



Hijacked by History: *The Merchant of Venice*, George Tabori and the Memory of the Holocaust¹

Sequestrados pela história: O mercador de Veneza, George Tabori e a memória do Holocausto

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Abstract: This article considers Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as a work singularly transformed by the events of the Holocaust, in such a way that stagings of the play are often turned into pretexts for remembrance. It discusses the play as an archive of trauma, and reflects on whether it may provide testimony for the atrocities committed during the war. To this end, the article provides an inquiry into different perspectives of trauma and its representation, relying on Giorgio Agamben's explorations of the aporia of bearing testimony, and on Shoshana Felman's notion of testimony as a performative speech act. Finally, this work looks at three different adaptations of Shakespeare's play in the second half of the 20th century by George Tabori (1914-2007), a Jewish Hungarian playwright and director.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*; memory; Holocaust; George Tabori.

Resumo: O artigo considera *O mercador de Veneza*, de Shakespeare, uma obra singularmente transformada pelos eventos do Holocausto, sendo frequentes as encenações em que ela se torna pretexto para recordar aqueles acontecimentos. Discute-se a peça como arquivo de trauma, para refletir sobre sua possibilidade de testemunhar

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as atrocidades cometidas na guerra. Para esse fim, examinam-se perspectivas variadas do conceito de trauma e suas representações, apoiando-se nas incursões de Giorgio Agamben pela aporia do testemunho. Vale-se, além disso, da noção de testemunho como um ato performativo de fala, segundo as ideias de Shoshana Felman. Finalmente, o artigo examina três adaptações distintas da peça, realizadas na segunda metade do século XX por George Tabori (1914-2007), dramaturgo e diretor judeu húngaro.

Palavras-chave: Shakespeare; *O mercador de Veneza*; memória; Holocausto; George Tabori.

When Gregory Doran, of the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1997, he emphasized the importance of recovering the play's context of the Venetian Renaissance, from which it had been distanced in the previous decades. In his view, the work had been "hijacked by history" (DORAN, 1997 *apud* BERRY, 2003, p. 51). Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, Shakespeare's comedy about Shylock and the pound of flesh is a work singularly transformed by the events of World War II. Dennis Kennedy (1993, p. 200), for instance, affirmed that "since 1945, we have been in possession of a new text of the play, one which bears relationships to the earlier text, but is also significantly different from it", for the memory of the Holocaust became inscribed within the fabric of the play, to the extent that productions, whether on stage or film, are often turned into acts of remembrance of the Jewish persecution and extermination. Along this line of reasoning, the critic Markus Moninger (2001 *apud* ACKERMAN, 2011, p. 367) asserted that "[e]very single postwar production of *The Merchant of Venice* remembers Auschwitz". In this manner, Doran's desire to "take the swastikas and the stars of David out of the play" might well be an impossible task to achieve (MONINGER, 2001 *apud* BERRY, 2003, p. 51).

Interestingly, hints of this highly traumatic event in the history of the 20th century appear even in cross-cultural renditions of the play, as occurs in the New Zealand film *The Maori Merchant of Venice*, directed by Don Selwyn and released in 2002, in which the Holocaust is meshed in Shakespeare's *Merchant* to testify to other acts of violence, such as those perpetrated in the colonization of New Zealand. There is a scene in this film where the Maori characters playing the role of Bassanio and Antonio discuss the bond sealed with the Jew. They are inside an artist's studio;

behind them, various paintings appear on the background wall. However, there is a moment when these works of art, which “have occupied a peripheral position throughout most of the foregoing scene, are brought up to the centre of the filmic gaze” (SILVERSTONE, 2011, p. 137). The camera moves away from the characters to focus on a painting by a Maori artist, where the word ‘holocaust’ (sic) appears emblazoned along its bottom, thus conflating the Jewish and Maori experiences of oppression and attempted genocide. As Catherine Silverstone (2011, p. 137) sees it, Selwyn’s choice to make the word a focal point in this brief scene “provides a reminder of the way in which all productions of *The Merchant of Venice* after the Holocaust are traced by this traumatic history”. After the war, the Holocaust constitutes a historical and symbolic body from which the play cannot be detached and productions, intentionally or not, tend to evoke the memory of the camps and the horror of extermination.

