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Free souls and captured state – Shakespeare as a means of subversion in Serbian theatres

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Abstract

This paper addresses the phenomenon of literature and theatre as a vehicle for freedom of expression, subaudition and subversion. The case studies are two plays enacted on Serbian stages in the past decade: *Shakespeare at the Kremlin*, an authentic post-Yugoslav and post-communist creation revisited and revived thirty years later; and “Project Shakespeare – *As You Like It*”, of Belgrade’s National Theatre, where even a comedy has a tragic ending. Prison as a little state, power and restricted freedom of an individual and a whole society, as well as the role of theatre in these processes, are the topics that pervade both plays analysed in this paper. (примљено: 27. јануара 2025; прихваћено: 11. маја 2025)

1. On page and stage

In *The Tempest* (III.i.71–73), Shakespeare forged the phrase “beyond all limit”, in Ferdinand’s declaration of his love for Miranda (Shakespeare, 1623: 31). In the years following the First Folio’s quadricentennial, it seems appropriate to describe Shakespeare’s reach and impact worldwide. Now that we can have his works on page and stage, online and in person, adaptable to film, podcast, novels and hip-hop, Shakespeare is a means of self-help, eye-opening and reconciliation. He teaches us to embrace, or at least to tolerate otherness, live with our imperfections, mix the high and the low and appreciate every single day of our lives. His kings teach us humility, and his fools teach us wisdom. And we will always need him for this, because he has seen men playing God and challenging heavens, from hubris to contrition. Shakespeare will always be with uncompromising activists like Brutus or Coriolanus, who gave rise to Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*, but also show how their extreme idealism can turn from virtue to destructive power. In times of crisis, we often wonder whom a historic figure would support. For Shakespeare we know that he would always be on the side of freedom.

In her book on adaptation, Linda Hutcheon argues that the adaptation process and its product cannot exist in a vacuum: “they all have a context – a time and a place, a society, and a culture” (Hutcheon, 2013: 18). We have vivisected Shakespeare, put him on the couch, deconstructed his language and viewed through all social and political lenses: Shakespeare and gender, Shakespeare and race, Shakespeare and the Holocaust, Shakespeare and fascism. Shakespeare is an ideal vehicle of the present-day theatrical subversion too, as showcased below in the examples from what the West commonly refers to as “Eastern Europe” – a recent Hungarian production of *Richard III* included President Orban’s speeches in the soliloquies, a Czech story of *Hamlet* told in the mood of post-revolutionary disillusionment, a Romanian *Romeo and Juliet* and Serbian *Titus Andronicus* makes explicit references to totalitarianism and the overwhelming influx of governments in everyday lives of the people who do not even need to think because “the government does it for you”. All communist countries experienced censorship, Yugoslavia being a partial exception as a non-aligned country on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Vacillating between two super-powers in the bipolar world, it was a unique place where the East met the West, a confluence of capitalist and socialist streams, a safe haven for dissidents like Havel, whose plays, forbidden at home, more than once stole the thunder of Belgrade’s stage. Both a soft communist heaven and US-preferred nation in foreign trade, the country had a mono-party system in place and intelligence agents operating everywhere, especially with foreign presence. Such situations with undercover agents and close monitoring were described in *The Quality of Mercy* by Peter Brook, who participated in the BITEF Festival three times (Brook, 2018: 39). While the theatre practitioners were indubitably exercising subversion and taking the best of both worlds, our intelligence were probably playing by the same rules and “outsubversioned” their subversion by “only doing their job”, in the whole make-believe of freedom and rights.

Let us briefly take stock of a few compelling appropriations of Shakespeare's plays in Central and Eastern Europe, before diving into Serbian state of play. In his paper "*Richard III: A Hungarian Transnational Readaptation*", Zsolt Almasi of Pazmany Peter Catholic University in Budapest provides a critical take on theatrical production of Matei Visniec's play *Richard III Will Not Take Place, or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* (2005), directed by Remusz Szikszai and premiered on October 10, 2020. Having employed a similar technique in his *Macbeth* adaptation in 2018, Szikszai in one scene includes a reference to the "culture war" declared by the Orbán administration, alluding to phrases and sentences derived from Orbán's own speeches. Almasi explains how they wielded power with the finance leverage:

In another instance, theatre managers engage in a discussion concerning the allocation of financial support to theatres that advocate for the preservation of cultural value, reminiscent of the rhetoric heard in the speeches of Attila Vidnyánszky. These insertions deftly interweave the past and present, forging connections between historical and contemporary political landscapes, ultimately adding depth and nuance to the production's thematic tapestry. (Almasi, 2023: 6)

A Czech adaptation of *Hamlet* sheds light on the period of disillusionment after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, as described by Ivona Mišterova of West Bohemia University. Josef Prokeš's play, *Emodrink of Elsinore*, gives his Hamlet the guise of a young bartender identifying himself with punk subculture, wearing black and reciting lines from Shakespeare's tragedy. His father (King Hamlet) returns to his homeland after many years and commits suicide the night he finds his long-lost son. Mišterova argues that the father's suicide "could be seen as a rejection of the corrupt political system that originally allowed Claudius to seize power. It might also be viewed as a commentary on the dangers of unchecked ambition and the corrupting influence of power" (Mišterova, 2023: 80).

In her paper, Dana Monah of the University of Iași, Romania, discusses a Shakespearean play by Andras Visky: "*Juliet. A Dialogue About Love*" (2001), which directly addresses the memory of communism in Romania. It is "centred around a very fragile, endangered Shakespearean production under communism – imagined by political prisoners rather than actually performed. As if, when trying to find a form for their theatre of memory, both authors turned to the main form of social critique under communism – stage performance" (Monah, 2020: 174, 176).

