Desperate Responsibility: A Postdramatic Reading of the Author's Presence in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Ensaio

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> The art of theater cues the audience that the performance is over. Shakespeare uses an epilogue to tell them when to applaud, modern theater gives the cue with lights or curtain, and each tradition has its own way. But we must have permission to engage again with our lives. (Woodruff 7)

The ambiguity of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare provokes and offers various readings. Walch remarks on *The Tempest*'s "remarkable resistance to interpretative closure" (224) possibly due to the openness of the text as well as its length, the grotesquely bizarre flatness of the characters, the allegorical quality of the work, its message, and finally, the strong authorial appeal at the end of the play. The aim of the present paper is to highlight the author's presence in the play in the mirror of postdramatic theory. The 21st-century theatrical assertion of the real creates a refreshing look at the interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as well as postulates the inevitable necessity of re-enacting Shakespearean theatre by subverting Elizabethan staging practices and developing its metatheatrical quality. Furthermore, the paper highlights several shared features of approaches to staging by both Shakespeare and Forced Entertainment, a leading British experimental theatre troupe, such as the author's creative dramaturgies, imagination, and manipulation of the audience. Finally, the paper attempts to approximate *The Tempest* to *Spectacular*, the latest show of Forced Entertainment.

Citação: Jan Suk, "Desperate Responsibility: A Postdramatic Reading of the Author's Presence in Shakespeare's The Tempest". Via Panorâmica: Revista Electrónica de Estudos Anglo-Americanos / An Anglo-American Studies Journal. 3rd series. 2 (2013): 89-99. ISSN: 1646-4728. Web: http://ler.letras.up.pt/.

Ambivalence

As argued above, *The Tempest* is an ambiguous play in many aspects, including its hard-to-locate genre. Various scholars argue that *The Tempest* belongs to the genre of comedy, romance, revenge tragedy, or allegory. Aware of certain ambivalences of the author's presence in the play, Yachnin postulates: "[T]he reading of the play as pseudo-allegorical autobiography is a plausible – even the probable – interpretation of *The Tempest*" (120). Accepting the pseudo-allegorical reading enables us to manoeuvre between the text and the act of interpretation more freely. Such formal, authorial and interpretative openness, as argued above, creates the ambiguity, which is described by Richter as "deliberately enigmatic" (qtd in Yachnin 124). Added to this, the ambivalence lies also in locating the central character, who is, as shall be illustrated further, most frequently Prospero: the creator, conjurer, manipulator of the characters in the play and possibly of the audience as well. Therefore, some scholars naturally identify the character of Prospero with William Shakespeare. As a result, several interpretations accentuate the view that the central character of the play is William Shakespeare speaking via Prospero – thus the play is read as Shakespeare's farewell to the stage, [1] or "Shakespeare's legacy" (Orgel 178). Taking into consideration that *The Tempest* was the last play Shakespeare wrote as a whole and realizing that at this time (1611) the playwright must have been a distinguished and a popular playwright, this idea appears perfectly plausible and justifiable and such a reading still remains popular.[2] From the early 19th century onwards, Shakespeare has been primarily canonized not for the subject matter of his works, but rather for his linguistic capacity and ability to create organic, believable and complicated characters. Correspondingly, Shakespeare's acclaim lies in the hundreds of believable characters he created. Throughout his plays, arguably, it is Prospero who most vividly personifies Shakespeare himself, most

apparently in the Epilogue of the play. Similar readings enable one to approximate *The Tempest* to the techniques of modern theatre, metatheatre (Walch 226) or postdramatic theatre. Thereby the audience is reassured that it is witnessing a play written by William Shakespeare and performed by a performer enacting Prospero. Additionally, it might be noted that *The Tempest* shows an extraordinary imbalance and even disproportion of characters, with Prospero being the most eloquent and physically present character. According to Marvin Spevack's word count, Prospero's lines compose 29.309% of the play and highly exceed those of other characters.[3] Logically, Prospero becomes the focal and pivotal point of the play, the agent and driving force of its action. In his essay *If by Your Art: Shakespeare's Presence in The Tempest*, Yachnin goes on to develop a theoretical reflection on the authorial presence of Shakespeare in his plays by introducing three-dimensional characters, whose convincing self-conscience is achieved by "ambiguity, inconsistency, and overdetermination" (120).

It is via alchemy that Prospero conjures the tempest and thus is enabled to execute his revenge. Alchemical creation not surprisingly conveys the metaphor for authorial creative energies; the term "tempest", after all, was in the Renaissance period used also to indicate the boiling temperature of a certain solution, as Hilský points out (92). This assumption leads to the conclusion that magic and art in *The Tempest* might take the form of instruments, most notably instruments of revenge. In *The Theatre in Life*, Evreinoff claims that "this ability to imagine something 'different' from everyday reality and to 'play' with this imagination, was also a pre-condition for religion" (24). Such sacral understanding triggers the meaning into the binary relationship of the author and god versus main character and the audience, thus identifying Prospero with the godly, immortal, performing agent of William Shakespeare. On the other hand, a notable number of scholars recognise the main character/Shakespeare

