Introduction: Shakespeare without his language

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> There is a typical Hungarian story, about the very well-known Hungarian theatre director, Arthur Bardos, who left Hungary in 1949 to direct *Hamlet* in England; and he was asked by the BBC what it was like to do so. Mr Bardos answered: "Of course, it is a great honour and a challenge, but to tell you the truth, it's strange to hear the text in English because I am used to the original version, translated by Janos Arany."[1]

Foreign Shakespeare? The moderately impertinent title of this volume implies a perspective on Shakespeare's stature, and on his place in world culture, which is normally obscured in the academic and theatrical enterprises that have adopted his name. It's both natural and logical that Shakespearean studies and theatrical production have been Anglo-centered: Shakespeare was an English writer, after all, and since the eighteenth century the understanding and formal assessment of his work have been in the hands of critics and editors with profound allegiances to English literature. These days the situation is more secure than ever, for the great majority of Shakespearean commentators are professional interpreters connected to university departments of English in English-speaking countries. In many cases the officials connected to placing his work on stage have had parallel backgrounds: the leading directors and administrators of the Royal Shakespeare Company for its first two decades, for instance, read English at Cambridge under the influence of F. R. Leavis. Both the teaching and the acting of Shakespeare in English customarily start with a deep study of the linguistic clues in the text, and most English-speakers initially encounter Shakespeare as a literary creator, the champion example of a distinctive and abiding literary tradition.

Though the condition of Shakespearean studies is natural it has been unfortunate in at least one regard, for it has tended to cloak

Shakespeare's vast importance in the theatre in languages other than English. A simple test will demonstrate my point: look at the stage histories that are usually included in the introductions to the numerous single-play editions of Shakespeare. Almost none will mention performances outside of the Anglo-American theatre. Three British publishers now offer series of performance histories, also in single-play formats; their record is no better.[2] Yet Shakespeare, by far the most popular playwright in England and North America, is actually the most performed playwright in the world at large. He regularly crosses national and linguistic boundaries with apparent ease. Does he cross into Poland or China as the same dramatist who is played at Stratford?

It would fit the notion of Shakespeare as the transcendent humanist to answer yes, but the truth is more complex. As these essays reveal, the performance history of Shakespeare's plays abroad suggests the opposite, and also suggests a reason why commentators normally pass over the subject. The cultural attitudes that inhere in the work, and that the Anglo-centered approach has assumed to be the common heritage of Shakespeare's art, require not only linguistic translation but also cultural adaptation when they are transferred to a foreign environment. While Anglophone critics have not ignored the alternative traditions, they have tended to look upon Shakespeare's popularity in other countries as an example of his comprehensive appeal. Rather than seeing the use of Shakespeare's texts in foreign languages as a phenomenon separate from their use in English, they have normally chosen to see it as further vindication of the importance of their subject, and, by implication, of the superiority of English as the medium for Shakespearean cognition. They have constructed a universal Shakespeare based on the value of his original language.

Yet almost from the start of his importance as the idealized English dramatist there have been other Shakespeares, Shakespeares not dependent upon English and often at odds with it. The English Comedians may have played Shakespeare in the German lands in the sixteenth century, and English sailors may have played *Othello* on the African coast in the seventeenth century – the evidence is uncertain. If such performances did occur, they would have been based primarily upon gesture and extremely improvised speech. Tantalizing as these possibilities are as early global exportations of Shakespeare, it's obvious that their actors could not have

been presenting the dramatist as a literary artist or his plays as subtle verbal creations. The almost absurd conditions under which the English Comedians first worked – as troupes of actors without German, attempting to present Elizabethan plays for audiences with little or no theatrical tradition, rendering the plays essentially as dumb-shows – emphatically point to the problematics of foreign Shakespeare.[3] The connections and cultural connotations that derive from playing Shakespeare in his own land in his own tongue are simply not applicable in another country and in another language. Whereas Shakespeare has been a given in English for some centuries, readers and audiences in linguistically foreign environments have had to *find* a desire for him.