The Israeli scholar Gershon Shaked (1989, p. 20-21) describes his difficulty with the Venetian comedy:

No play presents more difficulties to a Jew of every generation and class than Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. This is a classic example of art which created a stereotype in life: Shylock’s pound of flesh, on the one hand, and the thirty pieces of silver received by Judas Iscariot, on the other, became fixed images in anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews.

Here Shaked indicates *Merchant* as an undeniable entry in the archive of Jewish historiography. This is so because the play incorporates anti-Semitic images – the valuing of money at the expense of flesh and blood – that have contributed to violence against the Jewish people. That Shylock’s burden is not personal, but part of a collective experience, is rendered evident when he says “sufferance is the badge of all our tribe” (1.3.106).² Because Shylock recalls and symbolizes the experience of being Other, of being the stranger, Shakespeare’s play is viewed, after the Holocaust, as an archive of trauma, one that provides a testimony to the atrocities committed against the Jews and other groups during the war.

² All quotes from William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* are taken from the Arden edition by John Drakakis (2010). The act, scene and lines will be numbered in the body of this article.

Trauma and Testimony

Trauma is a word that may be applied both to an episode and the response it elicits. According to Cathy Caruth (1996 *apud* SILVERSTONE, 2011, p. 13), “in its most general definition trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena”. Because of its magnitude, which prevents it from being fully experienced at the time it occurs, the traumatic experience remains in the subject as an embodied memory, usually related to the senses. The subject will repeatedly return to that which cannot be assimilated into full cognition.

Aleida Assmann (2011, p. 277) offers the perspective that words are incapable of conveying the extent of the trauma, arguing that since language belongs to all, words do not harbor the specificity to convey the uniqueness of the persistent terror experienced after the traumatic event. There is a discrepancy between subjective experience and the intersubjective use of language. The traumatic experience is only grasped in fragmented glimpses. Addressing the difficulty in representing trauma, Catherine Silverstone indicates a similarity between the dynamics of trauma and the “epistemological implications of (post)structural literary and linguistic theory”, thus highlighting “the problem of reference, or the nature of the relationship between an event and the signifying system used to refer to it” (SILVERSTONE, 2011, p. 13). Representations of trauma may even bear no clear relation to the event itself, which remains deferred and is accessible only “at a remove through signifiers” (SILVERSTONE, 2011, p. 13).

Trauma may be understood as a bodily inscription that remains inaccessible to transcodification in language and thought; it is simultaneously present and absent in the subject’s identity framework, but it is altogether distinct from other forms of memory. Trauma thus poses a problem for testimony – how can one narrate an event that cannot be fully represented in language?

Giorgio Agamben’s considerations on witnessing and survival, developed in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, provide vital insights on the ethics of testimony. Drawing from Primo Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved*, Agamben builds up his reflection about the paradox of bearing witness to the experience of Auschwitz.

The Italian philosopher calls attention to the lacunae present in the registers of the catastrophe, considering that the full witnesses, following Levi's observation, are the ones who "touched bottom", the drowned (AGAMBEN, 2011, p. 43). Their death solely grants authority to the narrative of the atrocities, a view shared by Dori Laub, who avows to the impossibility of describing the Holocaust, emphasizing that during its existence in history, the event did not produce witnesses. This occurred not only because the Nazis in fact tried to exterminate the physical witnesses to their crimes, but also because the inherently incomprehensible and illusory nature of the event precludes the possibility of testimony, even by the victims themselves (SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2005, p. 70).

However, as he considers the question of bearing testimony to the traumatic events in the extermination camps, Agamben also warns against the risk of elevating the character of Auschwitz, the highest symbol of the Shoah, to a mystical level, to something that would be unutterable, impossible of representation. According to the Italian philosopher, this attitude would be the equivalent of *euphemein*, a silent adoration akin to that of a god; it would, in other words contribute towards a "glory" of the extermination camp, regardless of the intentions of those who defend its "incomprehensible" condition (AGAMBEN, 2011, p. 42). It is, therefore, imperative to provide testimony.

