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Vladimir Vysotsky: A Hamlet with a Guitar instead of a Sword

Abstract

The study focuses on the re-enactment of the acting interpretation of the role of Hamlet based on the eponymous tragedy of William Shakespeare, as rendered by Vladimir Semyonovich Vysotsky (1938 – 1940), Russian actor, poet, and performer of his own songs, staged by the Moscow Theatre of Drama and Comedy on Taganka Square. The role is portrayed as what the history of the theatre reckons to be an extraordinary inherent linkage between the actor-poet and his role to which he was transfigured in his perception of society, even off stage. The study reflects on this merging in the light of the artist's personal relationship with his role, through his own quest for Shakespeare's interpretation in collaboration with the director, down to the final stage form of the production and its period meaning in artistic and historical-social contexts. The study provides an overview of numerous testimonies of the then critics and of the opinions of theatre scientists and theoreticians reflecting on Vysotsky's acting. It highlights innovative trends in acting and directorial approach which tied into the traditions of the 20th century Russian school of acting while modernising them with their own artistic methods. They have affected



the generations of other performers of Hamlet who, through theatre art, have reflected the transformations of Western culture for over four centuries.

Key words

William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Vladimir Semyonovich Vysotsky, Yuri Lyubimov, the Moscow Theatre of Drama and Comedy on Taganka Square, the Soviet era

It has been four hundred and fifteen years since William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616), English playwright and poet, wrote one of the world's most brilliant works of dramatic literature at the turn of 1603 – 1604, which is among the most staged and most translated theatre pieces in Western culture. For over four centuries, the story of the Prince of Denmark has been shedding light on changes and developments in the theatre, in the approach of its creators to its interpretation and to staging concepts, its reception by viewers or critics, whilst alerting to the transformation of both society and the values of Western culture. "Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is what the audience, critique, publishers, translators, readers have made of it. There are tens, hundreds, thousands of *Hamlets*..."¹ Over time, the main hero's character has been transformed into a symbol of his time. In his production,² contemporary Russian director Yuri Butusov had the actors (including the actress) alternate in the role of Hamlet. He claims that "Hamlet has long been a myth, not a human being. It is a spiritual substance, void of age or sex, of no weight or scent. He is among the main protagonists of the world culture, an eternal thinker, an eternal victim – Hamlet will remain a mystery forever. He is the one who challenges the era.

¹ BŽOCHOVÁ-WILD, J.: *Malé dejiny Hamleta*. [A Short History of Hamlet]. Bratislava : Slovenské národné divadlo a SLOVART, spol. s. r. o., 2007, p. 13.

² Teatr im. Lensoveta (Lensoviet Theatre), Petersburg, premiered on 22 December 2017.

Understanding Hamlet means understanding the era. (...)³

Hamlet became a witness of his time in one of the most important productions of the second half of the 20th century⁴ of the Moscow Theatre of Drama and Comedy on Taganka Square, with Vladimir Vysotsky (1938 – 1980), foremost Russian actor, poet, and performer of his own songs,⁵ in the lead role. Though loved both as a man and an artist by the people, he was banned and stifled by the leaders of the ruling political regime, because in his creation he would speak the truth about the regime, and in his lifetime, he was considered a symbol of the era, a "singing nerve of an era."⁶ The staging of Hamlet "has always been a barometer of Soviet society"⁷, and the theatre's chief director and artistic director Yuri Lyubimov was well aware of what Vysotsky as Hamlet would mean to the Soviet audience

³ BUTUSOV, Y. In ABAKSHONOK, N., TSAREVSKAYA, E. (eds.): *Zolotaya maska. Rossiyskaya nacionalnaya teatralnaya premiya i festival*. 25. [Festival programme booklet]. Moskva : Zolotaya maska. Rossiyskaya nacionalnaya teatralnaya premiya i festival, 2019, p. 45.

⁴ In 1977, the production was awarded Grand Prix de la critique for the best foreign performance at the Paris Festival d'Automne.

⁵ In 1976, Vysotsky was awarded Grand Prix at The Belgrade International Theatre Festival BITEF, for his rendition of Hamlet and in 1980, he was also awarded a prize at the Theatre Encounters Festival in Warsaw.

⁶ YEVTUSHENKO, Y.: Poyushchiy nerv nashey epokhi. In SAFRONOV, A. (ed.): *Vospominaniya Vladimira Vysotskogo*. Moskva : Sovetskaya Rossiya, 1989, p. 356.

⁷ TUROVSKAYA, M.: Hamlet: la mort est là, elle est à l'oeuvre. In PICON-VALLIN, B. (ed.): *Liubimov. La Taganka*. Paris : CNRS Éditions, 1997, p. 324. Cit. according to LINDOVSKÁ, N.: Příběh režiséra, příběh Taganky, příběh divadla a společnosti... In *Slovenské divadlo*, 1999, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 100.

of the 1970s. He has inspired and influenced a number of Hamlet generations to come, even beyond the borders of the time.

Vysotsky who performed Hamlet two hundred and twenty-one times in nine seasons, became one with him and slipped into the character: "Sometimes, it seems that it is not the actor rendering Hamlet, but rather the Prince of Denmark is being reincarnated in Vysotsky – actor, poet, menestrel."⁸ In the history of the theatre, such an intense connection between the actor and his role which merged into a single soul and body, with the bond persisting even off stage, has perhaps not been witnessed and, therefore, it deserves our attention today.

Lyubimov's production was premiered on 29 November 1971. It was a theatrical and social event and the fact that *Hamlet* was to be rendered by Vysotsky had been long spoken of.⁹ He was cast in the role after seven years of performing with the Taganka Theatre. For years, Vysotsky had been pleading Lyubimov to stage *Hamlet* with him in the title role. However, the stage director was reluctant to list the play in the repertory as he was unable "to see" Vysotsky in the lead role. Unless

⁸ LYUBOMUDROV, M.: Princ Gamlet i starshina Fedot Vaskov. In *Vechniy Leningrad*, 6 July 1972. Cit. according to KUZNETSOVA, E.: Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 86.

⁹ The premiere commenced with a fifty-minute delay, after bringing order in the auditorium, as the number of theatre-goers had by far exceeded the theatre seating capacity, despite that, many prospective visitors refused to leave.

