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“REMEMBER THEE?”: POST-WAR MEMORY AND GUILT IN PETER PIOTR LACHMANN’S PERFORMANCE *HAMLET FROM GLIWICE*

BY

ANETA MANCEWICZ

After the horrors of WW II, Shakespeare’s works have been appropriated to re-establish cultural cooperation between European countries as “a potent healing force in the international arena” (Wells 370). Simultaneously, they have been used to expose wounds suffered by individuals and nations in the process of confronting painful problems of guilt, memory and mourning. In the context of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [“dealing with the past”] two plays have gained particular importance: *The Merchant of Venice* as an exploration of anti-Semitic prejudices with hindsight into the Holocaust¹ and *Hamlet* as a reflection on memory and guilt or father-son relations in the context of Nazi crimes (Loquai 151-153; Malchow 171-172).

Since the 1960s German intellectuals have presented the younger generation in a Hamlet-like situation, struggling with the wartime past of their parents (for instance, Konrad Wünsche in *Der Unbelehrbare* [“The Unteachable”], or Martin Walser in *Der schwarze Schwan* [“The Black Swan”]). Jewish authors like George Tabori in *Jubiläum* [“Jubilee”] have referred to *Hamlet* in order to face the problems of guilt and forgiveness, as well as to engage in the process of *Trauerarbeit* [“mourning”] after the disintegration of their families and the atrocities committed against them.

The play *Hamlet gliwicki. Próba albo Dotyk przez szybę* [“Hamlet from Gliwice. Rehearsal or the Touch through the Pane”] written and directed by the German-Polish artist Peter Piotr Lachmann keeps to the tradition of appropriating Shakespeare’s tragedy in the process of dealing with wartime memories. Its performance is highly original since it emerges from individual experiences of the author, from his personal reflections on Polish-German relations and from his cutting-edge experiments with video techniques – techniques which he has pursued jointly with the Polish actress Jolanta Lothe in their Warsaw-based *Videoteatr Poza* [“Videotheatre Beyond”] since 1985. The production may thus be investigated as a personal statement, a historical testimony and a piece of theatre avant-garde – all these aspects will be addressed in the following analysis.

¹ An evaluation of the post-war history of *The Merchant of Venice* in Germany is currently undertaken by Sabine Schülting, Zeno Ackermann and Franziska Reinfeldt at the Freie Universität Berlin; the research project is entitled “Shylock in Germany: The Reception of Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” after 1945”; <http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/shylock/index.html> (accessed May 19, 2009).

Hamlet (from Gliwice): Memory and Guilt

The interrelationship between biography and theatre in *Hamlet from Gliwice* is reflected in Lachmann's position as a character/performer and the playwright/director; these multiple responsibilities also correspond to Lachmann's double role as Hamlet and Shakespeare in the production – he is both the hero and the author of the presented events. The play springs from his *Trauerarbeit* after the loss of the father in Stalingrad, but also from the awareness of humiliation and hardship experienced by his mother during the Soviet capture of German Gleiwitz, and later, in communist Gliwice, when the city became Polish. In this production, like in many of his plays, poems and essays, Lachmann summons his childhood recollections through literary allusions and poetic metaphors; exploring the themes and quotations from *Hamlet*, he looks back at his own life, a life decisively determined by the course of the WW II.

Hamlet can be read as a compelling articulation of pains and pleasures of memory (Helgerson 1977; Kilroy 2003; Pechter 1986). In this tragedy one can distinguish multiple layers of the hero's past: Hamlet repeatedly refers not only to the horrible murder of his father, but also to the nuptial happiness of the parents and, finally, to his own blissful childhood. It is significant that the images from Hamlet's early days appear only in the last act of the tragedy, at the graveyard, shortly before the hero's death in the duel. From this perspective, Shakespeare's play may be interpreted as a journey into the hero's past, in which memory gives the protagonist access to idyllic and idealized moments of life but also torments him with the apprehension of his uncle's crime and his mother's involvement with the murderer.

