

INTERVIEW: VESELIN KOSTIĆ

THE EVERLASTING COMPANION OF OUR EXPERIENCE by Radojka Vukčević

BELLS: It is an honor to interview you, dear Professor Kostić. This year we are celebrating the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth and the 85th anniversary of our English Department—founded by a Shakespearean scholar. What do you make of this timing? What does Shakespeare mean to us now?

It is difficult to say whether the coincidence of these anniversaries has a symbolic meaning, but it was certainly a fortunate circumstance that the English Department was founded by a such a distinguished expert in Shakespearean studies as Dr. Vladeta Popović, because that fact lent additional significance to the new Department and helped to attract students, who were not very numerous at the beginning. Shakespeare was made the subject of a special course in the programme of the final years of English Studies and has remained one of the major fields of studies in the Department to the present day.

BELLS: You have made significant, voluminous contributions to Shakespeare studies in both the former Yugoslavia and beyond. Which aspect of Shakespeare's works have you found most rewarding (teaching, translating, analysis, etc.)?

One is hesitant to evaluate one's own work, but I can say which aspect of my work I found most enjoyable – it was definitely teaching. What I did in the other fields was in a sense ancillary to it. My studies of and comments on the Serbian translations of Shakespeare were intended to provide linguistic and other guidance that might help translators avoid the mistakes of their predecessors and get closer to the meaning and implications of Shakespeare's text. My interpretations of Shakespeare's works, on the other hand, were chiefly a corollary of my teaching and were written in the hope that they would enable students and lovers of Shakespeare to appreciate more fully the beauties of his poetic world.

BELLS: Which theory or scholarship on Shakespeare's works has most influenced your own work?

During my long academic career I saw the rise and eclipse of numerous schools of Shakespearean criticism. There can be no doubt that the more able proponents of each of them brought at least something valuable to our understanding of the Great Bard. Nevertheless, I cannot say that I was an ardent or constant supporter of any of these critical approaches. What I found objectionable in the majority of the modern varieties of Shakespearean criticism was their tendency to concentrate on a single aspect of Shakespeare's works – the aspect which supported, or could be made to support, the basic tenets of the particular school of criticism they sought to promote – and to neglect the elements which did not fit into its theoretic template. I felt that such a synecdochical approach could throw fresh and concentrated light on a particular aspect of Shakespeare's dramas, but that it left many other valuable features of their rich texture out of the field of critical enquiry. I therefore tried to use another approach, which is not original or particularly modern, and which might be termed "integrated" or "contextual". It seeks to interpret Shakespeare's works in their varying historical and cultural contexts – in the context of their own time, in their journey through time, and in the context of the present time.

BELLS: Some of the current methods of critical analysis applied to Shakespeare's works include New Historicism, cultural materialism, feminist criticism, deconstruction, and so forth. How much do they enlighten the layers of meaning in Shakespeare's opus? What are your views on New Criticism, specifically the idea that only that within a text constitutes the meaning of the text? How do you see this new approach in terms of works that have existed for centuries, continually read and re-read from the position of different contexts, epochs, literary theories, and generations of critics?

Although the champions of almost every recent trend in Shakespearean studies believed, or wanted to believe, that their approach was going to establish "a new paradigm" in Shakespearean criticism, this has not happened. Most of them have certainly shed new light on individual aspects of Shakespeare's work and made some useful contribution to our appreciation of his art, but none of them has won universal recognition and acceptance. However, if we have in mind the impression these insights or views, accumulated over time, have made, directly or indirectly, on our appreciation of Shakespeare, we can readily agree with the view that interpretation may become a part of the text.

BELLS: Stephen Greenblatt's achievement as a Shakespeare scholar is largely due to his critical view that literature should be studied and interpreted in terms of its cultural context. Would you agree with those who say that he has revolutionized Shakespeare studies?

Stephen Greenblatt is a very able and persuasive critic, an excellent stylist and an original thinker. He is justly regarded as one of the most important Shakespearean scholars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. He has made a great impact on Shakespearean studies, but neither has he succeeded in establishing his New Historicism as "the new paradigm". There are already signs that his approach is viewed more critically and that it will eventually take its proper place in the general depository of "revolutionary" critical schools with which the history of Shakespearean criticism abounds.

BELLS: What do you think about Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* now, fifty years after its publication?

