

THE SHAKESPEARES OF JOZEF CILLER, STAGE DESIGNER

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Abstract: The study *The Shakespeares of Jozef Ciller* tackles the Renaissance manner of the expression in the topic defined by its title using historical and comparative analyses. The author of the study analysed the way the scenographer projected general attributes of the European Renaissance (visual art, architecture) into specific theatre productions based on the remaining archive material (stage designs, production photographs, video recordings, production reviews and similar) and personal communication with Jozef Ciller. The analyses also contain the identification of the transfer of the architecture and the scenography of the Elizabethan theatre Renaissance. Another line thanks to which the scenography for Shakespeare has been traced is the analyses of the Renaissance elements according to the location of the scenography – whether it was aiming for interior or exterior space. The scenography of Jozef Ciller elaborates on characteristics of renaissance exterior and interior architecture or creates, by its means, a new theatrical reality. Even the original dramatic reality often works with motives of plays in the renaissance Elizabethan style: the space of the stage and the auditorium is united through an active display for the actors and their presentation. Such approach is typical for Ciller's scenography in general, not just for Shakespeare's plays. The result of the study is that Ciller uses Renaissance (theatrical and nontheatrical) elements as motives while retaining the awareness of the Renaissance spirit and greatness of human beings.

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Introduction

The scenography of Shakespeare's plays created by Jozef Ciller may be united in one thing, and that is that they are never just simple, straightforward or flat modernising reconstructions of Elizabethan scenography of Shakespeare's life and its interpretation, but neither are they their citations or allusions. His scenography elaborates on the characteristics of renaissance exterior and interior architecture or creates, by its means, a new theatrical reality. Even the original dramatic reality often works with motives of plays in the renaissance Elizabethan style: the space of the stage and the auditorium is united through an active display for the actors and their presentation. Such approach is typical for Ciller's scenography in general not just for Shakespeare's plays.

The core and the most dynamic visual element of the stage is an actor who can structure the space, change it if necessary or open up its fourth dimension by providing new meanings for the specific area. Scenography has to have its flow and its story, it is born within the process of creation of the production, and it has a particular logic and poetics. Scenography is an integrating dialogue connecting the motor and aesthetic elements with a physical and spiritual side of the theatre piece. It provides a wide range of possibilities that facilitate a meaningful impact on the audience and emphasises the purpose of the theatre production. Scenography should provoke the director, inspire the actor and surprise the audience. (Ciller, 2014).

Ciller's scenography for Shakespeare created in the Renaissance context are full of thick masonry walls or building façades, table stone pieces, greenery, long draperies, sand, portals, plasterwork sgraffito, frescoes and so on, but he rarely uses mock-ups (one example is *The Taming of the Shrew* in Zlín in 1972). Actors work with the stage elements in a dynamic way and change the original functions and meanings of the components as well as their visual perception. Of course, the shift in the sense of the theatrical adaptations of Renaissance elements is not derived solely from the action of actors, but from the conception and work of all the creators of the production who interact with the scenography of Jozef Ciller.

On Shakespeare Scenography in Facts

Jozef Ciller has created scenography for Shakespeare twenty-six times, out of which, twice for *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Cymbeline*, *Othello*; three times for *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*; and four times for *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He also created designs for the latest opera of Juraj Beneš *The Players* (Slovak National Theatre Bratislava, 2004; direction: Martin Huba), which was based on the motives from *Hamlet*. He also created the stage designs for the opera by Charles Gounod *Romeo and Julie* (National Moravian-Silesian Theatre in Ostrava, 2001; direction: Peter Gábor) and the opera by Giuseppe Verdi *Macbeth* (Slovak National Theatre

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Bratislava, 2004, direction: Marián Chudovský). All of his scenography, except for two, were created either in Slovakia or the Czech Republic. Only Hamlet (in two versions) and Cymbeline were created abroad in Zagreb, Croatia. Four of them were designed for exterior theatre spaces. Another three Shakespeare productions were created by the students at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava under Ciller's supervision.

