

POPULISM IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

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Abstract: If the choice of plays such as *Ubu Roi* or *Macbeth* was not rare in productions denouncing dictatorship in Latin America or in some communist countries during the seventies and eighties of the 20th century, we can notice that during the last five years several classical texts have been chosen through Europe to speak about religious pressure and political hypocrisy (*Tartuffe*) or populist tendencies (*Coriolanus*). Some of them were theatre plays, some were novels (*The Trial* by Franz Kafka staged by Krystian Lupa), some productions strictly followed the text, others widely adapted it (*The Curse* by Stanisław Wyspiański, staged by Oliver Frljić). I would like to examine a few examples of these performances and question their impact on theatre and society.

Keywords: classic texts, populism, William Shakespeare, Molière, Franz Kafka, Stanisław Wyspiański

Since the time of the French Revolution, the classics have not ceased, in France as elsewhere, to become the subject of political reinterpretations. Repertoire recommended by the political authorities, partial rewriting of certain texts, staging emphasizing this or that aspect of the plays: the classics have constantly been 're-discovered' in order to promote or on the contrary to criticize the regimes in place.

This practice began with the French Revolution, when the censorship put in place by the Committee of Public Safety demanded certain plays by Corneille or Molière to be included in the repertoire of Parisian theatres and banned others. This is how Corneille's *Horace* becomes essential in a period when the virtue of the Romans is cited everywhere as an example in political speeches. In the years 1792 – 1794, when the country was attacked on all fronts by foreign powers supporting monarchy, it was convenient to show the bravery and the patriotism of the Horatii fighting against the Curiatii. On the other hand, all allusions to monarchy has to be erased, which leads for example to the modification of the denouement of Molière's *Tartuffe*.

Similar recommendations are made by the Proletkult during the civil war in Russia. Unlike the tragic authors, Molière is still a noted author, but the leading play of the French repertoire is above all *The Marriage of Figaro* by Pierre Beaumarchais, which will remain on the theatrical stage throughout the Soviet period. Famous staging of the play by Konstantin Stanislavsky in 1927, designed by Aleksandr Golovin at the Moscow Art Theatre, is a testimony to this.

However, during the Thaw period, a very different tradition was established in Russia where some directors have been able to work on classical texts to criticize the regime in a veiled manner. Yuri Lyubimov, at the Taganka Theatre, even made a speciality of these difficult-to-censor allusions, nicknamed 'lizards', in his shows. This is how the staging of *Hamlet* in 1971, with the singer Vladimir Vysotsky in the lead role,

could become a protest spectacle, with many of his lines resonating as criticism of the government.

The situation is, of course, very different today in democratic countries where censorship is, in principle, abolished. There can be no question of using the classical repertoire for propaganda purposes and critical allusions have given way to frontal political attacks against the new targets of Western radicalism: economic liberalism, globalization, savage capitalism, denial of climate emergency, all subjects of which it is difficult to find traces in the classical repertoire, with the possible exception of the last question. On this point, I will only cite the recent production of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* by Thomas Ostermeier¹ or staging of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* by Stéphane Braunschweig².

On the other hand, the rise of nationalism and populism in Europe, as in the rest of the world, led to the return to the theatres of some classics used to denounce this new political danger. The coming to power of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and that of PiS in Poland, the alliance between Matteo Salvini and the 5-star Movement in Italy, the strong presence of the AfD in Germany and that of the National Rally in France, Brexit promoted by English nationalists, all these political changes which we find echoed in Trump's America, Bolsonaro's Brazil, Putin's Russia or Erdogan's Turkey have clearly shown how threatened representative democracy is by the coming to power of leaders who, claiming to speak on behalf of the people, vilify the "elites", seek to control the media and the justice system and advocate the return to moral order (defence of the family, prohibition of abortion, fight against homosexuality, defence of religion, etc.). If certain problems in Europe seem to concern more the East of the continent (economic difficulties, corruption, religious pressure, the emigration of young graduates), while others mobilize more the populists of the West (the influx of migrants, anti-Muslim racism), the fact remains that populists, wherever they are, use the same methods: manipulation of public opinion via the media and social networks, use of "fake news" and especially speaking on behalf of a "people" that is largely imagined.

