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Othello Transformations and Transfusions: *The Moth* by Pyotr Gladilin, directed by Javor Gardev (2012) and *Othello* at the Varna Prison, a documentary by Ivan Mladenov (2008)

What place is there for imaginative life in an environment where people have been reduced to ciphers, and life–to survival? What is the value of Shakespeare's cultural capital when his words are rendered by a teenager with delusions of greatness, by a pragmatic colonel whose standard of beauty are the curtains left behind by his ex-wife, or else–by thieves, murderers, and frauds? What do the tragic and the poetic turn into when grafted upon the delusional, the pitiful, or the despicable? Does the strange gift of art to the art-less, entrusting them with performance of a centuries-old play text from a foreign cultural tradition, have the capacity to change actors and their audiences?

The two Shakespearean transformations discussed in this article undertake precisely such quixotic ventures. In neither are magical powers of healing ascribed to art, nor to the transfusion of Shakespeare into the plot, but both home on the capacity of imaginative creativity to render even the most debilitating circumstances moving and meaningful, however fleetingly. The first is Javor Gardev's 2012 production of Pyotr Gladilin's play *The Moth* (2001), put on the chamber stage of the National Theater "Ivan Vazov." The second is Ivan Mladenov's 2008 documentary film *Othello*, featuring inmates of the Varna prison.[1] As the play and the documentary appropriate Shakespeare's tragedy about manifold Otherness, their characters–respectively fictional and real-life–develop a Shakespearean dimensionality, compelling the audience to respond to their newly revealed tragic mettle. Their cultural authority augmented thus, the characters become tools for critiquing the political and social worlds they inhabit. If

[1] In 2003 Gladilin's *Moth* was awarded the prize of the "Duty, Honor, Dignity" competition of the Russian Federation's Ministry of Culture; in 2012, the Bulgarian production of the play received four Askeer awards of the Bulgarian actors' guild: for best production, for best directing (Gardev), for new actor (Vessela Babinov in the part of Kolya Lebedushkin), and for theater music (Kalin Nikolov). The documentary film *Othello* received the Special Award of the Jury and the Silver Chest prize at the 33rd International TV Festival "The Golden Chest" (Plovdiv, Bulgaria, 2008), as well as the Annual Award for documentary cinema directing of the National Center for Film and the Union of the Bulgarian Cinema Artists (Bulgaria, 2008-09), and the Prize in the "Crime and Punishment" category of the Moscow International Festival of Detective Films and Television Programs on Law-Enforcement Themes (2010). In 2010, it was selected for screening at the International Festival "Moving Images" in London.

Shakespeare's Iago and his victims are vehicles for unveiling the racism and misogyny festering in Venice/London, the characters of the play and film analyzed bring into discomforting focus the moral indifference, self-centeredness, and political ruthlessness of post-communism.

"A moth of peace" in an Arctic garrison

So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for why I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. (Othello, 1.3.254-58)

In the words of playwright Gladilin, *The Moth* is "a play about the salvation of the human soul."[2] Salvation, however, has nothing to do with religion; rather, it relates to the capacity of individuals to break out of suffocating social roles and re-imagine themselves, even at the expense of their lives. In other words, "the soul" is the locus of the individual's fight for freedom of expression.

The action is appositely set in a frozen world: in a military unit, "at the end of a wild plane, where the permafrost begins."[3] This mini-society, brutally simplistic in its world view, is held together by a hyper-masculinized self-regard for its destructive might, ritualistically dramatized through senseless manoeuvers against fictional enemies. One morning a young conscript, Private Nikolai Lebedushkin (the name puns on "swan" and "soul"), wakes up transformed into a woman, Natasha, a miracle that comes complete with menstrual cramps. His rupture of the deadly cocoon of regimental existence is effected entirely by will power. The change-inducing flight of the imagination has one purpose–to set Lebedushkin free from the army, since women are not subject to military service. Sex change is the private's last resort after several failed attempts, including one of suicide, to prove unfit for the army. As the newly-hatched she-soldier explains to the perplexed commander of the division, "I am an artist, an

[2] "Moya pjesa ni v kakov sluchae ne pro armiyu, a pro spasenie chelovecheskoi dushi [My play is by no means about the army, but about the salvation of the human soul]," cited in Euroradio's review of the 2007 Belarusian production of the play, "Nikolai Pinigin's *Moth* in Minsk," available at http://euroradio.fm/ru/motylek-nikolaya-pinigina-v-minske.

