

*Shakespeare in the Worlds of
Communism and Socialism*

Edited by Irena R. Makaryk and Joseph G. Price
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006

Reviewer: Alexander C. Y. Huang

What kind of conversations would one have with Shakespeare in times of political crisis, in times of revolution and wars? Much ink has been spilled over Marxist approaches to literature, but little is known in the English-speaking world about Shakespeare's fortunes in the communist and socialist worlds except for, perhaps, Jan Kott's Poland (*Shakespeare Our Contemporary* [*Szkice o Szekspirze*], 1964). For those who know—or think they know—Shakespeare, a foray into this global cultural history is a triple experience of the Shakespearean text, of rewritings with their attendant ideologies, and of the Marxist critical tradition (our own or “theirs”). Over a decade in the making, *Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communism and Socialism*, a collection of eighteen well-illustrated, wide-ranging articles, is a sophisticated contribution to the scholarship on Shakespeare in the modern world. The book takes readers on a kaleidoscopic tour to Ukraine, Latvia, the USSR, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Cuba, China, and back to North American academic circles. The coeditors rightly note that of all these countries, “China has had the strongest, and longest, history of Shakespeare reception” (10). On the other hand, North Korea, “with its closed society and rejection of anything Western,” and Vietnam as “an emergent Communist state,” are not covered for lack of “evidence of Shakespeare's role in the adaptation of Marx” (9). While this may be true of North Korea, there are plenty of interesting works in Vietnam, including stage productions in *tuong* “operatic” style and *A Dream in Hanoi* (2002), a controversial documentary directed by Tom Weidinger that chronicles an English-Vietnamese bilingual coproduction of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Hanoi by the Central Dramatic Company of Vietnam and the Artists Repertory Theater of Portland, Oregon. Likewise, Cambodia and Laos would have provided fruitful contrasts and paral-

lets to the unpredictable relations among communist and socialist ideologies and Shakespeare that the volume aims to address.¹

One of the pitfalls of intercultural scholarship is the alluring evolutionary model that promulgates teleological history, which is addressed at the opening of the book. To their credit, coeditors Irena Makaryk and Joseph Price are quick to direct readers' attention to "the deeply ambivalent nature of Communist Shakespeare"—serving and subverting at once the official ideologies (5). Indeed, as most essays demonstrate, there is no single, fixed template for the appropriation of Shakespeare in these countries despite the dominance of the Soviet experience of revolution (6). The succinct but informative introduction steers readers away from any assumption about evolutionary trajectories of the uses of Shakespeare.

The volume is divided into four parts, the first two arranged chronologically and the next two thematically. Short, section-specific introductions by Makaryk precede the essays in each part. Part 1, "Shakespeare in Flux: 1917 to the 1930s," contains essays by Irena Makaryk, Laura Raidonis Bates, Arkady Ostrovsky, Laurence Senelick, and Alexey Bartoshevitch on the process of making Shakespeare available, for purposes of "unifying cross-cultural interests" and "homogeniz[ing] readership," in the twenty-eight languages of Ukraine, Latvia, and Stalin's Russia. As in communist China, Shakespeare was appropriated as a "founding father" of socialist realism in these locations. Among the surprising stories told in this section are one of an intellectualized production of *Macbeth* for peasants in 1920s Ukraine and another about the perceived social functions of comedy in Russian theater. A specialist of Shakespeare reception, especially in the USSR, who is proficient in Russian and Ukrainian, Makaryk delves into a 1924 experimental modernist production of *Macbeth* by Les Kurbas, one of the most important Ukrainian directors, that came under attack by party officials who believed that "the foundational role of theatre should not lie in aesthetic delight but in its social significance" (30). Through the case study of Kurbas and analysis of the impact of the ideologies of socialist realism, this chapter delineates the larger picture of how the party leaders scrambled to create a coherent theory in the process of "the homogenization of theatrical art and cultural life" (34). Opening with a discussion of an enthusiastically received production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in Moscow in 1936, Bartoshevitch's chapter asks why so many classical comedies, including those by Molière and Shakespeare, were produced

in the thirties and forties, an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of the Russian theater. The answer lies in the advent of “historical optimism,” which made Shakespeare a spokesperson of the rising “winning” class of the proletariats. Comedies provided salutary illusions and satisfied a “craving for harmony” (109). Interestingly, *Much Ado About Nothing* and Stalin’s 1935 proclamation that “comrades, life has become more joyful” (106) also found a ready home outside of the context discussed by this essay, and the Soviet dramaturgy lived on. As Marxism moved eastward from Europe, it increasingly took on utopian purposes. Soviet directors working in Maoist China under the Soviet-Chinese collaboration scheme, such as Yevgeniya Lipkovskaya, similarly favored comedies (e.g., her production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in Chinese) and propagated Stalin’s negative view of Hamlet as an intellectual. They appropriated comedy’s utopian vocabulary and idyllic and pastoral elements to project a bright communist future.²

The situation changed with Stalin’s death in 1953, and *Hamlet* took center stage, as amply demonstrated by Makaryk’s second essay in the volume. For good reasons, part 2 turns to various uses of *Hamlet* during World War II, with an emphasis on the German experience. Essays by Werner Habicht, Lawrence Guntner, and Maik Hamburger unpack the political and literary meanings of Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, which were intensified by East-West polarization in Germany. Hamburger discusses Piet Drescher’s *Hamlet* in Potsdam in 1983, which he calls “the bluntest exposition of dictatorship known to GDR theatre” (208). The history of Shakespeare in East Germany reveals the permeability of the physical and intellectual boundaries established by official ideologies and the Berlin Wall. An in-depth study of the “flagship” production of *Hamlet* in Moscow (1954) by Nikolay Okhlopkov, Laurence Senelick’s essay presents valuable new documentation on the work by one of the most important directors in Soviet theater history.

