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Strategies for Communicating the Sacred in *A Study on Hamlets* by the Chorea Theater

Strategie komunikowania *sacrum* w spektaklu „Studium o Hamletach” Teatru Chorea

ABSTRACT:

A Study on Hamlets, directed by T. Rodowicz and W. Raźniak, makes use of different strategies for communicating the sacred. It shows the sacred as decontextualized, brought out of the temple and treated like a gadget, an attractive item for sale for a modern consumer. According to the creators of *A Study on Hamlets*, the signs and sacred symbols are increasingly only a hollow form, simulacra without reference. Also, the production shows the infringed sacredness of death. Coffins-outdoor toilets, careless washing of dead bodies, mass graves or summary exhumations desecrate death, take away its profundity and grandeur. In the Raźniak's and Rodowicz's vision, religious symbols are dying, since their relationship with the group for which they mean anything has come to an end. In the world of the dissipating *sacred*, only songs have the power to save, telling about the most difficult things, upholding the distinction into the sacred and the lay.

KEY WORDS:

the sacred, the profane, the Chorea theater, *Hamlet*, *The Hamlet Study*, *The Study on Hamlets*, Wyspiański, Grotowski, Rodowicz, Raźniak

STRESZCZENIE:

Artykuł traktuje o różnych strategiach komunikowania *sacrum* w spektaklu *Studium o Hamletach* Teatru Chorea. Twórcy – Tomasz Rodowicz i Waldemar Raźniak poprzez elementy scenograficzne – kiczowate plastikowe figurki Matki Boskiej oraz projekcje video – dowodzą, że znaki i symbole sakralne coraz częściej są tylko pustą formą, nieodsyłającym do niczego symulakrem. Spektakl pokazuje naruszone *sacrum* śmierci. Trumny-sławojki, bezceremonialne obmywanie martwych ciał, masowe groby czy zbiorowe ekshumacje profanują śmierć, odbierają jej powagę i wzniosłość. W wizji Raźniaka i Rodowicza symbole religijne umierają, ustaje bowiem ich relacja z grupą, dla której przestają cokolwiek wyrażać. W świecie więdnącego *sacrum*, moc ocalającą mają jedynie pieśni, które skutecznie opowiadają o sprawach najtrudniejszych, które utrzymują podział na święte i świeckie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

sacrum, *profanum*, Teatr Chorea, *Hamlet*, *Studium o Hamlecie*, *Studium o Hamletach*, Wyspiański, Grotowski, Rodowicz, Raźniak

The Chorea theater is focused on a synchronized work on the body, voice and rhythm. It draws on the modern dance techniques as well as taps into the well of inspiration that is the ancient movement and gestures. Tomasz Rodowicz, the founder and director of the theater, used to participate in the works of Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theater, later he co-founded the Gardzienice Theater, he pursues the idea of team and laboratory-like work. He is looking for his own language, referring to the antiquity and the classical figures of the 20th century theater, i.e. Tadeusz Kantor or Jerzy Grotowski. In his work, he finds his inspirations in different cultures, old Polish, Balkan, Jewish or Oriental songs. Established in 2004, originally based in Lublin, now in Łódź, Chorea focuses on the problems of the city and its people.¹ Through the stage it speaks about the dilemmas of different groups, e.g. the youth or the disadvantaged suffering from exclusion due to their being physically challenged or addictions. Rodowicz sets out for himself and his team a number of aims – artistic, pedagogic and research ones – treating them all as equal.² To his projects, he invites both professional and non-professional actors, people from various backgrounds to build relationships through art. The Chorea theater has staged a few dozens of titles, both their own and in cooperation with other artists.

In 2017, the Chorea actors and the Warsaw Theater Academy students prepared a performance called *Studium o Hamletach* (A Study on Hamlets, directed by T. Rodowicz & W. Raźniak) based on *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, *Studium o Hamlecie* by Wyspiański and a script entitled *Studium o Hamlecie* (The Hamlet Study) by Grotowski. I would like to point out that *A Study on Hamlets* in the Laboratory Theater was created in 1964 and treated as a study, a kind of workshop, set on searching for a new actor's method. It focused on training and studio performances.³ They were work in progress, a stage in the journey leading to the ultimate result (*akt całkowity*). The script of the study was built based on passages from Shakespeare and Wyspiański. The creators – the actors directed by

¹ See K. Leszczyńska, *Chorea. Więcej niż teatr*, „Teatr” 2017, No. 10, pp. 44–49.

² See A. Banach, *Teatr poza teatrem. O społecznym kontekście działań Teatru Chorea*, <http://nietak-t.pl/index.php/82-teatr-pozza-teatrem-o-spoiecznym-kontekscie-dzialan-teatru-chorea>, access: 10.12.2017.

³ L. Flaszen, *Hamlet w laboratorium teatralnym*, w: *Misterium zgrozy i urzeczenia. Przedstawienia Jerzego Grotowskiego i Teatru Laboratorium*, red. J. Degler, G. Ziółkowski, Wrocław 2006, p. 74.

Grotowski – assumed that “*Hamlet* is a masterpiece with a myth-like capacity” and “it has a unique ability to lure out of us the truth about our seeing of the human condition.” However, in Poland the myth of Hamlet “calls for an individual treatment arising from a spiritual situation of a Pole.”⁴ Adding Wyspiański’s comments about putting it on stage to the lines of the drama, it was to be a production on how the show was created. In the Grotowski’s study, Józef Keller saw a story of a stranger among others, with the others being peasants and the stranger – Hamlet, an intellectual. “In this situation it is not relevant who Hamlet really is but the way the “others” see him – mystified with their involvement and distorted under their pressure. And also, what the “others” are like – utterly distorted and mystified by Hamlet’s vision. The error lies on both sides, as the creators of the performance seem to suggest.”⁵ Grotowski’s Hamlet unveiled the conflicts of the then contemporary Polish public. It showed a great gap between the Polish general public and intelligentsia. Although, as Flaszen assured, the show was not about the Jewish question and anti-Semitism, Hamlet spoke Polish with the Jewish accent and instead of the skull he held the Bible.