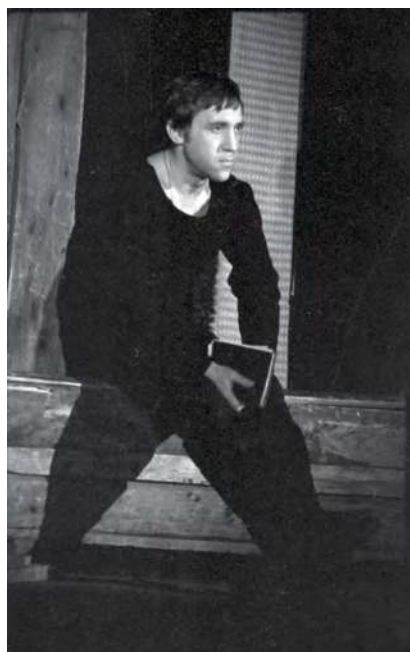
the stage director was able “to see” an actor in a role, he would not be cast in it. While Stanislavsky used to tell the actors “ne veryu” (“I don’t believe”), Lyubimov, for a change, would say “ne vizhu” (“I don’t see”).

Eventually, Lyubimov reached out for *Hamlet* because the State Department of Culture did not approve of his idea to stage a composition of several of Shakespeare’s plays. By that time, Vysotsky had gained experience and he demonstrated a wide range of expressive means of acting, he asserted himself as a distinctive artistic personality, a popular and controversial actor and poet, thereby offering suitable material for the portrayal of a contemporary Shakespearean hero. The governing bodies contested his cast and argued that Vysotsky was “an outlaw, not a prince.”¹⁰ Lyubimov defended his choice: “I’ve cast Vysotsky in the role of Hamlet. He’s a very earthly, humane actor. He’s all flesh and blood, right from the street. He’s popularity is far-reaching: from the physicists of Dubna research centre to vagrants. Which means that his acting must appeal to something in people’s inside...”¹¹

In Vysotsky’s acting biography this was only his second lead role, after Brecht’s Galileo Galilei in *Zhizn’ Galileya* [Life of Galileo]¹²: “Somehow, it turned out that someone who had been engaged in the

theatre as a largely comic actor – initially, I performed comic roles and sang all sorts of humorous songs with the guitar, because it’s possible in our theatre – was suddenly cast in the roles of Galileo and Hamlet. I don’t think I managed it all at once, but rather by the director watching me for a long time to see whether or not I could make it. There seem to be two reasons for this. For Yuri Lyubimov, the actor’s talent isn’t the most important thing, although the actor’s talent is important, too, but, above all, he’s interested in human personality,¹³ because: “In our theatre, an actor’s personality is more important than the role: an individual who performs is more intriguing, that is, what he wishes to say, what he comes up with – he’s not just an actor who’s put on a role like a costume.”¹⁴

The rehearsal process full of explorations and challenging experiments took almost a year (the first stage rehearsal took place on 11 January 1971). They kept on rehearsing for six hours a day. For example, there were twenty-two variants of the scene with the ghost of Hamlet’s father. Lyubimov made several modifications to the text – for example, he deleted the crowd scenes and Fortinbras was removed at the end



William Shakespeare: Hamlet. Vladimir Vysotsky. Direction Yuri Lyubimov. The Five-year Plan House of Culture in Leningrad. The Taganka Theatre tour, June 1972. Photo by Alexandra Ukladnikova. Oleg Vasin archives.

¹³ VYSOTSKY, V.: A TV interview of the programme head Mati Talvik with the author. Recorded on 18 May 1975. Tallin: Estonian television studio, 1975. (*Vladimir Vysotsky: Tallin – Moscow, 6-Disc Edition*). [DVD]. Moskva : Bomba Miuzik, 2006.

¹⁴ VYSOTSKY, V.: Dlya pesen net granits. [An interview for the French broadcasting of the All-Union Radio]. November 1977. In *Muzikalnaya zhizn*. 1986, No. 24. Cit. according to TOKÁR, M. (ed. and transl.): *Taký bol Vysockij*. Bratislava : Obzor 1990. p. 51.

¹⁰ MIKHALOVA, E.: *V granitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva : Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 157.

¹¹ SMEKHOV, V.: *Zolotoy vek Taganki (vosem vecherov)*. Moskva : Staroye kino, 2012, p. 81.

¹² Direction Yuri Lyubimov, premiered on 17 May 1966.

of the play. Vysotsky prepared for his role seriously. He would study materials about Shakespeare and Elizabethan theatre and he had a great number of books covering the topic housed in his private library. His goal was to render what he believed to be “the best role of world drama”¹⁵ as brilliantly as no one else could: “I volunteered for the role myself. I had wanted to play it for long, I’ve seen almost all of our Hamlets. To play him not just differently from others, but (what I believed then) as Shakespeare would want him to be rendered. Apparently, every actor would be thinking the same way. (...) I think, I’ve found the necessary thought turning point. The Hamlets I’ve seen, and you could’ve seen, the whole performance, looked for the evidence of Claudius’ guilt, in order to kill him, but they only found an excuse for themselves and their revenge. What I’m looking for, though, is an evidence of the king’s innocence. I keep laying snares in the hope I’d get convinced of his innocence, of him not killing my father.”¹⁶

Lyubimov staged the tragedy as another modern parable of humanism. He followed the inspirations of street and square theatre with pantomime and humorous interludes inherently contained in his directori-

al principles and theatre aesthetics – *Hamlet* “was put on, or, perhaps more accurately, regained the nature of town squares.”¹⁷ Vysotsky went further in these traditions. It is through the connection between Shakespeare and street and square theatre that teatrologist Natalya Krymova deliberates the reason for casting Vysotsky, “the author of market vaudevilles,”¹⁸ in the role of Hamlet, thereby linking up with her hypothesis of Vysotsky as the vehicle of skomorokh heritage.¹⁹

At the same time, by staging Shakespeare’s tragedy, the Taganka Theatre continued the dramaturgic line of drama productions, but also of poetic theatre: “The tragedy of Shakespeare, which was not common on domestic scene, sounded in the power of the poetic word. The rhyme and the stanza proved equally important to the director as the general conceptual intention. It goes without saying that only a poet must be a hero of poetry theatre.”²⁰ And it was the real poet Vysotsky who became the poet on stage: “Therefore, when I started rehearsing, it had already been assumed that Hamlet would

be performed by an actor known as a man with the guitar, as someone who writes verses and sings himself, so he’d already be the vehicle of an image.”²¹ The poet’s identity was an integral part of his being “in the very psychology of his being, he is a poet. It is a trait of his human nature.”²² He was “a poet born out of theatre”²³ and, at the same time, an actor born out of poetry. A year after the premiere, he wrote his own poem *Moy Gamlet* [My Hamlet, 1972], which he never set to music for his feeling of reverence.