The semantics of the Renaissance elements

The tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* was the first of Shakespeare's play that Jozef Ciller had created scenography for in 1970 for the Theatre of the Slovak National Uprising in Martin (direction: Stanislav Párnický). It was symbolic in several ways. Not only because it is the most often played Shakespeare, or because it has precedence within Ciller's Shakespeare productions. It was mainly because he had already then fully expressed his ability to grasp Shakespeare's texts in a dynamic visual and open manner. He was able to think of theatre shortcuts, indications and create space with a high variability regarding significance.² Such approach allowed Ciller to link the usual period specifics in a nonconflicting way, which is required when producing Shakespeare, with a shift in theme towards nowadays and the actualisation of its message. The scenography for *Romeo and Juliet* was mobile, nonlyrical and used a scaffolding construction upon an extensive masonry wall in the rear part of the stage. The core elements were cold grey 'stones' in cubic and cuboid shapes of various sizes. Some of them imitated parts of walls of Renaissance Verona and were movable around the whole stage. Theatre critic and theatre historian Vladimír Štefko highly regarded the effect of constraint space created by the movable masonry pieces. Štefko interpreted the meaning of the masonry pieces as: '...witnesses but also borders, fortifications with obstacles to people's understanding.' (Štefko, 1970). Another critic, writer, dramatist and, translator Juraj Váh, had not written positively on the scenography of the production, he criticised the excessive focus on sexuality. His words describing scenography can be also regarded as a general description of Ciller's approach to Shakespeare's texts: Ciller had created according to him 'not a Renaissance, but a timely abandoned, dry and cruel Verona.' (Váh, 1972).

Exterior productions have a specific position in the context of Ciller's Shakespeare scenography designs. The stage designer appreciates them not only because of the particular spaces and the possibilities of their utilisation but also regarding the occasions they were created for. The first – *Hamlet* – was created in 1994 (The Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, Croatia) and this was realised in an indoor theatre, directed by Joško Juvančić, but for the Summer Shakespeare Festival in Dubrovnik, it was adjusted for the fortress Lovrijenac.³ Croatia was at that time in a war with Serbia, and a production of *Hamlet* in an army fortress felt particularly oppressive. Thick walls, a historic canon, that was used for shooting, hanging above the main stage, a huge stone block on the floor, and at the time very familiar – to everyone – sacks with sand used as protection against the shooting – all of this made this *Hamlet* a timeless production and one with a cautionary current message. Moreover, the audience was not afraid to sit close to the stage. As Ciller said, they were not scared of proximity, which might have been due to the war experience. They did not mind sitting close to each other on narrow walls above the central part of the stage despite the fact that they could fall.⁴ The atmosphere of the production was very intense, and it was almost like a live broadcast.

The productions of *Hamlet* were Ciller's second collaboration with director Juvančić. Their first joint production was *Cymbeline*, in 1986 (The Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, Croatia). The critical feature of the stage was a pile of sand, actually 10 tons of sand, formed into a giant hill that created an irrational and surreal frame for the story (BURIAN, 1992). Specific environs were created using the emergence of realistic set props such as a ceremony table with chairs, a house made of canvas, a column, real grass and the like. There were also imaginative set props like a 'flying' ship or facial masks dug out of the sand.

The scenography for the following three productions – *King Lear* (2002), *Romeo and Juliet* (2004) and *Richard III* (2012) were created for the Czech Summer Shakespeare festival in Prague where they

² Podmaková (1977) and Kunovská (1997) among other critics and theatre historians characterise Ciller's scenography for Shakespeare in this sense.

³ Actors from all over Croatia were involved in that production.

⁴ From an interview with the stage designer by the author of the study. J. Ciller's studio, 1. 11. 2015, The Slovak Chamber Theatre Martin.

were staged within the premises of the Old Castle and its courtyard. The director of all of them was Martin Huba. Jozef Ciller believes the environment of the Prague Castle to be ‘...the perfect background for theatre productions and especially for Shakespeare’s tragedies which amazingly interconnects history, theatre and the present. Its monumentality and texture are immensely suggestive...’⁵ Ciller’s goal with all of these productions was to make the audience feel that ‘...the stage designer was present.’⁶ For example, in the production of *King Lear* at the Prague Castle courtyard (specifically the part called ‘Nádvoří Starého Purkrabí’) he used the opening in the main wall which lead into the Golden Street. He had an enormous drape (drop-scene) dragged in after the first entrance of Lear and Goneril,⁷ in fact, Lear entered the scene from the back of the auditorium. The dominant element of the stage was a grand masonry table consisting of several stone blocks. The table was also used for *Romeo and Juliet*.⁸ Further aspects of the sets comprised: sand, water and the multiform and structured façade of the courtyard.