[3] Pyotr Gladilin, *The Moth*, 3. Citations from the play are from the electronic edition, available online at Gladilin's official site, www.theatre-library.ru/files/g/.../gladilin_petr_5.pdf; translations are by Kirilka Stavreva. An English translation-in-progress is available at http://gladilin.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=125&Itemid=75.

actor, I cannot live in the barracks, I am suffocating, dying, I need a creative environment."[4] Confined to the abandoned social club of the garrison to be "re-trained" back into "a man" that "the Fatherland would be proud of," Natasha becomes the epicenter of tensions, and a vehicle for interrogating the soulless militaristic values of her world.[5] There her fairy-tale presence would create an ephemeral alternative to destructiveness. At its climax, her ten-day experiment in imaginative re-visioning features a short scene from *Othello* directed by her. In it, Natasha acts Desdemona, the "moth of peace" who breaks every rule of the Venetian patriarchy, while the no-nonsense colonel steps into the shoes of the Venetian general. For him, as well as for the spectators of Gladilin's absurdist metaphor for the oppressiveness of Putin's Russia and more generally, for state and institutional oppressiveness, she becomes a "mote to trouble the mind's eye" (*Hamlet*, 1.1.111), an emblem of the squashed potential of humanity and beauty.

Two philosophies of life are pitted against each other in the garrison club: the colonel's duty to save the military reputation of the regiment from what seems to be a gender disaster, and the artist's mission to question, to transcend convention, to create, and be free. The stakes are high as the tables begin to turn. Since the sex change is a mere signifier–albeit a striking one–of Lebedushkin's body-and-soul dedication to an imaginative life in the theater, it would be meaningless if the colonel, her audience of one, remained indifferent to her art. Natasha's first foray into demonstrating what theater is all about is a performance of her own childishly absurd sci-fi tragedy about the King of the Bees, his beloved, Princess Solminor (G-minor), and their nemesis, the Black Angel of Evil. Unsurprisingly, it does little to convince the earth-bound colonel of the transformative power of art. However, in order to understand the sex change of his private, he begins regular evening conversations during which Natasha's unbridled fantasies and theatrical performances create the space for memories and reflections long suppressed by the routine of soldiering. Natasha's improbable, yet physically real presence de-centers his pre-conceptions of social and gender roles and plunges him into soul searching. The process of putting on her fantasy play offers yet another discovery: that the discarded objects of an unremarkable environment can bring the imaginary to life. The club curtains, a camouflage jumpsuit, a flashlight, and a boom box with recorded music transform its hopelessly melodramatic finale into a liturgy of tragic love.

[4] *Ibid.*, 8.

[5] *Ibid.*, 10.

In Gardev's production the performance unfolds within an expressive minimalist environment created by designer Daniela Oleg Lyahova, composer Kalin Nikolov, and choreographers Violeta Vitanova and Stanislav Genadiev. A low platform at the center of the black box theater space is extended vertically by means of a light metal framework, its boundaries and permeability suggested through white gauze curtains. It allows fluidity similar to that of the Elizabethan stage, to which it unobtrusively gestures, portraying, alternatively, a garrison office, the frozen desert, the mostly unfurnished club, a theater within the theater, a fantastic planet. The costume design is similarly kinetic: Lebedushkin's white camouflage overalls are retailored into a shift dress, the lace curtains supply a ballet skirt. Intimately close to the viewer, Vessela Babinova's sylph-like Natasha performs an exquisite *enpointe* number with an automatic rifle slung across her back–a breathtaking visual metaphor for the weight of a regimented world on the soaring artistic soul (fig. 1). Natasha's tender dance, unwitnessed by other characters, is emblematic of her radical otherness, a longing for spiritual horizons, and unfulfilled desire for artistic communion. Unfulfilled, that is, until she takes the colonel on a course of direct collision with Othello's verbal destruction of Desdemona.

