

# "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action": teaching Shakespearean drama

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**Abstract** The teaching of drama is a unique phenomenon, as it connects literary, theoretical and practical approaches that must converge together in understanding a given work. One of the most prominent and effective practical methods aimed at students are performances. They allow students to define a given work in terms of individual and social reality, while the act of performance also correlates with the act of reception and appropriation. The teaching of drama can also be enriched by other activities, for example with audio/video recordings, attending theatre performances, through discussions with individuals involved in staging and production and also actors. The aim of this article is to look at the possibilities of teaching Shakespearean drama in an academic environment based on the reception and aesthetics theory of the Constance School.

**Klíčová slova** Drama, Shakespearean drama, William Shakespeare, the Constance School of reception aesthetics, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, teaching, performance, the J.K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen

## 1 TEACHING DRAMA

Drama is an artistic genre characterized by development based on the discourse and actions of its dramatic characters. The structure of drama is determined by its staged externalization, which involves the possibility of incorporating scenic and paralinguistic tools.<sup>1</sup> The basic instrument of dramatic art, however, is still language and its organization. The smallest architectonic unit of dramatic text is replication, which in turn constitutes dialogue. The basic element of drama is action, which arises from dialogue between acting protagonists, who through their discourse express emotions, wishes, intentions and signalize certain character qualities and finally create various semantic contexts which constantly intertwine and provide a source of tension.<sup>2</sup> Contexts may concern the acting characters, but also general or even abstract phenomena. The storyline, presented mainly in the present tense, does not take place in a closed place and time, but is subject to changes in terms of individual acts and scenes.

<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to differentiate between a dramatic text designated primarily for stage performance and "literary drama", which places emphasis primarily on the literariness of the performance.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, Jiří Levý differentiates between physical behaviour, which encompasses paralinguistic elements of communication, and verbal behaviour.

The structure of drama follows certain set patterns that lend it its relatively fixed composition and often rather severe plot twists. The composition of a dramatic work has gone through many changes over the course of its development, from Aristotle's principle of the uniformity of time, space and action to Freytag's pyramid concept dividing the structure of drama into five sections, i.e. exposition, collision, crisis, peripeteia, and catastrophe. As Libor Pavera and František Všeticka (2002, 84) observe, however, various types of drama deal with these normative procedures in varying manners.<sup>3</sup>

In the teaching process, this specific character of the drama can provide for the effective integration of theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The teaching of drama, to a certain extent, can be understood as a performance act, synergistically combining literary, scientific and creative approaches embedded in a relevant context. The juxtaposition of both methods naturally takes into consideration the artistic formulation of a work of drama (in terms of scene, music, drama, film, etc.) and its reception. The teaching of drama, which is perceived in a wider context as the factual and symbolic bridging of a text and its interpretation or to a certain degree as the transposition of a dramatic text expressed in language into synthetic audiovisual form, is a challenge for literary and pedagogical science.

The use of drama in the process of education and learning reaches back to medieval liturgical performance and the reading of Latin authors, accompanied by pantomime and later the performance of plays, the aim of which was mainly as an exercise in Latin. In addition, in the era of humanism, school games served as a method of exercising memory and to teach proper ethical and social behaviour (Folprechtová 2012, 1).<sup>4</sup> The connection of educational and didactic goals was also supported by Jan Amos Komenský, who differentiated the play of the theatre and the play of the school, transforming it into a pedagogical tool serving to teach language and knowledge. The ban on public and non-public performances, which was established in a number of European countries in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, shifted the original school performance to the area of interest groups. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, plays portraying child heroes (to which the dramatization of fairy tales was later added) served primarily towards building religious and ethical education. Dramatics as a progressive education method, however, began to

<sup>3</sup> Dramatic genres transformed in connection to the historical development of individual national literatures.

<sup>4</sup> Jana Folprechtová deals not only with the terminology used in this article, but also the history of dramatic/educational methods in teaching and the principles of drama education in the teaching of foreign languages.

establish itself as late as the 1920s in the so-called “reform schools” (Folprechtová 2012, 2). The 1960s also saw a return to the awareness and implementation of not only dramatic, but drama-education teaching methods and to drama per se.

