

## RE-CONTEXTUALIZING STAGE POLITICS: INTERROGATING SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* IN URUGUAY

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### Re-Contextualizing Stage Politics: Interrogating Shakespeare's *Hamlet* In Uruguay

**Abstract.** For the spectator initiated in the political aspect of the Shakespearean theatre, Carlos Manuel Varela's *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* proposes "a kind of extended palimpsest" of *Hamlet* that connects on stage a troubled, fictional Elsinore to the traumatic reality of Uruguay during the military junta. For the reader fascinated by comparative literary studies and implicated in the theatre world, *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* resonates with the Bulgarian playwright Nedjalko Iordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago* by drawing from parallel extreme ideologies of neo-fascist and communist dictatorships and their institutionalized regime of terror. Both plays showcase the potential of the performance in *Hamlet* to underpin the role of the artist in the political landscape. Applied to *Interrogatorio en Elsinore*, such reflections lead the initiated spectator to conclude that Varela's play proposes a *Hamlet* who connects on stage a troubled, fictional Elsinore to the traumatic reality of Uruguay.

**Keywords:** William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Interrogatorio en Elsinore*, theatre, literary criticism, Uruguay.

### Re-contextualizarea politicii de scenă: cercetarea lui *Hamlet* de Shakespeare în Uruguay

**Rezumat.** Pentru spectatorul inițiat în dimensiunea politică a teatrului shakespearian, piesa lui Carlos Manuel Varela *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* propune „o extindere a unui tip de palimpsest” a lui *Hamlet*, care leagă pe scenă un Elsinore fictiv și tulburat de realitatea traumatizantă a juntei militare din Uruguay. Pentru cititorul fascinat de studiile literare comparate și implicat în lumea teatrului, *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* își găsește ecou și în piesa dramaturgului bulgar Nedjalko Iordanov *The Murder of Gonzago*, care aduce în prim-plan paralelele dintre extremismul ideologic al neo-fascismului și al dictaturilor comuniste și instituțiile de teroare prin care operează. Ambele piese reliefează potențialul piesei *Hamlet* prin accentuarea rolului artistului în peisajul politic. Aplicate la *Interrogatorio en Elsinore*, astfel de reflecții îl determină pe spectatorul inițiat să concluzioneze că piesa lui Varela propune un *Hamlet* care leagă pe scenă un Elsinore zbuciumat, fictiv, de realitatea traumatică a Uruguayului.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Interrogatorio en Elsinore*, teatru, critică literară, Uruguay.

Expanding my interest in transnational appropriation for a dramatic staging of Stalinism in site performances of *Hamlet* in the Central and Eastern European theatre, this close examination of the Uruguayan Carlos Manuel Varela's *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* (1983) [1] furthers my exploration of plays that rely on the defining influence of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for a dramatic interrogation of this Latin American country's immediate historical past and current socio-political transformations.

My interest, then, lies in the further critical examination of *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* as a unique cultural production embedded within and also beyond its country and surrounding region of the Latin American Southern Cone. In this I follow what I believe to be Varela's own intention in citing *Hamlet*, with its familiar constructed characters and situations, only as a point of reference in an entirely different context that presupposes to fill the communicative gap between Shakespeare's classic and *Interrogatorio en Elsinore*, a play whose characters re-interpret and re-contextualize the familiar dramatis personae and occasional verbatim passages of *Hamlet* in Uruguay's political space.

Bearing the hallmarks of a shared artistic platform and a desire to revisit canonical texts in a fresh light, Varela's *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* (1983) inaugurates a series of similar dramatic adaptation like Ricardo Barts's *Hamlet, o la Guerra de los teatros* [2] and Simon Reyes's *Yorick, la historia de Hamlet* [3] and calls for a political introspection and configured locality to accentuate the presence of *Hamlet* as a "sort of common mythology" that creates new stories and site-specific appropriation.

