

To Insert, or not to Insert, that is the Question

Two Hungarian Hamlets from the nineties

Katalin Tabi

This essay is from the field of play-script analysis, which deals with the question: What happens to Shakespeare's play-texts in the director's hands? My analysis is going to focus on the play-scripts of two Hungarian *Hamlet* productions: Gábor Zsámbéki's 1991 *Hamlet* in Kamra (Chamber), the studio stage of Katona Theatre, Budapest, and a studio performance directed by Csaba Kiss in Győr, 1994. This paper is going to concentrate on the modifications of the Shakespearean text in these two acting scripts and the interpretive consequences of these changes. Nevertheless, two other points are also going to be involved in the discussion: the socio-political context and the medium of the studio theatre.

I selected the productions of Zsámbéki and Kiss primarily because their play-scripts represent two extreme ends of the alteration-scale. Both play-scripts are based on János Arany's classic translation, but Zsámbéki created a rather conservative and respectful play-script, while Csaba Kiss considerably de- and reconstructed Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Zsámbéki did not make any other textual changes than the so-called "classic cuts," that is certain major and minor speeches traditionally excised from *Hamlet* productions.¹ Kiss employed the same "classic cuts" together with further omissions, transpositions and his own insertions.

¹ Classic cuts have already been collected in an article by Claris Glick in "*Hamlet* in the English Theater—Acting Texts from Betterton (1676) to Olivier (1963)," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. XX, No. 1, Winter 1969, 17-35. Although there are significant differences between the English and Hungarian histories of *Hamlet* play-scripts—the most important being the use of Q1 and Q2 in England, and the use of several translations in Hungary—, this article can be of great use for comparison.

When staging *Hamlet*, it is normal that certain scenes and speeches fall prey to the director's pen because the whole play would last for more than four hours. This is so true that it is almost pointless to use the "original" text (in our case, Arany's translation) as a reference point for play-script analysis, because it seems more suitable to use a "classically cut" play-script like Zsámbéki's purely Shakespearean and economically modified text. Consequently, the two scripts are not going to be examined in the same proportion. More alterations demand more interpretation, and therefore in my discussion Zsámbéki's version is going to serve rather as a theatrical control text against which Kiss's modifications can be observed.

Also, these two productions seem to be apt for comparison because they were both staged just a few years after the change of the communist regime when the society could experience a dense and tense atmosphere with a mixture of anger with the past and hope for the future, and it is interesting to compare how differently the two play-scripts reflect even if indirectly this political situation.

Although this paper wishes to focus on the play-scripts, a brief account of the two performances cannot be disregarded for this provides a background for the texts. Zsámbéki directed the production twice. In 1991 his first *Hamlet* was Zoltán Ternyák, who had to be replaced by Gergő Kaszás, and therefore there was a second premier in 1993. Both *Hamlets* were taking notes during the performance. Zsámbéki explained in an interview² that note-taking stood for Hamlet's intellectual attitude, and he wanted to understand Hamlet's outsider nature: why the society cannot bear him. The sight of the acting space reinforced the bleak and gloomy world from which a young man with no prospects is trying to find his way out. The performance was played on an empty octagonal floor with no scenery, just props, and the colours of the ageless costumes were black, brown, white, and grey. The audience surrounded the players from four sides, so the atmosphere was intimate and suffocating at the same time.

² Bartók FM, *Szalon*, 4 April 1993.

Zsámbéki was apparently interested in the hopeless situation of the individual. According to contemporary reviews, after Fortinbras's merciless orders the four captains did not appear to "bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage," so in the end poor Horatio was left alone dragging the prince's corpse irresolutely up and down. If we draw a parallel between the political context and the performance, Horatio's puzzled behaviour might stand for the transitory nature of the period when one political system has obviously been overthrown and another has come, but it is still a question who Hamlet is. Is Horatio holding the remnants of the old system in his arms or the already dead hopes of the new one?

In Csaba Kiss's direction the actors did not have so close contact with the audience, but Kiss also used minimal scenery and more props. His main conception was to *decentralize* the play and divert the focus of attention from Hamlet himself to his relationships with his mother, Claudius and Ophelia. He was looking for answers to questions like "What is sin?", "Is it possible to tell who is guilty?" and if so, "Who has the right to judge and punish?". He explained in a conversation that after the change of the regime there was a strong demand for political retribution on the one hand, but a kind of passivity or uncertainty on the other hand, and this hesitation in the society created tension within people. For the director this situation was so obviously Hamletian that he decided to articulate the problem in his staging of *Hamlet*. Kiss invented two frame-scenes to the original play in which two grave-diggers were speculating over the dead bodies about who could possibly be responsible for all the deaths. The first scene then was followed by Hamlet's homecoming from Wittenberg—another invention of the director's to be discussed later on. This retrospective time-structure made a witness of the audience, who could not but identify with the witnesses rather than Hamlet or the other main characters.