The production turned into a meeting place of three great poets – the author William Shakespeare, the translator Boris Pasternak, and the main character rendered by Vladimir Vysotsky who, during the performance and in line with Lyubimov’s “school of acting” became its author: “Rather than reciting verses written more than three and a half centuries ago, the actor seemed to be reciting verses he composed... here and now, in the very process of the play.”²⁴ By doing so, he delivered

²¹ VYSOTSKY, V.: Dlya pesen net granits. [An interview for the French broadcasting of the All-Union Radio]. November 1977. In *Muzikalnaya zhizn*. 1986, No. 24. Cit. according to TOKÁR, M. (ed. and transl.): *Taký bol Vysockij*. Bratislava : Obzor 1990. p. 51.

²² NOVIKOV, V. (doctor of philology, literary critic, prose writer, author of works on Vladimir Vysotsky): *Sound recording of an interview with Vladimir Ivanovich Novikov by Zuzana Spodniaková* (authoress) [MP3]. Recorded on 6 June 2017. Moscow : The private archives of the authoress.

²³ KRYMOVA, N.: O Vysotskom. In *Avrora*. 1981, No. 8. Cit. according to KRYMOVA, N. 2005. *Imena*. 1972 – 1986. Vol. 2. Moskva : Trilistnik, 2005, p. 254.

²⁴ KRECHETOVA, R.: Vladimir Vysotsky. In *Teatr*. 2005, No., 1. Cit. According to ABELIUK, E., LEENSON, E.: *Lichnoye delo odnogo teatra*. Moskva : Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2007, p. 84.

¹⁵ VYSOTSKY V.: A TV interview. Moscow, 1975. (*Vladimir Vysotsky: Sofia – Moscow, 6-Disc Edition*). [DVD]. Moskva : Bomba Miuzik, 2005.

¹⁶ VYSOTSKY, V.: Dlya pesen net granits. [An interview for the French broadcasting of the All-Union Radio]. November 1977. In *Muzikalnaya zhizn*. 1986, No. 24. Cit. according to TOKÁR, M. (ed. and transl.): *Taký bol Vysockij*. Bratislava : Obzor, 1990. p. 51-52.

¹⁷ ABELIUK, E., LEENSON, E.: *Taganka: Lichnoye delo odnogo teatra*. Moskva : Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2007, p. 91.

¹⁸ KRYMOVA, N.: O Vysotskom. In *Avrora*. 1981, No. 8. Cit. according to KRYMOVA, N.: *Imena*. 1972 – 1986. Vol. 2. Moskva : Trilistnik, 2005, p. 250.

¹⁹ Skomorokhs were Russian medieval roaming actors, singers, dancers, and musicians, authors of narrative, music and drama pieces, which they personally performed. They gave performances in streets and town squares, and they were in constant interaction with the audiences which they engaged in their performances.

²⁰ MIKHALOVA, E.: *V granitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva : Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 163.

on what Krymova believed to be “crucial” in Hamlet’s staging tradition, i.e. “whether Hamlet remains a purely theatrical character, or he genuinely expresses the spirit of his nation and his time.”²⁵

Unlike previous poetry theatres on Taganka Square, *Hamlet* was not about the fate of several poets or about one poet rendered by several actors, such as, for instance, five characters of the poet Mayakovskiy in the production *Poslushayte!* [Listen!].²⁶ This time, several poets became one – Vysotsky. The poetic concept also contained a reference to the then top poetry theatre on Taganka *Pavshie i zhivye* [The Fallen and the Living]²⁷ about the fates of the poets who perished in war, however, this time, the war was waged amidst family and friends. In it, there was only one “fallen and alive” poet fighting. Being “alive” made him sad as he had survived and was bound to fight as a grieving survivor in a war of ordinariness in which he was drafted rather than making it a choice of his own: “I do my utmost to prevent blood from shedding.”²⁸ – “Vysotsky renders a young man at war, a drama of youth brought to sacrifice. This glamorous

young man was born to love and sing, but he must fight back and give out blows.”²⁹ Although he knows his end in the struggle for truth and the spiritual values of life, he kept fighting during every performance until he perished in “the military way.”³⁰

At the beginning of each performance he would speak up for himself as Vysotsky, poet and performer of his own songs, while leaning against the rear wall of the backdrop of white bricks. The stage designer of *Hamlet*, David Borovsky-Brodsky, referred to the denuded backdrop wall on Taganka as “the seagull of the Taganka Theatre,”³¹ since (apart from the very first season when it alerted the general public to a lack of funding the theatre had to struggle with) it had always been inclined to represent the artistic and ethical direction of the Taganka Theatre toward portraying the truth, while digressing from the creation of a realistic setting of productions and accentuating the rejection of film illusion and actual reality, much like the seagull on the curtain of the Moscow Art Theatre designed by Feodor Shekhtel which epitomised the theatre’s creative principles.

In *Hamlet* “the seagull” carried the weight of a gigantic wooden cross, equivalent to the almost its entire width. Beneath it, big metal swords leaned against its white

wings of bricks, as if being additional smaller crosses protruding from the ground somewhere in the distance. Vysotsky sat beneath it – on his “Golgotha”³² (Stanislavsky³³ also referred to the Danish royal court as Hamlet’s “Golgotha”). He was singing and strumming the guitar while the audience kept streaming in. Hamlet, rendered by Vasily Kachalov, in the opening scene of the production *Hamlet* directed by the English theatre maker Edward Gordon Craig (1911) at the Moscow Art Theatre sixty years ago, also experienced his own prologue. Unlike Vysotsky, he would be seated in front “by a stone palace balustrade, immersed in his gloomy thoughts and flashing back on the foolish, debauched, meaningless luxury of his life at the court of the hated king.”³⁴

After the spectators took their seats, a live white rooster crowed in the upper left window of the portal and grave diggers with shovels entered the stage, acting as clowns (along with Polonius, Osric, and a group of actors). They began digging into real ground to recover the skull of Yorick (which was also part of the buffoonery). The King and the Queen came out and approached the grave to remove black-and-red mourning straps from the handle of

25 KRYMOVA, N.: O Vysotskom. In *Avrora*. 1981, No. 8. Cit. according to KRYMOVA, N.: *Imena*. 1972 – 1986. Vol. 2. Moskva : Trilistnik, 2005, p. 250.

26 Direction Yuri Lyubimov, premiered on 16 May 1967.

27 Direction Yuri Lyubimov, premiered on 4 November 1965.

28 VYSOTSKY, V.: Dlya pesen net granits. [An interview for the French broadcasting of the All-Union Radio]. November 1977. In *Muzikalnaya zhizn*. 1986, No. 24. Cit. according to TOKÁR, M. (ed. and transl.): *Taký bol Vysockij*. [This was Vysotsky]. Bratislava : Obzor 1990, p. 53.

