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Macbeth, Petty Bourgeois

Jana Wild

Abstract

Thirty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, *Macbeth* appears to be paradigmatic for the post-Communist Slovak Shakespeare. Several productions have made the play a playground to explore the world in new terms (gender issues, grotesque, social identity). The focus of this paper is on a 1999 production in Nitra which fashioned Macbeth as an Ubuesque petty bourgeois.

Key words

Shakespeare, Macbeth, grotesque, post-Communist, gender, national identity

Until the mid-1990s, the Slovak reception of Shakespeare was dominated by *Hamlet*. For two centuries *Hamlet* – whether on the page or on the stage – appeared as the central play and the undisputable epitome of Shakespeare: passed on by the German romantics, the particular appeal of the prince of Denmark as a noble hero, rebel, and victim in conflict with the society, captured the imagination of translators, critics, theatre makers, readers, and audiences alike. After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, many Slovak stages attempted to exploit the ‘to be or not to be’ of this particular hero anew, i.e., in a post-totalitarian society. The majority of these productions cast the prince of Denmark with actors who were put into the centre as egomaniac superstars, catching the audience by their restless hectic activity. The protagonists of *Hamlet*, Marek Majeský in Nitra and Robert Roth in Bratislava, ultimately became teen idols.

Those *Hamlets* of the first decade or so after 1989 expressed a feeling of collapse of all values and certainties, indeed of ‘a weird fragmentation of reality which defied order and structure’ (SHURBANOV and SOKOLOVA 2001: 249). *Hamlet* in Nitra, produced by a Hungarian team (director Róbert Alföldi, choreography Attila Király, costumes Andrea Bartha, stage design by ‘Kentaur’, 2001), corresponded exactly with the obviously general post-Communist tendency not to stress the story of the individual, but to overlap it ‘by multiplied images of outer reality and bombastic visual quotations’ (WILD 2001: 10), to reshuffle it ‘into a medley of disconnected events, a kaleidoscope of shattered glass which glittered with a myriad faces and forms in utter disarray’ (SHURBANOV and SOKOLOVA 2001: 250). The production featured a firework-like performance ‘teeming with all sorts of easily detectable allusions [...] multiplied to a point where they completely cluttered and suffocated the original play’ (SHURBANOV and SOKOLOVA 2001: 252–254), exactly as Shurbanov and Sokolova have characterised some early post-1989 Shakespeare productions in Bulgaria. Yet after 1989, a *Hamlet* understood as a hero at deadly odds with the world did not work any longer. His rebellion had rather lost currency unless he was stripped of his self-centredness and staged as an observer of the world around him, as was the case in Rastislav Ballek’s remarkable production of the First Quarto in Prešov in Ruthenian (WILD 2017).

However, thirty years after the historical landmark of 1989, another play appears to be paradigmatic for post-Communist Slovak Shakespeare: *Macbeth*. There have been several productions on the main professional stages, e.g., 1998 in Žilina directed by Edo Kudláč; 1999 in Nitra by Vladimír Morávek; a 2004 puppet version in Nitra by Karel Brožek; 2009 in Martin by Viktor Kollár; 2009 a touring Czech-Slovak *Shakespeare Summer Festival* production directed by Ondrej Spišák; 2013 in Košice by Lubomír Vajdička. Student productions have also been presented, e.g., at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava: in 1999 directed by Lena Šimić; 2003 directed by Lukáš Kukučka and Lukáš Trpišovský with puppets; and 2013 by Tomáš Procházka. There have been some free adaptations/rewritings, mainly on alternative stages, e.g., *Shake-Shakespeare Macbeth* at the Pôtoň Theatre, Bátovce, 2007; *Macbeth, the Man who Killed the Sleep* at the Kontra Theatre, by Klaudyna Rozhin, 2013; and *Doctor Macbeth* at the City Theatre in Bratislava by Valéria Schulczová and Roman Olekšák, 2014. Two

productions of the Scottish play, one directed by Edo Kudláč and another by Tomáš Procházka, deserve closer attention, for they explored gender identity, an issue rather neglected so far.

Oddly enough, student master's theses concerning *Macbeth* have been defended at the Theatre Faculty, which is remarkable, as Shakespeare definitely is neither a common nor a favourite subject for student research in Slovakia. Apart from the Croatian student of directing, Lena Šimić, who presented her master's thesis along with her staging of *Macbeth* (1999), there have been two other deeply researched and focused theses, both dealing with Slovak stagings of *Macbeth* throughout the 20th century: one explored the various interpretations of the weird sisters (FILINOVÁ 2001); the other's focus was on visual design (FILKOROVÁ 2006).

