

RUSSIAN AND WESTERN PRODUCTIONS OF “THE MERCHANT OF VENICE”: SOME PROBLEMS OF STAGING

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ABSTRACT

Authors turn to the creativity of one of the classics of world literature, to Shakespeare and the problem of his plays stagings in the modern theatre. Authors underline that according the different directors accents “The Merchant of Venice” can be staged in completely new way, facing the actual challenges of modernity. Directors can use different effects to achieve such a result, but the canonic text remains the same. The certain timeline of productions of the XXth century is created and different directors’ approaches are shown. The authors attention is also focused on the recent Russian productions of A. Zhitinkin and R. Surua. Both of them are completely different, but still bear some common traits. The authors show how the post-modern theatre can transform and interpret the classical text, enrich it with the modern problems. This research shows how the productions of “The Merchant of Venice” are combined with the problems of antisemitism, intolerance, organized crime, etc.

Keywords: *contemporary interpretations of the classics, eternal images, Shakespeare, staging, antisemitism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice" can be considered among the most controversial creations of Bard. Allocated in the first folio as a comedy, it bears the clear imprint of the tragic vision of the world and man, which four years later would be shown in the great tragedies. None of Shakespeare's plays can be named such an eclectic mix of different genre traditions. At first it's a lyrical comedy with common for Shakespeare's early period renaissance characters, jokes, trickery. Then it is a story borrowed from folklore about the courtship with a choice of casket. Finally, it is the story of intolerance and hatred that led to the crime. And if in "Romeo and Juliet", "Hamlet" and even "King Lear" buffoonery and clowning organically fit into the text of the play, without compromising its integrity, that fact we can't meet in that very story. It brings certain difficulties for the directors, who want to stage this play. It was easier in the time of Shakespeare, when Shylock was perceived as a collective image of gentile, villain whose defeat caused the joy of the audience and marked the victory of good over evil.

A heartbreaking monologue "Hath not a Jew eyes" was perceived as an attempt of Shylock to justify his wickedness. The demand for a pound of flesh is quite consistent with the Christian legend about the so called ritual sacrifice made by the Jews, especially because there were no Jews themselves in England - they were expelled in the 13th century, and were able to return to England only in the second half of 17th century. Another factor boosting the anti-Semitic ideas was the fact that shortly before the play creation personal physician of Elizabeth, Portuguese Jew Lopez, was executed, he was accused of trying to poison the queen, but his fact remained not proved (one can find a hidden link in the play, when Shylock is

named "wolf heart»). It should be noted that this period in England was marked by intolerance towards any foreigners and, especially, the gentiles, and also towards nationals professing other religious views .

Anyway, in Shakespeare's time, and until the 19th century directors did not feel much inconvenience, and Shylock was performed as comical character in clown wig and fake. This tradition, at least on the English stage, was broken by great Edmund Kean, who first shown Shylock as character deserving a compassion, performing this part inspired by Cain of Byron [1:120]. Another significant staging of the play was made in the 20-ies of the last century by Terence Gray, who was one of the most striking and paradoxical reformers of the English theatre. Although an image of Shylock was also decided in a grotesque way, those who opposed him also did not cause much sympathy. According to A.V. Bartosiewicz, Venice in that production appeared as a dingy gloomy city where hypocrites, evil and shrewd businessmen, who are dressed like Renaissance clothing hedonists, live. "The demand of meat of the debtor is the common thing for such Venice. Antonio and his comrades were not surprised by the idea of a pound of meat, they were shocked that the miserable Jew dared to put such a condition"[1:178]. Pathetic words about friendship, loyalty, compassion were pronounced by the actors as the formal clichés. During the court scene Portia monotonously muttered proverbially famous lines, as the process was, in fact, a mere formality, the result of which was known in advance by everyone except Shylock. In the final, after the apotheosis in Belmonte ruined Shylock came down from the stage to the stalls, he played on the hurdy-gurdy, and sang in a nasal voice. It was the only moment in the play when grotesque alienation was softened, and in the audience could feel compassion to the hero.

2. TRADITIONS AND PREDECESSORS

In the 20th century this tradition - the desire to cause sympathy for Shylock - became dominant in all countries, except in cases when the play was intended to incite anti-Semitism, as it was in the Third Reich, where the play was staged immediately after the infamous Kristallnacht and later went on all the territories controlled by Germany. It is interesting that there were nearly no productions in Soviet Russia, due to the fact that in society, carefully masking the anti-Semitism, the story of a pound of meat, written by playwright, who was considered close to socialist realism, was clearly unwanted.

If in the first half of the 20th century, the play could still be staged with minimal adjustments, and with the help of putting the proper emphasis it did not cause a sharp rejection of the spectator, after the Holocaust Jewish theme became too painful to stage "The Merchant of Venice" without changing the genre structure itself, which was primarily determined by the image of Shylock. According to J.C. Bulman, none of Shakespeare's comedies was edited so many times as this one [3:27]. First the Western directors started to turn over "The Merchant of Venice". At first it was only an attempt to edit the Shakespearean text, cutting and rewriting the individual pieces of text to soften the image of Shylock. That principle was used in the Jewish Theatre of New York [2: 172]. But the next directors of the play took up the matter more radically. The same presented Maurice Schwartz's production called "Shylock and his daughter in 1947. Director makes the story of Shakespeare a part of historical chronicles of anti-Semitism. The action takes place in the Jewish ghetto in Venice in 1559, which shows all the nuances of the relationship between Christians and Jews .

