

SHAKESPEARE’S THREE SHADES OF SERBIAN – DID HE WRITE ABOUT US?¹

Two most often adjectives attributed to Shakespeare’s name are “universal” and “timeless”. Centuries before the internet and social media, Shakespeare was embraced and appropriated as a global brand. In the English speaking world, he will always be an iconic figure. But why did we play *Henry VI* for the 2012 Globe Olympics and believed it was a play about us? Whether we can recognise our own past, present, and, probably, future in his plays because every other nation can, or be it that there are stories “more Serbian” than somebody else’s – we infallibly identify certain historical characters and events in his oeuvre as our own and feel that “mirror held up to nature” flashing at us. *Julius Caesar*, *Henry VI* and *Romeo and Juliet*, three plays based on different epochs and cultures, equally found their way home through Serbian appropriations. The universal topics of love, power, war, manipulation, prejudice, communication and judgment, resonate with our collective memory and present-day reality as if written for us and about us. The answer is simple – they are about us. Shakespeare knew us before we knew him, to paraphrase Father Nikolaj Velimirović (Milanović 1995:90)¹. Who is here so rude that would not be a Shakespearean²? More Shakespeare in a society means less intolerance, violence, crime – all that Shakespeare’s works abound in.

Key words: Shakespeare, Serbia, history, politics, theatre, identity, appropriation

What is Shakespeare to us, the Balkans, and what are we to Shakespeare? The nearest to the Balkans that Shakespeare got in his works is Illyria in *Twelfth Night* and, despite his obvious anatopism, he might have been familiar at least with South Adriatic coast, notably

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1 “I don’t know Shakespeare ... but he knows me”

2 “Who is here so rude that would not to be a Roman?”, *Julius Caesar*, III.ii.

Dubrovnik, through his Italian connections and merchants sailing across the Mediterranean, as thoroughly explored and recorded by the renowned Serbian Shakespearean, Professor Veselin Kostić (2015: 7-8). Illyrians were known to the ancient Greeks from the Bronze Age and lived in the Balkans as well as the Celts afterwards, before the Slav tribes arrived in the VII century. The first Brits that arrived in Serbia were – soldiers, in 1476, to the parts under Pope Pius II and the Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus. Some of them to master war skills, some craving adventure and glory, and some were expellees, like Irish soldiers at the time of the “Flight of the Wild Geese” in 1691, agreed in the Limerick Treaty following the Jacobites’ defeat (Kostić 2015: 12-13). The Habsburg-Ottoman battle of Belgrade in 1717 is the motive of Alaric Alexander Watts’ Addison-style poem called “Belgrade” from 1789. The battles around Belgrade are also mentioned in Lawrence Stern’s *Tristram Shandy* (1762) and Byron’s *Siege of Corinth* (1816) (Kostić 2015: 20).

It was not just soldiers or adventurers that travelled acrossed the Balkans before the diplomatic relations between the two countries were established. But, Serbia was just a province in the Turkish Empire, part of the oriental world so distant and murky to the Occident. The letters of Mary Wortley Montague on her stay in Turkey, 1716-1718 gave rise to *ars peregrinandi*, with more reports on our lands. Sir Walter Scott translated the Serbian epic poem „Hasanaginica” from Goethe’s German translation (around 1797), but it had been mentioned almost two centuries earlier, in the *General History of the Turk* by Richard Knowles, from 1603 (Kostić 2015: 63-68).

