

A Clockwork Brick in the Wall: Shakespeare and Communist Aesthetics

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I.

Immediately after the political changes in Bulgaria at the end of 1989 a new production of *Romeo and Juliet* appeared in Sofia¹ - a near pantomime in an absurdist setting of falling plaster columns and dummies, assembled and dismembered on the spot, among which the young actors, dressed in black body-costumes, performed at breath-taking speed. A few months later a production of *Hamlet* had also done away with the better part of the text.² In the manner of Stoppard's *Rozenkrants and Guildenstern are Dead* *The Mousetrap* had taken over the play of the Danish Prince and imposed on it a bizarre, neurotic pall of dark humour. Some deaths had been added to brighten up the atmosphere: Hamlet dispatched the prattling gravediggers. Perhaps, even the director was not aware of the symbolism of this act as the death of an old aesthetics.

The productions were jarringly iconoclast and arrogantly youthful, so much in tune with the hectic world which was falling apart outside the walls of the theatre that I, sitting elated in the audience, cared little about what had been done to Shakespeare (and much had). It was the spirit, not the letter that mattered. An elderly couple sitting in front of me at *Romeo and Juliet* were discussing the performance and saying that the translator, whose name appeared on the poster, for a few garbled scraps of the text had remained, should sue the director for misusing his name. These people cared about the letter and were lucky to be able to separate their theatrical from their political experience. Or were they? As for myself, I could relish these new productions but also shared some of the concerns of the elderly couple. History had caught up with me in mid-life.

Nor, thinking of politics, was it very clear then what it was that these two productions meant in political terms. They consisted of gaps like the hole in the Rumanian flag at that time, like the world in the streets where events moved with dazzling speed, their logic often totally uncertain, where language was acquiring new surprising significations.

However, these productions and many others, which followed, can be seen in the light of dissent from an old aesthetics. They brought to the fore the post-modern and unruly as a diametrical opposite to the forcefully imposed aesthetic norms of the communist period. These young people had put him out for sale like the army uniforms, flags and all the other paraphernalia of the old regime which irreverently and flagrantly hung in the jumble sales in the streets of east European cities. Yet, they were also in a hurry to make him part of *their* artistic biographies, to relate their names to his as his brave new co-authors. Older audiences and directors as well as *their* Shakespeare were quickly turning into an item of the past. The generation gap yawned wider than usual.

II.

¹ Directed by Stefan Moskov at the Mladezhki Teatur (Youth Theatre) Sofia, opening night in March 1991.

² Directed by Alexander Morfov at the First Private Theatre, opening night 2 February, 1993.

In an important essay Vladislav Todorov makes the seminal point that communism is primarily engaged with matters aesthetic by means of which the power structure seeks to perpetuate itself. In comparison with other totalitarian regimes communism has the unique quality of suppressing economic logic. It fashions itself as a state of fulfilled myth, as the achieved harmony of heaven on earth.

Communism creates ultimately effective aesthetic structures and ultimately defective economic ones. That is what empowers its strong presence and durability in the world. That is what fortifies it ... The result is a deficit of goods but an overproduction of symbolic meanings ... The realities of communism are aesthetically worked out. Society is a poetic work, which reproduces metaphors, not capital ... The fundamental academic field of communism lies in its political aesthetics. The political economy is a simulative one. It generates an initial appearance of an economically motivated society. Actually, it produces the symptoms of such a society, not the causes of it. The working out of metaphors and figures of speech is that which generates life forms. The true symptoms of communism are the overproduction of words and symbols. The political economy of communism hides genuine symptoms - the politically aesthetic ones, and creates others, simulative ones.³

This definition of the period pithily sums up the dominant position of ideology, the ultimate merging of the aesthetic and political and the turning of the aesthetic into an instrument of coercion like the labour camps and the chronic lack of means of sustenance. Together with fear and hunger, brainwashing is one of the triple pillars of the system. The Word in it literally has power to kill for the Word is spoken by an almighty person who crowns a strict paternalistic hierarchy. He is the holder of Ultimate Meanings, the Party Leader. This close-knit system is basically irrational for all the seeming rationality on which it rests, an aspect which has rarely been considered in depth as its prominent feature. Professor Assen Ignatov has shown how motives for behaviour in a machiavellian totalitarian system are entirely non rational, i.e. they may be useful to the ruling person but detrimental to the system and, therefore, 'irrational in relation to it'⁴. Paternalism is irrational for it curbs human activity and in this way prevents change and progress. Modernity in all its forms, whether economic or literary, is a mortal danger, a sign of independence of the established order. To strengthen further its position paternalism requires total emotional involvement. It is not enough to be loyal to the Party and its leader, you must love them - the political and emotional are grafted on each other. Hence the drastic, black-and-white value statements concerning political systems, literary works or persons crucified on dichotomies like 'most progressive/ retrograde', 'assertive of true values/ decadent', 'loyal to the death/ treasonous'⁵.