The Laboratory Theater performed *The Hamlet Study* twenty-one times. Each time it was played for the audience of 12-24 people, mainly these were specially invited guests or free-ticket holders.⁶ In retrospect, Grotowski did not consider this performance to be a good one.⁷ Actors, however, would speak about it as a new way of work with the body, space and prop. Later interpreters found there a story about the generation and the idea that negatively affected both sides – intellectuals and peasants, followers and adversaries – about impossibility of reconciling two different perspectives on the world.⁸

The underlying idea of the study by the Laboratory Theater and its workshop-like format seems to have become an artistic inspiration for Rodowicz and Raźniak, who also presented their show as a form of exercise of actor’s performance based on the work with their own bodies, a partner or space (the audience

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. Kelera, *Hamlet i inni*, in: *Misterium zgrozy i urzeczenia...*, op. cit., p. 174.

⁶ Z. Osiński, *Jerzy Grotowski, Źródła, inspiracje, konteksty*, Gdańsk 2009, pp. 168, 172.

⁷ E. Barba, *Hamlet bez przyjaciół*, in: Idem, *Ziemia popiołu i diamentów. Moje terminowanie w Polsce oraz 26 listów Jerzego Grotowskiego do Eugenia Barby*, Wrocław 2001, p. 108.

⁸ A. Wójtowicz, „*I Hamlet został Żydem*”. „*Studium o Hamlecie*” według Wiliama Szekspira i Stanisława Wyspiańskiego, w: *Misterium zgrozy i urzeczenia...*, op. cit., p. 361.

who were taking part in the Chorea workshops could see individual elements of actor's training by Rodowicz). Apart from experienced performers from the Łódź theater, there were also undergraduate actors who in their regular classes usually work based on other methods. Perhaps to secure themselves in the meetings with audience, the creators stressed that *Studium on Hamletach* (A Study on Hamlets) was not a successful study.

Does putting the Shakespeare's drama together with *Studium o Hamlecie* by Wyspiański have the same aim for Chorea as it had for the Laboratory Theater? Is it about showing the spiritual situation of the Polish people, showing the social conflicts and ridiculous divisions? Why does Chorea give the title in plural: *A Study on Hamlets*? Undoubtedly, for Raźniak and Rodowicz *Hamlet* is a masterpiece of culture, a myth which we can give an account of or deconstruct. Also, it surely calls for being made specific, to be – as Wyspiański advised – shown in the Polish context, in the current situation of Poland, which – like Grotowski in the past – does not fill the creators of the performance with optimism. Chorea tried to open *Hamlet* with the key earlier used by Wyspiański, who in his brilliant interpretation endeavored to persuade the audience that it was not the father's Ghost (or at least not only this) but a continuously developing thought and a unique mind that brought the Danish prince to discover the truth. It comes increasingly obvious as he sees the actors' play and compare the portraits of his father and uncle put up on the wall in his mother's bedroom as well as in the scene in the graveyard. How do the Chorea creators refer to these three scenes that drive Hamlet's thoughts contributing to his better understanding of the truth? Having cut out large portions of *Hamlet*, the script does not include the scene with actors. Few of their lines are included at different points (Scenes 6 and 17). The script authors put more emphasis on the dialogue between Hamlet and his Mother. It is divided into two parts. In scene 7, Hamlet blames Mother of getting remarried and enseaming her bed, and in scene 11, he accuses his uncle: "A murderer and a villain! A slave. A cutpurse of the empire and the rule." The line of Hamlet where he compares the portraits of brothers, pointing at the strengths of his father and inferiority of his uncle, was not included. For Raźniak and Rodowicz the drama actually starts when Hamlet has achieved the highest level of his thought, which he paid for with his life. That is why the play is set in a cemetery. The script of *A Study on Hamlets* conspicuously refers to different types of texts (drama, sketch, scripts) and this is possibly what explains the plural used in the title of the play. This answer,

however, seems incomplete. Perhaps the Hamlets (it is not only one Hamlet that is the protagonist in the play) who leave their graves are wandering souls which wake up at exactly this time in history, because they deem it special, critical, to show us our image and stigma – and maybe just everyone of us is a Hamlet (the actors added to the script their own lines that were relevant to them).

“In Poland, the riddle of Hamlet is what is to be thought about in Poland.”⁹ According to the staged vision of Raźniak and Rodowicz, today’s Poland is divided and speaks with at least two voices (so maybe this is the reason for the plural in the title?), it is standing in a graveyard among open graves of its dead. Chorea’s Hamlets, like the Wyspiański’s protagonist, exist in the world of graves, the dead, among skulls and tibia, decomposing bones and remains, rubble of life and world, where there is no falsehood or pretense, where there is only rum and rubble and the Last Judgment.¹⁰ This is a place where everyone loses their masks and “only naked bone remains. Out of all of us – invariably.”¹¹

Chorea’s production has received a few reviews in which the onstage performance of the team as well as the script composition with its twists and turns are discussed and analyzed.¹² None of them, however, addresses the issue of the sacred meanings of some signs, symbols or acts, which from my perspective make an important element of the stage production, impose some ways of interpretation, tell us a lot about the modern cultural processes in which the boundary between the profane and the sacred seems to be getting blurred. As Leszek Kołakowski explains the sacred in today’s culture is not only negated but also made universal. This process, which is commonplace nowadays, invalidates the division into the sacred and the profane, consequently allowing for all forms of the lay living. This decomposition of the sacred could be directly related to spiritual phenomena, e.g. immanent eschatologies, amorphism or a belief in the unlimited competences of a human, which pose a real threat for culture and could add to its degradation. Therefore, as Kołakowski strongly asserts, the sacred is indispensable. Among its roles, one could point out building the fundamental notion network and the

