

# VIAGGI PER SCENE IN MOVIMENTO

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## VIAGGI PER SCENE IN MOVIMENTO

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**Journeys  
through Changing Landscapes**

**Literature, Language, Culture  
and their Transnational Dislocations**

edited by  
Carla Dente and Francesca Fedi

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## GENERAL EDITOR PREFACE

The transnational dimension of literature and research in the humanities has increasingly come into focus over recent years, selecting texts and authors and producing new scholarship that promotes dialogue across disciplines, times and boundaries. This series of research books intends to offer a channel for valuable work in this field: it will publish new writings in English, in Italian and in other European languages in areas such as transnational literature, history, language translation and linguistics, theatre and performance, political and cultural studies, history and dissemination of books and ideas. The investigations will suggest a rich web of itineraries and exchanges which have triggered a range of creative interventions in the cultural field, stimulating also the reflections of researchers in order to account for the complexity of cultural and literary phenomena. The emphasis, then, will be explicitly on movements and transformation of stories, texts and ideas across time and space with the aim at throwing new light on some problematic issues within a variety of cultural paradigms, while inviting an integrated approach to the understanding of their meanings and mechanisms.

Carla Dente



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PLEASE, CONTINUE (HAMLET):  
SHAKESPEARE ON THE MOVE

*Sara Soncini*

With their unparalleled record for global circulation as international cultural capital, Shakespeare's plays undoubtedly provide an ideal site for exploring the way in which meanings are produced, circulated and validated in our increasingly diasporic public sphere. This perception has instigated some of the more exciting critical and creative engagements with Shakespeare over the past two decades or so, and still continues to trigger innovative interventions in transnational cultural production. In this essay I draw attention to an exemplary case in this ongoing debate, focussing on a very recent artistic response to the 'mobility turn' that seems particularly significant for the way it taps, at once, into the mobility which is intrinsic to the field of performance, and into the ability of Shakespeare as a highly mobile signifier to act as a 'cultural circuit facilitating motion', in Stephen Greenblatt's apposite formulation (Greenblatt 2010: 5).

As already suggested by its title, *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* is a theatre project in which the cross-cultural transmission and transmissibility of *Hamlet* – the leading globe-trotter in the Shakespearean canon<sup>1</sup> – become fully embedded in the creative mechanism, engendering an all-pervasive, structural unfixeness that deeply destabilizes conventional notions of textuality and performativity, authorship and cultural authority. I will begin with a brief account of the creative process and then move on to consider the ways in which *Hamlet*, itself also a play about mobility and travelling, has been refunctioned as a performative device that compellingly fore-

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most iconic tributes to *Hamlet* as the play that best encapsulates Shakespeare's planetary spread is the recent 'Globe to Globe' project, a touring production that premiered on the Globe Theatre stage on 23 April 2014, marking exactly 450 years since Shakespeare's birth, and then embarked on a two-year tour to every country in the world before returning to the company's London home on 23 April 2016, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death.

grounds the highly mobile relationship between texts, textuality and performance in our age of global flows.

## On the road to *Hamlet*

*Please, Continue (Hamlet)* is the brainchild of Yan Duyvendak and Roger Bernat, two well-known exponents of contemporary performance art. Born in Holland but currently based in Geneva, Duyvendak began his career as a visual artist; this project was his first move into theatrical territory, marking also the beginning of his collaboration with Roger Bernat, who studied painting and architecture before training as a theatre director and dramatist in Barcelona. The two theatre-makers describe themselves on their respective web sites as creators not of plays, but of concepts that require the audience's active participation in order to become realized as performance.<sup>2</sup> Their joint projects are envisaged as a way to restore to the theatre experience the original civic function it had in the Greek *polis*; by breaching the divide between the *private* space of the auditorium and the *public* arena of the stage, they specifically aim to counter the growing privatization of the public sphere. This form of emancipation, they insist, is best achieved by offering to the audience's view not a theatrical representation of the public sphere, but an interactive experience where spectators are simultaneously called upon to exercise and reflect on their power to act as political subjects.<sup>3</sup>

Reflecting these intents, *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* is not a play but an itinerant (and still ongoing) performance piece in which Shakespeare is specifically mobilized in order to strengthen the participatory quality of the production and enable the audience to engage critically with the experience they are put through: in this case, that of a legal process or, more precisely, a criminal trial in which

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://rogerbernat.info/en/roger-bernat-4/>, accessed on 4-12-2015, and [www.duyvendak.com/index.php?/performances/introl](http://www.duyvendak.com/index.php?/performances/introl), accessed on 11-11-2015.

