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Peter Zadek and "Hamlet"

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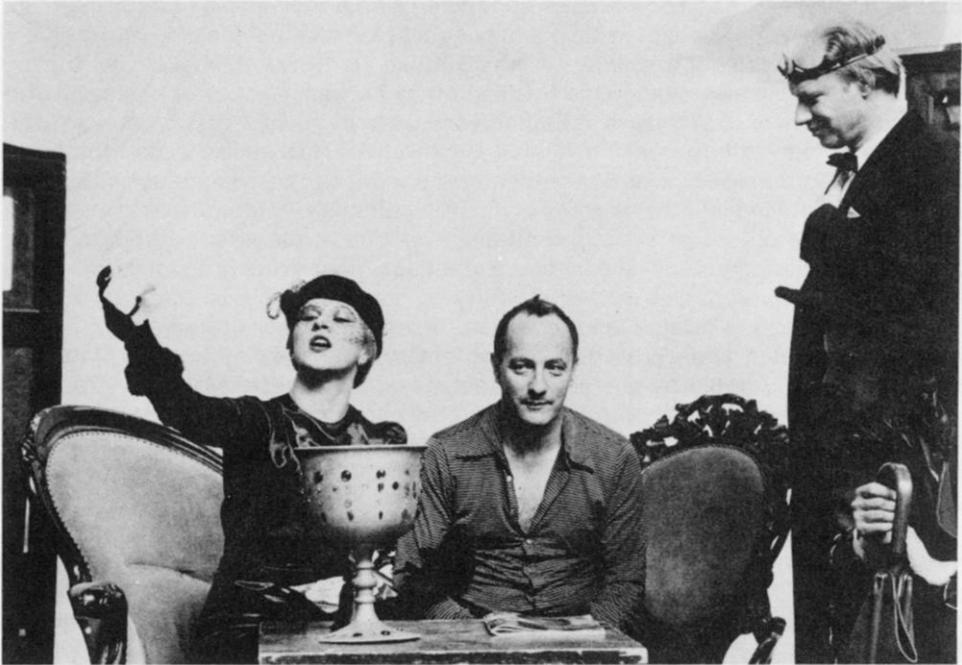
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# Peter Zadek and Hamlet

by Volker Canaris



Peter Zadek grew up in the English theatre, using the English language and applied himself to the plays of Shakespeare with intensity. After preparation in Ulm and Hannover, Zadek made his first great experiments with Shakespeare on the German stage in Bremen. *Measure For Measure* presented a radical reformulation of the play's characters and their potential through the acting of the performers, thus furiously destroying the narrative structure of the play. This was based on the self-investigation and self-discovery of a group of theatre people—the articulation of their situation with theatrical means was the primary impulse motivating the performance. The Bremen program succinctly explained the method of the production: "*Measure For Measure* by William Shakespeare in the translation and adaptation by Martin Speer in collaboration with Peter Zadek and Burkhard Mauer as a starting point for a *mise-en-scène* of the actual content of the play on the open stage by Peter Zadek. Scenery: Wilfried Minks." Zadek's later Shakespeare productions continued to build on the experiences with those working methods, but he was searching for something more adventurous: a way not away from the play but toward it.

For *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* (these productions built on each other) Zadek created working situations free from pressures by the theatre management, from theatre routines and considerations for subscribers. Therefore the long rehearsal periods, therefore the organization of performances outside the management: in a

movie house (*Lear*), a night performance (*Othello*), in a factory hall (*Hamlet*). Zadek wanted to remove what he hates most in the German theatre—the organizational and ideological rubbish that threatens again and again to turn this theatre into a dead institution.

Zadek's creation, particularly for his Shakespeare productions, of working conditions contrary to the "apparatus" is connected with a second essential point in his work with Shakespeare. Just as he could not get at the dimensions of Shakespeare's works with the worn-out procedures of the German Stadttheater, he also saw the approach to Shakespeare's language blocked off by its translation. For someone who evolved his concepts of theatre in England and with the theatre of Shakespeare, the problem of translation must be almost unsolvable. (How much Zadek thinks in English when he works with Shakespeare is shown by the conceptual notes and questions scribbled into the margins of his first—English—promptbook. They are in English.) Therefore Zadek's second attack, developed from intensive group work, aims at formulating its own scenic stage language of which only a small part is linguistically articulated. Out of the difficulty of not being able to translate Shakespeare adequately, a (stage) language was forged that made it possible to put on stage Shakespeare's nonverbal dramatic potential. Thus, the play, in spite of its lack of verbal speech, could be presented intact. *Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *A Winter's Tale* were worked out during rehearsals with the performers. They were grounded in colloquial speech based on the language of the performers and allowed poetry and melodic line only in context, at times roughed up with almost unwieldy but precise, literal or provocative anachronistic metaphors.