### 1.1 The Dramatic Experience

In the 1960s, the teaching of Shakespearean drama also underwent a fundamental change. Implementing drama workshops at American universities shifted the direction of teaching methods of the Shakespearean dramatic canon towards drama-pedagogy. Proponents and implementers of dramatic seminars included, e.g., Homer Swander, Bernard Beckerman, Lois Potter, Alan and Cynthia Dessen, Miriam Gilbert and others. In addition, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the time of other significant publications that placed emphasis on teaching through performance, for example Styan's *The Dramatic Experience* (1965) and *Playing Shakespeare* (1982) by John Barton. Analogical topic matter also dominated three special editions of the *Shakespeare Quarterly periodical* (1974, 1984 and 1990). The practical application of performance in the teaching of Shakespearean drama was analysed, for example, by Robert Hapgood, Michael Shapiro and others. David Bevington and Gavin Witt, who carried out a Shakespearean drama workshop as a supplement to literary seminars, saw the greatest advantage of this approach in interactivity and the active involvement of students into the process of transposing a dramatic work into the teaching process and the reality of life (in Showalter 2006, 81).

The teaching of drama is a unique phenomenon, as it connects literary, theoretical and practical approaches that must converge together in understanding a given work. One of the most prominent and effective practical methods aimed at students are the performances that were mentioned previously. These performances allow students to define a given work in terms of individual and social reality, while the act of performance also correlates with the act of reception and appropriation. The teaching of drama can also be enriched by other activities, for example with audio/video recordings, attending theatre performances, through discussions with individuals involved in staging and production and also actors.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this article is to peer into the possibilities of teaching Shakespearean drama in an academic environment based on the concept of the Constance School of reception aesthetics.

## 2 THE CONSTANCE SCHOOL OF RECEPTION AESTHETICS

As main representatives of the Constance School of reception aesthetics, Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser<sup>6</sup> contributed to the transformation of the paradigm of literary science and set the basic premises of reception aesthetics and the history of reception. They dealt with the principle of the dialogical relationship between work and reader. In regard to the ambiguous correlation between poetic effect fixed in the past and the experience of the modern reader, Jauss created the concept of the Horizon of Expectations<sup>7</sup>, which

defines the character of dialogue between the reader and the text. This crucial concept of reception aesthetics and hermeneutics represents a collection of criteria, i.e. cultural conditions, expectations, experiences and norms that readers use to approach a given text in a given time and that form the reader's perception and interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Through the horizon, the expectations of a work's author seem to almost communicate with its recipient.

As Ormond Rush observes (1997, 79), the horizon of [literary] expectations, or in other words the horizon of aesthetic behaviour, should be differentiated from related although differing categories of the horizon of everyday experience. The horizon of expectations is not an unchanging constant, but rather a fluctuating quantity whose value transforms according to changing time, space and social-cultural factors, literary norms and undoubtedly the individual interpretations of those who interpret it. Therefore, the horizon of expectations is to a certain degree dependent on historical transformations that influence the perception and evaluation of texts. In terms of these transformations and changing signals shown by the text, new horizons of expectation are constantly arising, aimed in an ideal situation towards the trans-subjective horizon of understanding, thus defining the impression a text makes (Nünning 2006, 310). The temporal and spatial variability of the external factors of the horizon of expectations leads naturally to a discrepancy in, or in Jauss's words, to aesthetic distance of the reception of a work of art by various readers in various periods of history. In regard to transforming literary conventions, aesthetic distance emerges mainly in the inter-generational reception of a single work. Put in Rush's words (1997, 80), “the shock of the new no longer shocks”. In Jauss's concept of reception and aesthetics, the distance between the horizon of expectations and a work becomes the indicator for the literary value of the work. It is however important to mention that Jauss's application of the horizon of expectations as a measuring tool (or rather a certain type of qualification or quantification) for the degree of aesthetic value is one of the controversial aspects of reception aesthetics (see e.g. Selden 2004, 323). The concept of aesthetic distance, however, also allows subsequent recipients to define, reassess and possibly renew the original provocativeness of the horizon of expectation that is connected to the initial reception of a work. Vice versa, specific receptions reform not only the aesthetic horizon of expectations but also a broader horizon of real experience.