<sup>3</sup> 'Please, Continue (Hamlet): Press Kit (English)', p. 5, [www.duyvendak.com/index.php?/perfos-vip/please-continue-hamlet/](http://www.duyvendak.com/index.php?/perfos-vip/please-continue-hamlet/), accessed on 13-10-2015; further references are given in the text with the abbreviation *EPK*.

Hamlet stands accused of having murdered Polonius. The other two Shakespearean characters who are brought to the bar, Ophelia as the plaintiff and Gertrude as the only eyewitness to the crime, are played by actors, but the trial is conducted by a real judge, recruited from the local court in each town where the performance takes place, and the same holds true for the prosecutor, the defence counsel, the psychiatric expert, the bailiff and the clerk, whereas the final verdict is passed by a jury chosen by lot among the members of the audience.

The first trial took place in Geneva in November 2011. Since then, over 120 trials have been held in more than fifty cities, large and small, all across Europe, and in a number of different languages: French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Polish, Catalan, Flemish, Portuguese, though notably not English. Each time, the trial is carried out in accordance with the criminal law procedures that are in force within the relevant national jurisdiction. This *Hamlet* has usually been staged in theatre venues, but occasionally local courts of justice or other extra-theatrical spaces have also been used. This is the case, for example, of the Italophone version of the format. The production made its debut in October 2013 in Lugano, in Switzerland's Italian region, then toured through Italy between August and October 2014, calling at theatre festivals in Andria (Castel dei Mondì), Rome (Short Theatre), Prato (Contemporanea) and Cagliari (Approdi); its latest appearance to date was in November 2015 at Milan's Unicredit Pavillion, a newly-inaugurated multi-purpose building that had just been presented to the city as the international banking group's gift of 'a vital place for discussion, participation and experimentation' designed to 'facilitate interaction between the languages of economics, culture and art'.<sup>4</sup> Honouring its titular promise, *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* is still currently on tour, with forthcoming performances announced in Aalborg and Athens. Of late, moreover, the format has gone extra-European, reaching Rio de Janeiro and Recife in Brazil, while a Japanese version is also in the pipeline.

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.unicreditgroup.eu/en/press-medial/press-releases/2015/inaugurato-a-milano-unicredit-pavillion.html](http://www.unicreditgroup.eu/en/press-medial/press-releases/2015/inaugurato-a-milano-unicredit-pavillion.html), accessed on 1-04-2016.

Intriguingly, the initial impulse for this pan-European, and indeed by now global, *Hamlet* was extrinsic to Shakespeare. *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* was triggered by the shock and outrage felt by its creators when they read the court records of the trials of suspect terrorists in Guantanamo Bay detention centre – ‘a mockery of justice’, is how Duyvendak bluntly puts it.<sup>5</sup> The two artists contemplated the possibility of doing a play out of an edited version of the Guantanamo transcripts, but the idea was quickly waved aside: a theatrical reproduction of the military trials, they felt, would sit uncomfortably with their creative approach and its ethical-political underpinnings. It is from there, however, that the project gained the working title of *Please, Continue*: this was the exhortation incessantly repeated by the American military tribunal to detainees who arguably ‘hadn’t got much to say’ (*OT*: 94).

A different possibility materialized for Bernat and Duyvendak when a friend who worked as a lawyer slipped them a preliminary investigation file concerning one of his cases, a murder committed in a dismal suburban area of Marseille mired in poverty and alcohol abuse. On reading the evidence contained in the case file, the theatre-makers formed a completely different opinion about the incident: whereas Bernat saw a sound case for criminal conviction, Duyvendak pleaded the extenuating circumstance of the defendants’ socially-induced intellectual limits. The two artists found their disagreement promising: it would be very interesting, they agreed, to put a theatre audience through the same experience; to turn spectators into active co-participants in a truth-seeking process and make them aware of the inescapable subjectivity and even arbitrariness of human judgment.

