



THE
COLLECTED
PLAYS
AND
WRITINGS ON
THEATER



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TRANSLATED
WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
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ON THE THEATER OF THE WORD

I

Reaching for Shakespeare, the Rhapsodic Theater, in accordance with its tradition, has given us a synthesis. Basically, the performance refers to *Hamlet*, as can be seen from its title: *Actors in Elsinore*.¹ But this title expresses only to a small degree the problem raised by the performance. The essential theme is the theater itself. We are concerned here with more than that important fragment of *Hamlet*, the performance at the court in Elsinore, intended to goad the conscience of the wicked Claudius and the disloyal Gertrude. That fragment is only a point of departure, voicing as it does a truth about the great ethical power of the theater. Shakespeare made here a clear confession of his faith in that power. Wyspiański devoted his *Study of Hamlet* to this matter.²

The Rhapsodic Theater company approached Shakespeare with a profound need to define their mission, to communicate it to others, and to confess their faith in their own art. This has certainly played a part in the construction of their Shakespearian performance. In that performance the Rhapsodic Theater puts its collective signature under the words in which the great dramatist himself formulated the theater's mission, "whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as

1. This essay reviews *Actors in Elsinore*, a production by the Rhapsodic Theater that consisted of excerpts from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Henry IV*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth*. It is in effect an essay on the rhapsodic style.

2. Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907) was a painter, poet, dramatist, theatrical innovator. He was considered the greatest figure of the Young Poland movement and one of the most influential men in Polish theater. His plays represented modernist tendencies, for he tackled in his symbolist dramas the problem of national liberation, but he also took his subjects from ancient myths and from Polish history. His *Study of Hamlet*, a semitheoretical, semi-imaginative recreation of Shakespeare's tragedy, set in the precincts of the Wawel Castle in Kraków, was part of his drive to create a monumental national drama based on new techniques of production and stage design.

'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

2

These words define the idea of the theater and its mission in a fundamental and indisputable but general way. They do not articulate concretely how the arts and the artistic theater are to take shape. On that level, while keeping to the basic Shakespearian canon, various paths can be taken and various solutions are possible. It is best to state at the outset that in the ten years of its existence the Rhapsodic Theater has, with hard work and immense insight, found its own, original, path, which seems to be far removed from the production style and solutions accepted in a traditional Shakespearian theater. Fundamentally Shakespeare is not rhapsodic. Indeed, he seems less rhapsodic than any of the other authors presented by the Rhapsodic Theater: Słowacki, Pushkin, Mickiewicz, Mayakowski, or Conrad.

But because of the contrast, this Shakespearian performance helps us formulate some views on the essence of the rhapsodic style.

Everyone will doubtless agree that in our artistic life the Rhapsodic Theater stands apart. It has succeeded already in working out its own style. Let us consider the conditions in which the peculiar aesthetic phenomenon one could call the rhapsodic style appears and works.

The rhapsodic company has accustomed us to a theater of the word. What does this mean? Is not every theater a theater of the word? Does not the word constitute an essential, primary element of any theater? Undoubtedly it does. Nonetheless the position of the word in a theater is not always the same. As in life, the word can appear as an integral part of action, movement, and gesture, inseparable from all human practical activity; or it can appear as "song"—separate, independent, intended only to contain and express thought, to embrace and transmit a vision of the mind. In the latter aspect, or position, the word becomes "rhapsodic," and a theater based on such a concept of the word becomes a rhapsodic theater. And so without entering into deliberations on the primacy of word or movement in the art of the theater, we can safely assume that according to the rhapsodic principle, the word is a pre-element of theater.