Fig. 1. Ballerina (Vessela Babinova) with Kalashnikov. Performance photo by Simon Varsano.

The *Othello* performance is her challenge to the colonel to make good on his boast that he is bound to succeed in anything he undertakes. Having risen to a colonel, he declares, he is on the track of becoming a general; similarly, there is nothing to prevent him from becoming the

greatest actor, should he choose to attempt this.[6] For his stage debut, Natasha chooses a part from Act 4, Scene 2 (ll. 26-85), where Desdemona is subjected to the vehement abuse of her husband, a choice which will puts the colonel through an emotional rollercoaster. The resulting performance may be only six minutes long, its lighting–basic, the costumes–makeshift, and Othello's "conceptual" black-up–taken from a pot of grease for the Kalashnikovs, but as the colonel (Mihail Bilalov) himself steps into the shoes of a radical Other, he opens up to the vulnerability of his long repressed dreams and desires. Shakespeare's dialogue places the "Northern man" of reason in open contradiction with his ordered surroundings and reduces him, unexpectedly, to the tears that the seventeenth-century playtext calls for. Forced to mouth the insults that Othello hurls at Desdemona even as the intense physicality of the scene leaves no doubt about his attraction to "the moth," the colonel realizes that his entire life of loyal service has been based on suppressing his real emotions, that he has, in fact, substituted his ability to love unquestioningly with the unquestioning obeying of orders.

Shakespeare's Desdemona "saw Othello's visage in his mind" (1.3.251) and gave him love, which he did not believe he deserved. On her part, Natasha frees the colonel's mind from the trappings that have made him forget the experience of an "impossible love" in his youth and his childhood dream to fly like a bird.[7] The effect of the performance surprises them both, and for a brief moment, the two exult in the prospect of sharing emotional and imaginative freedom in other plays, together. It is only after Natasha's death, however, that the colonel owns up to the fact that this exhilaration was also a symptom of his falling, unexpectedly, in love.

As both the play's title and its structural parallels with Shakespeare's *Othello* have signaled all along, Natasha's transformative agency is to be cut short. To her company commander, Captain Bagaev (an analogue of Iago, the ensign) she is a deserter from the banal world of pointless violence, from which he derives his authority (fig. 2). In the end, against the colonel's orders, he drags her back into that most rote performance, the war game, where "the moth" is literally crushed by the military machine: she is run over by an armored vehicle while gazing at the stars. As Natasha herself has realized in the outcome of the *Othello* scene, the Iago of her world "is not an Angel of Evil, but … a prosaic person, like most."[8] His hatred arises from

[6] *Ibid*., 24-25.

[7] *Ibid*., 31, 39.

[8] *Ibid*., 40.

his inability to abide Natasha-Desdemona's multivalent difference–gender, spiritual, intellectual–and from an unstated envy for his superior's protectiveness of her. For this narrow-minded, self-serving man, she is too blunt a reminder of his own ordinariness. To restore ordinariness to life in the frozen tundra, he resorts to the trite principle of mobster violence: "where there is a person, there are problems, where there is no person . . ."

Fig. 2. Bagaev (Hristo Petkov) and Natasha (Vessela Babinova) facing off.
Performance photo by Simon Varsano.

Thankfully, ordinariness is not restored in *The Moth*. In the finale, before Natasha's coffin is taken away, the distraught colonel bids her farewell with a heart-breaking recitation of Princess Solminor's monologue from her fantasy play. Gardev's staging of this scene features a Shakespearean visual allusion. Embracing the coffin as he had never embraced her in life, the military man "that was Othello" (5.2.290) collapses on top of this sterile "marriage bed" in a scene visually evocative of the general's farewell to Desdemona and his own life: "I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this: / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (368-69).