It was only at this point that Shakespeare actually came into play (pun intended). In order to avoid the pitfalls of the reality-TV effect that would inevitably derive from the on-stage simulation of an actual murder case, Bernat and Duyvendak opted for a blatant

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<sup>5</sup> This is from ‘*Please, Continue (Hamlet): On Tour*’, Duyvendak’s tour diary published on the occasion of the 100th trial (Montreuil, 23 November 2014), p. 94; available at [www.duyvendak.com/index.php?perfos-vip/please-continue-hamlet/](http://www.duyvendak.com/index.php?perfos-vip/please-continue-hamlet/), accessed on 13-10-2015. Further references are given in the text with the abbreviation *OT*; all translations from French are mine.

hybridization of fact and fiction. Paradoxical as this may sound, they resolved that the best way to provide an authentic experience would have to be by overtly acknowledging the fundamental imbrication of the real and the simulated. They initially considered *Othello*, because of the contemporary resonance of the theme of race, but eventually settled on *Hamlet* and the episode, in III.4, where Hamlet stabs Polonius hiding behind an arras in Gertrude's closet. With only minor adjustments, they realized, Hamlet's 'rash and bloody deed' (III.iv.26)<sup>6</sup> could be turned into a legal case based on circumstantial evidence only, therefore a criminal trial in which the verdict would be entirely based on the inner conviction of the court and the jury. With the crime scene conveniently hidden from our gaze, and some of the more incriminating evidence provided by Shakespeare tactically withdrawn from us, it becomes harder to pinpoint Hamlet's motives and this opens up a multiplicity of possible scenarios, ranging from wilful and even premeditated murder (whether of Polonius or Claudius is irrelevant), to involuntary manslaughter, down to an insanity acquittal on account of substance abuse and/or the defendant's mental disorder (this Hamlet, too, is stalked by ghosts after his father's sudden death and his mother's hasty, incestuous marriage).

On the right path at last, Bernat and Duyvendak set about preparing the 'script' that the performers would have to work from, namely, the preliminary investigation file. The first dossier of evidence, in French, was put together with help from a judge from the Geneva court of justice and a lawyer from the local bar association.<sup>7</sup> Currently, there are nine different language versions of the case file on the move, each of them the result of the collaboration between the theatre-makers, a linguist and a new team of legal experts. My observations here are based on the Italian version, a few copies of which were handed out to the audience during an interval in the trial at Prato's Teatro Fabbricone, on 28 September 2014. The materials produced in this lengthy dossier – over sixty single-spaced A4 pages – include a police report; a number of maps and photos of the crime scene (some of them rather gruesome); seven witness state-

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<sup>6</sup> References to *Hamlet* are taken from Shakespeare 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Respectively, François Paychère and Simon Ntha (*OT*: 41).

ments signed by the main ‘actors’ who will then appear in court (with the exception of Claudius, who quickly flees the country, they are all heard twice); the report of the preliminary hearing, where Hamlet pleads guilty to involuntary manslaughter, claiming that he really thought there was a rat behind the curtain, that he had no intention whatsoever of killing Ophelia’s father and no reason to believe that Polonius might be hiding in his mother’s bedroom; and the defendant’s committal to trial. These legal transcripts are followed by the autopsy report; a review of the forensic evidence by a prosecution-retained expert; the report of the court-appointed psychiatric expert; and finally, a report issued by a rat removal company confirming that this modern-day Elsinore is indeed overrun by rats, as stated in Hamlet’s and Gertrude’s version of events.

As should be clear from my description, the ‘dramatic scenario’<sup>8</sup> that serves as a pretext for *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* is the outcome of a double process of adaptation: on the one hand, the real-life incident is reshaped in accordance with the Shakespearean story; on the other, the plot of *Hamlet* is made to fit into the court case, leading to a stripped-down, cheapened version of this quintessential literary myth. By way of example, here is an excerpt from Gertrude’s account of ‘what happens in *Hamlet*’ – to parody J. Dover Wilson’s classic analysis of the play’s complex action – in her first statement to the police:

On 6 July, Claudius and I decided to throw a party at our home to celebrate our wedding. We’d married the day before, on 5 July. On the morning of 6 July, around noon, we had a drink at the local bar, then we took a bus to do some shopping for the party. At the supermarket we bumped into Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, my son’s friends. Claudius talked to them, told them to keep an eye on Hamlet. He’s not been quite alright since his father died; he’s letting himself go.

Then we saw Polonius. He told us that Hamlet was upset because of a love story with Ophelia. He was positive about it. He said he could prove it.

Polonius offered to set up a meeting between his daughter and Ham-

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<sup>8</sup> As according to the definition given in *EPK*: 4.



let at the bar and arrange things so we could overhear their conversation. He had everything figured out.

He ordered Ophelia to return Hamlet's love letters. She did. Hamlet went ballistic, he called her all sorts of names.

