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The Murder of Gonzago: Reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Communist Bulgaria

Abstract: Capturing and recreating in the socio-cultural context of his work the politics of the tumultuous twentieth century, Bulgarian playwright Nedjalko Iordanov displays a particular focus on dramatic innovation and creative freedom. After a critical examination that brings in Shakespeare's Hamlet, Iordanov's play, The Murder of Gonzago, emerges as an aesthetic production with valuable artistic and cultural capital that reflects political changes and unveils Bulgaria's theatrical euphoria.

Key words: Stalinism; Bulgaria; poison; torture; betrayal; politics

Nedjalko Iordanov's play *The Murder of Gonzago* opens the stage for a dramatic representation of revolutionary violence ingeniously interwoven in the intricate plot of a timeless piece, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to show the horror of enforced Stalinism in East Central Europe.

Iordanov's unmediated understanding of revolutionary fervor and brutal killings stems from his own knowledge of Bulgarian Communism, forced upon his native Bulgaria after WWII, with the return to the country of Georgi Dimitrov, the great theoretician of Leninism. In the epoch opened up by the Bolshevik revolution, Dimitrov, who literally took his dictates from Stalin and kept a detailed journal during his exile in the Soviet Union, linked his entire life with the ideas of Leninism and forged himself into a Communist leader capable of organizing the working class and of positioning Bulgaria in the wave of Stalinist takeovers that brought Communist regimes coordinated with the guidance of Moscow to the countries of East Central Europe. In this design preordained at Yalta, where according to Dimitrov's journal of Jan. 28, 1945, Stalin confined to the Bulgarian Communist and trusted political ally his own vision of post-WWII Europe as a conflict between the Soviet and capitalist worlds, the premises for the sovietization of East Central Europe lay in a political culture incapable of conceiving the exercise of state power as anything but iron-fisted domination and totalitarian control, ready to adopt methods of brutal repression whenever authoritarian rule was threatened.²

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² Dimitrov's journal and letters are available in the volume Georgi Dimitrov, Letters, 1905-1949. Sofia Press, Bulgaria in 1962. In English translation, these materials are available in Georgi Dimitrov: An Outstanding Militant of the Comintern. 1972. Another source is Silvio Pons, "Stalin and the European Communists after WWII (1943-1948)" which includes several quotes from Dimitrov's "Diario".

Framed by WWI and the victory of the Bolshevik revolution and geographically distant from the other side of Europe, post-WWII Russia imposed in the countries of East Central Europe a political agenda that would bring not only catastrophic and historical separation of the region from the rest of Europe; it also caused the region's conceptual estrangement from the West and the instauration of the basic premises and imperatives of a dehumanizing Communist political culture that were so much easier to reinforce in countries with a weak democratic tradition. Stalinist Russia's police-state climate, the persecution, intimidation, and arrest of anti-communists, which were copied by peripheral rulers of the Soviet empire, like Georgi Dimitrov in Bulgaria, revealed to a contemporary playwright like Iordanov the multifaceted and dynamic contact and continuity between such political scheming and the violent history and intrigues of the medieval world related in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, both in the play and in the play within the play.

Written and staged in 1988 at the Burgas Theatre, and subsequently dramatized fairly regularly in the countries of the Soviet bloc, particularly in Russia, Iordanov's play begins with the memorable arrival of the actors at Elsinore – a beginning which brings to prominence the role of theatrical performances in politically sensitive situations, such as the crisis triggered by what appears to have been the murder of the old King, the resulting transfer of power to his brother, Claudius, and the marriage of the Queen to her former brother in law. Beyond the play's brilliantly devised plot and ingeniously orchestrated denouement that offer credible alternatives to the familiar story of Hamlet, Iordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago* also presents an emotional tribute to the art of acting, to the politically active role that actors and the theatre world can fulfill in totalitarian systems.

