

## **MACBETH IN (THE SHADE OF) IRAQ: CROSSING THE BORDERS OF POLAND, NATO AND THE DEFENSIVE WAR**

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### **Abstract:**

The numerous Polish productions of *Macbeth* in an overt or covert fashion address issues that have been at the core of political debate in the past decade, such as the state's engagement in military missions that are in fact real wars. Furthermore, they also comment on the new Polish political system (is it still "new"?) and the situation of individuals in it, how they can profit in it. The paper discusses productions such as Andrzej Wajda's (2004) from the Stary Theatre in Kraków, Maja Kleczewska's (2004) from the Kochanowski Theatre in Opole, Grzegorz Jarzyna's (2005; the full title is "2007: *Macbeth*") from the Teatr Rozmaitości (TR) in Warsaw, and Piotr Kruszczyński's (2005) from the Polski Theatre in Warsaw.

**Keywords:** *performance, reinterpretation, recontextualization, politics*

In recent years in Poland particularly one play by Shakespeare has been used to comment on the topical situations, especially the state's engagement in what is called military missions, but what has turned out to be in fact wars, ones fought not in order to defend Poland, but – as it has been argued – to defend democracy. Now, this is something of a paradox: on the one hand, the illegal democratic opposition under the communist regime sought and fought to bring democracy in Poland; for this reason, Poles feel that it is justified they be perceived as fighters for democracy (for the first time Poland was actively involved in the "defence of democracy" in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Furthermore, it corroborates a romantic myth of fighting for "yours, and our cause", viz. freedom. On the other hand, however, such a stance runs counter to another, perhaps even more significant myth, that of the justified defensive war, linked with the threats Poland received from its neighbours (and the partitions it went through). The numerous productions of *Macbeth* in an overt or covert fashion address these issues. Furthermore, they also comment on the new Polish political system (is it still "new"?) and the situation of individuals in it, how they

can profit in it. The productions discussed will include Andrzej Wajda's (2004) from the Stary Theatre in Kraków, Maja Kleczewska's (2004) from the Kochanowski Theatre in Opole, Grzegorz Jarzyna's (2005; the full title is "2007: *Macbeth*") from the Teatr Rozmaitości (TR) in Warsaw, and Piotr Kruszczyński's (2005) from the Polski Theatre in Warsaw.

### 1. Andrzej Wajda's *Macbeth* (2004)

Wajda's production is quite surprising in his theatrical oeuvre. It turns out that his previous attempt to approach *Macbeth* was the 1969 teleplay, shot partially on location, partially in the television studio. Many critics view Wajda's new production in the light of his famous theatrical rendering of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Such a context, however, does not seem to be fully justified, if only for one fundamental reason: the age of the protagonists. Surprisingly enough, the actors playing the main roles – Krzysztof Globisz (as Macbeth) and Iwona Bielska (Lady Macbeth) are an aging couple, not young and ambitious people who cannot wait for their chance to seize power. Consequently, it is not that they are impatient; in Wajda's production they seem to grab the *last* chance that fate offers them. The production's pessimism and gloomy nature is further enhanced by the décor: Wajda and the stage designer Krystyna Zachwatowicz keep it as simple as possible; its characteristic feature is that it is monochromatic, just black and white, with the dominance of the former. The costumes are likewise dark and sober, whereas the main element of the stage design are the prevalent black plastic bags containing dead bodies of the casualties of war.

This is how the performance actually opens: the bare floorboards of the stage are strewn with plastic bags containing the bodies of killed soldiers: the symbol of war, the symbol of a battle just fought (one cannot fail to recall at this point the first scenes of Polański's filmic *Macbeth*, in which the battleground is also covered with mutilated bodies of warriors). A red ribbon ties the bags to the necks of the bodies. Significantly, the Witches in Wajda's play actually do appear in such black bags, with their heads hidden under bandages, thus becoming, as Piotr Gruszczyński<sup>1</sup> observed, the spirits of war destruction. When they utter their lines, the witches disappear among the dead bodies by simply lying down.

War imagery is in the production also marked by the black uniforms which the protagonists (and other characters) actually wear, stylised on modern military outfit. Interestingly, Wajda and Zachwatowicz do not stop at that; they

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<sup>1</sup> Piotr Gruszczyński, "Wiedźmy wojny" [Witches of War], at: <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/6700,druk.html>

attempt to extend the play onto the whole of the stage production, having stagehands dressed in the Spetsnaz uniforms, wearing balaclavas. Thus, the oppressive, even totalitarian atmosphere of the performance is further underscored. As one of the critics remarked, Wajda's show is about the present-day war, as if it were a CNN-report.