Even more radically politicized performances appeared in 1960-70ies of the last century. At first, German director George Tabori staged "The Merchant of Venice" as a play within in the play - the action takes place in a Nazi concentration camp, where it is performed for Nazi soldiers by the prisoners. The Hungarian director Tibor Egervary living in Canada does the same, he creates a production called "Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice in Auschwitz." Both the director actually used the technique previously demonstrated by Peter Weiss in his play "Marat / Sade". This presentation of the material could not fail to remind the audience about how the play was used in Nazi Germany for anti-Semitic propaganda.

In the 90s mono plays appeared, where the events of "The Merchant of Venice" were shown through the perception of Shylock. Thus, the American actor and director Gareth Armstrong wrote and performed the mono play "Shylock" in 1997, which combined the text of Shakespeare's with the story about anti-Semitism in Europe. Initially his Shylock is shown just as such stereotypical Jew, as he was portrayed in Elizabethan times - in red wig and fake nose. But when he reached the lines, " And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? " in the famous monologue - he tore off his clown attributes and transformed to a deeply offended, suffering person.

The most notable dramaturgical remake of Shakespeare's play was the play of the famous English playwright Arnold Wesker " The Merchant". Wesker repeatedly appealed to the Jewish question on a material of modern England. By his own words, he wrote his "Merchant" in response to a sensational statement of Laurence Olivier in the role of Shylock in 1973 at the National Theatre. He believed that, despite the clear desire of the director and the actor to cause sympathy for Shylock, Olivier played an evil caricature of the Jew, who for a brief moment becomes human, but still is a caricature. "It is like no one Jew whom I had known!" [4: xvi]. While working on the play Wesker discovered the fact which became the key to rethinking the history of a promissory note. It turns out, according to the Venetian law, citizens do not have the right to any transactions with the Jews without a contract. [4:xvii]. The play takes place in the Ghetto Nuovo, in Venice in 1563, 10 years after the burning of Jewish books, which makes Shylock of Wesker to hide his library. Antonio is an old Shylock's friend, who helps him to make a catalog of books. House of Shylock becomes a refuge for Jews fleeing from persecution in other European countries. He patronizes artists, intellectuals and activists, whose names are taken from the chronicles of the time. Shylock offers free money to Antonio as to his friend, and named him a brother, but it is against the laws of Venice, and that leads to the decision to issue a promissory note. When Antonio is unable to return the money, the Venetian laws require the payment of the promissory note. Like in Shakespeare's play, Portia's intervention saved Shylock from death, but leads to a complete bankruptcy. Despite the persistence of many of Shakespeare's storylines Wesker insisted that his "Merchant", which was later called "Shylock" is not an adaptation but an original work. Indeed, the sequence of scenes, characters and motivations is changed. The genre of the play also undergoes changes, it is turned to a historical drama, throws a bridge from the past to the present, revealing thus motivated events of the twentieth century. Moreover, Wesker uses Shakespeare's text, and creates his own style of Victorian prose, borrowing from the original only famous monologue. John. L. Levinson is right , saying "The Merchant / Shylock" by Wesker is obliged to "The Merchant of Venice" by Shakespeare for its creation, and from beginning to end is permeated with allusions to the original [5: 260].

3. DISCUSSION

This deconstruction of Shakespeare's play is quite symptomatic, as the recent Russian directors of "The Merchant of Venice» are trying to stage the play not about anti-Semitism, but about intolerance, which can bear not only racial and religious character.

Kazan production of "The Merchant of Venice" was the first in Russia since 1919. Recently, however, there were at least two acclaimed productions of this play. They are the production of A. Zhitinkin in Mossosvet Theatre (with M. Kozakov starring) in 1999 and immediately after the production of Sturua "Shylock" in the Et-Cetera Theatrtr with Alexander Kalyagin having the main part, which won the Golden Mask award in 2000.

Talking about performance of Zhitinkin, it was made in the aesthetics of the TV- show, according to M. Davydova [7], it is quite common for this director. The world of Renaissance Venice appears here as a total game show, which includes the elements of "Love at First Sight", pop concerts and various game shows, such as "Name That Tune". Even the famous scene of the court where the claimant Shylock demands a pound of flesh from the defendant Antonio as a forfeit, is shown like a theatrical trial with a

lawyer, the prosecutor and the jury, which is constantly on different channels. In the episode with the casket Portia and her maid Nerissa appear as the newscasters with the microphones.

There is some portion of eroticism - nude Portia is bathing and demonstrating her attractive figure, saying «fuck you» to annoying grooms.

