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Hamlet in Warsaw:

The Antic Disposition of Ernst Lubitsch

Hamlet is like a sponge. Unless it is produced in a stylized or antiquarian fashion, it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time.

Jan Kott, "Hamlet of the Mid-Century"¹

I was Hamlet. I stood on the shore and spoke BLAH BLAH BLAH to the breakers, behind me the ruins of Europe. The bell tolls in the state funeral.

Heiner Müller, *Hamletmaschine*²

What he did to Shakespeare, we are doing to Poland.

To Be or Not to Be (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942)

The post-war Polish critic Jan Kott saw *Hamlet* as a text that might either be submerged under an ideology of reverence, or be sharpened by urgent post-war contingencies—the

legacies of genocide and the oppressions of totalitarianism. Kott's "*Hamlet of the Mid-Century*" called for us to see *Hamlet* as a play of intrigue, espionage, and surveillance. Writing from the point of view of a Poland under successive Nazi and Soviet control, Kott asserted that Shakespeare's plays needed to be seen in new ways, not as precious inheritances or sites of nostalgia, but as tools of radical political, social and intellectual struggle.³ Along with his influential analyses of the mechanism of power in the history plays and of comic absurdity in *King Lear*, Kott suggests in his *Hamlet* essay that it is not enough to rely on the assumed inherent power of a Shakespeare text or the long tradition of veneration and interpretation of his plays. We need, he asserts, to modernise: "An ideal Hamlet would be one most true to Shakespeare and most modern at the same time. Is this possible? I do not know. But we can only appraise any Shakespearean production by asking how much there is of Shakespeare in it, and how much of us."⁴

Kott asserts that a modern *Hamlet* must be either dead or relevant: his metaphor in the epigraph above ("like a sponge") implies that the play will either vegetate under a sea of antiquarian respect, or will drench us with new meanings. The other epigraph above, from Müller's *Hamletmaschine*, reminds us of how great a sea-change has occurred in the contemporisation of *Hamlet* in the post-war years, in particular in the fragmenting politics and aesthetics of eastern Europe. Post-war performance of *Hamlet*, as well as the other tragedies, has proceeded with a radical enactment of the tension between respect and relevance, Kott's two criteria for a contemporary Shakespeare production—"asking how much there is of Shakespeare in it, and how much of us."

In the politicised environment, as Lawrence Guntner points out, "performance generates new and unpredictable meanings about both Shakespeare's past and the

spectator's present."⁵ Those meanings have tended—as Müller's "BLAH BLAH BLAH" implies—to break down the inherited visions of a unified and tasteful Shakespeare.⁶ As Michael Billington notes, dissident Shakespeare under totalitarianism has had to counter a long-held view of character and meaning:

I was brought up, in the Bradley tradition, to see [*Hamlet*] as a character study of a flawed hero and as a moral debate about the ethics of revenge. In the Soviet Union and eastern Europe the play has famously become a potent, politically subversive weapon aimed at corrupt and decadent tyrannies: one in which Elsinore, rather than Hamlet, is the hero.⁷

Given that the totalitarian regimes themselves tended to assume an inherited "Shakespeare" as their own material, a radical reworking of Shakespeare was necessary for dissident action.⁸ As Müller told the East German Shakespeare Association in 1988, "We haven't arrived at ourselves as long as Shakespeare is writing our plays."⁹ Shakespeare in post-war Germany, as Werner Habicht recounts, "released a free play of fragmentation and association, when the act of retranslating the text became part of the productions, when Jan Kott became a major influence, when progressive directors separated Shakespeare productions from the opulence of conventional stages."¹⁰ After the war, spurred by Kott's influence and a spate of brilliant production work, *Hamlet* has become a test-case of adaptation, politicisation and appropriation: to Müller's industrial Hamlet we might add such diverse dissident forms as Charles Marowitz's collages, Tom Stoppard's self-conscious re-engagements (*Dogg's Hamlet/Kahout's Macbeth*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), Grigori Kosintsev's tense and emotional film (using the text of one dissident, Boris Pasternak, and the music of another, Dmitri

Shostakovich), and even the tragicomic plight of the clowns in Samuel Beckett's Hamlet-like masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*.

Ernst Lubitsch's 1942 comic film *To Be or Not to Be* seems an unlikely text to place at the head of such a list of modern and post-modern interventions.¹¹ A farce from the master of the "Lubitsch touch,"¹² starring the glamorous Carole Lombard and the popular radio comedian Jack Benny, the film directly touches on *Hamlet* only in three depictions of Benny acting the first few lines of the title soliloquy. The film's tones are so far removed from Shakespeare that during production some feared that the highbrow implications of its title would alienate its true audience.¹³ Indeed, even with the *Hamlet* title, some viewers saw little of profundity in what *Time* called "a very funny comedy, salted to taste with melodrama and satire."¹⁴

Others, however, even in the early days of the war, saw that *To Be or Not to Be*, like the *Hamlet* that Kott was to call for, was an explicitly politicised and resistant work—a sponge absorbing the very acute problems of 1942. Reviewers commented again and again about how disturbing the film's comic tone seemed: they saw, but could not understand, the film's prophetic mixture of dead-serious issues with playful, theatrical and inversionary farce. Lubitsch had maintained his aesthetic distance in *Ninotchka* (1939), made while the world was still "on the brink of collapse"; but—as William Paul puts it:

[w]ith the falling bombs and crumbling civilizations in *To Be Or Not To Be* Lubitsch finally had to move into an area of commitment. Commitment itself became a norm for the period as Hollywood began going to war long before the rest of the country. But the form that Lubitsch's commitment took was far from the norms of the period and produced the most divided and hostile reaction to any Lubitsch film.¹⁵