In this context, the theatre can play an important role of a critic and the directors have not failed to see in certain classical texts the opportunity to denounce these new forms of demagoguery. This is how we could see in 2018, in Belgrade, on the occasion of the BITEF, a staging of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*³ produced by Oliver Frlić become, thanks to a grotesque prologue and the accent put on certain aspects of the play, a virulent criticism of moralism, homophobia, family politics of the Croatian regime and particularly of the Minister of Culture Zlatko Hazanbegovic, leader of the far-right. We should also mention the adaptation of Kafka's *Trial*⁴ by Krystian Lupa,

¹ *An Enemy of the People*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier, Schaubühne, Berlin, 2012. The staging contains a violent indictment of corruption, which allows serious ecological damage to be ignored. This part of the show, which provokes a dialogue with the audience, led to the suspension of the performances during the tour of the show in China.

² Chekhov's *Uncle Vania*, directed by Stéphane Braunschweig (in Russian), Theatre of Nations, Moscow, 2019, focusing on Chekhov as a pioneer of ecology, through the character of Astrof.

³ *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Pirandello, directed by Oliver Frlić, Kerempuh Satirical Theatre, Zagreb, 2018.

⁴ Adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*, directed by Krystian Lupa. The play finally premiered at Warsaw's Nowy Theatre in November 2017, after the director of the Polski Theatre in Wrocław, where the show was to take place, was dismissed.

a spectacle which has toured extensively in Europe and which directly attacked the politics of the Polish government putting the independence of the judiciary at risk.

There would be many examples, but I would particularly like to study here two plays which have been the subject of recent productions denouncing populism or at least some of its aspects. It is a tragedy by Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* and a comedy by Molière, *Tartuffe*.

Coriolanus is not one of Shakespeare's most performed plays, and its success is all the more surprising. Written between 1607 and 1609 during the reign of James I, during a period of prosperity but also of popular revolts provoked by the Enclosure Act which deprived poor peasants of common lands where to graze their small herds, the play fairly well reflects these conflicts while transposing them into Roman history. The action inspired by a story from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* takes place at the beginning of the fifth century BC, shortly after the establishment of the Republic. Caius Marcius is a brave warlord, descended from a noble and powerful family. His mother Volumnia predicted a prominent political destiny for him when he returned to Rome victorious crushing the Volscians, after taking their city Corioli (hence under the nickname Coriolanus). A hero admired by all, he can be appointed consul. However, he will have to swear allegiance to the people, two of whose representatives now sit in the Senate. Due to his aristocratic superiority, Coriolanus refused, which led to the fury of the two tribunes of the plebs who set the crowd against him. Adored and soon hated by the people of Rome manipulated by the tribunes, Coriolanus is exiled. He leaves Rome resentful and goes to seek refuge with his enemy Aufidius, the chief of the Volscians. Now a traitor to his homeland, he fought in enemy troops and besieged Rome. As the city is about to fall into the hands of the Volscians, a delegation made up of Coriolanus' mother, wife and son is sent to him. Touched by his mother's prayers, Coriolanus decides to lift the siege. Back at Corioli, he is considered a traitor and executed.

What makes this piece still relevant today? Admittedly, this episode in Roman history evoking the beginnings of the Republic may seem quite distant from the contemporary public, on the other hand, the character of the hero who became a traitor to his homeland offers a magnificent role to a great actor and reminds us of certain scenarios of war movies and above all, the place which is given to the tribunes of the plebs makes it possible to highlight the eternal rhetoric of the populists based on flattery towards the people and the use of lies to heighten hatred of the elites. Shakespeare had already shown the roots of political manipulation in the speech of Richard III in front of the people of London or that of Anthony in *Julius Caesar*. He depicts in *Coriolanus* how the elected representatives are pulling the strings of power. The parallel with the situation of populists today is easy to draw.

In this perspective, the first significant staging of the play was undoubtedly that of the Belgian, Ivo van Hove in 2008. *Coriolanus* constituted the first part of a trilogy entitled *Roman Tragedies*⁵ which also included *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In this great four-hour show, Ivo van Hove analyses the history of democracy in Rome: its beginnings in *Coriolanus*, its challenges in *Julius Caesar*, its abandonment with the arrival of Augustus to power, all shown as a single great tragic journey. The unique

⁵ *Roman Tragedies*, directed by Ivo van Hove, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, 2008. This highly successful show is still touring in 2020.