"in Miranda and Ariel as in Prospero" (Orgel 180). Arguably, Prospero represents God – through his knowledge, words, and illusion, which create the whole "dream world" on the island, thereby coming close to representing the work of a playwright, here Shakespeare with his creative potential. A biblical approximation to *The Tempest* signifies, according to Steven Marx, another parallel between the creation and omnipresence of the author: "The creator God, therefore, must be both the story's protagonist and its author" (23). This whole situation offers, through a postdramatic lens, an inevitable parallel with Austin's theory of performativity – with the words that conjure the world, that perform whole worlds: *Totus mundus agit histrionem*, all the world is a stage.[4] Correspondingly, the tempest in the play embodies the change, metaphorically meaning the author's creative art, as in the line "If by your Art, my dearest father" (1.2.1), where Miranda alludes to Prospero's creative magical powers. The omnipotent possibility of the creator or individual undoubtedly reflects the then contemporary rising importance of the individual. The audience is thus transformed, via alchemical/theatrical experience, from *it* into *they*. "His [Prospero's] power transforms the island into a stage and the environment into theatrical effects" (De Sousa 166).

Another ambivalent element of the play is its unusual time frame. Together with the *Comedy of Errors*, it is the only play by Shakespeare to follow the neoclassical three unities. Still *The Tempest* is a work concerned with time. Its title, as Martin Hilský points out, suggests the resonance of *tempo*, or *tempus* (94). The story time is both linear and dense – almost real spectating time, without the conventional shifts and jumps of its Elizabethan contemporaries. The actual action of the play occupies a period of approximately six hours; through several allusions and sub-narratives, the story time of the play, however, "dilates its boundaries to encompass events extending over a period of more than two

decades" (De Sousa 159). Such a framing, temporality within eternity, summons awareness of the limited powers of the author, alluding further to the audience's existential reaffirmation, signalling what Suk calls metaphysical death (104-107) i.e. death not present, but immanently perceived. The metaphysicallity and *timenessness*, and at the same its timelessness, create, as Woodruff highlights, a somewhat unclear boundary between the real and the acted:

> Sometimes after the last line of *The Tempest*, we in the audience are silent for a while, before the applause begins. . . . Suppose the charm never broke, and the applause never began. . . . When we applaud, we set the actors free and, at the same time, free ourselves from the spell actors have cast over us. . . . Life would stop, if the play never does. (7)

Blurring, going over the line between life and theatre, illusion and the real, the fictional provisional, is one the aspects of modern spectatorship that the play seems to anticipate. The mystery, however, remains whether Shakespeare's audience truly identified Prospero with Shakespeare, or if it all remains within the frame of modern scientific analyses. Woodruff's aforementioned suggestion implies the manipulating power of the play and supports the main protagonist-author, who thereby imposes a certain responsibility on the audience, such as the one referred to by Prospero in the Epilogue, where he begs the audience to free him – Prospero/Shakespeare: "But release me from my bands/ With the help of your good hands." [Epilogue]

This awareness of yourself as well as reaching out to the audience articulates a metatheatrical reaffirmation of the spectating process, its reference to reality, and a self-referentiality in which the audience can laugh at the protagonist while feeling empathetic simultaneously. Many contemporary postmodern theatres, like the British Forced Entertainment, address the

audience directly in the course of their plays, postdramatically transforming the audience from the very beginning of the play, not leaving that to the finale. The audience inevitably becomes a compatriot, co-creators of the play from its very start.

The Tempest Spectacular

There are many similarities between Elizabethan theatre and the plays of Forced Entertainment. Primarily it is their up-to-datedness: both Shakespeare and Forced Entertainment borrow richly from period sources, be it Virgil, the Bible or Montaigne, or television films, overheard conversations and internet pages. Additionally, one may argue, both struggle on the border between fiction and reality. In both cases the audience is taken into the play, manipulated into the authorial scenario. A crucial aspect towards understanding such theatres is the audience's responsibility. According to Yachnin, "*The Tempest* represents the natural culmination of a tendency in Shakespeare's drama towards giving the audience increased responsibility for making crucial decisions about the meaning of his plays" (120). Similarly, Tim Etchells, the director of Forced Entertainment and writer, deliberately elaborates on Michael Herr's theory "that you are responsible for everything you saw as well as for everything you do" (Etchells 14), which implies a notion of performance, developed by Erving Goffman, as a "cultural behavior for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience" (Hymes 208). This responsibility shift enables the author to develop his omnipotent bird's eye view, and to impose onto the witnesses in the audience a considerably larger demand for attention, even the experience of what might be understood as a feeling of failure or guilt.