The independence of the word that underlies the rhapsodic concept

of theater art has manifold, prolific consequences. The first of these concerns content. Accepting the word as a pre-element of theater art results consistently in a significant rhapsodic intellectualism. Because the word, first and foremost, proclaims certain truths, ideas, and structures rather than accompanying the action, rhapsodic performances have an ideological rather than a narrative character. We do not find in them the usual dramatic plot, comic or tragic situations, complications, solutions—everything that combines to form the ordinary stage narrative. In rhapsodic performances, however, we always find a problem. That problem "acts"; it is posed directly and bluntly. Every worthwhile stage play poses and solves a problem, but always within the framework of a story, that is to say, indirectly. The Rhapsodic Theater always poses the problem straightforwardly, but in an abstract form, not in the guise of a story; any story that appears is peripheral to the problem, an illustration of it. The impact of the performance is caused not by events, transferred in a literary manner from life to the stage, but by the problem itself (perhaps the production of *Eugene Onegin* has had, relatively, the most developed story). The problem itself acts, rouses interest, disturbs, evokes the audience's participation, demands understanding and a solution.

This characteristic of the Rhapsodic Theater one should call intellectualism because the intellect, the mind, is the sphere of abstraction, of concepts. We can make a comparison with reading: there are people who while reading a novel, for instance, grasp mainly the plot, the details of the story, the descriptions and background of events; there are others who, above all, see and grasp the ideas of the work, the way problems are posed and solved, expounded and developed. The second group of readers is thrilled by the intellectual vision, the abstract elements of the work. This is how the Rhapsodic Theater reads and prepares its texts. No wonder that for the most part it has reached for works not designed for the stage. That theater has made of them not traditional "adaptations for the stage," but always specific and authentic uncoverings of the very essence of the works, their thought and ideas, their authors' intellectual vision. This is a novel and revealing approach.

Rhapsodic intellectualism, however, expresses itself not only in content but also in the form of the performance. Generally speaking, the theatrical effects are attractively sparse and when they are not sparse, they are different. Again we must return to the word as a pre-element, separated as an expression of thought rather than integrated into the action, the word proclaimed, an idea proclaimed with a living word. With this in mind, the arrangement of representational elements

seems to be strictly limited. Sound effects must predominate. But the Rhapsodic Theater does not confine itself to them. It wants to be, and is, a genuine theater, not just a chorus reciting the works of poets. So visual effects are employed—indeed there have been more and more of them recently—but they all serve the word. And thus the basic thesis is confirmed: the gestures employed in the Rhapsodic Theater, mime elements, music and scenery, static and dynamic means—all these develop from the word, flow from it, complement and enhance it. The word and the thought are served through the structure of performances, their construction and realization. Let me try to reconstruct a few fragments of this organic process, which could be called evoking theater from the word.

For instance, to give a primary function to the word as a pre-element of theater and to the thought that the word conveys does not at all mean that the actors must be inert. The theater has never been only the word brought to life. In fact, if the word is to be alive, it cannot be conceived without movement. The word matures in gesture (but not as it occurs in everyday life, particularly in our nervous life today, which abounds in gestures, an anxiety of movements imposed on words; the words are expressive, the anxiety convincing, but the words lack maturity). Gesture in the Rhapsodic Theater is different: the word matures in spare, simple, rhythmic gesture, which acquires its rhythmic pattern from the rhythm of the words. A turn of the head or the body, a single step sometimes, or the placing of speaking actors on different levels—these are not typical theatrical situations that reflect life. All this happens in the rhythm of the word and thought, in their inner tension. Thus the movement that best complements rhapsodic speech is dance movement, stylized, nonnaturalistic. So much for movement.

The actor. How is one to define his essential function, once we have said that he “acts” the problem? The actor is a rhapsodist. That does not mean he only recites. On the other hand, it does not mean he simply “acts.” Rather, he carries the problem. I have often pondered the “place” of the actor in the rhapsodic concept of theater. He hardly ever re-creates a given character or embodies it onstage. In performing his part, he repeatedly has to change from the first to the third person: he ceases to speak *as* a given character and begins to speak *about* him. The rhapsodic actor does not become a character but carries a problem; he is one of those who carry the problem of the whole performance. This has been the case even with Falstaff, even with Lady Macbeth in the recent production. In this consists the difficulty of these parts as “rhapsodic” parts.