It is unlikely that Iordanov could have predicted, even in 1988, the fall of Communism in his native Bulgaria that would render his play obsolete; yet the continued currency of the play, even after the dramatic events of 1989 that toppled the Communist regimes of East Central Europe, rests on the play's dramatic plot, which underscores the frailty of political allegiances, the unreliability of power and designated authority in totalitarian and despotic regimes, and the traumatizing consequences of the intervention of police states in the lives of individuals, in short on the insurrectional quality of theatre and its ability to subvert classical models for political aims. As they are manipulated and victimized in their most legitimate professional and personal interactions, Iordanov's characters, imagined or borrowed from Shakespeare, reveal the precarious condition love, friendship, and loyalty, whose conceptualized normativity is challenged, altered and distorted in its most perverse forms during times that feel equally rotten in Iordanov's Communist Bulgaria and Hamlet's Denmark.

In the first part of Iordanov's play, the actors, summoned by Polonius to cheer up Hamlet, arrive at Elsinore and begin to rehearse the play with its sixteen additional lines that Hamlet has prepared for Charles, the principal actor and troupe director. Although Iordanov's text parallels to this point the original play, it becomes increasingly obvious that there is added intrigue and that a web of conspiracies is looming in Iordanov's rewrite. A more alert character than the Shakespearean original, Iordanov's Polonius has his own agenda, which coincides in part with Hamlet's. The old servant wishes to dispose of Claudius, and, aware of Hamlet's inability to rule, plots a secret alliance with Fortinbras, an extravagant but not impossible scheme that would bring his own son, Laertes, to the throne of Denmark and also free Ophelia to marry Fortinbras.

Acting on his suspicion that the staging of "The Murder of Gonzago" is maneuvered by Hamlet and that its aim is to unmask his crime, Iordanov's Claudius, in a departure from the Shakespearean original, arrests the actors and subjects them to the interrogations and torture that echo for the audience the reality of Stalinist tactics in the Soviet Union and in the Communist countries during the period opened up by the 1945 Yalta agreement. Under the brutality of the Executioner's treatment, Charles's carping wife Elisabeth, and the troupe's promiscuous actress Amalia, the young actor Henry and the older Benvolio carve, point fingers, and become self-destructive as they are forced into coerced self-criticisms and confessions of presumed guilt to overthrow Claudius. The traitor among them proves to be the Prompt, just as in a police state complete with a panopticon system the least threatening of people often prove to be the most vicious and dangerous.

The huge surprise in these shocking developments is Horatio, whose legendary friendship and loyalty for Hamlet are all but lost and whose survival at the end of Shakespeare's play allows for Iordanov's political rewriting. In *The Murder of Gonzago*, Horatio is the supreme traitor, the embodiment of the naked political evil, and the only survivor, who survives not to tell the tale, but to welcome Fortinbras, switch loyalties and pledge his services to the new master. But this new king knows that he too will need the support of the actors to maintain and consolidate his power. That is precisely why Fortinbras's first decree has to do with paying the actors and with elevating them to the superior rank of a regal troupe that would in the future serve his interests and support his policies in the kingdom.

As in the Shakespearean original where the play within the play features shocking betrayals, spying, power struggles, poisonings and erotic innuendos, in Iordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago* secretive plots, false testimonies and murders are the means by which to eliminate enemies. Simultaneously, the violent overtakes, political manipulations, and criminal practices featured on stage reach levels of unspeakable cruelty reminiscent of Soviet tactics on the real stage of the Communist countries, where the only dissident voice that can be heard by all is that brought to the stage in a theatrical production. When questioned about the right to subvert the authority of the king, Charles, the troupe director, proudly invokes his rights as an actor, that is "the right of art to which I serve and which is obliged to tell the truth."³

Few in the contemporary audience of Iordanov's play would have been able to denounce publicly the dismal actions of Stalinism. But they felt engaged politically when they were invited to detect in King Hamlet's poisoning reenacted in the Bulgarian playwright's *The Murder of Gonzago* allusions to the reality of Stalin's customary practice of having his enemies poisoned. Featured prominently in Shakespeare's play, the poisoning theme is the cardinal link between the play within the play and the Hamlet story proper. In asking Horatio's help during the forthcoming entertainment, Hamlet says:

There is a play to night before the King,

One Scene of it comes neere the Circumstance

³ Iordanov's play has not been published in English. The text used in this essay was forwarded to the author by Iordanov, as an unpublished version translated by David Mossop. All quotations from *The Murder of Gonzago* are from this version.