In my essay, I will argue that it is not only the quantity of page and stage reception but also the cultural relevance of the stagings that allow us to see *Macbeth* as a playground to explore the world in new terms (gender issues, grotesque, national and social identity); thus, *Macbeth* may appear as an epitome of the new Shakespeare in Slovakia. After briefly presenting two *Macbeths* exploring gender, the focus of the essay will be on the 'Ubuesque' *Macbeth* staged in Nitra, 1999.

Gender identity

The two young experimental directors, Edo Kudláč in Žilina and later the student Tomáš Procházka in Bratislava, both in their mid-20s in those days, were primarily interested in gender issues. In Žilina, 1998, *Lady Macbeth* was played by a male actor dressed as female;¹ in Bratislava, 2013, *Macduff* was played by a woman. The productions addressed the question: what does it mean in society to be a man or a woman?

In his 2013 Bratislava students' production of *Macbeth*, subtitled 'a play about bastards', director Tomáš Procházka proposed a reading of *Macbeth* 'as a precursor to the male identity crisis' (*MACBETH* 2013). The masculinity of this rather soft *Macbeth* was permanently being examined and called into question by his wife as well as by the witches, as in their world to be a real man meant to kill. Yet none of the murders strengthened *Macbeth's* male identity.

To underline the issue of gender and death, Procházka experimented with Japanese *butoh* dance. This 'dance of the darkness' (HEINRICHS n.d.), as its founder Tatsumi Hijikata put it, was allocated mainly to the three weird sisters, zombies with white faces and bodies unnaturally curved, wrapped up in gauze, suggesting inhuman beings with the mind dissociated from the body. The central element of the stage was a circle filled with sand, with the whole performance unfolding as a ritual. The end of the story after *Macbeth's* death suggested that the questionable ideal of masculinity would still survive, as the new king Malcolm was hailed by the witches the same way as *Macbeth* before. As a sceptre Malcolm was given an axe (the weapon used by Raskolnikov, and

1 Unfortunately, limited by the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, I was not successful in researching this performance.

used on Trotsky, too), which Macbeth had used to slay Duncan, instead of the dagger. Thus, the murderous history would repeat itself.

Before 1989, challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity and otherwise examining gender issues was simply unthinkable, and most probably beyond the horizon of artistic experience of the settled professional theatre makers in Slovakia. Arguing for this, I offer an example which may be non-Shakespearean but telling. In 1991 two Slovakian productions were invited to the *Edinburgh International Festival*: a staging of Brecht's *Baal* and Marivaux' *La Dispute*. Both stagings had been highly acclaimed in their native country, and both treated gender identity and sexual relationships in a very traditional, stereotypical way. As a theatre critic accompanied by my peers from the UK, I remember myself wondering at their objections concerning the gender stereotypes in both these two Slovak shows. Only now would I fully agree with them. Indeed, it took some time until a cultural shift emerged along with new theatre directors who came to address gender issues and to challenge received stereotypes.²

NITRA

The production of *Macbeth* staged in 1999 in Nitra overwhelmed audiences with its daring cultural references, its visual excess, and grotesque imagination. Already the very opening of the piece offered an image which had the effect of a shock of the unexpected as well as, at the same time, that of an immediate *anagnorisis*: it located Shakespeare's play in a setting recognisable straight away as Slovak and refigured the supposedly tragic hero as a petty grotesque figure, i.e., not a remote Scottish nobleman, but a Slovak country bumpkin like someone from the local neighbourhood. As the critic Milan Lukeš argued, if the story of Macbeth was to work as disturbing for the contemporary Czech and Slovak society, it needed to be 'appropriated to the point of becoming mercilessly trivialised' (LUKEŠ 2004: 238).³

To degrade a Shakespearean tragedy down to the level of ridicule and bitter grotesque had not been seen in Slovak theatre before, nor had such clear ethnographic and social references to a meagre Slovak way of life been presented before. There had been parodies looking at Shakespeare from the bottom up, yet all of them good-natured. And there was a bitter, deeply sarcastic *Macbeth* in Bratislava back in 1979 directed by Vladimír Strnisko which had supposedly reached the peak of depicting the hypocrisy and equivocation of an authoritarian society. The whole iconography of Strnisko's production suggested connections between power and religious practices, critically commenting on them (e.g., Macbeth's royal throne was a rough wooden cabin which served also as a latrine, a confessional or the burden of a cross; the characters wore monks' robes; long candles, a table covered with a white sheet, etc. were featured). This *Macbeth* of 1979 presented the sophisticated, ruthless, brutal exercise of

2 One of the first directors to offer a new gender-conscious view on Shakespeare in Slovak theatre was Jozef Gombár with his sophisticated 1996 student production of *The Tempest*, see (BŽOCHOVÁ-WILD 2003: 246–248).