Starting from the perception of *Hamlet* as an "instrument of self-analysis across Europe...at moments of crisis" [4], my critical analysis aims to broaden the exploration of the boundaries of theatrical adaptation to recent Latin American plays that expand the famous Shakespearean original in terms of its composition and relevance to the region. Enhancing the dynamic interactions between indigenous playwriting and dramatic appropriation, Varela's innovative *In-*

*terrogatorio en Elsinore* provides a comparative approach and socio-political contextualization of the theatrical and playwriting tradition of Uruguay and invites an in-depth analysis and interpretation whose scope extends beyond the existing critical approaches and embeddedness in the Latin American region by exploiting the perceived connections and disjunctions.

Varela's *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* enhances the dynamic interactions between fictional and political localities to explore the engagement of the Shakespearean classic with Uruguay's experienced repression – the imprisonment, torture, confinement, and disappearances of the thirteen years of civil-military dictatorship (1972-1985) dramatized in such literary testimonies as Carlos Liscano's *The Truck of Fools* [5]. As a moving account of the physical and psychological torture during his imprisonment at the Libertad prison, Liscano's narrative, like Mauricio Rosencof's fictionalized memoirs *The Letters that Never Came* [6] or Amanda Berenguer's poem "The Signs on the Table" [7], provides a detailed and unforgettable account of torture and imprisonment in the time of Uruguay's military junta, a readily available manual for deciphering and appropriating the sociopolitical terms and dynamics of torture receiving critical validation in respected critical volumes like *Repression, Exile, and Democracy: Uruguayan Culture* [8]. Embedded in this cultural production, Varela's play both magnifies and sublimates the impact of Liscano's account, Rosencof's letters, and Berenguer's lyrical expression, by giving a new life on stage to the nightmare of physical and psychological annihilation in the years of the long imprisonment which is, according to Elizabeth Hampsten, the Uruguayan dictatorship's distinguishing feature.

Unlike Liscano's, Rosencof's, or Berenguer's critical valuations ranked as "damnable iterations" that propose processes of decomposition (imprisonment and torture) and re-composition (the prisoner becomes congruent with the nation's self-image) according to Diana Taylor's *Disappearing Acts* (1997) [9], Varela's *Interrogatorio* moves beyond embeddedness in the Uruguayan culture. Introduced in its own title

as a staging of a canonical text, the play offers a range of active interventions on what Jean Genette calls hypo-text: the engagement of Ophelia, the frequent invocations of Hamlet or the implications of the ghostly Laertes, Polonius and Fortinbras afford an infinitely more interesting source for deciphering and appropriating the sociopolitical terms and dynamics allegorized in Varela's play than recent critical examinations within a testimonial range discussed in such critical monographs as Ana Puga's *Memory, Allegory, and Testimony in South American Theater* [10]. Further, if the mechanism and coping strategies with which inmates and even the guards confront and ultimately overcome the hardships of life at the prison known as *Libertad* formulate an intensely personal narrative that can stand on its own in a micro-universe of suffering and pain, the dialogue between Varela's protagonists, the Actor and the Interrogator, and the relentless physical and psychological torture enacted in the cell acquire, and are charged with a dramatically arousing leap from the stage into the collective consciousness of the theatre articulating the loneliness of solitary confinement, the prisoner's relationship to his body through the various steps of torture, the insidious exchanges with the interrogator known as *responsable*, everything that brings about the prisoner's mental and physical breakdown.

Re-interpreting the canon for the twenty-first century, and in line with Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation, Varela's play is "a kind of extended palimpsest" of *Hamlet* whose bold transfer into Uruguay's political scene involves an act of theatrical appropriation that operates beyond mentioning the play's scaled-down cast (only six actors) and duration (a third of Shakespeare's text) or equating Hamlet's torment with the jailed protagonist. Given Varela's distinctive dramatic approach that shakes up the conventions of theatre and spectatorship by adapting the canonical text to the social and political analysis of contemporary cultures, *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* not only restructures Shakespeare's text by relocating its elements to achieve a society's self-representation through

theatrical adaptation but also blurs the boundaries between iconic and performance characters to fulfill the concept of "porous dramaturgy" [11].