⁹ S. Wyspiański, *Hamlet*, A Collection, vol. 13, Kraków 1961, p. 99.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 105

¹¹ Ibid. p. 108

¹² P. Olkusz, *Hamleci miedzą*, <http://teatralny.pl/recenzje/hamleci-miedza,1982.html>, access: 15.01.2018; P. Urbanowicz, *Blaski i cienie teatru aktorskiego*, <http://www.dziennikteatralny.pl/artykuly/blaski-i-cienie-teatru-aktorskiego.html>, dostęp: 15.12.2017.

establishment of rudimentary differentiations: the sacred draws the boundaries that outline a man and help identify evil.¹³

1. THE SACRED DECONTEXTUALIZED

Entering the audience of the Fabryka Sztuki theater of Łódź, a spectator can almost stumble upon plastic figures of Virgin Mary. Arranged in a line, they separate the stage from the audience. Part of the popular culture, these kitschy images can be found at stalls dotted around famous places of worship or pilgrimage destinations. Pink-blue-white Virgin Marias with twist-off crowns are used as bottles for holy water. For a Polish spectator they bear a strong association with the Mother of God of Licheń, although baskets full of the plastic bottles that can be found around churches today are a symbol of reducing the sacred to a mass culture commodity, to the so called "sacrobusiness", businesses trading in religion-themed objects. These figures are devoid of any artistic value, and it is hard to assume if they can help anyone refer to any transcendent reality. "A kitschy religious message is a false religious message and the messages communicated through a banal form are considered banal".¹⁴ The plastic copies of the sacred image are not meant to communicate the unfathomable, they do not refer to the original – they are merely a worthless commodity.

Today's sphere of the sacred is not only full of kitschy products but also tourists who buy the images of saints like postcards or other souvenirs.¹⁵ When you browse the Internet for this type of things, you can easily find plastic or plaster images of saints or other things of everyday use with images of saints placed on them. Nail clipper with the Virgin Mary, earrings with Christ are no longer controversial, especially when they are stacked along with string panties with Mother of God with the Child Jesus (!), flip-flops with the Holy Family printed inside so when you put them on your foot covers entire image or – brutally

¹³ L. Kołakowski, *Odwet sacrum w kulturze świeckiej*, in: idem, *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań*, Kraków 2012, pp. 240–242.

¹⁴ *O kiczu w religii i miłości*, z Janem Andrzejem Kłoczowskim rozmawia Sławomir Rusin, <http://www.katolik.pl/o-kiczu-w-religii-i-milosci,639,416,cz.html>

¹⁵ P. Kowalski, *Religijność potoczna. Notatki na temat kiczu i religii*, „Dekada Literacka” 2002, No. 3–4, http://witryna.czasopism.pl/gazeta/artukul.php?id_artykulu=142, access: 20.11.2017.

speaking – treads on it. The kitsch, as Dagmara Jaszewska argues, is quite legitimate today since due to the intensification in homogenizing and democratizing culture the division lines separating high culture from the low one get blurred.¹⁶

Therefore the plastic figures used on stage are a sign of deep changes that are going on in the modern culture. They also speak of a creeping demise of the ability of reading symbols and allegories in the religious language, which once – connected largely with valuable pieces of art – required some effort and knowledge of theological truths; Today it is being replaced with the colloquial language: easy, operating only on one level, and legible despite ignorance of cultural and traditional contexts. This is the language of popular culture for which the figure of Virgin Mary is only one of many colorful elements of the cultural landscape set-up. “The inability to discern the things connected with religion and other “attractive” goods since they have turned into gadgets, deepens the state of being uprooted and misplaced, a loss of symbolic meanings which seem to be inaccessible for a memorabilia collector.¹⁷ It could be concluded that Rodowicz and Raźniak establish a concrete and somewhat alarming diagnosis of the Polish modern religiosity: sacred signs and symbols are increasingly becoming superficial, a form devoid of content, a simulacrum that has no capacity to communicate anything. They are gadgets for collecting or playing.

In the show, the orderly placed figures are collected by actors and thrown into graves that look like wooden outdoor toilets. This act suggests obsolescence, running out of power, or even the death of the sacred, desintegration of certain values and established orders. Throwing the figures into the outdoor toilets also becomes a sign of profanation, desecration of holy symbols. In the last scenes, in the open outdoor toilets, in which the actors are sitting – with some to relieve themselves, and others to have sex with a beloved one or lose oneself in reading – there are still some left-behind figures lying on the floor. Pushed or shifted aside with actors’ feet, they are meaningless for everyone. They have been deprived of their power by being brutally transferred into the sphere of commerce, giving them the status of a cheap commodity. The remaining figures which have not been thrown into the outdoor toilets, are collected and thrown up-stage forming

¹⁶ D. Jaszewska, *O Gombrowiczowskim kiczu w kontekście teorii (po)nowoczesności*, „Załącznik Kulturoznawczy” 2016, No. 3, p. 33.