Wajda does not specify the locality of his production. He just presents the image of war at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, drawing on the grim experience of the wars in Bosnia, Chechnya, and of course Iraq. The significance of these experiences lies in that the wars shocked the mass public by the atrocities committed in them, mass murders of civilians, tortures of POWs, construction of concentration camps, etc. This is the evil that Macbeth-like soldiers, lured by a dream of power, may perpetuate.

## 2. Piotr Kruszczyński's *Macbeth* (2005)

War is not the context in which Piotr Kruszczyński puts his *Macbeth*. On the contrary, as one of the critics put it, it is a "country *Macbeth*" (Majcherek), or even "a State-Owned Farm *Macbeth*",<sup>1</sup> situated in the Polish province, and clearly alluding to contemporary Polish politicians.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the image of war is very much present in the production, despite the location. It is shown in a most characteristic manner, though. Since Kruszczyński evokes the contemporary mass culture, the world of the play is filtered through mass media, especially television, steeped in the commercials. The war is naturally mediated through television, but not in the grim reports from the front, but actually narrated in the style typical of sports commentary – the spectator recognizes the voice of a Polish well known football commentator, Dariusz Szpakowski.

Other tokens of contemporary war are rather scarce in the production. Yet, they include guns and bullet-proof vests, which Macbeth and Banquo wear. Furthermore, Kruszczyński's *Macbeth* returns home from ... the war in Iraq and is welcomed by his parents (sic! this is not the only directorial intervention into the original plot). Rather, Kruszczyński prefers to stress a most pessimistic vision of the fictional world, one which – again – runs counter to Shakespearean vision. Thus, Malcolm does not bring relief into the troubled Scotland, but becomes another tyrant. What critics, generally reserved in praises in the reviews of the production, appreciate is the manner in which the transfer of power is signalled to the audience: by the change of huge portraits of Duncan,

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Pawłowski, "Makbet z PGR-u" [A State-Owned Farm *Macbeth*]. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 13. 17-01-2005.

<sup>2</sup> The same critic, Pawłowski compares Kruszczyński's performance to Ivo Brešan's *The Performance of Hamlet in the Village of Mrdusa Donja*, successfully shown on Polish television in 1985.

Macbeth and Malcolm, respectively. Also, fate – symbolised in the play by the mysterious figures of the Weird Sisters – is in Kruszczyński's production represented by children playing cards, which further underscores the unpredictability and fickleness of fortune, its indifference to people's lives. The children may actually remind a film goer of the opening of Julie Taymor's *Titus*, in which a boy wreaks havoc on toy soldiers, which are soon transformed into human figures.

### 3. Maja Kleczewska's *Macbeth* (2004)

Kruszczyński's production is also characterised by a fast sequence of short scenes, resembling the editing typical of a video clip (that is why a critic – Agnieszka Celeda - called it “A Video Clip *Macbeth*”). Likewise, Maja Kleczewska's performance is noted for its fast pace, to the extent that it has been termed an “action movie *Macbeth*”.<sup>1</sup> This term describes the production aptly also in another respect: Kleczewska sets the play in the milieu of mafia and mobsters. Of course, her characters are not the “honourable” mobsters of the 1940s one knows from the *Godfather* sequence of films. Rather, in the eyes of yet another critic, the production is more like *Goodfellas*;<sup>2</sup> it certainly quotes from gangster movies.<sup>3</sup> In the construction of the figures and action, Kleczewska draws on two major sources: the increasing violence in contemporary life, on the one hand, and the Tarantino style of cinema, on the other. From the former she borrows strong scenes (which actually made some teachers at Opole secondary schools think twice whether or not their students should see the performance), from the latter she attempts to create a distance to the cruelties shown on stage. As I have already signalled, not everybody approved of Kleczewska's play; also, critical voices were far from unanimous. Be that as it may, one aspect of the production needs to be underscored: the director draws a most consistent vision of one facet of contemporary evil. The drastic and explicit nature of violence in the production should not be surprising in present-day theatre, especially in the context of the In-Yer-Face plays by, for example, Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill.

The source of evil in Kleczewska's production is, similarly to Kruszczyński's play, mass culture, the perpetuating cycle of movies and newsreels which accelerate violence. Therefore, violence in the performance is represented by mass culture tokens. For example, Lady Macduff is raped and

<sup>1</sup> Jacek Melchior, “Makbet Polski” [Polish Macbeth]. *Wprost* 9. 26-02-2005.