29 GAYEVSKY, V.: O Gamlete. In NIKULIN, S. (ed.): *Vysotsky na Taganke*. Moskva : Soyuzteatr, 1988. p. 55-56.

30 MIKHALOVA, E. *V granitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva : Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 162.

31 Ibid, p. 40.

32 The name was given to this part of the scene by Ella Mikhailova in her book, in the chapter on Hamlet: Gamlet. In *V granitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva : Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 156-163.

33 STANISLAVSKY, K.: 1954. *Mój život v umení* [My Life in Art/Moya zhizn v iskusstve]. Bratislava : Vydavateľstvo krásnej literatúry, 1954, p. 495.

34 Ibid, p. 493.



a sword stuck in the ground and tied them around their wrists as a token of mourning for the dead king. Horatio, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern followed suit. In the spirit of Vakhtangov’s early productions when actors slipped into their characters right before the audience, the actors introduced themselves in the opening act of *Hamlet* and announced they would play the tragedy of life and death.

Vysotsky got up and walked toward the proscenium, to sing the poem *Hamlet* from Pasternak’s *Doktor Zhivago* [Doctor Zhivago].³⁵ In the prologue he introduced the audience to the story that followed the spirit of the theatre of the streets and squares of Shakespeare and Lyubimov: “it starts off the way drifters and comedians would start off.”³⁶ The poem was not a depersonalised address of an actor to the viewers. It was a confession of man, an “actor,” who had to deliver the role assigned to him by the stage director on the grand stage of life, where death always lurks. The banned bard Vysotsky sang the verses of the then prohibited novel he set to music,³⁷ standing over a grave with a big

sword nearby, to demonstrate that the guitar was his sword.

A modern image of Hamlet amazed the audiences and Lyubimov’s concept triggered a variety of opinions – he was regarded as “one of the main achievements of the production”³⁸ and also as a decline belittling the “noble beginning” due to which “the viewer does not see a ‘great thinker’ but rather a ‘variety show bard’.”³⁹

On his way from the Cross of Golgotha to the excavated grave on the proscenium Vysotsky, similarly to Jesus Christ, set out on a journey between life and death, to fulfil his father’s wish (at the time Hamlet was premiered, Vysotsky was thirty-three years of age, i.e., he was the age of Jesus). For the last time, uttering Pasternak’s verses, he requested the task assigned be withdrawn from him: “If only it is possible, Abba, Father/May this cup be carried past me.” He knows he cannot escape his fate: “But the plan of action is determined/and the end irrevocably sealed.”⁴⁰

According to the witnesses, the opening part drew the audience into the atmosphere of the tragedy and

35 The same poem had been recited by Irina Kuznetsova in the performance *Pavshie i zhivye* [The Fallen and the Living] on the Taganka Theatre stage six years earlier.

36 KOZINTSEV, G.: *Iz rabochikh tetradей: 1949 – 1973. Sobrannye. sochineniya: v pyati tomakh*. 1983. Vol. 2, p. 387-388. Cit. according to ABELIUK, E., LEENSON, E.: *Taganka: Lichnoe delo odnogo teatra*. Moskva : Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2007, p. 108.

37 The author of the music was Yuri Markovich Butsko.

38 KHAYCHENKO, G.: *Scena i vremya*. In *Znaniye*. 1975, p. 120. Cit. according to KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 84.

39 KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 84.

40 PASTERNAK, B.: *Doktor Zhivago*. Translation Zora Jesenská – Laco Novomeský. Bratislava : Tatran, 1969, p. 496.

foreshadowed its fatality: "The production started off at an emotional elevation that is usually put to use in the finale of a drama play. Vysotsky's voice, picking up strength and power from stanza to stanza, set the bottom, the 'start-off' limit of the tragedy, which from this very minute will continue to tamelessly rise to its climax."⁴¹

Side by side, life and death were present on the stage all the time. Throughout the tragedy, the grave diggers kept walking up and down the stage, carrying a chest of old wooden boards. The open grave was there waiting for anyone, but at the same time, the coffin served as an ordinary bench. The directorial concept translated into the work of actors reflected two artistic levels, i.e. the stylized (outer – the actor's body) and the realistic (inner – the actor's emotions) ones. The same principle applied to the stage design. All elements and materials had their realistic, but also metaphorical, symbolic meaning. Real clay was the ground to cover the grave, but it also epitomised dust that one would turn into after death, and at the same time, a life-bearing force from which every living entity could grow again. A live rooster stood in contrast to the grave. The materials were not theatrical or overly pompous, but rather genuine – wood, metal, wool – much like what mankind has been using since time immemorial.

As was customary at the Taganka

Theatre, the king and the queen had no descriptive crowns. The costumes of all actors were made of modern material, of wool. Hamlet was dressed up in a black wool sweater⁴² and a pair of black corduroy jeans. Gertrude and Claudius were clad in white (they were not in mourning), the others were dressed in earthy brown. Wool as a costume material was a mediator between the past and the present, a transition from the past to the present. Lyubimov decided to put a modern Hamlet on stage – "a Hamlet of the nuclear age"⁴³, a loner with an uncovered neck (voice), while others had their necks covered in turtleneck sweaters. Vysotsky's sword-guitar no longer appeared throughout the performance. Hamlet's, i.e. Vysotsky's, throat became an autonomous musical instrument.

Struggling with the "scum of hypocrisy in the rotten State of Denmark" illuminated by "Rembrandtean chiaroscuro effects,"⁴⁴ Hamlet was challenged, metaphorically and physically, with the curtain having the colour of earth, of scum, the size of 9 x 5.5 metre, made of a coarse undyed woollen fabric, which could move across the stage from right to



42 Allegedly, Vysotsky had four such sweaters, which he kept changing during the performance, as he was too hot in them and had to change them several times.

43 MARTÍNEK, K.: *Mistr divadelní magie. Příspěvek k portrétu režiséra Jurije Petroviče Ljubimova*. [The Master of Modern Magic. On the Portrait of Stage Director Yuri Lyubimov]. Praha: Divadelní ústav, 1980, p. 26.

44 GAYEVSKY, V.: O Gamlete. In NIKULIN, S. (ed.): *Vysotsky na Taganke*. Moskva: Soyuzteatr, 1988, p. 49.

41 MIKHALOVA, E.: *V granitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva: Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 161.

left, as well as back and forth. The curtain facilitated the connection between the backstage and the stage, to break it up and to develop parallel events as in a movie. The curtain changed the space of the story and it was a proxy for a variety of sets (for example, one could sit on it like on a throne). David Borovsky-Brodsky thus introduced the first tangible curtain to the Taganka Theatre, which became the dominating element of the production and its emblem. He found an ideal paravent Spanish wall that Craig had been looking for in vain at the Moscow Art Theatre.