Visky's Juliet remembers moments of her life before and during captivity. She performs the 'balcony scene' with the help of the wedding rings, in a sort of puppet show. There was nothing subversive about it, only personal and intimate internalisation of such post-traumatic experience, unutterable and thus expressed non-verbally, akin to that of Lady Macbeth somnambulist writing and sealing her letters. Freud explained it in "Remembering, Repeating and Working through" as impossible to be safely told or remembered; such stories are expressed through "dislocation, symbolization and action" (Freud, 1914: 145–146).

In Serbia, Andraš Urban's 2023 production of *Titus Andronicus* for the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade remains faithful to the original script throughout the performance, but begins in a strikingly provocative way: the cast, not unlike the ancient Greek choir, chanting "Why think? No need to think. The government will do that for you". In the scenes of bloodshed, when Titus mutilates the bodies of Tamora's sons, he puts them in a cold storage, which, to domestic audience, distinctly recalls the Balkan butchery from the wars in the nineties, when such gross crimes actually took place. The van is on stage all the time, the protagonists coming in and out of it, reminding of the attempts to normalize such extreme behaviour and the public indifference to it.

Professor James Shapiro, in his book *Shakespeare in a Divided America*, describes Shakespeare's cannon as "rich in the extremes of experiences – injustice, separation, violence, revenge" (Shapiro, 2020: 7). Shakespeare resonates equally strongly with underprivileged students of colour in the US, political prisoners in South Africa, or civilians in the war-ravaged Ukraine. Empathy, or "the quality of mercy", is the most valuable asset in his portfolio. Professor Emma Smith defines the verb *to Shakespeare* as: to ask questions, to unsettle certainties, challenge orthodoxies, filling in the gaps (Smith, 2019: 3–4).

Playing Shakespeare then and now has always been the matter of 'discursive determinism', as Richard Burt named it in his essay "A Dangerous Rome" (Logan/Rudnytsky, 1991: 112). It means that discourse determines the context and is always about us, irrespective of the epoch and culture the plays are originally set in, just as they were always about Shakespeare's contemporaries, although set in ancient Rome or Greece. His Romans wear doublets and they elect a king, to mention but a couple of tokens of Shakespeare's contemporaneity. So, these plays are to be read from three temporal aspects: the epoch of Shakespeare's characters and historical events, the time when Shakespeare wrote them and the time when we read them, with all the building blocks added meanwhile.

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).

2. *Shakespeare at the Kremlin*

The project of *Shakespeare at the Kremlin* commenced in the teeth of the USSR President Brezhnev's visit to Yugoslavia, depicting the moribund Stalin confiding in a Shakespearean actor, former political prisoner and dissident. The eponymous play was staged at the Serbian National Theatre of Novi Sad, in collaboration with "Ulysses Theatre" from Croatia. The play itself was victim of ideological repression and came to life decades after it was originally planned. Ivo Štivičić (*Shakespeare u Kremlju*, n.d.), Croatian dramaturgist, adapted the memoirs of a Siberian prisoner and Yugoslav Jew, Karlo Štajner (Steiner), titled *Seven Thousand Nights in Siberia* (1972) and its sequels, *Return from Gulag* and *An Arm from the Grave*. Though not anti-Socialist or anti-Soviet, the Yugoslav authorities decided to ban the project. It was

only 30 years later than Štivičić resumed the work on his play about the last days of Stalin's rule. Although Stalin and Beria are recognisable protagonists of the play, and there are other historical persons, the play is not a reconstruction of historical events or interpretation of political circumstances. Rather, it is a continuation of Štivičić's research of the position of individual in a repressive system, an intimiste analysis of less known events and relationships. One may wonder why Yugoslav leadership, after strained relations and a decided detachment from Stalin, would find this play unacceptable. But the censors must have infallibly felt its subversive potential: though a happy nation with a thriving economy and global popularity, we also had our own Gulag (Goli otok) and political prisoners. Plays like this could stir critical thinking and challenge the concepts of loyalty and treason, which was by no means welcomed by the partisan commissioners in theatres.

In June 1956, on a special train from Moscow to Kyiv, Yugoslav President Tito gave Khrushchev a list of 'dead souls', to use Gogol's title. It was a list of 113 former Yugoslav party officials who were in the Soviet Union. Among the 'living dead' (Danilo Kiš used the same phrase as Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, as Kvočka-Ratkov brilliantly suggests), in the faraway Krasnoyarsk, they found Steiner, who was sentenced to life exile after twenty years in prisons and camps. Such an expellee was called a "free agent". Remarkably, his book was finished in the same year as Solzhenitsyn's *Archipelago Gulag*. "The Shakespearean dramaturgy of power and rule, intrigue and betrayal, is placed within the walls of one of the most controversial toponyms of recent history", says Štivičić. It is a play about the people who agree to renounce themselves for a moment of power. A play about conscience which, after years of suppression, still emerges at the very end of life" (*Poslednje izvođenje „Šekspira u Kremlju"*, n.d.).

Štivičić's play first reflects an enormous bureaucratic apparatus, from inside a most monstrous secret service, led by Lavrentiy (Lawrence) Beria, head of NKVD accounting for massive deportations, the Katyn massacre and many other atrocities from the last years of Stalin's life. He organised arrests and murders of all individuals who dared deny absolute obedience to the Leader, although "such talents should be fostered, not killed", says Gavrilushka, Beria's assistant (Ratkov Kvočka, 2018: 409).