There is not enough time here to analyse the play-scripts in detail, so I am going to focus on the most significant omissions, insertions, and transpositions. There are two major

cuts that both Zsámbéki and Kiss eliminate from their play-scripts. The first is the dialogue about the competition of the boy players and the adult companies in 2.2, which is omitted because it has evidently lost its topicality. The second cut appears in 5.2: a Lord challenging Hamlet to a duel with Laertes after Osric's similar scene. The Lord's short scene basically repeats what Osric has already announced to Hamlet a few lines earlier. One may well wonder whether it was Shakespeare's carelessness or conscious decision to place two resembling episodes one after the other. If it was conscious, then he possibly wanted to reinforce dramaturgically the ever-annoying presence of bootlickers in the court. No matter how attractive this explanation may sound, theatrical practice shows that producers often eliminate the Lord's entrance in 5.2 as unnecessary.

Most of the minor cuts³ do not influence the meaning of the play significantly, but they can be omitted for several reasons. The lack of talk of the ghosts' peculiar habits in 1.1 and 1.4, for example, considerably rationalizes the world of the play leaving Hamlet alone with his wild phantasmagorias about his father's ghost. Another reason for smaller alterations might be to change the rhythm of a scene. Parts like the guards' scene (1.1) or the Claudius-Laertes scene (4.7) are supposed to be animated. Yet, in Shakespeare's text these scenes are lengthy and full of interesting but off the point elements—maybe the only exception being the fencing-scene. They are “lengthy”, but only theatrically speaking, because many of the so-called “superfluous” passages are lyrical inserts that used to work on the Elizabethan stage, but not so much in today's theatres. On the page, these details can contribute to the reading experience, but on the stage every useless piece of information diverts and gradually decreases the audience's attention and makes the action complicated and tiresome. If the

³ For the sake of completeness, here is a short list of the minor classic cuts. Both producers excise Horatio's account of the war affairs between Old Hamlet and Old Fortinbras in 1.1, the numerous references to the ghosts' usual habits in 1.1 and 1.4, most of Laertes' speech to Ophelia in 1.3, Hamlet's short speech about the consequences of the shameful Danish drinking habits in 1.4, the complicated contemplation between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern upon the nature of dreams in 2.2, most of the Player King's speech in the Mousetrap-scene (3.2), the majority of the dialogue about the plans of Claudius and Laertes to kill Hamlet in 4.7, most of Hamlet's account of his sea voyage in 5.2, and finally the First Ambassador's short speech in 5.2 which includes the famous line “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.”

events are exciting, the action demands a tighter acting pace with short sentences and quick replies.

The scene that suffers the most cuts in order to speed up the action is the discussion between Claudius and Laertes about how to kill Hamlet in the duel (4.7). Their conversation actually starts at the end of 4.5 after Ophelia's exit, but then it is interrupted by the Sailors' scene (4.6) in which they deliver letters to Horatio, and then it continues for another 232 lines in 4.7 until Gertrude's entrance. Although Zsámbéki keeps all the three scenes, in his script only 84 lines remain from the original 253, which is a massive reduction. Thus the action becomes considerably faster: Claudius and Laertes agree with icy brevity and cruel elegance on the ways and means of killing Hamlet. As one of the critics remarked, the cuts made the performance almost opera-like.⁴

Csaba Kiss keeps altogether more lines than Zsámbéki (133). Yet, what changes the tempo of his scene is not so much the excisions than the restructured scene sequence. In his play-script there is no Horatio, and consequently the sailors' scene is missing. Claudius and Laertes have their conversation in one go; the only person to interrupt them is Gertrude who always appears at the most exciting or (if you like) secret parts of their talk. So Kiss's cuts influence not only the tempo but also the characterization of the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius.

In the original play after having met her brother, Ophelia leaves the stage alone, but in Kiss's version she is accompanied by Gertrude. The king remains alone with Laertes, and takes the opportunity to explain to him how he personally feels about Hamlet. He tells him that Hamlet is still alive because "The queen his mother / Lives almost by his looks" and because of "the great love the general gender bear him." (4.7.11-12,18) Then he continues to tell him about his personal attitude towards the prince) when the queen suddenly enters

⁴ Cf. Forgách, András, „Hamlet borotvaélen” [„Hamlet on a razor blade”], in *Színház*, March 1992, 8-13.

(originally there is a Messenger entering here), and Claudius has to drop his sentence. In the script it sounds as follows:

CLAUDIUS:

I loved your father, and we love ourself,
And that I hope will teach you to imagine –
So much for this. (*Enter the Queen*)
How now? What news?"

The sudden change of the subject creates a tense atmosphere. Gertrude enters to deliver a letter from Hamlet, and by the king's command she reads it out. Since there is no Horatio in this production, Gertrude takes over Horatio's role as Hamlet's best friend. Later on, in 5.2 Hamlet tells *her* about his sea-voyage. This alteration makes the mother-and-son relationship especially emphatic, which must have an effect on the Gertrude-Claudius relationship, too. After having read out the letter, the king asks Gertrude, "What do you say to this?" to which she leaves the stage speechlessly. After this episode the king and Laertes continue the discussion of their plans, and Gertrude enters for a second time with the news that Ophelia has drowned—an obviously uncomfortable entrance again.

