Such Stuff podcast
Season 3, Episode 4: Politicising Shakespeare

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

This week, the building has been filled with extraordinary events celebrating the very particular relationship between Shakespeare and Poland. For decades, even centuries, Polish artists have appreciated, performed and played with Shakespeare's work, and no play more than Hamlet. The relationship is charged with politicisation, the plays an expression of the mood of a nation, even before it was acknowledged as an independent country, and a symbol of dissent.

It's sometimes too easy to think of Shakespeare as being particularly English, and to have a set idea about how the plays should be performed. But a festival like this raises all sorts of questions about the global conversation around Shakespeare.

So, this week on the podcast we'll be asking, what is the particular fascination with Shakespeare in Poland, and how has it become so politicised? How does Shakespeare cross international borders and how does this change the way we read, understand, perform and see Shakespeare? And what do we mean when we talk about the 'universality' of Shakespeare?

[Music plays]

First up, here's Director of Globe Education Patrick Spottiswoode to introduce the festival properly…

Patrick Spottiswoode: We're seeking to celebrate the work of the most remarkable polymath in Poland called Stanisław Wyspiański, and Wyspiański, it's his 150th anniversary and so we used that as the catalyst to explore Poland's fascination with Shakespeare in

general and Hamlet in particular and to give us a glimpse at various cultural responses in Poland to Shakespeare and to Hamlet.

IG: And just very briefly, who was Wyspiański?

PS: He was a remarkable painter, playwright, he's still a revered playwright in Poland, there's major art exhibitions of his work, he was the equivalent of the leader of the arts and crafts movement in Poland, he was a stained glass designed, a theatre director. And in 1905, two years before he died, he wrote this remarkable reflection, it's like a stream of consciousness on Hamlet, which has never been translated into English until this year. And that to me is almost criminal. So really it was commissioning that translation that was the catalyst for this festival.

IG: And what do we mean by this particular fascination with Shakespeare in Poland?

PS: Well it's a good point because of course every country will have a particular fascination. I think in the 19th century, Germany regarded Shakespeare as particularly German. The great critic Schlegel said 'He's entirely ours'. I think later in the 19th and early 20th century, the Polish would have said the equivalent, that he's entirely ours in terms of being Polish. But Poland has used Shakespeare, Shakespeare's been a prism through which Poland has explored its own state of 'nowness' over the years and Hamlet in particular is a great play for that.

IG: And what does Shakespeare in translation and you know, things like The Hamlet Study being translated back into English, offer in the way of a sort of international exchange of ideas?

PS: Yeah, people often ask me, you know, 'How can you possibly translate Shakespeare into another language?' And they say that just coming out of a theatre having seen Chekhov in English. So, we do this constantly, translation and what translators are doing is not just copying Shakespeare in another language. They are actually... translation is a form of conversation, and almost in the

19th century in Poland, it was a form of challenge. They were challenging themselves and challenging Shakespeare to find a meaning that reflected their own time. Translators can shed extraordinary light on the plays that we think we know because we own English, but in meeting Shakespeare and translating Shakespeare, it's a form of adaptation and re-evaluation. It's going to give us new perspectives on plays that we think we know, but actually it's the new light that we're going to get that is really exciting.

[Music plays]

IG: As Patrick says, the festival was inspired by commissioning a new translation of Wyspiański's The Hamlet Study. In Poland, everybody studies and knows the work of Wyspiański, an extraordinary polymath who crossed art forms, an artist, director, playwright, and craftsman. We caught up with translators Tony Howard and Barbara Bogoczek, to find out about Wyspiański's extraordinary life… and this seminal work that's being translated for the first time…

Tony Howard: Hello, I'm Tony Howard, I teach at the University of Warwick and with Barbara Bogoczek, I translated The Hamlet Study by Wyspiański which is part of the festival.

Barbara Bogoczek: My name is Barbara Bogoczek, I also use the name of Basia Howard. I am married to Tony, but I'm also an independent translator, interpreter and I use different names for different parts of my work so this particular work is signed with my name Barbara Bogoczek.

IG: So, you're both part of the Shakespeare and Poland festival here at the Globe. For audiences who might not know, could you talk a little bit about that broader relationship between Shakespeare and Poland, what I think we're calling in the festival 'a particular fascination'.

