Shakespeare's Reception and Interpretation in the Baltics

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By

Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė, Maris Peters
and Guna Zeltiņa

Edited by Maria Shevtsova

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Preface

Why this book?

There are thousands of books on Shakespeare in English, but none of them are devoted to interpretations of his works in the Baltic theatre. This is the first book analyzing the multi-shaped process of translating and staging the plays by the English playwright in the three Baltic countries–Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania–from the very beginnings until today.

Since the 1990s, the Shakespeare productions of the Baltic directors, especially those of Lithuanian directors Eimuntas Nekrošius and Oskaras Koršunovas, have become internationally known and recognizable; these productions are invited to international festivals and to tour worldwide, and the Baltic directors have staged Shakespeare's plays abroad. During the International Shakespeare Festival and the 'European Directors on Shakespeare' conference in Craiova, Romania, in 2016, George Banu, a Professor of Paris-Sorbonne University, stressed the fact that directors from small nations have created significant interpretations of Shakespeare.

The works of the English playwright are regularly in the repertoires of theatres in all three Baltic countries, reflecting both the global tendencies of interpretations of Shakespeare and the capacities of national art in every country to honour his work. Some of these productions are on the level of the best contemporary theatre. Nevertheless, information in English about this interesting and significant segment of European Shakespeare is very limited. For example, Laura Bates, Associate Professor of Indiana University, Bloomington, USA, has published a research paper, "Shakespeare in Latvia, 1870–1918: The Contest for Appropriation During the Nationalist Movement" (Stratford-upon-Avon: The Shakespeare Institute, 1993; University of Chicago, 1998). However, it analyzes just the first period of Latvian stage appropriation of Shakespeare.

Some essential facts, events, and names of Shakespeare's interpreters in the Baltics are mentioned in the Czech researcher Zdeněk Strbrný's study, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and in books by Russian Professor, Alexey Bartoshevich. Thus, his *Для кого написан "Гамлет": Шекспир в театре. XIX, XX, XXI...* (Москва: ГИТИС, 2014) contains chapters devoted to the Shakespearean productions of Eimuntas Nekrošius. Yet these and other research works

provide fragmented impressions and do not fully reflect the process of Shakespeare interpretation.

This work also refers to the Estonian stage designer and art theoretician Lilja Blumenfeld's research *Shylock. Trial. Venice: Corrupt Imagining in The Merchant of Venice* (Helsinki: Aalto University) published in 2014. While offering profound insights into the interpretations of this one play by Shakespeare on a global scale, from the Baltic region it covers only the theatres of Estonia.

The aim of this book, prepared by leading Shakespeare researchers in the Baltics, is to present their research in a compact form in English for international readers on the unique experience of Shakespeare to be found in the Baltic theatre. Its objectives are:

1. To analyze the importance of Shakespeare appropriation during the formation and professional development of the national culture in the Baltics, emphasizing the main trends and personalities from the very beginnings of this process in the 17th and the 18th centuries, to the present day.

2. To research foreign influences, for example, cooperation with Mikhail Chekhov both in Latvia and Lithuania, and experience gained by local artists while studying abroad, stressing the fact that Baltic theatre directors did not strive to copy and imitate the achievements of the great theatre cultures when staging Shakespeare's plays—they tried to seek their own ways of interpreting these works.

3. To study the correlation between the global and the national in Shakespearean productions in the Baltics both in historical perspective and in the context of contemporary theatre, analyzing the impact of political regimes and changes.

4. To show the trends in the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays that are practiced in the Baltic theatre, from traditional productions to 'site-specific Shakespeare', and multimedia versions.

Following the theoretical principles of researchers such as Jan Kott, Martin Esslin, Patrice Pavis, Hans-Thies Lehmann, Maria Shevtsova, Marvin Carlson, and others, and using methods of historical comparison, hermeneutics and semiotics, the authors of this research provide an overall panorama of Baltic Shakespeare, stressing the most important events and personalities.

The structure of the book consists of a preface, an introduction, three general parts, each devoted to one of the Baltic countries, a conclusion, a table with a chronological list of Shakespeare productions in all three countries, photos from the most essential performances, and an index of names and plays.