Stalin's decades-long autocracy was marked by the paranoia that there had always been a permanent conspiracy against him and the subversion against the state on the part of various enemies, even on the very executors of his terror: Chekists, members of GPU, NKVD. He even believed that his doctors were also plotting against him, as well as the Jews with their anti-Soviet activities, which actually repeated anti-Semitism towards the end of Stalin's life.

"Stalinism is a phenomenon older than Stalin himself" – Isaak Deutscher will express his view in his work *Stalin – A Political Biography*. "Stalinism is not dead" – Danilo Kiš¹ will claim – "as Stalinism, rather than a historical phenomenon, is a state of mind". (Ratkov Kvočka, 2018: 420)

1 Danilo Kiš was a famous Serbian novelist of Jewish and Hungarian background, whose character in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* wanders around the Kremlin walls after "resurrection" from a gulag.

The central figure in *Shakespeare at the Kremlin* is an actor and writer Timofey, called Timothy Shakespeare. His character was based on Soviet actor Solomon Mihoels, mentioned by Steiner in his *Return from Gulag*: “In 1952, they killed Jewish actors: ... Nobody doubts any more that the ‘car accident’ where Soviet actor Mihoels died was a premeditated murder”, as Štajner remembers in his 1982 book *Return from Gulag* (Ratkov Kvočka, 2018: 414). Solomon Mihoels was “resurrected” by Štivičić into his character Timofey so that someone could tell the truth to Stalin in the Kremlin. He just happened to clumsily end up in Stalin’s chamber while shooting *Ivan the Terrible* and accosted the Leader by “Your Imperial Grace”. The Leader responded in a cordial fashion, offering vodka to the actor. Remembering the actor by good knowledge of Shakespeare, the Leader wanted to see him the following day, but he never showed up. He was arrested the moment he appeared and expelled to the Amur region for seven years. In his last days, Stalin remembers Timofey and wishes to see him again. The grand mechanism of Beria’s secret police found him in Siberia and brought him to Moscow, to please the Master.

Just as on the eve of the WWII, the last years of Stalin’s rule were also marked by purges. Stalin died in 1953. Rumour had it that his comrades had given up on his further treatment lest they become victims of a next purge. Nobody felt safe in the general paranoia, as even the Politburo members were accused of espionage and treason, standing rigged trials and confessing under duress, to be hanged or executed in the end. Galina Alexandrovna, a fictional character in the play, who was having an affair with Timofey and thus had to collaborate with the intelligence, told Beria: “I plead guilty and I am committing perjury now. And both you and I know that this is a run-of-the-mill practice in our lives. That’s the way we are, and we’ll get even worse” (Štivičić, 2013: 10). She advised Timofey: “Listen to me, Timushka, now that you are there, seize the opportunity. People say he doesn’t even know what’s happening [...]. Tell him the truth” (Štivičić, 2013: 44). We cannot help the feeling of semblance between this couple and Orwell’s Winston and Julia. There is no such a thing as love, intimacy, privacy. Everything is politicised and nationalised, one is not entitled to possession of one’s own thoughts as the Thought Police know better what one thinks and you are not allowed to contradict.

Timofey, says Jelena Ratkov Kvočka in her study, opts for the meta-truth of Shakespeare’s plays. He holds the mirror up to Stalin, to see the truth without additional inputs (Ratkov Kvočka, 2018: 416). He tells him:

You know, Master, Macbeth is an unusual character. He could order us, tramps and professional murderers, to kill his enemies, but the way he puts it makes you feel it as your human duty to eliminate those people [...]. You know what Macbeth says in the end?

“My way of life
Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,

As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.”
(Štivičić, 2013: 53, quoting *Macbeth*, 5.3.21–30)

This is Timofey performing his sacred duty in Shakespearean spirit, as Hamlet instructed the players: hold a mirror to nature. (Ratkov Kvočka, 2015: 417). So, Timothy Shakespeare will make the Master see his own reflection in the image of Richard III, when the latter says: “I rather hate myself / For hateful deeds committed by myself. / I am a villain. (V.v.134–145) Later on, Stalin even asks: “Does it mean that you convicted innocent people, took them to camps? How many? Tell me the number immediately!” (Štivičić, 2013: 51).

Shakespeare knew how toxic words could be, seeping into ears like Claudius’ poison. Nowadays, with smear campaigns and infodemic, it is easier than ever to ruin one’s life and career with a little help of spin doctors. With global social media, we are one click away from fabricating, gaslighting, bonfiring. It is too late to shriek “I am innocent!” – they will pursue: “Kill him for his name!” instead of “his bad verses”, as they did against Cinnathe poet in *Julius Caesar* (Shakespeare, 1623: 131) That is why he left us with far more questions than answers. We remain “unsatisfied”. We will never find out or the revelation will come too late to matter. Pandora’s box is wide open. Shakespeare’s Prospero renounced the uncurbed power in consternation of possible scenarios. Broke the magic wand and drowned the books. Just about in time to prevent a doomsday. Now, there is no white magician navigating the climate change like in *The Tempest*, no pilot in the aircraft.

Lavrentiy Beria, who was carrying Stalin’s coffin, was executed not long after the funeral. For Štivičić, just like for Kott, history is not an abstract idea, but a mechanism and it will show how noble ideas can translate into criminal practice. The actor is this play, Timothy and Galina, have the same function as the players in Elsinore and the play may as well be titled “The Mousetrap”. Ivo Štivičić put the actors in the spotlight, making their creative power invincible. They stand for life, for humanity and democratic values, which will always outlive dictatorship, censorship and darkness. In times of austerity, theatre has always been an exile, like dreams or madness: anything is possible and everything is allowed in the magic woods.