The first major example of finding that desire outside of English occurred in German 200 years ago. The roughness and relatively sprawling nature of the plays, as well as their political stories, made them felicitous cultural material for an embryonic nationalist movement. Schiller's well-known project, to create a German literature and a German theatre that would transcend the petty principalities of the Holy Roman Empire and define the essence of a people, hoped to unite *das deutsche Volk* in a common, utopian resolve. Because Shakespeare was not French, and because his work violated neoclassic (i.e., aristocratic) principles, he became a rallying point for the new spirit of romantic democracy. It was, ironically, his very foreignness that made him useful as a model for the Germanic future: "*unser* Shakespeare" was an outright appropriation, dependent upon the absence of an existing tradition. Shakespeare could be made to signify what no familiar literature could signify, and simultaneously serve to validate Schiller's own dramaturgy.

In central and eastern Europe the same condition obtained in the mid-nineteenth century. In lands under the Austrian hegemony, Shakespeare's plays became part of the movement for a national literature and a bourgeois theatre separate from the court stages of the Habsburgs. Similarly, the first translations of Shakespeare in Poland were part of a nascent opposition to foreign cultural domination. This oppositional use of Shakespeare has received an intriguing variation more recently, when the plays were used in postwar eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as dissident texts. If new plays and films critical of a repressive regime are regularly censored, producers are sometimes tempted to make the

classics into coded messages about the present: Shakespeare thus became a secret agent under deep cover.

Such a catalogue, however brief, serves as a reminder that Shakespeare's work has never stood above or outside history in Europe. Shakespeare is of course part of history in Great Britain and Ireland and North America and Australia too, and has often been made part of larger political and philosophic currents. But in continental Europe the absence of immersed linguistic and cultural connections to Shakespeare has meant that this appropriation has been more overt, and has met less official resistance from advocates of high culture than in the home countries. *Hamlet*, for example, has long been read in England and America inside the romantic tradition, as the outcry of an individual tortured soul, focusing on the poetic insights of the central character. This reading has been reinforced by the tendency to use the text as a star vehicle for an ardent and youthful actor. It's interesting to note how many Anglo-American productions in the past have been insensible of the fact that the play contains three rebellions – Claudius' against old Hamlet, Laertes' against Claudius, and young Hamlet's against Claudius – and that the ending shows a belligerent outsider taking over the Danish throne. In fact, a long theatrical tradition in England cuts Fortinbras entirely, preferring to conclude with the personalized, anguished overtones of Hamlet's death rather than its political implications.

But if to the liberal west *Hamlet* is an expression of the individual spirit, to a censor in a more repressive land it is a threat. In eastern Europe the play frequently received frank political readings at odds with the standard romantic interpretation. At various times in the nineteenth century the czarist regime banned performances in Warsaw out of fear of encouraging rebellion. Most notoriously, Stalin banned it during the war in the USSR, its political allusions too sensitive for a supreme dictator and its hero too tentative for the nation's militant cause. This tradition has continued to the present. In 1989, just before the collapse of the Stalinist government of the German Democratic Republic, I saw Siegfried Höchst's production at the Volksbühne in East Berlin, which treated Denmark as a literal prison from which almost everybody was trying to escape, just as almost everybody was trying to escape at that moment from East Germany. The stage was enclosed with three rows of wire fencing, and when Laertes was given permission to return to France in the

second scene, he was handed a green document that looked suspiciously like the passports issued by West Germany. The audience howled in delight.[4] In these examples thinking about Shakespeare has been influenced by circumstances entirely foreign to those that apply in the Anglo-American tradition, where greater political stability has robbed Shakespeare of some of the danger and force that other countries have (re)discovered in his texts. It is worth remembering that there is no phrase in English equivalent to *coup d'état*.