I am very grateful to the co-authors of this book, Professor Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė and Mg. Maris Peters, and our editor, Professor Maria Shevtsova, for their work. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Michael Dobson, the Director of the Shakespeare Institute, UK, and Professor Kalina Stefanova, who supported the idea of this book from the very beginning. Many thanks to my previous colleagues from the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia, as well as to the translators of the texts, Elita Saliņa, Aušra Simanavičiūtė and Aldis Pūtelis among them, for their assistance and patience, also Janusz Peters, who proofread the Estonian chapters. We are grateful to all museums and archives, the Estonian Museum of Theatre and Music, and the Lithuanian Theatre, Music and Cinema Museum among others, as well as theatres and photographers from the Baltics for sending photos and granting us permission to reproduce them.

Our thanks to Sophie Edminson, Rebecca Gladders, Amanda Millar, Adam Rummens, and their colleagues at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their cooperation and for providing professional advice and assistance throughout the copy-editing process of the book. My thanks to their recommended proofreader, Victoria Barry, and to my Latvian colleagues Kristīna Guste, Baiba Dūdiņa, and Aldis Pūtelis, for their technical assistance. We extend our thanks to Professor Valda Čakare, Assoc. Professor Luule Epner, Professor Kalina Stefanova, and Assoc. Professor Šarūnė Trinkūnaitė, who were the first reviewers of our book.

The target audiences of the book are students, researchers, Shakespeare experts, art, literature and culture critics, theatre theoreticians and practitioners, and journalists.

Guna Zeltiņa,
Dr. Art Emeritus
2023

INTRODUCTION

GUNA ZELTIŅA

General trends of interpretation

In the world theatre, Shakespeare's plays have been staged in accordance with the aesthetic tendencies predominating in the theatre at the given historical period, and can be characterized as follows:

1. The so-called 'historical archaeologism', which developed in England in the 1830s–1850s, for example, the productions of Charles Kean, and in the Meiningen Ensemble in Germany in the 1860s and 1870s, strove to give an authentic representation of the environment described in the plays by using precise historical costumes, props and architectural details. The version of this trend that gained great popularity in Victorian England tried to capture the audience with various pictorial and visual effects, which led to an over-elaborate style of staging with extended scenes of state ceremonies, processions, battles, and feasts. Nowadays, some elements of this trend and style are evident in the productions of The Royal Shakespeare Company, and Shakespeare's Globe, as well as in the practice of some European, Asian and American directors.

2. Stylization of Elizabethan theatrical practices emerged at the turn of the 20th century with the ascent of the first modernist movement–symbolism–when art showed great interest in the revitalizing energy of 'primary sources'. The activities of William Poel at the London Shakespeare Society encouraged reverting to the simplicity and conditional credibility of Shakespearean theatre. The plays were performed on platform stages surrounded on three sides by spectators, the actors were dressed in Elizabethan costumes, and the stage design and props were minimalistic. Poel's creative activities typologically resonate with Nikolai Evreinov's experiments in St. Petersburg, where stylization of the medieval and Spanish Golden Age theatre was carried out, as well as with the French symbolists, who staged plays in the ruins of ancient Roman theatres.

In contemporary theatre, this trend is seemingly continued by the so-called 'original' or 'authentic' practices that attempt to recreate the staging conditions corresponding to Shakespearean theatre, such as daylight

performances, or by not dimming the lights in the auditorium, dressing the actors in 16th century costumes, restoring the original pronunciation of the Shakespearean texts (e.g., in the work of director Tim Carroll at Shakespeare's Globe and the Shakespeare Festival in Ontario, Canada) or all-male casts (the experiments of Declan Donnellan, and others). They also include games with authenticity characteristic of the post-dramatic theatre.

3. Symbolism in Shakespearean theatre is related to the use of an abstract theatrical language of symbols, imbuing it with universal meaning. In this respect, the most important experiments with Shakespeare's plays were carried out by Gordon Craig (e.g., the production of *Hamlet* in collaboration with Konstantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre, 1911). Nowadays, this approach is present in different theatre cultures, from French and German to Lithuanian, Georgian, and Armenian Shakespeare productions.