TH: The relationship between England and Poland goes right back to Hamlet the play, which has a whole plot about a threat to Denmark from Fortinbras. Fortinbras is marching through Poland with intentions to take over Denmark. And interestingly, that links in to the fact that there were strong connections between the Globe theatre and the part of central Europe which is Polish now in his time. So English players took versions of Shakespeare's plays across the continent and they performed particularly in what is now Gdańsk. Many of Shakespeare's actors spent some time travelling that part of the world. So that's a historical connection.

A sort of political and artistic connection came in the 18th century. For a long time, there was no such place as Poland. It didn't exist, because it had been divided between three great powers. And when that happened, people turned to literature as a way of sort of looking for a national identity. And they found in Shakespeare that there were many, many images that resonated with them and they began to think of Hamlet particularly, Hamlet the character this time, as someone whose problems about identity and commitment and revenge related to them. So, in the Romantic period, there was a strong fascination with Shakespeare. Though if you were in the part of Poland that was ruled by Russia, which is Warsaw for instance, you couldn't perform many of Shakespeare's plays, many of them were banned because they were so offensive to the Tsar.

One of the great things about Poland is that it's always had a cultural heart, really if you don't have a political identity, you have to find a cultural sense of who you are. And when at the end of the Second World War, it became a communist state and it was very much part of the idealist aspect of communism at that time that every substantial town should have a theatre, and that it should put on modern plays, it should work with children and it should do some sort of classics. And so, Shakespeare right after the Second World War became a very visible thing on Polish stages. There were some restrictions of the kind of interpretations you could put out for example. So, if the Tsar hadn't liked Macbeth or Hamlet or King Lear, Stalin wouldn't have liked them very much either, and in fact Stalin had a particular thing about Hamlet. So, it isn't until Stalin's

death that Polish stages start to put on substantial interpretations of Hamlet, dealing with every aspect of it: the personal, the romantic and the political too. And that's when a particularly important figure crops up, the critic Jan Kott who was one of the leading figures in communist Poland, and he was one of the first to see that Shakespeare could become a mouthpiece for the kind of political changes that people wanted to make after Stalin's death. And his book, Shakespeare Our Contemporary became an immense influence on British Shakespeare through the work of the RSC and especially Peter Brooke, all across Europe. And what he said, and this is something that Wyspiański had said beforehand, that Shakespeare is a sponge, a sponge that takes in the atmosphere and the ideas of the times, and you find yourself - this is another metaphor - mirrored in Shakespeare. So, a sponge and a mirror, those are both metaphors that Shakespeare uses in Hamlet and they became part of the peculiar fascination that Polish theatres had with Shakespeare, that it could be about them.

So that strange political connection really carries on right through to now. Depending on what state Poland is in politically, depending on what state Poland is in emotionally, Shakespeare gives them metaphors that really have rung true for a long time and that's partly what has inspired this festival.

IG: And for those who aren't familiar with his work, can you tell us a bit of background about Wyspiański?

BB: Well he was born I think in 1869...

TH: So, this is 150th anniversary.

BB: Yes, and he died in 1907, so he had a short life. 38, he was 38 when he died. He had a difficult life, starting with a very difficult childhood when his mother died when he was 7 and then a difficult lifetime due to an illness. But he was an incredibly creative person on very many levels, a very modernist figure who spent a long time in his formative time, early 20s in Paris, where he mixed with people

like Gaugin, where he got very influenced by the impressionist style of painting, he got incredibly attracted to colour...

TH: That's one way of looking at Wyspiański, which is as a visual artist and he's a great visual artist though he isn't known internationally for the very simple reason that when he was in Paris with Gaugin, he discovered he was allergic to oil paints. So, he could only work in pastels, he could only work with stained glass windows, neither of which travelled very well for exhibitions and he could do furniture and interior design. So that is the Wyspiański who many Polish people know and they know him in their hearts because the images are so beautiful. But we haven't talked about the fact that he's also a major, one of the major Polish playwrights. One of the things that happened when he was a young man doing a European tour, was he encountered Wagner. And for him that was fantastic, because it meant there was an art form which, as it is in Wagner's operas, the union of everything. And that's what he developed as a playwright. And to begin with he wasn't very successful because his ideas were quite confrontational. If you're a modern and you've been in Paris with Gaugin, the stained-glass windows you're likely to suggest should be put into Wawel Cathedral as a kind of central magnificent Medieval building would be unpredictable. So many of his designs were rejected by the church, and that's why he found theatre was a more malleable medium for him.

