
Afterword

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EuroShakespace and the Witness-Function: Convergences of History, Memory, and Affective Presence

Rather naïvely I did not expect the systematic torture and murder of two million people committed by Germans at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp – probably the greatest site-designed genocide in the history of humankind – to so obviously and profoundly influence the critical discourse at the 2005 Shakespeare in Europe Conference at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. The conference’s overarching topic, “History and Memory”, invited conversations about World War II and the Holocaust; as explained in the conference program, “memory offers itself for exploration and definition as the main factor in shaping history, as determiner of identity, and subject of political manipulation”.¹ The Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp is just seventy kilometers from Kraków in the Polish city of Oświęcim, which the Germans renamed Auschwitz. The conference’s organizers arranged guided tours of the death camp for the participants. Kraków’s pre-World War II Jewish ghetto, Kazimierz, with much of its original iconographic architecture still intact, has recently been revived as a popular tourist destination, and conference participants were encouraged to dine in the district’s “authentic” Jewish restaurants. Given these factors, one might conclude that the conference was indirectly on the Holocaust, that the Holocaust was the conference’s intended subtext or through-line, or that, more broadly, a European Shakespeare conference on history and memory is inextricably

¹ 2005 Shakespeare in Europe Conference website, see <http://pages.unibas.ch/shine/conference-krakow.html#programme>.

connected, however implicitly, to traumas inflicted on people by oppressive dictatorships.

With my newborn and toddler making it ever more difficult and less desirable to go away from my home in Irvine, California, even for a short academic conference, I had already overextended myself with speaking engagements for 2005 when I learned that the Shakespeare in Europe Conference was going to be held in Kraków. Yet I felt compelled to go because I had not visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, and something about being a father made going imperative. Oddly, it did not occur to me that others also attended the conference so that they could visit, or so that they could not in good conscience avoid visiting, Auschwitz-Birkenau. This is not to say that interest in the Shakespeare conference itself, that is, in Shakespeare and the Shakespeare industry, was not also a powerful draw. But, rather, that discussion among the conference's participants indicated an ulterior, different, if not (for some of us) greater, purpose.

I am of Ashkenazi Jewish descent (German, Belarusian, and Lithuanian); the Nazis eradicated all possible ties that I might have had to my European relatives (possibly at Auschwitz-Birkenau); and I had recently written a Holocaust play, *Railroad*, the first production of which the Southern California-based Transversal Theater Company performed in Romania at the Sibiu International Theatre Festival and National Theatre in Cluj during May/June 2006.² Hence, at this point in my life, my own interest in the Holocaust was unusually heightened. Despite spending a considerable amount of time in Germany over the last ten years, until the trip to Kraków – I am somewhat embarrassed to admit – I had consciously refrained from visiting any of the concentration or death camps. I did not want to feel the pain and discomfort I imagined I would experience when confronted with the memorialized spaces where the horrific atrocities occurred.

Derived from a seminar on history and performance at the 2005 Shakespeare in Europe Conference in Kraków, this collection of essays is haunted by the “affective presence” of the torture and murders at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the social, ethnic, cultural, and political issues that both informed them and continue to influence the ways we relate to them in history’s absent-spaces (where events transpired), present-spaces (where events happen), and future-present-spaces (where events will occur).³ I want to privilege the last of these terms, the future-present-spaces, which are anticipated events, the subjunctive meditations and equations by which actions are reasoned and intentions measured, all of which amount to the apparently probable. I am referring to the willful objective to analytic citationality, the retroactive assessment of events, however recent or remote,

² See Reynolds 2006a.

³ For more on “affective presence” see Reynolds 2002: 1–22, Reynolds 2003: 1–28 and Reynolds 2006b: 1–26.

via comparison with previous experiences; in other words, the evaluative indexing of the immediate or distant past – images, gestures, words, thoughts, emotions – as a means to making sense, understanding the present, and hopefully controlling the future. (What does “Never Again” really mean? How is it accomplished?)