4. Modernized Shakespeare is a trend most consistently initiated by Barry Jackson at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the 1920s, who dressed Shakespeare's characters in contemporary costumes and made them act in contemporary environments. This trend is still topical in the modern theatre and often takes the form of adaptations. A wide range of examples could be mentioned here, from the experimental productions of Frank Castorf, Thomas Ostermeier, Ivo van Hove, and Krzysztof Warlikovski in Europe to the provocative modernized versions/adaptations of Asian stage directors (e.g., director Natalie Hennedige's production of *Ophelia* presented at the Asian Shakespeare Festival in Singapore in 2021).

5. Psychological interpretations, which render the conflicts, characters and relationships in Shakespeare's plays within the terms and concepts of psychology. This trend emerged at the end of the 19th century, due to the development of psychology as a science, which helped to formulate the principles of psychological theatre that came into existence and were consolidated within André Antoine's 'The Independent Theatre' (Théâtre Libre), The Independent Theatre Society in London, and the Freie Bühne in Germany. It overlaps with the psychoanalytical trend for viewing Shakespeare's characters and conflicts in the light of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories. This became very topical in the 1950s–1970s, and separate aspects of this trend are still to be found in the modern theatre and cinema (Roman Polanski, Derek Jarman, and others).

6. Shakespeare of political theatre. The basis of this trend was laid down by the productions of German Expressionism but it was developed by the political theatre of Erwin Piscator and the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht. It emphasizes the political aspects of Shakespeare's plays, and projects current political issues and conflicts into them. Not always, but in many cases, this trend uses the principles of modernization. It gained new relevance after the

publication of Jan Kott's work, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary (*1961), and was a major influence on the so-called 'Shakespeare revolution' in the 1960s, which, in turn, left a lasting impact on the productions of the classics all over the world.

A special form of this trend is a double-coded political theatre, which was typical of the interpretations of the Soviet and other totalitarian regimes, when parallels with the reigning regime were encoded within the form of political theatre. There are many examples in Polish, Russian, Romanian, and Hungarian theatre, with the practices of Yuri Lyubimov, Robert Sturua, Valery Fokin, and others.

7. Intercultural stagings that graft the aesthetics of other national cultures and ages on Shakespeare's plays, creating an artistic phenomenon with a new capacity of semiotic energy (Ariane Mnouchkine's experiments with the forms and elements of Eastern theatre, some productions of Giorgio Strehler, which merge Shakespeare and commedia dell'arte, as well as Peter Brook's Shakespeare productions). It is characteristic of intercultural experiments that cast members represent different cultures (and races), lending their own individual accents to the figurativeness and perception of the interpretation. The experiments where Shakespeare is immersed in the folklore traditions of various nations also belong to this trend, and are widespread in Latin American and Asian theatre.

8. Metaphorical interpretations, when Shakespeare's characters, imagery systems, and situations are used to create a metaphorical theatrical language. The provocative stage versions of Luk Perceval, Jan Klata, Thomas Ostermeier, Oliver Frljic, and other directors could be mentioned here. Characteristic expressions of this trend are the work of the Lithuanian directors Eimuntas Nekrošius and Oskaras Koršunovas.

9. Traditional interpretations, or 'Shakespeare by the book' (Pavis) that strive to assert the literary and cultural value of Shakespeare's plays. This trend uses the aesthetics of psychological theatre, as well as the aesthetics of other models, and is still topical in the world theatre.

10. Postmodern/post-dramatic Shakespeare. This trend covers several types of theatre (physical, visual, object theatre) that are almost always based on the deconstruction of the text, and often on irony. Shakespeare's plays, characters, images, or motives, are used here only as the material for creating the figurative structure conceived by the director or the playwright (Robert Wilson, and others), or for performative practices, where Shakespeare's writings serve as the inspiration for autonomous works of art. The Polish director Grzegorz Bral and his Song of the Goat Theatre, with its cosmopolitan experiments, synthesizing layers from different ancient cultures into a musical-plastic theatre language, could be mentioned here.

This trend is widespread in contemporary theatre and often uses digital technologies.