Diplomatic relations between Great Britain and Serbia were established no earlier than 1837 and the first British consul was very close to the Serbian Prince Miloš, thus thwarting the Russian influence. However, when he asked his Prime Minister to support Serbia against Turkey, Mr. Palmerston replied that the only support Britain could provide for Serbia could be morale, unless Britain declared a war on Russia, which they could not do just because of Serbia. Duke Wellington designated the Ottoman Empire as Britain’s long-standing ally, so to keep the crumbling Bosphorus giant alive, and thus to perpetuate the balance in Europe, Serbia had to remain dependent on the Ottoman Porte (Kostić 2015: 111). Nothing seems to have changed in this thug-of-war and trade-offs, it is just that some of the global players are now different. That is where we recognised

Shakespeare's timelessness – precisely in his timeliness, “through multiple timely moments in which a play, a quote or a character coincides with the current moment and its concerns”, as observed by Marjorie Garber (Garber 2005: 21).

It is important to set the scene for introducing Shakespeare's Serbian appropriations as his works first found their way to our audience through German translations and, to him, we probably were one of those “states unborn and accents yet unknown” (Shakespeare 1997: 612). In Serbian literature and literary theory the cut-off point for Shakespeare's reception is the year 1859, when the first Serbian translation from the English original appeared. By the end of the century, seven Shakespeare's plays were staged in Serbian National Theatre of Novi Sad and eleven at Belgrade's National Theatre (Mihailović 1968). Within the first hundred years, 23 Shakespeare's plays had been staged in Belgrade, in Serbo-Croat, English, Russian, Czech and Italian, with a total of 830 productions and a premiere every second year. Shakespeare is the only playwright with so many plays enacted in Belgrade, in a “state unborn and accent yet unknown”. So, we may have discovered Shakespeare a bit late in a day, but once we did, we never let go of him. “Once you feel that rush in your heart, you can't settle for anything less”, said Antoni Cimino of Ontario's Stratford Festival, comparing Shakespeare to love (Cimolino 2016: 134). It is Shakespeare's sense of freedom and egalitarianism that the long-oppressed nations of the Balkans could relate to, as explored in Professor Ewan Fernie's Belgrade paper on “Shakespeare for Freedom”, where the 19th century Hungarian freedom-fighter Louis Kossuth features as a Shakespearean and Shakespeare-inspired hero. In 1916, at London's tricentenary of Shakespeare's death, Serbia was proudly represented by a university professor and a theologian, who subsequently became a bishop, Father Nikolaj Velimirovic. His paper “Shakespeare the *Pananthropos*” (Milanović 1995: 90), celebrated Shakespeare as a panhumanist who knew every nook and cranny of human soul. Let us mark that this was in the midst of the WWI, when the only foreign flag ever to be hoisted on top of Washington's White House was - Serbian, to acknowledge our contribution and sacrifice. So, someone seems to have turned the tables since.

Shakespeare and his compatriots may have been completely ignorant of Serbia, many of them still are. But we have always taken a keen interest

in these isles, the phenomenon of a rather isolated country that managed to conquer the world, with Shakespeare as its insignia. Better than all British chroniclers, at least in the author's humble opinion, the whole history (and pre-history) of Britain is described in a historiographic, yet masterfully written *The Sentimental History of the British Empire* by our famous novelist Borislav Pekić, compared to Thackeray, published in London in 1992, after a series of 10-minute talks on Radio BBC. Pekić traced the British scepticism, pragmatism and self-sufficiency back to the bronze age of the isles, unwillingly embracing metals and preferring privacy and seclusion (Pekić 1999: 30-31).

Another exiled Serbian novelist, before Pekić, wrote in London and about London – Miloš Crnjanski. Inevitably, he also makes references to Shakespeare, *A Novel about London*, where his main character, Russian immigrant Nikolay Ryepin, meditates about the world as a stage to invoke another Shakespeare's soliloquy on *theatrum mundi* (Crnjanski 2019: 19). It was convenient for Shakespeare to start exploring his metaphor of the world as a stage in the sphere of politics because, as John Bell wrote, "The people in his history plays inhabit a world much closer to our own. The crimes they commit are the stuff of the daily press" (2012: 129). The whole novel is a great meditation on suicide. The actor is always an alien, to the audience and to himself, lost in the numerous roles he plays. The heavy snow surrounding Ryepin resembles that in Dublin, just as *A Novel about London* resembles Joyce in many ways (Paunović 2007). And this brings us to Joyce's meditations upon Shakespeare, with the issue of paternity and authorship so close to his (Joyce's) heart and to the heart of his Stephen Dedalus. The spirit of the father hovering above one's head as a threatening figure, rather than comfort and support, is embodied in the Ghost created by Shakespeare the author and played by Shakespeare the actor. Crnjanski dedicated his only text on Shakespeare to his *Sonnets*, in 1930, discovering his dramatic art much later³. Why he did so is perhaps for the hope and curiosity that he read in the *Sonnets*, unlike the horror and grief of the Shakespearean stage.

