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The Circle of Outcasts: Krzysztof Warlikowski's 'African Tales by Shakespeare'

In: *Cervantes, Shakespeare y la Edad de Oro de la escena*, Jorge Braga Riera, Javier J. González Martínez, Miguel Sanz Jiménez (eds.), Madrid 2018, pp. 619-631.

Abstract

This article focusses on the depiction of Shakespeare's dramas in Krzysztof Warlikowski's *African Tales by Shakespeare*, a performance which first premiered in Liege, Belgium, in 2011. It presents *African Tales by Shakespeare* as an authorial interpretation of Shakespeare's tragedies and considers the performance in the context of contemporary discourse focused on identity, corporeality, gender and post-colonialism theories.

Key words: Shakespeare, Warlikowski, Polish contemporary theatre, exclusion, identity.

African Tales by Shakespeare is the title of the performance by Polish theatre director Krzysztof Warlikowski. The spectacle premiered in Liege, Belgium, in 2011. Warlikowski created it together with his Polish team —the actors and stage artists connected to The New Theatre in Warsaw. The poster for this performance presented two naked white men painted with African tribal patterns and a female Japanese tourist with a camera. For certain right-wing groups in Poland it was considered a provocative gesture. The title of this 5-hour performance sounds enigmatic and unconvincing at first, especially if we try to consider the connection between "African tales" and Shakespeare in a literal sense. What could this conjunction mean? Essentially, we could assume one of the following versions: the Polish director searches for the African motives in Shakespeare's dramas or he tries to read Shakespeare's works in the context of African culture. Before I present the possible ways of interpreting the title of the performance, I would like to briefly picture the background of this production and other works by Krzysztof Warlikowski. It seems to be necessary in the context of the director's interest in reading Shakespeare.

Warlikowski is undoubtedly one of the most renowned and inventive artists in contemporary Polish theatre, founder of The New Theatre in Warsaw, director of numerous productions on the most important dramatic and opera stages in Europe including Paris, Nice, Brussels, Milan, Stuttgart, Munich and others. In 2012 he directed *Coronation of Poppea* by Claudio Monteverdi in Teatro Real in Madrid and two years later he performed *Alceste* by Gluck on the same stage.

Since the beginning of his theatrical career Warlikowski has shown special attention to Shakespeare and has staged eleven of his dramas. He summarises his interest in the famous writer from Stratford as follows: “Shakespeare became a master of the craft to me. I value him for his refusal to compromise and his desire to describe the entire world, rather than a mere fragment of reality” [Warlikowski 2003: 230]. Warlikowski’s works provide a modern take on Shakespeare’s dramas whilst simultaneously preserving the fundamental essence of his plays.

In his first adaptations of Shakespeare’s works Warlikowski was focused on particular dramas trying to extract the new threads or hidden meanings of these well-known literary works. His *Timing of The Shrew* became a story about the enslavement of women in patriarchal system, in *Hamlet* he underlined the questions touching identity and sexuality of the main character. In his production *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* performed at the Théâtre National in Nice he showed “a brutal story about the thrashing of human feelings, the rape of bodies and souls” [Pawłowski 2003: 188]. His staging strategy is principally to portray the topicality and universality of human condition in Shakespeare’s stories.

In comparison to these earlier works his performance *African Tales by Shakespeare* is a compilation of a few different texts —these texts are not only Shakespeare’s plays but also selected pieces of contemporary literature. Warlikowski does not attempt to stage Shakespeare in a traditional way, showing the whole progress of action, characters and conclusions. The key part of his strategy is to illuminate Shakespeare’s writing by using different literature as well as exploring very comprehensive cultural contexts.

African Tales... is based on three of Shakespeare’s plays: *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*. In this authorial interpretation Warlikowski considers the position of outcasts in society by analysing different forms and mechanisms of social exclusion and the specific circumstances giving rise to such ostracism.