We took a bus back at 3.30 p.m. and had a few beers at home while we waited for our shopping to be delivered. I did a little cleaning.

Then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern came over. They'd seen Hamlet in the street with some other friends. They said he looked better, and was very excited because his friends were preparing a show for me and Claudius. We were glad to hear that.

Claudius and I went to the bar with Polonius to see if his plan worked. But from what we saw the problem definitely wasn't Ophelia.

I went home with the others to tidy up a bit and get changed.

Then, at about 8.30 p.m., we all went to the bar, except Hamlet who said he didn't feel like going out. We came back around midnight and had dinner.

Then Hamlet's friends put on this show. It was ok, only at some point Claudius felt sick, they had to stop the thing and he ran to the toilet to throw up. I gave him some help. He fell asleep in the toilet and I left him there. . .<sup>9</sup>

A few weeks before the trial is due, the investigation file is sent to the court and the legal team so they can study the case and build their line of argument. The actors, too, are instructed to base their performances on the evidence and the details provided in the investigation dossier. But neither the legal nor the theatrical players rehearse their parts. The performance – lasting roughly three hours – is completely improvised and the only form of directorial intervention is in the management of time: each 'actor' and each part of the trial is given a fixed number of minutes. With a sharp departure from the real-life situation that is being reproduced, the justice machine is here made to operate on a very tight schedule: twenty minutes for Hamlet's hearing, fifteen each for Ophelia and Gertrude, ten for the final summations.

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<sup>9</sup> Preliminary investigation file, unpublished, 28-29 (translation mine).

Once the hearings are concluded, the names of the jurors are called and the court retires for deliberation. Although only a limited number of spectators actually have a say in the verdict, a corrective is introduced to secure collective participation. As they enter the auditorium, audience members are handed a small notepad and advised to write down everything that seems relevant because they might eventually be called for jury service. The same invitation is repeated by the judge at the beginning of the trial. In this way, the entire audience is positioned as an adjudicating body throughout the proceedings, regardless of whether or not their names are drawn and they actually end up in the jury room.

Following the reading of the verdict, the performance closes with a brief overview of Hamlet's legal odyssey. In Prato, Duyvendak stepped onto the stage to inform us that ninety-two trials had been held to date, resulting in forty-one acquittals and forty-eight verdicts of guilty, with prison sentences varying between eight months and twelve years. On that occasion, Hamlet was sentenced to seven years: one of the harshest verdicts ever and a rather unexpected outcome after the brilliant final summation of the Defence.

With their own final summation of the stage history of *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*, the theatre-makers place each individual trial in the context of a wide-ranging investigation into the administration of justice in our purportedly 'united' Europe. The ambitious project envisaged by Bernat and Duyvendak involves setting the entire European judicial system *vis-à-vis* the same criminal case with a view to measuring variability, and the *Hamlet* scenario, with its unique trans-national consistency, provides them with an ideal litmus test for their nomadic experiment. In parallel, the manipulation of the Shakespearean *fabula* is also instrumental to the creation of a 'porous dramaturgy', a phrase I borrow from Duška Radosavljević's insightful account of the changing face of contemporary theatre. In her study, Radosavljević uses the notion of 'porosity' to refer to an emerging brand of theatre work 'which has interactivity and/or co-creativity in its structure and which seeks to produce a community between the audience and the makers' (Radosavljević 2013: 191), and she sees a prime motor of theatrical innovation in the purposeful reconfiguration of the relationship between text and performance that animates the contemporary scene. A similar intent is clearly discernible in *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*, a project that, in

mobilizing Shakespeare's play, creates a powerful synergy between the dual meaning inhering the term: 'putting in motion', and 'marshalling for action'.

### ***Hamlet* mobilized**

In the itinerant tribunal devised by Bernat and Duyvendak, the three actors who play Shakespearean characters wear a yellow T-shirt that blatantly advertises their separateness from the extra-theatrical reality of the court professionals.



Fig. 1. Roger Bernat & Yan Duyvendak, *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*: Prato, Teatro Fabbricone, 2014 ©Ilaria Costanzo.

During the trial, however, the boundaries between 'stage' and 'life' are constantly held up for scrutiny and shown to be far from watertight. This key move in the theatre-makers' effort to empower or emancipate the audience is to a large extent enabled, or at least made more effective, by the format's reliance on the *Hamlet* scenario.