At its metaphoric core, the curtain on the stage was a distinct character that shaped the story. It never took anyone's side, it lived "a life of its own."⁴⁵ The theatre and film scientist and theatre critic Tatyana Bachelis, capitalised the word in her study *Gamlet – Vysotsky* [Hamlet – Vysotsky]. In her opinion, as the story evolved, the curtain played the role of "History, Tragedy, Destiny, Faith, and Death."⁴⁶ Paradoxically, its softness and pliability aptly captured a hardy character – "anonymous and indifferent. (...) It was impossible to destroy or break it,"⁴⁷ no matter what forces were exerted.

45 BACHELIS, T.: *Gamlet – Vysotsky*. In FROLOV, V. V. (ed.): *Voprosy teatra 11*. Moskva: Vserossiyskoye teatralnoye obshchestvo, 1987, p. 127.

46 Ibid.

47 BEREZKIN, V.: *Chudozhniki v postanovkach Shekspira* In *Shekspirovskiy chteniya*. 1978. Moskva: Nauka, 1981, p. 273. Cit. according to ABELIUK, E., LEENSON, E.: *Taganka: Lichnoe delo odnogo teatra*. Moskva: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2007, p. 94.

It was "a huge shapeless force."⁴⁸ It was scheming and physically manipulating the characters, it could determine the direction of their movement and throw them off their feet, which is seen in the prologue after the declamation of Pasternak's poem and also in the epilogue when its "deadly flight"⁴⁹ off the stage swept away the dead bodies "as if flipping through the page of human existence."⁵⁰

Before the monologue "To be, or not to be..."⁵¹ takes place, Hamlet stands behind the curtain and listens to the king and queen's conversation with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and their suite, discussing how to get rid of him. Hamlet seems to be pushing it before him; he points his hand at the curtain, while asking "To be, or not to be?" He would start the monologue three times (only to finish it the third time) and each time, it was started differently: "I start declaiming him as if he [Hamlet – authoress' note] had been long trying to resolve the question "To be, or not to be..." (...) The cur-

48 BACHELIS, T.: *Gamlet – Vysotsky*. In FROLOV, V. V. (ed.): *Voprosy teatra 11*. Moskva: Vserossiyskoye teatralnoye obshchestvo, 1987, p. 128.

49 KRYMOVA, N.: O Vysotskom. In *Avrora*. 1981, No. 8. Cit. according to KRYMOVA, N. 2005. *Imena*. 1972 – 1986. Vol. 2. Moskva: Trilistnik, 2005, p. 251.

50 BEREZKIN, V.: *Chudozhniki v postanovkach Shekspira*. In *Shekspirovskiy chteniya*. 1978. Moskva: Nauka, 1981, p. 273. Cit. according to ABELIUK, E., LEENSON, E.: *Taganka: Lichnoe delo odnogo teatra*. Moskva: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2007, p. 95.

51 SHAKESPEARE, W.: *Hamlet*. Translation. Jozef Kot. Bratislava: HEVI, 1994, p. 68. [online]. Available at: <<https://cloud.edupage.org/cloud/William-Shakespeare---Hamlet.pdf?z%3Ar4775gKn-rpQOCn6off%2Bm8XWGZpiFmmZguiCKx-zH2A5JozkdUrUAOUz9QEpDcNY8Q>>.

tain follows me again, it pushes me past the wings, with them resuming their dialogue. And, again [Hamlet – authoress' note] returns and in a resolute and straightforward way – it is brilliantly solved there – suddenly, Hamlet becomes very rational and his speech becomes straightforward. And then [in the third monologue – authoress' note] he loses control and goes flat out and in an almost agitated state of mind, as if incidentally, commits manslaughter."⁵² During the third monologue he did not distance himself from the character. He would say: "Sometimes, I feel I won't be able to declaim the entire text, I won't be strong enough."⁵³ He would not stop repeating it even when the monologue was over "to make it clear that I'm tantalised by it all the time."⁵⁴ When the monologue was repeated for a third time, he would come to the proscenium to switch from a monologue to a dialogue with the viewers, while looking into their eyes and pointing his finger at the grave on the proscenium in token of his "fallacious belief, as he would be thinking of a murder all the time."⁵⁵

52 VYSOTSKY, V.: [A videorecording by Yuri Drozdov for Warren Beatty, American, actor, producer, scriptwriter, and director]. Moskva: Fakultet zhurnalistiky MGU. (*Vladimir Vysotsky, Grozny – Moscow, 6-Disc Edition*). [DVD]. Moskva: Bomba Miuzik, 2006.

53 SIDORINA, S. (ed.): Yuri Lyubimov: 80 let v mirovom stsenicheskom iskusstve. Moskva: Tri kvadrata, 2014, p. 192.

54 Ibid.

55 VYSOTSKY, V.: [A videorecording by Yuri Drozdov for Warren Beatty, American, actor, producer, scriptwriter, and director]. Moskva: Fakultet zhurnalistiky MGU. (*Vladimir Vysotsky, Grozny – Moscow, 6-Disc Edition*). [DVD]. Moskva: Bomba Miuzik, 2006.

For Vysotsky's Hamlet, the question "To be, or not to be..." is not "a philosophical quandary. In his mouth, it does not sound like a question, but rather like a scream having a common intonation: How to be?"⁵⁶ Hamlet does not ask "To be, or not to be?", but rather "to take action, or to run away, to fight, or to flee the battlefield?"⁵⁷ According to Bachelis, he does not address the problem of being and non-being with respect to himself, but rather with respect to mankind. Theatre and literary critic Vadim Gayevsky regards the three times and ever more ferociously repeated "To be, or not to be" as the best acted scene of "incorrigible" Hamlet, as "a monologue about life declaimed by the reader, a singular voice that school failed to correct and theatre was resentful of correcting."⁵⁸

Theatre scientist Ella Mikhalyova also expresses her opinion on the rebelliousness of Vysotsky's Hamlet, which she keeps mentioning even many years after: "He saw the impossibility of changing the universe, but reserved the right of a personal rebellion, personal redemption. He was a poet – one who matures earlier than others, who more painfully

perceives the breaks and cracks of the times, a leader who builds a path at the cost of his own life."⁵⁹ Vysotsky's Hamlet set up a mirror to an era whose rules he was reluctant to play by, but he still wanted to live freely: "Our Hamlet is, above all, a man. A man who was brought up in cruel times. But he was also a student, much smarter than all his peers. He was prepared for the throne, he was to run the state. The throne, however, was seized by a king killer. Hamlet is all set on revenge, but he is opposed to murder, which torments him brutally."⁶⁰ The most difficult struggle was the one with himself.

