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# Jan Kott and Shakespeare as a Life Guide

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**Jan Kott**

Family archives, by courtesy of Michal Kott  
Emigration Archive, Nicolaus Copernicus University

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I love to mention Kott's name when talking to theatre folks at home or abroad. If their faces start to shine – not out of mere admiration but because of an outright joy, as if in this big small world we have suddenly discovered a very close common acquaintance – I know I have met people with whom we share the same wavelength. The brothers of spirit.

I love to mention Kott's name, when talking to students. When I quote his favourite lines by him, the silence in the hall changes: it becomes more concentrated, in sync with the faces. I deliberately repeat the same lines in a while – the most important parts of them – and I see the expression in some eyes that must have given birth to the phrase about the eyes: that they get opened, figuratively. In this case, the eyes get opened to the fact that the most profound meaning of theatre – its quintessential meaning, that is – is only a key to the sacraments of life. There are won are more followers of the Kott's brethren.

If Jan Kott had lived in the time of Shakespeare, some scholars today would claim he had authored the Bard's works. The two of them have so much in common. Born nearly four centuries later, Kott continues to be our contemporary for most of the reasons that have made Shakespeare a contemporary to people for over four centuries. Kott was interested too, in the first place, in life, and, for the sake of life, was interested in theatre. For Kott, too, the striking extent to which theatre resembles life was important, but even more important was the opposite, the mirror effect. "Theatre is not an image of the world, it is the world that is an image of the theatre" (Kott 1984). Kott wrote, and this was his way of saying that "The world is a stage". And – what is more important – than maybe the theatre nature of the world is a code, or at least hides some codes, for the great riddles of life and the ever-mysterious dance of the visible and the invisible in which the "reality" is merely a partner.

At times, I think that it is, indeed, impossible for Shakespeare's oeuvre to have been the work of a single person; that it's 'given' to us, as the Bible, so that it could lift invisible curtains before our eyes and make us begin to see the essence of life – why and how we must live our lives.

And if Kott's book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* is outstanding – more than that: of a deserved cult status! – it is not only (and even not so much) because of the brilliant dramaturgical analysis (and this is something all great critics are good at) but because it is a unique interpretation of Shakespeare exactly as sort of a Bible, a specific Life Guide. That is why it does not cause theatrical claustrophobia in readers who are not professionals – unlike many books on theatre, which tend to put an end to real life as soon as one opens them. Not by chance, *The Guardian* wrote in its obituary from 2002: "Jan Kott, who has died aged 87, was more than a theatre critic and scholar: he was an involved philosopher of theatre" (Kastow 2002).

According to Kott, the main dispute in Shakespeare's works is on the nature of the world. "Is this world good or bad? What are the limits of suffering? What is the ultimate purpose of the few brief moments between birth and death?" (Kott 1965). Kott wrote these lines about *Othello* – that if the play were to be stripped of everything else, the dispute between Othello and Iago could be boiled down to this essence. Yet, I think he found this to be the core of Shakespeare's plays on the whole, especially of the great tragedies. Consequently, according to him, the main characters' drama is whether they manage to stay good or succumb to the lies, doubts, and dupery... Whether and how their innate conviction

that “the world is beautiful and people are noble” [Othello] and that “there exist in it love and loyalty” [Othello] will crumble. And, if so, how will these ‘fallen’ people become proof that “the world is vile”, i.e., they will become the accomplices of evil? Whether the man will have the arrogance to think he’s a God, has the power to administer life and death, and ruin love. Whether the man will allow to be misled by the illusion that nothing in life should be taken too seriously... In brief and inappropriately, a biblical spirit, the question of whether and how man will succumb to the temptations. All of them are so eternal – so contemporary, that is. Even the last one – so innocuous at first sight; yet do not we see so well its consequences today when the *to-have-fun* mantra has started to successfully substitute the much more important, the *most* important: the everlasting strife of human beings to be good, above all.

Naturally, the theme of *making a choice* comes as a part of the man’s struggle in the invisible net of temptations. How Kott interprets it in *Hamlet* seems to be one of his greatest discoveries; moreover, it is a discovery of genius. It is among the main reasons he is considered to be the person with the strongest influence on Shakespeare’s production history since 1965 – the year when his pivotal books came out in English – till nowadays, “although we live in an age of great Shakespearean scholarship” (according to Michael Billington, the doyen of the contemporary British theatre critics; Billington 2012). The essence of this discovery is in the following lines: “*Hamlet* is a great scenario...”, wrote Kott in the second chapter of *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. “This scenario is independent of the characters; it has been devised earlier. It defines the situation, as well as the mutual relations of the characters; it dictates their words and gestures. But it doesn’t say who the characters are... The scenario dictates the actions of the *dramatis personae*, but doesn’t dictate the motives underlying the actions, i.e. the psychology. This is true of life as well as of the theatre... *Hamlet* is a drama of imposed situations, and here lies the key to modern interpretations of the play. The King, the Queen, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern have been clearly defined by the situations... Claudius does not play the part of a murderer and a king. He *is* a murderer and a king. Polonius does not play the part of a despotic father and a king’s councillor. He *is* the despotic father and the King’s councillor. It is different from Hamlet. The situation does not define Hamlet, or at any rate, does not define him beyond doubt. The situation has been imposed on him. Hamlet accepts it, but at the same time revolts against it. He accepts the part but is beyond and above it....” (Kott 1965).