This comment in *The New Republic* was typical: “With appalling [sic] thick-skin, the movie ‘To Be or Not to Be’ facetiously thought that Nazi-dominated and cholera-ridden Poland was a world of laughs.”¹⁶ Bosley Crowther, the chief film reviewer for *The New York Times*, challenged the film’s flagrant contradictions of tone, the “comedy and grim excitement which Mr. Lubitsch has recklessly confused”:

In a spirit of levity, confused by frequent doses of shock, Mr. Lubitsch has set his actors to performing a spy-thriller of fantastic design amid the ruins and frightful oppressions of Nazi-invaded Warsaw. To say it is callous and macabre is understating the case.¹⁷

Criticism was not confined to the period of the film’s release. As Leo Braudy, writing in the 1980s, puts it: “Lubitsch has not fared well with critics who consider [his success] to be the mark of his evasion of the important social and political issues of the times. For them, his sophistication and his international cosmopolitanism are the hallmarks of his triviality.”¹⁸

As Lubitsch insisted, the film does not in fact trivialise suffering or terror; its satirical, black humour foreshadows some of the harsh, fragmented and politicised uses of Shakespeare called for in Kott’s essay.¹⁹ The struggle over the tastelessness of the film’s humour, which may have led to the film’s relative failure at the box office, evidences the way this comedy looks forward to a transformative post-war Shakespeare rather than backward to a tasteful, nostalgic—and hence powerless—Shakespeare. In this film, the Bard’s texts are considered less as autonomous texts of power and truth than as occasions for politicised struggle and improvised theater. As Braudy points out, the insight of *To Be or Not to Be*—that theatre, even the apparently trivial and farcical theatre of manners, enacts aspects of heroic public life—was an insight unavailable to most

viewers in the reductive, action-intensive years of the war.²⁰ Now, after Brecht, Beckett, and Peter Brook, perhaps we can more easily see the links between this light comedy and the fierce challenges of the tragedy from which it draws its title.

Specifically, the link that I want to pursue here is the necessity for an “antic disposition,” a comic improvisation in the face of crisis, which can be reworked through alternative forms of theatre to provide a model for survival and resistance.²¹ Hamlet, facing almost overwhelming demands from his own conscience, his perception of Denmark’s corruption, and the ghost’s imperative of revenge, takes an unexpected turn away from all that is expected of a prince. Instead of acting the part of courtier, soldier, scholar, he decides that he “must be idle”:²²

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe’er I bear myself –
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on...²³

Whether this “idleness”—this strange behaviour—is a disguise or a disease, it springs from the crisis of Denmark, and is meant to be a strategic cover for dissident action. And it is based in comedy. Immediately upon announcing this “antic disposition,” Hamlet demonstrates to his friends exactly what they must *not* do:

That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase
As “Well, we know,” or “We could, an if we would,”
Or “If we list to speak,” or “There be, an if they might,”
Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me...²⁴

He makes stand-up comedy out of the very responses that would blow his cover, despite

the solemnity of the apparition, the oath, and his ominous future. This mimetic shtick layers absurdity on top of the manic comedy that we have seen in earlier lines as Hamlet follows the ghost's peregrinations under the stage ("*Hic et ubique?* Then we'll shift our ground....Well said, old mole. Canst work i' th' earth so fast?" [1.5.165, 171]). As the play goes on, Hamlet works his "antic disposition" with the speed, flexibility, and satirical insight of a comic – with Polonius (2.2), at "The Mousetrap" (3.2), and in his dark jests to Claudius about the body of Polonius ("Where's Polonius?" "At supper....").²⁵

Hamlet may not be as funny as Jack Benny, but he is unmistakably using the tools of the stand-up comic: the one-liner, the zany twist on the expected response, the edgy joke. Even if we can't always figure out exactly why he assumes this antic routine, it clearly arises from the strenuous contingencies into which he has been suddenly thrust. Little in his life has led him to expect that he needs to improvise; but by the end, Hamlet knows, theatrically and spiritually, what it means to live without a script, on the edge, in the world of improvisation—in short, to "let be."²⁶ A similar fate, it may be said, befalls the play *Hamlet* as it enters the latter half of the twentieth century, becoming multiple, fragmented, sarcastic, resistant—an occasion, as Kott says, by which "through Shakespeare's text we ought to get at our modern experience, anxiety and sensibility."²⁷

Josef Tura, Jack Benny's character in *To Be or Not to Be*, is thrust into a modern experience of anxiety, and learns from it, but not as a performer of *Hamlet*. His first performance of the title monologue, early in the film, shows him to be the old-fashioned actor-manager: egotistic, pompous, and unbearably complacent [**videoclip 1**]. Tura acts with smug faith in the inherited trappings of his text: the doublet and tights, the open

book, the upcast eyes, the heightened tone of voice, and the reverent pace. Lubitsch exposes Tura's bad acting through this most recognisable scene, with its iconic monologue.²⁸ The pause that Tura inflicts on the audience is so unendurable that even the prompter cannot stand it: he delivers the famous lines for us in a mouthed whisper before Tura has the chance to intone them. The problem with Tura is made clearer by Lubitsch's costuming Jack Benny in recognisable parody of John Gielgud's well-known 1930s Hamlet, to contrast Benny's empty pomposity with Gielgud's famous rounded—and apparently more gripping—tones.²⁹ We are presented not just with a bad actor, but specifically an actor whose badness derives from a misconceived attitude towards his text and its history. Tura apparently believes in the transcendent power of “Shakespeare”—the words, the structures, the heritage of performances—in short, the aura. As Lubitsch shows us, that form of Shakespearean power is utterly illusory, unless an actor understands more about his context and his text than Tura does. Otherwise, the acting is pure “ham”—a metaphor that runs through Lubitsch's film as a critique of bad (that is, inflexible and disconnected) acting.