The Constance School of reception aesthetics places emphasis on the dialectic character of the relationship between work, recipient and history. A fundamental role in the process of reception is played by the recipient, who is not only the recipient of the work but is at the same time an active constituent in the process of its materialization. Put in other terms, the final form of a given work is created at a given moment in the receiving consciousness of the reader. If we apply this basic premise to dramatic text and productions, we can argue that finalization in this case takes place via the viewers' reception. Thus, naturally, a number of unique and subjective variations of reception emerge, influenced by the signals given off by the dramatic text (if the recipient is acquainted with it), study and undoubtedly other socio-cultural contexts. In this respect,

<sup>5</sup> As Lois Potter notes (in Showalter 2006, 86), however, merely watching video recordings can lead to the passive and rather limited encapsulation of what is being watched.

<sup>6</sup> While the Romance scholar Jauss was influenced by Gadamer, the Anglicist Iser was more inclined to phenomenology, mainly to Ingarden. In regard to the differing points of view and direction of both scholars, Raman Selden (2004, 327) concisely states that while Jauss dealt with the macrocosm of reception, Iser dealt with the microcosm of the recipient's reaction. Here it is also important to mention Iser's and Jauss's differing concepts of the role of socio-historical factors and their relationship to text.

<sup>7</sup> In connection with the concept of the horizon, it is necessary to point out that its author was not Hans Robert Jauss, but came into philosophy with

Nietzsche. Edmund Husserl developed on this idea in his own special concept of protention. Hans-Georg Gadamer then adopted this term and reworked it. Through Gadamer's hermeneutic lens, the reconstruction of text (as every text has a horizon according to Gadamer) is a condition for the interpretation of a text. He dubbed the convergence between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter as a process of the merging of horizons (Nünning, Trávníček and Holý 2006, 257).

<sup>8</sup> According to Ansgar Nünning (2006, 311), the horizon of expectation is composed of a collection of norms defining a given genre of text; the relationship between the text and other texts related to it which the reader is acquainted with; and the individual dispositions of the recipient. The ability of recipients to differentiate between reality and fiction also undoubtedly plays a certain role.

Susan Bennett (1997, 92) states that the reaction of theatre audience to a text (e.g. studying it) is connected with cultural limits that are constantly being scrutinized, changed and surpassed. Audience reception, however pluralist, is also unique and unrepeatable. We should not however forget the fundamental role of socio-cultural context of a specific historical period. Based on Iser's theory of the historical relation of a work of art to the past (1993, 2), we can assume that every interpretation taking place in the past is a reflection of historically determined (or transforming) approaches to previous evaluations, which according to Iser is symptomatic of the "history of interpretation". A work (text or production) is in this respect activated by previous reading (production) and read (perceived) in connection with the cultural norms and overall context of the time, which logically permeates the work itself and the receiving consciousness of the reader/viewer. Iser interprets a literary work as an appeal to the recipient, the function of which lies in updating the so-called places of indeterminacy in a text [production] that require specification. Iser elaborated on the issue of places of indeterminacy in relation to the role of the reader in his work *The Implied Reader* (Der implizite Leser, 1972).