In *Romeo and Juliet* the architectural space of the courtyard became a theatre space by its metaphorical transition to the present, and also the storyline was adapted to the stage. The story began at the summer coffee shop where an explosion occurred – one of the signs of the enemy family clans. The renaissance and romantic dimension of the space were achieved thanks to the greenery that was climbing up the walls of the courtyard, and it also facilitated the intimate space for Juliet – a chamber like a sanctuary that also hosted the balcony scene. The laurels in the lower section of the space created a Renaissance garden for the nobility.

In *Richard III* – except for the ‘table’ resembling a considerable throne – the main façade of the courtyard had a metallic hanging net (often used for climbing) which dominated the stage. The net, together with red drapery, was to evoke the context of the Renaissance combat atmosphere as if menhir sculptures, made of parts of broken Jewish table stones, were to resemble a cemetery. The iron net remained a central stage element for another production of *Richard III* that Ciller created for the Jokai Theatre in Komárno also directed by Huba. He also used pieces of red fabric, but the main stage elements were lustrous metallic barrels.

The width of the scenography work of Jozef Ciller, along with its contextual depth is, of course, visible also within his indoor realisations. Even there Ciller’s style is often stigmatised by his effort to create an open creative and playful space for actors, but at the same time, the stage juxtaposed the historical and ethical context of the productions and the message or the impact on the present.

For example, in one of his more recent productions, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* – for the Municipal Theatre Žilina in 2009, directed by Peter Gábor, the play was interpreted as a game. The stage was created with regards to the current understanding of the word sgraffiti. It consisted of a number of light, soft rubber panels painted with graffiti. The panels could be bent, jumped on, used as a bed; they created a ring-like space. Ciller did not omit his typical set props – chairs – and also the stage was ‘decorated’ with plastic bottles. The stage design for *The Midsummer Night’s Dream* produced in 1994 was pushed even further in the visual actualisation. The story was interpreted through a ‘drug fantasy’ and the power of financial success based on it. To emphasise it, Ciller used luxurious SUVs such as Suzuki and Mercedes-Benz (the golden Athenian youth used them to drive around). In contrast, the artisans were riding bikes to demonstrate their poverty. The wood was depicted as a white drapery, and Hypolite’s bed was purple and exaggerated in size. The symbolism of the story was expressed through a round mirror hanging above the stage that as a higher moral principle reflected the immoral actions of the characters. Ciller explained the modernising principle: ‘The only thing we had to do was to change the alchemy and the herbs for hard and soft drugs and the rest of it worked surprisingly precisely and clearly. That is why

⁵ From an interview with the stage designer by the author of the study. J. Ciller’s studio, 1. 11. 2015, The Slovak Chamber Theatre Martin.

⁶ From an interview with the stage designer by the author of the study. J. Ciller’s studio, 1. 11. 2015, The Slovak Chamber Theatre Martin.

⁷ The production of *King Lear* has an interesting history. It was successfully staged also at the Spiš Castle in Slovakia in 2003 with slight modification and it was also presented at the Summer Shakespeare Festival. A completely new auditorium and stage were built for this production.

⁸ Due to theft it had to be replaced by a new one.

we preferred such a solution – a group of people with two cars gets into a strange space where the conventions are destroyed, and everybody behaves differently.’ (Ciller and Dvořáková, 1994).⁹

On the other hand, most of Ciller’s productions are rather conservative – compared to the previously mentioned ones. For example, *The Twelfth Night of What You Will*, that was directed by Lubomír Vajdička at the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin in 1978. The stage was, in fact, a wooden foldable construction with a layer of concrete painted as if it was a fresco. It depicted the middle part of the painting called *April* from the cycle of allegoric paintings of months by a Renaissance painter Francesco del Cossa. The decoration was, in the beginning, covered by a cloth and without holes. The characters made their way through it when entering the stage: ‘They sawed openings in the fresco using real saws.’ (Štefko, 1978).