As an affective presence, Auschwitz-Birkenau, as one of the most heinous manifestations of the Nazi enterprise, operates as a discursive cultural force defined typically neither by its absence in present-space, nor by what Jacques Derrida would call a process of “supplementarity”, an ephemeral standing-in for an always already absent centre to a semantic system that is endlessly and differentially repeated, nor by definitional negations, the method of ascertaining what something is by what it is not. Instead, Auschwitz-Birkenau, like most phenomena with affective presence, can be readily defined positively and in practice, especially insofar as it is never forgotten, as opposed to always remembered; it is not a recalled absent-space, even if the experiences that happened there are irretrievable, since it exists so powerfully in the present. I am referring to the actual and imaginary, material and conceptual/emotional scars, artifacts, and formations evident in the “articulatory spaces” through which the histories of the Jews, the Nazis, Europe, and humanity converge, crystallize, transform, and disseminate.⁴ In this case, which is to say, in the cases which were under more immediate consideration at the 2005 Shakespeare in Europe Conference and are in the essays that comprise this collection, I am invoking Auschwitz-Birkenau-space; but, more specifically, I refer to articulations and formations of communist and fascist dictatorships in twentieth-century European history that have engaged and/or merged multi-dimensionally within the phenomena of “Shakespace”, a term that encompasses the plurality of Shakespeare-related articulatory spaces and the time and speed at which they move through places, cultures, and eras. In effect, this interaction with Shakespace constitutes a subset of Shakespace: “EuroShakespace”.⁵ This is a subset that, as demonstrated by the essays collected here, significantly interacts with a variety of important European articulatory spaces. These include formations in a number of countries and from diverse sociopolitical perspectives, such as Blair’s England (Stuart Hampton-Reeves), Franco’s Spain (Keith Gregor), communist Hungary (Veronika Schandl), Stalinist/post-Stalinist Russia (Mark Sokolyansky), and socialist Portugal (Francesca Rayner).

Affective presence often brings otherwise disparate constituents and forces into play, both diachronically and synchronically. As a result, they fuel at least one prominent formation, an articulatory space comprised of avenues for knowledge

⁴ For more on “articulatory spaces”, see Reynolds 2003: 1–28 and Reynolds 2006b: 1–26.

⁵ Donald Hedrick and I introduced the term “Shakespace” in Hedrick and Reynolds, 2000: 3–47. For more on Shakespace, also see Reynolds 2003: 1–28. Other articulatory spaces often experienced by scholars of early modern English theater are theaterspace, Marxspace, Freudspace, JesusChristspace, newhistoricistspace, postmodernspace, and lit-critspace.

transfer, communication, and interfacing experiences and phenomena. When encountering or embodying any media conceptually, emotionally, and/or materially permeated with the affective presence of an icon, event, or string of related events (a “movement”), we become a participant in a variety of such articulations. This collection, I want to argue, performs a series of articulatory formations in EuroShakespace, the culmination of which is a radical assertion of the importance and power of testimony, the indeterminate and negotiable “witness-function” that can be inclusive, exclusionary, suspenseful, stupefying, affirming, and so on, yet it almost always works to individuate subjectively.⁶ Once a witness, a person’s experience is, to greater or lesser degrees, either identifiable or not, something to which others can relate to or not, something expressible or not; and, depending on the audience to whom a testimony is conveyed, one, consequently, either counts as a subject and/or citizen or does not. The witness-function, whether manifested as a sharing of a momentous occasion, a review of a theatrical performance, or a testimony to a crime, works to reinforce, complicate, or fracture commonalities among its audience’s socio-culturally prescribed parameters for experience, that is, the audience’s subjective territories that a given society delineates and maintains. Under such commonplace circumstances, then, the voice of one witness, such as a theater critic, can become the cry of a generation; or, in the courtroom, it can become the singular truth that condemns an innocent person to capital punishment.

All of the essays in this collection rely to a significant extent on the witness-function. This is because they are about the topicality and reception of past productions of Shakespeare’s plays. But not all histories depend so heavily on the subjective reviews of critics. This critical variable is especially crucial to the construction of performance histories for which records are generally limited, the most substantive being reviews in daily newspapers or journal entries by members of a theater company, with the latter being considerably less common and presumably less reflective of popular opinions than the former. When critical responses to a production are wide-ranging, the challenge to the scholar who hopes to discern what a performance was “really” like becomes ever more difficult. Tina Krontiris effectively addresses this issue in her essay on receptions to productions of *Henry V* and *Richard II* on the Greek stage in the 1940s. About the 1947 production of *Richard II* at the Greek National Theatre, as she illustrates by quoting divergent reviews written by “a leftist critic”, “a critic of the moderate center”, and “a conservative critic”,

the division of opinion among critics, who apparently base their views on a reading of Shakespeare’s text, reflects the ideo-political polarization of the civil-war period more than it indicates any influence of the particular performance. None of these critics engages in a dialogue with the *director’s* view or suggests that there was a view to take up. Like *Henry V*, *Richard II* had failed to make an impression” (44).

