1993, the first new translation of Hamlet in 60 years appeared. The first of these translations (1989) was made by one of the most prominent Slovene literary translators, Janko Moder, yet it never attracted any attention, for various reasons: the translation was

of a rather polemic nature, and the publisher hardly advertised it. It has never been staged, and hardly ever mentioned among other translations of Shakespeare. But apparently, despite this lack of attention to Moder's translation, the time was right to end the era of Župančič. In 1994, a new translation was published and given strong publicity by its commissioner, the National Theatre in Ljubljana. The translator was, again, a prominent poet, a representative of Slovene modernism and postmodernism, the dramatist and literary translator Milan Jesih. The publication of this translation finally drew the attention of the audience to the fact that not only *Hamlet* but many works of world literature are indeed translations, and that translations can differ considerably. The publication of this translation also meant the beginning of a new period in which more than one translation exist side by side, since the transition from Župančič's translation was not as abrupt and complete as had happened 60 years before, when Župančič's translation totally and immediately replaced the older translation by Cankar. As a consequence, all announcements or reviews since 1994 have stated which translation was used for a particular production.

There were also two new productions of the play. First came an extravagant and grandiose production in the National Theatre of Maribor in 1990, directed by Tomaž Pandur. This production attracted enormous attention not only among the Slovene public, but also abroad. In Slovenia, the nineties slightly resembled the inter-war period as far as *Hamlet* was concerned, as people flocked to see the play from all parts of the country, which is rather unusual for a performance of classic theatre.

The production itself was the first in the history of Slovene reception of *Hamlet* to express a slightly "subversive"<sup>2</sup> attitude to the text. This marked its further decline on the prestige scale. In the true subversive spirit and against Linhart's 200-year old advice, the play was shortened, several characters and scenes were left out, and many characters were changed considerably. The experiment was successful, the audience was enthusiastic, and the production won many important awards. But the accompanying texts show a certain discomfort among the expert public, who hurried to reassert Shakespeare's and *Hamlet's* position at the top of the world canon.

The critics' demands on audience were partly high but partly lower than ever before. The audience was expected to speak English, since reviews were again littered with quotes in that language, sometimes *Hamlet*-related, but sometimes totally unrelated, in an attempt to connect *Hamlet* to its source culture and language.

But as far as the knowledge of *Hamlet* and Shakespeare is concerned, the expectations were lowered. For the first time in a hundred and fifty years, the critics felt the need to explain some finer points of the plot to the audience:

Most notable is the absence of Fortinbras (the guy who comes at the end, buries the dead and predicts the country's bright future).  
(Inkret)

As the writer himself states at the beginning of his article: "*Hamlet* is a part of general knowledge," which apparently means something that everybody has heard of, but only a few know well.

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<sup>2</sup> As Aaltonen used the term in *Time-Sharing on Stage*.



Only four years later came another production, this time at the National Theatre in Ljubljana, 95 years after this same theatre first introduced Slovene audiences to *Hamlet*. This production was more conservative than the Maribor one, but it used a new, modern translation, which caused a stir among expert and general audiences. The reviews tended to begin by quoting the most famous parts of the play in new translation. Apart from this, the reviews were mostly concerned with the production itself, the acting and directing, and the writers were not at pains to reaffirm the position of Shakespeare and *Hamlet* in classic canonical literature, as they had been with the Maribor production. The play was most often called simply “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”, which is a long way from the mythological discourse of the previous century. The tragedy was also no longer considered a test for the theatre, the public, and the whole nation, although it remained one of the greatest challenges on the individual level for actors, directors, and translators.

### Into the New Millennium

The subversive trend in the Slovene culture’s reception of *Hamlet* has continued in the first decade of the new century. First came a production in the Theatre of Nova Gorica which was, judging by the reviewers’ reaction, again of the polemic kind, with many of the most important characters being caricatures of their more traditional selves. This again spurred the critics to reaffirm *Hamlet*’s and Shakespeare’s position in their reviews, although the register of the reviews is rather low, as if the writers wanted to convince the contemporary, urban and (judging by the slang elements of the text) younger audience:

It is pointless to talk anymore about the story of the young man from Elsinor. The play has long since exceeded the level of just another theatre play, what is important now is how the director tackles the myth.  
[...]  
Therefore this episode does not mean a disappointment. It only means that Shakespeare can sleep peacefully, after having proved yet again who rules.  
(Jaklič 2000)

It is interesting that now that the play had completely lost its extraordinary place, the mythological status that it had held for many decades, the performers decided to compare it to a sacred text. During the press conference they pointed out, that it is second only to the Bible in the number of translations:

Hamlet is a text, well known to anyone, that has undoubtedly set a record among performed plays. Beside the Bible, it is the text most published, translated into the most languages and most often studied and quoted. It lives in the consciousness even of those who have never read it.  
(J. J. 2000)

After the year 2000 there were four more productions of what could be vaguely described as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The first one, a production of Mladinsko gledališče in Ljubljana, came in 2001, with a new polemic (and much shorter) translation and a Japanese-inspired stage. As with the production in Nova Gorica, it got mixed reviews, and it never became a hit with the public.

