

**Boika Sokolova and Kirilka Stavreva**

**“Shall we be, or not?”,  
or *Hamlet* as an Axiom for Cultural Survival: *Hamlet*, directed by  
Javor Gardev (2011)**

As Bulgarian has no grammatical infinitive, Hamlet’s famous question, “To be or not to be,” can be translated in two ways: either by referencing the individual, “Shall one be,” or, the collective, “Shall we be.” The “we,” used in Alexander Shurbanov’s new translation of the play, chosen by Javor Gardev for a production of *Hamlet* on the stage of the National Theater “Ivan Vazov” in Sofia (2012), attracted considerable public attention.<sup>1</sup> One may think that it was an easy hit for reviewers, used to a different canonical version, but both the director’s choice and the critics’ generally welcoming response were symptomatic. Fundamentally, the question posited from the main stage of the National Theater in Sofia was addressed to Bulgaria and the Bulgarians. According to the director’s note in the theater program, his was “not Hamlet—of Despair, but Hamlet of Salvation.” From the most influential stage of the country, “Shall we be, or not” sounded with urgency.

**A New Political Theater**

Javor Gardev has earned the authority to render such significant questions in a multi-layered stage language. Over the last fifteen years, he has become one of the most prolific, admired and awarded directors on the Bulgarian stage, a representative of a generation that is currently augmenting the cultural significance of theater in the country, and enhancing the status of Bulgarian theater in Europe. Among the forty plus plays he has directed so far, Shakespeare holds a relatively small place. Yet the four plays he has put on are fully representative of his sophisticated and engaging style and moral stance. Gardev’s earliest foray into Shakespeare gave a stark diagnosis of the political disorder of post-communism in a site-specific production titled *Bastard* (2001), a post-dramatic experiment based on a script that was a hybrid (a meta-theatrical “bastardization”) of Friedrich Durrenmatt’s *König Johann* (1968), Shakespeare’s *King John*, passages from the medieval philosopher Adso and

---

<sup>1</sup> Set and costume design by Daniela Oleg Lyahova and Nikola Toromanov, for “The Mousetrap,” by Venelin Shurelov; music by Kalin Nikolov; choreography by Violeta Vitanova and Stanislav Genadiev. Some of the ideas developed in this essay were first presented in a review by Boika Sokolova, in *Shakespeare Bulletin* 31:3 (2013): 553-57, and in “The Reflective Part of Man: Javor Gardev’s Bulgarian Shakespeares,” *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 85 (Spring 2014): 73-83.

by the director himself.<sup>2</sup> It showcased the destruction of political legitimacy, the utter contempt of power-mongers for ethical norms, and the brazen normalization of “bastardization.”<sup>3</sup> The spectators were faced with an avalanche of transgressions—which tapped a deep vein in the national experience of the politico-economic realigning of power at the turn of the millennium—and forced to take a side. Gardev’s *Tempest*, produced for the Adana Theater in Turkey and later shown at the high-profile Varna Summer theater festival, ended with the aristocrats blown up by suicide-bomber Caliban, paying in kind for Prospero’s life-long oppression.<sup>4</sup> His *King Lear* (2006) inhabited an intimidating world of metal walls in dangerous motion, a world of historical change, leaving in its wake emptiness, hopelessly reduced human beings, and a state in deathly collapse.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising then that for his daring directorial concept of *Hamlet* he chose a translation which was new, precise, and gritty to unaccustomed ears.

In spite of his postmodern visual aesthetics, Gardev is attentive to Shakespeare’s text, which he closely analyzes, even anatomizes, allowing for its full aural and performative heterogeneity to unfold. “This is an incoherent poem about a broken world,” comments he on the clashing stylistic registers of the production. The performance is clearly marked by discursive disjunctions: speech/music alternations, speeches directed not at their recipients, jarring voices.<sup>6</sup> Disjunctions are extended beyond the characters’ dialogue. As theater critic Nikolina Deleva points out, in this *Hamlet*, the blank verse is juxtaposed to contemporary music.<sup>7</sup> Poetic rhythm cohabits with the pop rhythms of modern tunes; the sound of translated poetry rubs against the karaoke-style projections of the English texts of the songs.