One of the basic structural elements of Shakespeare's plays is the alteration of verse and prose, of the poetic and prosaic. For the spectator, this change of form often means a change of emotion, a constant change in the relationship with the scenic events. Aiming for this effect in his Shakespeare productions, Zadek has found a corresponding scenic formula. Sequences of comical-silly, trivial, grotesque theatrical tricks and situations suddenly turn into simplicity, stillness, seriousness, grief. Not for very long, though; after a few moments, the scene may jump into the next turbulence.

The plays are not derived from "classic" Shakespeare but from the interaction of Shakespearean characters on stage in their concrete and often extremely exaggerated situations. The tragedies of the king Lear, the general Othello, the Danish prince Hamlet (stories of rather exotic strangeness looked at with our present-day psychology, with our interests, experiences and consciousness) are actualized not by making them fit our day-to-day reality but by translating them into a communication process between stage and audience. This process ignites, stirs, provokes and perpetuates feeling and thought in the spectator's own real world. An example elucidating this procedure: Othello observes, put to it by Iago, how Cassio flirts with Bianca with Desdemona's handkerchief. Ulrich Wildgruber, playing Othello, has to undergo a second masquerade. Already in a wild King Kong costume, he squeezes into a uniform jacket turned inside out, puts a cheap papier-maché mask of a carnival-black on his already blackened face, and picks up a musical instrument. The theatrical figure is overtheatricalized. Seated just outside the field of action, murmuring almost inaudibly behind the mask, plucking at his instrument with large helpless gestures, the moor's head slightly turned for listening, Wildgruber is reacting to the things that are meant to hurt Othello. Behind the twice-masked face, behind this theatrical theatre figure, tremendous sorrow becomes visible. The concern of the spectator is connected to the essence of the Shakespearean situation.



### ***Ophelia's mad scene***

In *Hamlet*, Ilse Ritter's Ophelia, in her madness, perceives Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes as pigheads—grunting, faceless creatures. One can experience both their real condition (they are all monsters anyway) and the precision of such shifted, crazed vision. That Zadek and his actors have found images and a performing style for such scenes and moments makes their struggle for Shakespeare so productive, precisely because of its provocativeness.

The material from which the scenic images are drawn is complex. Fantasies, thoughts and experiences of all the participants play a major role (according to Zadek himself) together with historical studies and the perusal of all kinds of material for associative stimuli. (Zadek showed Mahnke films of W.C. Fields in order to give him a sense of the comic in his presentation of the old man, Gloucester.) A collection of pictures and photographs of the most heterogeneous origin, which hangs on one of the walls of the environment for *Hamlet*, shares with the audience at intermission some of the moments in the evolution of the production. A similar collection exists for *Lear* and *Othello*. There are pictures that give a rather crude view on the play (an Italian comic strip of Hamlet as someone suffering from chronic constipation or a photograph showing a huge black man with a fragile white girl), pictures of situations that become incorporated into the production (colonial officers drinking tea), pictures that are the actual source for some details on the stage (a clown with an oversized hat pushed over his eyes), and many pictures whose function for the present production can no longer be reconstructed, since their stimulus has been discarded, forgotten or changed unrecognizably.

Zadek's theatre lives mostly from opposition and resistance: opposition against the management and the conditions surrounding his theatre; resistance to the expectations of the public. Opposition and resistance mainly against the theatrical conventions that deliver ready-made results instead of processes alive and stimulating. Applied to his work with Shakespeare, this means that Zadek is against Shakespeare, the Classic, but for the Elizabethan—against the dead man, dead for almost 400 years, but for the living theatre man Shakespeare. His productions speak against the expectations for an uplifting and edifying evening—the cultural event, the educational institution. They are for a passionate vital confrontation with an exciting contradictory process created on his stage with his performers. That's the reason for Zadek's show-elements, for the fun and nonsense and "action" on stage, the business of the clowns, the music and the bright circus spectacles. All this is meant to get them away from the patiently tolerated, cultured congregations and to establish an alive, open contact between performers and spectators.