So, he became a stage designer, a playwright and a director. He began to think of himself as potentially an artistic director of a theatre, and there's a wonderful theatre in Krakow that he applied for to become the artistic head. And it's at that time that he is writing the study of Hamlet. In a way, it's sort of part of his job proposal, that Hamlet is a play that he's thinking of directing and he's going to use it to explore every aspect of contemporary thought and he wants to understand it in its own terms, in its own times and what it means for now. Now means Poland in 1904 when it's written, but it's kind of a manifesto as a way of looking at theatre and so it's become hugely influential and important in Eastern European theatre, where it's known because it's written in the language that

people read. It's a manifesto for saying you can use Shakespeare in the way that Hamlet uses theatre in the play of Hamlet, as a mirror up to nature which shocks you and forces people in power to see themselves, forces individuals to understand things which they've repressed or hidden out of guilt so theatre could become an active mirror. That's what the book is about and that's typical of his ambition because I think he realised he did not have a long life ahead of him and so he was trying to pack as much, in as many fields, as possible.

General Piłsudski, who was to become the first leader of independent Poland after the First World War, having read the book, asks him 'Would you like to be involved in a revolution against the Russians?'

IG: So, what you've described so brilliantly is a piece which does that sort of sponge and mirror reflection of Poland at that very specific period of time. What does translating it into English at this very specific period of time offer in the way of sort of cross-cultural exchange and a way of enriching our understanding of Hamlet and Shakespeare more broadly?

TH: The reason why people had not heard of Wyspiański was because - as I said earlier - his art doesn't travel, physically it can't be moved around, the greatest pieces can't. But also, he's writing in Polish. It was so important for him to do that at the time. But it was also the minority language of a state that didn't exist, and to be quite frank the Anglo-Saxon world, the Anglo-American world is very self-satisfied. It isn't interested in other languages. And it happens to be a very complicated text to translate. But because we don't know about a culture, because we can't speak that culture's language, because we can't speak to that culture, we don't hear that culture. So, anything like this translation, in a very tiny way, anything like season in a much bigger way, that makes us aware of the different traditions, the different insights that we as nations and people have, is going to be very, very valuable and important. Particularly now, at a Brexit time. We first heard about this possible translation right after the Brexit vote and there was a strong sense

at that point that the country became much more aggressive in its inwardness. And there is so much going on, such as the Globe's work with Refugee Week at the moment, there is so much going on through culture that has to break down the intolerance and the ignorance which is so persistent and we are hoping that this season will appeal to people with Polish backgrounds in this country, but we hope very much beyond that, that it appeals to everybody.

[Extract from The Hamlet Study]

[Music plays]

IG: Alongside the Hamlet Study, Tony and Barbara have translated a short, lyrical piece by Wyspiański which imagines the end of Hamlet from Ophelia's perspective. Here's Tony and Barbara…

TH: So, we'd heard about this book, The Hamlet Study, it had never been translated into English until now but we also discovered once we started to look at it that he'd written a very short play called The Death of Ophelia. And once we'd read it we realised that this would be a perfect appendix to this powerful, philosophical exploration of Hamlet the play. It's a very brief, lyrical, beautiful little piece written for a female performer.

BB: So, having the little play at the end when Wyspiański actually gives voice to Ophelia, where she can express her feelings and her thoughts about the situations which have taken place in her life in the play seems like a completion of this particular piece of work.

TH: Yeah, his idea is that Shakespeare was a playwright, an actor/playwright, a working man of the theatre who was revising existing scripts all the time and that Hamlet the play that we all know is actually put together out of different versions and legends. For him, that's created a problem with Ophelia who seems to be a contradictory figure. Hamlet says that she ambles and minces and paints her face and that's not like the person that we actually see on stage. And he explains that, Wyspiański, by saying that there used to be a legend of Hamlet - and this is true - in which there was a

female character - which is true - but she wasn't that sort of person, she was simply someone hired by the King to seduce Hamlet. So, his idea is that there's an earlier legend version of Ophelia and there's Shakespeare's own, more sensitive performance. So that's why I think he wrote this short piece as an appendix, so that we get to see Ophelia on her own, we get to hear her say the things she never says in Shakespeare. Such as 'it's about you, it's not about me, it's about you, Hamlet'. And she says 'I lived in a castle, which is a circle of lies'. Very brief, within a lyrical context, but very piercing, where she's finally allowed to speak for herself.