11. Shakespeare of 'site-specific' theatre. Although this particular theatre movement gained its name only at the end of the 20th century, the first examples can be found at the end of the 19th century, e.g., Philip Ben Greet's "The Ben Greet Players" touring with outdoor productions of Shakespeare in England, and even organizing an American tour. Shakespeare's plays are staged in specific locations or buildings, such as castles like Kronborg Castle (Shakespeare's Elsinore) in Denmark, churches, cloisters, parks, and woods, or simply in the open-air, as well as in such provocative locations as swimming pools. The found spaces of these productions, whether in their natural form or adapted to the performance, actively participate in the creation of the imagery system and meaning of the production. Max Reinhardt developed this trend in his productions in Germany, Austria, and Italy. It is widely practiced in Shakespeare summer festivals all over the world.

Nowadays, these trends do not exist anymore in their 'pure' form, but can be seen in combined versions and synergy with different types of interpretation. The merger of political and site-specific theatre was noticed in Jan Klata's famous production *H* performed at the Gdansk Shipyard in 2004 by Teatr Wybreze. The synthesis of the elements of political and metaphorical theatre characterizes the Shakespearean productions of Robert Sturua, Oliver Frljic, and others. The trends and styles of interpretation listed above have been especially active in different historical periods, and have manifested themselves all around the world, including the Baltics. Historical circumstances and situations in all three Baltic countries have been similar, but the development of culture, including the theatre and literature, has been realized in different ways.

Historical background of the Baltic theatre

The professional theatre in the Baltics is a very recent phenomenon when compared to the ancient and established theatre cultures in other European countries. But Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian nations living near the Baltic Sea, have an ancient and unique cultural heritage in their folklore–concentrated poetic texts that accompanied local people from the cradle to the grave, viewing the world as a unity of nature and man, and contemplating it philosophically through symbolic imagery. Researchers of theatre origins have stressed the fact that these folksongs were sung or rhythmically recited, with swinging motions and steps, like small performances, in rites akin to those of Dionysian processions (Pētersons 1993).

Theatrical elements were also found in the Baltic summer solstice rituals, masked processions in autumn after harvest was brought in, and around the winter solstice, where participants in masks presented symbolic archetypical images, such as The Bear, The Bull, Death, The Gypsy woman, The Goat, The Crane, etc. These were, in fact, very close to theatrical performances, as the ritual activity actually made the participants play the roles of ancestors visiting their former dwellings, performing specific activities, and acting out specific required scenes. In addition, wedding and burial rituals contained aspects of such performances, along with other customs including festive games. Baltic wedding ceremonies and rituals especially resembled theatrical performances, with more or less set text, songs, dances, and other activities that involved playing small plots and dialogues, contests between the bride's and groom's parties, expressing ritual content in singing and similar activities.

The summer solstice, or the Festival of Jāņi or Līgo in Latvia, Jaanilaupäev (or as commonly abbreviated Jaanipäev) in Estonia, Jonines in Lithuania–A Midsummer Night, the eve of St. John's Day–has always been rich in theatrical elements, as this was considered a threshold moment for the agricultural year, with magical forces at play, requiring specific activities to ensure the right balance and future fertility.

While thousands of people gather at Stonehenge in England for this longest day of the year, the Baltic people usually celebrate the day in the countryside, keeping traditions and performing ancient pagan rituals, making wreaths from wildflowers, tree branches and flowers, and lighting fires. The centre of this celebration is the bonfire, symbolizing the sun, and activities such as singing, dancing, drinking, and fire rituals, are organized around it, including jumping over the fire in order to become purified. Traditionally, young people used to go into woods in couples, looking for the magical (and mythical) fern blossom (fern was supposed to blossom during that night only), and used to greet the sunrise after the night's festivity swimming in a river or a lake as part of an ancient ritual of fertility and purification. This summer solstice festival is still celebrated all over the Baltics, with the participation of individuals, and folk and ethno-groups, musicians, singers, and dancers.