Like Othello, in the final scene of the play the colonel embraces his otherness to the world he had called his own. Unlike Othello, he lives, tragically bereaved. His former and present selves are visually and verbally opposed–the erect military stature, to his body prostrate on the coffin; the no-nonsense prose, to the poetic liturgy he utters; the military stolidity, to a passionate reliving of the sorrow of a fictional Princess from another planet. Thus the end of *The Moth* begins to release the tension haunting Shakespeare's ending, brilliantly defined by Kiernan

Ryan as a "revelation that destinies such as this are neither natural, nor inevitable, but the resistible result of living in a world that can be changed."[9]

For the audience, Natasha's crushed beauty remains an enduring reminder of possible other worlds that can be created even within the most banal, indifferent environments. Like Pussy Riot's challenge to the proprieties of Putin's Russia, private Lebedushkin's fragile moth (which first appeared on the Sofia stage shortly after the crushing of the group for their transgressive political act in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior) demonstrates the capacity of the artist to threaten an entire social machine.[10] Already in its fifth season as we write, Gladilin's and Gardev's *Moth* is still dancing to full houses, stirring memories of a Bulgarian past which has not completely gone away and reflections of a present which drags back to it.

"Noble swelling spirits / That hold their honours in a wary distance" (*Othello* 2.3.48-49)

If Natasha's character in Gladilin's *The Moth* is the driving force of a luminous, though fleeting, transformation of a regimented, violent, and banal world, the actor-characters in the documentary film *Othello*, written, directed, and produced by Ivan Mladenov, can hardly be credited with transformative power. It is the writer-director's Montaigneian essayistic sensibility and attentive cinematography that bring about their transformation, or rather, that change their relationship with the viewer. "The world exists, in order to become a book," declares one of the characters from an early screenplay sketch for the film.[11] This is precisely what Mladenov has accomplished here, transfusing the life stories, passions, traits, and personal credos of convicted criminals with the dramatic dialogue of Shakespeare's play.

The narrative fit of contemporary Bulgarian criminals and Renaissance Venetian aristocrats and soldiers is sometimes precise, sometimes odd, but always provocative. The most significant effect of this intertextuality is the film's cultivation of what Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah describe as a cosmopolitan attitude toward the actor-characters. Mladenov accomplishes this by aligning–not equating–the stories of invisible people discarded from society with a literary text which has a symbolic significance for European identity.

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[9] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 92.

[10] See "Pussy Riot: The Story So Far," a brief overview by the BBC of the group's feminist protest against the repressiveness of Putin's government and its crushing, available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25490161.

[11] Ivan Mladenov, "Umorenite dazhdove na revnivata esen, [The Tired Rains of the Jealous Autumn]," 3.

Cosmopolitanism, as understood by these two philosophers, is an active and responsible engagement with "the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in [local] practices and beliefs that lend them significance."[12] In terms of epistemological and moral practices, it has a two-prong effect. As Appiah reminds us, a cosmopolitan attitude to the stories of strangers demands a "connection not *through* identity but *despite* difference." More radically, Nussbaum suggests, its point is "to get people to . . . consider how difficult it is to give good reasons for many of our [own] deeply held feelings."[13] Along these lines, Mladenov's film does not render the prisoner-actors sentimentalized or heroic, but as it connects the convicts' self-narratives with Shakespeare's story, it intersects the latter, historically and culturally, with contemporary Bulgarian histories. As the actors in this transplanted *Othello* enter the world's literary canon, their new status communicates to the audience an obligation to hear their stories "feelingly" (*Lear* 4.5.141),[14] and to consider seriously the critique issued from behind bars of the lawlessness, social apathy, and administrative incompetence so prevalent in post-communist Bulgaria.