Agamben's reflections point to an aporia in bearing testimony to the events of the Holocaust, which he explores in various interlocking paths, many of which highlight the condition of subjectivity and language. An important avenue he pursues is Foucault's notion of *archive*, where, according to the Italian thinker, as a set of rules that define the events of discourse, the archive lies suspended between *langue* and *parole*. This occurs because the archive is located between the possibilities of constructing phrases and the corpus of what has already been said or written. As Agamben explains,

The archive is thus the mass of the non-semantic inscribed in every meaningful discourse as a function of its enunciation; it is the dark margin encircling and limiting every concrete act of speech. Between the obsessive memory of tradition, which knows only what has been said, and the exaggerated thoughtlessness of oblivion, which cares only for what was never said, the archive is the unsaid or sayable inscribed in everything said by virtue

of being enunciated; it is the fragment of memory that is always forgotten in the act of saying 'I'. (AGAMBEN, 1999, p. 143).

Testimony, on the other hand, “designates the system of relations between the unsaid and the said” (AGAMBEN, 1999, p. 144). It is directed towards speaking; whereas archive slides toward *langue*, testimony is a movement towards *parole*. Testimony lies “between a potentiality of speech and its existence, between a possibility and an impossibility of speech” (AGAMBEN, 1999, p. 144). Testimony is a contingency, because it englobes the possibility of its not being, of its not taking place. What determines its occurrence is the human subject, who speaks and has language, but who is also capable of not having the language necessary to convey the experience. Subjectivity thus determines the possibility of testimony taking place.

As he investigates the Latin words for witness, the philosopher also calls attention to the distinct terms *testis* and *superstes*. While the first refers to a witness intervening as a third party in a legal dispute between two individuals or two distinct groups, the latter refers to someone who underwent an experience from start to finish and survived it, thus being capable of providing an account of the event. Another important term that Agamben considers is *auctor*, which indicates a witness whose testimony refers to an event that pre-exists him or her, the reality of which must be validated or certified. In making use of language, the human subject becomes an *auctor* or author of the account she provides. The testimony of the survivor, according to Agamben, has an ethical obligation to those who are incapable of providing their own account. At any rate, the subject who provides testimony is a split subject, constituted by and also divided between the possibility and the impossibility of witnessing.

Agamben's notion of *auctor* has points of contact with the concept of postmemory, as developed by Marianne Hirsch, and its relevance to Holocaust remembrance. Postmemory designates memories of memories, not of survivors of the Holocaust, but of their children, who recollect their parents' experience of having gone through the catastrophe and are inhabited by these remembering. Postmemory thus refers to “a structure of inter- and transgenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (HIRSCH, 2008 *apud* DIEDRICH, 2014, p. 3). According to Marianne Hirsch (2008 *apud* DIEDRICH, 2014, p. 3),

[p]ostmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because the connection to the object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past.

Interesting here is the value placed upon the idea of “imaginative investment and creation”, an element which is a prerequisite to the condition of being an author. Also noteworthy is the acknowledgment that all memory is mediated, whether one speaks of those who experienced the event directly, or those who recall the narratives of people who underwent the experience themselves. Postmemory is a supplement. The testimony provided by those who have come into contact with the atrocities of war through the memories of others, especially members of their family, is fraught with their creative imagining of what it might have been like to live through it, as well as their observation of the wound left by the experience on those who underwent it firsthand. Authenticity here is not important; instead, the re-activation of the memory, mediated by someone who was indirectly impacted by the trauma, becomes a representation of the occurrence.

Another relevant perspective is Shoshana Felman’s view of testimony as a “discursive practice” and a “performative speech act”. The importance of this view is that it challenges the authority of neutral language in its ability to convey the magnitude of the traumatic event. Pointing out that any testimony is necessarily only a partial view, incapable of embracing the extent of the occurrence, Felman affirms:

In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constataion of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice, as opposed to pure *theory*. To testify – to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one’s speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is *action* that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is *impact* that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations. (FELMAN, 1992, p. 5, her emphasis).