<sup>2</sup> Marek Świercz, “Makbet z ferajny” [A *Goodfellas* Macbeth]. *Dziennik Zachodni* 110. 12-05-2005.

<sup>3</sup> Kleczewska's decision to set the action of her play in the milieu of the gangster world reminds one of Michael Reilly's *Men of Respect* (1991), located in New Orleans, with a Voodoo priestess as an equivalent of the Witches.

killed by figures wearing Mickey Mouse masks. This is one of the many scenes of utter cruelty in the context of readily-recognised mass culture icons. Furthermore, violence in the production is tinted with perversity (also visible in Jarzyna's show). Thus, the Weird Sisters are presented as drag queens. They are present on stage throughout the production, which – of course – reminds a reader in English literature of the Medieval stage conventions whereby God presided, as it were, over a morality. It seems that it is precisely the perverse nature of evil that attracts characters, who in this way test the limits of their power. The only way to counteract this celebration of cruelty is to use against the degenerate Macbeth a counter-terrorist commando, which brings us to the theme of the present-day American-style war: on terrorism.

An interesting feature of Kleczewska's production is her search for new spaces. Her production requires a space vaster than most traditional theatres, which made the jurors of the Kalisz theatre festival, held on the stage of the Kalisz theatre, actually travel to Opole to watch the play, because the stage in Kalisz proved too small. The momentum of Kleczewska's play is similar to Grzegorz Jarzyna's version of *Macbeth*, which actually crosses the borders of both the theatre and Poland.

#### **4. Grzegorz Jarzyna's 2007: *Macbeth* (2005)**

Jarzyna moves his play to 1. a non-theatrical space of the old Waryński factory in Warsaw, and 2. Iraq, occupied by American troops. As the title of the performance suggests, the action is set in a nearby future; it appears, however, that this is a mere trick to provide a distance to the events shown on stage, or – to be precise – stages of the factory's shop floor and galleries.

Macbeth in Jarzyna's production is a U.S. major, commander of the First Scottish Assault Unit, who – against the good advice and an explicit order of his superior, General Duncan – decides to carry out an attack on the most wanted terrorist, Riazan. Characteristically, Macbeth kills the terrorist when the latter is genuinely praying in the mosque, simultaneously murdering accidental worshippers. Macbeth celebrates the execution of his enemy, beheading him with a knife (needless to say, he will suffer a similar death). One of his soldiers actually takes a digital picture of Macbeth posing with the terrorist's head in his hand. Here, Jarzyna clearly alludes to the terrorist practice of killing foreigners whereby terrorists ceremoniously behead their captives in front of the camera, as well as the commandoes' custom of taking photographs of their feats (exemplified in Poland with the pictures of the Grom assault forces collaborating with the Americans in the initial phases of the second Iraq war, which seeped into the media). It is not accidental therefore that one of the critics

Roman Pawłowski<sup>1</sup> referred to the production as a post-Abu Ghraib version. Interestingly, it is not so much that the American troops torture the Iraqis, but that the Americans torture themselves, especially in the scene of Macbeth's welcoming party to celebrate Duncan's entry into the former's castle/military zone. It is here that the American troopers organize an orgy, engaging in homosexual sex, tolerated by the commanders. Incidentally, the spectators also view yet another scene of explicit sex: Macbeth and his wife are having an intercourse after the murder of Duncan, against a lit fridge containing coca cola cans. This also may serve as an example of perverse nature of evil spreading among the troops.

The degeneration of the soldiers is in the production further signalled by Malcolm's stance and the figure of the conjurer, entertaining Macbeth's guests at a feast, an equivalent of the play's Act 3 Scene 4, in which Banquo's ghost appears. Malcolm, a young officer, actually stands up against his father when Duncan decides to reward Macbeth by nominating him the commander of the Cawdor air base. Malcolm bitterly reminds Duncan of the circumstances of Riazan's death (he was captured in a shrine, at prayer), which – in Malcolm's romantic vision of the war – was dishonourable. Characteristically, Malcolm is ignored by his father and his is the only voice on military honour we hear in the production. Nevertheless, it – on the one hand – contrasts sharply with the erosion of the army morale, and – on the other – sheds a positive light on the character of Malcolm, who, according to the play, will replace Macbeth.<sup>2</sup>

The figure of the conjurer is one of the whole series of mysterious characters. Dressed in the colours of the American flags, he takes a rabbit out of his top hat and performs other stereotypical tricks. Quite soon, however, he is transformed into a grotesque character wearing a cap with long rabbit-like ears who prophesies to Macbeth about the latter's future. In this way, he becomes a figment of Macbeth's imagination as well as one of the three incarnations of the Witches.