*Hamlet*, in 1977, was both the climax and finale of Zadek's work with Shakespeare in Bochum. The stage is an empty factory hall in Bochum-Hamme. In the center of the performance space are gray and black gym mats. At one wall behind a podium is Polonius' "room,": a sofa, an armchair, a tailor's dummy for the dress-coat of the minister, on a sideboard a stuffed bird of prey. (For the duel at the end, this podium will serve as tribune for the members of the court.) At various places in the hall are a coatrack and next to it, a skeleton. There is a huge writing desk and writing utensils for the King and a parlor organ, a virginal, on which Ophelia tinkles melancholically. Underneath a paneless window, which looks into a side room of the hall, is a sofa. It is the place for all twosomes: Polonius and Ophelia, Ophelia and Hamlet, Hamlet and Gertrude, Hamlet and Horatio. At one of the narrow walls is a Thespis cart (used for entrances, like one of the wandering players). In front of this is a huge picture frame. (Magdalena Montezuma watches the entire play through it as the "picture" of the old Hamlet and steps out of it to wander about as his ghost.) On the walls are a rough map of Denmark, Norway and England; a black cloth of clouds; a painted desert scene; and golden, glittering curtains. Next to the door leading to the dressing rooms of the actors is a picture wall with photographs—the association material for the production. Besides that there is only the naked hall: bare concrete walls, gray lacquered steel doors. Fluorescent lights remain on throughout the five and a half hours of the performance. Three hundred spectators are gathered around the performance area, spatially included and in direct connection with the action. Never in isolation, the actors relate continuously to the audience.

The costumes: like for *Lear* and *Othello*, they were put together by rummaging through the costume racks of the theatre. They are wornout, highly theatrical clothes, chosen to suit a particular role and situation, accentuating, exhibiting and clarifying the character and its changes in a changed situation. For example, in the beginning, the King (Hermann Lause) wears a wig of flax and a crown, a red cape with ermine, tight black pants and shoes with buckles. Later in the performance, this theatrical king transforms himself into a balding politician, highly-polished, in a blue suit. He becomes the blue-gray eminence of the present day aristocracy. For the presentation of the murder, he appears in a cutaway suit and top hat, like a gentleman in Ascot for the Derby.

Eva Mattes, the queen, comes to the obscene reception ceremony at the beginning in a bouncy crinoline with flowers in her curly wig and shows off her breasts, covered with red paint. She too—this show piece of a queen—will change time after time, each time uncovering more. She is the "Grand Dame," all wrapped in furs, the



### ***Gertrude at reception ceremony***

personification of the “demimonde” in a tailored suit with a fox stole slung over her shoulders. Stalking around in high heels, glued into a gold lamé dress with pink sleeves, she is Mama, slowly but surely disintegrating, coming apart at the seams. At Ophelia’s grave, she is the grief-struck, gray-haired mourner complete with the little hat and black veil. She watches the duel, palefaced, wearing an elegant dark gown with matching Dior cap. This is the outfit she dies in, like a mannequin left behind sitting in a sofa.

The other costumes. A pin-striped, double-breasted suit, vest, and watch chain for Polonius. A pleated skirt, sling shoes and a pearl necklace; a nightgown and nylon socks for Ophelia; foppish, camel-hair colored suits for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. All this evokes a certain closeness to our day-to-day reality, and at the same time creates its own intrinsic reality. Some of the details—particularly the grotesque makeup of the ladies and flunkies of the court—are so alienating that no reference can be made to “people like you and me” nor to “historicity of classical costume.” With its rejection of any obligation to fulfill the common expectations regarding costumes, this *Hamlet* shows a way to create characters that are clearly defined, never abstract and very real. Actuality and alienation alternate continuously.



### ***Claudius and Hamlet***

The performance of the actors corresponds to the theatricality of costumes and space. "Psychologizing" in the sense of getting into and acting out feelings does not take place. Hardly any of the casting "fits." Age and sex, type and role of the performer are not identical. The actor who plays Hamlet is much older than the actress who plays his mother. She is much younger than Ophelia. A young woman plays the old man Polonius. A heavy-set man plays the sportive nobleman Laertes. Hamlet is played by someone who "has" none of the distinctions of a Danish prince. Nevertheless, the psychological "gestus" of the characters and their relationships are demonstrated repeatedly. The means for this are manifold. Lively clowning, fun-and-games with masks, and artless charging about mark figures like the chattering gravediggers, who take measurements of the still-living with their measuring rods, or the grimacing pirates with sharp blades in their toothless mouths (both couples are played by Elisabeth Stepanek and Rudolf Voss).

Knut Koch reduces his voice and movements to softest tenderness. His Horatio is a helpless and wise observer, somebody who gives cues and listens, too. He is the good friend who packs his fluffy cap and takes his suitcase when Hamlet calls for him, and who can walk through a room, undisturbed, just glancing at the intrigues around him—the whole character expressed with Koch's silent walk.