3. Shakespeare in prison – the icon of subversion

“*A Midsummer Night’s Dream – Project Shakespeare*” by Kokan Mladenović² addresses the phenomenon of using Shakespeare’s text in correctional institutions, for the purposes of regulation and adaptation. Ominously staged on the eve of the

2 The author thanks the Research and Documentation Centre of the National Theatre in Belgrade for kindly sharing the full original script.

Covid-19 pandemic, it envisioned the restrictions of lockdown, abuse of power and the frenzy of infodemic. The curtain is iron, because of the prison bars, but also because of the illusion of freedom in the post-Cold War world. It is a par excellence example of Shakespeare as a vehicle of subversion – not only because stage directors see him as such, but also because other societal factors think the same of him, whether they have read his plays or not. The project in this production, as a play within a play, was commissioned by a Council of Europe’s programme, to facilitate an inmate’s resocialisation. She does what she is told to do, as usual, but this time it becomes quite a handful. She has never met Shakespeare before. The female prison warden in Mladenović’s appropriation is plodding her way to retirement and the last thing she wants is troubles caused by this rebel. In a Shakespearean manner, Mladenović uses a subtle anti-government allusion to the “thick-lipped” in her interaction with the guards, when she despairs over this Shakespeare guy, a nuisance that might cost her a lot. She insists on the “controlled version” and staying “within the framework of the legal framework”, a wording Shakespeare would be proud of, says the English professor who directs the prison play.

“Project Shakespeare” addresses the phenomenon of using Shakespeare’s text in correctional institutions, for the purposes of regulation and adaptation. Stage director Mladenović places his play in a prison and the inmates are female, a setting ideal for multiple discrimination. Studying their script, the prisoners undergo different phases of transformation. In that sense, prison as deprivation of liberty is both literally and symbolically the government system ruled by Theseus, or the world of ugliness and repression, as Mladenović put it, whereas Shakespeare’s text is the space of new experience, just like the forest is for the original lovers, or the world of beauty, freedom and imagination, to quote director Mladenović again (Sučević, 2019). The production opens with 15 women – declaring their number, length of sentence and the offence perpetrated. It is an array of vicious criminals, murderers, artists, and a high school student convicted of manslaughter. They are the future cast of the play, with a conspicuous absence of men, to counter Shakespeare’s male-only cast and the general domination of men. Mladenović adds that “All men in this play act from a position of masculine authority, smothering their own wives, exercising power. I think that men have ruined this world enough and it’s about time we saw women’s stories enacted” (Sučević, 2019).

Melvin Goldstein³ argues again that tragic themes are made comical by being put into the form of a dream. He might have added Freud’s view, suggests Jacobs, that a dream can easily be dismissed as ‘only a dream’, making it a good vehicle for disguised distress. Here again there is an equation of a play and a dream, making a comedy a good vehicle for the disguise of distress – one of Goldstein’s basic propositions about the function of comedy (Jacobs, 2017: 156). If we take Theseus for modern government, his Athens as a place with limited access to human rights (further deteriorated into Mladenović’s prison), and the forest as a free zone, this

3 “Identity crises in a midsummer nightmare”, 1973.

picture invokes more examples of escapade and freedom fighting. From quiet and peaceful freedom in *As You Like It*, via the innocence and naivete in *The Tempest*, all the way to modern examples of dictatorship juxtaposed with freedom. Theatre is dream-like in its freedom of creativity and imagination, and nations in unfree societies do exactly that – dream.

It is not just the patriarchy, continues Dimitrije Kokanov, dramaturge, but the entire hierarchy of power within a system that the play explores: Theseus won Hippolyta with his sword, Egeus has got absolute power over his daughter's life and the state has got the jurisdiction over women's rights (Theseus threatens Hermia with denial of freedom unless she succumbs and obeys her father), Oberon takes a revenge on Titania for disobedience and Helena is declined by Demetrius and despairs over his uninterestedness in her. Goldstein seems to concur (Jacobs, 2017: 142), as he gives examples of male power over women through the double-edged use of language: Theseus accepts that a father can "leave the figure or disfigure" his child (1.1.51); which, while it suggests moulding a child to his own liking, like a wax figure, Goldstein sees as also implying carving up the child's face. Oberon relates to Titania in much the same way as Egeus to his daughter: "Am I not thy lord" (Oberon, 2.1.63).

The structure of the Serbian AMND production is rather loose, with an alternation of rehearsals and details of the life in prison.

Amidst those urban offenders, "Puck" is a plain country girl, innocent and childlike in her ingenuousness and simple-mindedness, initially very insecure about embarking on such a demanding project. The stage director tasked with the preparation of the play is an enthusiastic professor of English, larger than life, but obviously schizophrenic. She professes to have murdered her husband, incredibly enough, "just because he was Black". Thanks to her eagerness and knowledge though, other women learn how to read and experience Shakespeare, along with many timeless quotes from other plays. Thanks to Shakespeare, she is alive again, she regains authority and capitalises on her knowledge.