The invasion of German crusaders in the Baltics in the 12th and 13th centuries prevented the local tribes from uniting into larger cultural centres, where mythological ceremonies and festive games could have gradually transformed into theatre, as occurred in Ancient Greece. The manifestations of local national art were considered to be an expression of paganism, therefore hostile towards the Christian church, which led to ancient traditions being diligently opposed for centuries. Nevertheless, the Germans

were the first to organize theatre performances in Latin in Latvia (in Riga, 1205) and Estonia, which were staged according to the tradition of religious plays popular in medieval Europe. The popularity of masques during the next centuries, and the upsurge of 'scholastic drama' in Latin, in cities of the Hanseatic League such as Riga in Latvia, and Tallinn (then Reval), occurred in three more towns (Tartu, Pärnu, Viljandi) in Estonia, as the theatre developed in accordance with European religious and spiritual tendencies of the time.

From the 17th century onwards, troupes of travelling comedians from Germany, England, Holland, Italy, Poland, and other countries included in their regular itinerary the area of the present-day Baltics. The first permanent theatre in Riga and Tallinn was German theatre, established in Riga in 1782, and in Tallinn in 1795. In the 18th and 19th centuries, these centres of culture housed visiting performances of European theatre celebrities, such as Ira Aldrige, Adelaide Ristori and Tommaso Salvini, Italian drama and opera troupes, and Russian and French ballet artists, who facilitated the development of multicultural urban life in the largest Baltic cities. Nevertheless, both Riga and Tallinn retained the specific features of towns of German burghers, due to the large number of German inhabitants who formed not only the biggest, but also the richest, population sectors in these cities.

The dominance of German theatre culture was stronger in Latvia and Estonia. In Lithuania, the situation was different, due to its historical connections with Poland and Russia. Lithuanian theatre researcher Kristina Steiblytė writes:

> Professional theatre has been known in Lithuania since the 16th century, when plays started to be performed at the Grand Duke's palace, in manor houses and at Vilnius University. Theatre shows were created and performed by travelling troupes from different countries, multinational theatre collectives of students, and manor and city theatres. However, theatre in the Lithuanian language emerged only at the end of the 19th century. At the time when the Imperial Russian authorities ruling Lithuania forbade the use of the Lithuanian language and the Latin alphabet, gatherings called Lithuanian evenings began to be held. At those gatherings, folk songs were sung, poetry was recited and plays started to be put on. Out of this tradition, and due to the activities of various national societies, as well as the efforts by theatre directors who had trained in Russia, the first examples of professional Lithuanian theatre were born (Steiblytė 2018).

Initially, Latvian and Estonian professional theatre was influenced mostly by German classicism in terms of theatre architecture as well as in

terms of visual form, directing, and acting. The Riga Latvian Society building, built in 1870, where the first performances of the Riga Latvian Theatre took place, is an example of the classicism at issue. The first leaders of Latvian and Estonian professional theatre were educated in Germany and followed the canon and standards of German theatre in their Shakespearean productions.

The advancement of Baltic theatre was only possible with the development of the Lithuanians', Latvians', and Estonians' social and political awareness of themselves as a nation in the second half of the 19th century. The First National Awakening or New Latvian movement (the 1850s–1880s), as well as the so-called 'New Current' at the turn of the century, and the New Estonia literary group in Estonia, established around 1905, strove to liberate culture from the dominant German influences and create national culture values. Theatre gradually became one of the most important means of building and raising the national consciousness and self-confidence of the local intelligentsia. Since the 1880s and 1890s, valuable stimuli for the development of Baltic theatre came from including of works of the great world classics, among them Shakespeare, in Latvian and Estonian, in the repertoire of the first semi-professional and professional theatres.

The situation was different again in Lithuania, where, after 1801, Shakespeare was performed in the Polish language for a long time, and later, in Russian. The first performances of his works in Lithuanian only appeared in the 1920s. Professor Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė, in her chapters on Shakespeare in Lithuania, explains this in greater detail.

After centuries under the rule of German, Swedish, Polish and Russian authorities, and almost 200 years as a provincial part of the Russian Empire after the Great Northern War (1700–1721), all three Baltic countries established themselves as national independent states in 1918. During this wave of the Second National Awakening, respectable national theatres were newly established in all three countries, and the development of national dramaturgy also intensified. Nevertheless, Shakespeare was still a trusted ally in the process of creating contemporary stage productions and aesthetics in accordance with the tendencies of European theatre.