Ilse Ritter shows us Ophelia in her madness—the almost affected style of her delivery of broken-up bits. They extend from sobbing with failing breath, through which her voice is barely audible—like a meaningless melody of pure sound and feeling—to deep silences, to harsh and aggressive attacks, even to vulgar and repulsive self-exposure.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are a gay couple. During the course of the play, both turn out to be transvestites. Fritz Praetorius, the man, suddenly starts prancing around in pasties and garters; Carola Regnier, the woman, throws off her man's clothing and show off, bouncing her big breasts. This game at disclosure is used to describe the relationship between the king and two of his creatures as a network of sexual lust and dependency—a relationship similar to the one between Desdemona and Emilia, and between Goneril and Regan and their men in Zadek's productions of *Othello* and *Lear*. The intricacies of power games are laid open with all their ambivalence. Lause—a whimpering, trembling King—hangs on the neck of Guildenstern, the woman, vying for sympathy for his woes. In the next scene, like one pushes the nose of a dog into his own puddle for punishment, he pushes the face of Carola Regnier in the puddle of blood left by the dead Polonius.

The role of Polonius is perhaps the best example to illustrate the process of creating a character. Rosel Zech with a gray wig, glasses, short pipe, floppy hat over her face, which is painted white, with her walking cane and baggy suit, presents the picture of a clown. And since all Polonius' utterances have to be made by the young woman, Rosel Zech, the comical features of this figure are sharply pronounced. Zech establishes and maintains an eye-twinkling, continuous understanding with the audience about the fun both the actress and the spectator are having with this artificial trick. At the same time, the character gains tremendous seriousness through conscious effects: the feet-dragging, shuffling tiredness with which this Polonius enters; the busy insecurity with which he tries repeatedly to get attention; the sudden concern with which he kisses Ophelia to console her—all this gives him a dignity and a humanity. The funny portrayal of senility becomes a showing of age. The fluttering talkativity of an old tottering man freezes into an image of a wise man, who for moments knows the truth and speaks it. The feigned, distorted, bent back suddenly carries the weight of a lifetime. The cheerfully blinking eyes, encircled by black, become empty, desperate, knowing. They have seen much, too much. The comic figure has become a sad old man, cracking jokes and oddly jumping about on stage.

Other figures manage their characterization with a minimum of elements. Hermann Lause signals the reactions of his King with a frown, a finger twisting on his back, a delicate gesture smoothing down his few hairs, a slight vibration in his voice—and we sense the gangster behind the smooth friendliness and cool casualness. When this mighty despot is unable to conceal his anxiety, his furor, his malice, Lause's blue eyes become sharp with the cold death-bringing stare of a hawk. His hair stands up. He starts fidgeting, fingering with spider-like obscenity and lasciviousness the instruments of his murders—the flask of poison and the sword.

The treatment of language in this *Hamlet* extends from raw brutality to tender, eloquent silence. There is comprehensibility and rhythmic structure without too much forced rhetoric. Certain passages are spoken directly to the audience for provocation and disillusionment. Harmony of beautifully flowing speech does not occur; uniformity and beauty of artistic language are constantly broken up. They are not totally destroyed, however. Lightning-fast eruptions of laughter or sudden attacks on the audience create perplexity and defensiveness, thus making the performed play an intrusion into reality. (This particularly works well in Ulrich Wildgriber's *Hamlet* monologues). The decisive unusualness and effectiveness of this *Hamlet* stems however from the scenic use of metaphors with which Zadek, as in his other Shakespeare productions, shows us the connections between narrative and content. The story is made visible as a message in the scene in which Polonius and Claudius



### ***Ophelia and Hamlet***

use Ophelia as a decoy bird for Hamlet. It begins with Polonius ripping the fur stole from Ophelia's shoulders. She is dressed in a long brocade gown and, with a prayer book in her hands, she is sent to Hamlet as a political call girl. Ilse Ritter stands there, her breasts bared, vulnerable and seductive at the same time, and waits, not knowing what she is doing, yet filled with guilt.