In the performance I attended at Prato's Fabbricone – but also elsewhere, according to reviews and to Duyvendak's diary of the European tour – the closing arguments of the prosecutor and the Defence were outstanding performances of rhetoric and histrionics; as such, they stood in sharp contrast to the colourless display of not-acting put on by the professional performers as they brought to life Shakespeare's characters. This trading of identities

was ironically emphasized by the non-actors' flaunted awareness of the sheer theatricality of their 'role'. When the prosecutor argued that Hamlet should be charged with wilful murder because he thought he was actually stabbing his usurper-uncle in the Queen's closet (which is more or less what we are led to infer from the scene in Shakespeare), the counsel for the Defence dubbed this argument, this swapping of Claudius for Polonius behind a curtain, a veritable *coup de théâtre*. For their part, the ostensibly fictional Shakespearean characters made frequent trespasses on the domain of the real, for instance by openly acknowledging the presence of the audience and sometimes even interacting with this further extra-theatrical participant in the trial.

While peculiar to the Prato production, these unscripted slippages were clearly encouraged – and at the same time intensified – by the customary stage arrangement (Ill.2) whereby the court is up-stage facing the audience, the Defence and Prosecution are on the sides, whereas actors during hearings stand with their back to the audience: a positioning that seems expressly designed to prompt the question of which of the two is the real 'show'.



Fig. 2. Roger Bernat & Yan Duyvendak, *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*: Marseille, Tribunal de commerce, 2012 ©Sylvain Couzinet-Jacques.

The reversal of prerogatives becomes even more blatant when the members of the legal profession featuring in the trial are ‘big shots’, therefore public and – as often happens – also television personalities. In Rome, for example, the tribunal was presided over by Giancarlo De Cataldo, a judge at the Court of Assizes but also a renowned crime fiction writer, thanks to his best-selling novel *Romanzo criminale* and the highly popular series drawn from it, as well as a recent candidate to televisual stardom as a member of the jury in the literary talent show *Masterpiece*. In the Rome courtroom, De Cataldo was flanked by another legal celebrity, the public prosecutor Paolo Ielo. Ielo was among the protagonists of the so-called ‘Clean Hands’ campaign, the nationwide investigation into public corruption that swept through the political establishment in 1990s Italy; Gherardo Colombo, who starred in the Milan performance, was an even more prominent member of the same inquisitorial team and has been a regular guest on primetime political talk shows after his resignation from the bench.<sup>10</sup>

Another paradigmatic attestation of the boundary permeability that Shakespeare contributes to generate comes from an episode reported in the tour diary. During a trial in Montreuil, Ophelia was overcome with emotion after her counsel inquired about her present feelings for the melancholy prince. When the Defence berated her, claiming that her tears were just for show and that her performance was being blatantly stage-managed by her counsel, Ophelia vehemently denied all charges of make-believe: she was not crying, she insisted (everybody could see she was); and she was not an actress (while her T-shirt proclaimed the opposite in large block capitals). Glossing on the episode, Duyvendak observes that Ophelia’s manifestly false statement is also paradoxically true: this Ophelia both *is* and *is not* an actress because what the situation requires of

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<sup>10</sup> Celebrity magistrates have appeared in other national versions of *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*: in Lodz, for example, the presiding judge, Anna Wesolowska, was ‘a TV celebrity known for her starring role in a Polish TV court-show’ (Rasmus 2014). A member of Zona K, the local partner in the Milan production, revealed that the indication to aim high came from the theatre-makers themselves (Valentina Picariello, private email to author, 24-01-2016).

her is a performance of not-acting, which is, of course, the ultimate form of simulation (*OT*: 46).

Akin to the metatheatrical remarks made by the legal players in Italy, Ophelia's self-defence in Montreuil sheds light on the dual function fulfilled by Shakespeare in *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*. The dramatic scenario effects a deep imbrication of the simulated and the real, and at the same time holds explanatory power with regard to it: both a trial and a stage production are live events in which truth or meaning are established through the act of witnessing a range of live performances. Indeed, as we are aptly reminded by an authorial aside, the epistemological primacy of live, embodied performance over recorded, textual evidence is probably even stronger in the legal than in the theatrical domain. Before they are handed some copies of the preliminary investigation file during a break in the performance, audience members are warned by Duyvendak that in a real-life criminal trial the jury would not have access to the written evidence collected there, and would have to base its judgement exclusively on evidence rendered orally in a live situation.