Baltic versions of global tendencies

In Baltic theatre, the so-called 'pictorial realism' or 'historical archaeologism', and 'pure' stylizations of Elizabethan theatre saw little development. As the author of the chapters on Shakespeare in Latvian theatre stresses, only random elements of these interpretative trends were

used. For example, Elizabethan stage design appeared in just a few productions of Shakespeare's comedies directed by the Latvian artist Eduards Smiļǵis at the Daile Theatre in Riga. In the 1920s, Smiļǵis actively introduced the principles of commedia dell'arte in his interpretations of Shakespeare, and he was also the only director in the whole Baltic region to stage twenty-one plays by Shakespeare. Smiļǵis's productions strongly influenced the creative life and theatre style of Kaarel Ird, who later became one of the grand personalities of Estonian theatre, having lived in Riga in his youth.

Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė in her chapters on Lithuanian Shakespeare, stresses the significance of the activities of Mikhail Chekhov in the Baltics during the interwar period, as does the author of the chapters on Latvia, because the Russian actor, director, and theatre pedagogue had a long-lasting impact on both Latvian and Lithuanian theatre spaces with his Shakespearean guest performances and acting courses.

All the authors stress the fact that psychological interpretations continued to dominate in Baltic theatre, not only during the interwar period, but also after World War II, and such brilliant representatives of this trend as actors Theodor Altermann and Kaarel Karm in Estonia, or Andrius Oleka-Žilinskas in Lithuania, with their power and energy, as well as the scenic culture of acting, could have been placed next to such celebrated Shakespearean actors as Alexandro Moissi, Albert Bassermann, and others.

However, searching for new, modern forms of stage design, directing and acting, was also topical. During the wave of Shakespearean modernization in the 1920s and 1930s, as Estonian author Maris Peters points out, Estonian directors and stage designers, theatre director Voldemar Mettus, and stage designer Alexander Tuurand, followed the global aesthetic tendencies of the time. Similar practices were noticed in Lithuania, in the activities of stage designer Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, and in Latvia, where, for instance, Eduards Smiļǵis in his production of *Cupid on the Dreadnought* (1931), which was his version of *Much Ado About Nothing*, transferred the action to the deck of a modern warship, with an impressive model of it on the stage of the Daile Theatre that could have competed with Theodore Komisarjevsky's 'aluminum' *Macbeth* in Stratford-upon-Avon in the 1930s.

Baltic productions of Shakespeare reflected the aesthetic, social, and political currents in the given period. After the Soviet occupation of the Baltics in 1940–1941, the German occupation during World War II, and the Soviet re-occupation in 1944–1945, historical optimism and floridness cultivated by the Soviet canons of socialist realism strongly influenced the Shakespearean productions of Baltic stage directors in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, in Estonian director Kaarel Ird's politicized interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* at the theatre Vanemuine (1958), the gondolas placed onstage under the arches recalled the thousands of Estonians, who had left their motherland by boat at the end of the war (as thousands of Latvians and Lithuanians had done, trying to escape from Soviet repressions to the West).

The influence of European aesthetic and philosophical movements, for example, the influence of the principles of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, was felt in such productions as *Coriolanus* interpreted by Kaarel Ird at the theatre Vanemuine in 1964, while the premises of existentialist philosophy were encoded in *Macbeth* staged by Juozas Miltinis at the Panevėžys Drama Theatre (1961), and *Hamlet* staged by Voldemar Panso at the Tallinn Youth Theatre (1966). Miltinis's *Macbeth* was a step towards modern theatrical language on a new level. The director's symbolic, 'purified' form of the production, and novel lighting technology, broke the ponderous, operatic traditions of staging Shakespeare that were typical of Soviet theatre. Panso's *Hamlet*, on the other hand, corresponded to the politicized interpretations of Shakespeare, because it represented the current social and political tendencies and atmosphere in all the Baltic countries during the Soviet regime, when the hopeful 'thaw' after Joseph Stalin's death was already over, and the clouds of authoritarianism and repression were looming on the horizon.

