

## COMICS AS CREATIVE INSPIRATION FOR PERFORMATIVE ART FORMS<sup>1</sup>

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*The medium of comics has established a long tradition with foundational works that question the genre's semiotic and aesthetic conventions. Comics have been gaining on popularity and recognition from various directions, which provided validation as an entrenched and autonomous art form. As such comics have also made significant contributions to creative imagination outside its own domain. Of particular interest is the mutual inspiration between different art forms and various genres, not only in its relationship with such narrative literary genres as the novel but also with less evident ones, namely performative genres and creative disciplines, e.g., scenography, design, film, aesthetics and performance. All instances of the comics – theatre relationship are categorized under the proposed term “comics scenography.” The hybrid nature of comics not only allows to draw inspiration from other media but is also susceptible to adaptation processes. This article uses the findings of the thematic panel entitled “Theatre, Performance and Comics,” which took place in the framework of Prague Quadrennial (PQ) Talks 2019. The findings from the PQ panel are used to analyze three comics which include theatrical elements in light of the links of the comics with other media and genres. The article aims to reveal the complexity of the relationship between the comics and the theatre and to acknowledge the position of comics within the domain of performative genres.*

<sup>1</sup> Some observations presented here were initiated and inspired during the PQ Talks 2019 panel “Theatre, Performance and Comics,” which took place on 14 June 2019 in Prague, and the discussions afterwards.

## Introduction

At first sight, theatre and comics do not seem to have much in common. Generally, it is believed that these two separate forms of art address different audiences with diverse interests. Comics and theatre seem to be different artistic entities, but because they are narrative arts they share such common features as characters, plots, fictions and storytelling techniques. They express human creativity, emotions as well as narrative potential. All these elements are common denominators of the respective forms of art.

As a consequence, comics and theatre can be brought together in order to inquire into their similarities and mutual influences. This approach requires theoretical reflection with a special attention to comics as a medium and genre, problems of adaptation and the notion of hybridity, as well as an overview of comics displaying theatrical influences. My aim is to explore the potential and the extent of the theatre – comics relationship. The article first focuses on the relationship of comics to theatre performance and explores some instances of theatrical adaptations of comics. The second part discusses theatrical influences on comics and their impact on the changes of their reception, focusing on three examples of comic-book and comic-strip adaptations of Shakespeare's plays: Frank Flöthmann's "Hamlet" in *Shakespeare ohne Worte* (Shakespeare without Words), Nicki Greenberg's *Hamlet* and Conor McCreery's *Kill Shakespeare*.

## PQ 2019 Panel "Theatre, Performance, and Comics"

The Prague Quadrennial provides a platform for exchanging thoughts, experiences and sharing achievements in performance, stage design and scenography: both theoretical and practical approaches are welcome. During PQ Talks 2019 I convened the panel "Theatre, Performance, and Comics." Its main aim was to initiate discussions concerning theatre – comics dynamics, especially the interaction of the two media and their mutual influences. The panel brought together theatre practitioners (Tomáš Jarkovský and Jakub Vašíček), who have adapted comics on stage, and academics (Randy Duncan and Anna Wołosz-Sosnowska) to reflect, in practical as well as theoretical, and partially also historical terms, on comics – theatre relationships and reciprocal influences between these media.

The discussion after the panel raised significant questions concerning the presence of comics in theatre, theatre studies and scenography. The comics – theatre relationship has proved to be deeper and more complex than initially expected. This made the participants propose a new term: "comics scenography."

The term refers to all influences and relationships between comics and theatre, including adaptation, plot construction, staging process or creating scenography. The scope and use of this term still need to be thoroughly discussed and require further explanations and exemplifications. In general terms, comics scenography refers to the process of adopting comics techniques in creating a theatrical performance.

### Hybridity of Comics

The discussion of hybridity in comics has been mainly focused on the verbal – visual dynamics, which, for some scholars, is a constitutive element of the entire medium. In comics, a story is told on two levels: image and text. For some scholars the image – text relationship is vital. Harvey puts it straightforwardly: “[c]omics are understood as narratives told by a sequence of pictures, with the dialogue of the characters incorporated into the pictures in the form of speech balloon. Comics are a hybrid form: words and pictures.”<sup>2</sup> Putting emphasis on the relationship between text and images as pivotal elements of the narrative, Harvey understands it as a defining element: without the image – text relationship comics does not exist. Similar ideas are expressed by Baetens and Frey who believe that

[t]he hybrid quality of the graphic novel introduces a split at the level of the dispatching of information, which is presented through the visual as well as the verbal channel. What one needs to understand is that the story is provided not just by the images but also by the text [...].<sup>3</sup>

Baetens and Frey draw attention to the two levels at which information in comics is conveyed and, at the same time, charge the reader with the task of decoding the meaning on both of these levels.