The complex consequences of a value system blending the political aesthetic and the emotional is a key to understanding the strained use of language, forced to oscillate between the poles of the imperative and superlative, the resilience of communist myths and the uses of Shakespeare as one of the historical bricks which the new politico-literary aesthetics claimed as a building block in the protective wall it erected around the system. For he held glorious pride of place in the canon.

³ Vladislav Todorov, 'Introduction to the Political Aesthetics of Communism', *Textual Practice*, Vol.5, Number 3, 1991, pp. 363-382. The article is part of Todorov's book *Adamov komplex* (in Bulgarian), Ivan Vazov, Sofia, 1991.

⁴ Assen Ignatov, 'Philosophy and Law. Rationality and Irrationality in Communist Behaviour', *Crossroads*, Jerusalem, Winter-Spring 1982, pp. 155-185.

⁵ The poem *Most* by the Bulgarian poetess Blaga Dimitrova is a bitter comment on this mode of expression. Its translation into English is by Nedyalka Chakalova in *Britain and Europe*, British Studies Conference, Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria, March 1993, edited by Ludmila Kostova, Margaret Dobing, Nick Wadham-Smith and John-Allan Payne, Petkov Publishers, 1994, p. 17. <I lived in the most golden of ages, / I lived in the fairest system / under the wisest doctrine, / with the highest morality, / amid the most eternal friendship, / in the happiest society, / towards a most wonderful future. // I skipped the comparative MORE, / and found myself straight into MOST. / It was compulsory for a smile / to be most blissfully radiant, / a moment - the most historic, / a feast - the most festive, / progress - the most progressive. // I believed with the most genuine belief, / I glowed with the most glowing glow, / and I always rose on tip-toe // to oversretch at the high jump: most, most. / It's just that I don't know why / my poems became so sad / sadder towards the end.

Any literary canon is essentially political, however, the product of the communist system is *consciously* so to a degree unknown until then in history. Enforced through the totality of an education without alternatives, it is a monological product of a setup which brooks no cultural debate. The analysis of the Shakespearean appropriations has shown how Shakespeare has been placed either 'above politics' or 'contemporary politics has been presented in the light of Shakespeare's plays'.⁶ Thomas Healy has noted that one result of this trend is 'to reinforce the perception that Shakespeare is capable of intervening in all politics, so that, curiously, it can appear *specific* politics are authorised by Shakespeare'⁷, which is precisely how communist ideologues have used the Bard and the other authoritative figures subsumed under the heading 'Great Progressive Writers'.

These were endowed with essential characteristics devised for the needs of the politicised canon, such as criticism of imperfect (non-communist) society, sensitivity to the voice and problems of 'the people'. The 'hero' is either tragically doomed to failure in his attempt to reform society (Hamlet), or, in the literature of 'socialist realism', conscious of class and party, is victorious often through his death (Gorky). The worth of the character and of literature in general, is measured by their social usefulness. With disarming simplicity a Bulgarian critic, writing in 1950, makes the point in a textbook meant for university students:

First and foremost I would like to present the most typical and progressive among Western European writers ...I have therefore allotted the largest place to those literary movements which have helped the struggle for the peoples' liberation from the yoke of feudalism, the oppression of the Catholic Church and the obscurantist ideology of monopolistic capitalism in the modern age, the age of imperialism ...The literary history of the Renaissance is similarly presented through the works of the most prominent critics of feudal society, such as Boccaccio, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes.⁸