¹⁷ P. Kowalski, *Religijność potoczna. Notatki na temat kiczu i religii*, op. cit.

a stack made of irrelevant images of the Virgin Mary. The left-behind fluorescent figures are glowing in darkness with a weak soft light. Fluorescence, however, is a short-lived effect following radiation being absorbed from some external source. When the source disappears, so shortly does the light. In the show, it is hard to find the source that could be tapped into. And light is essentially one of the most important symbols of holiness.¹⁸ The strongest beams of light, especially in the first scenes, come from the heart-shaped holes cut out in the doors to the outdoor toilets resembling coffins where dead bodies have been laid: if there has remained any source of light, it comes from the dead. Stacking the fluorescent figures in one place can be interpreted as an act of cleansing: discarding what is falsely simplified, cheap, an attractive gadget; it is about leaving an empty space that can be developed anew and where one can learn the symbolic language again.

Apart from the outdoor toilets and colorful figures, another important element of stage design is a video projection. In the background, there hangs a projection screen onto which a typical Polish landscape is projected, with a few weeping willows, a field, and a gray sky, all in one frame. This was, on the one hand, a realization of Wyspiański's guideline to see Hamlet in Poland, and on the other hand, a play with the Grotowski's show, where instead in Elsinore castle, the play was set in the coarse landscape of Poland", created with movements and onomatopoeic sounds by the actors of the Laboratory Theater. They were producing sounds imitating howling wind, whistling leaves in the willows or crow cries.¹⁹ On the screen, one can also see a small shadow of a Virgin Mary figure. The shape of the crowned Virgin Mary is growing, as the performance progresses, to get at some point outside the frame and "leave" it into an invisible distance. The Virgin Mary becomes the most important religious sign introduced into the performance. It is rather a specter of the past than a holy figure encouraging the feelings of *tremendum* and *mysteriosum*. Such presentations of the Virgin Mary call for a question if she is an intermediary and supporter or an element of religious oppression.

¹⁸ See M. Lurker, *Słownik obrazów i symboli biblijnych*, entry: *Światło* (Light), trans. Bish-op K. Romaniuk, Poznań 1989, pp. 237–239.

¹⁹ L. Flaszen, *Hamlet w laboratorium teatralnym...*, op. cit., p. 76.

2. UNDERMINING THE SACRED DIMENSION OF DEATH

Experiences where we undoubtedly feel the sacred are rites of passage, with death and a sexual act being their most prominent examples. In his book *The Face of God*, Roger Scruton defends “the sacred world” and argues that:

The idea of what is sacred is tied to the time and place where the true presence of the agent emerges, so that we feel a bottomless abyss in the general vision of the world, taking off into the transcendent, and ourselves as the ones standing at the verge of it, ready to jump. This is what, according to me, happens in a sexual act and death.²⁰

A Study on Hamlets starts with a scene of washing dead bodies – part of the rite performed to get rid of the filth connected with a dead body and prepare the dead to the rite of passage to help them move from the community of the living to the community of the dead. This activity, however, is performed carelessly. Wiping dry the naked torsos is a repetition of Kantor’s gesture from *Wielopole, Wielopole* where Widow of the Local Photographer carelessly cleans the body of Uncle Józef Priest with a dirty cleaning cloth. Although the rite of washing is performed on a thin line between the sacred and the profane, cleaning the body without due regard paradoxically underscores the subjectivity of man. Also, it is important that the dead are placed in the coffin-shaped outdoor toilets. This is another point at which the safe boundary between the holy and layman’s world gets infringed. No matter if the wooden boxes are more likely to bring to mind associations with an outdoor toilet or a coffin, argues Rodowicz, matter is bound to transform into Mother Earth. What is lofty is to merge – literally and metaphorically – with the down-to-earth. Bataille had already stated that the fear evoked by a dead body is similar to the one evoked by human excrement.²¹ Subject to the process of fermentation, a decomposing body, giving off a disgusting stench, brings to mind feces.

The show starts following the deaths of Hamlet and other characters of the drama. On the stage, the dead get back to the living to speak for themselves. The characters speak the Shakespeare’s character’s lines. Hamlet, as I mentioned before, is not performed by a single actor but like a ghost takes control of the

²⁰ R. Scruton, *Oblicze Boga*, trans. J. Grzegorzcyk, Poznań 2015, p. 207.

²¹ G. Bataille, *Historia erotyzmu*, trans. I. Kania, Kraków 1992, p. 63.

actors' bodies, looking for place to perch on and the opportunity to take the floor. Each actor produces some lines from the dialogues of different characters, adding their own ones. Looking for references to Jewish tradition whose elements turn up every now and then in the production, the voices that speak through the actors are not malicious *dybbuks* but rather *gilguls* – souls that had been present on Earth in previous generations, however, now they are coming back – according to some plan – to deal with some unfinished business or help someone.²² They come to reiterate their stories, for us to get reflected in them (the stories) like in a mirror. One can assume here a play with the Grotowski's production, where you have Hamlet-Jew versus a lot of peasants. In the Chorea's performance, on the other hand, you have multiple Hamlets versus one Jew-Adam, who is ultimately to abruptly wind up the performance, leaving the audience with material questions to answer. The Hamlet from the Laboratory Theater was deprived of agency, he did not manage to break the death march.

There is no doubt that death and the dead is the light motif of this production. The outdoor toilets put horizontally on the stage turn without doubt into coffins or open graves for dead bodies to be put in them a moment later. The rough-surfaced wooden box is not only a funeral object, a symbol of limited human life, but also a symbol of our Polish history and tradition. There we have the communion of the living and the dead, the *dziady* rite where the ghosts of our past are invoked. It was not an accident that Shakespeare is read through *Dziady* and Hamlet is seen through Konrad. A passage from the Great Improvisation was added to the script. The duel of Konrad with God has grown to be not only the most renown romantic poem (in Poland) but it also got strongly embedded in the national tradition and is part of our legacy. The Great Improvisation has always been a challenge for the best Polish actors, some of them – like Gustaw Holoubek and Jerzy Trela – with their performances have created another piece of cultural importance. Out of the monologue there were chosen lines in which Konrad, able to love and suffer for his nation, challenges God and scorning His indifferent wisdom, rebels against Him, makes demands and accuses of being cruelly silent. The hidden God who allows for evil continues to make theologians, and especially all artists, to reiterate questions about the meaning of suffering and evil. Like in the

²² See Szalom ber Stambler, *Gilgul – wędrówka dusz*, in: *Dybuk. Na pograniczu dwóch światów*, ed. M. Abramowicz, J. Ciechowicz, K. Kręglewska, Gdańsk 2017, pp. 13–23.

drama, like in the Raźniak's and Rodowicz's production, Konrad-Hamlet ultimately abstains from offending God with his blasphemous cry.