Memory and guilt are intrinsically linked in Shakespeare's scenario on yet another level. After the ghost has appeared with the baleful commandment "Remember me" (1.5.91), the protagonist gives a speech on the duties of memory promising his father to "wipe away all trivial records" (1.5.99) and to bear him in remembrance. Hamlet's resolution, however, is marked by ambiguity from the beginning, since he asks twice, "Remember thee?". Is he trying to imprint the instruction in memory, being afraid that he might forget the King, or is he outraged that the father may even imply that the son could be negligent? The encounter with the players in the middle of the tragedy prompts Hamlet to realize that he indeed may have failed to remember and revenge his father. At the sight of the actor recounting the sorrows of Hecuba, the Prince's feelings of guilt are intensified and he questions his own actions having constantly accused Gertrude and Claudius of not revering the memory of his father.

In *Hamlet from Gliwice* the author's focus on the issues of memory and guilt is underscored by the exclusion of secondary characters and the lack of subplots. The play focuses on intimate family traumas, and there are only two actors interacting on stage: HE (Zbigniew Konopka) and SHE (Lothe), who represent Lachmann and his mother, while they simultaneously play the roles of Hamlet and Gertrude. The author is also visible on stage – he stands aside and performs the role of a 'vj', someone who projects and registers video images, just as a dj plays and produces sounds.

In Lachmann's production the male protagonist is associated with Prince Hamlet by the audience due to his obsession with memory. It is the female character (SHE / the mother) who supports this analogy, observing that "Forgetting is salvation. Memory is

sickness” (26)² and claiming “that the world must forget, otherwise it will explode” (26). In recommending oblivion to the son, the mother is framed as a contemporary Gertrude. Similarly to the Queen, Lachmann’s heroine decidedly breaks with the past and enters into relationships with new partners. Each of the two women, however, acts upon different motives. Gertrude chooses Claudius as her next partner in order to satisfy sexual desire and possibly to protect Denmark from Norwegian assaults. Lachmann’s protagonist is forced to yield to the lust of German and Russian soldiers, as well as Polish officials, if she wants to survive and preserve the integrity of her family. While this distinction is striking, it is equally important to note that in each case, as the mother attempts to erase the past, she is blamed for it by the son, who deeply mourns the loss of the father.

In *Hamlet from Gliwice*, in analogy to *Hamlet*, the eponymous hero feels an obligation to remember his father, especially since the mother evokes the paternal authority in coercing obedience from the child (34-35). In stark contrast to the source, however, the memory of the father in *Hamlet from Gliwice* is saturated with guilt. Contrary to Shakespeare’s tragedy, in which the King is a paragon of moral virtues, the paternal figure in Lachmann’s production is tainted by war crimes. Caught in the grinding wheels of Hitler’s politics, the father may very well be perceived as a victim – especially because Lachmann portrays the Führer as a contemporary equivalent of Claudius – but he may also be accused of being Hitler’s accomplice being involved in the execution of his military plans as a Wehrmacht soldier.

Potentially guilty of horrific crimes, the paternal example will not serve to edify and guide the son. The eponymous hero explains: “Ghosts of fathers had no chance to reappear then in Germany. Neither this nor that. That is what they had in common. A hard taboo, harder than the Deutschmark and the wall” (12). Even though the statement does not give full justice to the reception of *Hamlet* in post-war Germany, Lachmann’s observation may serve to address the issue of paternal guilt in the process of dealing with the war and Nazi crimes, which has been recurrent in German adaptations of Shakespeare (Hortmann 2001).

The historical considerations become particularly pertinent when we compare the players’ function in *Hamlet* and *Hamlet from Gliwice*. In Lachmann’s production, in analogy to Shakespeare’s tragedy, the actors apply their histrionic skills in order to discover the truth about the paternal ghost, who insists to be remembered. In both cases theatre art is exercised in order to reveal the secret which concerns not only the hero and his family but also the whole state (Claudius seizing the crown in *Hamlet* is equated with Hitler’s usurpation of power in *Hamlet from Gliwice*). The nature of these secrets, however, significantly differs in the two plays, and this distinction cuts to the core of Lachmann’s approach to Shakespeare’s tragedy. While the Prince strives to unmask the murderer of the father in the Elizabethan scenario, it is the father as a Wehrmacht soldier and likely murderer who poses the secret in the contemporary adaptation.