---

<sup>2</sup> “Post-dramatic” is here used in the sense of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s notion of a theater focused not on the dramatic text but on the performance as related to its site and situation, a notion developed in *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). *Bastard* was first classified as driven by a post-dramatic aesthetics by Kamelia Nikolova in *Balgarskiyat teatar sled 1989 i novata britanska drama [The Bulgarian Theater after 1989 and the New British Drama]* (Sofia: University Press “Sveti Kliment Ohridski,” 2013), 287-88.

<sup>3</sup> Boyan Manchev, “Violence and Political Representation: The Post-Communist Case,” *Ideologiyata – nachin na upotreba: kultura i kritika*, chast IV [*Ideology -- a Means of Consumption: Culture and Criticism*, part IV], ed. A. Vacheva et al. (Varna: Liternet, 2004-06), *Publishers LiterNet*, 12 August 2004, [http://liternet.bg/publish2/bmanchev/violence\\_en.htm](http://liternet.bg/publish2/bmanchev/violence_en.htm). *Bastard* was produced by the Varna Drama Theater “Stoyan Bachvarov” in the wine cellar Dimyat. Set and costume design by Nikola Toromanov and Daniela Oleg Liahova.

<sup>4</sup> Kirilka Stavreva, “Dream Loops and Short-Circuited Nightmares: Post-Brechtian Tempests in Post-Communist Bulgaria,” *Borrowers and Lenders* 3:2 (2008), [www.borrowers.uga.edu/781864/pdf](http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/781864/pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Sokolova, “The Reflective Part of Man,” 80.

<sup>6</sup> “Javor Gardev, rezhisior [Javor Gardev, Director],” interview by Keva Apostolova for *Teatar* 1:3 (2013), 39.

<sup>7</sup> Nikolina Deleva, “Hamlet–spasenieto? [Hamlet–the Salvation?],” *Teatar* 1:3 (2013), 17.

Deleva's insight relates to the effectiveness of Gardev's theater. A sophisticated and civically engaged artist, he knows how to render his message popular. His productions, including *Hamlet*—still playing in 2017!—are hot commodity: they are visually enticing and employ new theater technologies—multi-media, film, dance, and pop-music. He successfully joins together elements from popular culture and classical theater to produce powerful theatrical events, appealing to “pundits” and “punks” alike. Gardev has a huge following among young audiences and is highly respected in academic and critical circles. Actors who appear in his productions soon acquire star status.

Popular as his theater is, it is not *populist*, but stands out as a new form of political theater. Looking at the whole array of his work, it is clear that Gardev is interested in grappling with moral conundrums. Outside the theater, he has taken a public stand in defense of democracy, decency in politics, has backed protests against government corruption. He has been outspoken about the disastrous lack of cultural politics, the impoverishment and consequent devaluation of intellectual depth in the artistic sphere, a devaluation that is part and parcel of the pervasive chalgazation processes.<sup>8</sup> His post-Brechtian style is well suited to such political engagement: his work is conceptual and multi-layered, challenging audiences to engage intellectually with it.<sup>9</sup> Critic Patricia Nikolova describes his method as successfully combining “the entertaining and the political, the absurd and the naturalistic, . . . the desperate and the uplifting.” On the outside, this new political theater, she continues, wears “masks of monstrosity, distortion, aberration and ugliness,” but deep down, it is driven by a humanistic impetus. Gardev's theatrical worlds are “inverted perspectives of the present, . . . reality [appears] in a state of subjectively experienced disintegration.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Gardev, interview with Ivo Bozhkov in “Sedmitzata na zhIvo” [The Week Live/of Ivo],” Evrokom TV, 25 October 2014. Video available at [http://www.yvobojkov.com/2014/10/blog-post\\_25.html](http://www.yvobojkov.com/2014/10/blog-post_25.html). On chalga and the chalgazation of post-communist Bulgarian culture, see “‘The readiness is all’, or the Politics of Art in Post-Communist Bulgaria.”