In *A Study on Hamlets*, national traumas are also invoked, with summary executions invariably bringing to mind the Katyń war crime, and the mass graves of the executed during the second world war. Not importunately but by consistent introduction of signs, the memory of Shoah is also invoked in the production (with a figure of a Jew, mass graves, Jewish songs, and a wardrobe as a hideout). The audience cannot miss the references to our today's realities, too, especially seeing in previous scenes allusions to the independence day marches and monthly commemorations of the Polish presidential plane crash at Smolensk. Continually opened and closed graves refer to the exhumations of the bodies of those killed in the plane crash from 2010.

The appearance of the dead in the world of the living, tarnishing the boundary between the worlds, mixing together what is typically separated, is a sign of a threat and crisis.

“It is a proof that the dead embody violence, the external and transcendent one in the times of order, and the immanent one when things start to be going wrong, when the relationships within a community are getting worse (...) along with death the contagious lawlessness permeates into the community and the living must defend themselves against it.”²³ So it happens in the world of *A Study on Hamlets*. The play is framed with the images of the dead rising from their graves. Let me quote some excerpts from the first scene and the last monologue. They seem to be relevant in the discussion of the strategies of communicating the sacred. At the beginning of the performance, the actors make the following lines taken from different parts of the play, building a new semantic structure:

²³ A. M. di Nola, *Tryumf śmierci. Antropologia żałoby*, red. naukowa M. Woźniak, Kraków 2006, p. 159.

Today out of defeated Poland/ The dead crawled out of their graves.../this stack of dead bodies/ a feast of eternal darkness/ today out of defeated Poland / thundering cannon salvos / pollen irritates an eye/ the dead crawled out of their graves/ graves graves graves/ bloody drizzle of the sky /our fighting a shadow / is a pointless struggle/ words words words/ you will always look for /your father's traces in the dirt/ one drop of evil/ infuses goodness with venom.²⁴

Distorted, rearranged and arranged anew passages of the monologues and dialogues became an uncompromising description of the Polish society. The picture of the defeated Poland where evil is commonplace and the dead rise from their graves to either restore order or perhaps further the chaos. The picture of graves, human remains and father's grave recurs in the production like a leitmotif. It is also inscribed in the final actors' performance. One needs to point out that *A Study on Hamlets* has two endings. At some point (the actor made his own decision when) one of the protagonists – Jew Adam (the actor decides when) – finished with the theatrical illusion. It turns out that what you have been watching is only a poor rehearsal that needs to be done anew. It is then that the final monologue starts. Its first part comes from a piece by Wyspiański. The other one is authored and delivered by Tomasz Rodowicz, who ironically explains:

All four of us, meaning: Wyspiański, Grotowski, Raźniak and myself, we all agree about one thing: for Hamlet to be any relevant (to us), he must be from Poland. The story is set in Poland, meaning nowhere..., meaning: for us, it can be set nowhere else.

So you, Adam, do not pretend to be a Jew, because the only real Jew here is me. Does any of you feel to be a real Arab? Nobody? And which of you feels to be a real Pole?

So what is the greatest holiday of our nation? Truly celebrated by all Poles, irrespectively of their religion, origins or social class? It is the Day of the Dead. With glowing graveyards all across Poland. Have you ever gone by car in Poland on 2 November? The sky is lit up with a glow all across the horizon.

So we need to ask this question: Isn't it so that to get to the truth about ourselves we should get all the graves exhumed, ideally all at the same time?

²⁴ *A Study on Hamlets*, script, T. Rodowicz, author's own archive. All other quotations come from this source.

To change the Day of the Dead into a Day of the Eternally Living? Once a year, to uncover all graves to cover them right afterwards. If anyone is yet to have a family grave, there are plenty of still untouched graves of anonymous soldiers, e.g. the cursed soldiers...

But I will not let you touch my father's grave! He keeps rolling over in his grave, seeing all this mess so let him rest in peace!

Inconspicuously referring to the current social and political situation, and drawing on the language of public discourse, the Rodowicz's bitter monologue is a call against infringing the sacred dimension of death and the peace of the dead. While Grotowski's *The Hamlet Study* emerged as a play on an impossibility to compromise two visions of the world – the intellectual's and peasant's ones – Raźniak and Rodowicz put their Hamlets in the polarized circumstances of today's Poland which, as many commentators (reporters, sociologists, psychologists) argue, is inhabited by one nation including two tribes hostile towards each other. The division does not run along the social or class lines but the political ones. In the following performances, however, this part has been cut out, deemed to be too literal. Just before the final incantations, one of the actors utters some passages from *Studium o Hamlecie* by Wyspiański, where the following statement was especially meaningful: "Both the actor and the author care about the TRAGEDY, the drama, people's lives, PEOPLE'S LIVES, those people concerned in the tragedy." In the monologue also appeared passages on our ignorance about both the living and the ghosts. "This gives a new horror of the debris which speak of the meaning and value of man – there is none, and this feels so odd thinking of a living soul of a living man when it is only lifeless skulls that are removed by grave diggers from freshly dug-out graves.