According to the dramaturge Dimitrije Kokanov, "Project: Shakespeare" is one of the productions of Shakespeare's works inside institutions for incarceration throughout the world:

Most often, those are projects aiming at resocialisation, adaptation and intellectual/creative activation of inmates. In the production of "Project Shakespeare – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", the initial idea was to deal with this phenomenon regarding utilisation of Shakespeare's text. It is not, therefore, a classical reading of a play by Shakespeare, instead it is a production tackling the phenomenon of using Shakespeare's text in a prison, using the text by Shakespeare for the purposes of regulation and adaptation, i.e. for improvement of quality of living in prison. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* thus becomes the means to shed light on social choreography of living in prison, i.e. on lives of individuals who have been incarcerated due to their illegal

actions. The female inmates go through several phases of transformation while learning their roles and rehearsing the play after Shakespeare's text. In this sense, the prison, i.e. the place where women are deprived of their freedom, both directly and symbolically represents the very system in which Theseus rules in Shakespeare's story, while the forest, i.e. the possibility to transform and be free, in this text is not the forest, as in a geographic locality, but the space of Shakespeare's text. In "Project Shakespeare – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", the very play is being observed as a space for possible transformation and freedom, i.e. for the change. The forest at night in the original text becomes the place for new experiences for lovers, just as the reading of Shakespeare becomes a place for new experiences for the inmates. With this production, director Kokan Mladenović, for the third time in his career, negotiates the plateau of placing a classical drama text into a prison environment, thus setting a goal for the actresses to approach the drama literature characters not merely as actresses, but also from the position of documentary and quasi-documentary characters of inmates, in order to reveal the potential of drama literature's influence on transformation of character of a person placed in isolation, subsequently discussing social and political phenomena of our everyday lives. (*A midsummer night's dream – project Shakespeare*, n.d.)

In the second part of her book, Professor Ashley Lucas provides examples of prison theatre companies in Brazil, United States, Uruguay, Canada, South Africa, United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Portugal, in the conditions of violence, HIV, deprivation, structural racism (Lucas, 2021). To her as well, theatre in prison is a moment of exercising freedom and repositioning, just like the *midsummer night's dream* is to the young Athenians. They are inspired with the happiness of sharing, of building something they will all treasure.

All these women are mentally deranged to a certain degree: traumatised by incest, maddened by abuse, nymphomaniac, schizophrenic. The prison, thus, resembles a community of the mad, like the night forest. This landscape calls to question the nature of crime, as mental disorder or aberration from normality, since all inmates have mental health issues. All their talents are mobilized and the play is something the guards do not understand, something like a secret language. They become quite a company by the date of the scheduled performance under the auspices of the Council of Europe. There is passion, there is ownership. They improvise, interpret, adapt, becoming Bennett Simon's playwrights *manqué*, because what madness and drama have in common is: 1) illusion and reality; 2) rational and irrational and the role of inspiration and reason in artistic creation ("poetic madness") and 3) tradition or stereotype as opposed to innovation. If madness is the inability to strike a balance between reality and illusion, it is even more the incapacity to make a compromise between the rational and irrational (Simon, 1993: 146).

The prison guards, also women, abuse and degrade the prisoners. They use them as informants, drug dealers and sexual objects. Enlightened by Shakespeare,

the inmates even dare organise a riot and seem for a moment to have taken over the control of the prison. The transformation by this empowerment of almost all of them is spectacular.

The National Theatre's webpage shares a valuable reference to Erica Fischer-Lichte,⁴ who suggests that all the four lovers in the play go through a rite of passage in three phases (*A midsummer night's dream – project Shakespeare*, n.d.). The first phase is separation when they leave their usual lives in the city, the second is the "threshold" phase of transformation, when they discard their identities and the third is incorporation, when they are changed and ready to return to the city. The visual aspect of love is brought *ad absurdum* by the love potion dropped on their eyebrows by Puck. The eye imagery becomes almost a leitmotif of the relationships, with 68 mentions of "see" and "sight". Through transformation, the "eye love" becomes constant and they assume new identities, to finish with the nuptials and the artisans' play, followed by the first marriage night. In Mladenović's play, the characters undergo a transformation not unlike the one described above. The transformative power in this case is not love, but Shakespeare. He makes each and every one of them a better person. The warden and guards, as they remain completely outside the whole process of studying and rehearsing Shakespeare, untouched by the gentle drops of humanity, remain as brutal (brutish?) as before.

But, before transformation can occur, the characters have to endure considerable suffering, which 'in a comedy, unlike the suffering in a nightmare, must be camouflaged' (Jacobs, 2017: 150). This is a second aspect of Goldstein's paper referred to as a "midsummer nightmare" in the title of his paper. Jacobs analyses the dark side of the *Dream*, including the function of comedy to disguise the play's nightmare quality. It is a way of fending off reality, one that Freud implies is healthier than some other ways of trying to evade suffering, such as intoxication, ecstasy, narcissism, neurosis and madness.

Juliet Dusinberre (2003: xxix) argues that the importance of Shakespeare as a means to dissidence can be better judged by the impact his plays make on an unfree society, more like his own and less like today's modern world. Such examples, says Dusinberre, would be former communist countries, or South Africa under apartheid. Quoting a description of solitary confinement in *117 Days*, a memoir book by South African activist Ruth First, Professor David Schalkwyk notices how the horizontal passivity of the body was balanced with activity of the mind: "I changed from a mainly vertical to a mainly horizontal creature. A black iron blackstead became my world" (Schalkwyk, 2012: 105). The next thing she realized was that "isolation and privacy are not the same thing", and Professor Schalkwyk repeatedly uses this analogy with Hamlet's "imprisonment" under scrutiny in Denmark. In Mladenović's play, the inner world is not thematised as the inmates are rarely alone with themselves. Instead, they share the fragments of their past lives, like debris after an accident which changed their lives for good. But they talked, they reminisced about

4 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, translated by Jo Riley.

the past and made plans for the future, thus avoiding the nightmare of isolation in which one can even forget the name of her own daughter, as described by another South African political prisoner (Schalkwyk, 2012: 110).