Now, let's see who's afraid of Shakespeare, 400 odd years later? Serbia's 2015 *Julius Caesar* production starts with a rhetorical question: "What would you do if you saw your country was plunging into tyranny?"

3 <https://www.scribd.com/doc/285786035/sekspirovi-soneti-crnjanski>

If one man were becoming too powerful, would you do anything to stop him and, if yes, what then?⁴ The director said that the main question he meant by Shakespeare was “Are we still going to believe in revolution after this play, or shall we realise that it is sheer alternation of political elites? Are we going to understand that the same people, be them government or opposition, govern our lives, running up and down the ladder of power? Will they be able to sell us their big words again, deliver inflammable speeches and instigate us to yet another upheaval where the “fight for the general good” will grow into their own benefit? Can we stop believing in democracy if we see it sneering into our face? Can we stand the autocratic government just because we know one usurper will be replaced by another? Can we agree to the societies we live in, even though we know they are based on lies? Can we fight lies, if we no longer know what the truth is?”⁵ Needless to say, this production is independent and not very welcome in Belgrade’s major theatres. Director Mladenovic sees the role of theatre in regaining its powerful function of a driving force, the power of tribune’s words spoken from the stage to the public. At the times of truth, theatre was called a lie, because of fictional characters and events. Now that lies have become the social framework and denominator of our political and public sphere, theatre stands the chance of being the hotspot of truth. It is up to our courage or cowardice to exercise that freedom or to let go of it. The same thoughts were shared by director of the Serbo-Albanian *Romeo and Juliet*: “Intellectuals and culture are never in harmony with politics. Cultural elite can challenge the ruling elite. Their public speeches and critical thinking can even decide on the election results” (Jovanović 2014: 191-192). If I may interpret Professor Richard Wilson’s idea of “storming the cultural citadel”, I believe this is what he meant by saying that Shakespeare cannot be just family silver you proudly treasure (Taylor 2001: 185).

The scene that definitely rings a bell for our regional audience is when leaders of both parties, the conspirators on the one hand and Mark Antony

4 The play’s opening night took place in Montenegro, at the Budva Theatre City Festival, 2015; production of the National Theatre of Sombor and the Cultural Centre of Svilajnac, Serbia.

5 On the occasion of the performance at Belgrade’s Zvezdara teatar, 14 December 2015, <https://zvezdarateatar.rs/vesti/julije-cezar-beogradska-premijera-14-12/>

and Cassius on the other, sitting in leather armchairs and costly suits, pouring whiskey and proposing toast to each other, while the plebeians are bleeding in the streets of Rome. Such was the rapport of our warlords in the '90's, having pushed the "distracted multitude" (Shakespeare 1997: 678) into the inferno of civil war.

Rome is a good example of what Richard Burt calls "discursive determinism" – how the history of Rome applies to Renaissance and how we read *Julius Caesar* interpreting it through the present (Logan and Rudnytsky 1991: 112). Actually, there are three moments to consider: the time about which Shakespeare wrote, the time at which Shakespeare wrote and the time when we read it. Just like the young Tom Nashe wrote that it would have joyed brave Talbot to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage, and have his bones embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators ... who imagine they behold him fresh bleeding" (Bell 2012: 158). Or, as John Bell remembers, a great Georgian actor Ramaz Chkhikvadze who played Richard III in London said: "Richard wasn't such a bad fellow. He only killed fifteen people. Stalin killed twenty million" (Bell 2012: 160).