<sup>9</sup> Stavreva, “Dream Loops.”

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Nikolova, “Kritichen pogled: Javor Gardev i negoviyat politicheski teatar [A Critic's View: Javor Gardev and His Political Theater],” *Vupreki*, 14 September 2014, <http://vypreki.com/post/97630902371/%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B4-%D1%8F%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80-%D0%B3%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B2-%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%8F%D1%82-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8>.

## Teatrum Mundi, Teatrum Historiae

The 2012 *Hamlet* bears all the distinctive features of Gardev's mature aesthetics and civic engagement. Central to the production is the fragility of the individual in a violent and indifferent world. A glimmer of hope nonetheless shines from the power of theater, dramatized in this production as *communitas*—a place of truth, reflection and delight.

Daniela Oleg Liahova's and Nikola Toromanov's set comprises a dangerous system of hurdles—ramps and pits, shifting metal constructions, raising and falling platforms, and water, lots of it. Sound sometimes escalates to aural fury, actors are mic'ed and video effects are on a filmic scale. Yet, in the eye of this maelstrom of visual and aural events exists an intense field of unexpected stillness, a spot for sharing thought and moral angst, and the audience is at its center. The designers—long-time collaborators with Gardev—have created an immersive environment where the stage, orchestra pit and auditorium (including the balconies) form a continuum; *Hamlet* is both *theatrum mundi* and *theatrum bulgaricum* and the audience is in the midst of the action.

A feature of the set is its cruciform layout, with its rich suggestiveness of the human form, a crossroads and crucifixion. A black drapery with a gaping doorway claustrophobically reduces the depth of the auditorium. In a mirror image, a red curtain with a similar opening—Deleva compares it to “a mouth that spits out the actors, . . . a threshold . . . and border”—blocks the proscenium arch.<sup>11</sup> Effectively, the apron stage and the shallow pit almost merge with the auditorium. This is where the personal relations in Elsinore are played out. A row of red swivel chairs in the color of the auditorium seats are set along the proscenium frame, separating this area from the upstage world of politics, which lies beyond the curtain. A metal gangway, placed slightly above the audience heads, connects the two doorways. This is the domain of the unexpectedly tender, teenaged Ghost (Konstantin Stanchev) in 1.1., 1.5, 3.4, and the place from where he quietly conducts “The Mousetrap” (3.2), sustaining a tension between the present and a past which literally steals upon the audience from behind. Here throbs the true heart of the production—on the gangway, right in the midst of the audience are set many of Hamlet's speeches, enhanced by the actor's immediate presence. From here, Ophelia walks to her watery grave (at the end of 4.6); Claudius unsuccessfully grapples to get on it during his searing prayer (3.3). From here, with the house lights on, Hamlet advises the players (3.2) that the mission of theater is to “hold a mirror up to nature,” even when playing to an audience “capable of nothing but inexplicable

---

<sup>11</sup> Deleva, “Hamlet – the Salvation?,” 16.

dumb-shows and noise” (3.2.10-11). Thus, the Shakespearean text is harnessed to address questions with a particular resonance in the present.

The centrality of the theater metaphor was evident from the start. The performance began with Leonid Yovchev’s Hamlet calling the actors to the stage. A group of men in grey hoodies and black T-shirts arranged themselves with their backs to the audience and started a theatrical exercise simulating collective drinking. As they mechanically raised their glasses, Hamlet called for the curtain to be raised and for rain to start. Next, during a musical transition, when he and Vessela Babinova’s Ophelia sang Adele’s “Set Fire to the Rain,” the group of actors turned into a gang of violently fighting characters who plunged through the sheet of rain to mark the beginning of the play proper. The Players’ arrival in Elsinore and the Hecuba speech were also done in close proximity to the audience, a moment of gripping non-illusionistic Brechtian theatricality, crudely destroyed by Polonius’s “This is too long” (2.2.478). Valentin Ganey’s Polonius was the typical self-satisfied man of power, completely blasé about what the players’ “ill report” could do to him. He paraded his pathetic theatrical experience and ordered the actors around in a manner all too familiar from the Bulgarian governments’ management of cultural politics.