Hybridity was also of interest to Hillary Chute: “[c]omics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially.”<sup>4</sup> For her, hybridity also becomes a defining element of comics, and the attention it gains is more significant than the juxtaposition of images and comics sequentiality.

<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book. An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 143.

<sup>4</sup> Hillary Chute, “Comics As Literature? Reading Graphic Narratives,” *PMLA*, 123.2 (2008): 452.

Although comics is indeed a combination of verbal and visual language in order to tell a story, it is necessary to remember that there are instances of comics in which only one of these languages dominates. Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*<sup>5</sup> is deprived of any verbal signs and the responsibility for telling the story lies purely on the visual input. The other extreme can be found in Moore and Gibbon's *Watchmen*<sup>6</sup> where every issue/chapter is concluded with narratives: e.g., the fragments of one of the characters', Hollis Mason's autobiography "Under the Hood," an article from the fictional *Journal of the American Ornithological Society*, police files, letters, etc., which have no pictorial elements. These are incomprehensible without the context of the main story and the story would be incomplete without them. Hence, such sequences without images are integral parts of comic books or strips and can sometimes be referred to as imageless comics.

However, Miodrag points out that hybridity is more complicated than a simple mixture of the verbal and the visual: "[t]hough critics may disagree on the nature of comics' visual-verbal admixture, the debate is confused by a parallel disagreement over what sort of admixture the term 'hybridity' actually connotes."<sup>7</sup> A different approach towards hybridity is revealed by Neil Cohn who claims that comics is "a hybrid form of *two* separate media."<sup>8</sup> His approach focuses on the cross-cultural and structural combinations rather than on the linguistic ones. Cohn follows Levinson's ideas that "hybrid art forms are art forms arising from the actual combination or interpenetration of earlier art forms."<sup>9</sup> Levinson's perception of hybridity influences the general approach to comics and is a point of departure for discussing intermedial relationships. Unfortunately, Cohn does not elaborate his approach by specifying which media it takes into consideration or explaining why the hybrid art forms are limited to a combination of just two media. In his view, comics is most often paired with literature, due to the narrative and storytelling dimension, and with visual arts (drawing, painting) essential for composing individual panels and pushing the story forward.

Restricting the discussion of the hybridity of comics just to literature and visual arts will not reveal its greater hybrid potential. Possible hybrid relationships among diverse media are illustrated by a diagram whose main purpose is to position comics within a medial context which can inspire and influence it.

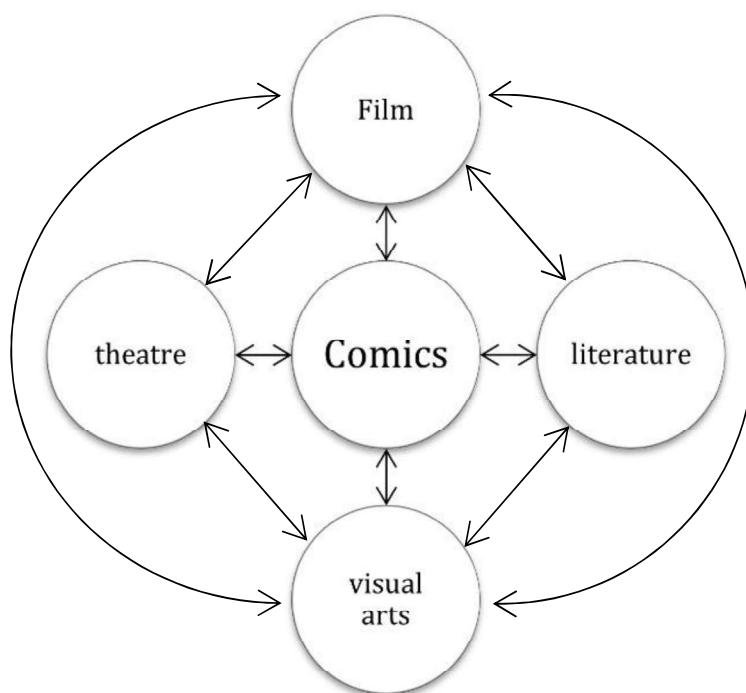
<sup>5</sup> Shaun Tan, *The Arrival* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Miodrag, *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013) 84.