Tura never learns what Shakespeare acting is going to have to become in the mid-twentieth century. He begins and ends as a ham trying to act a hammy *Hamlet*. But when he is freed up from his dream-world of *Hamlet* and thrust into the challenges of modern life in the Warsaw of 1939, Tura learns to improvise. With his company—with whom he must work now in collaboration rather than as the egotistic manager—his work becomes funny, cutting, resistant, and transformative. Acting against the Gestapo, he learns to watch his audience, to understand their motivations, to imitate and invert their behaviour to serve the increasingly serious ends of his own position. Though Tura's *Hamlet* does

not improve as a result, his move from hammy performance to comic improvisation is a strategic intervention of the kind that Europe desperately needed in 1942. It anticipates a new Shakespearean dramaturgy, more flexible, less pompous, and more “of the Mid-Century.”

Even in the fantasy world of romantic comedy, change occurs in response to the application of pressure. Kott’s premise about *Hamlet* was that it would be modernised only “under great stress.”³⁰ In one of the stress moments of *To Be or Not to Be*, Tura, disguised as the Nazi agent professor Siletsky, walks past the corpse of the professor propped in a wing-chair. A moment later, Tura does the famous Jack Benny double-take as Tura sees the body and takes in what it means [videoclip 2]. It’s a response that registers the urgency of this moment: his disguise has been blown, he’s in the deadly grip of the Gestapo, and he needs to find a new way to act if he wants to survive. In some ways, the film is one extended double-take: these actors, each at first comically caught up in his or her own complacencies, respond singularly and together to extraordinary crises.

The first challenge that Tura faces is theatrical. As he delivers “To be or not to be,” a young lieutenant in the Polish airforce (Robert Stack) gets up and walks out [videoclip 3]. As Tura says later, it’s “every actor’s nightmare!” Faced with this challenge to his authority as “Hamlet,” Tura doesn’t respond well. Lacking the skills of street theatre, dependent only on the authority of his “Shakespeare,” Tura’s recourse is to turn up the volume. He tries to use the text “to take arms” against the perpetrator of this “sea of troubles.” His “opposing,” though, is futile: he has lost the attention of the lieutenant and, we must imagine, of the rest of the audience. Mercifully, Lubitsch does not show us the rest of the monologue. But from what we do see, it is clear that Tura’s

fossilised view of Shakespearean acting isn't likely to carry much power, at least for the rest of this evening.

The theatrical challenge of this interruption is inseparable from the sexual challenge that has caused it. The lieutenant has walked out because Maria Tura (Carole Lombard) has told him to join her in her dressing room while her husband is stuck on stage. The casting of two tremendously attractive actors (Lombard and Stack) makes clear the sexual challenge to Tura: their obvious sexuality contrasts with Jack Benny's virtual impotence.³¹ He is the prototypical cuckold as well as the shlemiel. What chance could Tura (or Benny, the Jew from Waukegan) have against Robert Stack with his million-dollar smile, or the allure of "blonde, gentile, aristocratic Carole Lombard"?³² Her sexiness is devastating: while Tura plays his out-of-date Shakespeare, she is negotiating sex and bombers with the lieutenant [videoclip 4]. "Hamlet" doesn't stand a chance against this "Ophelia."³³ Comically, almost effortlessly, Maria has taken hold of language, improvising and twisting it in ways that Josef Tura cannot seem to do. In her hands, the Shakespearean text has become a code, a signal for assignation that will echo through the film.³⁴ Similarly, she takes the lieutenant's eager literalisms about dynamite and refigures them around sex. As in classic infidelity plots, the threat to the *senex* husband *seems* to come from his male rival—the lieutenant—but in actuality, it is the young, beautiful wife whose flexibility and self-possession constitute the real challenge. Tura will eventually rise to that challenge, but for the moment, he's comically defeated by it—depressed and grumpy.

A change occurs in Tura only after the film itself radically changes tone by representing the invasion of Warsaw. With "newsreel" shots of the Blitzkrieg and the

devastated streets of Warsaw, accompanied by an earnest voiceover, Lubitsch seems for a moment to be giving up on comedy, perhaps catering to the taste of audiences who might want a single-minded message about Nazi brutality. But the invasion functions largely to spur the comic plot to new intricacies, the theatrical and sexual challenges being now made much more urgent by the challenges of Nazi power. Rather than moving to the heroic, the film plunges back into the antic disposition of its disturbingly mixed comic tones. Finding the young lieutenant—now an agent of the resistance—in his bed, Tura joins a struggle that he barely understands. He embarks on a course of consciously improvisatory action: “I’m gonna meet Herr Siletsky at Gestapo headquarters. And after I’ve killed him, I hope you’ll be kind enough to tell me what it was all about!” [videoclip 5]. Joel Rosenberg describes this “transformation from cuckold to historical actor”:

The final line is coordinated with the classic Benny shrug—eyes rolled, head thrown to the side, arms from the elbows downward raised slightly and palms thrust outward, the acid voice of sarcasm throwing emphasis onto the final words...³⁵

The presence of actor Jack Benny behind the role emphasises the importance of the lithe ad-libbing that the radio comedian was famous for. In the dangerous farce of disguised identity that is to follow, Tura will have to learn about how to act more like Jack Benny—and, one might say, more like Hamlet.

That kind of acting is going to demand improvisation, which doesn’t come naturally to Tura, though it is Jack Benny’s stock-in-trade. Tura’s first improvised scene, with the dangerous professor, poses a specific problem of taste. Professor Siletsky ingratiates himself with Tura—disguised as Colonel Ehrhardt—by citing the “pleasant” report that in London, “they call you ‘Concentration Camp’ Ehrhardt.” How should Tura

react to such a blatant trivialisation of Nazi brutality—genocide presented as small talk? How should the audience react? This kind of tasteless epithet is part of what shocked the earnest critics of the film’s dark comedy. It *is* shocking, and it shocks Tura into his first real insight into how insensitive and brutalised this enemy has become.