English-speakers are apt to assume that foreign-language productions necessarily lose an essential element of Shakespeare in the process of linguistic and cultural transfer, and of course this is true. But it is also true, as I am suggesting, that some foreign performances may have a more direct access to the power of the plays. In this respect the modernity of translation is crucial. Shakespeare's poetry may be one of the glories of human life, but the archaism and remoteness of his language create enormous difficulties for audiences in the late twentieth century. The fact is, harsh as it may sound to some teachers of English, we do not speak the same language as Shakespeare: at best we speak a remote dialect of it. A foreign language, while missing the full value of the verse, can be said to have an advantage of great significance in the theatre. Even the oldest of the translations of Shakespeare in regular use today, the Schlegel–Tieck versions, are infinitely closer to the language spoken on the street in Berlin or Zurich or Vienna than Shakespeare's language is to that of London or Los Angeles or Melbourne. It is common practice in the contemporary theatre to commission new translations for new productions, so that the language is not only colloquial but also becomes tied to the interpretation and the mise en scène of the particular performance. As a result many foreign performances of Shakespeare sound similar to performances of new plays – just as performances in English of Molière or Schiller can do.

The idea of translating the plays into contemporary English is anathema to most Anglophone Shakespeareans, and probably to most Anglophone audiences. The reasons for this protectionism, however, may not be as obvious as they seem, especially when we remember that it was almost universal practice to adapt the language in the English theatre from the Restoration to the mid-nineteenth century. The reasons have as much to do with the traditions of modernist high culture and the entrenched position of

the Shakespeare industry as with the inherent superiority of the originals. It's not necessary to argue the issue here; I only need to note that what is anathema in English is a fact of life elsewhere.

The differences that derive from performing in languages other than English have led to major differences in performance strategies. They are especially noticeable in the visual aspects of production; unable to place the same emphasis on Shakespeare's verbal resourcefulness, foreign performances have explored scenographic and physical modes more openly than their Anglophone counterparts, often redefining the meaning of the plays in the process. Though of course there have been, and continue to be, innovative and highly influential productions in English, the authoritative and thorough-going rethinkings of the plays we associate with Leopold Jessner or Giorgio Strehler or Ariane Mnouchkine have not occurred to the same degree in the home countries. Even Peter Brook, reinventing the plays in English since 1945, has done his most radical work on Shakespeare in French. Those differences in performance traditions, which form the assorted themes of this volume, tell a complicated story about the interrelationships between an English dramatist, his performance in English, and his performance outside English. To begin to understand the importance of foreign productions, and to put them in the context of Anglophone Shakespeare, it will be useful here to look at the general history of Shakespeare performance since the Second World War.

International Shakespearean representation in our time has gone through many changes, and has not proceeded in anything so convenient as a straight line. But the dominant uses and styles of Shakespeare on the stage from about 1950 to about 1980 were established by a combination of two overriding forces: the open stage movement, and the movement to contemporize the meanings of the plays. Though it had predecessors in Germany in the nineteenth century, the open stage movement was essentially English in theory and Anglo-Canadian in practice. Its chief object was to demystify the dramatic event by stressing its non-illusionist nature. Tyrone Guthrie, modifying the urges of William Poel and Harley Granville Barker, demonstrated that a revised architectural structure would significantly alter how Shakespeare was received in the theatre, bringing the plays closer to their audiences in both the literal and the figurative sense. The Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario, designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch and Guthrie, opened in

1953, the stage first covered by a tent; the theatre combined Elizabethan attributes with audience arrangements similar to those at the ancient theatre at Epidauros, overtly welcoming spectators as mutual creators of the dramatic fiction. New playhouses soon followed in Minneapolis, New York, Los Angeles, Chichester, Sheffield, and around the world. Some of the discoveries of the open stage movement were widely adapted elsewhere, even modifying the interior architecture of proscenium theatres (like the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, which resolutely divides actors from spectators), and greatly increased the ease and the speed of performance. His producers at last seemed to free Shakespeare from nineteenth-century notions of Realism.

