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Schandl, Veronika. *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-regime Hungary*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. Pp. 239.

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If we say that “Shakespeare is one of the ever-relevant authors”, we claim that Shakespeare’s plays are relevant in every country, at any time. Lofty statements like this passed into general currency centuries ago and anyone can pronounce them without giving proper thought to their underlying validity. It was the bold venture of a young Hungarian literary historian, Veronika Schandl, to explore and thoroughly explain what a similar statement means in Hungary, in the controversial second half of twentieth century; and her work does not echo the cliché referred to at the beginning but asks and answers the overwhelming question: how is this possible?

We cannot agree with the Hungarian literary critic who said “Shakespeare makes himself current” (quoted in Schandl 2009:19 — all quotations from this book.) This would be idolatry. It is the historical background, the general taste, and consequently the director’s choices that make a play meaningful and current: there must be an interdependence between the play and the society in which it is performed. As Schandl suggests, the real questions to be asked are first “why Shakespeare” and then “how he is played”. She immediately delineates her research method — “this study will discuss productions as authenticated forms of art” (3) —, and also justifies its validity: it is only possible to discuss Shakespeare at a given time, looking back at the historical past using highly selective material without a wish to draw an overall picture (5). In her scholarly work Schandl used retrospective methods such as television recordings, contemporary reviews, interviews and essays. The conclusions she offers are fascinating.

The book starts with a quick discussion of Hungarian theater history from 1945, when — a strange moment in history — theaters were already controlled by the Communist Party and Shakespeare was, after the Shakespeare-renaissance of the 1930s, still being treated as a national classic. After 1949, Shakespeare became “a representative of internationalism” and of social development and progress (11). Fortunately for the Party, Marx made 160 references to Shakespeare’s plays in his writings, and soon Shakespearean characters were seen as early predecessors of the Socialist hero, ideal for the new theater.

This is where the Hungarian journey toward subversion and the “dangerous” theater begins: a subversive theater in the guise of a historical and moral educator. The phenomenon that we call ‘communist doublespeak’ is already there, in a country which — as Schandl affirms — is a prison cell and the land of freedom at the same time, where theater performances are controlled by censors, and where people sit on the stairs of the theater or stand through the performance “only to be there”, to be able to say that I’ve taken part in something, “*I’ve seen that performance*”. The theater of those days communicated in two directions in a schizophrenic manner, and even if people were thrilled by subversive performances, they both “played an instrumental part in holding up and sustaining the regime and its system of doublespeak” (72).

Schandl is very sensitive and meticulous when she has to find the hidden correspondences between history and theatrical performance, even if sometimes she has to admit to the lack of reliable data about how subversion in the theaters actually worked, and is keenly aware of the fact that the feelings she describes were never actually pronounced or recorded but “felt and understood” (41) by actors and members of the audience. It would have been more than

fruitful for the author to ask actors, directors, or even theatergoers of that time, interview them about their feelings, and add their comments and insights to the printed material used during the research.

By putting the “socialist Shakespeare” into a meaningful context, Schandl can now ask the question how it was possible for the theater to work against the political system while at the same time coexisting with and depending on it. Adopting a chronological approach, she gives a brief description of the so-called Kádár-era (1956-1989) and the role of theaters in it, and moving toward the present time she shows with sharp eyes how theaters re-interpreted some of Shakespeare’s plays as generations and political events moved on. The concepts that were so much characteristic of Hungarian life from the 50s to the 80s — common guilt, favoritism, double-dealing, pacifism, doublespeak — find very natural connections with Shakespeare’s prominent plays featured in the book, namely *Hamlet*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure for Measure*.

One of the most important questions of the book is if Shakespeare criticized his own society with such brutal honesty, how did the Hungarian theater adapt this criticism to fit its own society in a dictatorial state? The author claims Shakespearean plays were all transported into contemporary Hungary, predominantly by the way directors changed them. But it is not all the same which of these changes we take into consideration in a historical investigation like this. Schandl, wisely, set about doing her research by a careful selection of plays (let us not forget that it would be worth scrutinizing other plays as well in the future especially *Richard III.*, *As You Like It*, or *The Merchant of Venice*). The first, prominent part of the book is occupied by *Hamlet* — the Hungarian Socialist *Hamlet* (there is a separate chapter in the book about Hungarian adaptations) from 1952 to 1983, dealing with the questions of social progress, guilt, acceptance and rebellion, then it moves on to three of the problem plays, the high esteem of which was connected to the so-called Goulash-Communism in Hungary after 1956.

Schandl shows us how favoritism appears in *All’s Well* and how functionaries are represented; how the false sense of freedom in private lives in Kádár’s years reappears in the productions of a “a bitter comedy”, *Troilus and Cressida*, which mirror the separation of the public and private spheres in Kádár’s Hungary and express a desire to move from the “social” towards the “personal”. Thus, Pandarus in Hungary becomes a positive figure watching over the happiness of the young lovers. What Schandl refers to as the “failure of private lives” in *Troilus* could very well be that of the audience, whereas the double dealings of Ulysses did reflect those of the leading elite, of those who spoke about peace and humanity while warmongering and ignoring human rights. In the final chapter, productions of *Measure for Measure* play with the skills of reading between the lines and doublespeak so necessary for Hungarians at the time. The productions are “about the mechanisms of a regime which tries to sustain itself at all costs” (186), and all this in 1983, six years before the fall.

Veronika Schandl proves to us that Shakespeare is always relevant and current, especially in the isolated Eastern Bloc, so much so that his heroes sometimes become Hungarian characters. Schandl puts a strong emphasis on analyzing stage direction, performance, historical fact, and, in general, foregrounding topics of interest for her while ignoring the Shakespearean text itself. And what is very important for a small and isolated culture like Hungary is that Schandl has made her research available in English to all those interested, opening up a very important period of Hungarian literary history to the broadest possible public.