Tura’s response (pulled off with Jack Benny insouciance and a knowing chuckle) is funny and bitter: “Yes...We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping”

[**videoclip 6**]. After the film’s release, Lubitsch was to write in defense of his comic treatment of the Nazis. He didn’t make them typically “evil,” he says, because

they passed that stage long ago. Brutality, flogging and torturing have become their daily routine. They talk about it with the same ease as a salesman referring to the sale of a handbag. Their humor is built around concentration camps, around the sufferings of their victims.³⁶

Nervously, uncertainly, Tura enters the world of Gestapo concentration camp humour. But he adds to it that ironic inversion of the word “camping” that makes us realise—not that we could forget it—that such euphemisms are horrible deceptions. Tura is playing the role of a Gestapo commander, but Lubitsch is going to make sure he maintains the Brechtian distinction between playing the role and being the thing he plays.

Tura’s “camping” pun makes a great one-liner, but it doesn’t get him through the whole scene. When things go wrong, he has to stall the professor. Desperate, Tura cries, “I’m running out of script,” but no one gives him more lines. He flubs the rest of the scene, over-using his one line (“So they call me ‘Concentration Camp’ Ehrhardt!”). In his next improvisation, Tura—disguised as the professor—holds his own against the real Ehrhardt, keeping the Gestapo in the dark while appearing to reveal important information (not unlike Hamlet with Polonius). This second of Tura’s three “Gestapo”

interviews enables him to see that this enemy is remarkably predictable. When Tura feeds Ehrhardt the line from the earlier scene about his London nickname, Ehrhardt—the *real* Ehrhardt this time—responds with the same eager joviality as Tura did earlier, acting the role: “So they call me ‘Concentration Camp’ Ehrhardt!” Tura underlines the predictability that Ehrhardt has revealed: “Yes, I *thought* you’d react just that way.” A comedian learns to play on the utter predictability of human behaviour; and we watch Josef Tura learning what the comedian Jack Benny has known for years. Similarly, Lubitsch daringly recycles a joke—about the Führer and “a piece of cheese”—from an earlier scene, so that we can watch Tura’s dawning awareness of the scripted behaviour of the Gestapo, the oppositional value of improvisation, and the power of jokes. While the Nazis’ mechanistic regularity is terrifying in some ways, it provides great material for a comedian who is also trying to outwit them.³⁷

The third Gestapo interview, featuring the corpse of the professor, brings disguise and improvisation to a head. Ehrhardt, interestingly, is trying to improvise as he sets up his trap. His colleagues would prefer the regular forms of interrogation (torture), but Ehrhardt, believing that he is dealing with an intellectual, chooses an unusual, and more theatrical, method. The joke is on Ehrhardt, of course: neither Tura nor Jack Benny are intellectuals. Instead, they are comedians, and, like Hamlet, another comedian, they turn a crisis with a corpse into a scene of improvised one-upmanship. Tura draws on ingenuity, theatricality, disguise, and indirection to use Ehrhardt’s predictability against the colonel. The Nazis love to humiliate, to force the victim to expose his own subversive acts. Can the victim manipulate the oppressor into an act of self-exposure? When Tura first notices the body of the professor in the high wing-back chair in the

sitting room, we need little more than Jack Benny's classic double-take [**videoclip 2**], followed immediately by a thoughtful look at the extra false beard he's carrying, and then a knowing glance at the razor in the adjoining bathroom. In classic Lubitsch manner, the rest of the skit that Tura assembles is hidden behind a closed door until Ehrhardt himself enters into it, boisterously over-confident and obviously doomed to make a fool of himself.³⁸

As he improvises against Ehrhardt, Tura retains the initiative ("Shall I play detective?") while seeming to concede that the Nazis hold the real power ("You know, I'm likely to get shot?"). By setting up the game of detective, he makes Ehrhardt over-confident: Tura will be forced to pull the beard of the dead professor; Tura will find the beard real; that will reveal Tura as the false professor; Tura will crack under the strain. But it doesn't go that way. Apparently drawing back from touching the corpse, Tura suckers Ehrhardt into revealing his vituperative scorn for effete Polish scruples: "You can murder a man, you can kill in cold blood, but you can't pull a man's beard..." At which point Ehrhardt himself pulls off the false beard [**videoclip 7**]. Once Ehrhardt has himself exposed the corpse as the (apparent) imposter, he can hardly go on to try to expose Tura, who is, as he *must* know, the true imposter. By this point, Tura is theatrically far beyond Ehrhardt, more flexible in costume, behaviour, and wit. Faced with the challenges of power, theatre comes alive; the ham becomes an antic improviser, finding scripts in what he observes around him rather than dredging them up from the canons of the past.