Julius Caesar was not about Romans, of course. It's about Elizabethan Englishmen. And the play is not just about regicide, explosive as it may be as a topic. It is about the chaos that follows and the collapse into civil war. No matter how ambivalent Shakespeare felt about the crown, his plays demonstrate a horror of anarchy, mob rule and civil war (Bell 2012: 275). And I can fully subscribe to John Bell saying "We've seen enough of mass hysteria and violence to share Shakespeare's apprehension" (Bell 2012: 282). And though Marullus calls them "You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things", his mob in *Julius Caesar* was not a crowd of ragged blockheads. It was a mix of lawyers, doctors, teachers, students and housewives. They were us. The more intelligent and aware you make the citizens, the higher the stake and the more frightening the reality. A lot of ideas we espouse are the scraps we pick up from the media, the shock-jocks, the advertisers, the opinion pages. Brutus seems like a sketch of Hamlet himself – an intellectual almost paralysed by introspection, 'the noblest Roman of them all', renowned for his integrity and sensitivity. The conspirators needed him as their frontman. And here I can't help feeling that life imitates art, given the life of the renowned Yugoslav Shakespearean

scholar, Bosnian Serb Nikola Koljević, much quoted in this paper. He seems to have been the idealist Brutus in the mayhem of the civil war and tragically ended his life the way the noble Roman did. On the other hand, Antony is a master of improvisation and a master opportunist. His funeral oration is a model of spin. The 2001 Bell Shakespeare production had Antony read out Caesar's will to the populace, kissing a baby and signing a few autographs (Bell 2012: 279). He shows the will to the audience and it was a blank piece of paper. Why politicians want to keep the people at the primitive level of a mob is because "a more intelligent nation will want more intelligent rulers". And that's what this is all about. Shakespeare is for free and smart people. And who wants free-thinking subjects? We have seen, on the one hand, misguided idealism, self-deception and mixed motives. On the other, opportunism, insincerity, casual brutality and an exercise in smoke and mirrors. We have seen the world of politics: as it was, as it is, and, no doubt, as it shall always be (Bell 2012: 283).

Another point to take home from the Serbian production is the issue of gender equality, given the billing female characters got in his tragedies and the need of cross-dressing and gender-bending for them to speak up and be equal at least for a short while before they are tamed for good. So, the actresses who play Portia and Calpurnia get on the stage only to inform the audience that they are not going to play at all because they are so marginalised and make no difference anyway.

In *Henry VI*, produced by Belgrade's National Theatre, the "Laza Kostić" Foundation and the Globe Theatre as Serbia's contribution to the 2012 Globe Olympics, the same conflict is passed on to next generations and history stands in *enpasse*. Actually, it is making circles – symbolised by the round table that dominates the stage in the Serbian production of this play. Everyone has their own truth and nobody trust nobody, new wars and new alliances start at that round table... Will to power is still our reality. "Henry VI is like an open wound where you clearly see the fracture, but in the frenzy of worked up minds there is nothing that common sense can do", said its stage director Nikita Milivojević⁶. As Professor Koljević put it, history is Shakespeare's greatest *theatrum mundi*, with political dealing and wheeling as variations on the old political topics, from Plutarch to

6 <http://sekspirfestival.org/portfolio/henri-vi/>

Wars of the Roses (Koljević, 2012: 25). Pekić deconstructs the verz myth of the name of these wars, as white rose was but one of the York house symbols, while Henry VI never attached a red rose to his banner (116). Finding the Serbian medieval history from Stefan Nemanja to the Battle of Kosovo, Pekić compares this two-hundred year's stretch to the English Edwardian era ending with dethronisation of Richard II in 1399, labeling the latter period as rather monotonous in comparison to the tumultuous Serbian history (108-109).