This "intellectual drama"⁶¹ gushed out from the very essence of Vysotsky- an actor who had a kind of divided consciousness the whole time. He had never been "a mere" actor in the productions of the Taganka Theatre. When on stage, part of his consciousness would never cease to contemplate, to philosophise about the questions asked. He did not just create an outer image of the intellect like, for instance, Innokentiy Smoktunovsky in the film *Hamlet*,⁶² who only portrayed the image of a wise man, but actually

never lived it. The essence of Hamlet's interpretation – identical to the essence of the actor-poet Vysotsky – was dialogism.

In his interpretation it was very important that he was "a hero who knows everything."⁶³ Apart from knowing his fate, he also knew who killed his father. The encounter with his father's ghost only solidified his belief, which is evidenced by his affirmatory head-nodding when the murderer's identity was disclosed to him. An inconspicuous line, which is not usually of great significance: "O, moyi prozreniya!" ("My premonition did not fail me!"⁶⁴), was crucial for Vysotsky's Hamlet (Bachelis adds that these "premonitions" were also highlighted by theatre scientist and Shakespeare expert, Alexei Bartoshevich, in his first review of *Hamlet* staged by the Taganka Theatre). Vysotsky upheld the importance of Hamlet's premonitions: "Hamlet knows much more than all the other Hamlets I've seen. He knows what will happen to him, what's happening to the country. He understands that he has nowhere to flee from his fateful end. He was bound to live an era that was cruel."⁶⁵ That

56 ANIKST, A.: Tragediya: harmoniya, kontrasty. In *Teatralnaya gazeta*. 12 December 1972. Cited according to ABELIUK, E., LEENSON, E.: *Taganka: Lichnoe delo odnogo teatra*. Moskva : Novoye literaturnoe obozreniye, 2007, p. 103-104.

57 KHAYCHENKO, G.: Scena i vremya. In *Znaniye*. 1975, p. 120. Cited according to KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 87.

58 GAYEVSKY, V.: O Gamlete. In NIKULIN, S. (ed.): *Vysotsky na Taganke*. Moskva : Soyuzteatr, 1988.

59 MIKHALOVA, E.: *Vgranitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva : Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 162.

60 VYSOTSKY, V.: Dlya pesen net granits. [An interview for the French broadcasting of the All-Union Radio]. November 1977. In *Muzykalnaya zhizn*. 1986, No. 24. Cit. according to TOKÁR, M. (ed. and transl.): *Taký bol Vysockij*. [This was Vysotsky]. Bratislava : Obzor 1990, p. 51.

61 GAYEVSKY, V.: O Gamlete. In NIKULIN, S. (ed.): *Vysotsky na Taganke*. Moskva : Soyuzteatr, 1988, p. 55-57.

62 Direction Grigori Mikhailovich Kozintsev, Lenfilm, 1964.

63 BACHELIS, T.: Gamlet – Vysotsky. In FROLOV, V. V. (ed.): *Voprosy teatra 11*. Moskva : Vserossiyskoye teatralnoye obshchestvo, 1987, p. 125.

64 SHAKESPEARE, W.: *Hamlet*. Translation Jozef Kot. Bratislava : HEVI, 1994, p. 38. [online]. [2019-07-04]. Available at: <<https://cloud.edupage.org/cloud/William-Shakespeare---Hamlet.pdf?z%3Ar4775gKnrpQOCn6off%2Bm8XWGZpiFm-mZguiCKxzH2A5lozkdUrUAoUz9QEpDcNY8Q>>.

65 VYSOTSKY, V.: Dlya pesen net granits. [An interview for the French broadcasting of the All-Union Radio]. November 1977. In *Muzykalnaya zhizn*. 1986, No. 24. Cit. according to TOKÁR, M. (ed. and transl.): *Taký bol Vysockij*. [This was Vysotsky].

notwithstanding, as he said at the beginning: "I want to perform my role again." His knowledge is accompanied by fear: "... regardless of his knowledge and, more accurately, largely thanks to it, he is more fearful than other Hamlets of making a mistake."⁶⁶

Instead of a monologue "To be, or not to be" which was "sidelined"⁶⁷ in Lyubimov's directorial interpretation, the idea crucial to Hamlet was uttered in a conversation with the Ghost: "Raspalas svyaz vremen" ("The time is out of joint"⁶⁸), because it is his lot to fix the time: "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!"⁶⁹ An emphasis put on this motif would, contrary to what is usual, affect the main monologue in Act 3 – "To be, or not to be."

Vysotsky's Hamlet accepts death, although he knows that the answer is "to be" and that to live is better than to die (unlike Kachalov

who despised the earthly world and chose "not to be"). However, he is not afraid of physical death: "The death of his soul tantalised his reason and heart. To be or not to be, if you are forced to play by the dirty and godless rules of time? (...) To live by the different rules of the universe was the destiny of Hamlet"⁷⁰ "dying for the redemption of sins"⁷¹ in the finale. At the very end of the play Hamlet dies by the white wall on the backdrop, at his Golgotha, from where he set out on his way of the cross. He utters his last words: "Dalshe – tishina." ("And silence thereafter.")

His recorded voice uttering Hamlet's words from Scene 4, Act 4 cuts through the "silence" (the sequence of lines is reversed), leaving a message to progeny that the biggest of tragedies is a life without a purpose:

*"Sure, he that made us with such large discourse, Looking before and after, gave us not That capability and godlike reason To just in us unused. What is a man If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more."*⁷²

In his acting, Vysotsky linked up two schools of acting – the School-studio of the Moscow Art Theatre and the "school" of the Taganka Theatre under Lyubimov's stage direction. He demonstrated his mastery of psychological experiencing: "It is was this mutual bonding, the "radiation" of the actor's will that Stanislavsky may have once dreamt of."⁷³ He linked up the veracity of inner psychological experiencing with stylisation. His entire organism constantly worked with rich expressiveness, movement plasticity, and a wide vocal range. In his monologue "To be, or not to be" Vysotsky "kept vigorously rotating around his axis and upon the words "To be" he made an angry gesture, as if driving a dagger in the ground. His eyes glowed with "To be!"⁷⁴ Bachelis gives the following

Bratislava : Obzor 1990, p. 51.

66 SHCHERBAKOV, K.: Gamlet: Tragediya Shekspira na stsene Teatra na Taganke. In *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. 26 December 1971, p. 198. Cit. according to KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 88.

67 KUZNETSOVA, E.: Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 87.

68 In Lyubimov's staging the line was repeated three times, each time in a different translation – one by Pasternak and then by Andrei Kroneberg and Mikhail Lozinsky (1933).