Though the movement claimed an authenticity deriving from Elizabethan stage practice, it affected Anglophone production so deeply in the 1950s and 1960s partly because it fit inside the dominant, modernist interpretation of Shakespeare that stressed the centrality of his subtle and imagistic poetry to his meaning. The linguistic text became even more consequential to Shakespearean enactment by situating the actor on a (relatively) bare stage in a (relatively) Elizabethan mode, placing the main force of interpretation on the (relatively) unencumbered word. The movement, though not much analyzed, was so taken for granted that when J. L. Styan published *The Shakespeare Revolution* in 1977 his premise went unquestioned. Shakespeare wrote for the non-illusionist stage, Styan emphasized, and the production modalities of the twentieth century have been moving to refulfill Shakespeare's Elizabethan assumptions through a combination of architectural and performance tactics.

The second major postwar force in Shakespeare performance, the movement to contemporize the plays, was foreign in origin, though it was seized almost immediately by the Royal Shakespeare Company. This movement had two separate European parts, both thoroughly conditioned by the war: one derived from Marxist theory and Bertolt Brecht, the other from Existentialist philosophy and Jan Kott. Brecht's effect was achieved partly through his writing but more directly through the work of the Berliner Ensemble, probably the most influential theatre company in the world in the third quarter of the century. This troupe, subsidized by the government of East Germany, stressed the combined responsibility of actors, directors, designers, playwrights, and audiences to the

social and political issues that lay beyond the entertainment value or the high-art virtues of attending plays. Kott, on the other hand, wished to stress the relevance and immediacy of Shakespeare's texts to the excruciations of the postwar world, and asked for theatrical representations that would reveal what he saw as the underlying cruelty of Shakespeare's fables, a cruelty not limited by political issues.

Peter Hall, greatly impressed by the visit of the Berliner Ensemble to London in August of 1956 (the very month of Brecht's death), set out to capture its organizational structure and its social commitment for the Royal Shakespeare Company, founded in 1960–1. At the same time Hall and his colleagues like Peter Brook wanted to make British Shakespeare production relevant to the modern condition, firmly moving it away from the rather operatic, high-culture-is-good-for-you posture that had generally characterized it since the Victorian era.[5] The new mode of the RSC converged with European trends in the 1960s: at Stratford, in a variety of European cities from Moscow to Milan, and eventually even in North America, some of the chief directors and designers of the age began to accent the historical messages of Shakespeare's plays for the present, often in a committed or engaged context, and in simple scenographic environments deriving from Elizabethan practice.

These tendencies of postwar Shakespearean performance received substantial theoretical support. Though the procedures of the RSC and of other major companies were frequently attacked by traditional scholars, a number of critics and theatre historians in the 1960s and 1970s provided research and commentary that endorsed radical experimentation. The two most important of these for theatre, interestingly enough, were foreign. Both wrote under Socialist regimes in central and eastern Europe. Kott spoke for himself; the Brechtian strategies were best fortified by the scholarship of Robert Weimann.

Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (published in Polish and French in 1962 and in English in 1964), probably the most widely read book of Shakespearean criticism since A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, overtly annexed the Elizabethan dramatist to the absurdist environment of postwar Europe. Kott wrote in implicit opposition to the Stalinist government of Poland, a nation whose identity had been forcibly redefined, and whose freedom had been savagely abridged, first by German and then by Soviet annexation.

Kott read Shakespeare, as it were, by the searchlights of a police state. In the histories he saw the "Grand Mechanism" of implacable human corruption, in the comedies a dark and bestial vision of sexuality, in the tragedies a kindred comic grimace reminiscent of Samuel Beckett. As Peter Brook said, "Kott is undoubtedly the only writer on Elizabethan matters who assumes without question that every one of his readers will at some point or other have been woken by the police in the middle of the night."[6] It was through Brook, in fact, that Kott affected the theatre most directly, especially through Brook's (in)famous RSC productions of *King Lear* in 1962 and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1970.