Having inherited the medieval idea of actor as impostor, it was easy to imagine the court as a theatre and to relate the power of acting to the political power, as was the case of the "Protean" Richard III (Bell 2012: 242). But it is not just the court "pomp and ceremony" which is theatrical in political games. Ideology, the divine right of king, is the theatrical ritual which everyone must practice. However, in English chronicles, most action took place in or about courts, so Shakespeare couldn't miss the chance of Roman democracy, with rallies, fora and tribunes. That called for a strong leader. Antony becomes a "shaman" inspired by plebeians to turn into a medium with Caesar himself speaking through him. (Bell 216-17) His leader's trance where he gets ritually inspired by the mob with whom he shares emotions for the dead Caesar, is an example of political fanaticisation. "In order to fanaticize others, the leader needs to be fanaticized himself" (Bell 231). The decisive factor was the emotion that the actor-politician manages to stir with the audience – the public. Just like the theatre audience, the public anxiously awaits an exciting show, with most sympathy and affection for the most fiery actor. In that, Brutus and Coriolanus are morally agreeable, but anti-actors, just as Richard II was the boring actor who the audience wanted to step down so that they can enjoy Henry's bravado. Brutus says in IV.2. that "true value knows no art" (Shakespeare 1997: 621). Coriolanus even accused his people for wanting him to pretend (II, 3). However, the roles that Shakespeare's greatest heroes play are precisely opposite their true nature and that opposition ends with tragic resolution. (Koljević 2012: 232) Henry VI saw his role of the king as imposed from/by his birth and ominously shows reluctance to play it, preferring that of a subject⁷.

7 *Henry VI*, Part II, IV, 9

In the end, let me show how cultural professionals approached the need for reconciliation and peace building in the region, because someone had to start it. The vehicle they used for this was Shakespeare, of course. Belgrade-based “Integration” workshop run by our famous actor Miki Manojlović, who, paradoxically, became famous playing *Richard III*, got in touch with the Albanian theatre company “Qendra” in Kosovo and they prepared *Romeo and Juliet*, premiered in 2015. They play in Serbian, Albanian and English, without translation. It is a play about love, hate and communication. As director Manojlović stated, “Language can be a bridge or a wall, a surmountable or insurmountable obstacle”⁸. People can understand each other speaking different languages and that is why Serbia’s *Henry VI* was rewarded with standing ovation at the Globe Olympics. Just as sometimes people do not understand each other even when they speak the same language. The director added Edmond’s soliloquy from *King Lear I.2*:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that,
when we are sick in fortune,--often the surfeit
of our own behavior,--we make guilty of our
disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as
if we were villains by necessity; fools by
heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and
treachers, by spherical predominance; drunkards,
liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of
planetary influence; and all that we are evil in,
by a divine thrusting on: an admirable evasion
of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish
disposition to the charge of a star. (Shakespeare 1997: 948).

It picks up on that origin of evil and the human habit of blaming it on others, never on oneself. Shakespeare wanted precisely the opposite: instead of being judgmental and self-righteous, we should all turn our eyes into our very soul and look for black spots therein, to paraphrase Gertrude faced with Hamlet’s accusations (Shakespeare 1997: 676).

The hate between the Serbian-speaking Capulets and the Albanian-speaking Montagues is devastating, irrational, so fierce that they cannot

8 https://www.b92.net/kultura/vesti.php?nav_category=321&yyyy=2016&mm=06&dd=07&nav_id=1140893

even discern its reason any more. It is hatred feeding on itself, leaving a waste land behind. Lovers are always at the margins of the society, “deserters” of history. Their tragic grandeur remains their own, does not spill over to the streets of Verona. This production insists on the external world, which, like the Greek predestination, sets everything in advance for the characters and they are hopeless against it. But the message is not that nothing can be changed, it is that without sympathy and changing ourselves there is no understanding of each stakeholder’s position.