The main characters —Othello, Shylock and Lear— are shown to be individuals who are discriminated against based on skin colour, faith and old age. In their own tragedies Warlikowski tries to find some mutual elements, the similar experience of solitude, helplessness, and upcoming demise. This is also the reason why all of them are played by the same actor, Adam Ferency. Othello, Shylock and Lear appear here as the representatives of minority cursed with silence. The director highlights their individual struggles whilst connecting them with the common theme of exclusion.

Shakespeare and his dramas were the starting point for *African tales...* but concurrently Warlikowski had been searching for a common ground between Shakespearian stories and our contemporaneity —some texts which could put these tragedies in a new context. He found such commonality in John Maxwell Coetzee's prose, especially in his novels *Summertime* and *In the Heart of the Country*. Both of them are strongly rooted in twentieth-century South Africa's reality and this fact sheds a completely new light on Shakespeare's understanding. It is not difficult to divine that Coetzee is also the reason of the performance title. In this instance an adjective "African" will be the synonym of disparity, dissimilar tradition and new perspective but simultaneously it will mark the areas common for all humanity. Coetzee's characters and their internal dilemmas served here as a liaison between Shakespeare's world and our contemporary experiences.

For Warlikowski Coetzee's writing is the main key to reading and interpreting Shakespeare but effectively it is not the only author whose works he used as an inspiration to create his spectacle. A very important part of the performance are the monologues of Portia, Desdemona and Cordelia written by Canadian writer Wajdi Mouawad and also numerous quotes derived from different pieces of literature, film, comic-books and music.

This staging strategy based on juxtaposing different texts and source materials is typical for postdramatic theatre and it was well described by Hans Thies-Lehmann [2006: 27] who said that "the newer theatre aesthetics practise a consistent renunciation of the one plot and the perfection of drama". However, it is not my intention to analyse Warlikowski's *African Tales...* in the context of postdramatic signs though his performance could be a representative example of this aesthetics. Primarily, I would like to consider the specific impact of the other texts on Shakespeare's stories. What new meanings do they abstract? How do they reflect Shakespeare's world and his protagonists? Do they get us closer to the tragedy of Shylock, Othello and Lear?

Warlikowski connected three Shakespeare's dramas describing in them a similar human condition. This condition has been defined as a condition of excluded one. In the description of the performance we can read: "Sooner or later everyone is to experience the condition of Lear, Othello, or Shylock by becoming an animal banned from its herd. Shakespeare depicted these states through a tragic prism of history's titans acting in circumstances of tale and myth. Coetzee, knowing the apartheid reality, describes his characters only through categories of existence. He does not create soaring plots but instead designs intimate and unbearable psychotic worlds through which his own broken pride is filtered"¹. Despite searching for common elements in Shakespeare's dramas and Coetzee's novels the performance does not present one coherent story. Instead it provides different narratives, various voices of outcasts, different "African tales" interspersed with each other. Employing a composite narrative construction Warlikowski points out to us that there is no one way of experiencing exclusion.

Tale number 1: Lear

The performance begins with a double quotation, the scene which comes from the early Kurosawa's film *Ikiru* and was also evoked by Coetzee in *Summertime*. The scene revolves around the conversation between an elderly terminally ill man and a young beautiful girl. Warlikowski presents this scene on the screen as avatars' dialogue. The key phrase for this projection is a question the man asks his interlocutor: 'how to be just like you?'. This dialogue between the dying man and young healthy girl is an introduction to the first Shakespearean scene from *King Lear*. Warlikowski presents this scene in darkness. Three of Lear's daughters, Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia, are waiting for their father's final statement concerning a division of the kingdom. Regan and Goneril are played by two older actresses. Their age is similar to the age of the actor who plays the role of Lear. This incompatibility is intentional, it emphasises an artificial declaration of love that Lear's daughters give to him.