BB: This piece about Ophelia just brought to me an echo of Virginia Woolf telling us about Shakespeare's sister and for me, there is something here about giving a voice to the person from the age of Shakespeare, to a female person from the age of Shakespeare who was denied that voice to a large extent.

IG: We chatted to director Nastazjia Somers and actress Edyta Budnik, who will be playing Ophelia in the Globe's performance of The Death of Ophelia, to ask about staging work from a woman's perspective and how the Ophelia you see in this piece is so different to the one we're used to seeing…

IG: The festival as a whole is dedicated to what I think we're calling the particular fascination of Poland with Shakespeare. What was your relationship with Shakespeare like before this, did you grow up with a lot of Shakespeare?

Nastazjia Somers: Yes. Yeah, I think the reason I wanted, essentially, to go into theatre was because when I was 14, I saw Maja Kleczewska's Macbeth, which actually, funnily enough was at the Globe five years ago during the Globe to Globe. So that was in my hometown in Poland and that production got loads of awards internationally. So yes, I definitely grew up around Shakespeare but my notion of Shakespeare definitely changed when I came here and when I realised the way we were receiving it in Poland was quite different than here, I think. Because it's so politicised in Poland and it always has been. You know, sometimes it's like 'Oh, you

sometimes just do this for entertainment'. And that was kind of very alien to me. So yeah that's my answer I guess. I love Shakespeare but...

Edyta Budnik: I sort of left Poland when I was 14, so I haven't really been exposed to that side, like Nastazjia is saying. But I still have a difficulty of kind of... when I read Shakespeare, I always have to buy a Polish version because I find it... it just makes it easier for me to understand. But it's interesting to see also the difference between the Polish language and how that's written and obviously how Shakespeare wrote it in English and stuff.

IG: What do you mean by the politicisation of Shakespeare in Poland?

NS: So, I think because... and I think it's similar to a lot of classics, I think if you're going to stage it again, you need to say something new and it needs to relevant to why it's being stage right now. So, the reason I'm saying it was very different for me is you know, when I came here for the first time I... you know, it has not been used as a tool to make statements, but rather it has to sound a certain way, and it has to be done a certain way. Actually, Shakespeare is like everyone else and belongs to everyone else. And the politicising of it is again, if it's a classic text and it's coming back, why is it coming back right now and why do I need to see it, there needs to be an urgency. So, you know, seeing something like Richard II here and the first company of women of colour, you know, that's the urgency that I'm always looking for when I see Shakespeare.

IG: The Death of Ophelia, the Wyspiański piece, was it something you were familiar with before this...?

NS: I was yes. Were you?

EB: I wasn't, no. First time. [Laughs].

NS: I think just because he's so present in Polish psyche, and it's so interesting that it's the first time it's been translated, because he is

like Shakespeare, I don't think there's every any time in Poland when Wyspiański's not being stage, because he's written so many pieces and they all very much... it's interesting the choices that have been made here in The Hamlet Study and The Death of Ophelia because I think when you first time introduce a playwright to an audience that is not necessarily familiar with him, those are actually really great pieces to choose. Because a lot of his work is very much interconnected with Polish tradition, Polish culture, Polish history, and so if you don't feel particularly connected to that, at first that can maybe feel a little bit alienating. So, I think these are great choices. So, audiences can see 'oh there are connections!'

IG: As a piece it feels very modern to give voice to the character we never really hear from. Can you talk a bit about that sort of resonance of the play now?

NS: Go on!