Needless to say such a matrix leaves out an enormous body of literature, including many of the works of the 'Great Writers' themselves. The typical explanation condescendingly suggesting that these authors could not but have shared some of the 'weaknesses' of their historical periods (e.g. Shakespeare's romances), and, as a result, these texts have been silenced through rare publication or by not being taught. Thus, 'good' literature is defined as one which offers a series of 'struggles, great clashes, grandiose conflicts'⁹ and is popular in character. One of the last Soviet encyclopaedias of literary terms published as late as 1987 defines 'popular' as

a polyvalent notion which characterises: 1) the relationship between individual and collective art, the level of imbibement and adoption by professional literature and art of motives and images from folklore; 2) the level of adequateness and depth achieved in recreating the nature and outlook of the people; 3) the level of social accessibility of art to the people.¹⁰

The amorphous all-inclusiveness of this definition illustrates the fake historicist claims of the new aesthetic approach, for it can be applied equally successfully to texts from antiquity (Homer), the Renaissance (Shakespeare), Romanticism (Walter Scott), 19th century realism (Tolstoy), 'socialist realism' (Gorky). The processes of refashioning are given further impetus as authors' biographies are

⁶ Michael Dobson, 'Accents Yet Unknown: Canonisation and the Claiming of *Julius Caesar*', in *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth*, edited by Jean I. Marsden, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 21.

⁷ Thomas Healy, 'Past and Present Shakespeares: Shakespearean Appropriations in Europe', *Shakespeare and National Culture*, ed. John J. Joughin, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, pp. 206-232. The manuscript of the paper was generously offered by the author for reference.

⁸ D. B. Mitov, *History of West European Literature. Early Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (in Bulgarian), Sofia, Nauka i Izkoustvo, 1950, p. 3.

⁹ A. Peshev, *Lectures on the History of West European Literature. Early Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (in Bulgarian), Sofia, Nauka i Izkoustvo, 1951, p. 230.

¹⁰ *Literaturnii Entsiklopedicheski Slovar*, Moskva, Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya. 1987, p. 235.

touched up to suggest as humble origins as possible. Shakespeare was consistently presented as the little educated son of a poor craftsman; as for Byron with his aristocratic lineage, it was stressed that he came of an impoverished old family, or, more often, that he had 'denied his class' to join the ranks of the 'Progressive Intelligentsia'. The latter was integrated into the Trinity which the new ideology supposedly worshipped: workers, peasants, *progressive intelligentsia*.¹¹

Evaluating across the centuries creates a semblance of a continuity of developments, presented as the causes effecting socialist realism. The latter is placed at the top of a hierarchical construct as the ultimate achievement from whose height one can look back at the 'Great Progressive Writers' to discover the inevitability of the course of history towards a socialist revolution, as well as comment on the pardonable ideological lapses of the Great ones, due to their luckless life in previous social formations. Large periods of human history are labelled either progressive or reactionary. The Middle Ages are uniformly conceived as feudal, obscurantist, grunting under the yoke of the Catholic Church. The Renaissance, on the other hand is 'a most progressive overturn', 'a period which needed titans and gave birth to titans who were anything but narrow-minded bourgeois', a phrase borrowed from Friedrich Engels. The new political aesthetics created a whole fully-fledged theory around the relatively few pronouncements by Marx and Engels on literary matters. This phrase, together with other scattered statements, is the kernel of the later ideologised adulation of the Renaissance as a period of titanic personalities applying their tremendous potential to the fight against 'feudal' values as the analogue of fights against any antiquated historical order. From this perspective Shakespeare had superlative credentials as a man of the Renaissance. He also had the honours which the Romantics had bequeathed on him and Romantic credentials were an asset because the Russian literary intelligentsia of the 19th century had been under a strong Romantic influence. Since the Bolsheviks, under whose rule the new aesthetics became normative, presented themselves as heirs to these 'precursors of the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917' the adulation of Shakespeare was received as part of the revolutionary legacy. The Soviet Union became the true homeland where his ideals had finally come to fruition. 'Shakespearisation' became one of the current terms denoting literary perfection. (Another underhand derivative from a remark made by Karl Marx in a private letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, discussing the relative merits of Shakespeare vis-a-vis Schiller.) Writing 'like Shakespeare' was proposed as a totally a-historical aesthetic norm which implied mostly being understood by the people. This idea was so grafted on popular consciousness that at one of the Congresses of the Soviet Writers a woman farmer explained to the writers to try to write like the Bard, if they really wanted to be admired.