<sup>8</sup> Neil Cohn, "Un-defining 'Comics': Separating the Cultural from the Structural in 'Comics,'" *International Journal of Comic Art*, 7.2 (2005): 237 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> Jerrold Levinson, "Hybrid Art Forms," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 18.4 (1984): 6.



**Fig.1. Rethinking the relationship between art forms with comics as their synthesis**

The diagram places comics in the central position in order to demonstrate its relationships with all other media. Obviously, it can be redesigned with another medium in the centre. The diagram shows how comics selects elements from other media in order to improve the storytelling potential. Simultaneously it represents comics as providing inspiration for other media. For example, comics has adopted elements of film language, such as the camera angle and types of shots influencing the composition of panels. On the other hand, film is influenced by the comics techniques and conventions, e.g., telling the story through images or splitting the screen to present multiple actions at the same time.<sup>10</sup>

The proximity of comics with film and literature is caused by the popularity of adaptations. Literature and its narrative theories have impact on the storytelling

<sup>10</sup> Film adaptations of comics which are popular (e.g., have a superhero) or universally praised by critics are quite commonplace. They can be very broadly divided into four categories: (1) adaptations of mainstream superhero comics (produced by Marvel or DC) which become blockbusters and create networks of characters and films called “universes”; (2) adaptations of entire comic books such as *300*, *Sin City* or *Watchmen*; (3) adaptations of comics and graphic narratives in animated films, such as *Persepolis* or *Alois Nebel*; (4) comics retelling the stories in popular films and TV series, such as *Game of Thrones*, *Twilight*, or *The Handmaid’s Tale* (interestingly, all those adaptations have a literary predecessor).

construction of characters and plot. The most surprising affinity exists between comics, theatre and performative arts, despite the general perception of theatre as a form of highbrow and comics of lowbrow culture. However, nowadays, the division into the high and low is losing its significance and the boundaries between cultural forms have become blurred. The increasing popularity of comics and more common links with theatre require a closer scrutiny of their relationship.

### **Adaptations of Comics for the Stage: Theory and Historical Overview**

The most straightforward relationship between comics and theatre is focused around the notions of adaptation or appropriation. One of the most influential theoreticians of the field, Linda Hutcheon, states that in the postmodern era numerous media can become part of the adaptive process and the process of adaptation does not have to be unidirectional, because any source text can be transposed into another medium.<sup>11</sup> Adaptations are characterized by shifts between media and genres which can be traced by intertextual exploration.<sup>12</sup> The study of these shifts as intertextual processes tests the possibilities and limits of adaptive media. In view of these features, adaptations can be included in the category of Jakobson's intersemiotic translations.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Leitch shows that adaptations are viewed differently depending on the source medium or genre and their position in value hierarchies:

Because 'literature', unlike 'cinema', is already an honorific, however, any discussion of literature on screen, as opposed to journalism or comic books or video games on screen, will begin willy-nilly with a bias in favour of literature as both a privileged field (literary texts are what movies normally adapt) and an aesthetically sanctified field (literary texts have already been approved by a jury whose verdict on their film adaptations is still out).<sup>14</sup>

The process of adaptation consists of three modes: showing, telling and interacting,<sup>15</sup> to follow Hutcheon. A source text can be presented in a new medium (e.g., a transposition from novel to film) or genre (tragedy to a musical): such a

<sup>11</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012) xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) 1.

<sup>13</sup> Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," *Selected Writings II, Word and Language* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971) 261.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Leitch, "Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads," *Adaptation*, 1.1 (2008): 63.

<sup>15</sup> Hutcheon 22-27.

change may enrich the understanding of the source text which is viewed as fluid, following Bryant's terminology. He explains that fluid text is "a work [which] is the sum of its versions; creativity extends beyond the solitary writer, and writing is a cultural event transcending media."<sup>16</sup> Hutcheon has laid theoretical foundations for the description and interpretation of the stage adaptation of comics. In her theory the reception of the new text depends on the awareness of the source text(s): without it, the meaning of the adaptation may be elusive. Obviously, the audience does not need to be acquainted with the source in order to enjoy the adaptation. The difference between adaptation and appropriation is based on a conscious link of the former with the source text, established by the adaptor and noticed by the audience.