Roman Tragedies of William Shakespeare's plays. Toneelgroep Amsterdam, Holland Festival, 2007. Director Ivo van Hove. Back in the middle Fedja van Huêt (Coriolanus). Photo by Jan Versweyveld.

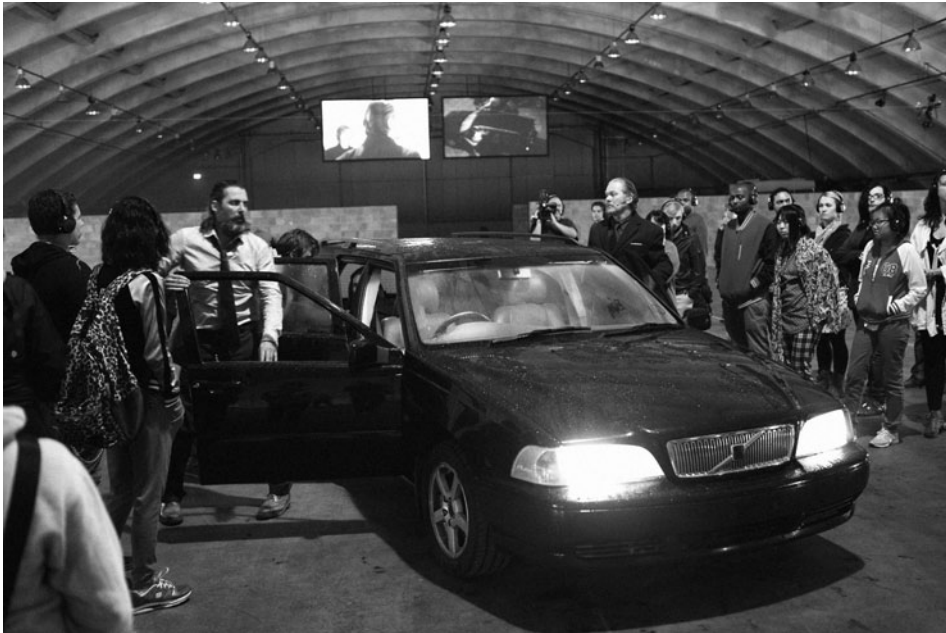
scenic arrangement was reminiscent of an airport waiting hall or a television recording studio with its sofas in which actors and spectators took place and its multiple screens where you could follow the action, sometimes presented as a TV program, sometimes broadcast in the form of close-ups on a giant screen. In this version, the tribunes of the people became politicians of today violently arresting supporters of Coriolanus under the eyes of the cameras. Postures like speeches very directly echoed those of the populist leaders most present on the European political scene.

Three years later, Ralph Fiennes' movie⁶ gave an international audience to the story of Coriolanus transposed to the present time, in an urban guerrilla conflict between Rome and Corioli. The Roman general in this context became a violent and adulated leader, close to carrying out a military coup, while his relationship with the chief of the Volscians, Aufidius suggested a latent homosexuality. Another aspect of populism marked by military adventurism, well known in Latin America, was highlighted here.

In 2012, the National Theatre Wales produced its own version of *Coriolanus* using the text revised by Brecht in 1951 – 1953, at a time when he wanted to denounce the heroic interpretation of the character during the Nazi era. Entitled *Coriolanus*,⁷ the show aimed to put the audience (word “us” in English) at the centre of the play. Director Mike Pearson, famous for his site-specific shows, had chosen an abandoned Royal Air Force hangar located by the sea to deploy the play. The used space was so

⁶ *Coriolanus*, a British-Serbian-American movie by Ralph Fiennes, also starring, 2012.

⁷ *Coriolanus*, directed by Mike Pearson, National Theatre Wales, 2012.



Coriolanus. National Theatre Wales, Vale of Glamorgan, 2012. Photo by Mark Douet/NTV.

vast that spectators had to follow the action on two giant screens and listen to the actors through headphones. The audience was also filmed live and became part of the angry crowd, while more intimate scenes were played and filmed inside caravans. According to several critics, the atmosphere of the show echoed the “Arab Spring” movement contemporaneous with the show, and showed how the legitimate uprising of the crowd was diverted by ambitious leaders and recovered by rival factions, provoking a political reversal of the people in a period when democracy was still fragile.