In accordance with Shakespeare's drama Cordelia is the only one who stays honest with her father and refuses him exaggerated cajolery. Wrathful Lear banishes Cordelia and divides his kingdom among the two other daughters. His last sentence in this scene is very meaningful, it was taken from Rodrigo Garcia's paraphrase of *King*

¹ Description of the performance *African tales by Shakespeare* on the official theatre page. <http://www.nowy teatr.org/en/event/opowiesci-afrykanskie-wg-szekspira> [accessed November 14, 2016].

Lear [1997]. “I’m drawing with a chalk a thin line. Share the dust”, says the resentful father. The thread of *Lear* and his daughters returns in different parts of the performance but not in chronological order. Also the relatedness to Shakespeare’s drama undergoes the progressive relaxation. In the next few scenes we can still recognize the relations between some characters and motivations for their behavior but concurrently their voices sound much closer to our reality. This effect is largely caused by contemporary literature used in the performance, especially Coetzee’s novels.

In the *King Lear* part Warlikowski especially explores the relation between “dying” father and his adult children. This is also explored by Coetzee in *Summertime*. *Lear* as an old man has been excluded from the world of active healthy people and has been deprived of self-narration. His own condition is expressed here by the attitude of his daughters to him. Warlikowski intentionally removes other Shakespearean characters like Edgar, Edmund or Fool in order to illustrate the conflict between *Lear* and daughters without any mediators. For him this intimate family situation was an epicentre of the drama.

Primarily, the Polish director seems to be focused on two main issues connected with the drama *King Lear*. The first is why does Cordelia decide to look after *Lear* despite being disinherited? The second concerns Regan and Goneril’s ingratitude. Warlikowski does not believe in a simple division into good and bad daughters. Using Coetzee’s texts he tries to avoid one-dimensional reckonings. In one of the scenes Regan and Goneril visit their father in a retirement home. *Lear* wants them to bring him home but they both are too concerned on relish their new life, the life they probably did not experience before. Perhaps this is the reason Warlikowski makes Goneril say words which in Shakespeare’s drama belong to Edgar: “This stupid and nonsensil captivity, the tyranny of old men which bring bitterness to the best years of our life and only bars our way to the good things in this world. Things which in old age we will not be able to take delight in”². At the end of this scene Regan brutally points the source of *Lear*’s exclusion: “The condition of being oneself is the ability to act”. *Lear* is not able to be self-reliant anymore, his internal strengths have exhausted. “I’m scrap”, he says, “Ignoble metal. Not worth recycling. Useless and worthless to one and all. Too pale, too cold, too fearful”.

² All the Shakespearean quotations used in the performance where based on Stanisław Barańczak’s translations.

Cordelia appears again on the stage when the other sisters leave. “Will you come with me?”, her question includes an invitation for a very difficult and risky attempt to live together. Cordelia does not use Shakespeare’s words anymore, she becomes a female counterpart of John from Coetzee’s *Summertime* who lives together with his infirm father. She also acts like Magda, a desperate and lonely daughter from *In the Heart of the Country*, dominated by her authoritarian father. Coetzee’s works prompt an alternative explanation of Cordelia’s decision to stay with her father. Perhaps it is not only compassion or mercy of the youngest daughter? Importing John and Magda’s traits, Cordelia becomes a recluse as well. There is no big difference between her solitude and Lear’s exclusion. This is why she thought that it would be possible to rebuild lost family bonds. Cordelia’s desires are focused on her imaginative past and future, in some part of the performance she repeats words used by Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*:

Do you remember (...) how we used to go to the seaside, in the old days? How we packed a basket full of sandwiches and fruit and drove to the station in the trap and caught the evening train? How we slept on the train, rocked by the song of the wheels, waking drowsily at the water-stops, hearing the trainmen murmur far away, sleeping again; and how next day we arrived at the seaside and went down to the beach and took off our shoes and paddled, you holding my hands and lifting me over the waves?³

Like John in *Summertime* and the desperately lonely daughter from *In the Heart of the Country* Cordelia tries to get closer to her father but it turns out that spending time together, going for walks and to the beach does not rebuild anything. Quite the opposite, all these situations show that there is nothing common between these two adult people who speak different languages, have different desires and their own interior worlds. Cordelia’s last monologue written by Mouawad [2011] was inspired by both Coetzee’s novels. It consists of grief, sorrow and unfulfilled desires taken from the female narrator of *In the Heart of The Country* and fears of John from *Summertime*. “If I stay I will hate you, but if I leave I will hate myself”, says Cordelia in the final scene.