3. A SONG AS A STRATEGY FOR INVOKING THE SACRED

According to Tadeusz Kornaś, lament, funeral or liturgical songs as components of culture and religion developed by the society over the centuries, can effectively speak about the most difficult issues: about death, extermination, tragedy. They are the most resilient means of expression which do not make the eschatological issues seem banal. "If religious incantations have always served to express the greatest human fears, one can and should use them in theater as an artifact, independently effective, speaking of extermination without enticing shame or a sense

of unfitness”.²⁵ In accordance with artistic assumptions of Chorea, working with the word uttered to a tune and movement makes the basis of actor’s practice. The selected songs are about death and transitory nature of reality. I couldn’t disagree more with Piotr Urbanowicz who argued that the passages of *Hamlet*, Chorea’s esthetics and folk songs do not fit to one another. On the contrary, only songs can restore the meaning and order of this disfigured world. Let us then review their content and look at the order of performing, to ponder if with them being put into the script, they create their own dramaturgy.

The washing dead bodies lying in the coffins was accompanied by a folk song *Cós po kumorze*. Its doleful character was contrasted with careless wiping of the dead bodies. The folk song is about a dialogue between little Mary and her late mother. The dead woman complains that she has been put to a coffin, covered with sand and moss. The song ends with her cry to God: “*Weź mie w łopieke, ło Boże Święty, ło Boże Święty*” (“Take care of me, oh, Lord, oh, Lord”). The piece strengthens actor’s performance and from the very first scene, it shows what is going to be the topic of the play – this is because the main character is a dead person. If Stanisław Rosiek is right to say that in the modern culture there has come to devaluation of the words about death, that there are no philosophical discussions about it, and hence disappearance of death as a general category, then one can and should speak about the dead and the living who participate communal and private mourning rituals.²⁶ Every piece used by Chorea is about the dead. Another in the order of being performed was the song of Gravediggers from *Hamlet’s* Act 5, which was richly infused with an atmosphere of transience. It says about the following stages of life which invariably finds its end in death. The Gravediggers’ song is founded on an opposition of youth vs. old age. While at the first stage of life people do not seem to be concerned with life going by or believe that anything bad could ever happen to them, being older the perspective of unavoidable death seems to become increasingly apparent. Following the words: “A pickax and a shovel, a shovel, / And a sheet for a funeral shroud, / Oh, a pit of dirt is what we need / For a guest like this one here”, they sing a Serbian folk song *Selo, selo moje*

²⁵ T. Kornaś, *Zajrzeć za horyzont. Z Tadeuszem Kornasiem rozmawia Katarzyna Flader-Rzeszowska*, „Teatr” 2018, No. 1, p. 82

²⁶ S. Rosiek, *Słowo wstępne*, in: *Wymiary śmierci*, wybór i słowo wstępne S. Rosiek, Gdańsk 2010, p. 5.

about the pleasures of country life, about bucolic landscapes. The “pit of dirt” from the last line of a gravedigger is juxtaposed with the bliss of country living, bucolic landscapes and beauty of nature. Does *Selo, selo moje* become a by-gone happiness and light-heartedness of childhood in retrospect? Of youth? Hamlet’s? Hamlet’s father’s? Once the song is finished, one of the actresses approaches the audience and says a passage from a monologue of King-Ghost (*Król Duch*): “This world is not made for either one to last long in, and it’s no surprise that even our loves change along with our luck.” Joy, love, youth are only transient and short-lived feelings and states, since sooner or later everything will get decomposed.

Therefore, relentlessly persistent like a sine wave, in Scene 9, a song was used again. This time with a reference to a religious folk song from Kurpie²⁷ *Na smentarzu* (At the graveyard). “*Na smentarzu mieszkać będę/ a na chwilę tu pobędę/ aż Pan Chrystus wszystkich ludzi/ głosem trąby z martwych zbudzi*” (I will live at the graveyard/ and I’ll stay here for a while / until Christ the Lord wakes up / all the people with the trumpet sound). This song includes a lot of theological content describing Christian eschatology. In the first stanza, it says about bringing back to life all the dead in order to send those without sin to heaven. In heaven, which is full of flowers, they will spend their time together with the Lamb – the Son of God. Immortal soul will go to the land of everlasting singing, leaving behind in the grave only the mortal body. A song gives hope for the eternal life, with a condition being to have lived a decent life on Earth. The Christian vision of the world gets mixed here with folk beliefs and literary images. The message, however, is straightforward: everyone is to end up in a graveyard, but not everyone will be redeemed.

After finding Hamlet mad and the scene of Great Improvisation, one can hear Ophelia’s song about her late beloved whose death has not been mourned by anyone. (1) “How should I your true-love know / From another one? / By his cockle hat and staff, / And his sandal shoone.” “He is dead and gone, lady / He is dead and gone, / At his head a grass-green turf, / At his heels a stone.” (2) “White his shroud as the mountain snow”; “Larded all with sweet flowers, / Which bewept to the ground did not go / With true-love showers.” In the Shakespeare’s play, Ophelia

²⁷ Kurpie is one of a number of ethnically distinct regions in Poland, noted for its unique traditional customs, such as its own types of traditional costume, traditional dance and distinctive type of architecture and livelihoods – translator’s note.

sings these words having turned insane, just before taking her own life. In the Chorea's script, they are used following the monologue from Mickiewicz, which ends with: „*Patrzę na ojczyznę biedną, / Jak syn na ojca wplecionego w koło; / Czuję całego cierpienia narodu, / Jak matka czuje w łonie bole swego płodu.*” (I am looking at the poor land of my father, / Like a son looks at his father's body stretched on a breaking wheel; / I can feel the entire suffering of the nation, / Like mother can feel the pain caused by the baby in her womb.) In this arrangement, the song becomes a memory of the rebellious thinker, Hamlet or a mournful tribute for the deceased while living (the ground has not been wet with anyone's tears) madman who was defeated fighting for his own principles. If Konrad is the embodiment of the nation, the poetic piece can also be interpreted as a lament after the “poor fatherland”.