Theatrical adaptations of comics are on the increase and they are not limited only to productions intended for young audiences. Numerous examples can be provided which vary in terms of style, genre, and theme. Kołsut has described the best known examples of such performances in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>17</sup> One of these was a Broadway musical by Charles Strouse titled *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman* (1966) and based on characters from *Superman* comics by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Another musical, created by Lisa Cron and Jenine Tesori, was based on a well-known graphic narrative *Fun Home* written by Alison Bechdel. It premiered in 2015 at Circle in the Square Theatre.

Adaptations of comics is not solely a domain of American theatres. Belgians staged their most famous comics, *Tintin*, written by Hergé. *Tintin. Le temple du Soleil*, premiered in 2001 at the Stadsschouwburg in Antwerp. It was directed by Dirk Brossé with lyrics and scenario by Seth Gaaikema and Frank van Laecke. Polish theatres have also staged productions based on comics; however, they still focus on works for children, such as *Tytus Romek i A'Tomek: Jak zostać artystą* (Tytus, Romek and A'Tomek: How to Become an Artist)<sup>18</sup> adapted by Teatr Kamienica (2014) in Warsaw and directed by Katarzyna Taracińska-Badura, or

<sup>16</sup> John Bryant, "Textual Identity and Adaptive Revision: Editing Adaptation as a Fluid Text," *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, ed. Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik and Erik Frisvold Hanssen (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 47.

<sup>17</sup> Rafał Kołsut, "Dramatyczne Dymki, czyli komiks na scenach polskich" (Dramatic Speech Balloons: Comics on the Polish Theatrical Stage), *Magazyn Miłośników Komiksów*, 2015, <https://kzet.pl/2015/07/dramatyczne-dymki-czyli-komiks-na-scenach-polskich/> (accessed on 25 May 2019).

<sup>18</sup> *Romek, Tomek i A'Tomek* was written by Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski (better known as Papcio Chmiel) and published in 1957-2009.

*Łauma*<sup>19</sup> (written by Karol KRL Kalinowski) which was adapted twice: first, in 2013 by Teatr Studio in Warsaw (directed by Rafał Samborski) and in 2017 by Teatr Dramatyczny in Wałbrzych by Magdalena Mikasz. In Slovakia, a production of *Titus, Romko a A'Tomko*, directed by Ján Šilan, was staged in a theatre in Prešov in 1988. A more recent example is the Czech adaptation of Jaroslav Foglar's *Záhada hlavolamu* (The Mystery of the Conundrum, 2017) in Divadlo Minor in Prague, which was adapted by Tomáš Jarkovský and Jakub Vašíček.

Apart from being adapted for the stage, comics can also have other kinds of impact on theatre productions. In 1991, Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels staged the ballet *The Hard Nut*. The scenography and stage design of this adaptation of *The Nutcracker* were influenced by the works of a comic artist, Charles Burns. Scenography was inspired by Burns's art, style and panel design. It imitated his works that are deeply instilled with archetypal concepts of guilt, childhood, adolescent sexuality, and poignant, nostalgic portrayals of post-war America.<sup>20</sup> The ballet was set in 1950s United States and in order to create its atmosphere, the scenographers worked with comic book clichés and rearranged them in a disturbing yet funny ways. It appears that comics can not only inspire theatrical adaptations, but also function as a visual inspiration for scenographers. The comics – theatre relationship thus extends beyond a mere adaptation process, but such an influence requires further analysis and explanation. Moreover, the impact is not unilateral: comics can influence theatre as well as theatre comics.

### Comics → Theatre

Apart from adaptations, comics can influence and inspire theatre through characteristic features that facilitate the creation and reception of a theatrical performance. Both comics and theatre have to deal with the limitations of space: in case of theatre, a three-dimensional theatrical space which requires careful planning and adopting the space to various places in the performance. In comics, artists have to tackle the limited space of the page and the panel, working on their composition and layout. Furthermore, comic authors always design a sequence of panels, and, despite changing perspective, they are never able to depict the full extent of the plot setting. In addition, both theatrical and comics spaces use synecdoche in order to represent chosen places, since it is naturally impossible to fully encapsulate the spaces in which the plots are taking place. The signs in

<sup>19</sup> Łauma is a Baltic goddess of earth and childbirth, a patron of witches and mysticism. Despite the title, Łauma as a character does not appear in the comics.