Which I have told thee, of my Fathers death.⁴

Previously, his father has told Hamlet how he was murdered by having poison poured into his ears, and the Play-scene shows this act twice, once in the Dumb Show, and again with the speech. In the world of Italian princes, which Shakespeare consulted to find suitable topics for his plays, murder by poisoning was a relatively common occurrence. Critics generally agree that at least one of the sources for “The Murder of Gonzago” was a story “written in very choice Italian” recounting the actual poisoning of Francesco Maria I della Rovere, Duke of Urbino by his barber, who confessed under torture that he had been hired for the murder by one of the Duke’s political rivals, Luigi Gonzaga, Marchese di Castelfoffredo. (In Shakespeare’s play, Lucianus, the poisoner, might well be a Latinised form of Luigi.) Such murders, which were manipulated with great freedom in most medieval plays, were often politically motivated, or to extract revenge. But in adapting the pivotal poisoning scene in *The Murder of Gonzago* for the audiences of the Soviet Union and of East Central Europe, Iordanov magnifies this important element of the Shakespearean original to trigger through theatrical representation the more immediate memory of Stalin as supreme poisoner. The Russian State Archive of Social and Political History that holds Stalin’s notes, records his scribbling on a memo pad during a Politburo meeting “Poison, poison, Nadir Khan.” Lavrenti Beria, one of Stalin’s chief executioners, did not think twice before heeding Stalin’s orders to “poison, poison” close collaborators and rivals alike. According to Simon Sebag Montefiore, after dinner with Beria in Tiflis (today’s Tbilisi), Nestor Lakoba, one of Stalin’s Abkhazian loyal friends, was overcome with nausea and died after dinner with Beria, but not before groaning, “That snake Beria has killed me.” Although the official cause of death was “heart attack,” Stalin’s entourage knew that the Red Tsar, as Stalin is aptly called, had ordered the poisoning of the forty-three year old Lakoba, who was subsequently declared an Enemy of the People (Sebag Montefiore 197-209).

It was common knowledge in the Soviet Union that the NKVD boasted a department of medical poisoners under Dr. Grigory Marionovsky, although Stalin’s devotees like Beria and his circle needed little help in such matters. Added to their creative Borgia-like venoms, mercury poisoning also had a special pedigree at Stalin’s court; feared henchmen like Yezhov, after spraying his own office with mercury, claimed that his political rival Yagoda, who had poisoned Maxim Gorky’s son Max Peshkov, had done it in an unsuccessful attempt to poison him.

Fewer yet among the spectators of Iordanov’s play would have admitted their knowledge of mass murders in Stalinist Russia and throughout East Central Europe. Yet they were eager to identify in Claudius’s order to execute the players for staging a subversive play the hundreds of thousands of executions, most often by quota, which were known in the Soviet Union as the “Highest Measure of Punishment.” Stalin, the supreme mass murderer who called such executions black work and regarded them as noble Party service, usually delegated the political executions to henchmen like Lavrenti Beria, Yezhov, or Yagoda.

In Iordanov’s play, the Executioner, who occupies center stage after the actors’ arrest, appears to have more in common with the butcher of Stalin’s court than sheer brutality and

⁴ For a full discussion around this quote, see G. Bullough, “The Murder of Gonzago,” in *The Modern Language Review*, Vo. 30, No. 4, Oct. 1935, 433-444.

monstrosity. At play's end, when Horatio brings in the new proclamation by which Fortinbras releases the actors and awards them for their allegiance, the Executioner is spared the death sentence. His anxiety is put to rest when Horatio, the newly appointed First Counselor to the King, announces: "Taking into account your experience, you are appointed to the post of royal executioner, my royal executioner."