Two scenes on, just before Ophelia gives back the prince little possessions and memorabilia, with him violently and aggressively tugging at her body, there come two songs in Yiddish. The first one is based on a traditional Jewish melody *Oj mame, mame*, being a song about a young girl who wants to get married. Ophelia is but a would be Bridegroom who has not lived to experience the marital happiness. The wedding did not take place, the fiancée has been rejected. The only thing for her to choose was to take her own life. The song, from a full of humor and lighthearted story, turns into a tragic statement about an unrealized dream. Following *Oj mame, mame*, there comes another song *Niszt zorgn*.²⁸ It originates from the Łódź ghetto, created at the beginning of 1940 and liquidated in 1944. It was the first fully isolated ghetto organized on the territory of Poland, with Chaim Rumkowski being the head of Jewish administration. L-stadt Getto was the only one that made it till the end of the Nazi occupation. About 10,000 Jews managed to survive their time in it. The lyrics and music for the song were most probably composed by Jankiel Herszkowicz, a musician known as the bard of ghetto.²⁹ Having often sourced his inspirations from traditional Jewish pieces, Herszkowicz would describe everyday life in the ghetto. *Niszt zorgn* says about war-time struggle of a Jewish intellectualist to survive, with hunger, lack of shelter or job being

²⁸ The music for this song, like for all the pieces used in this production, was composed anew by Tomasz Krzyżanowski

²⁹ Herszkowicz started writing songs in the Łódź ghetto where he performed them. Following the liquidation of the ghetto, he was transported to the concentration camp KL Auschwitz-Birkenau. He survived the war and stayed in Poland. In 1970, he committed a suicide.

his daily reality. Only a person who was able to get in line and adopt the imposed ghetto system could count on more welfare, “even getting a bed on the top level” (in the ghetto one room was occupied by six or seven people). Fear and tragedy get mixed there with hope. Already in the first stanza of the song one can sense a hope for a change: “It’s gonna be all right here again. / There’ll even be potatoes. / The improvement will come shortly. / We’re gonna eat biscuits on holiday.”³⁰ The song’s protagonist is Hamlet’s alter ego, a misfit intellectual who living in a world full of evil dreams about change. The question of his chances of winning seems rhetorical.

One needs to note that Jewish mystics believed that every creature and everything that is an expression of nature, sings their own song for the God. And, in Chasidism, music was to encourage the soul to “get attached to God”.³¹ In the Jewish culture, apart from the music that accompanied the ceremonies in the synagogue and the home rite (following the demolition of the Temple, due to the mourning strict rules about musical instruments were introduced) there were bands of klezmers who would play at weddings, in pubs and family ceremonies. Chorea used two songs that complemented each other, though from different contexts. They combined what lofty and tragic with the ordinary and cheerful. *Oj mame, mame* could be heard in different meeting and merry jubilees, this is a popular song that is still played during Jewish culture festivals. However, putting it together with Ophelia’s and Hamlet’s stories, it gains a tragic streak, and complemented with the ghetto song, it becomes a story of unfulfilled dreams, broken half-way-through love relationships, and biographies cut short by the war. *Niszt zorgn* is a song for saving the memory, evoking the most tragic moments in the history of the Jewish people.

With two songs permeating each other, the end of the production is the most powerful. The last scene opens with a male voice singing *Bogurodzica*, joined shortly by female voices singing a folk song *Smutku, smutku*. Men set off to war, and women mourn their dead, left alone in the world of male conflicts. The creators of the production made here use of the Polish oldest religious song, its most

³⁰ The recording of the original and the translation into Polish I received thanks to the courtesy of Joanna Chmielecka, an actress of the Chorea Theater.

³¹ A. Unterman, *Encyklopedia tradycji i legend żydowskich*, trans. O. Zienkiewicz, hasło *Muzyka*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 192-193.

archaic part to be exact, that is the first one,³² where Mary portrayed as the Mother of God, an intermediary between the worshipping people and her Son. It seems to be extremely important, especially in the context of the tacky plastic figures of the Virgin Mary, because it is then that the Medieval poetry shows the power of its artistic value. If we were to look for the place where the religious value of the figure of the Virgin Mary as the intermediary, supporter and advocate has been saved, it is in the sounds of the old song. Its power permeates the audience. Despite being sung by many actors, its power and artistic value is apparent. *Bogurodzica* (Mother of God) functions in the production as a symbol of both the Christian religion and motherland, a motherland song (*carmen patrium*). Using its pieces brings to mind another question: how often and to what extent have religious symbols been utilized for furthering political interests and put "on the banners" when people go fighting; how often have the words of *Bogurodzica*, like in the Chorea's play, been the last ones before death. Perhaps Grotowski posed similar questions when he decided to use the same piece of the song in the graveyard scene (Act 5, Scene 1), which is pictured as troops going out to war. He presented the history of Poland in a series of snapshots: from Slavic fights, through Grunwald, Vienna, the fighting of *husarz* and *ulan* soldiers, up to Warsaw Uprising and National Army (*Armia Krajowa*). Flaszen explained that what this scene was to show was that the only "way out for the national community" was its tragic myth of struggle.³³ Although Hamlet, holding a Bible, cries "You need to save it", the peasants going to the battle spit in his face and bravely wander into the "grave of History."³⁴

The other final piece *Smutku, smutku* is a funeral song, i.e. words uttered to music performed during funeral ceremony, from the moment of preparing the body for the rite (washing, putting on clothes) until the end and attendees going home.³⁵ Funeral songs has been changing and evolving. In the first, pre-Christian era, when the dead were buried at the house or in the field, there were sung pagan funeral songs. Next, when a funeral had two parts, the Christian one and the pagan one, folk – pagan – songs were sung and religious – Christian ones. The funeral songs were passed on by old men (*dziady*) – as an old saying went: "in

³² See T. Michałowska, *Średniowiecze*, Warszawa 2002, p. 278–293.