Tale number 2: Othello

³ COETZEE, John Maxwell (2006): *In the heart of the country*, London, Vintage, 135-136.

Using Othello's story to discuss racial discrimination and apartheid reality is not the new concept. One of the most prominent adaptations of *Othello* which brought attention on this issue was the performance of Janet Suzman premiered in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1988 during the closing years of apartheid. John Kani [2016: 6], an African actor who played the role of Othello notes that it was an anti-political act to perform this play with a black actor in the title role:

I agreed to do the play on condition that I should be the only black actor in the cast and that all other parts should be played by white actors. (...) I was fully aware of the inherent risks in playing this role in apartheid South Africa. But for me it was an invitation I could not refuse. For me it was an opportunity to bring the relationship between black and white to the stage.

Warlikowski also puts Othello's story in the apartheid context. The actor who had played Lear appears on the stage with his face and hands painted black. Since the beginning of this thread Warlikowski clearly indicates the stigma which excludes Othello from the community of white people. However, in contrast to the African adaptation from 1988, Warlikowski reduces the political background in order to present private tragedies which occur between concrete people. Essentially, it would be justifiable to say that Warlikowski follows Coetzee's strategy whose writing is strongly submerged in the political reality of apartheid but concurrently it turns to intimate and individual experiences of humans. In *Summertime* Coetzee writes:

South Africa is not formally in a state of war, but it might be as well be. As resistance has grown, the rule of law has step by step been suspended. The police and the people who run the police (as hunters run packs of dogs) are by now more or less unconstrained. In the guise of news, radio and television relay the official lies. Yet over the whole sorry, murderous show there hangs an air of staleness⁴.

In Coetzee's biographical novel these kind of political notations plot the context for private confessions of particular narrators. In Warlikowski's performance there is no

⁴COETZEE, John Maxwell (2009): *Summertime: scenes from provincial life*, London, Harvill Secker, 12.

explicit reference to apartheid but we intuit its ongoing consequences: racial segregation, discrimination and aggression towards black people. In Shakespeare's tragedy the most apostle of racism is Iago but Warlikowski shows that even Cassio and Emilia are not real allies. It is especially noticeable in a scene taken from the second act of the drama. Warlikowski allows Cassio to speak Shakespearian words but at the same time underlines his adhesion to the white community. Also Emilia's attitude is very equivocal, her cruel laugh is an expression of approval for Iago's racist jokes. When Othello appears on the stage Warlikowski intensifies the purport of this scene by interlarding Shakespeare's dialogue with the fragments of *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver [1999: 193-194], founder of the Black Panthers. It is startling how correlated the texts are with one another. When Iago tells their interlocutors a parable about the white Omnipotent Administrator and the black Supermasculine Menial taken from Cleaver's book it strictly refers to Othello's marriage and its consequences:

Look, Boy, we have a final little adjustment to make. I'm still going to be the Brain and you're still the Body. But from now on, you do all the flexing but I'll do all the fucking. The Brain must control the Body. I will have access to the white woman and I will have access to the black woman. The black woman will have access to you but she will also have access to me. I forbid you access to the white woman. The white woman will have access to me, the Omnipotent Administrator, but I deny her access to you, you, the Supermasculine Menial. By subjecting your manhood to the control of my will, I shall control you. The stem of the Body, the penis, must submit to the will of the Brain.

Warlikowski does not show the death of Desdemona as an effect of Othello's jealousy. Instead he portrays the tragic breakdown of their relationship because of social revilement. In contrast to Lear, Othello was not officially deprived of his position in society but his position is still deprived of full rights and self-narration. This inability to articulate his own condition is the main similarity between Lear and Othello. In *African tales...* Warlikowski returns to a well-known but prevailing observation that in the official discourse there is still no place for the voice of "others".