From 2016, productions of *Coriolanus* seem to have multiplied. While an all-female staging was offered in Australia, two versions were produced off-Broadway during the campaign for the US presidential election. The first, played in a trash style, in gladiator costumes, seems apolitical. The second, on the other hand, presented at the Red Bull Theatre⁸, made the public, seated on three sides of the stage, vote for or against Coriolanus whose supporters wore the red caps of Trump supporters, while the tribunes of the people who stood up to them were assimilated to the leaders of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The parallel may seem a bit superficial, but the show seems to have been a real success. In 2019, the Delacorte Theater⁹ produced an open-air version of the play in Central Park, presented as a “fascinating epic on democracy and demagoguery”. In a post-apocalyptic war setting, the emphasis was this time on the character of Volturnia with a central question: “How does a mother create this kind of hero?”

⁸ *Coriolanus*, directed by Michael Sexton, Red Bull Theatre, New York, 2016.

⁹ *Coriolanus*, directed by Daniel Sullivan, Delacorte Theater, New York, 2019.

This is also one of the questions that Anna Potapova asked in Moscow in 2016 in her protest play. In this production Coriolanus was depicted as a courageous hero accepting no compromise, but whom his mother, incarnation of an abusive homeland, urged to sacrifice himself. Questions were addressed to the public entering the room: "Is a politician always a liar? Is power always obtained by force? Is a head of state always a tyrant? Do we have a homeland for all life there? Are people, deprived of their own will, always victims?" All these questions seemed very incorrect in the context of Putin's Russia.

These different interpretations of *Coriolanus* show how much the play can still provoke public reflection today in different political contexts. Over the centuries, however, it has always been used to question democracy threatened by military adventurism, personal dictatorship and, more insidiously, by manipulations of all kinds.

The second example I would like to mention here is that of *Tartuffe*, a famous play by Molière, which has known countless stages all over the world, but which in recent years has taken on new political resonance.

The play was political and scandalous from its creation in 1664 and therefore prohibited and censored before its final authorization in 1669. Originally Molière targeted those he named the "false devotees", particularly the members of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament, a more or less secret Catholic brotherhood, which sought to maintain moral order in society. It is obviously this aspect of the play that can speak to us today, in a period when the populist right is attacking the right to abortion, homosexuals, marriage for all, in the name of the "eternal values of Christian Europe". But the play also resonates in the face of the dictates of rigorous Islam imposing on women "decent" attire and condemning entertainment (dance, tobacco, etc.), as the Company of the Blessed Sacrament did in its time.

The first political interpretation of the play, in recent decades, was undoubtedly that of Ariane Mnouchkine in 1995¹⁰, when, without changing the text of the play, the director attacked radical Islam very directly. For the past fifteen years or so, Iran had been under the dictatorship of the mullahs and Islamist terrorism had recently devastated Algeria. Shiites and Sunnis imposed in these two countries their new religious order particularly oppressive for women. To stage *Tartuffe* offered an opportunity to denounce the moralism and hypocrisy of Islamic fundamentalism. When Tartuffe asks Dorine to "hide her breast" and condemns the lifestyle of the family, when Orgon wants to force his daughter to marry the protégé, the parallel was obvious. In order to underline this new interpretation, Mnouchkine chooses to dress Tartuffe like a bearded mullah, dressed in black and wearing the turban, while all his admirers, including Madame Pernelle in a chador, were also in black. On the contrary, everyone in the Orgon family who decided to resist them wore white clothes. This very Manichaean vision of the play earned Ariane Mnouchkine many critics for Islamophobia. It was all the easier for her to answer these attacks considering that she was at the same time, in Avignon, on a hunger strike to protest against the massacre of the Bosnians of Srebrenica by the Serbian army.

Many other productions of the play have followed since, in Western Europe, which transposed the text into contemporary times and sometimes emphasized the

¹⁰ *Tartuffe*, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, Théâtre du Soleil, Avignon, 1995.



Molière: *Tartuffe*. Théâtre du Soleil, Cartoucherie, 1995. Direction Ariane Mnouchkine. Juliana Carneiro da Cunha (Dorine), Shahrokh Moshkin Ghalam (Tartuffe). Photo by Michèle Laurent.

return of a reactionary and hypocritical Christianity (in the staging of Luc Bondy for example¹¹), sometimes denounced the new age gurus, very influential in certain bourgeois circles. This was the case, in 2019, in the production of the National Theatre¹² which very freely adapted the text to show the influence of certain trendy neo-spiritualist currents. However, the most radical version was probably that of Thalheimer at the Schaubühne in Berlin in 2015.¹³ Played by Lars Eidinger as a sort of rock star with a chest tattooed with biblical quotes, Tartuffe exposed the hypocrisy of the Orgon family much more than he manipulated it for his own benefit. In this re-interpretation of the text, the characters showed themselves for what they were: bourgeois obsessed with money, sexually frustrated, which Tartuffe was only revealing to themselves in a sort of macabre farce. By removing the happy ending from the play, the director further accentuated the darkness of his interpretation.