In Prato, the artist went on to remark that the disclosure of the pre-text for the trial was an advantage granted by the theatrical nature of the experience in which we were taking part. Through this specification, the performance effectively drew attention to a further, meaningful aspect of the immersive experience we were being put through. The audience's previous knowledge of *Hamlet* – on page, stage, screen, or even simply as a shared cultural trope – is by no means irrelevant to their perception of the legal proceedings. As they watch the trial unravel, spectators find themselves comparing the version(s) of events that emerge from the hearings with the level of information supplied by Shakespeare's play. From my individual vantage point – that of a researcher who habitually traffics in Shakespeare – I soon became conscious of the very scant amount of truth about Hamlet's case that was allowed to surface in this theatrical courtroom, and therefore of the very limited range of evidence on which we were being asked to base our judgement. At the same time, the extent to which my apprehension of the legal process was conditioned by my previous memory of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* led me to reflect on the prejudice – the individual and cultural 'script' – that we inevitably bring to our assessment of the actions and behaviours of others. Clearly, these perceptions vary

individually, and are directly related to each spectator's degree of familiarity with the play.

This also applies to another aspect pertaining to the hermeneutic value of the Shakespearean palimpsest, namely, the play's extensive engagement with the related themes of truth, justice, performance, and mobility. Just like Bernat and Duyvendak's theatre project, *Hamlet*, too constructs the domain of the real and the domain of theatre as fundamentally coterminous. When Duyvendak describes his immersive piece as a compressed, accelerated version of a real-life trial, and claims that it functions as a mirror of reality (*OT*: 20), one is immediately reminded of Hamlet's 'mirror up to nature' (III.ii.22) in his advice to the players but also, crucially, of the problematic light cast by Shakespeare's metatheatres on stage mimesis and its epistemological underpinnings: Hamlet relies on the play-within-the-play as a means to establish the truth about his father's death, but Shakespeare makes it clear that the sense of inner conviction he eventually reaches about Claudius's culpability is the result of a subjective, biased reading of his uncle's angered reaction at being publically presented with the spectacle of a king's assassination at the hands of a wicked nephew, rather than brother. In terms of plot, the most immediate consequence of Hamlet's cognitive investment in the Mousetrap is his inconsiderate killing of Polonius in Gertrude's closet: a pernicious chain of causation which is also underscored through the forensic overtones in Hamlet's evidential use of the contrasting portraits of Claudius and his father. Equally enmeshed in ambivalence are the actual producers of the immersive experience on which the Danish prince pivots his truth-seeking mission: as travelling actors, Hamlet's prime instruments of justice are statutorily connoted as doubly social suspect; further reinforcing this culturally-induced perception, their vagrancy is depicted in the play not only as potentially causing, but also as directly caused by, legal trouble.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Upon their arrival in Elsinore, in II.2, we learn that the players have been banned from their permanent residence in the city on account of a recent insurrection, with a possible allusion to the Essex rebellion of 1601 and the role (unwittingly) played by Shakespeare's company in it.

Though not expressly acknowledged by Bernat and Duyvendak, these thematic resonances must not have been irrelevant to their choice of *Hamlet* among a range of other possible dramatic palimpsests. The critical self-reflexivity that pervades Shakespeare's tragedy significantly adds to the 'porosity' of *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*, contributing to a heightened awareness of the dramaturgical mechanism and its implications, enabling audience members to at once *be* the theatre and interrogate it. But it is also on account of the status it has achieved through a centuries-long process of transmission, reception and reproduction that *Hamlet* becomes a strategic partner in Bernat and Duyvendak's project, bringing an enlarged cultural significance to the artists' inquiry into issues of agency and authority in the legal field. As an epitome of textuality and an emblem of 'high' or literary culture, *Hamlet* lends itself particularly well to turn the spotlight onto the relationship between writing and enactment, the struggle for authority that has historically underpinned this relationship, and the changing ways of authoring and authorizing cultural production that have been brought about by the onset of the transnational paradigm.

### **Text and performance: whose Shakespeare?**

In the tour diary, Duyvendak describes the role of *Hamlet* within the project as that of a 'given', a pre-text that becomes increasingly less relevant as the audience realize that what they are watching is not a version of Shakespeare's play but a real trial taking place in the here and now of the theatrical courtroom. Already advertised by the bracketing of '*Hamlet*' in the title, this emancipation of live performance from the written text and its supposed control over its meanings is ironically paraded through the consistent trivialization of the tragic plot borrowed from Shakespeare. I have already hinted above at the downsizing of the *Hamlet* 'myth' in the preliminary investigation, but one moment in the Prato trial offered an even more eloquent – *qua* embodied – token of the playful provocation informing this Shakespearean reproduction. While intent on proving his client's innocence on grounds of mental illness, the defence counsel asked Hamlet whether he had ever contemplated the possibility that his father might have been murdered by Claudius;



at which the actor replied that yes, he was indeed ‘having some doubts’ at the time, thereby enacting a spectacular send-off of the tragedy’s defining topic and, with it, of the rivers of critical ink spilt on Hamlet’s hesitation.