4. Country as prison, prison as country

The night forest is a dream, a space of freedom and imagination. Athens is a prison like Hamlet's Denmark. Not only like his individual "nutshell", but collective incarceration of the whole community that found refuge in a forest like that of Ardennes in *As You Like It*. This brings me to a unique book by Professor David Schalkwyk, *Hamlet's Dreams*. It is about the notorious prison on Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela and many other freedom fighters served decades of sentences and read Shakespeare's collected works from the prison library. There is a meaningful process of underlining specific verses or even writing side comments to them. The need for privacy in a constant exposure to "public gaze", the importance of friendship and solidarity, but also the refuge into solitude in hope to escape being "out of joint", leading ultimately to isolation and being alone with one's inner self – creates a place of nightmares. (Schalkwyk, 2012: 116) In a letter to his wife (1970), Mandela quoted Orlando's lines "Sweet are the uses of adversity" (Schalkwyk, 2012: 42). Two members of his 'isolation section' marked Puck's apologetic closing words, "If we shadows have offended... No more yielding but a dream" (Epilogue 1–6). They might have had the same whimsical fantasy that one may enchant away such an experience by thinking of it as a little more than a dream (Schalkwyk, 2012: 37).

Home was not a secure place in Shakespeare. In almost all plays, both tragedies and comedies, there is the motif of strangeness and dislocation. If we add mental dislocation to physical exile, we get the ancient concept of madness – solitary heroes wandering unknown lands and waters. That's why solitary confinement and that's why darkness.

Madness involves taking illusions for reality – that is what any audience does. "Actors are madmen, playgoers are fools", says an old Chinese proverb (Padel, 1995: 240). In Greek tragedy, madness is something temporary and coming from outside, like Plato's inspiration. That's why Shakespeare's Greek characters in *AMND* restore their sanity and normal lives. Sanity may not be the right word though, as madness is not the same as insanity. But "the possibility of madness is implicit in the very phenomenon of passion", says Ruth Padel (Padel, 1995: 228). In Mladenović's play, they are shocked by a cruel reality check that marked the end of their "revels". Aren't we all "such stuff as dreams are made on" (Shakespeare, 1623: 34–35)?

Despite epithets like "correctional", "reformatory", etc., prisons do not make better persons and do not instil any values. As Professor Ashley Lucas concludes in a podcast talk about her book *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration*, "prison does more to harm people than to heal, it is part of the cycle of violence" (Lucas, 2021). The book is based on her in-depth research into prison institutions around the world, the role that theatre plays in creating community, and how it can transform the lives of the people forced into the prison system. "Obscured behind concrete and razor wire, the lives of the incarcerated remain hidden from

public view. Inside the walls, imprisoned people all over the world stage theatrical productions that enable them to assert their humanity and capabilities”, reads Bloomsbury’s introductory note.

But if prison cannot change the lives of its inmates for better, Shakespeare can. Perhaps it would be too anarchistic and unfair to paraphrase Jacques and say “All the world’s a prison and all men and women are merely prisoners”, but there are definitely different types of prisons and different democracies in today’s world, most systems being hybrid. Perceived as forms of modern slavery, carceral systems need reformation, but do theatres too? Lucas shows theatre as subversive because it is opposed to the “regular” life in prison. She introduces prison theatre as a practice that “threatens the naturalized logic of the prison” by allowing spontaneity amid regulation (Lucas, 2021: 12), a community-building process in places that are “not meant to engender community” (Lucas, 2021: 29), and a space to show that incarcerated people “can work together in peace, create something beautiful, accomplish difficult tasks, and give back to others” (Lucas, 2021: 144). It helps inmates restore their self-esteem, despite the prison administration system that seems to be doing quite the opposite. This is precisely what the Shakespeare project did in Mladenović’s play. At one point, the prisoners felt so empowered and confident that they overtook the prison in what seemed to be a spontaneous riot. The no more agreed to inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment, which are, by the way, strictly prohibited by the Council of Europe, the sponsor of the whole project. Just as this “revolution” was thwarted, the enthusiasm about the play was sagging. ANMD will never take place, to paraphrase the above-mentioned Hungarian play. The playful country girl who played Puck and greatly enjoyed this revealing experience, was found hanged the night before the play’s premiere. Needless to say, she did not kill herself, as the official records had it. “Incapable of her own distress” (Shakespeare, 1623: 280), she was drugged into death by “Bottom”, the vicious guard, sister of the Minister of Justice, in retaliation for the practical joke “Puck” had played on her in the riot night. Unleashed and entranced, experiencing the newly found freedom brought by Shakespeare and imagination, half-way from drama to dream, life imitated art: just like her character from the play, “Puck” applied some powerful substance to the sleeping guard. But it was not a magic potion, it was “Magic Mushrooms”, illicit drugs that the prison guards trafficked with some prisoners and criminals. This was the reason of ferocious argument between the Minister and her problematic sister, whom she had to drag along and get out of trouble all her life. We all have a skeleton in the cupboard. Panicking after yet another offence, “Bottom” hangs “Puck”’s dead body to make believe it was a suicide. She will get out of this “inconvenience” with impunity, because in the world of unfairness and violence such people always do.