By the very noticing of the existence of a margin – between the part imposed by the Scenario/situation on Hamlet and his genuine self – and by especially underlining that margin, Kott draws our attention not only to the essence of Hamlet, the character, but to one of the reasons for the invariable and overwhelming magnetism of *Hamlet* play – a reason the roots of which lie far beyond theatre as an art form. The main Shakespearean works – again, exactly like the Bible! – are sort of a ‘tunnel’ between the world of the material and the universe of the Spirit. The signs pointing to the ‘entrances’ of this ‘tunnel’, though, are hidden behind many appearances and façades, including the façade of words (more concretely, how we are accustomed to reading and using them in life). By noticing the margin in question in *Hamlet*, Kott may have discovered one of these ‘entrances.’

The actions the scenario dictates belong to the visible world. The motives preceding them and the thoughts leading to the formation of the motives dwell in the world of the



**Jan Kott with Adam Ważyk, poet and writer**

Polona – Polish Digital Library

invisible. So the more Hamlet (and some of the other characters in the different directors' interpretations) and consequently us, the spectators, focus on the motives, on their formation and development, the further ahead inside the 'tunnel' we are to go and, thus, the bigger the chance for us is to take at least a glimpse of what's on the other side of the 'tunnel', i.e., in *the beyond*. Based on the numerous productions of *Hamlet* that I have seen, I dare say that it is exactly the treatment of this margin that defines the depth and richness of the respective productions. Also, the larger the margin, the more modern the respective interpretation of *Hamlet* tends to be.

I have written extensively about this in the esteemed magazine of the STA *Theatre Arts*, so I will not elaborate on it here (Stefanova 2016). At one point in 2013, the young Czech director Daniel Spinar most unexpectedly succeeded in 'opening up' the margin to infinity in the most moving *Hamlet* I have ever seen. Spinar's *Hamlet*, the character, not only revolts against the role imposed on him but refuses to play it fully out. At the very end, in one of the bloodiest final scenes in principle, when it is his turn to shed blood and, thus, continue the vicious circle of vengeance, he chooses the most difficult step – the step aside – so that the anger and the blinding rage do not get hold of him and his soul could be saved. In other words, what happens exactly during this step aside is the only thing that can save not only his soul, but also every human's one in principle. Namely, the whole hatred and animosity, so to speak, has to drain away off us, human beings, if I am to paraphrase another masterpiece, the novel *Weary of Living and Dying* by the Chinese Nobel-laureate Mo Yan.

Alas, to set oneself into a hatred-free mode is such a rare achievement – the few real-life examples that come to mind include, for instance, the example of Mandela – that the outstanding *Hamlet* of Spinar does not at all belittle the importance of Kott's discovery of the margin's existence and, consequently, of the eye-opening potential of this discovery in principle because its essence is important not only to the theatre per se but even more so to how we live our lives beyond stage.



Kott makes us realize that most of the time if we find ourselves in various life situations, the point is not so much in choosing the final destination – it may well be ‘set up by the Scenario’ (destiny or karma) – but it is rather in the choices we make along the road from point A to point B. This reminds me of a great paragraph by another critic, Kenneth Tynan: “If you want to understand great British acting, then you have to imagine a chasm above a roaring river. Olivier goes over in one great animal leap. Gielgud crosses on a tightrope, and right down in the raging current, you can see Redgrave battling his way through the water to the other side” (Tynan 1976). Is not this exactly about the different roads that one can choose between points A and B? It is amazing, indeed, how wise and insightful great critics could be!

Back to Kott in particular: in brief, he makes us realize that ‘To be or not to be’ is not about point B, which is a predestined, but about which of the paths we are to take; even more precisely, about each of the steps we make between point A and point B; that is, it is a question of numerous to-be-or-not-to-be decisions – the choices that form the whole journey. The choices that determine finding *the right path* – again, so much in the Biblical sense of these words!

“Shakespeare leaves no motivation out”, (Kott 1965) underlines Kott, leading us again to the essence of existence – in this case, to the importance of thoughts. It’s as if the “scenario” in question or the so-called “Grand Mechanism of History” are other ways of naming an idiosyncratic ‘determinism’ of the character’s actions (and of the actions of people in principle) ‘within’ the roles they are cast into. And the fully free choice is mainly – and at times only – on the territory of thoughts via which the characters (and we as well) form the motives for future actions.

That is why it is so bad when a crime is committed *also* on the level of thoughts or – even worse – *only* on the level of thoughts. “Murder does not have to be committed. It’s enough that it has been exposed”, writes Kott regarding *The Tempest* (Kott 1965). In his chapter about *Titus Andronicus*, he underlines: “Watching *Titus Andronicus*, we come to understand – perhaps more than by looking at any other Shakespearean play – the nature of his genius: he gave an inner awareness to passion: cruelty ceased to be merely physical. Shakespeare discovered the moral hell” (Kott 1965). Are not all these biblical dimensions again the inner awareness of a crime before – or even without – its commitment as the very opposite of the all-forgiving line of Jesus “they do not know what they are doing”? The moral hell to which the step beyond the inner innocence leads – the place from where there is no return.