What should be observed here is the performative component of testimony and the idea that a testimony, particularly when a traumatic event is concerned, cannot be contained within the delimitations of constative utterances, in which the account of an action or event is supposed to be merely descriptive. Testimony cannot be encapsulated by language alone, often what remains unsaid is also significant, as it points towards the marks the event has left in the subject, the body writing that cries out to be known but fails to be fully expressed. As a performative speech act, testimony also involves the body in its articulation of trauma, it involves a *doing* as well as a *saying*. Performance is also important because, as Silverstone (2011, p. 17) emphasizes, even though it might not fully represent or offer “some kind of authentic experience” of trauma, it might offer “a way of knowing such an event [...]”.

Tabori's *Merchants* and the Holocaust

If trauma is in many ways a “body writing”, the involvement of the body also has a role in the process of testimony. Herein lies the significance of performance. This section considers the theatre as a site for representing the events of the Holocaust, while looking at George Tabori's adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The theatre is an arena where spectators watch the bodies of actors present on stage, witnessing the actions that unfold for their benefit. Of course, as W. B. Worthen (2004, p. 17) affirms, the field of performance studies has “provocatively challenged many assumptions about what performance is, where performance is, and how performances signify”. As an interdisciplinary discipline, performance is not limited to the realm of the theatre, but the latter remains a specific site where spectators are engaged in the observation of live performance, an event which is unique each time and authentic in its singularity. George Tabori's creative adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Shakespeare's play becomes a vehicle for remembering the Holocaust, remains an audacious and remarkable episode in Hungarian director's vibrant career. His *Merchants* challenged the audience to reflect on the catastrophe, testing their limits while engaging their attention.

A few brief words ought to be said about the biography of this extraordinary artist, whose life was no less intense than his works: originally György Tábóri, the playwright and director was born in

Budapest in 1914 and was raised in a secular Jewish family. As an adult, before the war, he lived in Germany and then in England. His father was arrested in the 1940s and was then sent to Auschwitz, where he died; his mother was also arrested, but was able to elude the police and escape deportation. Tabori spent the war years as a correspondent for the BBC and the British army. After the war, he established himself as a stage director and lived in the United States and the UK. Among his varied and many accomplishments as a writer and theatre practitioner, he wrote the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess*.

I reproduce here an account of interest that appears in *Embodied Memory: The Theatre of George Tabori* (1999), the first extended study of Tabori in English, by Anat Feinberg:

On 30 January 1933 Tabori was present as Adolf Hitler waved to the raving masses, with hundreds of torches parading in front the Reichskanzlei. "He appeared rather lonely to me, even if I didn't have pity for him. I thought, how weird, power makes you feel lonely. The decisive thing was that most people, like me, didn't know what all this really meant" (FEINBERG, 1999, p. 8).

His art enabled him to elaborate the meaning he was unaware of back then. He wrote the play *My Mother's Courage*, based on how his mother evaded deportation. His other Holocaust plays also include *The Cannibals* and *Mein Kampf* (the latter is a farce about Hitler's youth). As a theatre practitioner, Tabori worked in the United States, Germany and Austria. He directed dramatic pieces based on the oeuvre of Kafka, Beckett, Brecht and, of course, Shakespeare, taking liberties while offering an original and authorial perspective of the plays. His work with Shakespeare includes stagings of *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, as well as his adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*. He died in Berlin, in 2007.

Tabori turned to Shakespeare's *Merchant* three times, adapting the play differently in every single one of them. As Feinberg (1999, p. 211) phrases it, "Tabori, intent on genuine and uncompromising grappling with the Holocaust, interested neither in a sentimental response nor in tearful sympathy, defied sociocultural properties and ran against taboos in his productions, first in America, then in Germany". The first adaptation, entitled *The Merchant of Venice (As Performed in Theresienstadt)* was staged during a theatre festival in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in 1966;

the title of Tabori's second version, which took place in Munich, in 1978, quotes a line from Shylock in Act 3, Scene 1: *Ich wollte, meine Tochter läge tot zu meinen Füßen und hätte die Juwelen in den Ohren: Improvisationen über Shakespeares Shylock* [I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear: Improvisations on Shakespeare's Shylock]; the last appropriation of *Merchant* by the Hungarian director was in 1989, when he referred to Shylock in his Shakespearean collage, *Lovers and Lunatics*. These interventions in Shakespeare's play provided the director with the opportunity for interrogating the possibility of staging *Merchant* after the events of the war, establishing, as Sabine Schülting (2017, p. 227) phrases it, "a complex connection between Shylock, the story around the pound of flesh, and the Holocaust, so that the productions turned into exercises of cultural remembrance that thoroughly disconcerted the audiences".³