³³ L. Flaszen, *Hamlet w laboratorium teatralnym*, op. cit., p. 170.

³⁴ E. Barba, *Ziemia popiołu i diamentów...*, op. cit., p. 105.

³⁵ J. Kolbuszewski, *Polska pieśń pogrzebowa. Prolegomena*, „Polska Sztuka Ludowa – Konteksty” 1986, vol. 40, z. 1–2, pp. 49–56.

every wedding party a match-maker, in every funeral an old man (*dziad*)³⁶). With the Christianization process going on, the pagan songs would be replaced with the religious ones. The pagan songs would increasingly adopt Christian messages and themes, adding to the repertoire of folk religiousness. With time as a result of ultimate Christianization of the funeral, the pagan songs had disappeared completely. Kolbuszewski argued that the process of folklorization of religious songs took a long time, beginning in the Middle Ages and getting completed in the 20th century.³⁷ For example, the *Smutku, smutku* song is a paraphrase of Medieval *Skarga umierającego* (A complaint of a dying person) beginning with a line that goes: *Ach mój smętku, ma żałości* (Oh my sorrow, my grief). The play ends with the following words:

Ciało ciało, źleś zdziałało,
 żeś na duszę nic nie dbało
 I tyś duszo przy tem była,
 wszystkiegoś mu dozwoliła

Oh my body, my body, you were wrong
 to have taken no care for the soul
 And you, my soul, you witnessed that all,
 being also complicit allowing it all.

This is a warning for all of us. *Homo consumens* has entirely forgotten about spiritual values. If we are to look for a diagnosis of modern spirituality in Hamlet, as Wyspiański and Grotowski would suggest, it emerges as a solitary island which is not visited by anyone any more. The first song that starts the *A Study on Hamlets* gave simple hints instructing how to behave in a life marked by death: one should bear in mind the dead (*na mojem grobie połóż kwiateczek* – put a flower on my grave), pray for them (*Idź moje dziecko zmów pociurecek* – go my child and say a prayer for me) and believe in the God's mercy (*weź mnie w łopiekie ło Boże Święty* – take care of me, my Lord), the last piece showed a man who had forgotten about spirituality. What used to make an indisputable value, now has been rejected.

³⁶ A. Fischer, *Zwyczaje pogrzebowe ludu polskiego*, Lwów 1921, p. 215

³⁷ J. Kolbuszewski, *Polska pieśń pogrzebowa. Prolegomena*, op. cit.

The songs in *A Study on Hamlets* are very important to the script: they are present in 7 of 22 scenes, i.e. 1/3 of the entire production. Some scenes, like 1 and 22, are entirely built on a song. Among the selected pieces, there are old Polish songs, Slavic songs, Jewish songs, a Christian song and a song from *Hamlet*, masterpieces of not only European culture but also world heritage. These are basic building blocks building our tradition, and every one of them makes an important piece of a greater whole, complementing one another.

After a close review of the songs you can find that the pieces have been selected to cause "friction", to keep unveiling human dichotomies: being young vs. being old, life vs. death, body vs. soul. Undoubtedly, there emerges an image of a dead person and a graveyard, a place of passage, a borderline between these opposing notions. Is there anything that could save a mortal man? The answer to this question is to be found in the last song. Only a good life, not a one rinsed of spiritual values, can give us an eternal life. But does anyone still believe in such a perspective?

A song in the Chorea's production evoke numinous feelings. With references to images of death, grave and decomposition, they evoke fear and terror. Sometimes they bring about a sense of loftiness, sometimes through beautiful arrangement they introduce an element of mystery. However, in the reality of a withering or decontextualized sacred, in the culture where, let us reiterate it, all forms of the lay things can be recognized as sacred, they restore order, carry the burden of the unutterable. While in the visual culture and social life we often have to do, as Giorgio Agamben says, with carelessness and an inappropriate use of the sacred, with its neutralization,³⁸ this is the songs that save the sacred order and make us sensitive to evil. In the Raźniak's and Rodowicz's vision, other religious symbols die out, since their relationship with the group for which they mean anything has come to an end. It seems that the songs are the last thing that has the power to evoke the sacred and uphold the division into the sacred and the lay. At the same time, they can recount what happens between the visible and invisible worlds, between the space of the living and the dead. Being an important element of mourning traditions, they mainly serve to purify those who have been related to the dead, so they are effective in purifying ourselves who are in a transitory period of mourning.

³⁸ G. Agamben, *Profanacje*, trans. M. Kwaterko, Warszawa 2006, p. 95.

Rodowicz stresses that “theater is there for you not to look for your identity through a wall of a screen, through zero-one valuations but to hear another person’s message at the same (“real”) time and place, with the same question will be reiterated in many ways: who are we? How do we act? For what? For whom? Why are one species whose members slaughter one another, although in heart they only crave God’s love and presence.”³⁹ To a great extent, *A Study on Hamlets* actually poses these questions and seeks, sometimes in vain, to find answers.

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³⁹ T. Rodowicz, <http://www.chorea.com.pl/pl/o-nas/idea/>, access: 11.12.2017.

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