On one level, then, the title’s entreaty to ‘please, continue’ while *Hamlet* is demoted to parenthetical position is legible as a clarification call for the contemporary stage to take leave, once and for all, from text-driven, ‘dramatic’ or ‘literary’ theatre – from our culturally-rooted, but historically and ideologically determined notion of the written text as the true repository of meaning, and of performance as simply ‘a means for echoing meanings that exist elsewhere’, in William B. Worthen’s lucid formulation (Worthen 1995: 19). The very fact that none of these Hamlets speaks English seems to gesture in this direction. While the more immediate reason advanced by Bernat and Duyvendak for their eschewal of Shakespeare’s native tongue is the incompatibility of the format with the judicial process in common law countries (*OT*: 47-49), the performance of *Hamlet* ‘without his language’ – to quote Dennis Kennedy’s pioneering work on Shakespeare’s transnational afterlife (Kennedy 1993) – also implicitly proclaims the production’s independence from the words that might be thought to have generated it. What is effected in or through *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*, however, is not a simple up-ending of cultural hierarchies, a one-way transfer of authority from text to performance. The mobilization of Shakespeare’s tragedy in Bernat and Duyvendak’s project involves a far more radical unsettling of the text/performance binary that also reverberates on the oppositional categorisations – original and copy, author and interpreter/translator, producer and receiver – that are traditionally used to describe cultural production.

In the press and publicity material for *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*, Duyvendak and Bernat are credited as the authors of the concept, while for the multiple versions of the production currently on tour they share responsibility with the actors – a different cast for each language, and sometimes even for national variants of the same language<sup>12</sup> and with the legal professionals, who always change

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<sup>12</sup> The project, for example, has two different Germanophone casts – for productions in Germany and German Switzerland, on the one hand, and

from one performance to the next. With such a plethora of fathers to be reckoned with, Hamlet's punning complaint about being 'too much in the sun' (I.ii.183) would sound quite to the point, and even more so given the extent to which this *Hamlet* is blatantly disengaged not only from the specific authority of the writer as embedded in the *drama* text, but is equally released from any kind of individualized authorial governance over the construction of the *performance* text.

Once the trial begins, the performers are left in full control of the proceedings. This applies to the actors, who are free to author their part on the basis of the *Hamlet* scenario, but even more to the non-actors, whose unpaid collaboration is vital to the production, and who are therefore given *carte blanche* to build their performance in accordance with their professional customs and tactical needs. Duyvendak himself playfully recognizes the 'absurd' (*OT*: 4) nature of a project predicated on an unconditional surrender of authorial prerogatives to the receiving end, leading to uncontrollable and essentially unpredictable outcomes. Indeed, his diary of the European tour is peppered with anecdotes about various mishaps along the way and invariably records the authors' powerlessness to prevent or fix them. The various instances of mutinous behaviour reported by the artist involve not only the 'masterless' legal players but also, revealingly, the hired cast of professional actors. During the first trial at the Wiener Festwochen, for example, the flat performances of the court personnel seemed to conspire with the intolerable heat in making the audience particularly restless; many people walked out in manifest irritation. When Duyvendak asked his actors to be 'a bit more theatrical', in the endeavour to hold the show together, they completely and deliberately disregarded his instructions, claiming that they had a right to play the game as they saw fit, and that their main goal was the outcome of the trial, not the success of the production (*OT*: 58).