The stage design for *Othello* in 1998 could also be regarded as conservative, but only at first sight. The production was for the National Theatre in Prague, and Ivan Rajmont directed it. The beginning of the production was placed in a mock-up façade of a coffee shop at San Mark’s square. The square was created as a continuation of the interior of the theatre. Above, there was a golden drop-scene that emphasised the feeling of heaviness and oppression by a dangerous splendour. After the curtain and the mock-up façade were drawn up, the revolving platform was uncovered, and there were more symbolic set props such as a lighthouse, bed, bunker and so on. The base of this concept was an effort to create a stage environment providing for a constant fight over the island. In regard to this, *Othello*’s inner world was built on a constant impact of the army drill and system with which he was familiar. Even this type of scenography is dominated by an effort to create dynamic change, openness for great stage happenings and work with suggestions of hidden meanings or messages that gradually uncover the meanings.

So far Ciller’s last Shakespeare scenography in Bohemia, *Othello* (National Theatre Brno, 2014, directed by Rastislav Ballek) was also at first sight typical for Ciller and quite traditional. The stage was completely open, and even the technical elements were uncovered (side curtains, portals, ladders, with yellow cautionary coating and so on). Side balconies near the portals were also involved in the action. Geographic or other spatial locations were created only with minimal stage props along with the costumes created by Katarína Holková¹⁰. For example, *Desdemona*’s and *Othello*’s bed situated in the rear parts of the stage was limited mostly by light and microphones on stands. The army context was signaled by the army canvas or the army transportation boxes. Vladimír Čech, a theatre critic stated: ‘The production unfolds on a bare black stage that provides a deep rift in the deepest entrails. This universal simplicity is emphasised by oversailing footlights that created a timeless stage.’ (ČÁP 2016). Uncovering the back and side areas of the stage was first of all supposed to refer to the atmosphere of the theatre productions from the times of Shakespeare namely by allusive work with the ground plan of this theatre. Ciller maintained the Renaissance expression by ‘opening’ the Elizabethan outside stage area using balconies as another element included in the plot (Matějka, 2014).

Another type of ‘playful’ use of the elements with Renaissance meanings is present in the production *Romeo and Juliet* (Jokai Theatre Komárno, 2017, direction: Martin Huba). The story is visually placed into a Renaissance Ferrara in Italy using a part of a fresco called *Allegory of April – Triumph of Venus*, specifically the detail called *The Garden of Love*, by an Italian Renaissance painter Francesco del Cossa. The parts of the details were in the form of a reproduction:¹¹

The reproduction of the fresco was applied on both sides of the textile-made portals, and the upper part of the fresco was applied to the prospect. A contrapuntal portal enclosed the side curtains with a depiction of sky and stars. All the spaces used table constellations and stage building elements in a darker olive green colour that represented the area for a feast, an entrance into the interior rooms of both the enemy families, Julia’s bed, the tomb and so on. The lighting varied and made the side curtains greyish or even black, but the basic olive green colour was derived from the colouring of the fresco. The

⁹ Ciller did not use specific Renaissance elements in the productions of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1985) and *Coriolanus* (1997) directed by Roman Polák at the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin. He only divided the space vertically. He applied similar approach to the productions of *Troilus and Cressida* (1986) directed by Zdeněk Kaloč at the National Theatre in Brno and *Henry IV* (2002) directed by Peter Gábor at the Moravian Theatre in Olomouc.

¹⁰ It was a combination of contemporary, army, historical (allusions on carnivals in Venice, Africa, England and similar) costumes.

¹¹ The fresco is part of the cycle of twelve months painted on the walls of Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara in Italy. Cossa painted only three of them.

lights emphasised the gloominess or tragedy of the scenes or on the other hand their merry or loving dimension (Inštitutorisová, 2017b).

The introduction and the end of the production were devoted to a skittle pins play and the feast on a long table with a white cloth. In the beginning, there were glasses, bottles and bowls with fruits that the characters ate. In the end, the table cloth was spread over the table adversely and in its symbolic dimension referred to the last supper of Jesus and his disciples, e.g. the sacrifice of the innocent.

In the production of Antony and Cleopatra (The National Theatre in Brno 1999, direction Ivan Rajmont) Ciller used other principles of the Elizabethan Theatre space:

‘He gains similar possibilities to the vertically divided stage of the Elizabethan theatre. He opened a smaller scene in the background parts of the stage that was elevated to various heights according to the requisites of the storyline. They even outgrow the Polyekran vision although it might have inspired Ciller’s approach.’ (Pražan, 1999).