EB: Resonance? Well I think when we were talking about the piece with Nastazjia we both sort of agreed we didn't want to portray Ophelia as she was in Hamlet or you know, as she's been written in the 19th century because that's not really relevant anymore, that's not really interesting and like Nastazja was saying, if you're going to do something like that, do it for a purpose and with an urgency, to mean something and for people to relate to. And at first, sort of The Death of Ophelia felt very much that you know, it would be easier to do it maybe as a woman who is a little bit mad or whatever, but I think it's more interesting to portray her as a woman who is oppressed, who's filled with anger and upset from the lack of a voice and not being able to express herself and constantly being dominated by men. You know, it's quite interesting how it's actually... it's still all those are so much relevant now in the current, in the 21st century, which is mad and the more we read it, the more stuff comes out of it.

NS: I'm smarter than to thank the man for giving agency to female character because I don't think that's the point. But you know it's still written from a male perspective. Well, it's not from a male

perspective, but it's still the male words that's being written down. I think what is clever is he leaves enough space for the agency to be sort of created there, rather than just go 'Oh this is what she says'. And you know generally it's interesting because she's one of the most you know famous, literally and artistically, characters in the world and yet in Hamlet she exists purely in relationship to men so whenever people ask me 'What is it about?' I'm like 'It's the last half an hour of Ophelia's life which you actually don't get to see in Hamlet. It's great, it's great and I think Wyspiański is also interesting in terms of like when he was writing it and it's one of his last pieces before he died. He kept rewriting it and rewriting it and you know, so he knew there was something there that he wanted to get right that Shakespeare necessarily didn't platform.

[Extract from The Death of Ophelia]

IG: And has it changed the way you look at Hamlet as a play, having sort of delved into this...

NS: I'm trying to sound diplomatic. [Laughter] I don't need to see another Hamlet, that's something that I personally don't need to do. Again, it's something we're talking about with Edyta constantly is like, why is what he's saying a genius, and when she says things they are hysterical, sort of mad woman? Yeah, I'm... urgh, men [laughs].

EB: Yeah, no absolutely. Everything that he sort of says is, 'Oh it's fine, he's just going through a phase'. Whereas anything you know... Ophelia's just lost her Dad, and she hasn't just lost him, he's been murdered and then she wasn't able to say goodbye. So, you know obviously she's allowed a moment of grief and just this moment of losing her mind in a way, do you know what I mean? And suddenly she's just being kind of possessed, hysterical, she should be banished and all that kind of stuff which is just... urgh. [Laughs] The more sort of like I think about it and the more I read it, the more upsetting it gets [laughs] and the more annoyed I get about sort of Hamlet and the whole portrayal of men in that play.

NS: I think there's a lot to unpick about how we see women and how we still continue to see female characters in relationship to male characters and why it is that Ophelia has been denied a voice for a very, very long time. Even things like, why do we believe that she killed herself? These things are not said in the text, and I know there are loads of scholars arguing, but like there is definitely space for female characters to make choice, but they always seem to make the easiest and choices that are just made through the male gaze.

IG: So, who is the Ophelia in your piece... what is that voice that people will hear here that they haven't heard before?

EB: Hopefully someone who's allowed to express themselves without being judged for their suicidal thoughts, for the pain she's going through, for the fact that she was in love and you know, for everything that she's done she's not going to be judged for her choices and her life like she always has been in the past through paintings, and through different sort of text analysis and psychoanalysis and all that kind of stuff. We can show a woman who is just a woman, who is able to feel stuff and that's fine. That she doesn't, you know, she's emotional and that's OK. And so are men. And nobody should be judged for being able to feel stuff and expressing their feelings, that's all.

NS: Yeah and I think we're also tapping into this idea of what is female sexuality and how women apologise for their sexuality, and I think again in Wyspiański's text it allows for her to move away from that and actually she says well I have sinned, but you know the subtext being I did have sex with this man and why should I be ashamed of that. So, you know, double standards that we still see today, the sort of Madonna versus a whore but you cannot be both, you just have to be one. I hope she's relatable and I hope she's not... I would like the audiences to be surprised that maybe, that they haven't seen that side or maybe realised that their view on this particular female character has been influenced by certain stereotypes as well?