² Parenthetical references to the play derive from the script which was published by Lachmann in 2008. Even though the text does not fully reflect the production, I decided to quote from it, since there are no video recordings of the performance available to the public.

Putting the question of German guilt in front of the Polish audience in Warsaw, Lachmann provokes his spectators to recall painful moments from WW II, such as the extermination of civilians or the destruction of the Polish capital during the desperate uprising of 1944. Lachmann, arguably, forces the audience to take the position of Hamlet who watches the staging of his father's murder and of his mother's duplicity: as the audience follows the adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy, they have to face painful episodes from Polish-German history and reflect on the issues of guilt and forgiveness.

Due to his moral ambiguity, the father evokes contrasting feelings in the son. On the one hand, the male protagonist experiences fear and detachment from the paternal apparition; on the other hand, he expresses affection when recalling happy memories of his parents. Lachmann shows on the screens authentic pre-war photographs of his father, Ewald Lachmann: a shot taken on the wedding day, a picture from the football pitch, showing the father as the star of the local team *Vorwärts Rasensport Gleiwitz*. The photographs do not only illustrate and validate the author's story, but they also evoke the memory of a lost paradise – a pre-war happiness which proved to be extremely fragile and short-lived.

At some point Lachmann throws a ball to the male protagonist and they pass it between themselves for a moment. The scene creates the physical link between the author and the character, the director and the actor, and also conjures the spirit of the deceased father. This simple yet poignant episode may be an echo of Lachmann's games with his lost *Vati* [daddy], yet it may also be an allusion to Hamlet's childhood amusements with Yorick.

Memory as Collage and Palimpsest

The scene evoking the football game with the father is particularly touching to the audience, yet it should be emphasized that the entire structure of the play consists of intimate childhood memories. Such a manner of composition is justified by the eponymous hero who declares that in our times History as a universal category is no longer valid, and that we are left with individual histories – or hysterias, according to the mother. Consequently, historic events remain in the background while the audience follows scenes and images related to family incidents, personal traumas and identity issues.

In order to recreate the multi-layered and fragmentary nature of his recollections and make it a part of the global memory of WW II, Lachmann has structured his production around quotations from dramatic works of Shakespeare and Helmut Kajzar, from photographs and video recordings. The intricacy of the play's construction corresponds to the absurdities and ironies in the author's life, as well as in the history of 20th-century Europe (Zawadka 107). *Hamlet from Gliwice* is conceived as a complex, multi-media, metatheatrical collage and palimpsest of video images. The actors on stage interact not only with one another but also with images of themselves either pre-filmed during rehearsals or recorded by Lachmann in the course of the performance and projected onto several television screens. As a result, the actors are often seen from three perspectives on stage: they are physically present; they are

projected onto the screens in real time, while on stage, and, finally, they are presented in the recordings from the past. The images on screen both duplicate and extend the physical presence of the actors, creating complex relationships between the past and the present. While the performance follows the author's recollections, it simultaneously generates new memories which involve not only the actors but also the spectators, since the audience members are recorded and projected on video screens at the beginning of each performance.

In one of the interviews Lachmann described video recordings as “the mirrors of another time”, and indeed the images projected in his production reflect complex relations of temporality, relying on a transparent yet impassable boundary between the past and the present. The video camera allows us to capture and replay bygone moments more accurately and vividly than human memory will yet the effect of immediacy is nothing but deceptive. In fact, the more accessible the past events seem, the more painful is the inevitable discovery that our experience of them is only fragmentary and illusory.