In postdramatic terms, according to Lehman, theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that

space in which performing *and* spectating take place (Lehman, *Postdramatic Theatre* 17). Thus the arena of the theatre creates a confluence of energies, ideas, and simple being together. Then the actors, as stated above, no longer become alienated beings but instead co-create a collectively unmediated experience of theatregoing. Therefore, it is not by accident that Forced Entertainment's plays resemble those of William Shakespeare in their nature and structure. (Lehman, *Shakespeare's Grin* 103-118). It is no surprise that, with the help of postdramatic theory, the 21st-century works of Forced Entertainment are becoming irresistibly more and more appealing. Their 2009 play, *Spectacular*, magnificently builds on Elizabethan conventions of illusionary theatre. If we add to this the appeal to the audience, we have an ingenious confluence of *The Tempest* and *Spectacular*. Like *The Tempest*, *Spectacular* has one strong character, a narrator-cum-commentator-cum-conjuror-cum-creator. Like Prospero, the central character creates a world not only open to the audience, but completely giving to the spectators the scope for them to enact the whole visual and audio setting of the play. The main protagonist, Robin, dressed as a skeleton, directly addresses the spectators in this way:

> Yes, actually what might be helpful is if we could all just sort of imagine our way back to the beginning. So if you could all just imagine that you are coming to the theatre and there's that nice atmosphere, people looking forward to a nice night out. [*Spectacular*]

The following passage clearly offers the assertion of the audience's theatrical presence, a crucial acting strategy of postdramatic theatre. The summoning of presence in absence creates anticipation and further attacks on the audience's imagination, thus producing a certain energetic investment. The perception of

the play thereby remains highly individualized, idiosyncratic, unique, and thus driven by responsibility.

> You're just thinking about another time, another place. A street. Or a forest…… [sic] And then suddenly, you find yourself here, standing in front of everyone, and you think to yourself: 'Well, how long have I been away for? How long have I been standing here not saying anything. I don't know – 10 seconds? A minute?' [*Spectacular*]

The extract, taken from roughly halfway through the play, displays a fragility, a compassionate metatheatrical appeal and a reassertion of the here and now somewhat similar to the one which can be witnessed at the closure of *The Tempest*,

> Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
> And what strength I have's mine own,
> Which is most faint: . . .
> But release me from my bands
> With the help of your good hands:
> . . . And my ending is despair,
> Unless I be relieved by prayer,
> Which pierces so that it assaults
> Mercy itself and frees all faults.
> As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
> Let your indulgence set me free. (Epilogue)

What Shakespeare achieves in the Epilogue of his play Forced Entertainment puts forward from the very beginning of their play. The vulnerability of the individual spectator is appealed to constantly. In *Spectacular*, the main protagonist, Robin, conjures the world to the audience, leaving the play's visual and sound texture almost entirely in their hands and minds. Unlike *The Tempest*,

and besides the skeleton costumes, there are neither props nor costumes in *Spectacular*. The whole play remains extremely un-spectacular visually, realistically. On the other hand, given the fact that the audience invests their fantasy into it, the play may turn into an overwhelming theatrical experience. A similar thing might be argued in the case of *The Tempest*: to believe that Prospero is aware of the audience's presence and that the audience members realize their spectating experience turns the play of *The Tempest* into a genuine postdramatic experience. Both *The Tempest* and *Spectacular* are plays that stimulate extraordinarily what Goffman stresses as the quintessence of a performance, the relationship between a performer and the audience. Like Goffman, also Geertz believed that only those plays involving the participants in "deep play" are likely to raise real concerns about fundamental ideas and codes of the culture (1-37). Thus, both of the plays, the Elizabethan *The Tempest* and the 21st-century *Spectacular*, summon engagingly thought-provoking insights into the authors' creative alchemical laboratories.

In a postdramatic reading of *The Tempest*, its liminal ambiguity and openness may transit into the liminoid,[5] i.e. optional, voluntary, unexplained. This shift from liminal performance – which is able to invert the established order, but never subvert it – into liminoid activity – which is much more limited and individual, having to do with the audience´s responsibility or conscience – not only greatly outlines authorial creativity but also possibly expresses the difficulties of life and the author's appeal for understanding, sympathy and apology; in other words, it represents the modern need for seeking compassion and the necessity to articulate this in a confessional manner through a desperate ending. The postdramatic elaboration on the understanding of the spectators´ role and the theatre´s insistence on the real – the "*theatre of the present*" (Lehman, *Postdramatic Theatre* 142) – conjures new parallels and encourages

the reading that the main character of *The Tempest* is neither Shakespeare nor Prospero but the audience/spectator/witness naturally manipulated by the author, be it Prospero/Shakespeare or Robin/Tim Etchells. The ambivalence of reading *The Tempest* in a postmodern context and with postdramatic theories manifests a somehow very believable, painful, even desperate responsibility.

[1] The idea was first justified by Thomas Campbell in 1838. See William Shakespeare, *Dramatic Works*, ed. Thomas Campbell (London 1838).

[2] For the most frequent cases, one may refer to Alvin Kernan and Harriett Hawkins.

[3] Caliban is the second most eloquent character with 8.393% of the words of the play, followed by Stephano with 8.137% and Ariel 7.888%. See Marvin Spevack's conclusions (from *A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare*, 1968-80) quoted in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan 7.

[4] One recognizes the Shakespearean quote which was later also inscribed on the Globe Theatre.

[5] For the treatment of the Liminal and Liminoid see Victor Turner, "From Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual" in *From Ritual to Theatre, Human Seriousness of Play*, 20-60.

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