From the creative handling, for example, with the portal as a principle, we could mention the production of *The Taming of the Shrew* in Zlín (Theatre of the Working People Gottwaldov¹² 1972, direction: Svatopluk Skopal). Ciller placed the decorations between the two side portals and restricted the stage but at the same time he drew it closer to the audience – precisely according to the purpose and functions of the Elizabethan Theatre space. Among the scenographies for Shakespeare, there are also some in which Ciller worked only with pieces of furniture from the Renaissance period. For example, in the scenography for *Cymbeline* in 1995 directed by Rajmonta for The National Theatre in Prague, in which the direct carrier of the Renaissance expression became a chair, a bed and so on.¹³

Ciller created scenic designs for *The Merry Wives of Windsor* two times - once at the National Theatre in Brno (2001) and once at the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava (2017). They were both directed by Peter Mikulík. Both productions expressed the Shakespearean Renaissance atmosphere mainly through historicizing costumes (Zbořilová 2001, Bartošová 2002)¹⁴ and Ciller brought the period morphology with a panorama of the Windsor city. In Brno, it was in drawing and in Bratislava it was in the form of maquettes. In Brno, the critics commented: A simple stage made of a pale wood has a system of small theatre curtains running along the whole width. Above the small curtains, there was a panorama drawing of the city. The stage was empty except for some benches that could be rearranged...’ (Mareček, 2002). In the Bratislava production Ciller reduced the number of wooden benches to two benches. Other stage properties such as the basket, wooden bath remained. Such a solution helped the director to focus on the work with the actors and their interpretation of the play. The system of the small curtains allowed fast changes of the acts. The stage area behind the curtains was used only rarely, but the characters entered from behind the curtains as if from the exterior, from the city of Windsor. The space behind was used at the end when the other characters haunted Falstaff.

Ciller also used a similar space alignment as a theme in another production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin directed by Matúš Ol’ha (2003). He chose a detail from the panorama of the city, enlarged the facade of one of the houses and made it the core principle of the space arrangement. There were three entrances to the area of the stage through the doors of wardrobes. Tablecloths or curtains defined them, and they represented both the exteriors or interiors of houses. Laundry lines enforced the homy feeling of the space. Ciller used only a small detail from the Windsor period architecture in the production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* directed by Emil Horváth ml. in 1998 for the Slovak National Theatre. He left the whole stage empty except for an enormous structure of a Windsor house with a similar layout to the Elizabethan Shakespeare stage. The structure revolved, and parts of the house belonged to the family of Fords and the other part to the Page family. As a way to further define the spaces, they were lit whether it was an indoor or outdoor activities and sometimes there were also projections of clouds, Moon etc. on the horizon or Renaissance pieces of furniture such as a table, armchair, wardrobe and similar. The first scenography for *The Merry Wives*

¹² The present name of the city is Zlín.

¹³ In regards to another extensive topic of Ciller’s work – his use of symbols and signs – we could talk about various types of spheres (also, for example, a light circle) and its meanings. In the scenography for *Cymbeline* in 1995 directed by Rajmonta for The National Theatre in Prague the sphere was used for fortune telling, reflecting, reminding of the fate, bounding and so forth....

¹⁴ The paraphrased reviews concern the production in Brno.

Ciller created was in 1996 at the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra together with Peter Bzúch as the director. The central concept was an interior of a Renaissance type provincial pub that also became the house of both of the families (Borčín, 1996).

Conclusion

Jozef Ciller, in his interpretations of the plays of W. Shakespeare, is not only interested in transferring symbols of Elizabethan theatre straightforward or allusively into specific solutions. The spirit of the Renaissance period is present in all of those scenographies and in that sense they are different, and they are not only visually appealing, they speak about a Renaissance man as a humanistic ideal. Ciller uses Renaissance (theatre and non-theatre) elements as motives, but he maintains an awareness about the Renaissance spirit and the greatness of human beings.

Jozef Ciller reminds us of the human incorrigibility that has been present throughout history to the present day and emphasises openness to the actors and characters that they represent. Ciller does not condemn human beings in his theatre. He doesn't curse them but helps them show the depth of the apocalypse and evil in such a way that the human beings should not only forgive themselves but should also understand which side to pick.

The understanding is of course mainly addressed to the audience. The directors as such have influenced Ciller's scenography for Shakespeare, Peter Scherhauser, Evald Schorm, Jerzy Grotowski or through Magical Realism with the belief that the stories can often be much better defined by reality than by long philosophy tractates (Ciller and Brezina, 1989).

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