1 The metatheatrical device

The first of these adaptations happened in 1966, at the Berkshire Theater Festival in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where George Tabori was the official artistic director. It was the first production in the United States to recontextualize the play, making it confront recent history.

Tabori's idea for the play emerged out of workshops that took place in New York City. According to Viveca Lindfors (1981 *apud* FEINBERG, 1999, p. 310), the Swedish actress who was married to Tabori at the time and played Portia in this version of the play, the director "had found an old, yellow flyer advertising a performance of the play in Auschwitz by a group of inmates". This flyer allegedly gave Tabori the idea for the format of a play within the play. But there is no historical evidence that *Merchant* was ever performed by prisoners in a concentration camp; rather than Auschwitz, it was in Theresienstadt that theatre shows and other cultural activities were allowed to occur.

This rendition of Shakespeare's play incites an experience of remembrance that is at once disturbing and thought-provoking. The

³ The descriptions of the plays offered here draw mainly from Anat Feinberg's book (1999) and the book chapter by Sabine Schülting (2017), included in the references, rather than from primary sources. The work of these scholars was invaluable for the reflections developed here.

title, *The Merchant of Venice (As Performed in Theresienstadt)* alludes, as some critics have pointed out, to Peter Weiss's play, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (also abbreviated as *Marat/Sade*), famously directed by Peter Brook in 1965. Another aspect in which Tabori's play resembles the *Marat/Sade* is the play-within-the-play structure. Having arrived at the concentration camp concept, the company considered the following questions during the rehearsal process:

How daring could the inmates be during the performance?
How would they shift from one fictitious role (in Shakespeare's play) to their role as Jewish prisoners? How would they provide the Nazi officers with a satisfactory spectacle and yet assert their dignity or posit theatre as a form of defiance? (FEINBERG, 1999, p. 212).

The production opened in July 19, 1966. An eyewitness account of the performance is provided by Dan Isaac:

All the actors played the roles of inmates in a German concentration camp who had been ushered to put on a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* as an entertainment for the officers in charge... Alvin Epstein, in one of the most brilliant and moving performances I have seen, played Shylock with the yellow nose and red beard that traditionally marked the Jew in medieval morality plays. But the role was conceived with a double edge: on the surface, Epstein was a craven caricature of the Jew as comic villain, complete with a whining accent and exaggerated hand gestures... but just beneath the top layer of this Jewish Uncle Tom was a hostile inmate of a prison camp desperately seeking revenge. (ISAAC, 1967 *apud* SHAPIRO, 1986, p. 7).

As Sabine Schülting observes, the performance of Tabori's adaptation of Shakespeare involved a constant shift between theatrical levels, the outer plot and the play within the play. Similarly to the characters in the *Marat/Sade*, who must perform a play and yet deviate from the director's instructions, the characters playing the inmates in Theresienstadt are faced with the dilemma of delivering Shakespeare for

the camp officers while also asserting some form of agency regarding their plight.

Isaac, in his description of the performance, affirms that Tabori “had shrewdly placed actors dressed as Nazi soldiers in the audience and on the stage. With guns slung over their shoulders, they were the guards who were present to make sure the inmates’ performance never got out of hand...” (ISAAC, 1967 *apud* SHAPIRO, 1986, p. 8). Another critic observed that “one of the conceits of the production was that the inmate/performers were to consider the entire audience to be their Nazi oppressors” (HOROWITZ, 2007, p. 15-16), which disconcerted members of the public. This conceit draws on the framework of the play within the play format, where a real audience watches a stage audience. In this situation, an associative device is created between the two groups. Both are onlookers; as far as reception is concerned, both share the experience of watching the inner play. Furthermore, the placing of actors playing Nazi guards among members of the outer audience approximates the spectators, i.e., the actual audience of Tabori’s play, to the fictional events depicted, drawing them into the action. Many members of the Berkshire audience found the experience disturbing; some left the theatre in anger.