In 2006 followed three new productions: one in the Puppet Theatre of Ljubljana, one in the City Theatre of Ljubljana, and a third production entitled *Stroj Hamlet* (*The*

*Hamlet Machine*) which combined Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the play *Hamletmaschine* by H. Müller.<sup>3</sup> But this time the productions did not have any far-reaching effects. They are very different from each other, with the puppet show focusing on the "tragic fairy-tale" aspect and even introducing fluffy animals to attract children, the production in Maribor emphasizing the complete lack of free will, and the one in Ljubljana following the traditional road. Still, all three received a rather positive response from the critics, and the ordinary response of the public – no barely contained enthusiasm, no enraged outbursts, just the ordinary response to any work of art. We could conclude, therefore, that after a hundred years of presence in the Slovene culture, *Hamlet* has finally settled in as a classic work of art, nothing less, nothing more. In 2008, the most recent Hamlet-related performance, entitled *Hamlet (60minutes)* was performed in Slovenia, in the Novo Mesto Theatre. This performance had a story loosely related to Hamlet, and a large display of a digital clock counting down the 60 minutes allowed for the show to develop.

Also, in this first decade of the new century, Hamlet in Slovenia acquired a more international status. Pandur, the director of the celebrated performance in Maribor in the 1990s, took the play to Madrid: the lead was played by the actress Blanca Portillo, and the performance was, according to the Slovene critics, warmly received by the Spanish audiences. In Slovenia, meanwhile, the audience were able to enjoy an Ukrainian version of the play (*Hamlet.Dream*), presented at the Ex-Ponto festival in Ljubljana, which concentrated mostly on the non-textual elements, such as music and dance, while parts of the text were recorded in advance and the recording (in Slovene translation) was presented during the performance.

However, none of the performances in the last decade were full versions. They were all adaptations, they all focused on dramatic elements other than the text, and none of them achieved the success of enjoyed by past performances as recently as the 1990s.

## Conclusion

The relationship between *Hamlet* and the Slovene audiences, as we have seen, has been an intense and interesting one. Perhaps it was because the Slovene audience, like Hamlet, lived in a state of more or less permanent political crisis, that Slovenes felt this was the right text to see them through all the fundamental changes in their society over the last turbulent century. Even before his plays were translated into Slovene, Shakespeare helped shape Slovene theatre, and translations of his play were eagerly anticipated and enthusiastically received.

In the first decades during which the Slovene nation and its culture, literature and theatre were in their formative stage, *Hamlet* was almost mythologized, and the attitude of the public was often described in religious terms of gratitude, debt, ordeal and adoration. After World War I this relation changed into a passionate poetic enthusiasm. The play gained enormous popularity and was labelled not only a part of Slovene popular culture of the time, but even its best example. Thus it was only natural that

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<sup>3</sup> One could speculate that the imminent demise of the national currency and the arrival of the euro was one of the causes for this, since currency change was again a critical event in Slovene society, and as we have seen, Slovenes tend to respond to crises with productions of *Hamlet*. But that would also imply that the EU membership in 2004 left Slovenes completely cold, since there was no production of *Hamlet* between 2001 and 2006.

*Hamlet* was the last performance to inspire courage in its audience at the beginning of World War II. After the war, *Hamlet* and its audience were entangled with the social changes and ideological struggles of post-war society.

Throughout this time the attitude of the Slovene audience towards *Hamlet* was respectful, although not as passionate and devoted as it had been in the beginning. This changed in the 1990s when the first signs of a shift toward a more subversive attitude appeared, with a polemic translation that sank without a trace, and a polemic production that was very successful. This was, incidentally, also the time of another set of fundamental and violent historical changes, which left Slovenes living in an independent state for the first time. As the confidence of the receiving culture and society grew, the status of *Hamlet* declined.

The polemic productions of the 1990s opened the way for several more playful performances in the beginning of the new century, when the play was not only shortened but also changed considerably, and adapted for different audiences such as the urban young, children, etc. The perceived importance of the play for the well-being of the nation seems to have faded, and the public no longer turns to *Hamlet* for advice and consolation at critical times. But then, it has to be said that times have recently been considerably less critical than for the most of the previous 150 years. Thus, the relationship between the play and the audience has become less special, less passionate, and more like the ordinary relationship between an audience and a good theatre piece.

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