I remember the enthusiasm and admiration with which many lovers of Shakespeare, myself included, hailed that excellent book. It was an interpretation of Shakespeare in perfect accord with the intellectual and political atmosphere of that time. Kott's book not only strongly influenced academic criticism of Shakespeare studies, but had a great impact on the theatrical sphere, too. There were many productions of Shakespeare's plays inspired by it, and two remarkable English ones were also seen in Belgrade – *King Lear* (1962) and *As You Like It* (1969). Today, however, we can agree with the view that almost the only relevant element of Kott's book is its title. Its content remains, as the content of so many other excellent interpretations, rather a record of the spiritual climate of a period than a lasting answer to the abiding questions raised by Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare continues to be our contemporary, but now other answers are sought and offered to the questions posed by him, different from those of yesterday and no doubt distinct from those that will be offered tomorrow. This is the real marvel of Shakespeare's art – he is, as a Shakespearean scholar has aptly put it, the everlasting companion of our experience.

BELLS: You have witnessed turbulent times, but also the glory days when Belgrade's English Department was a center of research and scholarship, visited by prominent international scholars. Where are we now; how visible and relevant are we on the global map?

There can be no doubt that the English Department suffered severe losses not only by the death of some of its most distinguished members, but also as a consequence of the disastrous developments of the 1990s, which made several talented students, prospective additions to the staff of the Department, as well as some of the already appointed assistants, leave the country. I am now glad to say that they have fared well abroad and that at least two of them have successful careers as professors of English literature in Canada, but I am sorry that they are not members of our Department as it had been planned. Fortunately, the Department has succeeded in attracting able and distinguished scholars from other English departments in the country, and it has also recruited a number of young

and talented graduates, who have already made a remarkable contribution to the English studies in our country.

BELLS: What are your thoughts on recent translations of Shakespeare's works? Does it remain a useful endeavor to translate his works time and again? To what extent do new translations influence interpretations of his works?

New renderings of Shakespeare's works should always be encouraged, especially if they are based on an awareness of the deficiencies of the previous translations and on the latest advances in textual criticism and research in the field of Elizabethan English. I do not think, however, that new translations can contribute greatly to the interpretation of Shakespeare's works, since good Shakespearean criticism has to be based not only on the literal meaning of the text, no matter how exactly it is transferred to another language, but also on various other elements which require good knowledge of the idiom of the author, such as the associative aura which a word or phrase may have had in its Elizabethan social and cultural setting, on the knowledge of the semantic losses or gains a verse from Shakespeare's plays may have had in its journey through time to the present day, and on a number of other elements which are important for a detailed and reliable interpretation and which are unavoidably lost in translation.

BELLS: Shakespeare's works are being studied by a new generation of scholars at the Faculty of Philology. These include Zorica Bečanović-Nikolić, Milica Spremić, and Nataša Šofranac. What is your assessment of the latest research on Shakespeare in Serbia?

I follow with great interest the work of the young generation of our Shakespearean scholars and am glad to say that I find it not only valuable in itself, but promising of even more important achievements in the future. Their criticism is, generally speaking, based on solid research, ability for subtle analysis and a good knowledge of recent trends in Shakespearean criticism. What I regard as very important in the broader sense are their efforts, particularly those of Prof. Bečanović-Nikolić to reintegrate Serbian Shakespearean studies into the broader context of Shakespearean studies, to re-establish the participation of our scholars in the international Shakespearean organizations and to renew the personal links with

distinguished Shakespearean scholars and organize their visits to our University.

BELLS: Shakespeare is not your only academic interest. At the beginning of your career, you took a comparative approach (of Spenser and Tasso; Spenser and Ariosto) to examine cultural relations between Yugoslavia and England. Then you turned to Shakespeare studies, to return to cultural relations in your latest book: *Britain and Serbia: contacts, connections and relations: 1700-1860 (Britanija i Srbija : kontakti, veze i odnosi: 1700-1860, Beograd: Arhipelag, 2014)*. Are you currently researching relations between Britain and Serbia or Shakespeare and his works, or both?

My work in the field of Shakespearean studies was related to my teaching. I published my books on Shakespeare not only because I admire his works, but also because I felt it my duty to provide texts that would make it easier for my students to understand and appreciate the precious heritage that he has left to us. My books dealing with cultural and other relations between our country and Britain were, on the other hand, the outcome of my wish to contribute to the existing knowledge in a field which I felt had not been sufficiently explored. The research I did in exploring these links and the work on the presentation of its results have given me the genuine pleasure that the pursuit of knowledge may afford to a dedicated scholar. At the moment, however, I have no immediate plans, and shall probably enjoy a period of leisure.

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