Tale number 3: Shylock

Apparently, there is nothing common between the story of the Jewish merchant and African discourse. Nevertheless, the epithet “African” used in the performance title refers to broadly comprehended excluded groups, culture’s peripheral areas which may bring different than white, European and Christian perspective. Piotr Gruszczyński [2011: 15], dramaturgist of the performance, explains it as follows:

These various texts we used in the performance redirected Shakespearian narratives to our ‘African tales’ which are read not only from the perspective of racial and cultural segregation, but also from the perspective of the world of different aesthetics and sensitivity. [15]

Who is Shylock and what is the reason for his bloody demand? In Warlikowski’s performance Shylock is played by the same actor who created the role of Lear and Othello. He also lives with the stigma of being an outcast. The main source of this exclusion is his religion. Since the beginning Shylock is insulted by Antonio and Bassanio, even when these two want to borrow some money from him. This hatred to Jews is perfectly portrayed in the dialogue that accompanies the following scene:

SHYLOCK: You call me a cut-throat dog and spit upon my Jewish gabardine (...) Well then, it now appears you need my help: you come to me and you say ‘Jew, we would like money’ (...) I still have your rheum upon my beard and bruises after your kicked me off over your threshold. And now you want money. What should I say to you? (...)

ANTONIO: I am as like to call you so again, and spit on you again, to spurn thee too.

Warlikowski intensifies the purport of this Shakespearean dialogue by appending in the next scene a few figures from the comic book *Maus. A Survivor’s Tale* by Art Spiegelman [1986; 1991]. The animals which symbolise various nations appear on the stage after Shylock’s daughter fled with Gentile. Firstly we can see the Mouse-Jew who is reading prayers in Hebrew. This ritual is brutally interrupted by two swine who represent both Poles and Germans. The swine abuse and harass Shylock, they remind him about his daughter’s vice and together with Antonio they mock him for his beliefs and background.

Shylock has all the reasons to hunger for revenge. However, Warlikowski tries to show that the Jew could also have another motivation to demand one pound of Antonio's body. James Shapiro in his interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* finds that Shylock's intention to cut a piece of Antonio's body evokes an obvious association with circumcision. There is no doubt that physically the main difference between Christians and Jews is related to circumcision. James Shapiro [1996: 130] says:

Antonio and Shylock, who fiercely insist on how different they are from each other, to the last seek out ways of preserving that difference through symbolic acts that convert their adversary into their own kind. Paradoxically, though, these symbolic acts – a threatened circumcision of the heart and a baptism that figuratively uncircumcises – would have the opposite effect, erasing, rather than preserving, the literal or figurative boundaries that distinguish merchant from Jew.

In *African tales...* Warlikowski breaks up with the image of a revengeful and rapacious Jew, his Shylock still wants to collect the pledge but his attitude to Antonio is pretty ambivalent. "I was dead but now I live for you again", says Shylock after he finds out Antonio is bankrupt. Warlikowski attempts to discover the meaning of this declaration. In some peculiar way Shylock tries to close on Antonio as though he would like to ask: "how to be just like you?" or "how to lift the bound between us?".

Coda

These three Shakespearian characters portrayed by Warlikowski create the circle of outcasts, individuals who have been deprived of their self-narration and equal rights to be a part of community. All of them have been defined by the same condition. Furthermore, Bryce Lease [2016: 187] argues that:

The intention of the adaptation is not to read these three characters exclusively or individually, rather as a new complex, multi-faceted figure; an intention that requires an equalizing of each position of exclusion that is compounded by the casting of a single actor, Adam Ferency, to embody all three roles.

The question from the first avatar's scene returns in all these stories as a leitmotiv. "How to be just like you?" does not mean "how to be the same?". For Lear, Othello, and Shylock this question conveys rather "how to have the same rights like you to express myself?"

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