As the authors show, Baltic theatre has experienced metaphorical interpretations and versions of political Shakespeare that project the social and spiritual experience of the stagnation period of the Soviet regime into his plays. Take, for example, *Hamlet,* staged by Mikk Mikiver at the Estonian Drama Theatre (1978). Symbolic theatre and the principles of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty were developed in Jonas Vaitkus's production of *Richard II* at the Kaunas Drama Theatre (1985).

With the development of the various forms of psychological, metaphorical and political interpretation, the postmodern period in the theatre saw the first deconstructions of Shakespeare's texts, such as the Estonian director Kalju Komissarov's *Hamlet* in the punk style (1986), which was a rebellious, yet attractive, manifesto for a whole generation of young actors and emerging directors.

The *perestroika* processes of the late 1980s in all three Baltic countries allowed theatre to move away from 'the language of Aesop' in productions of Shakespeare's plays, and to speak openly about the political situation in the Baltics, the agony of the Soviet regime, and regaining independence and freedom for the Baltic countries. It coincided with the so-called 'Singing Revolution' and the Third National Awakening in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (1988/1990), which grew into a mass movement, with meetings

and demonstrations of thousands of singing people, which led to the declaration of independence of all the three Baltic Republics in 1990.

Though it brought hope, and some kind of national euphoria, it was a very difficult time for theatres and the staging of classics, including Shakespeare, because audience figures decreased sharply. Firstly, the real-life scenes of mass demonstrations and rallies were more exciting and fascinating than anything seen on the stage. Secondly, the standard of living of the most active theatregoers–the intellectuals–was falling rapidly. State subsidies for theatres were radically reduced under the conditions of the new market economy, and a bitter struggle for survival started in the theatres. The first independent alternative, theatres, which were established in the Baltics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, were also struggling for survival. Shakespeare appeared in the repertoires of these theatres–both big state theatres and also smaller independent ones– mainly in a chamber format or in the aesthetics of the 'poor theatre'.

The metaphorical versions of Shakespeare–the trilogy *Hamlet* (1997), *Macbeth* (1999) and *Othello* (2000)--staged by Lithuanian director Eimuntas Nekrošius, as well as the productions of the young and provocative stage director Oskaras Koršunovas, pointed out a new level in Baltic Shakespeareana. Koršunovas directed *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Comédie-Française (2007), and it was the first time that a Baltic director was invited to such a prestigious theatre.

Postmodern adaptations were offered by the Latvian director and playwright Lauris Gundars, with his *Hamlet* at the Liepāja Theatre (1994), and Estonian Mati Unt with his interpretations of *Hamlet* at the theatre Vanemuine (1997), and *Richard III* at the Estonian Drama Theatre (1998), applying the techniques of irony and parody. The stylization of Eastern theatre was present in Jonas Vaitkus's interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* at the Kaunas Drama Theatre (2003).

During recent decades, a wide range of multishaped forms and approaches to Shakespeare have been present in the Baltic theatres. Having viewed the whole spectrum of interpretations, the authors conclude that there is no special 'Baltic Shakespeare' that could form a separate trend, or represent new practices, which were radically different from those found in the European Shakespeare theatre, or the rest of the world. However, there are a few essential Baltic accents, which Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian theatre practitioners, with their mentality, idiosyncratic creative personalities, and subjective vision of Shakespearian heritage, influenced by the political, social and cultural situation of the Baltic States, have contributed to the global perception of Shakespeare. Lithuanian actor Darius Meškauskas calls *Hamlet* 'the actor's Bible', and Shakespeare has an unfading value and

cultural quality that unites theatre people all over the world. It is these configurations and connections that are, for the first time, described in the present book.

Alvis Hermanis, one of the leading directors in the Baltics, who has never staged Shakespeare during his successful career after the 1990s, has said that "all the mushrooms have been already picked" in the plays of Chekhov and Shakespeare. The authors of this book hope that its readers will recognize that 'the Shakespearean forest' in the Baltics is still full of fresh, interesting 'mushrooms' deserving not only local, but also international, attention.

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