Show must go on, the premiere eventually happens, but nobody cares about the play any more. The dream of the prisoners was dispelled by the cruelty of the system, and it will be even harder to motivate and integrate them again. The Council of Europe and Ministry of Justice will tick the box and write affirmative evaluation reports, leaving all these persons in their darkness and dismay. The tragic irony is

that “Puck” was supposed to be released earlier, but she begged to stay in for five more days prison in order to participate in the play that meant so much to her. To clinch this extension, she demolished the warden’s office and was “granted” fifteen days’ extension.

Perhaps the ultimate transformation, or subversion, is brought by having two guards as Pyramus and Thisbe. Hippolyta (the Minister of Justice) welcomes the audience with a quote by Borges: “There is a world created by God and a world created by Shakespeare”. The play ends with Bottom (played by the Minister’s sister wearing full equipment of police special forces) reciting Pyramus’ words of lament (AMND, V.2.295–310), which resonate with the heartfelt loss of “Puck”’s life:

But stay! O spite!
But mark, poor knight,
What dreadful dole is here!
Eyes, do you see!
How can it be!
O dainty duck! O dear!
Thy mantle good—
What, stained with blood?
Approach, ye Furies fell!

...

O, wherefore, Nature, didst thou lions frame,
Since lion vile hath here deflowered my dear,
Which is—no, no—which was the fairest dame
That lived, that loved, that liked, that looked with
cheer? (Shakespeare, 1623: 163)

The iron curtain is drawn again.

5. Subversion, treason and madness

To Shakespeare, subversion was like a play, because it had to be ludicrous. Playing with words, playing with concepts and challenging paradigms, subversion is at home with theatre, dreams and playing, because it is elusive and fluid. Love madness in AMND releases the spirits and imagination in the Moon-lit forest, just as it seeps subversive ideas into the heads of prison inmates. They become more self-confident, buccaneering, even riotous. They start believing in a different life that future might hold for them. Shakespeare inspired them with *joie de vivre* and hope because now they know they do more. Štivičić’s Timushka musters courage to throw the truth into the face of the dying dictator. He was invited to act “some Shakespeare” in front of the Leader, but his choice is smart and subversive.

As King Theseus puts an equation mark between lunatic, lover and poet, all three have the “licence” for subversion: lunatics cannot be held responsible for “dangerous conjectures”, which gives them the freedom to provoke and insinuate,

unnoticed or ignored. The partition line between madman and villain is very thin and criminals are often placed in the wrong institution. Lovers are excessive in their passion, which is akin to madness, so it is love that makes the characters in AMND lose their senses and act irrationally. This is why the couple in the Kremlin play, resembling Orwell's lovers in 1984, need to keep their relationship secretive. Poets? They can always be killed for their bad verses, even if they are not political. Poetic licence is too dangerous if taken for granted. Karin Coddon (Coddon, 1989: 51) analyses the madness of the Earl of Essex, which turned out to be both his enemy and the enemy of the Tudor state. Madness is a powerful adversary to the ideology of self-rule, of what Mervin James called "the internalisation of obedience" (Coddon, 1989: 52). As such, madness dissolves the identity carefully shaped by internal control and self-rule, making the subject a sign of external breach of order. Coddon reminds of Foucault's statement that madness never resumes reason or truth, as it survives the subjectivity of an individual in the gap between tragic experience and its ultimate retelling. Foucault demands madness to be explored in terms of its function within and opposite the structures of power. If the political drama of Essex' madness, rebellion and death have a similarity with the tragedies of the age, then theatre itself is duplicated and reflecting the authority crisis in the late Elizabethan England. The opposition to the monarch's orders stems from the trespass of ideological boundaries and leads to treason and madness. Similar to the way Greek gods dealt with defiant men who dared challenge their will – whom gods want to destroy, they first take away their reason⁵ (Padel, 1995) – modern political regimes have always had recourse to confinement and disqualification of their opponents as mad. The fact that Hamlet's madness cannot be interpreted or deconstructed enables its constant perception as a "strange desygn" and threat to the sovereign. "Strange desygn" come precisely from the space where reason and madness cross. Ophelia's madness, too, is perceived as a potential to stir social turmoil. So, madness in Hamlet, though subjective, is not limited by subjectivity, but is always (erroneously) taken for instigation to social unrest. Hamlet continues to defy the hierarchy and authority by turning against his mother, whom he was requested to leave to Heaven. In comedies, on the other hand, madness and disobedience are only temporary and are restored to the "old normal" after the instructive and warning escapade. Theseus will have his way in the end. Distortion of the system is no more but a prank of a trickster (Puck), only a glance into what the future holds for us if we disobey.

Subversion can be quite innocent, even inadvertent. There must be a reason why guardians of order in Mladenović's production of AMND raise their eyebrows at the mention of Shakespeare, just as Queen Elizabeth panically exclaimed "I am Richard III!" fearing a *coup*; or the warden of that Serbian prison expressed an utmost mistrust in "that guy Shakespeare" and condoned him only because "the EU wanted us to". Shakespeare "may strew dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" although he was the Queen's favourite, the King's protegee and the symbol

5 "Quem deus vult perdere, dementat prius".

of British imperialism. It is probably his spirit of freedom and egalitarianism that exudes such sentiments. That is why he inspired Louis Kossuth in the Habsburg monarchy, the Chartists in England – as Professor Ewan Fernie⁶ of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford reminds us – or the Serbian romanticist national awakening. Even without striking phrases and compelling actions, in utmost silence of a dumbshow, Shakespeare intrigues and provokes. Such is the story of a political prisoner in Romania, a dissident's wife and a mother of seven, who reminisces about a school play and enacts it all by herself. Or, rather, imagines its enactment, as in the above-mentioned Romanian play.