Lachmann further emphasizes the distorting and superficial portrayal of the past by the camera lens by revealing the tricks of the trade to the viewers. For instance, in the video recording of a monologue from Kajzar's play *Obora* [“The Barn”], spoken by the Polish actress Stanisława Łopuszańska, Lachmann as a vj transforms the resolution and the sharpness of the image. And when projecting his childhood photograph onto the video image of the onstage actor, he instructs Konopka to move in a particular direction in order to blend the two images.

Furthermore, Lachmann points to the misleading nature of video techniques, having the male hero identify the menacing influence of the mass media on our perception of reality. The protagonist criticizes television for blurring the boundaries between then and now and complains that in this medium nothing is really “live” because it is being shown again and again (27). Simultaneously, however, repetition and illusory immediacy, characteristic of television (27), constitute the very basis of *Hamlet from Gliwice* as a production which obscures the distinctions between the past and the present. The performance blends earlier recordings of the actors with their actual presence, it combines episodes from Lachmann's childhood with his being on stage *hic et nunc*, and it mixes quotations from Shakespeare's and Kajzar's plays with reference to WW II.

The collage- and palimpsest-like structure of the video image becomes particularly apparent in the portrayal of Gliwice in Lachmann's play. The city functions as the birthplace of the author as well as the venue of the first staging of his *Hamlet* adaptation – in both cases the playwright/director accumulates and intersects events from different points in time. The allusion to Gliwice as Lachmann's birthplace is significant not only as an information about the author's origins but also as a hint at his double identity. Lachmann was born in 1935 into a German family in German Gleiwitz. When the city was incorporated into Poland in 1945, he was naturalized as a Pole: his name was changed from Peter to Piotr, his primary language from German to Polish and his religion from Protestant to Catholic.

None of these alterations, however, is marked by complete closure and erasure. Instead, Lachmann's identity – like his home city – has become a “palimpsest” (15);

just as Gliwice has not completely ceased to be Gleiwitz, so has Piotr never forgotten Peter, but rather, as Lachmann's Hamlet claims, "he hid Peter under the skin and under the tongue" (11). In *Hamlet from Gliwice* the protagonist enumerates several Polish place names, professions and objects along with their German equivalents (15) and he frequently switches between Polish and German (for instance, 18, 21). Accordingly, Hamlet's soliloquy turns into "To be or not to be / a German / a Pole" (29).

Gliwice/Gleiwitz functions as a palimpsest also on a theatrical level as the site of the first production of *Hamlet from Gliwice* on September 17, 2006 in the ruins of the Teatr Miejski ["Municipal Theatre"]. Two months later Lachmann staged the production in Warsaw at the Pałac Szustra ["Szuster Palace"] where he mixed videotaped scenes from the rehearsals and episodes enacted in Gliwice before the premiere with onstage interactions between the actors. Thus, the Warsaw audience watched scenes shot at the Municipal Theatre, at the city cemetery, a church and a hotel situated in the very building that used to be Lachmann's home. The images illustrate the post-war metamorphosis of the city, testify to the persistence of its German identity through the presence of German signs as well as incorporate the Gliwice production into the Warsaw performance. Lachmann recalls the original staging immediately at the beginning:

SHE: So what are we playing today?
HE: We were supposed to play *Hamlet from Gliwice*.
SHE: And we are playing *The Touch through the Pane*.
HE: Isn't it the same?
SHE: Yes and no. We are not in Gliwice anymore. But let's try. You play Piotr. Here. In his theatre. (5)

The response "Yes and no" by the heroine is not evasive; on the contrary, it is precisely to the point since she accurately identifies the subtle link between the two parts of the title – Gliwice is and is not Gleiwitz, Piotr is and is not Peter, and Lachmann is and is not Hamlet.