69 SHAKESPEARE, W.: *Hamlet*. Translation Jozef Kot. Bratislava : HEVI, 1994, p. 38. [online]. [2019-07-04]. Available at: <<https://cloud.edupage.org/cloud/William-Shakespeare---Hamlet.pdf?z%3Ar4775gKnrpQOCn6off%2Bm8XWGZpiFm-mZguiCKxzH2A5lozkdUrUAoUz9QEpDcNY8Q>>.

70 MIKHALOVA, E.: *V granitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva : Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 161-162.

71 Ibid, p. 156.

72 SHAKESPEARE, W.: *Hamlet*. Translation Jozef Kot. Bratislava : HEVI, 1994, p. 110. [online]. [2019-07-04]. Available at: <<https://cloud.edupage.org/cloud/William-Shakespeare---Hamlet.pdf?z%3Ar4775gKnrpQOCn6off%2Bm8XWGZpiFm-mZguiCKxzH2A5lozkdUrUAoUz9QEpDcNY8Q>>.

73 BACHELIS, T.: Gamlet – Vysotsky. In FROLOV, V. V. (ed.): 1987. *Voprosy teatra 11*. Moskva : Vserossiyskoye teatralnoye obshchestvo, 1987, p. 126.

74 BACHELIS, T.: Gamlet – Vysotsky. In »

description of his dynamic work with the body “swift gait, vigilance, swiftness, and unforeseen reactions – all this suggested that he made a firm decision: win first, then die.”⁷⁵ In a stylized battle with Laert, before which they did a jump rope exercise, he first has a sip of a poisoned drink, but after a dramatic pause while holding it in his mouth, he starts to gargle and then spits it out. Most of the time, his stylised movement and unpredictable gestures were in contrast with his stern, concentrated, and almost motionless face: “... it was a roughly sketched face, as if carved of wood”, which “very rarely, as a last resort, gave permission to a wasteful lavishness of facial expression.”⁷⁶ Several preserved fragments of video recordings (of rehearsals and performances) show Vysotsky’s utter inner and physical concentration.⁷⁷ His stern facial expression is in sharp contrast with the expression in his eyes that show a deep and rich mental world of his character: “My Hamlet loves his father so much that he can see him any time he pleases. He calls him – and he appears. But all of this takes place in Hamlet’s imagination. To my mind, this is a very clear and understandable rendition. And I believe it to be a Shakespeare’s rendition.”⁷⁸

Since the text was challenging technically and dramaturgically, Vysotsky’s voice, i.e. his “tool” boasting a wide range and rich colour that “sets the tone of the performance,”⁷⁹ proved to be Hamlet’s essential means of expression. He lengthened the consonants and “it appeared as if the fire bell was sounded.”⁸⁰ In the scenes with other actors, his voice was composed and he would talk to them “in a brotherly manner, as if they were on an equal footing,”⁸¹ in a dialogue with Ophelia, he would switch from a balanced to a mocking tone, which he alternated with a menacing roar, with Yorick, he would engage in an amicable and “a mournful conversation,”⁸² in a scene with the flute with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his “deep voice was resounding ominously and it seemed that its low tones would burst the theatre building apart.”⁸³

His endeavour to become an actor worthy of a Shakespearian text was unanimously appreciated by critique: “Poetry and simplicity! They are congruent.”⁸⁴ “Vysotsky

zhizn. 1986, No. 24. Cit. according to TOKÁR, M. (ed. and transl.): *Taký bol Vysockij*. [This was Vysotsky]. Bratislava : Obzor 1990, p. 52.

79 GAYEVSKY, V.: O Gamlete. In NIKULIN, S. (ed.): *Vysotsky na Taganke*. Moskva : Soyuzteatr, 1988, p. 52.

80 BACHELIS, T.: Gamlet – Vysotsky. In FROLOV, V. V. (ed.): 1987. *Voprosy teatra 11*. Moskva : Vserossiyskoye teatralnoye obshchestvo, 1987, p. 130.

81 Ibid, p. 135.

82 Ibid, p. 139.

83 Ibid, p. 136.

84 GUGUSHVILI, E.: V zashchitu “Gamleta”. In *Vechornyi Tbilisi*. 4 October 1979, p. 4. Cit. according to KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 89.

FROLOV, V. V. (ed.): 1987. *Voprosy teatra 11*. Moskva : Vserossiyskoye teatralnoye obshchestvo, 1987, p. 134.

75 Ibid, p. 126.

76 Ibid.

77 He said, he would lose as much as two kilograms during a single performance.

78 VYSOTSKY, V.: Dlya pesen net granits. [An interview for the French broadcasting of the All-Union Radio]. November 1977. In *Muzykalnaya*



declaims the text as both Hamlet and Shakespeare.”⁸⁵ “In his mouth, the verse has acquired the pliability of metal. His unique mastery of accelerating an emotion, his ability to hear the rhythm of a verse, to find the momenta for action in the very music of the verse were also found enjoyable. Vysotsky’s ability to freely find his way through the alternating currents of high and low rhetoric styles, to immediately move from a dry statement of fact to a prophetic divination – to my eyes and to my hearing – ideally matched Shakespearean language setup.”⁸⁶ “This is Vysotsky’s way of verse declamation, he stands exactly at the edge of a tipping point. He flings back his head, he is about to fall down. Vysotsky plays the withering energy of a soul that has taken off by a miraculous effort and is about to nose-dive. Vysotsky plays this moment when his soul rejoices, it is filled with the glory of its take-off, even though it anticipates the pain and shame of its fall. Vysotsky’s monologues are like a cracking vibrating string.”⁸⁷

The role of Hamlet rendered by Vysotsky was thought to be “the actor’s greatest victory”⁸⁸; “an exam-

85 KRECHETOVA, R.: Poiski yedinstva. In *Teatr*. 1973, No. 2, p. 65. Cit. according to KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 87.

86 BACHELIS, T.: Gamlet – Vysotsky. In FROLOV, V. V. (ed.): 1987. *Voprosy teatra 11*. Moskva : Vserossiyskoye teatralnoye obshchestvo, 1987, p. 130.