Together with attempts to create a new geography by designing to change the course of the major northern rivers (one of the great designs favoured by Stalin) the political aesthetics of communism, developed in the Soviet Union, prescribed the qualities of the New hu-Man being. Since the very essence of this construct is aesthetic, and literature is considered a *bona fide* historical document, we can glean the features of this new form of life from a dictionary of *literary* terms. 'The Great Hero' of the literature of socialist realism is a proponent of 'revolutionary, active, socialist humanist values', he is a 'harmonious human being' acting in accordance 'with the requirements of the historical moment, 'optimistic' and 'committed to the communist ideal and the Party.' Needless to say he comes from the very depths of the people.¹² Though Shakespeare is claimed to have lived in a specific historical period and to have been concerned with its problems, the millennium perspective imposed by communism 'produced an aberration of this historical pattern by replacing the familiar

¹¹ It should be noted that this three-ply structure of ideal communist society, where the peaceful co-existence among classes eliminates class struggle, also has a hierarchical structure. First among equals is the working class which is the leader of peasants and inspirer of the progressive intelligentsia. The very need to define the latter as 'progressive' reveals the lingering unease over its subversive social function and, consequently, the need for its control by the workers and peasants. Of the two other groups the peasants are the one which also takes a qualification. Often the class of the peasants is referred to as 'collectivised' as opposed to those who clung to their 'petty-bourgeois' ideal of private property. The working class is the only intrinsically reliable partner in the scheme as signalled by the lack of adjectival definition. The working class, like God, possesses an essential superiority and is spoken of only in the superlative degree.

¹² See the entry *Narodnost literaturi i iskusstva* (about the popular, ie from the depth of the people, origins and nature of the Great Hero) in *Literaturnii Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar*, Moskva, Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia, 1987, pp. 235-237.

timelessness (associated with bourgeois criticism) by a humanist dream of an ideal future'.¹³ His heroes, like the line of Kings seen by Banquo, portend the arrival of the new order in the forward march of history.

As time went on and the aesthetics of communism became an ideology spreading beyond the Soviet Union and into eastern Europe, the idea that Shakespeare is 'one of us', to use Mrs. Thatcher's phrase,¹⁴ turned into a slightly hysterical fantasy. In an article called '*Shakespeare and We*' a critic writing already in 1964 upon the occasion of the quadricentenary of Shakespeare's birth gave vent to his political emotions by declaring:

What bridges the gap between us and Shakespeare are the great playwright's humanism and the ideals of our social order. For communism has turned into reality the boldest dreams of Shakespeare's free-speakers. Altruism, doing one's social duty, faith in Man's powers, the cult of the future - are these not the noblest of features of the builder of communist society? That is why we feel the depth of Shakespeare. An amazing harmony binds us in one.¹⁵

It is easy to notice the changed new meaning of words where 'humanism' stands for the love of/by the people, a trans-historical quality binding the progressives of all ages and countries. In the thus suggested chain of commonness Shakespeare is the nexus binding us (communists) to the rest of progressive history. Things can be hardly taken any further.

The canon which embedded Shakespeare into the politicised aesthetic structure transformed him into a 'Great Precursor' of communism, a creator of Great Fighting Characters, a Popular writer, loving and loved by the people. However, as we know, life cunningly tends to subvert norms human beings try to impose forcefully on it and so does the stage, which Shakespeare wrote for. If we are to believe him, the theatre is 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure (*Hamlet*, III.ii. 23-4). Its ever-changing, protean, short-lived shapes that vary with each performance, proved the medium, which, in spite of close monitoring and censorship, turned the brick in the communist wall into a mine. And, as time went on, one could hear it tick. Shakespeare was slowly turning into 'our contemporary' but a contemporary very different from the icon devised by the new aesthetics.

III.

About the time when the Bulgarian critic writing the canonical history of western European literature was reproducing the received Soviet model one of the first post-war productions of Shakespeare was being prepared for the stage. Director Stefan Suchadjiev's *Romeo and Juliet* opened in the National Theatre in Sofia in 1954. The production was an immediate success with the audience. Just as quickly though, it fell prey to the budding young critics of the new school. The Communist party daily organ *Rabotnichesko Delo* featured a major half-a-page diatribe, analysing Shakespeare's intentions, and, consequently, the director's ideological lapses:

The main theme of Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* is love. Yet, the pathos of the play does not proceed from the theme itself but from its humanistic reading in the spirit of the Renaissance. To the Medieval conception of marriage as a political or economic transaction the progressive people of the Renaissance opposed the idea of free choice in love. What is more, they conceived love as one of the moral tools by means of which human beings could be reformed ...Such is Romeo's and Juliet's love ...but in the society which they live in there is no room for it. Romeo and Juliet perish. In spite of it, the tragedy is optimistic ...