I said above that the most suitable complement to the rhapsodic word is stylized movement, balletic or dancelike in character. This movement calls for music, which plays a mediating role between word and movement. It would oversimplify to say that music illustrates the word. Instead, like movement, it complements the word, often exhausting the rhythmic pattern hidden in the word and transposing that pattern into a gesture, a movement. The gestures so frequent in rhapsodic performances, originating in the hidden rhythm of the word and directly demanded by the music, are particularly attractive. But music also responds to the very thought structure of the performance; it binds and distributes, underlines and diffuses. Music involves itself in the problem. A particular achievement of the Rhapsodic Theater is the chorus—parts spoken collectively, usually supported by music. In such moments, I think, the word reaches a peak; it no longer accompanies the “practicalities” or even exists as an independent vehicle for thought; but in all its formal, fundamental power, formulated in rhythm, it ceases to be a means and becomes a self-contained element.

The visual aspects of this theater, let us observe briefly, are always a powerful factor for concentration. The setting composes the stage space and differentiates it economically. With simple means it legitimizes and justifies, on even the smallest of stages, all the elements of the vast rhapsodic vision; it serves and expresses them in an ideal manner. Always abstract, the setting uses symbols, has nothing to do with naturalism; and yet in a way that accords with rhapsodic principles, it is “realistic.” As a relevant epitome, it serves the whole performance, requiring neither changes nor a curtain. It would be wrong to call it decor, but one is fully justified in describing it as plasticity—a plastic background for the rhapsodic vision.

These few observations must suffice to depict, however briefly, the conditions and circumstances in which the rhapsodic style occurs.

And now about *Actors in Elsinore*. I consider it a difficult performance, difficult as a concept and as a problem. I have mentioned that it concerns the theater and the actor, seen and arranged through the basic Shakespearian canon. The problem of theater and its artistic and ethical mission forms, as it were, the deepest and most fundamental level of

the performance. Those Shakespearian actors in Elsinore, performing at the court of Claudius and Gertrude, express the highest ambitions of the Rhapsodic Theater.

The performance, however, is not constructed on one level only but on several levels, each full of condensed substance. In Shakespeare's drama of Hamlet, the actors appear in an episode marginal to the basic action, whose hero is the prince of Denmark. Kotlarczyk's version rearranges the structure of the drama so that the case of Hamlet is played out on the margin of the problem of theater and the actor. Hamlet's situation then forms the second level, brought out in the course of the performance. Such a novel juxtaposition of the problem of theater and Hamlet's situation, interesting in itself, also colors anew the story of Hamlet. (The juxtaposition suggests that the world and life are simply horrible and hard and, above all, full of deceit; art, however, particularly the art of the theater, carries within itself the right measure of purity, truth, and greatness. It is hard not to notice that such a conception assumes a certain absolutization of art. This seems to go beyond Shakespeare's idea: Shakespeare only wishes art to be life's conscience and mirror. To the question of Hamlet I shall return later.)

The performance reveals yet another level in its structure, a level occupied by Shakespeare, by an abridged cross section of his dramatic work. Actors, on their arrival at Elsinore, perform before the royal court and before Hamlet several of Shakespeare's plays, including comic excerpts from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Henry IV*, the drama of Romeo and Juliet, and finally the sombre tragedy of *Macbeth*. Hamlet takes part in all these performances and in each one finds ample food for thought; each somehow touches on his life's problem and helps him to solve it. The director does not dramatize Hamlet's real-life tragedy onstage; we discover it when Hamlet himself speaks or a courtier. Such an approach informs us about Hamlet's personal problem, but we cannot grasp the whole depth of his tragic experiences without the ample background given to us by Shakespeare. He conceived Hamlet's drama as an inner human drama, a drama of the psyche, a drama of intelligence, a drama of emotion, a drama of conscience. It grows among incidents and events, which very closely condition it, constantly strengthening and deepening it. This has been brought out particularly by Laurence Olivier's film concept. The gloomy chain of guilt and punishment breaks in the unusually sensitive mirror of Hamlet's soul. There a separate tragic current is born and developed: the inner drama. But that drama becomes intelligible only against the background of dramatic events piled by Shakespeare around his hero. Only

against their background does it grow and develop organically. To my mind the novelty of Shakespeare's work lies exactly in his breaking the tragic course of events at Elsinore in the mirror of one soul.