With essays by Martin Hilský, Krystyna Kujawínska-Courtney, Zoltán Márkus, Xiao Yang Zhang, and Shuhua Wang, part 3 ventures beyond the familiar circuits of the USSR and Germany to translations of and artistic experimentations with Shakespeare in China, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia after 1949, when those countries signed up for the idea of Shakespeare as a “Soviet-sanctioned humanist writer of the people” (213). Márkus traces the developments of the “thematic duality of love and war” of *Troilus and Cressida* from the 1960s to the early 1980s in Hungary. Hilský ex-

tracts, through delicious details, multiple layers of intended and unintended meanings when his 1986 translation of *Love's Labor's Lost* was staged in Prague with a curtain made of iron on the set. Among many other examples, act 5, scene 2, in which the king of Navarre and his lords are disguised as Russians, resonated with the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia (215–20). In the shadow of the political discourse of the normalization and the Prague Spring reformers, Costard's remark, "Walk aside the true folk, and let the traitors stay" (4.3.210), took on different meanings each night as Hilský sat through the performances, hinging upon who is perceived to be the "traitor" and who the "true folk" (223). Courtney's account of Shakespeare in Poland strikes a similar chord by noting the ironic turn his plays take as the country moved from oppression to liberation. Director Krystyna Skuszanka reminisced during an interview with Courtney that under the communist regime, attendance of politicized theater was at once sponsored and encouraged by official policy and seen by the populace as "a meaningful defiance against totalitarianism," an attractive community event to achieve a collective catharsis (242). A liberated Poland no longer provided the stimulus for artistic experimentation and enticement for audiences to attend theater performances.

The last section, "Theorizing Marxist Shakespeares," takes up the questions of critics' and artists' positionality when approaching Shakespeare and literary criticism in Cuba (article by Maria Clara Versiani Galery), East Germany (Robert Weimann), and North America (Sharon O'Dair). In his article on the productive tensions that always exist between academic criticism and the unpredictable energy of theatrical performances in East Germany, Weimann lays bare the limitations of two approaches that tend to yield predictable conclusions: the approach that pursues "a salvaging operation"—recovering certain positions at a particular point in a play's reception history in order to serve today's ideology—and a "muck-raking" approach that focuses on past liabilities and accuses communist Shakespeares of being nothing more than a "deplorable aberration from the true standards of Western culture" (329). He suggests, with solid evidence, that "Shakespeare in East German post-war theatre and criticism constituted a public site on which cultural communications inhabited an ambivalent space . . . between ideological dogma and a search for a forceful, irrepressible performative" (346). O'Dair's closing piece examines the tension between poststructuralism and Marxism in the Canadian and U.S.

academies and the unique challenges of democratization in elite higher education. She posits that it is precisely because of scholars' acute awareness of the fact that they cannot turn class analysis on themselves and achieve political transformation from within their institutions that Marxism remains "a site of desire" for North American Shakespeareans (366).

The 402-page book builds upon and supplements such works as *Shakespeare in the New Europe*, edited by Michael Hattaway, Boika Sokolova, and Derek Roper (1994); *Redefining Shakespeare: Literary Theory and Theater Practice in the German Democratic Republic* (1997), edited by J. Lawrence Guntner and Andrew M. McLean; Zdenek Stribrny's *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (2000); and *Painting Shakespeare Red: An East-European Appropriation* by Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova (2001). Shurbanov and Sokolova's book deals exclusively with Bulgaria, while others focus on Eastern Europe. Makaryk and Price's book brings the conversation beyond the Eastern bloc to a global level.

It would be useful to have more interconnected essays on the trajectories of Marxism as it moves from its European homeland to locations discussed in the volume and beyond.³ It is important to recognize that the strength of the book lies in its capacity to compel readers to consider the unique perils and rewards of engaging cultural events that, for lack of historical distance (such as the collapse of the Soviet Union), may expose our biases for the better. As the introduction and O'Dair's essay cogently argue, the study of ideological Shakespeare is "itself not a neutral act" but rather an exercise preoccupied with pressing issues of our present moment (7).

Notes

1. The reception history of Shakespeare in Southeast Asia is substantial. *Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace*, ed. Alexander C. Y. Huang and Charles S. Ross (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009); and Alexander C. Y. Huang, "Shakespeare in Southeast Asia," in *The Shakespeare Encyclopedia: Life, Works, World, and Legacy*, 5 vols., ed. Patricia Parker (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, forthcoming).

2. Alexander C. Y. Huang, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 142–60.

3. Cf. Daryl Glaser and David M. Walker, eds., *Twentieth Century Marxism: A Global Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007).