With the red curtain up, one could see the gangway extending from the back of the auditorium all the way to the stage wall covered by a cyclorama. The backstage space was occupied by a precarious metal construction, stairs and ramps—an expressionistic, angular, world, where the public political scenes and deaths (1.2, 5.2) took place. This was also the site of a fearsome “Mousetrap” (3.2), performed on a huge platform which rose from the floor, with three actors on stilted stands, looking like ancient actors in cothurni and masks. Polish critic Anna Bajek who reviewed the performance at the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival in 2014, noted the melodic enunciation “resembling dithyrambs in ancient theater” and the overall effect, which she considers a development in “the aesthetic language of theater, sending it in a new direction.”<sup>12</sup> To the sounds of Kalin Nikolov’s eerie deep strings and relentless percussion, dancers performed maniacally the interaction of the Player King and Queen, a scene that culminated in a stunning image of a body rising from a bath full of blood, while a projection of the action fragments complicated the stage effect. In “The Mousetrap” ritual, classical theater, video, and dance, were layered, producing a vehicle for the revelation of truth through the experience of complex meta-theatricality. At the stunningly choreographed ending of the scene, the Player King spread his bloody arms in a horrid

---

<sup>12</sup> Anna Bajek, “Innymi językami [New Languages]” *Gazeta Szekspirowska* 1, 28 September 2014.

emblem of violent death and, as Claudius turned around calling for light (3.2. 261), he faced the Ghost prompting the Player's movement from the gangway (fig. 1). With the court seated in the swivel chairs along the proscenium arch, their backs to the spectators, this was a moment of alignment of the points of view of characters and audience, while the audience also became privy to a revelation not visible to all of the on-stage spectators. Theater as ultimate truth-teller of history triumphed in its various forms, ancient and modern.



Fig. 1. The Ghost directing “The Mousetrap.” Production videorecording still.

### “A sea of troubles”

Political truth-telling in this *Hamlet* had yet another dimension. The production highlighted the dangers of having personal passions dictate political decisions. Here, unconventionally, the attraction that Marius Kurkinski's Claudius felt for Hamlet overrode cool political reason. Personal passions, most often, unfolded and played out in the upstage area—a kind of mental space set for fantasies, suppressed desires, and fears. In the transition to 2.2, a silent Polonius sat under the proscenium arch facing the audience, while far behind him, somewhat obscured by iron railings and sheets of rain, a naked Hamlet danced to Florence+The Machine “You've Got The Love,” sung by Ophelia—an image suggestive either of the lovers' sexual abandon, or of jealous paternal imaginings. The closet scene (3.4) also took place upstage, distanced and visually sliced by the metal railing. Gertrude wore a dark red coat with a sharp-edged profile, as if cut out of sheet iron—a seemingly strong, but ultimately brittle shield. Currents of suppressed and obvious desires and jealousies ran both ways between Hamlet and his mother, from Claudius to Hamlet, Polonius to his daughter, and from Reynalda to Ophelia. Reynalda was Ophelia's silent, dog-loyal, heavy-metal clad bodyguard with a lethal uppercut, who committed suicide at her friend's grave.

Passions may have been white hot in Denmark, but personal relations were in total crisis. No character, except Hamlet in moments of high emotion, made eye contact with the target of their speech, the intonation was flat and actors mostly talked in the direction of the audience. In her leather boots, Gertrude (Svetlana Jancheva) was intimidating and still as a cobra before striking. Polonius bared Ophelia's shoulder to sharpen the bait for Hamlet in 3.1, friends turned on friends. The tragic impossibility of a relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet was another important thematic line. At its outset, they told each other of their passions and misgivings through the mediation of Adele's "Set Fire to the Rain," a kind of youthful cipher of desire, betrayal and loss: "there's a side to you that I never knew, never knew/All the things you'd say, they were never true, never true/And the games you'd play, you would always win, always win." From this extra-textual moment on, their relationship was obstructed by the constant presence of others and the lack of intimate spaces among the railings, ramps, and pits.