¹³ A. Shurbanov and B. Sokolova, 'Shakespeare in the Bulgarian School', *Research in Drama Education*, Vol.1, Number 1, 1996, p. 12.

¹⁴ Hugo Young draws attention to this use in *One of Us*, Pan Books, London, Sydney and Auckland, 1993, p. ix.

¹⁵ V. Karakashev, 'Sheksir i nie' ('Shakespeare and We'), *Narodna Kultura*, 17, 25 April, 1964.

The director has impoverished the idea of love by concentrating only on it. Love has existed in all human societies. So it is important to reveal the concrete content of this emotion and the forms in which it realises itself, its objective, social content. Suchadjiev's production of *Romeo and Juliet* is a play of the 'banal' idea of eternal love for which, according to the director, the best setting are the warm Italian nights, the serenades, the pranks of the lovers, the lavish costume, pompous decor, organ music, etc. As a consequence the audience is not shaken by the cruelty of feudal attitudes which cause the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*.¹⁶

This early review is a good sample of the brand of pseudo-historical criticism which, while declaring that love is historically specific, also prescribes the form of specificity. To the critic the play is about love but love as a vehicle of revealing a clash between two worlds, which, though bearing the titles of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance have nothing of historical relatedness to them. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance are simply two drastically opposed periods, which are in a state of war, merciless and total in the style of class war as conceived by communist ideology. One of them, the Renaissance, is 'progressive'. It tries to reform morally the Middle Ages which are retrograde. The very idea that human beings must be reformed is a function of the political aesthetics of communism which sets about to re-mould the world in its totality. It tried to re-model nature, eradicate 'bad' upbringing in human beings by forcing them into slave labour, or re-educate them through the politically juggled example of Great Literature. Socialist realist Shakespeare writes optimistic tragedies and is a partner in the struggle for a New Humanity.

In this framework all characters have their clear-cut place and meaning. Tybalt, Prince Paris, the old Montagues and Capulets stand for the 'dark powers of feudalism'. Friar Laurence, on the other hand, is postulated to be 'a representative of the life-assertive materialist philosophy of the Renaissance, which Medieval scholasticism could not destroy either on the pyre or through the Inquisition'. Mercutio, is 'Shakespeare's favourite character, one 'who gives an objective meaning to the personal struggle lead by *Romeo and Juliet*.' Strangely, the Nurse is not mentioned. The critic also complains that the production fails to instil in the audience hatred against reactionary ideologies, nor does 'one feel the raging of the spirit of feudalism in Verona.' As a result *Romeo and Juliet* have not been shown as prefigurating the New hu-Man, for their emotion does not awaken an awareness of social oppression which would have turned them into class-conscious rebels.¹⁷

The production was saved from being banned partly because even 'wrong readings' of Shakespeare, cannot be entirely damaging, partly because of the brilliance of artistic performance which gathered audiences in the theatre for five successive seasons.¹⁸

Together with thinking of dramatic conflict in terms of class-struggle, the new mould demanded a reshuffling of accents which would bring to the fore 'the role of the people in history.' Alexander Shurbanov has written about the use of minor personages in Shakespeare, characteristic of communist readings of his plays.¹⁹ Usually referred to by critics as 'clowns' or 'fools', these characters belong to a lower stratum of society and are endowed with a kind of earthly common-

¹⁶ Svoboda Buchvarova, 'Romeo i Zhulieta na Stsenata na Narodnia Teatur Krustyu Sarafov' ('*Romeo and Juliet* on the Stage of the Krustyu Sarafov National Theatre'), *Rabotnichesko Delo*, 290, 17 October, 1954.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ From the point of view of the more dynamically developing theatre in western Europe this manner of presentation became old-fashioned already at the end of the 1950ies. However, in many east European countries there was a tendency to preserve this essentially pre-war style because of the new conservatism which set itself at many places. It seems that it sometimes also served as a sign of a lost but not forgotten past, associated with a different political system. In an interesting article entitled '*Hamlet* in postwar Czech theatre' published in *Foreign Shakespeare*, (ed. Dennis Kennedy, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp.195-210.) Jarka Burian comments on the first set of reasons and concludes that '... Czech productions have been notable for their relatively conservative, traditional (some might say outdatedly conventional) orientation ... The fact that they have shown relatively more fidelity to their source than have other postwar productions in Europe may owe something to the after-effects of Socialist Realism, to a long affinity with a Stanislavskian acting tradition, and to a cultural tradition that values reason and moderation above impulse, passion, subjectivity' (pp. 208-209).