Shot over a few weeks of a muggy sea-side summer, this remarkable film reprises themes familiar from Mladenov's earlier work: blind aggression, physical destruction, degradation, despair, but also humiliated humanity, endurance, and the fierceness of the imagination. His previous films, bearing evocative titles such as *The North Side of the Sunflower* (2006), *The Wind of the Bare Moon* (2003), *The Village Where Nothing Happened* (2002), *The Silence in the Shadow of the Grasshopper* (2001), feature forgotten people from the disappearing villages of Bulgaria: tragic characters, rich in passion and poor of words, victims and agents of indifference, injustice, and cruelty. Similarly, the prison inmates from the *Othello* documentary are at once vicious and vulnerable, aggressive and resigned, treacherous and betrayed. Just as the peasants of his earlier films remain locked within a materialistic mindset, the actor-prisoners in *Othello*

[12] Kwame Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), xv. Explicating the origins of cosmopolitanism, Nusbaum writes about the need to "regard all human beings as our fellow citizens and *local* residents." See her *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 52, emphasis added.

[13] Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 135; Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 57.

[14] Gloucester's bitter pun on his blindness as opening an empathetic relationship with the world relates to the cosmopolitan idea about the obligations we hold to Others, people beyond kith and kin; Lear's cynical response about the miscarriage of justice in the kingdom that even a blind man should be able to see is pertinent to the instigation, by cosmopolitanism, of a critical attitude to beliefs and dispositions we take for granted.

neither seek nor achieve redemption. What they gained from their participation in the film, in the view of Maria Terzieva, Head of the division for social work and education in the Varna prison, was emotional fulfillment and a sense of their own worth. A talented and empathetic administrator in charge of therapeutic programming, education, and cultural events in the prison, Terzieva was instrumental to making possible the unprecedented, for Bulgaria, shooting of a film behind bars because she was convinced that the experience would open new horizons for her "boys," whose intelligence she praises.[15] While a brief artistic experiment such as Mladenov's cannot hope to achieve the long-term effects of a full-scale theater therapy program like the one featured in Hank Rogerson's documentary *Shakespeare behind Bars* (2005), the Bulgarian director did succeed in gaining the respect of the audience for his actor-characters–thanks to the crossover between their life stories and Shakespeare's play and to the tender attentiveness afforded them by the camera.

The film opens with a medium close shot of a heavily tattooed Othello (Alexander Stoyanov), wistfully declaring to the camera, "Desdemona! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee, and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.91-93). It is followed by a painterly long take of the barbed-wire top of the prison wall, traversing the ruddy clouds and pale sun behind them, and the memories of a prison guard (Staiko Dimitrov) about horrific events witnessed on the job. The opening sequence establishes a dichotomy in the film's visual and narrative aesthetic and a hierarchy within it. On the one hand, the prison, both setting and character, is represented in a cinematic style reminiscent of expressionism. Predominantly low-angle, deep-field shots, blown up details (shredded plastic caught in the barbed wire, the black bolt of a cell door, etc.) create the sense of a distorted environment. Likewise, Dimitrov's grotesque horror stories about prisoners setting themselves on fire, attempting to hang themselves, sewing up their mouths with copper wire, keep the viewer at a safe emotional distance. Contrasted to this *representational* palette, the scenes with the prisoner-actors are predominantly *presentational* (with the exception of some distorting camera angles in the scene of Desdemona's murder). Their self-narratives and most of the scenes from Shakespeare's tragedy are rendered objectively, with slow close-ups and extreme close-ups of the faces against a blue or black background, the camera painstakingly documenting each emotional nuance. The cinematography of these scenes invites not only complete attention to the stories told, but also an

[15] Maria Terzieva in discussion with Stavreva, Varna Prison, Bulgaria, 15 January 2014.

emotional proximity to the characters. Just as Shakespeare supersedes the prison in the opening of the film, the emotional intensity and, in the case of Krassimir Iliev (Iago), the analytical intensity of the characters supplant their convict status.

"I don't believe there is an evil person," declares Mladenov in a reflection on his movie-making, "for me it is important to see in one's character their own inimitable world." And he uncovers this world through a quiet, almost static cinematic approach that derives its energy, in Mladenov's own words, from "the passions of the characters–their rage, love, and hatred."[16] "Valiant Othello" (Alexander Stoyanov, serving a sixteen-year sentence for the murder of his fiancé) is appropriately dignified as he relates, straight to Brabantio, how Desdemona chose him: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.166-67). In Stoyanov's self-narrative that follows, the emotional refuge Othello seeks in Desdemona connects to his own improbable and likely forbidden love. As he confides to the camera with a mixture of self-deprecation and contentment, "There is someone who will still love me, at least one person from the seven or eight million in Bulgaria today, will love me." A full twelve-second pause ensues before he packs an emotional punch, "And I won't be a black sheep. She knows full well about my sentence . . . if I was the monster that the papers describe, who would be with me or trust me." The desire of a convict and a "black sheep" to be trusted and loved, if only by one person, resonates here with the amazement of Shakespeare's ex-slave and racial Other at being loved by Desdemona.