The first incarnation, appearing just after Riazan's execution is an Arab woman (the actress playing the part is dark complexioned and has Arab lineaments: slightly aquiline thin nose, and large dark eyes), dressed in the characteristic chador. She speaks the prophecy in a loud, unnatural voice, as if she were possessed. Later on the same actress in the same dress appears as Lady Macbeth's servant, thus undergoing further scenic transformation. The final

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Pawłowski, "Makbet po Abu Ghraib" [A post Abu Ghraib Macbeth]. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 117. 21-05-2005.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm's protest also draws the Polish spectator's attention to the concepts of justified war. According to the Romantic myth only defensive war or fight for freedom (not only that of Poland, but any country – "for yours and our freedom", as the slogan had it) are justified. Naturally, Jarzyna's production undermines and questions this myth.

incarnation of the Witches turns out to be the Doctor, who looks after Lady Macbeth. This role is played by an actress, with a bald head and dressed in white. She also makes a prophesy, this time in English, when actually talking to Macbeth. In fact, she may be treated not so much as the Doctor figure, but as a symbol of death, a version of modern Grim Reaper (which in Polish happens to be feminine). This symbolic reading of the character is corroborated by the scene of Lady Macbeth's death: she dies in a laundry wrapped in sheets from a washing machine, sheets which appear to actually strangle her. Shortly before it happens the spectator notices the Doctor figure seated in the laundry, as if waiting for her turn to use the machine or waiting for the machine to finish the laundry, indifferently observing Lady Macbeth, without reacting to her predicament. Of course, Lady Macbeth's death in the laundry is a theatrical translation of the sleepwalking scene from the play (earlier in the production, we see how she cleans the space where Macbeth butchered Riazan with a garden hose).

The laundry is one of the many locations or stages used in the production. It is separated from other locales by a translucent plastic screen, or curtain, which gives it a look of an abattoir. Incidentally, it is against the screen that the Murderer's brains are splashed when Macbeth shoots him in the head, after hearing a report on the killing of Banquo. Jarzyna also recreates in his play other localities; the production opens with a view of HQ, where General Duncan and his staff officers actually watch on numerous TV screens the development of military actions (as a critic observed, war in this production is mediated through television; this is how the Western public is informed about the war today, this is how war is experienced today in the West). Using the vast space of the shop floor, Jarzyna – with the help of spotlights and appropriate sound effects – presents the landing of a helicopter, in which Duncan arrives in Macbeth's zone. The director thus creates a number of stages, positioned both horizontally and vertically in the space of the old factory. The post-industrial interior significantly facilitates Jarzyna's image of contemporary Iraqi *Macbeth*.

## 5. A Coda

To finish this brief discussion of the memorable season 2004/2005, in which "*Macbeth* ruled with absolute power"<sup>1</sup> I would like to mention one more production, prepared by the avant-garde Biuro Podróży Theatre from Poznan, famous for its fringe performances, and directed by Paweł Szkotak. This production whose title is *Who is this man in blood?* [Kim jest ten człowiek we

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<sup>1</sup> Jacek Sieradzki, "Zły Makbet" [Bad/evil Macbeth]. *Polityka* 29. 23-07-2005.

krwi?]) is also a comment on contemporary war, be it Bosnia, Chechnya or Iraq. The action is situated in a wood; the trees symbolise characters; when one of them dies, it is lit and burns; in the course of time, the wood becomes a burning wood. The references to the war today are contained, among others, in the characters' using modern weapons and virtually gunning down their opponents and in the Witch figures, who look like the suicidal Shaheeds, and whom Macbeth (in a uniform actually reminiscent of the Nazis from World War II) eventually kills with his gun. Thus, in an outdoor performance presented in the space of the Poznań Old Market Square at the annual Malta Theatre Festival Szkotak builds a vision of total war, which crosses civilization and temporal borders, and which haunts and will haunt the West. It is a war which encompasses the experience and atrocities of World War II, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, but also Rwanda. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is thus used once again to explain or perhaps ask questions about the growth of evil in contemporary world, questions like the one posed in the title of Szpotak's production.