Hamlet enters, dressed for the love-scene in a red coat and fox fur. In one hand are his sunglasses, in the other his obligatory dandycane. "To be or not to be" is

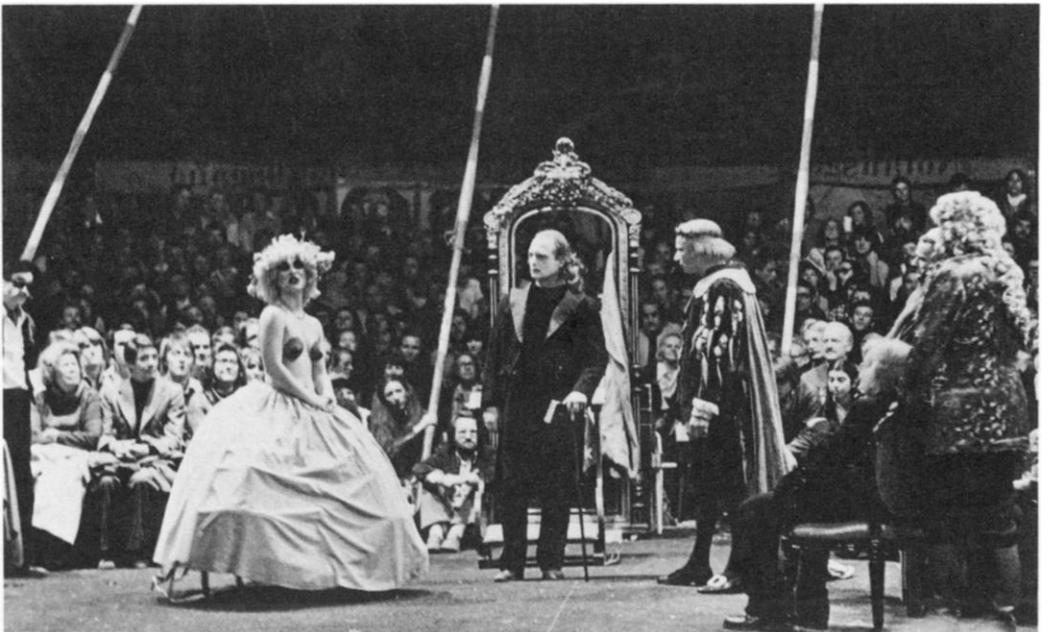
spoken by Wildgruber across the whole width of the room, uninterruptedly looking at Ophelia with an occasional quick turn to the audience.

Then follows, spoken softly and sadly by both, the memory of their past love—which is interrupted by a horrifying entrance. The steel door groans, Hamlet turns, is irritated and halts in his speech. Polonius enters, dragging his feet, wearing a pig-mask. He crosses the stage and meets the king, who had appeared just as unexpectedly, a horse's skull on his head. Hamlet slams the door closed and, beside himself with anger and grief, rages and raves physically over Ophelia. After his fit of madness, he leaves; she has collapsed into a little pile of misery and wretchedness.

The brutal reality of this scene has been made clear. Hamlet sees clearly that Ophelia is lying to him—his question "Where is your father?" and her answer "at home." The entrance of Polonius and the King in masks has demonstrated two things: the concrete situation they are in (hiding) and their real characters (the murderous, beastlike intention of this scene set up by them). The whole complicated network of this moment is scenically told and exposed.

Later, in Ophelia's madness scene, this use of masks is repeated with a variation. Now it is Ophelia who sees the others as monsters with their proper faces. The King and Queen disappear for her behind faceless ovals, softly grunting. Her brother, in spite of her love for him, appears to her as the pig-faced monster he will turn out to be soon enough. Still worse, Hamlet, dressed as for their love scene, now wears the same pig mask Polonius wore before—Polonius who was killed by Hamlet and is the reason for Ophelia's madness. The reversal of guilt and suffering, of executioner and victim, is made obvious by this.

### ***Hamlet in Munich Circus***



Who is Hamlet in this play? The player, the initiator, the blusterer and the entertainer, staging everything, first of all himself. Wildgruber appears in makeup of the different faces of a clown: pale melancholy, yellow grotesque, red-lipped madness. Cane and black tailcoat, sometimes a high hat and a chrysanthemum in the buttonhole, identify him as the director of this circus. There is no doubt: this Hamlet plays the madman. And he himself discovers the metaphor for all the tricks he is playing with reality. With a piece of chalk he draws a little stickman on the concrete wall to remind himself of the smiling foolish king. He addresses and plays up to this little king again and again. He spits his hate at him. He beats him with his sword, and look, it gives off sparks. Even the King adopts the image of this tiny figure and finally recognizes himself in him, unconsciously. Lause stands in front of the drawing, combing his hair and looking at it as at his own image in the mirror.

Zadek's Shakespeare theatre makes radical use of extremely heterogeneous theatre conventions for the fabrication of his own iconography, the language of images. And one thing is denied absolutely: the unity and beauty of a work of art in its completeness, which Brook and Strehler, for example, strove for, and achieved. The romantic Zadek denies himself such classicism—in favor of the openness, vitality and radicalism of his treatment of Shakespeare, which derives solely from theatrical actuality and negates insolently a surrender to Literature and Art.

**Translated from German by Brigitte Kueppers**