Hamlet as a Mask and a Mirror

In this intricate metatheatrical production, *Hamlet* serves the author as a mask that allows him to conceal his own self behind a theatre character who serves as a symbol, a cultural icon and a universal myth. At the same time, however, *Hamlet* functions as a mirror in which Lachmann can see his own life reflected on stage. In *Hamlet from Gliwice* the interplay between illusion and authenticity is particularly striking, since Lachmann accentuates the craft involved in representing characters on stage. Konopka and Lothe do not identify with their roles in a naturalistic, seamless manner; instead, they approach them in an act of conscious appropriation. The actors often simply read their parts from the script rather than speaking from memory. Moreover, they are constantly drawing attention to their role-playing: they declare the attempt to embody Lachmann and his mother, while pretending to be Hamlet and Gertrude and throughout the whole play they speak as Konopka and Lothe, who confess to the difficulty with enacting the scenes from the author's life and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

The male hero does not identify unconditionally with the Shakespearean Prince, revealing the gulf between Lachmann and Hamlet or, more generally, between the author and his stage *alter ego*. In the conversation with the mother, the protagonist evokes “Hamlet, the true one, you know, the one from Shakespeare who played a loony...” (21) The inherent irony stems from the treatment of the Prince as a living person (“the true one”) as well as a fictional creation (“the one from Shakespeare”). Simultaneously, the statement reveals a double metatheatrical distance towards the Shakespearean hero in Lachmann’s production. Konopka is not Hamlet; he only performs the role of Hamlet – the act of distancing is confirmed by the mother who urges him to “[s]top *playing* Hamlet” (20) [my emphasis]. The character Hamlet, in turn, appears as a living person/fictional figure who acts the role of a madman (“played a loony”). Thus, the production involves an elaborate network of identity projections, which is complemented by the multifaceted presence of actors on stage and screen. As Lachmann associates himself with Hamlet, biography is confounded with myth, with Konopka and Lothe acting as catalysts who bring the theatre script into the realm of performance.

Significantly, even when the actors claim to be themselves, they perform clearly defined roles: they speak as dramatic creations of the author, articulating the words written for them by Lachmann, and they fill the parts of the comedians who put on a show for the Prince. The subtitle to the production, *The Rehearsal or the Touch through the Pane*, testifies to the framing of *Hamlet from Gliwice* as a play focusing on the metatheatrical event of the actors arriving at Elsinore. Not only does the notion of the “rehearsal” evoke the image of the theatre troupe, but the reference to the “glass” can also be interpreted as an evocation of the mirror metaphor and, thus, as an echo of Hamlet’s advice to the players “to hold as ’twere / the mirror up to Nature” (3.2.21-22).

The image of the mirror is also biographically significant for Lachmann. In the script he claims that, as a child, he used to look at himself in the triple-panel mirror at the dresser in his parents’ apartment. This mirror has led him to discover that identity can be double or even triple (11). The mirror image functions as a symbol of Lachmann’s hybrid nationality, German and Polish. It is also an intertextual trace alluding to his appropriation of Hamlet’s identity and pointing to the fact that in Shakespeare’s plays the mirror effect is a fundamental element of the plot organization. According to Jan Kott “Shakespearian dramas are constructed not on the principle of unity of action, but on the principle of analogy, comprising a double, treble, or quadruple plot, which repeats the same basic theme; they are a system of mirrors, as it were, both concave and convex, which reflect, magnify and parody the same situation” (245). Although I have been told by the director that he did not intentionally employ this idea, there is arguably an intuitive connection, since Lachmann had translated *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* into German prior to his work on *Hamlet from Gliwice*; what is more, he explicitly refers to Kott’s essays in the playbill.

In his version of the tragedy, however, Lachmann reverses Shakespeare’s strategy of mirroring nature and gives it a postmodern twist: while in *Hamlet* the motif of the avenging son is diversely enacted by three separate characters, Hamlet, Fortinbras and

Laertes, in *Hamlet from Gliwice* the three filial figures, Peter, Piotr and Hamlet are reflections of the same individual, who strives to connect with his mother and father. The task is extremely arduous and painful, since Piotr as a Polish poet cannot share his verses with the mother, who never learned the language of her new homeland (35), nor can he assess – due to the lack of documents – the level of his father’s incrimination as a *Wehrmacht* soldier.