Water was used to express liminality in both dramatic action and character state. The start of the play proper was signaled by a plunge of the actors through a heavy downpour; later, Ophelia floated in a bridal dress in a water pit, as did Gertrude at the end of the play. Hamlet's emotional swings in his relationships with others and with himself were similarly marked.

According to Polish critic Sabina Misiarz-Filipek, the gaping pits visualised the "repetitive cycle" in the lethal operation of the social system.<sup>13</sup> Ophelia, Gertrude, Reynalda, all ended up there. In the Gravedigger scene (5.1), the edge of the grave was lined with skulls, as an emblematic marker of the recurrence of death (fig. 2). Yet the dark chasms of Gardev's *Hamlet* notwithstanding, death's triumph was not taken for granted. Shakespeare's play promises Ophelia a "living monument" (5.1.282), but never delivers on the promise. The production, however, offers memorable images: blown up on the screen her face appeared enhanced by lighting and music, a filmic monument granting her transcendence over the play's deathly revolutions.

---

<sup>13</sup> Sabina Misiarz-Filipek, "Hamlet 'wytupany' [Hamlet 'stomped out']" *Gazeta Szekspirowska* 1, 28 September 2014.

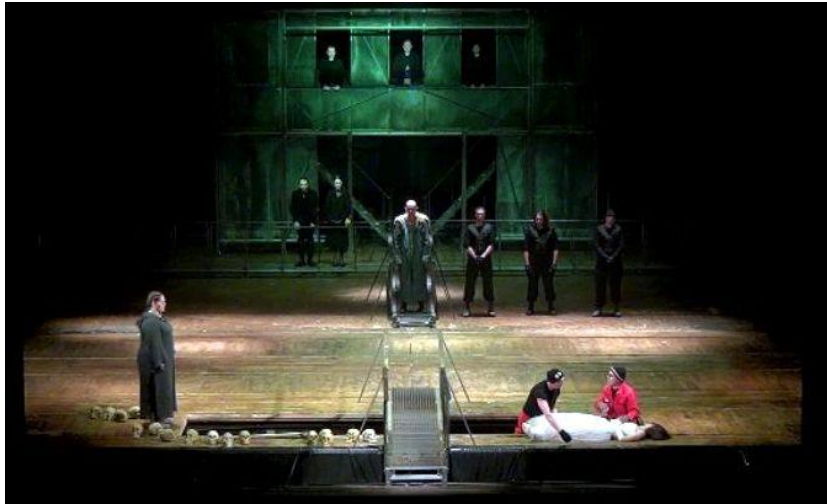


Fig. 2. Ophelia's grave. Production videorecording still.

### The Threshold of Redemption

Leonid Yovchev's nervy youthful Hamlet frantically negotiated the pitfalls and hurdles of this physically collapsing world, of messy human motives, political intrigue and betrayals—a reality so “out of joint” that there was no hope anyone would ever manage to “set it right” (1.5.189-90). A modern young man in Dr Martens boots, with the face of a Christ, Hamlet vented his frustration through a progressively manic behavior. It alienated even Bernardo and Marcellus, who, joined by Rozencrantz and Guildenstern, badly beat him up when he refused to reveal the whereabouts of Polonius' corpse (4.1). Hamlet's vulnerability was signified by an ever increasing state of undress—he mostly sported leather shorts, knee protectors, an exposed, un-heroic body possessed of inexhaustible energy. This vulnerability was especially poignant in the juxtaposition of the projection of Hamlet's dead body stretched in Christ-like pose and nakedness, with that of the drowned Ophelia in the production's finale.

In stark contrast to Hamlet's mad pranks in the company of others, his soliloquies and speeches, delivered from the walkway in the center of the auditorium, were calm, lucid and reflective. Along with the speech about the mission of the theater to be the “very age and body of the time” (3.2.21-22), the soliloquies were the production's direct addresses to the audience—gifts of faith in theater and in the individual's self-understanding as paths leading through a profane world.