In one key sense, though, Tura is still the ham: that is, he is acting alone, trying to be the star of the resistance plot. But for theatre to come alive, it needs an ensemble – something Tura didn't seem able to bring to Shakespeare. So Tura's last challenge

comes from the need to overcome isolation—to collaborate with his own company. Immediately on the heels of the third improvisation, in yet another turn, the rest of the company is brought into the action. Believing Tura to have been exposed in the confrontation with the corpse, they march into Ehrhardt’s office dressed as Nazis and denounce Tura as an imposter. “Well? What have you to say for yourself now? Here is a man with a beard, and you didn’t even pull it!” exclaims one of the false Gestapo, indignant at Ehrhardt [**videoclip 8**]. The comment reconfigures Tura’s victory over Ehrhardt: what had seemed lithe, funny, and improvisatory, is revealed as just a tired comic routine, the pulling-of-beards-in-farce, like the basis of much of Jack Benny’s highly repetitive comedy and, we might guess, much of Josef Tura’s acting.³⁹

The final piece of improvisatory theatre—Greenberg’s confrontation with “Hitler”—is not solo work but an ensemble effort. Like the company’s earlier *Hamlet*, it is based on a classic script—*The Merchant of Venice*—but there are important differences: a different lead actor, a different venue, a very different play. This time theatre comes not from the top down, but from the bottom up. At the bottom of the company are the two spear-carriers, Bronski and Greenberg. To be sure, Bronski had the big-name role in *Gestapo* (he played Hitler) and his Hitler impersonation opens the film. But, though we don’t see much of *Gestapo*, it’s a good guess that Bronski/Hitler had a pretty small role in it. Moreover, his Hitler impersonation is comically revealed to be transparent, when a little girl asks the actor for his autograph. In rehearsal, early in the film, Bronski tries to assume a larger role with an ad-libbed “Heil myself!” [**videoclip 9**]. It gets “a terrific laugh.” But Bronski’s improvisation is too radical for the play and is shot down by the the director, Dobosh. Over the impassioned objections of Greenberg,

the director asserts a withering authority: “What does the script say?” “I make an entrance.” “And what do you say?” “Nothing.” “Then say nothing!” [videoclip 10]

Early in the film, the company seems to have nothing to learn from the dispossessed in its ranks. Tura and others studiously avoid comment on the confrontation, which is ended only by the entrance of Carole Lombard in her fanciest gown, dressed impossibly for the upcoming concentration camp scene.

The debate that Bronski and Greenberg initiate about the script of *Gestapo* has serious implications. In a film about living under harsh proscriptions, their challenge becomes especially meaningful: mounted by Bronski, a person of proscribed status (“I hired you as an actor, not a writer”), assertively supported by Greenberg, a person of proscribed ethnicity (played by the Swiss-Jewish Felix Bressart, Greenberg is unmistakably a Jew), and arising from a proscribed mode of theatre (like the banished line, the whole play is soon to be cancelled because it is too funny—the aesthetic judgement of Dobosh, “I don’t want a laugh there,” is chillingly similar to the censor’s judgement that the satire will offend the Nazis). “Heil myself!” challenges top-down politics in theatre and nation—adherence to authority and dependence on a script rather than the inspirations of the moment. And it is a serious challenge: as Greenberg viscerally puts it, “A laugh is nothing to be sneezed at.”⁴⁰ At another point, Greenberg makes clear his allegiance to improvisation and flexibility: he says to another actor, Rawitch, “What you are, I wouldn’t eat!” Rawitch, indignant, catches the implication: “How dare you call me a ham!” Ham is not only distasteful, it is religiously wrong. It’s also not funny. As Rosenberg puts it, “Laughter in this film is pitted against all that is the

enemy of laughter, and Greenberg will in some sense be the angel of laughter in the story.”⁴¹

On the other hand, Greenberg is not averse to seeing himself as a star. As in any hegemonic system, challenges often take the form of fantasies of inversion and substitution – the oppressed hope to take on the roles of the dominant. Greenberg’s fantasy is to star as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. In particular he wants to perform Shylock’s “Rialto” speech, “Hath not a Jew eyes?” While this would certainly threaten Tura’s ascendancy over the company, it would not revolutionise the basic politics of theatre, simply substituting one star for another. From what we see of Greenberg’s performance of the “Rialto” speech early in the film, the speech, in Greenberg’s hands, is hardly an instrument of change [videoclip 11]. Like “To be or not to be” in Tura’s acting, Greenberg’s “Hath not a Jew eyes” begins as a set-piece performed by a guy in a goofy Viking helmet. Moreover, this early in the film, the powerful speech is notably separated from the contingencies of the political moment—the imminent invasion of Poland by a dangerous Jew-hating ideologue. So this first Rialto performance is not free of ham. Even so, Greenberg introduces with it a distinct theatrical edginess in his privileging of an alternative Shakespearean text (instead of the canonically revered “To be or not to be”), an alternative mode of performance (in the corridor of the theatre), and an alternative goal to performance (to register outrage at the fate of the spear-carrier).

Once the Nazis invade Warsaw, Greenberg loses any chance of fulfilling his fantasy of stardom. The speech about the humanity of the Jew is hardly going to appear on stage in occupied Poland. But it does reappear in the streets. The Rialto speech appears a second time in the film as Greenberg and Bronski, now snow-shovelers on a

bleak Warsaw street, reminisce about the good old days when they were spear-carriers in a theatre. Greenberg performs the speech again, now sadly (the fragment picks up with the empathic line “If you prick us, do we not bleed”). The Shakespearean text is now a powerful fragment that signals loss, and hope, however distant—“I wonder if we’ll ever carry a spear again?” “Let’s hope so” [videoclip 12]. The Rialto speech in this second manifestation develops the critique of ham acting in this new context of totalitarian oppression: Jews, Poles, the dispossessed in general, are going to have to turn from ham to a street-theatre attuned to circumstances; melancholic when it needs to be, hopeful when it can.