As Raman Selden points out (2004, 327-28), Iser's concept is based on Ingarden's theory of Places of Indeterminacy, which the recipient completes or specifies through confrontation with the text. Specification, however, does not mean a simply mechanical filling-in of empty spaces in a text but, in contrast, creates an open and active platform of activity that constructs reason, arising in the interaction between text and reader. Places of indeterminacy, which basically represent broken continuities or omitted contexts, lead the recipient towards combining individual text segments and perspectives of depiction, and also to the creation of hypotheses regarding their mutual relationship. The role of places of indeterminacy as conditions of communication stems from the premise that between text and recipient there exists a fundamental asymmetry, springing from de facto non-existent shared poles and situations. This should not, however, be perceived as a disadvantage or insufficiency<sup>9</sup>, as the experience of *incidentalness* functions similarly in dyadic relationships of the natural world and also expands the dynamic process of communication between text and recipient. Places of indeterminacy are entrenched in the systemic reference of the structure of a text, which is, however, constantly open to intersubjective reconstruction. On a syntagmatic axis, places of indeterminacy create and influence the transformations of a reader's point of view and at the same time influence the paradigmatic axis of a text's repertoire (Nünning 2006, 517).

Although this article does not intend to deal with the question of reception aesthetics in further detail, it is necessary to mention that Iser criticized the simplified notion that literature reflects the reality of the outside world or that it actually creates a wholly separate reality. According to Iser, the reality of a text is not a reflection of the real world existing before a text and outside of it, but rather a reaction to the world constituted in a textual universe. Contrary to interaction with the real world, literary interaction has a fictitious character that is rooted in the process of reading or, more broadly put, in the process of perception and interpretation.

Needless to say that Iser's reception theory gained its supporters and critics. A strong critical response came primarily from American literary scientist Stanley Fish, who substantially contributed to the development of so-called reader response criticism. In his study of Iser's *The Act of Reading* entitled *Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser* (1999, 69), Fish takes a negative approach towards the theory of places of indeterminacy and relocation of literary communication from real communication. He takes a similarly dismissive approach towards Iser's theory that states that a work of literature cannot be identical to a text or to its specific parts, as it is located in a space between them. Therefore,

the text is of an absolutely virtual character and cannot be identified with the reality of a text or with the subjective view of the recipient. Thus, the text and even the reader become the interpretative authority. Fish, however, does not stop here with his critique; in contrast, he introduces his own definition of interpretation, which in his opinion, is influenced mainly by the selected strategy of interpretation or actually even creates a different reality of its own.

If we diverge from the previous critical statements and attempt to transfer the fundamentals of reception aesthetic theories on the relationship between dramatic text, production, the recipient and the socio-historical context, we can argue that the scenic form of a dramatic text is created based on the recipient's reception, which is by nature unrepeatable. If we take our focus off Iser's disputing literature's reflection of the reality of the outside world, its interference in production (or the text itself) cannot be ruled out, as it creates an integral part of the socio-historical context.

### 3 TEACHING SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

The analytical section of this article is based on personal experience with the teaching of Shakespearean drama as an academic subject, the aim of which is to introduce students to issues connected with this special dramatic genre in a wider cultural and historical spectrum (e.g., the rule of Queen Elizabeth I and James I, comparing Elizabeth's and James's eras, Shakespeare's life, etc.).<sup>10</sup> The course provides a basic strategy for approaching dramatic texts and offers a glimpse into the reception of William Shakespeare's plays on Czech and foreign stages and in cinemas. A part of the seminar is also a comparative look at the prominent Czech translations of Shakespeare's dramas. Through a wide range of activities, the seminar develops the knowledge and individual experience of students. Although Shakespearean drama is not the only subject in which students can become acquainted with works of drama, it is the only course so far to offer a complex view into the dramatic arts.

The course was inspired by ideas concerning whether and how Shakespeare's dramatic work can interest young people at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Put in the words of the famous British expert on theatre and Shakespeare scholar Rex Gibson (2011, 1), "why and how should we teach Shakespeare?" The answer can be found from Shakespeare's words themselves: "My reasons are most strong; and you shall know them." (*All's Well That Ends Well*, IV.2). Shakespeare's language, characters from his plays and the topics discussed offer much inspiration for interpretation. The study of Shakespeare's work develops intercultural competence (cognitive, affective and behavioural) and aids in the acquisition of new vocabulary.