¹⁹ A. Shurbanov, 'Hamlet's Gravediggers ... of Capitalism: Marxist Overinterpretation of Minor Personages in Shakespeare', in *Britain and Europe*, eds. Ludmila Kostova, Margaret Dobing, Nick Wadham-Smith, John-Allen Payne, pp. 117-121.

sense or wisdom. The aesthetics of the communist period has regularly sentimentalised and presented them as full-blooded motheads of popular sentiment.

The gravediggers in *Hamlet* who acquired jocular notoriety among students as 'the gravediggers of capitalism' were seriously discussed by critics as such, the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Porter in *Macbeth*, the Fool in *King Lear* were often interpreted as paragons of virtue, the people at its most progressive.²⁰ Mercutio, Friar Laurence and other marginal characters, though not exactly part of the people, belong to the phalanx of Progressive Intellectuals who have denied their class. There came a moment though, when the lavish presence of 'the people' had its fatal effects on the Great Heroic Concept of Shakespearean drama. The people struck back.

Three directors have had a formative effect on the Shakespeare productions in Bulgaria from the 1950s onwards: Vili Tsankov, Leon Daniel and Luben Grois.

Tsankov's productions include, *Richard II* (1964), *Romeo and Juliet* (1953,1966), *Titus Andronicus* (1975), *Richard III* (1979), *Hamlet* (1956, 1983), to mention only a few. Except for his debut in 1953 with *Romeo and Juliet* which was praised as a realistic 'hymn to the dying traditions of feudalism'²¹ one can map out a consistent line of the development of a style very different from what the review implies. Tsankov, always elegant and precise, decentered the hero, reduced him in stature, mathematically stylised gesture, posture, scene sequence, speech, detached his characters from the beauties of 'high poetry'. The choice of plays, some of which had been little or never performed until he staged them (like *Richard II* and *Titus Andronicus*), clearly spell out his interest in the nature and workings of power. Yet, he refuses to turn his tyrants into out-and-out feudal villains. The abundance of characters on the stage, the repetition of scenes, the detachment, bring about a new dimension to 'the role of the people' in his productions. The latter disturbingly begins to appear as an accomplice to the crimes of the tyrant. More and more often critics speak of the productions as 'sounding very modern in the way they divulge the roots of evil and the abuse of power'.²² In the cool rituals of Tsankov's Shakespeares the audiences recognised the Asiatic ritualism of their own world meant to hide the widening gap between the people and those who ruled it as well as the complicity of silence.

Luben Grois, whose early death brought to an early end a brilliant artistic career, created a Shakespeare with emotional finesse and depth. Whether in tragedy, (*Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*) or comedy (*The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*), or the romances (*The Winter's Tale*), he probed into the the isolation of characters in the world surrounding them. His own professional life was blighted by political censorship which kept him as little known as possible by allowing very few reviews of his productions to be published and by keeping him away from the capital. He concentrated his attention on the life of the character with 'a mark on his forehead' (in Bulgarian this means being singled out as the black sheep, ostracised) and the way social pressure destroys nobility and love. His Othello was not a Moor but a man with just one a black spot on the forehead, and so was Shylock. Both characters were only temporarily integrated into society, used as far as they were needed, and then discarded. Grois definitely preferred the comic world, with its rich texture of characters and with the greater versatility of situations to which it lends itself. The labelled character (some mark on the face or costume) was a way of suggesting a complexity of readings. 'Are characters what their labels suggest they are? How far is the label consistent with the character? Is it at all true to it?' While Tsankov's productions tended to analyse power in texts where it is the main theme, Grois showed it infiltrating the fibres of the social organism down to the most personal and intimate, the joke, the gesture, the friendly prank. His Shakespeare had an emotionally rich language, and the dynamics of his productions prompted discrepancies creeping into the social harmonies. In the midst of joy and merriment lurked the shadow of the character with a mark on his forehead, the one pushed to the margins because of his difference.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 117-118.