Costumes are also made in the aesthetics of the TV show. Director created specific suits for all the characters. When Antonio comes to Shylock with a request to lend him money, Shylock appears as an oligarch in a white suit, coping on a cell phone about the situation on the stock exchange, while the court hearing he is in khaki camouflage, exactly from paramilitary settlements. The merchant Antonio by Alexander Goloborodko has an appearance of the former and current deputy party member, so that there are clear allusions themselves. At the same time all the critics (O.Zintsov, E.Yampolskaya, P. Rudnev, Agishev N., N. Kaminska, S.Rassadin) agree that over the entire brightness, outrageous and successful ideas no clear concept justifying all these "bells and whistles" can be found. And while the vast majority of critics allocate M. Kozakov's game that adds to the stage events a deep and terrible meaning. According to O. Zintsov, in the interpretation of Kozakov the usurer becomes, first of all, the severe exposé of anti-Semitism: "Some monologues are decorated with so pathetic overtones that it seems like the actor confused the theatre with the Parliament, which nestle many of his ideological opponents" [8]. "The Merchant of Venice, rests on Kozakov, on his strength and passion. On his knowledge of his own nation - good and bad" [9], - writes E. Yampolskaya. "At the same Kozakov <...> plays the tragedy not of the person - of the whole nation ... He plays the state of mind that a peaceful resolution of the conflict is no longer possible ... It goes beyond the eternal" Jewish question "and demonstrates what irreparable consequences necessarily fraught with long humiliation of a single person or the people" [9]. N.Kaminskaya echoed Yampolskaya: "His (Kazakov) Shylock is shockingly modern, and not because he uses a mobile phone, dresses fashionable uniform to the court. This Shylock is an absolute product of the second half of the twentieth century, <...>. We see the man in whom the age-old genetic memory is mixed with the wicked sense of revenge. His inner strength, mixed, of course, with the suffering, sublimated into a cold and desperate ... no, not defense, and offensiveness" [10].

This modern tendency to stage "Merchant" not only and not so much about anti-Semitism was continued by production R. Sturua, just a half of the year later. However, if Zhitinkin performance was, by all accounts, eclectic, here the director has achieved an absolutely organic integrity.

All the story lines of the play are staged in the one space of a modern bank office - with white tables, computers, and shelves with folders displays. There is subtle, as in a fog, the famous Venetian facade on a white backdrop. Unlike Kazakov, who from the beginning said about his character as a devout Jew - at the beginning of the play, he even appeared in a robe and read Hebrew psalm of David, Shylock of Kalyagin appears as a person without nationality - a respectable gentleman with a cigar, in a black top three and a bowler hat. When he shed coffee, he shamelessly wipes pants with kippah; when he opens Thales, he kills off mole from it - evidence that the book is opened infrequently. Shylock says that he was a Jew, when his dignity is offended, then it turns to his own tragedy. Sturua is not trying to whitewash Shylock which is quite justified. He did not introduce any fundamental adjustments to the text, only the traditional refusal of the last act. Moreover, the director of the play does not change the genre, keeping the comedy and lyricism of separate scenes. At first glance, Venice of Sturua is a place where all have long got used to each other and are not too concerned about issues of national identity. Here, everything is presented in a rather reduced way - without pathos, without bubbling hatred, no Shakespearean passions - a modern world where people are busy with purely material problems on the first glance. And the director in this performance shows how quickly this apparent balance can be broken as suddenly the executioner and the victim can be swapped and the one who has recently boasted of his generosity, would shout "Get him". N. Kazmina says according to this: "Sturua tried to rise above the fray and to weigh in the balance the mistakes of history and complexes on both sides. The Jewish question troubled him as a private matter

of one big problem - pre-programming of modern man on hostility to other people ". [11] The starring performer A.Kalyagin reflects on the same topic: "Deep hatred of man to man, as it turns out, is not because some ideas and difference of tastes, but because of the original inner hatred to the other blood. It was written by many. It was written by Shakespeare. Playing Shylock in a production by Robert Sturua means not to talk about racial prejudice, but of deep strength, driving humanity: understanding or lack of understanding that people with the other blood are the same people. This is a philosophical, political, civil, personal question ". [12].

Unlike the performance of Zhitinkin where Shylock, according to the insistence of Kozakov, dies - falls dead after the trial, Sturua's play ends with the appearance of Shylock daubed with six-pointed star drawn with the chalk on his back, sitting backwards on a donkey. That not only crowns the final humiliation of the hero, but also is an explicit reference to the auto-da-fe ritual burning of Jewish heretics by Spanish Inquisition, but also to the auto-da-fe of the twentieth century.

4. SUMMARY

Thus, we see that, on the one hand, the current productions of "The Merchant of Venice" fit into the overall tradition of postmodern theatre with its desire to deconstruct the classic canon, discovering new, hidden meanings of the text. On the other hand, it is obvious that all these changes are dictated not only and not so much by a fashion, but by the desire to reveal the background of the problem, ingeniously designated at the time of Shakespeare, which has become one of the most actual in our time.

5. CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's play are extremely interesting for modern directors. Their unique plots and methods give great opportunity for the discussion and can be easily transformed according the contemporary demands.

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