Brabantio, among the least developed characters of Shakespeare's tragedy, acquires a rich personality through the intertextual connections with the life-story of Maxim Dimitrov, who is cast in his part. The "magnifying glass" of the camera captures Dimitrov's vivacity as he recalls the movie-like "adventures" that first landed him in prison. They start with the robbing a Second World War Resistance museum to secure guns and grenades with which he would carry out his first armed robbery. The intent of the armed robbery in which he brandished the museum exhibits was to secure 500 lev for a year's supply of formula for his lactose intolerant infant son–an exorbitant sum of money for a Bulgarian working class family in the destitute 1990s. After serving a fifteen-year sentence for this crime, Dimitrov threw himself into work seven days a week to save up for a visit to Moscow, where he hoped to reconnect with his already grown up

[16] Ivan Mladenov, "Maika mi umrya na 30 ot bolno sartze [My Mother Died at 30 from Heart Sickness]," interviewed by Emi Mariyanska, *Blitz,* 21 August 2009, http://www.blitz.bg/article/13450.

children who had moved there with their Russian mother. However, he was unable to make enough to pay his bills and those of his ailing mother, and soon afterwards ended up in prison again for two other armed robberies. In an interview given six years after the release of the film, Dimitrov confided that during his second prison term, like Brabantio, "I thought I had lost my daughter forever." For him, playing the part was an occasion for much soul-searching: "My kids grew up without me, and now I had the opportunity to play the father of a girl who was all grown up. I wondered what kind of father I would have been if I hadn't spent most of my life in prison." When intersected with Dimitrov's story of losing connection with his children, Brabantio's possessiveness of Desdemona takes on a tender quality. Among the participants in the film, Dimitrov is exceptional in experiencing the shooting as a cathartic moment. "You tell things that, in principle, you would not share with anyone," he explained in the interview. Working on the film, he says, takes you to "a point, when you start talking, and you can no longer stop; it's like pouring water out of a jug. You talk and talk, and it's like you get cleansed and a burden lifts off."[17]

In the filmed scenes from Shakespeare's tragedy, Mladenov's unlikely actors, contoured by darkness like Rembrandt's portraits, bring depth to the characters through their own distinct personalities: melancholy Othello and excitable Brabantio (fig. 3), restless, driven Iago and forlorn Cassio (fig. 4).[18] In the scenes in which the prisoners tell their own stories, dramatic lighting gives way to bright, all-revealing three-point lighting. Both scene types are stark and unadorned, devoid of background music and diegetic noise, and closely focusing on the human face–a stylistic approach underscoring the connections between the two types of narrative. Time and again, the viewers are brought face to face with people they might shudder to meet in person; yet, discomforted as they might be, they cannot help but ponder the intersections of these life-stories with those of Shakespeare's characters.

[17] Maxim Dimitrov in discussion with Stavreva, Varna Prison, Bulgaria, 15January 2014.

[18] Roderigo was performed by Konstantin Drumev, a repeat offender serving a fifteen-year sentence for robbery, Desdemona and Bianca–by Nikolai Nikolaev, sentenced for deceit to a six-year prison term. As the self-narratives of the actors playing the Duke and Emilia were not included in the film, they remain anonymous.

Fig. 3. Alexander Stoyanov as Othello and Maxim Dimitrov as Brabantio. Film stills.