In the third Rialto speech, Greenberg explores a hitherto-unexplored aspect of the text, its vindictive anger. What we witness at the climax of the film, in the upstairs lobby of the Teatr Polski, is the first gripping, serious, and effective performance by this company. For once, Tura does not get the star role. The performance fulfills Greenberg’s fantasy of starring as Shylock, but in an unexpected and radically new way: he gets to perform it as a Polish freedom fighter explaining his claim to his homeland and his hatred for the Nazis—directly to the face of Hitler [videoclip 13]. The moment partakes of heroism and tragedy—the last speech of an obviously doomed man sacrificing his life for freedom. But it is, to say the least, a complicated heroism. It is not, as it appears, delivered to Hitler, but to Bronski, like the first two versions of the speech. Nor is it the climax of a heroic tragedy—the speech is a fragment, the “theatre” is a lobby, the star is a spear-carrier. Like most theatre, it’s based on compromise: for example, the performance notably erases the Jewishness of the speech and its origins in the moneylender-villain of Shakespeare’s play, substituting a universality that will “play”

better in the circumstances. Greenberg speaks not specifically for himself, or for Shylock, or for Jews, but for a unified Polish “us.”⁴²

The scene is like the dark, unsettling street theatre of the post-war era: zany in its unpredictability, inversionary, improvised, contingent, oddly serious in its fulfillment of its comic potential. It’s not funny—it does not serve, as Greenberg always wanted, to “get a terrific laugh.” But it is comic in a deeper sense, as Chaplin’s radio broadcast at the end of *The Great Dictator*—earnest and sentimental in many ways—is nonetheless still comic in its utterly implausible substitution of the tender humanity of a Jewish barber for the insane rages of the Führer. The “terrific laugh” that Greenberg wanted comes later, as, on the basis of this excellent skit, the company manage to commandeer Hitler’s private plane and fly in it to safety in England. What a joke! Or is it really? Again, the comic tones are mixed, and the laughs are uneasy. As Bronski, still dressed as Hitler, commands his Nazi pilots to jump out of the plane without parachutes, they do so unhesitatingly [videoclip 14]. Bronski seems in his final comment (“What very obliging fellows!”) to realise the depth of the very serious obligations that bind men to the Führer, obligations that he has himself summoned up with a single word, “Jump!”⁴³

That one word has tremendous power. What then of the power of Shakespeare’s text, so laden with history, meaning, and impact? When Tura escapes to “the land of Shakespeare,” he wants to play *Hamlet* again, and apparently his performance is the same old ham. In the grip of his old assumptions about Shakespeare—and some continuing challenges from his wife (another young man walks out of the soliloquy, to the surprise of both Tura and the lieutenant)—Tura is once again comically disempowered in his big speech [videoclip 15]. It doesn’t look good for Shakespeare. But after the war, perhaps

something different will happen, if we can judge by Lubitsch, or Greenberg, or the spirit of comic improvisation that has entered the Teatr Polski during the film. Maybe Tura's antic disposition to defeat the Gestapo presages an alternative to hammy, egotistic appropriations, a different role for Shakespeare in post-war Europe.

The most controversial line of the film, in its day, was a joke made by Ehrhardt about Tura's acting. Prompted by Tura, who wants to hear himself praised, Ehrhardt wryly comments: "What he did to Shakespeare, we are doing to Poland" [**videoclip 16**]. Critics of the film—including several in the production team—thought the analogy was in the worst possible taste. It met with dead silence in the previews; to trivialise the suffering the Nazis were inflicting on Poland by making it into a joke about bad theatre seemed the worst of taste. But Lubitsch defended the line and kept it in the film.⁴⁴ He was right, for the line became an important site of what Stephen Tifft calls "the convoluted affinities between comic and fascist rhetoric."⁴⁵

Tura's bad acting *is* like the bad actions of the Nazis: both depend on a totalising attitude, a mythified reverence for the past, a mechanistic repetition and predictability. Like the Nazis occupying Poland, Tura was "occupying" Shakespeare: appropriating it in the worst possible way, treating it with a mechanistic trust in its autonomy, depending on its ability to confer status on a bad actor, assuming that it could exist in isolation from the world, a private realm of privilege and power. But neither the Nazis nor their Soviet successors were to remain the lords of Poland; eventually, Poles found ways to dismantle the apparently monolithic empires that dominated them far too long. Similarly, Shakespeare survives the hammy Turas and comes back vitalised in the struggles and contingencies of the post-war period. What might have seemed mere rhetorical posturing

in the hands of the ham has gone through a transformation in its collaboration with resistance and improvisation.⁴⁶

One last scene: as the Polish company gather to plan their final scene in front of “Hitler,” Tura calls out, “Friends....” Instantly, Maria breaks in with “... Romans, [and] countrymen.” He does not apparently intend to have quoted Shakespeare, but she makes him seem as if he had been starting one more war-horse speech: “We know you want to play Mark Antony, but that doesn’t help us” [videoclip 17]. Tura is instantly labeled a ham, and ham is dismissed from the occasion as irrelevant. In the midst of struggles to survive, we have to find new contexts for Shakespearean texts like the oratory of Mark Antony, the vengeance of Shylock, and the questionings of Hamlet.

Lubitsch worked consciously against the deadening constraints of genre and type: “I was tired of the two established, recognized recipes; drama with comedy relief and comedy with dramatic relief. I had made up my mind to make a picture with no attempt to relieve anybody from anything at any time.”⁴⁷ As his comment in the *Times* suggests, the alternative won’t be easy—“no attempt to relieve anybody from anything at any time.” Lubitsch’s Shakespeare film, with its mockery of the forms and traditions of “deadly theatre,” suggests that there are alternatives, as yet not fully understood, that will change Shakespeare to make his work, and our work with it, more contemporary, more relevant, and more powerful.⁴⁸