The performance began with the collapse of a feeble prisoner, who dies after having crawled onstage through a trapdoor, arriving at a bare setting that “consisted of a potato sack strung by wire across the top of the stage, with swastikas along its bottom” (HOROWITZ, 2007, p. 15). This identifies the camp, where the shaved inmates, wearing the striped concentration camp uniform, are about to put on a performance of *Merchant* for the guards. There was a portrait of Hitler hanging on the wall; as the guards arrived and took their seats, a military version of the popular World War II hit song Lili Marlene played on the background. During the prisoners’ incongruous performance of the play, the inmate playing Portia (Viveca Lindfors) showed signs of being horrifically raped by the authorities in the camp. In the scene where she delivered the “quality of mercy” lines, an infuriated officer interfered with the prisoners’ performance. He assumed the role of the Venetian Doge, and demanded Shylock to beg for forgiveness. In the sequence of actions that occurred, Shylock pulled out a real knife and attacked the officer, trying to extract his pound of flesh from him, rather than from Antonio. This brought on a standoff between prisoners and guards, and the play ended

with a blackout; the potato sack curtain dropped and when it came up again, only a pile of uniforms lay on the stage floor.

Along with the exploration of different levels of theatricality, the performance alternated absurdly between tragedy and farce. Launcelot Gobbo, the clown, introduced various scenes and created an eerie tension between distancing laughter and the inescapable horror of the action. Epstein played Shylock in a grotesquely caricatured manner, also drawing uncomfortable laughter from the audience, and reminding them, as Schülting (2017, p. 231-232) points out, “of their complicity in perpetuating this anti-Semitic cliché”. In demanding the participation of the audience as witnesses of the horrors of extermination, this vision of *Merchant* was an act of remembrance. The Hungarian playwright articulated the Venetian comedy to the horrific situation of the concentration camp, thus juxtaposing the archive of anti-Semitism from which Shakespeare’s play draws its material, to the extreme biopolitical experiment of the extermination camp. Tabori’s adaptation thus created an avenue through which to examine the recent past; it also outlined, twenty years after the end of the war, an ethics of rendering the play.

2 The *Improvisations*

The Hungarian director returned to *Merchant* twelve years later, after having moved to Germany. For this new project, he had initially idealized having the play performed on the actual site of the Dachau concentration camp. From the rehearsal notes she researched, Feinberg provides a description of Tabori’s original concept for the production:

Spectators and actors would be bused from the theatre to the railway station in Munich, escorted to the Venice-bound train by a Bavarian band. The journey – overtly paralleling the journey that ended in the gas chamber – would be disrupted when SS storm troopers took the passengers (actors included) by surprise, shoved them into groups, and stitched a yellow star on their coats. On the way to Dachau, scenes from the *Merchant* would be performed, in juxtaposition to the prisoners’ expressions of fear, hope, or grief. In Dachau trucks would transport the audience from the railway station to the camp site. The actors were to perform the play in the barracks under the permanently

menacing presence of the guards. The audience would be taken back to Munich by buses, leaving behind the dim site and the lonely Shylock, only just baptized. (FEINBERG, 1999, p. 216-217).

Tabori was not given permission to have the play performed in the camp and perhaps this was for the best. The director had visited the Holocaust museum present at the site of the Dachau camp and found it “sterile” and distancing in its “false piety” and “designerly” (sic) appeal, so that visiting the camp was “like going through an illustrated magazine in the dentist’s waiting room” (TABORI, 1981 *apud* FEINBERG, 1999, p. 217). The camp as tourist attraction was anathema to the project he had envisioned; furthermore, Tabori was aware of the risk of turning his endeavor into kitsch.

It should be noted that since the end of the 20th century, the concern with Holocaust kitsch has been registered by scholars and other critics. This preoccupation has followed the construction of various memorials around the world to honour the memory of the Shoah; as David Rieff points out, “even when well done, commemoration almost always skates precariously close to kitsch” (RIEFF, 2018). Rieff (2018) further explains that

it is understandable to hope that people will be moved by an act of collective remembrance. And it is often, though not always, right to insist that they have a moral duty to remember. Where such acts become kitsch is when people take the fact that they are moved as a reason to think better of themselves.