3 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

power based upon traditional yet perverted rituals which allegedly claimed the brotherhood of man, with the performance arousing terror and fear by its gritty cruelty. Exactly two decades later in 1999 Morávek's *Macbeth* in Nitra showed the extent to which a real, familiar national pettiness could reach – from a 'fattish beer-drinker' (DRÁBEK 2014: 71–72) to the royal throne. This production had the oblique effect of showing with a wry sneer the danger and terror of a trivial man coming to power.

The intertextual key to the production in Nitra, as also suggested by some critics, was Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi*. Yet, for my part, I would also add Mary McCarthy's reading of Macbeth as a literal-minded superstitious petty bourgeois (MCCARTHY 1962). And Morávek's plump Macbeth also certainly echoed a number of Czech theatre and film productions.

Ubu Macbeth

In the Slovak theatrical tradition, connecting *Macbeth* with *Ubu* was an innovation. Internationally, there had been the well-known and highly acclaimed 'viciously burlesque' (INNES and SHEVTSOVA 2013: 111) Romanian production *Ubu cu scene din Macbeth* (*Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth*, premiered 1990 in Craiova) by Silviu Purcărete which toured many international theatre festivals (e.g., 1991 Edinburgh, 1995 and 1996 Avignon, Bruxelles, Mülheim, etc.). Yet in Nitra, there were hardly any connections to that staging. Purcărete's *Ubu*, amplified with *Macbeth*, referred clearly to the late Romanian Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife who had been executed in Bucharest shortly before, whereas Morávek's *Macbeth* in Slovakia, staged exactly one decade after 1989, fell into a different time. In 1999, there was no need to use Shakespeare (or Jarry) as a foil to get to the bottom of the past Communist era. This *Macbeth* in Nitra aimed to tackle national identity and popular superstitions rather than any specific moment from political history. Furthermore, verbally, neither the director nor his Macbeth made any direct reference to Ubu whatsoever. Yet visually, the connection was clear. As Nicoleta Cinpoș suggests, there were also 'similarities of costuming, interpretation, etc., with Silviu Purcărete's 1990 production' in terms of general 'stage aesthetics (the grotesque, the mundane triviality, the infantilising and childish/ fiendish behaviour'⁴).

Czech *Macbeth* and *Ubu*

The Nitra production of 1999 might have been informed by an older Czech theatre production of *Macbeth* and by the recent Czech film *Král Ubu* just as well. Supposedly, some of the visual elements in Morávek's production echoed the famous Czech theatre production of *Macbeth* from the 1970s staged by the alternative Studio Ypsilon (premiering in 1976 and maintaining popularity throughout the early 1980s in Prague and

4 I am grateful to Nicoleta Cinpoș for her comment on my paper.



Fig. 1: Poster to the production of *Macbeth*, Studio Y (Prague), graphic design by Jan Schmid, 1976.

Available online: <https://www.ypsilonka.cz/uvod/aktuality/vystava-plakatu-jana-schmida>.

elsewhere in Czechoslovakia). If Morávek (born in 1965) did not know the production itself, he might at least have been familiar with the catchy poster of the Ypsilon-production which also served as the theatre bill and which hangs even today in the foyer of Studio Y. The poster shows a plump monster as if drawn clumsily by a child (Fig. 1). The drawing may refer to Alfred Jarry's own illustration of King Ubu. Yet whereas Jarry's Ubu conveys rather dull militant stupidity, the effect of the *Macbeth* drawing on the Studio Y poster⁵ is equivocal: the shape, infantile as it appears, could be laughable; yet it spreads a sinister horror of an unknown but unconstrained evil as well.

Thus, a connection, at least a hypothetical one, between Studio Ypsilon's poster and Morávek's idea of *Macbeth* may be traced. Staging *Macbeth* in Nitra in 1999, the director might have been reminded of the clumsy poster image from Ypsilon: *Macbeth* as a tubby monster wavering between terror and humour, between unconscious horror and infantile ridicule.