And what about salvation, as promised in the program? Like *Wittenberg Revisited*, discussed in the previous article, the notion of salvation in Gardev's *Hamlet* is inflected by Giorgio Agamben's idea about the moment of recognition of the irreparability of the world as



the portal to the transcendent.<sup>14</sup> Such recognition is a precariously balanced point: on one side lies the lost utopia of an ordered and meaningful world, on the other—the despair about a profane world that has fallen apart. To be poised on the brink between these states, pace Agamben, is to be at the threshold of contemplating the profanity of the world from a standpoint distinct from the world-as-it-is, the threshold of redemption. In the words of philosopher Leland de la Durantaye, this is the point from which the irreparable is visible as transient, and the profane—as the “necessary precondition for addressing the situations that are most in need of our attention and action.”<sup>15</sup> Hamlet is only capable of remaining poised at this brink for so long. Nor is he the only character in the production capable of such intellectual and ethical heroics.

In an unexpected twist in the play’s final scene, it was Horatio (Ivan Yurukov) who brought out two poisoned chalices and placed them on the stage. During the duel, which degenerated into a fist fight and a shootout, he sat with his back to the endgame unfolding upstage, facing the audience, peering into the darkness. We had watched him get more and more exasperated by Hamlet’s mad behaviour, so much so that in 5.1, he grabbed the iconic skull and threw it back to the gravedigger. What/who was he contemplating, or waiting for? In came Fortinbras (Alexander Uzunov) with the English Ambassador (Kalin Javorov). In Gardev’s interpretation, Fortinbras, Hamlet, Horatio and the English Ambassador were bound by a friendship and old university ties, marked by their greatcoats with similar initials on the sleeves.<sup>16</sup> The Norwegian was cast so as to look almost like Hamlet’s double and did not enter as a triumphant power-grabber, but as a saddened friend, almost unwilling to carry his lot. In 2012, the final tableau offered a muted triangulated ending. Projected on the screen, Hamlet’s body existed in a transcendent “beyond,” already a memory detached from the almost invisible actor’s body upstage; sitting on the line connecting the stage and the gateway to the supernatural, Horatio looked at the audience; Fortinbras sat dejectedly off-center (fig. 3). No triumph, nor tragedy. The three Wittenberg students could be a collective portrait of a generation. Hamlet fulfilled the bidding of the Ghost and brought down old Denmark, but was crushed under his moral burden. The resuscitation of the polity was a task for a Fortinbras, to whom Hamlet’s voice was genuinely given. His back on the mayhem upon the

---

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hordt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 105.

<sup>15</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 199.

<sup>16</sup> This reading goes back at least to the 1920 silent film *Hamlet* directed by Sven Gade and Heinz Schall, and starring Asta Nielsen in the title role.

stage, Horatio looked above the heads of the audience toward the entrance to the undiscovered country from where the Ghost had emerged. Was there a real hope that the new political actors would hold on to a moral compass? As the lights went up, many unanswered questions hung in the air.



Fig. 3. The friends from Wittenberg. Production videorecording still.

In the 2014 version, shown at the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival, there was less ambiguity regarding the nature of the power transfer. This time, Horatio stood in line with the English Ambassador and Fortinbras. As the latter declared his “rights of memory in this kingdom” (5.2. 373), Horatio, startled, looked at the new ruler, which denied him a right to political neutrality in the new state. Frozen in profile, his position captured the shock at how easily his former friend justified his acceptance of power—a shock familiar to those who have lived through the post-communist transition with its overnight identity swaps, betrayals and transformations of political allegiance.

Bringing forth the idea of theater as encompassing life, the production ended by closing the frame opened at the start. The actors who had first stood with their backs to the audience downstage, now stood upstage, facing it, adjusting their costumes ruffled in the stage deaths. As the lights went up audience and actors looked at each other, while up on the screen the images of Ophelia and Hamlet appeared in a sequence, dissolving into one another, alternately joining and displacing each other. Theater-goers could now exit into their own Denmark, face its uncomfortable truths, and either brood over its fate, or try to make it better. At stake were the fates of the Hamlets and Ophelias of their world. Gardev imbued his theater

with the power to move and engage and, by transforming Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into an urgent tool for self-analysis, pointed to a path of communal survival.