Utopian Spectres

The inability to communicate with the parents is complicated not only by the linguistic and national barriers separating the two generations but also by the fact that both mother and father have a spectral existence in Lachmann’s production, suspended between presence and absence. The artist claims that his work on *Hamlet from Gliwice* has been inspired by the apparition of his mother as an island – silent and mysterious, fertile yet stone-like (“Wywiad” 45). Commenting on the significance of this image, the author observes that his play might have been entitled *The Silence of the Mother*, because his *Mutti* [mummy] could not understand him speaking Polish, so that the silence between them eventually became more expressive than any words that could have been uttered (“Wywiad” 45).

At the end of the play, Lachmann presents a video recording in which Lothe talks about a place devoid of languages where the mother and the son can finally communicate. As Konopka approaches the screen and touches it, Lothe opens her arms. The actors meet through the pane despite spatial and temporal barriers. The utopia promised by the maternal apparition is strikingly similar to the Auschwitz fairytale introduced in the finale of Tabori’s *Jubilee*. Here the ghost of the father arrives to claim that the Nazis used their infamous ovens only to bake bread, and he brings it for all to eat. And yet the more comforting the images introduced by the two playwrights are, the more disturbing is the knowledge that we are offered an impossible consolation. The contrast between the imaginary reparation for the victims and their actual anguish serves to sharpen our perception of the horrors of WW II and the Holocaust.

Conclusion

In her historically-oriented review of *Hamlet from Gliwice* Małgorzata Zawadka speculates whether the performance might help us to shake off the shackles of the past and restore harmony on an individual and national level (107). When confronted with this possibility, Lachmann gives a very cautious answer. He claims that the Polish-German catharsis requires the participation of a perceptive audience who needs to understand that due to their complexity, historical relations can only be approached case-by-case (Zawadka 110). Accordingly, *Hamlet from Gliwice* functions, as a *pars pro toto* statement – it is an expression of Lachmann’s hybrid identity, inasmuch as it is an exposition of the complicated relationship between Poland and Germany – countries that share an agonizing common past, which culminated in the experience of WW II.

While Lachmann's appropriation of *Hamlet* can be seen as an endeavour to expose individual as well as national conflicts and dilemmas, the possibility of reconciliation remains uncertain. The play is the thing to catch the conscience of the audience in an attempt to engage them in the process of *Trauerarbeit*. The rest, however, is certainly not silence, since the ghosts of the war continue to haunt both Poles and Germans with the harrowing cry for remembrance. Lachmann seems to be arguing that it is impossible to forget the horrors of the past, yet his performance functions as a way of coming to terms with memory and guilt.

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Zusammenfassung

Im Verlauf dieses Artikels über das Theaterstück *Gleiwitzer Hamlet*, Drehbuch und Regie von Piotr Peter Lachmann 2006, wird die Frage nach Erinnerung und Schuld während der Nachkriegszeit im Kontext der Aufarbeitung des 2. Weltkrieges analysiert. Die Videotheaterproduktion wird einerseits als eine autobiografische Kriegserinnerung, in der sich das historische Vermächtnis der polnisch-deutschen Beziehungen widerspiegelt; andererseits als ein Theaterexperiment, in welchem sich die

physische Präsenz der Schauspieler mit deren Darstellung auf Bildschirmen vermischt, dargestellt. Die Videosequenzen in der Produktion fungieren als Palimpsest und Collagen, die mit dem vielschichtigen und fragmentarischen Aufbau von Lachmanns Kindheitserinnerungen einhergehen. In dieser metatheatralischen und intertextuellen Produktion dient Hamlet dem Autor als eine Art Maske, die es ihm ermöglicht, sich hinter einem Theatersymbol, einem universellen Mythos zu verstecken. Zugleich jedoch nutzt Lachmann die Figur Hamlet als Spiegel, der es ihm erlaubt, sein eigenes Leben auf der Videotheaterbühne verfremdet zu sehen.