Another more apparent and undisputable point of reference for Morávek's reading was the Czech film *King Ubu* (1996, directed by F. A. Brabec). Both, the cinematic king

⁵ The drawings in Y's theatre bills were mostly by the director and *spiritus movens* of Studio Y, Jan Schmid.



Fig. 2: Theatre Divadlo A. Bagara (Nitra), *Macbeth*. Photo by Ctibor Bachratý, 1999.

Ubu and Macbeth in Nitra theatre, were played by the same actor: Marián Labuda (1944–2018), and in both productions the actor was mostly dressed in pyjamas or old-fashioned pyjama-like underwear.

Labuda, short and rather bulky, was one of the best-known Slovak *comic* actors, his physical appearance associated with a stock comic character, instantly arousing laughter. Despite his professional mastery and the undoubtedly broader scope of roles he played during his lifetime, the cliché expectation of a rather down-to-earth buffo persisted about him throughout his career. As far as it concerns Ubu, he would be associated with this type of character straight away; yet to cast him as Shakespeare's major tragic hero showed unprecedented impertinence, and an innovation in reading *Macbeth*, too.

Strictly speaking, it was not only Labuda's stature that made Macbeth appear ridiculous and Ubuesque. His acting range would also have allowed him to embody a person of royal grandeur. In this respect, the key point after casting *him* as Macbeth, was to dress him into pyjamas (Fig. 2). The indecent and dirty clothing underlined the definite inappropriateness of both – Ubu and Macbeth – to serve as public figures of power.

The key points – the actor's physique and his costume – were complemented by a whole range of cultural and social signs to construct Macbeth's whole *habitus* (BOURDIEU 1982). In this way, the audience was made to recognise him as a petty, backward, rural Slovak man with all his despicable uncivilised, Ubuesque attributes. His low manners, skills, and dispositions were indeed 'written within [his] body'



Fig. 3: Theatre Divadlo A. Bagara (Nitra), *Macbeth*. Photo by Ctibor Bachratý, 1999.

(BOURDIEU 1982: 190). Played by Adela Gáborová, Lady Macbeth, with her greasy hair, dirty shapeless nightgown, and thick socks also supported this concept. Besides their bodily expressed habitus such as stature, costume, gestures, posture, movement, facial expression, and speech (BOURDIEU 1982: 190), there was a range of signs referring to his and her mental dispositions, social habit and skills, shaping their minds and their world.

The stage designer Alexandra Grusková set the couple in a typical dilapidated Slovak house: the run-down wooden cottage was covered with a half-finished roof of straw; in front of it: plaster garden gnomes; inside the house: the claustrophobic small-size stinking kitchen serving as an all-round space for eating, drinking, watching TV, sleeping, and storing all sorts of rubbish; a hodgepodge of kitchen furniture and accessories: an old bulky fridge, loud TV, feather bed, 'modern' plastic roll-door, greasy tablecloth, rustic knife and plates, countless empty beer bottles, a first-aid kit, etc. Both Macbeths were of crude rustic manners (he: cutting and eating bacon, drinking beer from the bottle, angrily rebuffing the weird sisters, treating his wife as a macho, and finally suffocating her with an old cushion; she: drinking home-made hard liquor from the bottle, etc.). And above this dirty country house – a luminous crystal chandelier as if it were a comet pointing to a Biblical birthplace of a miracle (Fig. 3).

The weird sisters were also part of this deeply backwards world: three bigoted harassing old women in traditional black folk-like costumes with headscarves as if they had come directly from a village church funeral, each carrying a prayer book in their simple

small handbags. The show began with a voodoo-like scene: the three women roasting barbecue on some impromptu sticks over an open fire near the Macbeths' house while singing a folk song. Later on the three turned into centaurs (with a black horse barrel and two additional horse legs at the back), as if incorporating the dark world of folk superstitions which is part of Macbeth's lifeworld.

The opening setting and images – omitting any military scenes and presenting the witches outside the country house and the Macbeths inside it at home – were constructed with ethnographic accuracy to make sure that the Macbeths were immediately recognisable as our (contemptible) fellow countrymen. After Duncan and his royal court appeared from the pit, as if embodying a trashy TV costume film, the two worlds clashed – one naturalistically backward and stinky, the other, artificial, kitschy royalty.