⁶ For more on the “witness-function”, see Reynolds and Ayanna Thompson, 2006.

Krontiris goes on to give a cogent explanation for this “failure”. For the purpose of the present discussion, I am interested in the conditions under which a verdict was reached.

In her comparison of receptions of a 1947 production of *Richard III* and its 1955 revival at the Hungarian National Theatre, Veronika Schandl also finds correlation between the sociopolitical status of the country and the marked biases of reviewers. As representative of critical responses to the 1947 production, she provides the following quotation from a review by Gorgy Somlyó:

The works of art are transmitted through the history of mankind as short wave signals are through the air. A never-ending “fading” changes their latitudes, thus sometimes we can receive them clearly, but at other times they creak annoyingly. At certain moments they lose their voice completely. We cannot believe that there has ever been a better time for receiving *Richard III* this clearly than it is now when Europe slowly recovers from the horrors of fascism. (Somlyó qtd. in Schandl 53)

Like Krontiris, Schandl goes on to show, through her comparison with responses to the 1955 revival, that the sociopolitics of an historical moment can, and indeed often does, have measurable impact on the reception of theatrical productions. Krontiris, who contrasts the underwhelmed receptions to *Henry V* and *Richard II* with the enthusiastic reception of an earlier 1945 production of *Julius Caesar*, and Schandl both emphasize that artistic directors of theaters would benefit greatly from a keen awareness of the sociopolitical climate of the time before deciding on which play of Shakespeare’s to produce, despite any commitment they may have to Shakespeare’s universal appeal or edifying powers. In other words, Shakespeare’s popularity is manifestly historically contingent and culture-specific. However true, I want to call attention to the necessary reconstruction performed by scholars in the process of doing such theater history; as Schandl puts it: “From surviving pictures and contemporary descriptions we can reconstruct a traditional show which in reviews, however, was received as highly topical” (53).

Although, obviously, the job of every historian is to reconstruct the past with the available traces in order to make it accessible to people in the present, I want to suggest that it is the witness-function that makes possible the presence of subjectivity within critical inquiry that allows an affective (conceptual-emotional) gateway between historical phenomena. Put differently, it is an acknowledged testimony, when the witness-function emerges transparently or with identifiable self-awareness or “reflexive-consciousness”, that gives credence to past actions so that they can be registered and indexed cognitively. This awareness can be seen in the fact that, at some point, most of the essays in this collection question their sources. They express doubt with regard to a theater critic’s motives, competence, or the constraints under which she or he wrote. About

a production of *Hamlet* in New York by Romanian director Andre Serban, Patricia Lennox addresses reliability as it applies to testimony, but also the empathetic connections that are often the goal of testimonies:

It is very possible that Serban's *Hamlet* was as truly dreadful as the critics claimed, that his ideas were merely gimmicks. The production may not have come together in the way Serban had envisioned. No video recording is available, so the only publicly shared memory is in the reviews. On the other hand, if Serban's goal had been to unsettle the audience, to keep them aware that they were watching "a native Romanian who trained with Peter Brook" who "approaches the classics with absolutely no respect for tradition or orthodoxy or authorship" (Brustein 2000: 32) – he definitely succeeded. (107)

Also considering the expectations of the audience (reviewers included) as well as the delicate project of history-making, Schandl asserts:

Reviewers deflated any possible parallels to current events or figures [...] Had we only have these reviews at hand, we would be left with the image of a mediocre production which would go down into Hungarian theatre history as a revival of minor significance. Later recollections of the actors reveal a radically different production. From these we can reconstruct the 1955-*Richard III* as a production which exemplifies that all it takes to make a play political is a social context in need of a political change, and even a performance that was not intended to be subversive could become one. (54–55)

In regard to a 1989 Polish teleplay production of *Richard III*, Jacek Fabiszak makes a comment:

Maciej Bordowicz's *Henry IV* came halfway through Gierek's term whereas Feliks Falk's *Richard III* was produced in 1989, the most significant year of Polish post-war history, the year in which the first semi-democratic elections after World War II took place. Although Feliks Falk, the director, and Andrzej Seweryn, who (again) played Richard, may deny it, the production can be read as a political and historical comment on the transfer of power and the dangers to which the intoxication with power may lead. (62)