Notes

- ¹ Jan Kott, “*Hamlet of the Mid-Century*,” in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City; NY: Doubleday, 1964), 57.
- ² Quoted by Lawrence Guntner in “Brecht and Beyond: Shakespeare on the East German Stage,” in Dennis Kennedy, ed, *Foreign Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 135.
- ³ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History, from the Restoration to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 310.
- ⁴ Kott, 52.
- ⁵ Guntner, in *Foreign Shakespeare*, 109.
- ⁶ “[I]f to the liberal west *Hamlet* is an expression of the individual spirit, to a censor in a more repressive land it is a threat.” Dennis Kennedy, “Introduction: Shakespeare without his Language” in *Foreign Shakespeare*, 4.
- ⁷ Michael Billington, “Was Shakespeare English?” in *Shakespeare: World Views*, ed. Heather Kerr, Robin Eaden, and Madge Mitton (Newark; NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 19. For a detailed account of the Taganka *Hamlet*, see Spencer Golub, “The Taganka in the *Hamlet* Gulag,” in Kennedy, 158-177.
- ⁸ See Guntner, in *Foreign Shakespeare*, 114-17. In Bulgaria as in other Soviet bloc countries, as Alexander Shurbanov points out, Shakespeare had been adopted by the ruling socialist governments as “a perspicacious critic of his contemporary society as well as of class society in general...credited with an admirable anticipation of socialism, the happy consummation of history.” (138) Dissident productions had challenged this approach, bringing “Shakespeare” down from an assumed socialist nobility: “[L]ike his author, Hamlet stepped down from the superhuman heights to become one of us, a poor imperfect man whose traditional tragic grandeur was eroded by touches of irreverent comedy.” Alexander Shurbanov, “Politicized with a Vengeance: East European Uses of Shakespeare’s Great Tragedies,” in *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Los Angeles, 1996*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Jill L. Levenson, and Dieter Mehl (Newark; NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 139.
- ⁹ Guntner, in *Foreign Shakespeare*, 115.
- ¹⁰ Werner Habicht, “Shakespeare and the German Imagination: Cult, Controversy, and Performance,” in *Shakespeare: World Views* 100. As Kennedy puts it, “Kott gave to the theatre of the 1960s and 1970s a theoretically backed fortitude to admit that Shakespeare, despite the cultural accretions that inevitably cling to the work, exists on stage in the present tense; and that the representation of Shakespeare can exhibit powerful and intellectually provocative visions of the present.” Kennedy, *Foreign Shakespeare*, 9.
- ¹¹ *To Be or Not to Be*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch, prod. Lubitsch and Alexander Korda, with Jack Benny, Carole Lombard, Robert Stack, Felix Bressart, Sig Ruman (Romaine Film Productions, 1942; re-issued on video, Warner Home Video, 1990).
- ¹² The term was ubiquitous in discussions of Lubitsch, especially after the publication of the appreciative biographical study by Herman G. Weinberg, *The Lubitsch Touch: A Critical Study* (New York: Dutton, 1968).
- ¹³ See Scott Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 298. Lubitsch defended the Shakespearean title vehemently and successfully.
- ¹⁴ *Time*, 16 March 1942, 90.
- ¹⁵ William Paul, *Ernst Lubitsch’s American Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 223-24.
- ¹⁶ Manny Farber, “Real War,” *The New Republic*, 7 September 1942: 283-84. Farber contrasts Lubitsch’s “dream war” with the more single-minded and realist representation of “real war” in *Wake Island* (John Farrow)—“no fantasy in this war” (283). Similarly, the *Motion Picture Herald* disapproved of *To Be or Not to Be*: “this treats humorously of the Nazis at a time when the war news is not funny” (21 February 1942; quoted in *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States*, ed. Patricia King Hanson and Alan Gevinson [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988-1999], F4, 2555). The reviewer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* was even more disparaging of the mixed modes of the film,

calling it a “callous, tasteless effort to find fun in the bombing of Warsaw” (quoted in *The American Film Institute Catalog*, 2555).

¹⁷ Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, 7 March 1942: 13. In the same issue, Crowther gives high marks to the patriotic *Captains of the Clouds*, starring James Cagney, in which the bombers and the bomber pilots are, as Crowther puts it, “stoutly heroic and exceedingly masculine.” Lubitsch’s mixture of tones—off-putting for a 1942 America that wanted to see itself as devoted to heroism—along with the confusion about how to read the Carole Lombard role after her sudden death in a plane crash before the film’s release, may have contributed to the film’s tangled financial situation: the production company wrote it off as a tax loss, and Lubitsch himself had trouble getting paid his share, though some claimed that the film had made plenty of profits (Eyman, 300-301).

¹⁸ Leo Braudy, “The Double Detachment of Ernst Lubitsch,” *Modern Language Notes* 98.4 (May 1983), 1073. Braudy disagrees with this reading of triviality, seeing Lubitsch’s style of detachment as the key to his moral commentaries: “The eye of the director, as both Jew and moviemaker, is totally skeptical of all social order” (1077).

¹⁹ Lubitsch responded to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* critic in a letter asserting that the bombing is shown “in all seriousness; the commentation under the shots of the devastated Warsaw speaks for itself and cannot leave any doubt in the spectator’s mind what my point of view and attitude is towards those acts of horror. What I have satirised in this picture are the Nazis and their ridiculous ideology” (quoted in *The American Film Institute Catalog*, 2555). Lubitsch’s response in the *Times* was even stronger: “Did I try to make them look at the Polish background through rose-colored glasses? Nothing of the kind. I went out of my way to remind them of the destruction of the Nazi conquest, of the terror regime of the Gestapo” (Ernst Lubitsch, “Mr. Lubitsch Takes the Floor for Rebuttal,” *New York Times* 29 March 1942, section 8: 3). Eyman sees the film’s black comedy as deriving from the “mordant humor” of scriptwriter Edwin Mayer (292).

²⁰ Braudy, 1083.

²¹ Lubitsch had already explored the liberatory possibilities of comic improvisation and laughter in a situation of political tension in *Ninotchka* (with Greta Garbo and William Powell, 1939).

²² *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, 3.2.89. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (Harper Collins, 1992). All quotations are from this edition.