Although there were clear connections to the recent film *King Ubu* (the protagonist in pyjamas, the eating scene in the scruffy kitchen, etc.), this was just one part of the concept. The other inspiration that the director seemed to have had in mind was an essay by Mary McCarthy entitled 'General Macbeth' (1962), which in the early 1960s was highly praised by McCarthy's good friend Hannah Arendt.⁶

McCarthy's essay marked a shift in the reading of *Macbeth*, an interpretation which was followed exactly on the stage in Nitra: Macbeth as a petty bourgeois, 'superstitious, credulous, literal minded whose main concern is to get a good night's sleep' (MCCARTHY 1962: 535), with a 'deadly combination of ambition, fear and kind of stupidity [...], not clever, [...] taken in by surfaces, by appearance' (MCCARTHY 1962: 533), 'his invocation to sleep [...] perfectly conventional', with 'no feelings for others' (MCCARTHY 1962: 536).

In Nitra, the detailed account of this Macbeth's cultural practice, of his life horizon, his social interaction and patterns of behaviour, clearly pointed him out as a person from a backward rural context. The focus was on the identity of a man raised to power, a kind of a sociogram stressing social and cultural patterns and practices, a Macbeth stripped of detailed psychology and explicit political machinations as it had been common in the pre-1989 productions. What the audience of 1999 took home was not the terror of murder but rather a 'thick' portrait of a superstitious and grotesque person, his narrow-minded cultural background and his obviously dull-witted mental horizon. Not the text, action or plot, but rather the context and Macbeth's identity were at the centre of the production. The audience was called on to situate Macbeth and his wife socially and geographically and then to question the status of the royal reality.

The production tackled parental and gender issues as well, although, surprisingly, this aspect remained rather unnoticed by the critics. The first issue to consider was that Duncan was very much younger than Macbeth and could have easily been his son. Thus, the murder may have appeared as the return of the old, i.e., of an earlier backward lifestyle and superstitions as opposed to the kitschy glamorous life of the new and young, and/or even as a symbolic filicide. Then, the director inserted a scene

6 'McCarthy doesn't use the word "banal", but there's enough to suggest that Arendt's understanding of Eichmann follows McCarthy's understanding of the Scottish lord' (Shapiro's 'Headnote' in MCCARTHY 1962, repeated in SHAPIRO 2014: 530).

showing the previous Thane of Cawdor, who in Shakespeare's text has been executed for treason against Duncan before the action of the play begins and is thus absent. But in Nitra Cawdor emerges as a muscular bare-chested young man chained as a prisoner calling urgently upon Duncan to win his trust and love again and not to have him killed. Here, Cawdor was given a speech by Desdemona (*Othello* 4.2.153–165), slightly rewritten, referring clearly to their betrayed relation of love. Yet Duncan remained silent and unapproachable towards Cawdor's plea. Soon after this, as if attracted by a new decadent pleasure embodied in the disgusting old fatty Macbeth in pyjamas, Duncan exclaimed hoarsely, scarcely hiding his erotic impatience: 'Let us go to your place!' (instead of 'From hence to Inverness', *Macbeth* 1.4.42). His spoilt aristocratic libido having felt a sudden desire for an authentic foul-smelling plebeian, thus the sweetly young Duncan along with his values and royal reliability were put into question, too.

Since Duncan and his court were constructed as from an artificial candy world, the Macbeth couple after entering the status of royalty also imitated their aristocratic and magnificent lifestyle. As if following Pierre Bourdieu's account of social classes, the Macbeths' attempt to climb higher only disclosed their fully internalised habitus of the petty bourgeoisie. Macbeth in his Scottish costume thus appeared as a ridiculous, nearly circus-like variant of the bulky king Henry VIII (Fig. 4); and Lady Macbeth presented her idea of the queen, with costumes following cabaret and revue models like Josephine Baker and Mata Hari.

This particular production which deconstructed the received traditional image of Shakespeare by playfully employing all sorts of visual references, as well as the other two *Macbeths* staged by young theatre directors, marked new ways of reading and understanding Shakespeare in the post-Communist Slovak theatre. These pieces were no longer concerned with exploring the fall of an ambitious and ruthless ruler, as had been pre-1989 *Macbeths*. The most important turn these new productions made was suppressing the importance of a unified plot and shifting the perspective: instead of a detailed psychogram of a murderous couple, the productions were interested in exploring identity in terms of gender, culture, social status, and questioning the status of reality itself.



Fig. 3: Theatre Divadlo A. Bagara (Nitra), *Macbeth*. Photo by Ctibor Bachratý, 1999.

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