Iordanov's rewrite of the brutally enforced order and criminal tactics of the Communist societies, complete with spies, betrayals and dramatic reversals, may not be as eccentric as it seems since the imagined similarity between the chaotic violence of *The Murder of Gonzago* and the slayings of medieval princes staged in *Hamlet*, both in the play itself and in the play within a play, is formed at the intersection of imperial spaces with a new order. Thus, the theatrical discourse of Iordanov's and Shakespeare's plays is strongly associated with political intent: the Russian tsar is overthrown and the Bolshevik revolution ushers in the Communist state which later forces its criminal ideology and brutal tactics on the subjugated countries of East Central Europe; with his last breath, Hamlet announces that Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway orphaned when his father was killed in a bloody war of territorial aggression by the old King of Denmark, is now the avenger who will appropriate the crown and the throne which once belonged to the murderer of his father.

Iordanov's adaptation of *Hamlet* as a politically subversive play that engages a contemporary audience makes sense in terms of a process of transcultural borrowings between the medieval world and the Soviet Union/East Central Europe. After King Hamlet's death, Claudius's reign at Elsinore was not much different from Stalin's rule of paranoia and power games at the Kremlin and of Communist leaders' oppression of their people in the police-states of the Soviet Block. In a play that must have reminded Iordanov's audiences not only of the Soviet Union where the Red Tsar surrounded himself by courtiers as everyone was engaged in a game of paranoia and power but of all the Communist states that lived in a secret world of fear, betrayal, state orchestrated murders, the actors in *The Murder of Gonzago* are forbidden to leave Claudius's court which, in the words of Polonius, is "full of gossip and spies" and where "the walls have ears." He ought to know. As the old courtier tells Horatio, his own "intervention" led to the execution of all the King's counselors for being agents of Fortinbras.

In the ensuing whispers and intrigues aired in the conversations among characters, as Horatio tells Charles, "I will say something to you, but I will show you the opposite." Further, Polonius's recitation of verses from his own "memoirs," which he threatens to attribute to Horatio, if necessary in a power struggle between the two of them, must have brought to the mind of Iordanov's audiences in the Soviet Union and East Central Europe the recognizable landscape of their own homeland:

Denmark is a goal

And the whole world is a goal.

Perfect, with countless cells, dungeons and holes.

Denmark is the worst.

The parallel forms of political upheaval operating in the two spaces, Russia's Communist takeovers and medieval Europe's territorial wars, are actualized on stage under

the directions of the principal actor of the wandering troupes both in *Hamlet* and in *The Murder of Gonzago*, in tacit but firm recognition of the powerful role of the theatre, “the play’s the thing,” and of actors in stirring political dissent. But if the lead actor in the Shakespearean original remains passive after the enactment of the play within the play which consists of the insertion of “some dozen or sixteen lines,” the principal actor of the itinerant troupe in Iordanov’s play is far from disengaged. In a series of dramatic somersaults, he evolves into a catalyst that acquires an urgent dimension through direct implication in his own political quest. His newfound consciousness initially mediated, as in *Hamlet*, by imperial sovereignty, is ultimately internalized and transformed into a revolutionary ferment stirring from within. Charles takes his nourishment from his own revolutionary spirit that prompts him into decisive and courageous action – in ways that recall the political engagement of actors and the theatre world (Vaclav Havel in Communist Czechoslovakia!) in the critical moments of East Central Europe’s recent history of political conflict.

The theatrical velocity of Iordanov’s play in adapting a classic like *Hamlet* to the contemporary Communist space is in line with the tendency of the Russian avant-garde and insurrectional theatre that was rewriting traditional plays to bring them “into consonance with the revolution.” In Iordanov’s case, this consonance materializes in the politicalization of *Hamlet*, that is in the subversion of the Shakespearean original to fulfill a political agenda and purpose that translated for Iordanov into the freedom the stage afforded him to rebel against what appeared to be in the 1980s the definitive monopoly of Soviet power in East Central Europe in general, and the sovietization of Bulgaria, with help from one of its own, Moscow-indoctrinated native sons, in particular.

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