It's hard to pinpoint how Kott altered performance traditions, since Shakespeare had normally been subject to contemporary revision and revaluation anyway. In the modernist period, however, critics were strongly inclined to see Shakespeare as somehow existing outside of time, a refuge of immutability secure from the insistent intrusions of the twentieth century.[7] Kott gave to the theatre of the 1960s and 1970s a theoretically backed fortitude to admit that Shakespeare, despite the cultural accretions that inevitably cling to the work, exists on stage in the present tense; and that representation of Shakespeare can exhibit powerful and intellectually provocative visions of the present. What was particularly new was Kott's injunction that Shakespeare should be read as a dramatist of pain. By drawing analogies to the apocalyptic nightmares of the European absurdists, he deprived Shakespeare of the comfortable status of a tamed classic. Of course, many commentators and some audiences found his ideas excessive or inappropriate; on the other side, by 1980 these ideas had themselves become a new kind of theatrical orthodoxy. But there can be no doubt that *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* broke down a number of artificial, Anglo-centric values that had dogged Shakespearean criticism and production into the postwar era.

Kott's working assumption was that human nature is unchanging and essentially comic in its absurdity. While he stressed the particularity of the postwar condition, he seemed to ratify a determinate universe in which human fate remained inscrutable, the black void our only end. The circus and the theatre, where human beings grapple with extreme issues that change nothing in the other world, became for him the pertinent metaphors for life, and Beckett's plays the characteristic comic expression of the era. Thus, thinking about

Gloucester's clownish leap from Dover Cliff in *Lear* Kott is immediately reminded of Didi and Gogo's clownish attempt to hang themselves in *Waiting for Godot*:

> Gloucester did fall, and he got up again. He made his suicide attempt, but he failed to shake the world. Nothing changed ... If there are no gods, suicide makes no sense. Death exists in any case. Suicide cannot alter human fate, but only accelerate it. It ceases to be a protest. It is a surrender. It becomes the acceptance of world's greatest cruelty – death.[8]

Obviously indebted to Sartre and Camus, the passage also reflects a view of the world, congenial to the liberal western democracies, that privileges the anguish of the individual over the destiny of the social group. For Shakespeare the world was a cruel place, for us it is still a cruel place. We cannot affect our fates, only hasten them: personal survival and stoic perseverance are solemn protests against the cosmic odds, hugely stacked against us.

This kind of Kottian fatalism regularly appeared in numerous productions of the comedies in the period that liked to suggest that human beings were caught in a trap of their own making. Konrad Swinarski's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Krakow, 1970) is an interesting example: a round of sinister sexuality was treated with nightmare intensity, with two secret policemen silently observing throughout; political power and sexual power were intertwined. In the histories and tragedies, productions under Kott's influence often suggested that evil was an unending, cyclical force. Borrowing a favorite dramaturgical structure from Beckett, directors sometimes added *da capo* endings to plays like *Lear* and *Macbeth*, codas that saw the same cycle of destruction replaying itself. Perhaps the most widely seen example of the *da capo* approach was in a version by another Polish director, Roman Polanski's 1972 film (in English) of *Macbeth*; after Shakespeare's final scene, the camera showed Donalbain as a disenfranchised younger brother climbing through a storm to seek out the witches, and hearing the same music Macbeth had heard at the beginning of the play.

While Kott's influence was vast and international in scope, his book spoke with the greatest immediacy in eastern Europe, as my examples tend to suggest. Just as his notion of the "contemporary" requires historicizing, his synchronic approach to Shakespeare was itself part of cold war history. Brook noticed this phenomenon with the 1962 *King Lear*, a production that many English-speaking commentators thought too "European" (i.e., foreign) anyway, which