The teaching of the Shakespearean dramatic canon represents a synthesis of varying methods and activities that strive towards understanding the essence of Shakespeare's work, deepening the aesthetic perception of the reader and viewer, and the mutual exchange of experience. It is also important to mention that properly chosen activities can aid in the development of the independent and critical thinking of students and their individual growth.

In his monograph entitled *Teaching Shakespeare*, Rex Gibson (2006, 7-25) reminds us of various approaches towards the teaching of Shakespeare's plays based on the principle of utilizing dramatic texts as scripts. In regard to the degree to which Gibson's concepts have been included in the course, we will now review various educational possibilities they offer:

<sup>10</sup> The seminar has the status of an elective course under the title English Language and Literature, offered to students of the British and American Studies bachelor's program. The course includes two hours each week and ends in a credit examination. Works analysed include *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Taming the Shrew*. The selection of works is subject to change.

<sup>9</sup> In this situation, Wolfgang Iser uses the term "defect" (1993, 9).

1. The embodiment of Shakespeare's words in terms of Hamlet's monologue from the second scene of the third act can be viewed as one of the crucial principles in teaching through performance:

Hamlet Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as '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.  
(III. 2, 16-24)

2. Using dramatic text as a type of script allows for a creative (and to a certain degree freer) interpretation of the original dramatic structure. It also offers the space for the creative use of scene comments.

3. The orientation of activities towards students aids in individual perception and reception and at the same time lends a broader contextualization of a work of dram<sup>11</sup> As was mentioned previously, with the process of reception comes a large amount of purely subjective variations of reception and subsequently also the realization of a work.

4. Sharing activities and experiences creates an environment for a true theatre rehearsal. For a short time, students transform themselves into the role of actors studying a given script. The activity can vary through gender inversion in which men play female roles and vice versa. During the seminar, this activity is preceded by a short extract from *Romeo and Juliet* staged by the Petr Bezruč Theatre in Ostrava, in which Sylvie Krupanská plays the role of Prince Escalus and Norbert Lichý plays the role of the Nurse.

5. Involvement of the imagination is also necessary to mention. This is done not only during the interpretation of a text, but also in the act of performance itself, which places emphasis on the (adequate) use of verbal and paralinguistic tools.

6. The research and gradual unveiling of thematic and motif lines of Shakespeare's text is not only a rhetorical cliché, but actually a prerequisite of critical thinking mentioned previously.<sup>12</sup> Although Shakespeare's work is characterized by its thematic diversity, we can list a number of central topics which intertwine in the various works of the Shakespearean canon:

- conflict
- fiction and reality
- order and chaos
- metamorphosis

7. The natural connection of Shakespeare's plays with actual situations and historical events aids in understanding the specific qualities and uniqueness of the plays. In this sense, the seminar uses the scene history of Shakespeare's dramas on Czech and international stages.<sup>13</sup> It is evident that the use of Shakespearean

dramatic text as a script allows us to incorporate various activities and frame a course around them in accordance to the needs of students. It is also important to mention that individual activities should be verbal, demonstrative and practical. The selection of a specific method depends on many different factors, e.g. the level of students' language skills and their preparedness and ability to master a given method; the level to which they are equipped with social skills; the aims of the teaching material; the abilities of the teacher and so forth.

Activities that can be used in the teaching of Shakespearean drama are, for example:

- recapitulation of the scene history of a play<sup>14</sup>
- comparing a work of drama with its stage or film portrayal
- comparing Czech translations of plays (a selected scene or a fragment of it)
- creation of a Shakespeare diary with brief records of Shakespeare's allusions and connotations
- summarizing a scene through a newspaper article meant for a fictitious periodical, e.g. *The Elsinor Times* or *The Verona Gazette*<sup>15</sup>
- summarizing a scene through a letter or telegram
- filling in an intentionally left-out scene
- filling in a conclusion
- studying a monologue and performing it
- studying a scene and performing it<sup>16</sup>
- designing the scenography of a specific scene or scenes (e.g. *The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*)
- attending a theatre performance and leading a subsequent discussion with students
- preparation of a performance review based on subjective reception
- preparation and realization of a performance including program creation<sup>17</sup>
- preparation of a students' Shakespeare conference