On another note, Tim Cole (2000, p. xviii) warns against a trivialization of the Holocaust in view of an actual industry that has emerged in films and publications of various works, all of which confirm that the Holocaust sells well.

Tabori had no interest in making those involved in the performance feel self-satisfied for participating in the memory evoked by the play. Rather, his approach was to create a “theatre of embarrassment” (*Theater der Peinlichkeit*), defying artistic boundaries to the point of bad taste; in this manner, his plays “sought to taunt and disconcert, to shock, to offend and to injure, to get under the skin” (FEINBERG, 1999, p. 223). He sought, in other words, to make the audience seated in a German venue

remember events they would rather forget. An interesting point about this production is that none of the actors in the cast were Jewish; the play thus also proposed a discussion about what it means to play a Jew.

Presented in the boiler room of an abandoned plant in Munich, *Improvisations* comprised 18 scenes bearing titles such as “Antonio is sad”; “Bassanio needs money”; “Shylock makes a bid, or the meat-market scene”. While these titles alluded specifically to Shakespeare’s play, others referred explicitly to the context of the Holocaust: “Kristallnacht” and ‘Concentration-camp narrative’ are examples of the latter. The titles also indicated the interlacing of the play to the different historical periods covered in the *Improvisations*: early modern England, Nazi Germany and the period contemporaneous with the production, the late 1970s. A key element was the exploration of the complexity and multi-faceted dimension of Shylock, refracting the character in a variety of scenes, played by different actors. As the title of Tabori’s adaptation indicates, *I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear: Improvisations on Shakespeare’s Shylock*, the relationship between Shylock and Jessica was a central point of the play. The first word pronounced in the performance was “Jessica”, as Shylock emerged on stage with a lantern, searching for his daughter, after she had abandoned her father and stolen his money and jewels, so she could marry a Venetian.

The use of jazz music underscored the notion of improvisation and a grand piano was present on the stage throughout the performance. Live music was played by Stanley Walden, who performed as a Cabaret style emcee. As the audience entered the performance space, the actors mingled with the public, telling inappropriate Jewish jokes. A scenic prelude involved a puppet show, where “Jew-puppets” were tortured in a variety of manners, and had their mutilated parts distributed among the public. The prelude also included an anti-Semitic ballad attributed to Samuel Pepys. “Although many in the audience,” writes Feinberg (1999, p. 220), “embarrassed or shocked, decoded the gesture as a direct accusation, Tabori was primarily interested in leading spectators to reflect on ‘Shylockism’ in terms of their individual responsibility”. Throughout the performance, a pool of blood underneath the piano increasingly developed and moved towards the audience, an indication of their implication in the historical ties surrounding the anti-Semitism within Shakespeare’s play and its reach towards the extermination camps.

The text used in the *mise en scène* drew from the Schlegel-Tieck translation of *Merchant*. In Feinberg's (1999, p. 220) analysis, "this classical rendition [of Shakespeare in German] emphasized, by its stark contrast to the setting, the utter rupture with the past caused by the Holocaust". In opposition to the Romantic vision of Shakespeare propagated earlier by Victor Hugo, where the French author affirmed that the grotesque features in Shakespeare's texts – for instance, the witches in *Macbeth* or the gravedigger's song in *Hamlet* – enhanced the sublime quality of the plays, here it is the refined poetry of the translation which, in being incongruous to the bizarre acts portrayed in the *Improvisations*, forged an uncanny connection between idealized beauty and violence.

Indeed, the acclaimed beauty and poetry of the Schlegel-Tieck translation points to a disjunction between literary achievement and the crimes of war alluded to in Tabori's version of the play. The choice to use the romantic Schlegel-Tieck texts also underscored the fact that the same culture, proficient in producing artefacts of elevated aesthetic quality, was also capable of perpetrating horrendous acts of violence. This juxtaposition undermines any clear cut differentiation between civilization and savagery, which often constitute the founding steps to claims of racial superiority.