When communism was thriving in Yugoslavia, during the ’60’s, BITEF, the famous international theatre festival was established, bringing together the most avant garde productions from the West and dissidents from the East. No doubt it was a well-devised cultural diplomacy of a country that never was under the iron curtain and that co-founded the Non-Aligned Movement, but of course there was a mono-party system and intelligence agents were operating everywhere, especially with foreign presence. Peter Brook describes such situations in his *Quality of Mercy* (Brook 2018: 39). He participated in BITEF festival three times, having come for the opening year with his *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. There were no football hooligans or street gangs in our country at the time when Shakespeare’s anniversaries were celebrated with a week-long programme in all Yugoslav regions, with a central ceremony in Belgrade. More Shakespeare in a society means less intolerance, violence, crime – all that Shakespeare’s works abound in. And by Shakespeare, I mean the overall culture and orientation of a society to foster fundamental values and freedoms.

So, what can a nation like mine seek in Shakespeare? History – we’ve got too much of that. Tragedy – another surplus commodity. It is love. Universal, in all its “infinite variety”, for every human being. Where Shakespeare was different from his contemporaries is that he felt with and for others in all their faults and frailties. And, after all the vicissitudes, it is hope. “I love Shakespeare because he never leaves me in the darkness where he pulled me in”, Professor Koljević remembered a student’s observation (Koljević 2012: 296), explaining it by the Elizabethan belief that the world was created for goodness, not for evil or for nothingness (198). History was bloody, but alive, there was always the possibility of change, testified by the frequent changes in the throne. And motiveless benignity always prevails over malignity. Usurpers get duly punished in the end. Intriguing

impostors too. So, at both macro- and micro-level, balance is restored and “time is free” (Shakespeare 1997: 999). Or, as Peter Brook called it, the trinity of quality, mercy and freedom – that is Shakespeare’s conundrum (Bruk 2018: 90).

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Наташа Д. Шофранац

ШЕКСПИРОВЕ ТРИ НИЈАНСЕ СРПСКОГ – ДА ЛИ ЈЕ ПИСАО О НАМА?

Сажетак

Два најчешћа придева која иду уз Шекспирово име су „универзалан“ и „ванвременски“. Још вековима пре интернета и глобализације, Шекспира су широм света прихватили и присвајали. За енглеско говорно подручје он ће увек бити икона, али зашто смо ми играли Хенрија VI у Лондону и веровали да је тај комад о нама? Било да можемо препознати своју прошлост, садашњост, а вероватно и будућност у његовим делима зато што и сви други народи могу, или има прича које су „српскије“ од других – свакако можемо непогрешиво пронаћи „двојнике“ одређених историјских личности и догађаја у Шекспировом опусу и гледати право у то „огледало које је држао спрам природе“. Јулије Цезар, Хенри VI и Ромео и Јулија, три драме о различитим епохама и државама, једнако проналазе свој пут до куће кроз српске позоришне верзије. Универзалне теме љубави, моћи, ратова, манипулисања, предрасуда, комуникације и расуђивања налазе одјек у нашем колективном сећању и садашњици као да су писане за нас и о нама. Одговор је једноставан – Шекспир је нас упознао пре него ли ми њега, речима Владике Николаја Велимировића. (Милановић 1995:90)⁹. Ко је онда такав варварин да не би хтео бити Шекспиров¹⁰? Више Шекспира у једном друштву значи мање нетрпелјивости, насиља, злочина – свега чиме обилују његове драме.

Кључне речи: Шекспир, Србија, историја, политика, позориште, идентитет, присвајање

9 „Ја не знам Шекспира ... али он зна мене.”

10 „Ко је онда такав варварин да не би хтео бити Римљанин?“, *Јулије Цезар*, III.ii. прев. Симић-Пандуровић