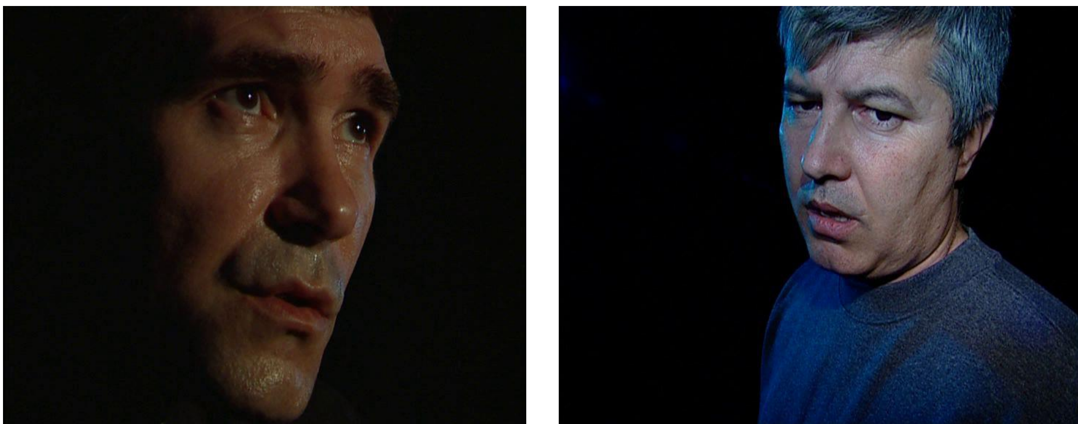

Fig. 4. Krassimir Iliev as Iago and Zhivko Terziev as Cassio. Film stills.

"Today, in the era of material success, when the heroes of our time are yuppies, thugs, models, while money rules supreme, Ivan has dedicated . . . years of his life to persuade these people that he can portray them compassionately in their own environment; people authentic, genuinely suffering, and unheard of until now," writes film critic Ivo Draganov in an overview of the documentary filmmaker's work. The other side of Mladenov's respect for his subjects is the social engagement of his work. His films are documents, Draganov continues, "that accuse the governing class of incompetence, apathy, and misanthropy."[19] Perhaps the strongest condemnation of post-communist lawlessness and the concomitant abuse of the have-nots in the film is the story of Zhivko Terziev (Cassio), serving a sentence for aggravated murder. No "great arithmetician" (1.1.18), he is a simple man, who used to rent municipal land to raise sheep and grow some corn and wheat. He was powerless, however, against the members of the local

[19] Ivo Draganov, "Chovetzite na Ivan Mladenov [The People of Ivan Mladenov]," *Kultura* 7, 23 February 2007, http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/12646.

hunting club who ruined his crops and tried to force him off the grazing field by shooting their guns at night in the glaring headlights of their SUVs. When one of the hunters, parading the mug-masculine entitlement of Bulgaria's new business class, threatened Terziev's father and shot two of the sheep dogs to drive his point home, the shepherd craved revenge. Drunk and "full of quarrel and offence" like Othello's quick-tempered lieutenant (2.3.43), he beat up the hunter with a club and left him, unconscious. The man died before the ambulance arrived several hours later, as there was no cellular coverage in the area. Telling his story in front of the camera, Terziev appears as sorrowful as Cassio about his "mistake," but remorse quickly gives way to bitterness. "The poor man is under everyone's thumb and foot," he concludes. "We don't stand a chance. The way things are, there is no justice. . . . They come here, buy lambs, eat and drink, shoot around . . . to whom can you complain. . . when those to whom you should be complaining, they are the people doing it?" It is impossible for the audience to dismiss this condemnation of a society in which justice is meted out so selectively.