As for Hamlet's characterization, there is, as I mentioned before, a significant difference between the basic conceptions of the two productions. Zsámbéki puts the emphasis on Hamlet's loneliness and misfit nature, while Csaba Kiss concentrates on the deformity of human relations that ends in tragedy. Zsámbéki shows the tragedy of the individual, while Kiss shows that of the community. Therefore, in Zsámbéki's script none of Hamlet's soliloquies are abridged by any means. Hamlet is often left alone soliloquizing to the audience.

As opposed to this, Kiss does not leave one single soliloquy without modification. His Hamlet also remains sometimes alone, but his soliloquies are considerably shorter, which suggests that the director was not so interested in the image of the lonely prince. Hamlet's

Hecuba-soliloquy, for example, at the end of Act two, is shortened by one third of it. **[Handout]** Four lines are missing from the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, and more than half of Hamlet’s last soliloquy starting with “How all occasions do inform against me” is omitted, too **[Handout]**.

Kiss also puts more emphasis on the point of view of the average man. He inserts four scenes, some of which have already been mentioned earlier. In the first scene, two gravediggers (called “witnesses” on the playbill) are looking at the “quarry” of dead bodies and one of them mentions that he was there in the harbour when young Hamlet arrived from Wittenberg. This statement takes us back to the beginning of the story, and the second scene—still Kiss’s insertion—displays Hamlet’s homecoming. The director explained in a conversation that he wanted to see Hamlet’s warm-hearted reactions when greeting his mother and uncle in the harbour before knowing anything about the home affairs. This way there is a sharper contrast when he becomes astonished by the unexpected news.

The third insertion is an extra scene between Hamlet and Ophelia, which highlights their intimate relationship. In this scene the girl is persuading the prince to take back the “remembrances” he gave her. This insertion is partly Shakespearean, partly the director’s own creation. Ophelia enters saying:

OPHELIA:

The sun is rising, my good lord... I’ve been awaiting you!

HAMLET:

I’m sorry if you had to wait... Go to sleep...

OPHELIA:

I’d like to talk to you, my lord...

HAMLET:

Not now!

In the original play, Ophelia comes to Hamlet only in 3.1, after the grand soliloquy, but in this production this scene comes immediately after Hamlet's meeting his father's ghost. As the director explained, he wanted to find an explanation why Hamlet has no time to meet Ophelia. In the original play there are hardly any scenes which expand upon their relationship. Kiss believes that it is Hamlet's unwanted political mission that prevents him from dealing with his private life. Therefore he places Ophelia's entrance after Hamlet's "Time is out of joint" speech. The girl finds the prince in a distracted and distressed mood, which is further worsened by the girl's rejection of his love. It is this unpleasant situation into which Osric intrudes with his flamboyant style learning French phrases from a guidebook:

Bonjour, that is good morning, isn't it?

Je...je...je m'appele Osric,

je suis danois...that is my name is Osric.

Csaba Kiss expands Osric's part by replacing Reynaldo with him, so at this point he is entering the stage to talk to Polonius about his journey to Paris to spy on Laertes. If the different moods created tension between Hamlet and Ophelia at the beginning of the scene, now the stylistic clash between the young lovers and Osric does the same.

Lastly, the director's fourth interpolation is the final scene when Fortinbras enters the stage to give orders in Norwegian, and then leaves. Only his Captain and a grave-digger remain on the stage with the corpses in the same position as in the opening scene. The Captain asks, "What assassination has happened here?"—to which the grave-digger replies, "I don't know," then leans the shovel against the wall and leaves the stage. This is the end of the

performance. The uncertainty of this close invites the interpretation that the witnesses started an investigation at the beginning of the play to find out about the whys and wherefores, but in the end they could not come to any conclusions, so gave it all up: this time Hamlet's story remained unsolved again.

To sum up what I have been talking about so far, my aim with showing up certain elements of the two play-scripts was to show the difference between the two kinds of dramaturgical work. Zsámbéki apparently decided to stage a classic interpretation of the play (the outcast, lonely young man with a mission impossible), while Kiss wanted to shift the focus of attention from the individual hero to the problems of the community. In fact, Kiss did not want Hamlet to act as a hero. He was just another man who got into a difficult situation that confused all his previous conceptions of family, love and politics. His production presents the play from the spectator's (that is the investigator's, or if you like the posterity's) point of view.

We could also see, however, that beside the human problems (either the individual's or the society's), both producers tried to reflect upon the political situation of the period, too. Zsámbéki tried to achieve this without using extra texts. Kiss wrote new speeches to be interpolated, and these insertions altered the structure of the whole production. His free use of the Shakespeare-play raises the question whether it is important to be textually loyal to Shakespeare. I suggest that not necessarily if the director diverts from Shakespeare's text for a justifiable reason like to unfold certain less elaborated aspects of the play or to give a particular edge to the production. It can only be acclaimed if a director wants to say something meaningful with the play – even if the price of this is some foreign material in the Shakespearean texture. I personally believe that the failure of most modern *Hamlet*-productions is the lack of conception or a personal conviction that this play *is* about

something that is relevant for us here and now. However, there remains one question to be answered: Where does *Hamlet* end, and where does adaptation start?