It is not by chance that the most successful Shakespearean directors focus on the very process of characters becoming aware of their passion/s, like the Lithuanian Eimuntas Nekrošius. He doesn’t have to make us see a character’s tears on stage; what is important is to make us experience, together with that hero, the whole journey of his tears toward his eyes. By that means, we do not miss any one motive that leads to his actions.

It is so since the ‘reckonings’ in Shakespeare’s works are not of an earthly nature; they are between the real (for us) world and the invisible one, and they are settled within the human soul; they only are revealed – so to speak, come out in the open – in the human fate. That is why, despite the intensity of the stage action, the really important action actually takes place on the territory of the characters’ thoughts and emotions.



**Jan Kott with a *bunraku* doll in Kyoto, 1973**

Family archives, by courtesy of Michal Kott  
Emigration Archive, Nicolaus Copernicus University

It is there that Kott's focus is, which makes his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* a metaphysical book in a special way. He touches upon the connection between intuition and coincidences and makes comparisons with the theory of games; for him, like for Cressida, in *Troilus and Cressida*, the ratio is only for the merchants. Kott draws our attention to astonishing coincidences (or perhaps more codes), like Puck's line in *Midsummer Night's Dream* – "I'll put a girdle round about the earth/in forty minutes" – and the time the first Russian sputnik went around the globe – 47 minutes! Kott constantly reminds us that time is relative in principle and thus in the extraordinary Shakespearean works. That its importance is of a nature very different than the one that human beings attribute to it. That is why Shakespeare intensifies and stretches time via montage or other means of expression. And it is in this flexibility of time and in the time folds that Kott searches for more possible 'entrances' to the 'tunnel' between our world and the other one – *the beyond*. *The beyond* for which we are (maybe) actors and which (maybe) judges our 'acting' based on our deeds but mainly on our thoughts.

Not by chance, Kott writes a lot about the system of mirrors in Shakespeare; the mirror situations and characters where the mirrors are at times deliberately distorted. The whole life as a mirror-image of something we do not see but from where we are (maybe) coming and which we (maybe) carry as a special wisdom. And theatre (again, maybe) can be perceived as the means of awakening our intuition – the blocked, rudimentary, neglected, or directed renounced inner road of ours to the 'entrances' of the 'tunnel. Why not too:

theatre as an ‘entrance’ to the ‘tunnel’ – as a chance for enlightening ‘the eyes of our hearts’, i.e. theatre as a *revelation*?! Is this not just another word for naming the same thing?!

“The task of the critic is close to that of the director who takes a play and shows its inner, hidden energy on the stage,” wrote Alexei Tolstoi; very rarely is this as evident as in Kott’s writings. Reading him is like seeing theatre, living the very life of the characters he writes about. The difference is that in his writings, one can also clearly see the thoughts and motives that precede and lead to their actions. Kott’s psychological analysis is amazing, especially in combination with his flair for aphorisms. His texts resemble a very accurate *action analysis*, which the directors do. No wonder he is a favourite of directors worldwide. As Peter Brook says in his foreword to *Shakespeare’s Our Contemporary*: “To the world of scholarship, this is a valuable contribution – to the world of theatre, an invaluable one” (Kott 1965). To a Brit, too, Michael Billington belongs to the most accurate definition of the essence of Kott’s contribution: “If we still see Shakespeare as our contemporary, we have a... Polish theatrical scholar to thank for it” (Billington 2012).

Polish theatre has helped shape my viewpoints as a critic. As a matter of fact, it was a Polish show that catapulted me to the world theatre and initiated me in it. I was a student when *The Theatre of the Nations* was held in Bulgaria, and I will never forget the *Inferno* by Józef Szajna: the grey statues in the foyer of our Satire Theatre in Sofia that suddenly started to move. I have been closely following the development of the Polish theatre during the last three decades, and I dare say that several Polish directors have changed the face of Eastern European theatre during this time: Włodzimierz Staniewski, Krystian Lupa, Jan Klata, Grzegorz Bral, Krzysztof Warlikowski, Grzegorz Jarzyna... I think that some of them, like Bral and his *Song of the Goat Theatre*, have been literally moving the boundaries of world theatre ahead to completely new territories.

Yet, oddly enough, given the impressive number of Polish directors who have made or are in the process of making an impact on world theatre, there is no doubt that *the* most influential Polish theatre figure worldwide since 1965 remains a critic: Jan Kott. Of course, for the obvious reason that, as a man of words, his work easily crosses borders, but, in the first place, because he was interested in the meaning of life that theatre is here to help and open our eyes to. Kott, the critic-philosopher, wrote in a “startling, juicy, informal, jazzy” way, as another great critic, Erik Bentley, very accurately put it (Bentley 1984).

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