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Coda

“Shall beauty hold a plea,/Whose action is no stronger than a flower?”

Shakespeare, Sonnet 65

Looking back at the work this project entailed is to relive a mind-expanding experience of discovery and collaboration, accompanied by an awareness of the urgent need for more work of the kind we have initiated. Our idea of looking at the uses of Shakespeare in the post-communist context crystallised in a serendipitous moment during a coffee break at the ESRA Congress in Montpellier, in 2013. In an off-the-cuff sentence, Francesca Rayner (Universidade do Minho, Portugal) gave us a starting signal: “Shakespeare is changing beneath our feet and we have to run to catch up with him.” So run we did. Yet, the impulse to document and conceptualize Shakespearean productions and adaptations as they come out has been there a long time, developing through work done for the congresses of the European Shakespeare Research Association, the World Shakespeare Congress, and expanding academic networks. We wish to thank many who have helped us with word, deed, or thought, not to mention video recordings, bibliographies and advice, but we owe special thanks to Nicoleta Cinpoes (University of Worcester, United Kingdom) and Janice Valls-Russell (French National Centre for Scientific Research).

In the course of our research into the Bulgarian case of marshalling Shakespeare against the post-communist disorder and shaping his works into vehicles for imagining a way out of this disorder, we met prisoners whose experience of the world offered perspectives on society and art we had not imagined before. We came across extraordinary people who have, against the odds of economic collapse and disintegrating social values, created a Shakespeare festival around a small village school and were awed by their steadfastness and enthusiasm in trusting the power of theatre to sustain a community. We have savored the outstanding intellectual and creative work of directors and playwrights whose inspired versions of *Hamlet* have provided probing reflections on the state of the polity. In the charismatic re-workings and interpretations of these Bulgarian theater professionals and amateurs, Shakespeare has become a shield against the devastations of consumerism and the debasement of ethical norms in politics. Even as Shakespeare has been used to explore the unbearable harshness of being, his plays have also been employed for raising civic awareness and shoring up the spiritual conditions of social survival. Working with Shakespeare has indeed become “a piece of coal” to stoke the fires of the invisible and invincible resistance of the thinking mind.

To return to the urgency mentioned above: What looking into the case of Bulgaria has revealed is that there is so much more in the vast lands of post-communism that needs documentation, analysis, and elucidating for the world audiences. Now that the entire continent of Europe and the world at large are living through the re-adjustment, dismantling, and reshaping of the post-Second World War social contract, post-communist experiences and cultural politics can teach us a lot. In such a fluid context, the politics around a world cultural icon, like Shakespeare, as well as around classical literature and culture, can be seen as a litmus test for the nature of change. We hope that our effort will encourage others to contribute to this conversation and share their research through open-source media, which was one of our guiding principles.