In the non-Shakespearean film scenes involving Krassimir Iliev (Iago), the palpable resignation in Terziev's delivery of his dire social diagnosis is replaced by a calculated strategy to indict the Bulgarian penal system.[20] Unlike the rest of the participants in the film, Iliev chooses to talk not about himself, but about his "peculiar end" (*Othello* 1.1.60). As he explained in a later interview, his main incentive to participate in the film was to reveal what happens after incarceration not only in front of the domestic TV audiences, but potentially, to the world as the film participated in international festivals.[21] Like the character that Iliev performs, he prefers not to shed light on himself. To the camera, he reveals the bare minimum of his life story: the length of his sentence (twenty years), his crime (fraud), and the years he has served (ten). The rest of his on-screen time Iliev dedicates to precisely worded, relentless accusations: "I believe that when one is sentenced for whatever crime, above all, the concept of justice should be present, as well as the understanding of the purpose of punishment. At this point in time the punishment pursues and achieves a single goal: to destroy the individual. Like many others, I think that we have no chance . . . to rejoin society like normal people – and that is because the state denies us this

[20] Iliev was sentenced to a twenty-year prison term for some hundred-plus counts of deceit and fraud involving state documents. See Julia Kuneva and Alexander Botev, "Mezhdunaroden izmamnik lazhe zhertvi s lovkost i um [An International Fraud Deceives His Victims with Cunning and Intelligence]," *Trud*, 5 October 1998.

[21] Krassimir Iliev in discussion with Stavreva, Varna, Bulgaria, 19 January 2014.

chance." In front of the camera, Iliev assumes the role of a judge of the penal system. In all likelihood, this choice is all about self-preservation and self-affirmation in a dehumanizing environment, the kind of motivation also underlying the series of lawsuits that he filed against the state while in prison.

Another striking connection between the Bulgarian and Shakespearean stories is Iliev's declared aversion to Iago's character, who, he says, "personifies all that I hate and despise, namely, hypocrisy, callousness, perfidy." While the dramatic irony of having one sentenced for multiple frauds expose the iniquity of the penal system is not lost upon the viewers, his denunciation is as compelling as it is disturbing. We believe him even as we realize that he has offered us an agenda instead of a confession, in the same way that we recognize the truth in Iago's equivocation to Othello, "O monstrous world, take note, take note, O world, / To be direct and honest is not safe!" (3.3.382-83).

The "monstrous world" with its iconography of decay makes recurrent appearances in the film through refrain shots of the prison's soaring brick façade, its barred windows, the barbed-wire topped fence. A character in its own right, the setting functions as a silent witness, indifferently pointing to the many internal and external walls that enclose Shakespeare's characters and the actor-prisoners alike. If Mladenov's film has an anti-hero, it is this indifferent witness–the antipode to cosmopolitan emotional and rational engagement with devalued, forgotten lives.

As is the case with Private Lebedushkin in *The Moth*, the improbable artistic flight of Mladenov's people is brief. Their *Othello* ends, the cell doors are bolted, and the film's last shot pans on the horizon over the distant sea receding unattainable beyond bars and fences. At the time of writing this essay, however, the life stories of the actors in the documentary have broken the tragic mold of Shakespeare's play. Having served their sentences, none of them has returned to prison, and all are gainfully employed. Tragically, Mladenov, has not been able to make another film. In 2009, a year after filming *Othello*, he was sentenced, on the basis of falsified documentation and *in absentia*, to restore funds for a film that he never shot. Not long afterwards, he suffered a massive stroke, from which he has recovered only partially.[22] Yet both

[22] Emi Mariyanska, "Rezhisyorat Ivan Mladenov: Sasipaha me, insult mi dokaraha bezchestnitzite [Director Ivan Mladenov: I Was Devastated, Driven to a Stroke by Dishonest People]," *Blitz*, 20 March 2015, http://bg.b2.mk/news/rezhisort-ivan-mladenov-ssipaha-me-insult-mi-dokaraha-bezchestnitsite?newsid=RNGo.

the play and the documentary leave their audiences with memories of characters transformed by an encounter with art, characters transcending social roles and narratives imposed by a callous, indifferent society. If there is one person out there who believes that they can offer meaningful stories, that their speech is the right fit for Shakespeare's tragedy, perhaps they are, after all, worth caring for.

Acknowledgements

The authors are deeply grateful to Maria Terzieva for her insight into prison education and for enabling contacts with Ivan Mladenov and two of the actors in his film, Maxim Dimitrov and Krasimir Iliev. We would also like to express our profound gratitude to Ivan Mladenov for generously sharing his creative archive on *Othello*.