3 The collage

Tabori's last exploration of *Merchant* occurred in 1989, in a six-hour-long collage of Shakespearean plays entitled *Lovers and Lunatics*, staged in his Vienna theatre *Der Kreis*, when the director was in his seventies. The title is taken from Theseus's declaration, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that "Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,/ Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend/ More than cool reason ever comprehends" (5.1.5-7). In this play, which looks at the figure of lovers in Shakespeare's works, Tabori took liberties as he transited, seamlessly, along various works. It should be noted that Kurt Waldheim (1918-2007), a Nazi collaborator and former secretary general of the United Nations, was the elected president of Austria at this time, a direct consequence of the growing influence of the far-right Freedom Party in the country. According to Sybille Fritsch (1988 *apud* FEINBERG, 1999, p. 166), Tabori endeavored, in cutting up the plays, to create "a deconstruction which could lead to the dark heart of the poet and to ours; a learning

process about the cross-connections between Lear's daughters and Macbeth's witches, for instance". The collage involved scenes from twelve plays, stitched together in a bare, proscenium stage where the main scenic elements consisted of a raised platform in the centre, and a throne covered in black and red material.

Tabori inserted the scene from *Merchant*, which involved an episode from Shylock's trial, between the episodes taken from *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Romeo and Juliet*. But he took many liberties with the text. He played Shylock; Portia was done by Hildegard Schmahl, a Polish actress nearly fifty years old at the time.

The identities between actor and role fused in performance; for instance, in one of its most riveting moments, Tabori playing Shylock fiercely addressed his partner on stage by her real name: "For God's sake, Hildegard, how often do I have to tell you, I insist on the contract" (TABORI, 1989 *apud* FEINBERG, 1999, p. 170), in reply to her insistence that he must become a Christian. Shylock continued to demand his bond, raising the tension between the characters on stage and the audience, who watched as bystanders, well aware of Tabori's Jewish background. In the context of Austria's right wing government, led by a former Nazi sympathizer, the wounds from the past rose to the surface during the performance. At the end of the scene in Tabori's play, as the defeated Shylock prepared his exit, he spoke the lines from *Merchant*, "I pray you, give me leave to go from hence;/ I am not well" (4.1.391). Just as he seemed to collapse, he assumed the role of Romeo, and Hildegard Schmahl, that of Juliet. In an ironic rendition of the star-crossed lovers, the old actor speaks the lines: "Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized" (RJ 2.2.54).

The idea of conversion and its corollary, the erasure of Jewish identity, is pervasive in Shakespeare's play. After having lost half of his money to Antonio, Shylock is forced to become a Christian, a measure that would require his baptism. There is, therefore, an eerie note in Shylock/Romeo's line about baptism in this post-Holocaust adaptation, where conversion implies an erasure of identity. When asked, in an interview about *Lovers and Lunatics*, about what the two plays had in common, Tabori answered:

At first, everyone would say: nothing. But today, when we read it, the word ‘hate’ kept turning up, in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. It is exciting to follow connections like this one and to unlock doors. (TABORI, 1989 *apud* SCHÜLTING, 2017, p. 242).

Shylock’s forced conversion to Christianity at the end of *Merchant*, and Romeo’s baptism of love offer an ironic bridge between the two plays. *Romeo and Juliet* is sometimes described as a comedy that ended tragically; *Merchant*, likewise, is a comedy surrounded by darkness, whose tragic contours are magnified by history.

In her analysis of Tabori’s adaptations of Shakespeare’s, while addressing the *Improvisations on Shylock*, Schülting (2017, p. 238) asks “Can a production of *Merchant* ever give truthful testimony to the dead?”, she ponders that “Tabori’s *Improvisations* did not answer this question, but problematized the process of remembrance of the Holocaust via Shakespeare’s Shylock as contradictory and inevitably inadequate”. In his appropriations of *The Merchant of Venice*, Tabori articulated an archive of the Holocaust drawn from personal experience and the fabric of Shakespeare’s play. It is, however, undeniable that his Shylocks provide a testimony of the imbrications between culture and barbarism, while confronting the audience’s prejudices and assumptions.

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