[Extract from The Death of Ophelia]

[Music plays]

IG: Next up… we sat down with the Globe's very own research fellow and lecturer Dr Will Tosh to take a step back and look at the bigger story, of how the work of an English dramatist spread across the world over 400 years. It's a story inevitably bound up with Britain's imperial past, and raises all sorts of questions around the politicisation of Shakespeare and what we mean when we talk about 'universality' and Shakespeare. Here's Will…

IG: So, as a sort of backdrop to the Shakespeare and Poland festival... we're looking at that very specific relationship between Poland and Shakespeare, but I guess I'm interested in what the broader story is of how Shakespeare spreads internationally from the early modern period onwards.

WT: I think that's fascinating, isn't it, because almost as soon as Shakespeare starts writing and having his plays performed, stories develop about the passage of those plays around the world. Historical stories subsequently develop around Shakespeare's era, so there's a very famous, probably apocryphal story, about a performance of Hamlet on an East India Company boat called The Red Dragon that's moored off Sierra Leone en route to Indonesia and the sailors on board this boat apparently have a copy of the first quarto of Hamlet and they perform the play for each other, for visiting dignitaries from the mainland and you have this astonishing kind of image of early globalised Shakespeare, of a meeting between English sailors and West African traders and it's a very compelling image. It's probably a forgery, so this is a story that gets told in history but the documents on which this story apparently is based have vanished and more recently historians have gone back to the archive and gone: 'Oh god, do you know what, we actually think this is probably not true', however compelling it is as a story. But I think that's fascinating because it suggests what we want to believe about Shakespeare as a global entity which is that, it's right there at the beginning, you know 1607, only a few years after

Hamlet was performed in London and it's there as an exchange that seems kind of equable. At least in this instance, the visitors from Sierra Leone were coming on board the ship as just sort of interested people. But I think the reality is more complex and in some senses more problematic in terms of the way Shakespeare spreads across the Globe with English as a language and British and European culture.

But what you do get in the 17th century is the definite spread of Shakespeare and Shakespearean material through Europe on the back of tours by companies of English actors and also European companies, specifically German companies who are touring versions of Shakespeare's plays around mainland Europe. So, you find lots of adaptations and translations of Shakespeare's plays both in straightforward theatrical adaptations but also puppet show theatre popping up all over Germany and the Low Countries and the sort of central parts of Europe. So, we know there's a definite early modern sweep of Shakespeare across continental Europe in the 17th century and that continues to evolve over the next century until Shakespeare's sort of rediscovered as a literary subject in the 18th century by German Romantic writers and poets who kind of claim Shakespeare as their own and part of the German Romantic mindset.

But I suppose the next big development with global Shakespeare comes with the age of imperial expansion from the 18th century onwards, when Shakespeare gets worked into the kind of package of colonial impositions that Britain brings with it as it kind of expands across the world. That's quite deliberate, it's a deliberately articulated objective of the colonial mindset which is to export common law, Christianity and English letters, English literature as a sort of bundle and it's tied up as a sort of in inverted commas 'civilising' mission. And then obviously those three pillars run up against the existing cultures in the various countries and communities that England engages with as an imperialist aggressor, invader, trader in its various ways. And I think the most notable example of this is the Indian subcontinent where England's kind of gradual takeover process that really happens from the 1600s

onwards and then into the 18th and 19th centuries, is accompanied at every step by Shakespeare as a sort of totem of English culture. Quite soon, certainly in the mid 18th century, theatres are established in Calcutta and Delhi and Shakespeare becomes part of the cultural life of the colonial administrator community. But pretty soon after that, Shakespeare gets worked into British Indian school and university syllabuses, and that's British Indian as in the British administration for Indian students. So, Shakespeare is absolutely part of the education that's delivered to Indian students at secondary schools and at universities and at training colleges. And then quite soon you get Bengali and Hindi and Parsi translations of Shakespeare coming out as well and you get adaptations of Shakespeare in theatre and then of course into the early 20th century in the burgeoning Indian film industry as well. Shakespeare becomes much more enwrapped into cultures around the world and the tale of that colonial expansion.

IG: So, is it fair to say there's something slightly different happening in the European relationship with Shakespeare to the one that happens more broadly across the world?