In his analysis of productions of Shakespeare in Franco's Spain, Keith Gregor also points to the value of reviews for the purpose of assessing the social, cultural, and political relationships between contemporary politics and aesthetic production and appreciation:

The importance of Shakespeare's role in the Francoist narrative of national consciousness can be gauged in the reviews of these productions published in the more or less "official" organs of the regime. After the inauspicious production of Hans Rothe's *Falstaff*, almost universally decried as a travesty of the "real" Shakespeare, Luca de Tena's production of *Macbeth* was hailed as *the* theatrical event of the season (1941–42) and the herald of a new era in Spain's theatrical history. (Gregor 31)

Whether the interpretive flexibility lies with reviews by critics, in accounts given by members of the producing company, or in statements by the artists, or in some combination of these always already biased records, the attention

given to the witness-function by the contributors to this collection situates them in the welcoming zone of the witness-function itself. This is, most importantly, a critical action with pedagogical as well as rhetorical advantage. Insofar as we, as scholars and teachers, acknowledge our roles as sociopolitical conductors whose witness-function is primary to our authoritative power and the responsibilities that such power confers, our contributions will be more influential and positively defined, whether disagreed with or not. Pretences to disinterested scholarship, reviews, or teaching have no justifiable place in a conscientious educational environment.

This collection of essays came out of a conference that valued and depended on accountability. Whether tacitly or explicitly expressed in the different seminars and paper sessions at the conference, accountability was the critical nexus that weaved together the conference's key terms, history and memory, since, after all, they are mutually accountable to each other. And it was within the zone of the witness-function that these terms were most genuinely and productively negotiated, as evinced by the essays collected here. *Shakespeare and Europe: History – Performance – Memory* is a forward-looking plurality of perspectives that engage future-present-spaces.

It was a placid and crisp November day, with fresh snow blanketing the earth in every direction, when I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. I brought my digital camera with me to record photographically my experience there. It was strange to enter for the first time a complex of buildings designed for an unfathomable purpose. Yet because the death camp, and this one in particular, was an architectural genre I knew from photographs and films, the grounds looked oddly familiar to me. I experienced an uncanny déjà vu. The barbed wire, barracks, and guard towers were beacons to past virtual encounters. I imagined my wife, daughter, and son among those in a displayed photograph showing hundreds of people waiting in the trees to be gassed. The sound of my footsteps echoed in the buildings' hallways. I touched the bunks: the same wood, in the same place, that was touched by the victims sixty-five years ago. But it did not take long until my self-consciousness surrendered to the memories I began to process for events I had never personally experienced. Meanwhile, I snapped photographs perfunctorily, even though I sensed a certain futility in doing this. The importance of the witness-function is emphasized throughout Auschwitz-Birkenau to which I had believed I would contribute through the sharing of my photographs with others upon my return to the United States. Then, while looking at a glass-cased display of beautifully crafted suits, dresses, shirts, and hats for toddlers, I accidentally dropped my camera onto the cement floor and it broke. My digital record was ended.

I did not realize the positive service this did for me until recently, when I returned from my first trip to India, which was prompted by the 4th World Shakespeare Conference of the Shakespeare Society of Eastern India in Kolkata.

While in India I was equipped with a digital camera, and, perfunctorily, I took many photographs. I took them of performances, people, animals, street scenes, traffic, food, religious ceremonies, temples, rivers, trains, and so on, of all the things that make India so extraordinary. Upon my return, I was so excited to share the photographs with my family that I downloaded them immediately and began the slideshow. And with each new photograph, I felt more disappointed, despite the fascination the images kindled. The singular point of view of each photograph seemed to circumscribe the stories they could tell, as if each one had only a two-dimensional truth to convey. As an enabler for transversal movement through histories, this experience brought me back to the broken camera at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the experience I had there that I was able to share, to my satisfaction, with spoken words. Liveness was crucial then, and continues to be, at least for me. There is no substitute for the immediacy with which one occupies the witness-function when recounting an experience. This, of course, recalls the power of live performance, what makes theater so remarkable, and irreplaceable, even by a video recording of itself. There is an intensity conveyed in the immediacy, one that may have more to do with the fact that the audience has accessible to them more codes, more vocabularies, more languages (bodily, verbal, molecular) to read than when information is presented primarily through recorded media. History, performance, and memory are only as alive as the media through which they are articulated and commensurate with the vitality of audiences.

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