6. Conclusion

In the era of political flux, religious anxieties and the New World discoveries, Shakespeare had to remain covertly subversive, aware of the slippery slope that his choice of topics most often was. Erich Freid calls upon the necessity to make a distinction between “bringing Shakespeare up to date, by giving his plays a particular political slant, or approaching him more open-mindedly, following his intentions, where we would certainly find the echo of contemporary life” (Elsom, 1989: 173–174). *Hamlet*, for example, was a perfect Watergate play, with espionage intrigues around the highest political position. His criticism of Denmark as a prison talks to Mladenović's ANMD, with subversive messages of disobedience and rebellion. Another play directed by Mladenović, *Julius Caesar*, may tell us that revolution does not make sense because nothing will ever substantially change with the change of government, while others may read it as a call for a *coup d'état*. The latter is how the Republican voters saw it, as painfully recorded by James Shapiro, only because of an outdoor performance surreptitiously recorded by a passer-by, who shared it on YouTube (Shapiro, 2020: 143–146). It was enough to Google “Shakespeare in the park” and to massively alarm the public that the stabbed man falling helplessly in the street was projected to be Donald Trump. It is easy to spin such ideas with today's technology and discrepancy between digital and functional literacy. It takes some education and reading for subversion to be effective. Not for nothing was a Shakespearean actor the eye-opener and voice of conscience in Štivičić's Kremlin setting.

Professor Richard Wilson defines the role of Shakespeare's legacy in the following way:

Shakespeare is too valuable to British society to be disposed of like the family silver. As an art object, a monument to the old gods, Shakespearean drama must be re-interpreted, re-deployed, re-occupied. In the works of directors like David Thacker and Michael Bogdanov, Shakespeare may yet prove the Trojan horse to storm the cultural citadel. (Taylor, 2001: 185)

6 Fernie, E. “Shakespeare for Freedom”, a lecture delivered in Belgrade as part of the *Shakespeare Lives* series, 2016.

So, how did Shakespeare's Serbian adaptations shake our cultural citadel? All his plays, not only the 'political' ones, expose totalitarianism, censorship and corruption, not just at the level of state, but trickling down to community, family and individual. The early modern subjectivity cross-fertilised with Paracelsian idea of the world as a great body and the body as a small world gave rise to introspection and melancholic seclusion of Hamlet and Richard II. Both royal characters soliloquised in prison: King Richard – disempowered, humiliated in public incarcerated; Hamlet – suffocating in the captured state of Denmark, where crime and its impunity spread like contagion. In the plays analysed in this paper, criminals are convicted and imprisoned. But the state is still rotten and justice is not duly administered. Shakespeare cannot save the world, but truth and justice can, and he speaks for them with all the wisdom of his books, with all the art of his language and the magic of his theatre. This is genuinely felt by scholars, theatre-goers and prison inmates who get to know him in such an austere and violent place. They feel that this guy, whoever he was, wrote about them too, that he knew all about temptation and fall, navigated the depths of human soul and could understand them as humans. This was the intuitive response of all those disheartened women who thought life was not worth living. Shakespeare brought them back their dignity, pride and hope. The Kremlin story was inspired by a returnee from dreadful camps in Siberia, but it is not about Gulag; it is about the state capture that Soviet citizens lived in, the Orwellian make-believe of freedom and happiness. Prison is a system *sui generis*, but could be a metaphor for a whole state, or the entire world. More than to prisoners, Shakespeare is indispensable to law enforcement authorities, whose realm is often the microcosm of terror, trauma and torture. Their authorities are autocratic and impervious, making their prisons the mirror-images of the entire country. And it is not just in totalitarian states that inhuman and degrading treatment is common. Marjorie Garber masterfully demonstrates that such dehumanisation is possible in developed democracies, drawing parallels with the Abu Ghraib prison torture committed by the US soldiers on the mission of bringing peace and democracy to the Middle East (Garber, 2008: 156). Developed or affluent does not necessarily mean civil. This is why, more than ever, theatre is needed, not just as "brief chronicle of time", but to "aid the process of social change", as Professor Wilson argues (Taylor, 2001: 17). And this is why the culture of theatre-going should be fostered. Everyone loves story-telling. Every human is a *homo ludens*. Let them see plays, but also enact and live them, feel the ownership, internalise the experience. In short – give them Shakespeare.

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Наташа Д. Шофранац

Сажетак

СЛОБОДНЕ ДУШЕ И ЗАРОБЉЕНА ДРЖАВА – ШЕКСПИР КАО СРЕДСТВО СУБВЕРЗИЈЕ У СРПСКИМ ПОЗОРИШТИМА

Овај рад за тему има феномен књижевности и позоришта као средства слободе говора, скривеног значења и субверзије. Студије случаја обухватају два комада која су током протекле деценије играна на српским позорницама: „Шекспир у Кремљу”, аутентично постјугословенско и посткомунистичко дело реактуелизовано након тридесет година; и „Пројекат Шекспир – *Сан летње ноћи*“ Народног позоришта у Београду, у којем се чак и једна комедија завршава трагично. Затвор као држава у малом, моћ и неслобода појединца и целог друштва, као и улога позоришта у тим процесима, теме су које се преплићу у оба савремена комада.

Кључне речи:

Шекспир, Штвиичић, позориште, субверзија, комунизам, затвор, слобода