WT: I think there is a different relationship between Shakespeare as an English playwright in continental Europe and Shakespeare as an English/British playwright around the world especially in those countries that bear the impact of British colonialism. Shakespeare is not imposed on continental Europe as a cultural artefact to be admired and to be learnt in school and to be sort of wondered at. And in fact, Shakespeare's, other than the example of Shakespeare as a sort of touring product, especially in Germany and central Europe, it's not until the 18th century that Shakespeare then works his way into the sort of regular repertory in theatres in France and Italy and Spain and places like that. It's a slightly slower process for Shakespeare to become part of that world and then Shakespeare is very much sort of seen as a kind of literary classic. So, you get a profound admiration and enjoyment of Shakespeare. But less of a sense that its being forced down by people's throats or people are compelled to study Shakespeare at school.

IG: So, one of the things we've been speaking about with some of the artists from the Shakespeare and Poland festival is this idea that Shakespeare in Poland is very politicised and that that might have something to do with Poland not existing as an independent country. How have different interpretations of Shakespeare grown up out of the very specific ways that he's spread globally? So, you know, when we're talking about that colonial impact, how do some of those translations and the later versions of it then sort of act back on the Shakespeare?

WT: It's really interesting, isn't it? In many ways I think Poland's a really unusual case because of the particular impact of the critic Jan Kott writing about Shakespeare from the point of view of Cold War realities and thinking about how Shakespeare can give voice to that kind of oppositional sentiment. My sense is sort of globally what one finds is the notion - and it's a notion that's challenged now by lots of scholars - that Shakespeare is somehow 'universal' gives it it's value as an oppositional artefact. So, either nations or communities that feel like they're kind of struggling under some form of oppression have access to a set of literary texts that they regard as universal as a way to give voice to liberational instinct or something like that. So, we say now in the 21st century, that that 'universality' is really problematic and I think in loads of ways it is because it suggests that the particular world view of one Englishman in the 16th century is somehow relevant to everyone the world over at whatever time period and there are serious problems with that as a conclusion. But by the same token, the idea that you invest something with universal potential means that anyone around the world can claim it and go, 'this is a story that I want to use to tell my version of this story and I'm going to use it because you're more likely to know what I mean because I'm tapping into something we all consider universal'. And that seems to be what's happening when you have Shakespeare translated into various languages in West Africa, into Yoruba for example, in the early part of the 20th century as a form of political protest and as a form as a sort of articulation of national identity. Using something which has the stamp of the English colonial oppressor and translating it into something belonging to that oppressed people.

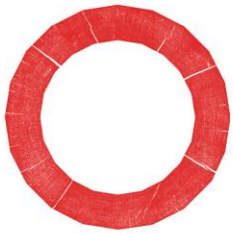
IG: So now we have this huge body of Shakespeare in translation and then, you know texts like The Death of Ophelia and The Hamlet Study being translated back into English. It creates this massive global dialogue around Shakespeare's work. How does that enrich the subject?

WT: I mean the situation now is just astonishingly rich. So many voices around the world are engaging with the same stories and source texts but taking them in all sorts of directions and you find that with theatre as well, you know. You only have to look at Shakespeare performances from theatre companies in Germany or South Africa or South East Asia and they're kind of mind blowing, they're going in directions you'd never see in London. And that's because these texts are fundamentally open, they're open to interpretation and often cultures who don't regard them as sort of hedged around with sort of preciousness can be much freer in terms of where they take them. And that just creates an astonishing multi-vocality of people engaging with the same stories and ideas which I think is hugely exciting.

And I think it really does help to rebalance this idea of Shakespeare as a sort of universal brackets English genius, because in a sense there's nothing wrong with thinking Shakespeare's universal in terms of Shakespeare is for everyone to enjoy if they want to enjoy his work. But that doesn't mean that Shakespeare is a universal human or that his thoughts are somehow separate to the world he was born in to and the world that he knew. But what it does mean is that his work can speak to people all over the world in ways that would frankly have blown his mind and certainly blow our minds today.

[Music plays]

IG: That’s it from us, but you can catch the last days of the Shakespeare and Poland festival at the Globe now.



Wyspiański's Hamlet Study and the Death of Ophelia is tonight, and includes talks and performances. Tickets are available online or through our box office. The new translation will be available in our bookshop.

The music in this podcast was by the Song of the Goat Theatre Company, who will be performing in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse on Saturday 6 July. Tickets are also available online or through our box office.

[Music plays]

You've been listening to Such Stuff with me, Imogen Greenberg, and Patrick Spottiswoode.

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