Mieczysław Kotlarczyk's conception differs from that psychological concept of Hamlet in that it lacks the drama's background of events. In the Rhapsodic Theater Hamlet's inner drama breaks in yet another mirror, that of theater art, in the mirror of Romeo and Juliet or in Lady Macbeth's gloomy mirror of crime and deceit. It is in them that Hamlet finds his inner drama, discovers its various elements, grows aware of them, formulates them.

The conception of Hamlet's part has shifted from one that is organic and psychological to one that is far more abstract than Shakespeare's; it has shifted, we could even say, to a logical conception. We understand Hamlet very well when he lectures actors about the role and mission of the theater, the principles and demands of its art. This is Hamlet-Shakespeare. But in the Rhapsodic Theater we understand Hamlet-the-man above all as a being who fights desperately for his view of life and searches for an answer to the most difficult questions concerning fate, immortality, and the purpose of existence. And the last sentence, in which Hamlet announces that purpose as "tearing the mask off evil," undoubtedly accords with Shakespeare's Hamlet, but the rhapsodic Hamlet achieves that accord through art and the theater—that rich mirror of truth and life. Theater discovers, theater unmasks, and he derives from it his concepts and even his strength.

This rhapsodic Hamlet is above all a superior intelligence. He is Hamlet-the-intellect far more than Hamlet-the-man. Hamlet's intelligence becomes apparent in the second half of the performance, where he delves with such insight into psychological and ethical deliberations. Conclusions stop at the threshold of rationalism. Does Hamlet in this way win the struggle for his view of the world? In theory that view boils down to agnosticism: "We still do not know anything"; in practice, however, it leads to the decision to struggle relentlessly against evil, tearing off its mask. Such is the conception of the part. To have defined it in this way is bold and necessary. And when one measures it against the criterion of our modern times, it is hard to say which of the two conceptions expresses them better: the other, psychological and empirical, or this one, abstract and geared to a view of the world. One can say rather that they complement each other.

This Shakespearian production has been a great effort for the rhapsodists, because Shakespeare, as I have said, is not at all rhapsodic but theatrical, dramatic, comic, and tragic in his own way. He re-creates

life and does not evade its concrete events; on the contrary, he enriches his plays with them. It is not easy to isolate in Shakespeare a pure construction of ideas or to stylize the action in a rhapsodic fashion to give sway to the word. For this reason, while agreeing that this production—as I said at the outset—had its origins in the rhapsodists' profound need for self-definition and undoubtedly expresses that need, one must also state that it is a new confirmation and experience of the proper direction of this particular theater.

[1952]

DRAMA OF WORD AND GESTURE

During the ten years of its open existence in Kraków, the Rhapsodic Theater became an essential institution in our cultural life. Its importance is confirmed by the many people who have spoken already of the necessity to reactivate it in its former location, a building suited to its needs.¹ To elucidate these demands, I shall delve into the peculiar character of the Rhapsodic Theater and attempt to define what has made it unique.

It is relevant to mention that during the occupation the Rhapsodic Theater had a clandestine, catacombic, period before it emerged to open activity after the war. In that first, clandestine, period the company assembled by Mieczysław Kotlarczyk began to call itself the theater of the word. The name was born out of the realities of life. The clandestine company was, after all, entirely cut off from the normal base of theatrical production. Of all the complex resources of theatrical art, there remained only the living word, spoken by people in extrascenic conditions, in a room with a piano. That unheard-of scarcity of the means of expression turned into a creative experiment. The company discovered, or rather confirmed an earlier belief, that the fundamental element of dramatic art is the living human word. It is also the nucleus of drama, a leaven through which human deeds pass, and from which they derive their proper dynamics.

Discovering the relation between word and action provided a point of departure for Mieczysław Kotlarczyk and his group. One must admit that although this discovery met certain needs, it went against con-

1. This article, published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, was one of several statements by different persons arguing the necessity of reopening the Rhapsodic Theater, which had been closed in the Stalinist period.