²¹ N. Bozduganov, 'Romeo i Zhuljeta na stsenata na Rusenskiya Narodni teatur' ('*Romeo and Juliet* on the stage of the Rousse Popular Theatre'), *Dunavska Pravda*, 30, 5 February, 1954.

²² A. Stoyanov, 'Nova postanovka na klasicheska tvorba' ('A new production of a classical work'), *Rabotnicesko Delo*, 26 February, 1979.

Leon Daniel's Shakespeareana is particularly impressive, with about twenty productions and a landmark *Hamlet* in 1965.²³ Some critics believe that this production changed the course of Shakespeare stage history in Bulgaria. The set consisted of a shabby circus-like tent with a mixture of costumes and property which looked as if collected at the very last moment. The great tragedy spoke directly to the audience in the frank, familiar voice of the street, about a tyranny easily recognisable as Stalin's regime of the previous decades. Most of the personages were driven to a state of submissive apathy, entirely motivated by fear and self-interest. Hamlet, the only human being of some conscience, verbally aggressive and totally disorientated in his violence, moved in a spiritual void. He was even deprived of the final act of revenge, for Claudius took his own life leaving the hero morally and physically helpless in the face of evil. This pattern, like Tsankov's and Grois's, also completely disregarded critical impositions. Instead of the 'Hero' of socialist realism a pathetic ineffectual intellectual, wading a sea of depravity which smothered him, walked the stage. Hamlet stepped down from his heights to become 'one of us', not the elect few 'us' of the critic who had claimed oneness with Shakespeare only a year before that, but 'us' sitting in the audience as desperate and guilty as the Prince himself.

In *Romeo and Juliet* (1971) Daniel drastically transformed Friar Laurence from the expected 'Renaissance humanist and materialist' into the villain of the play who had enmeshed the lovers in intrigue and double-dealing. History less and less looked like an orderly cause-and-effect, class-struggle-motivated text-book affair. It was filled with the personal interests of those who had power and who acted under the disguise of decent motives.

The general politicised scheme began to crumble as more voices and styles were imbibed by the theatre. And though no one in Bulgaria could imagine in the 1980s that the Berlin Wall might fall or the Soviet Union disintegrate, the theatre had found a voice and power capable of challenging monistic control in spite of the ever-shifting degrees of censorship. A new critical generation had also appeared which was no more united under one banner. Modernity was stirring the spirits of Bulgaria until finally it burst out in 1989. For a while the sound of the explosion overcame the very memories of communist aesthetics. The new generation of directors and actors regaled in their newly gained freedom which sometimes brinked on absurdity²⁴ Today, eight years later, in the depths of economic depression, Bulgaria has had time to regain the memories of the past and start coping with the legacy of communism. Under the rubble of the 'dreams factory' new Shakespearean shapes come to life. Their faces are many, some distorted like the materially shrunk and disorientated world around them, others sophisticated and philosophical. In the eruption of post-1989 heteroglossia Shakespeare's plays are again in the centre of the quest of aesthetic, ethical, social and personal positions. Yet, in the spate of interpretations and styles it is impossible to discern a discourse which a large group of the Bulgarian audience can identify with. The theatre has lost its subversiveness and many of its old directors which made it a proponent of a shared cause. It is again, happily, a place of entertainment, so much so that one wonders if we are already living in Arcadia or are simply badly concussed by the undeclared war (which might be the other name for the transition from communism in some parts of eastern Europe). Political aesthetics is dead and the resultant swing to the flagrantly apolitical is one of the reflexes of 'the shape and body of the time'. Shakespeare, once again, walks in the guise of a contemporary. Or might this be a disguise?

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²³ I wish to thank Alexander Shurbanov for letting me use the manuscript of his unpublished paper presented at the 6th World Shakespeare Congress, Los Angeles, 1996. Here I closely follow his discussion of Daniel's *Hamlet*.

²⁴ In the elation of the new freedom many Bulgarian theatres rushed to make up for past prohibitions. The 1990 and 1991 seasons were marked by a surprising number of productions of absurdist plays, a short-lived excitement which came to an absurd climax when one could choose among four Ionesco or Beckett plays on the same night in Sofia, two neighbouring theatres showing sometimes the same play, as happened with Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* running parallel at the Army Theatre and the Sulza i Smyah which are a hundred meters from each other.