Making the point that political crises are an opportunity to look at theatre in its broader context, Varela uses the Shakespearean classic "as a mere departure for the development of ... scenic writing towards an autonomous work of art" [12], that transfers the pre-existing material into innovative representation. *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* carries on with history through theatre in the stance of a proto-revolutionary Hamlet who negotiates and appropriates anew the perceived political experience on stage: the nightmare of psychological annihilation in solitary captivity, somewhere in Montevideo.

This type of hybridity is quintessentially contemporary and "true to Shakespeare's intentions", as he was also collating his heterogeneous material from several pre-existing sources presented in a broad variety of styles. Titillating our expectations of how to interpret its text, *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* features memorable spectacle scenes that engage the audience in political immersion and site-specificity by referencing the ways in which theatre infiltrates politics and society. As a stand-in for a political system, Shakespeare's famous meta-theatrical device, "The Mousetrap", invites thus an angle of critical examination into Varela's play whose actor-protagonist is jailed for having staged "The Mousetrap". What may be of interest to the reader of this translation is an additional international and comparative dimension that braids *Interrogatorio*'s particular texture and specificity into the Bulgarian playwright Nedjalko Iordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago* [13], a play whose actor-protagonist is also jailed and tortured for staging "The Mousetrap" scene in *Hamlet*. By drawing from parallel extreme ideologies of neo-fascist and communist dictatorships and their institutionalized regime of terror, *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* and *The Murder of Gonzago* showcase the potential of performance and of the politically committed artist to use what Komporaly calls "the intermediality of performance" and "the

actor's intermedial dimension" to underpin the political landscape [14].

In Varela's time, Communism became the catchall for a complex array of resistance to the country's nondemocratic governments during the 1973-1985 military junta that offered an eerie parallel with the political struggles of Europe's communist era. The irony of expanding this line of critical examination into the reading of Varela's play is that Communism in the vein of the Soviet Bloc was not at that time a real threat to the region but that the Communist threat became, nevertheless, the bogeyman catchall for a complex array of both legitimate (i.e., constitutional) and illegitimate (guerrilla terrorism) resistance to the country's authoritarian or non-democratic government.

Varela's or Iordanov's theatrical adaptations in Latin America or Eastern Europe can be seen as a paradigm for their socio-political scene, closely attuned to their overlapping recent past and post-dictatorial present. Written in 1983, a few years before the end of the military dictatorship, Varela's *Interrogatorio* is a politically premonitory counterpart to Iordanov's *The Murder of Gonzago*, written only a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall. With the opening of Latin American and East European societies in post-dictatorship times to ongoing political trials, as the former exile, political dissident, distinguished author and playwright Griselda Gambaro notes, "each play is a settling of accounts, an immediate confrontation with society".

Whether in Latin America or Eastern Europe, the impact of political repression, far from having been absorbed and still needing to be interpreted outside the region, unravels through mechanics deployed on the stage and resonates with the notoriety of the plays which have taken up an independence of their own, connecting the world of the performance to that of the broader present. Having invested Shakespeare's text with up-to-date contemporary references, Varela confirms the continued validity of Jan Kott's thesis that Shakespeare is our contemporary.

If *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* seems to navigate an uncertain course between indigenous

and canonical drama, the initiated spectator will recognize in the title that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* offers an interesting dramatic modality to underscore Uruguay's political scene. In this context, one can only agree with Hans-Thies Lehman's reflections on the post-dramatic theatre that a disconnected Hamlet "occurs through being unable to establish whether one is dealing with reality or fiction". [15] Applied to *Interrogatorio en Elsinore*, such reflections lead the initiated spectator to conclude that Varela's play proposes a Hamlet who connects on stage a troubled, fictional Elsinore to the traumatic reality of Uruguay.

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