The methods listed can also be combined with video and audio recordings. In this respect, we can assume that students are acquainted with some of Shakespeare's film adaptations. In using these materials, it is however necessary to use caution and view them rather as additive or supplemental activities. As Rex Gibson (2006, 204) notes, the overuse of video recordings can lead to simplification or misled interpretations. The use of audio-visual technologies should naturally be accompanied by concise formulations of the exercises. Through various activities, students gain theoretical knowledge and practical skills from the areas of literature, drama, culture and history. At the same time, their skills in convergent and divergent thinking are strengthened, as well as their independence and creativity.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to formulate an outline of the possibilities of teaching Shakespearean drama based on concept of

<sup>11</sup> According to Gibson (2006, 11), contextualization is connected to cultural transposition, e.g. through showing film.

<sup>12</sup> A discussion on the various reasons which spark the rupture between the two famous Verona families can serve as a preparation activity for analysis and performance of fragments taken from *Romeo and Juliet*. The activity can be carried out through a debate on the tragic, real-life death of two young lovers in the Russian town of Fryazino, whose love was misunderstood by their parents. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* is thus gradually transferred to the general level of a story of two average young people whose love was denied by their parents and surroundings (Mišterová 2012, 217).

<sup>13</sup> Stage history can be used to illustrate the transformation of literary conventions, aesthetic norms and critical receptions in basically all of Shakespeare's plays. In the seminar, stage history is used mainly in connection with the tragedy *Macbeth*. Václav Špidla's production staged at the J. K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen in 1963 was deemed by theatre critics to be a

readable analogy to Stalin. As a counterpoint to this openly political performance, we can use the example of Nekrošius's production of *Macbeth* which presented the Scottish leader in the style of Breugel's peasants.

<sup>14</sup> Students have access to an electronic database of Anglo-American plays in Pilsen's theatres, which also contains theatre reviews.

<sup>15</sup> Recommended journalistic texts include, e.g. news, reviews, reports, interviews, obituaries, advertisements, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Recommended are, e.g. *Macbeth* (I.3, 1-86), *Romeo and Juliet* (I.1, 1-79), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (I.2, 1-88), or *Hamlet* (I.1, 1-69).

<sup>17</sup> This activity naturally requires a review of the structure of drama. The performance can be a part of a student's Shakespeare conference.

reception aesthetics represented by the Constance School, which places emphasis on the process of reading and the reception of a work of literature. According to Iser's theory, a work of literature cannot be identical to the text nor to its implementation, as it appears between the two. Therefore, it is of an absolutely virtual character and cannot be identified with the reality of a text or with the subjective view of the recipient. The reader and text become the interpretative authority. The relationship between text and recipient, however, does not create equal partnerships, as the meaning of a work is constituted in the process of interaction in which both sides take on differing and independent roles. The text, then, is constructed gradually as a succession of changing viewpoints. An active role in the process of reading shifts the recipient to the role of (co-)creator of a text. Put in the words of Wolfgang Iser (in Sedmidubský 2001, 41): "We update a text by reading it. The text, however, must naturally provide the space for this updating, as in various periods the text is perceived by various readers always in a slightly different way (...)."

The text implies a number of perspectives and significances of interpretations, which are unveiled in the process of reception. It is this plurality of meanings which allows for open literary communication, into which it is necessary to integrate the reader as an active constituent of the meaning of a work of literature as it is perceived by literary theory aimed at readers.

In the teaching of drama, subjective reactions take on a more important meaning, as they stem from a text which they at the same time refer to. Also, they are connected to the historical context and current social situation. Their uniqueness is also of fundamental significance. Based on experience with the teaching of Shakespearean drama, we can state that interest in Shakespeare's work is growing, not declining. One of the reasons for Shakespeare's stable popularity is undoubtedly the universality and timelessness of his topics.

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