²³ *Hamlet* 1.5.178-181

²⁴ *Hamlet* 1.5. 182-188

²⁵ Kott notes in this passage (*Hamlet* 4.3.16-17) “the ‘black outs’ of modern political cabaret, and great ironic humour” (56).

²⁶ *Hamlet* 5.2.222

²⁷ Kott, 53.

²⁸ Paul writes of the way that Lubitsch, through the 1930s, takes a “decreasingly ironic view of human personality,” beginning to engage directly with the problems of the ego. In the later films, Paul says, “an aggressive individualism takes root and blossoms into a conflict with the libidinal drives of other characters as well as with the dictates of the social order” (Paul, 13-14).

²⁹ Pictures of Gielgud in his *Hamlet* costume—open-necked white collared shirt, black doublet, and prominent chain—can be found at <http://www.frehomepages.com/hamlet/film/gielgud.htm> (10 May 2001). Thanks to David Young for this idea.

³⁰ Kott, 56.

³¹ Jack Benny often joked about emasculation; one of his radio lines about his childhood was “our rabbi was an Indian...he used a tomahawk.” Paul, 235-36.

³² Joel Rosenberg, “The Doubly Vanished Jew in Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be*,” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 16.3 (September 1996), 227.

³³ This twist on the *Hamlet* situation—in which *Hamlet*’s anger and madness often lead to the abuse of Ophelia—gives Ophelia more control than usual. It anticipates feminist attention and interventions in later century (a brief list of feminist studies of *Hamlet* is in Suzanne L. Wofford’s edition of the play in the *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* series [Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1994]). Robert

Willson, Jr., notes that in order to create the interruption, Lubitsch has had to take the nunnery scene out of its textual position immediately following “To be or not to be:” “[Lubitsch] gets his laugh at the cost of Shakespeare’s text.” Robert F. Willson, Jr., “Lubitsch’s *To Be Or Not To Be*,” *Shakespeare and Film Newsletter* 1.1 (December 1976), 2 ff., quoted in Kenneth S. Rothwell and Annabelle Henkin Melzer, *Shakespeare on Screen: An International Filmography and Videography* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1990), 59. Shakespeare’s scene order, however, was by no means canonical in nineteenth and early twentieth-century productions.

³⁴ “To be or not to be” is used by the lieutenant to transmit his love from England to Warsaw; intercepted by the double agent Professor Siletsky, it becomes a tool by which Maria can manipulate the professor; at the end of the film, it marks the beginning of yet another affair as an unknown young man walks out on the speech.

³⁵ Rosenberg, 229-30.

³⁶ Lubitsch, *New York Times* 29 March 1942, section 8: 3.

³⁷ Paul emphasises how the automatism of the Gestapo in the film is a source of humour (246).

³⁸ Paul, in his chapter “The Purest Style,” gives a good introduction to the closed door in Lubitsch (19-33).

³⁹ Tiftt elaborates on the ways in which facial hair figured in early attitudes toward Hitler, the “man with the little mustache,” and suggests that “Lubitsch’s film ‘beards’—in classical comic parlance, mockingly defies—Nazism generally for its own posturing. . . . In resisting oppressive power one can only gain by taking the falseness of beards as a starting point” (Stephen Tiftt, “Miming the Führer: *To Be or Not To Be* and the Mechanisms of Outrage,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 5.1 [1991], 32-33).

⁴⁰ Rosenberg explains the significance in 1942 Hollywood of the Jewishness of Greenberg—his prominent nose, for example—and his intervention in the debate as an invitation (against the Hollywood wartime code) “to fantasise the Jew throwing the enemy into an awed consternation” (Rosenberg, 219).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴² Shakespeare’s text (“Hath not a Jew eyes?”) becomes in the film “Aren’t we human? Have we not eyes?” Greenberg asks his audience of Nazis: “What does he want from *us*? What does he *want* from Poland?” Rosenberg points out Greenberg’s emphasis on “us” and then on “want” (as opposed to the expected contrast of “us” [Jews] and “Poland”). This, he asserts, ensures that the erasure of Jewishness serves as a way of “deflecting any implied contrast between Jews and Poles” and thus “entwining the destinies of Jewish and Slavic ‘Poles’” (233).

⁴³ *Time* oddly cited this scene as “a slick sequence”: perhaps, for some, its dark humour relieved some of the tensions of the film through its swift finality. Lubitsch defended the scene for its comic effect: American audiences, he says, will laugh “to see this new order [Fascism] and its ideology being ridiculed. They have no sympathy with men who jump out of a plane without parachutes because a man with a little mustache says, ‘Jump!’ They have contempt for people who get a perverted pleasure out of such serfdom.” Lubitsch, *New York Times* 29 March 1942, section 8: 3.

⁴⁴ Even Lubitsch’s wife wanted him to drop the line; he kept it, he said, because it showed the crudity of Gestapo humor (Paul, 230).

⁴⁵ Tiftt, 2. Tiftt suggests further that the tastelessness of the joke is important in that “it may be precisely the most tasteless jokes that are the most difficult to confine interpretively to a reductive gesture of ridicule, paralleling the single-minded aggression of propaganda” (7).

⁴⁶ Tiftt emphasises the importance in the film of the idea of collaboration—including both its positive and its negative implications, as the Turas are revealed as both theatrical collaborators and potential collaborationists: “by their stagings of seemingly collaborative rhetoric, the Turas demonstrate that the political and moral significance of images, utterances, and gestures that seemed essentially fascist is reflexive, pragmatic, and mobile: it emerges only through a complicated interplay between the rhetoric and a fundamentally theatrical context that, however oppressive, can be made to ramify subversively when exploited by a deceptive comic opportunism” (30).

⁴⁷ Lubitsch, *New York Times* 29 March 1942, section 8: 3.

⁴⁸ I am using the term “deadly theatre” as Peter Brook does in *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968).

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