And it is not just a matter of the individual license exercised by the players: space and place, too become active participants in actualizing the theatre-makers' concept. Each environment in which the trial takes place is saturated with meanings that interact with

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Austria, on the other.

the itinerant 'text' and contribute – whimsically at times – to determine its actual configuration. A prime contextual factor in this respect is the local legislation or, rather, the regimes of performance in which it becomes realized. These include the players' linguistic, kinetic and proxemic behaviour but also their appearance (the prescribed court attire, for one) as well as props and stage décor. Every unscripted detail can have a deep impact on the shape and outcome of the legal process. To give but one illustrative example, a defendant presented in court in handcuffs or behind a bullet-proof glass cage may be strongly prejudicial in a jury's determination of guilt. Another type of variation that the theatre-makers are particularly sensitive to is the very uneven degree of theatricality informing criminal law procedures in Europe. This aspect is seen by them as vital in that it can determine not only the verdict, but the very success and actual survival of the project: this *Hamlet*, Duyvendak concedes, will probably cease to 'continue' in German-speaking countries because the distinctly low-key mode of jurisprudence there makes for appallingly dull theatre (*OT*: 62).<sup>13</sup>

At the same time as it wholeheartedly embraces the radical instability of performance, however, Bernat and Duyvendak's project also asks us to consider the strange resilience of a 'text' which is patently no longer there as a script to prescribe or direct the production, yet continues to contribute to it in a meaningful way. The performances in which *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* becomes instantiated are not scripted, yet they are still related to a piece of writing, the case file, which is in turn rooted in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the ur-text of Western dramatic literature. The case file, for its part, is a far cry from the traditional notion of the drama text as a single, fixed and individually authored piece of writing: as pointed out above, it exists in multiple (and continually multiplying) versions prepared by as many teams of experts. Even more importantly, each of these 'scripts' becomes refashioned as performance material that is different with each individual production and that develops according to regimes of behaviour ungoverned by either Shakespeare's play or the investigation file, and to a large extent drawn from a

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<sup>13</sup> 'Inert' is the term used in Ralf Remshardt's review of the Berlin production (Remshardt 2015: 313).

cultural sphere which is not that of theatrical production. While these performances can still be said to move from a text, then, they blatantly defy description as a one-way 'translation' from page to stage of pre-existing meanings: this is a work in which the Shakespearean 'original' is continually referenced but intentionally lost.

Rather than through the commonplace binary of drama and performance, model and realization, the interaction between forms of textuality and modes of embodiment instantiated by *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* would seem to find a more accurate description as a 'pseudotranslation', a term that I borrow from Emily Apter's sweeping inquiry into the transnational/translational framework of contemporary writing. In *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Apter turns to a range of historical cases of fictitious or fraudulent translations and throws light on the wide-ranging implications of pseudo translation for a theory of cultural (re-)production. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, 'The Task of the Translator' (Benjamin 1968), and on Derrida's reading of it in 'Des Tours de Babel' (Derrida 1985), Apter classifies this 'scandalous' form of translation as 'a technology of replication that engineers textual afterlife without recourse to a genetic origin' (Apter 2006: 225), leading to a full-scale reconsideration of the generic distinction between original and copy and any attendant rhetoric of fidelity and/or essence.

Apter's definition felicitously captures the post-genetic, post-teleological and definitely post-fidelity stance of Bernat and Duyvendak's project and the thought-provoking cultural work it seeks to perform. If we may take this *Hamlet* to be celebrating the autonomization of performance, it is undeniable that this relocation of authority results in a proliferation of texts, rather than their supersession. In its radical open-endedness, *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* exists as the sum total of all its scenic embodiments, past and future, to which must be added a true panoply of related textual incarnations: the existing case files, the ones to be, but also, arguably, the subjective transcripts of individual trials that spectators are expressly encouraged to make. With its heightened translational quality, then, this production makes us acutely aware not so much of the demise of 'dramatic' theatre, as of the changing ways in which writing is being consumed on the contemporary stage. As a pseudotranslation of *Hamlet*, moreover, this theatre project invokes

a much more fluid, relational understanding of Shakespeare's 'textual condition', to borrow Jerome McGann's apposite formulation (McGann 1991). Casting a distinctly cross-cultural gaze on *Hamlet*, Bernat and Duyvendak are able to bring out the sheer adaptational quality of Shakespeare; in this respect, their project lends creative backing to the growing emphasis, in recent critical studies, on a relocation of 'his' cultural authority from a fixed corpus of poems and plays to 'an aggregated web of cultural forces and productions' (Lanier 2014: 27).<sup>14</sup> Adding yet another facet to its empowering 'porosity', *Please, Continue* immerses spectators in the dynamic cultural environment that goes by the name of 'Shakespeare': a highly mobile representational field where different lines of force interact, in largely unpredictable ways, with the trans-historical and trans-national community of users upon which (*Hamlet*) depends for its continued life.

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<sup>14</sup> The other essays in Huang-Rivlin (2014) offer a comprehensive picture of recent research in this area.

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