87 GAYEVSKY, V.: O Gamlete. In NIKULIN, S. (ed.): *Vysockij na Taganke*. Moskva : Soyuzteatr, 1988, p. 57.

88 KHANIUTIN, E.: Gamlet epokhi kinematografa. In *Nedelya*. 6 – 12 December 1971,

ple of modern acting.”⁸⁹ The literary scientist and acclaimed expert on Shakespeare Alexander Anikst wrote the following about Vysotsky’s Hamlet: “There have been many different Hamlets in world art. Every era has been laudating its own Hamlet. Amidst all the interpretations of the great tragedy, the interpretation by Lyubimov and Vysotsky is an unparalleled gem of world culture. No one has ever rendered Hamlet as Vysotsky has. He has been portrayed as a Hamlet-warrior, as a tragedy of a split personality, but no one has ever unveiled the torn soul of a young intellectual with such a tragic strength. A suffering, maimed soul that will not be broken in the gusts of mind and emotions. This image is created by a wounded heart, the life-bearing force of undaunted reason, struggling through to truth.”⁹⁰

Hamlet and Vysotsky merged into one human being: “... in this case, the image and the actor became one whole”⁹¹ “He entered the stage being his true self. And he

No. 50, p. 18-19. Cit. according to KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 89.

89 KRECHETOVA, R.: Poiski yedinstva. In *Teatr*. 1973, No. 2, p. 65. Cited according to KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 89.

90 Cit. according to MIKHALOVA, E.: *V granitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva : Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 160.

91 KUZNETSOVA, E.: *Vysotsky v teatralnoy kritike*. In KRYLOV, A., SHCHERBAKOVA, V. (eds.): *Mir Vysotskogo: Issledovaniya i materialy*. Moskva : GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2000, p. 86.

played nothing but his fate. (...) This was beyond what is called theatre.”⁹²

For years, the role had lived together with Vysotsky: “An exposed robust neck, which had gotten wider over the years, it became more relief-like, resembling a musical instrument, an organ with veins-whistles...”⁹³ “In his Hamlet, and together with him, Vysotsky grew and matured as a drama actor, as a tragedian of contemporary theatre.”⁹⁴

On 18 July 1980, it was the last time he rendered Hamlet on the Taganka stage. The performance scheduled for 27 July was never put on. He died early at an age of forty-two, of a supposed heart failure in his apartment on the Malaya Gruzinskaya Street No. 28 (exactly one year after a second clinical death during a performance in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, 25 July 1979), on 25 July 1980.

Instead of a cancelled Shakespeare’s performance, Vysotsky, clad in Hamlet’s costume,⁹⁵ “performed” his last monodrama on Taganka stage a day later, on 28 July 1980. The staging of this “title” was not easy for the Taganka Theatre due to the intervention of

92 KRYMOVA, N.: O Vysotskom. In *Avrora*. 1981, No. 8. Cited according to KRYMOVA, N.: *Imena*. 1972 – 1986. Vol. 2. Moskva : Trilistnik, 2005, p. 251-252.

93 DEMIDOVA, A.: Begushchaya stroka pamyati. Moskva : Exmo-press, 2000, p. 17. Cit. according to ABELIUK, E., LEENSON, E.: *Taganka: Lichnoe delo odnogo teatra*. Moskva : Novoye literaturnoe obozreniye, 2007, p. 92.

94 MIKHALOVA, E.: *V granitsakh krasnogo kvadrata*. Moskva : Izdatelskiy Dom Rodionova, 2007, p. 158.

95 Vysotsky was not dressed in the costume from the production, as was written by Alla Demidova later on. In her book *Vladimir Vysotsky, kakim znayu i lyublyu...* she explained he had a dress resembling Hamlet’s costume.

the public authority. There was not a single poster announcing farewell to Hamlet which took place during the opening of the Summer Olympic Games in Moscow.⁹⁶ Yet, everyone knew about it. Mounted police failed to disperse the crowd carrying flowers that kept streaming into the theatre building and its wide neighbourhood. This time, everyone was let in and attended Vysotsky's performance.

The audiences who came to see this tragic piece experienced the fate of their prince more deeply than ever, as they realised it would never be repeated. "Silence thereafter" and only Vysotsky's recorded voice was heard. It was heard this time, too, just like in the finale of *Hamlet*. It kept streaming from every corner. People brought tape recorders and played and sung his songs...

*A true poet meets a tragic culmination.*⁹⁷

Several days after the farewell ceremony with Vysotsky which was held on 28 July 1980, Lyubimov came up with an idea to preserve Vysotsky's live presence at the Taganka Theatre and, in the spirit of previous poetic compositions, to develop a poetry theatre about the

life and work of a poet who "grew as an actor at the Theatre on Taganka."⁹⁸ However, he first had to painstakingly apply for an approval from the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov, to put up a poetic "commemorative" composition *Vladimir Vysotsky*,⁹⁹ to at least mark the 1st anniversary of Vysotsky's death on 25 July 1981. The production was officially premiered as late as 25 January 1989,¹⁰⁰ on the day of the actor's and poet's un-lived fifty-first birthday and ever since, it has been performed (with a changed cast) until today. This goal is aptly pinned down in the subheading to the production – *Gamlet bez Gamleta ili poslednyaya rol poeta* [Hamlet without Hamlet, or, the Poet's Last Role] which has been on the theatre's repertory ever since.

Vladimir Vysotsky has never left the Taganka Theatre – he fell but stayed alive. "Hamlet has become part of the myth of Vysotsky, just like Vysotsky has become a symptomatic part of the legend about the Taganka Theatre. In that sense the death of the Prince of Denmark underscored the importance of Vysotsky for Russia and it put an end

to an era."¹⁰¹

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⁹⁶ On 25 July 1980, the daily *Vechernyaya Moskva* informed of Vysotsky's death in a laconic and formal way. No mention was made of the farewell ceremony and no obituary was published either.

⁹⁷ An excerpt from Vladimir Vysotsky's song *O fatalnykh datakh i tsifrah*. (On Fatal Dates and Figures, 1971). In linguistic collaboration with Milan Tokár translated by Lubomír Feldek. Cit. according to TOKÁR, M. (ed. and transl.). 1990. *Taký bol Vysockij*. Bratislava : Obzor, 1990, p. 175.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Initially, the production's name was *Moskva proshchaetsya s poetom* (Moscow bids farewell to a poet).

¹⁰⁰ In the late 1980s, Lyubimov moved the original production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Leicester Haymarket Theatre in the UK (the renewed premiere took place on 14 September 1989) and he dedicated it to Vysotsky, which is also evidenced by the text on the cover of the programme booklet.

¹⁰¹ TUROVSKAYA, M.: *Hamlet: la mort est là, elle est à l'oeuvre*. In PICON-VALLIN, B. (ed.): *Liubimov. La Taganka*. Paris : CNRS Éditions, 1997. p. 324. Cit. according to LINDOVSKÁ, N.: *Príbeh režiséra, príbeh Taganky, príbeh divadla a spoločnosti...* [The story of a director, the story of Taganka, the story of a theatre and society...]. In *Slovenské divadlo*. 1999, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 100.

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