In Eastern Europe, Molière's play was also a great success, with various interpretations. The version of the Georgian director David Doiashvili, in 2017¹⁴, was similar to that of Thalheimer in showing an attractive Tartuffe, half priest half psychoanalyst, which revealed the family of Orgon to itself. The aesthetics of the show, however, were very different: the scene, elegant and minimalist, was notably dominated by an

¹¹ *Tartuffe*, directed by Luc Bondy, Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris, 2014.

¹² *Tartuffe The Impostor*, rewritten by John Donnelly, directed by Blanche McIntyre, National Theatre, London, 2019.

¹³ *Tartuffe*, directed by Michael Thalheimer, Schaubühne, Berlin, 2015.

¹⁴ *Tartuffe*, directed by David Doiashvili, Tbilisi Music and Drama State Theatre, Tbilisi, 2017.



Molière: *Tartuifas*. Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, Vilnius, 2017. Direction Oskaras Koršunovas. Toma Vaskeviciūtė (Elmire), Salvijus Trepulis (Orgon). Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

immense crystal chandelier which descended from the hangers in the fourth act to shelter the romantic relationship of Elmire and Tartuffe. It is also from this chandelier that Tartuffe was finally hanged, upside down, in an interpretation quite different from the initial denouement.

Oskaras Koršunovas'¹⁵ approach in the same year was much more clearly political. Staging the play in a labyrinthine park setting contrasting with the “pop” colours of the costumes worn by the actors, the director had decided to target the hypocrisy of all religious or political ideologies today. It was aimed in particular at the former communist leaders of his country who became, after 1990, enthusiastic supporters of liberalism. The screens placed in the baroque space of the labyrinth allowed him to denounce in close-up the role of the media and social networks in the spreading of fake news dear to populists. “The theatre,” said Koršunovas, “must have a political dimension. Tartuffe is a demon who is constantly reinventing himself, the image of a radical populism that is spreading across Europe and the world. This demon has nothing to do with faith or human values like: God, country, family, nation. I am inspired by what is happening in my country and by the general political ‘tartufferie’ that has developed in our homeland. Lithuania is a small country and a single play can make a huge difference.”¹⁶

¹⁵ *Tartuifas* [Tartuffe], directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, Vilnius, 2017.

¹⁶ Programme booklet of the Avignon Festival, 2018.

This was undoubtedly also the conviction of Igor Vuk Torbica in staging his *Tartuffe*.¹⁷ In his very free adaptation of the play, the young Serbian director made Dorine his spokesperson commenting on the action in front of the audience. In this version, Tartuffe was neither a religious fanatic nor a seducer, but a little charismatic man, speaking in a moderate tone, like an “ordinary” politician, gradually exercising his influence on the Orgon family, to the point of depriving the family of all critical judgement. The only opponent of his takeover, Dorine was mercilessly killed at the end of the play. The message was clear to the audience that was triumphing at the show: Aleksandar Vučić, the former nationalist leader who became president of Serbia, was this new Tartuffe, manipulating his fellow citizens with great reinforcement from soothing interventions in the media.

Can theatre really “make a huge difference” one would be tempted to ask after these performances? Undoubtedly more in a small country of the former socialist bloc where the theatre still plays an important social role rather than in France or Germany. However, while these various productions of *Coriolanus* or *Tartuffe* probably did not play a direct political role in the countries where they were presented, they most probably provoked spectators to reflect on ancient political practices, whose roots had already been exposed by Shakespeare and Molière (demagogic denunciation of the elites, use of lies, manipulation of minds in the name of morality and religion), all of which are still at the heart of populist manoeuvres today, almost everywhere in the world.

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¹⁷ *Tartuffe*, directed by Igor Vuk Torbica, National Theatre Sombor and Serbian National Theatre, Novi Sad, Serbia, 2019. The show was presented at the BITEF 2019 festival.