<sup>20</sup> Kolsut.



theatre as well as in comics have to be clear enough for the audience. In the case of theatre, the situation complicates as the space (stage) remains the same. In the case of comics, the artist/writer also has to struggle with composing panels, considering what to include or what part or fragment, even symbolic, would function best to illustrate the events of the plot. In her book *What is Scenography?*, Pamela Howard wrote about adopting a creative technique of “thinking drawings” in order to rethink and analyze staging choices for a performance.<sup>21</sup> She described her own preparations for staging her play *The New Jerusalem* where she used pictures (from the same, unchanged point of view) in order to trace the movement (blocking) of actors on stage.<sup>22</sup> The pictures include speech balloons, in order to correlate and synchronize the movement with speech. These juxtaposed images resemble very simple comics. Howard’s account demonstrates that scenographers and stage directors may adopt comics techniques when preparing for new performances: the comics panel may be helpful at an early planning stage as far as scenography or movement of actors are concerned.

Conscious readers and audience members constantly question themselves whether the line of interpretation they have adopted is comprehensible. In other words, the audience may not always fully understand what they are seeing and/or reading. In the case of comics, the fact that only fragments of reality depicted in panels can be shown highlights the importance of the page layout, where panels are separated by the frames’ gutter, and the reader is charged with the responsibility to ‘fill the gutter,’ to understand the link between the two, or more, pictures together with the events and actions that are depicted. McCloud has named this process a “closure,” stating that “[c]omic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality.”<sup>23</sup>

The idea of closure, relying on the audience to actively search for and create meaning, can also be applied to a theatrical performance in which the audience faces changes on the stage, such as the changes of scenes, or, in the case of role doubling, recognizing the convention and identifying the characters played by the same actor. The idea of closure, so characteristic for comics, belongs to the domain of reader-response and reception theory which, according to Fortier, is associated with most theoretical approaches and their representatives: semiotics (Peirce,

<sup>21</sup> Pamela Howard, *What Is Scenography?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019) 37-38, 244-45.

<sup>22</sup> Howard 314-35.

<sup>23</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993) 67.

Barthes, Elam, Pavis), phenomenology (theories of reception – listening, seeing, unravelling, the act of reading; Husserl, Ingarden, Iser), and post-structuralism (readerly and writerly text, joy of reading; Barthes), psychoanalysis (Freud) and others.<sup>24</sup> Fortier's summary points to a variety of approaches which may be adopted for the analysis of comics as well. The reception of comics takes place on two levels, the verbal and the visual: the receiver is at the same time a reader and a viewer – thus, reception theories typical of theatre studies, as well as reader-response criticism characteristic of literature can be applied for interpretation.

The significance of the audience in understanding theatrical signs and semiotics is discussed by Marvin Carlson. He claims that the viewer can focus in numerous ways but only on a fragment of a performance, while an understanding of the whole does not arrive until later; as summarized by Fortier,

The complexity and openness of signification on the stage create in the audience a “psychic polyphony” which allows individual audience members to focus their attention in any number of ways, allowing the theatrical spectator “an unique and individual ‘synchronic’ reading as the play moves forward diachronically.”<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the recipients of a comics experience the story through small fragments, that is, individual panels, and only through bringing them together they can actively participate in the story and fully comprehend it. Discussing the concept of receiver-audience, Anne Ubersfeld engages with similar ideas. She claims that experiencing a theatrical performance is an active and complex task:

spectators sort information, choose, and reject some of it, they push the actor in one direction, albeit through weak signs that the original sender can nonetheless clearly perceive as feedback. [...P]robably the greatest paradox, and the most difficult to understand in the particular conditions and limitations of proscenium theatre – it is the spectators, much more than the director, who create the spectacle: they must reconstruct the totality of the performance, along both the vertical axis and the horizontal axis. Spectators are obliged not only to follow a story, a fabula (horizontal axis), but also to constantly reconstruct the total figure of all of the signs engaged

<sup>24</sup> Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 21-26, 133, 88, 84-90.

<sup>25</sup> Fortier 136, quoting Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 99.

concurrently in the performance. They are at one and the same time required to engage themselves in the spectacle (identification) and to back off from it (distancing).<sup>26</sup>

As in the case of theatre, comics readers are charged with a similar task: to “reconstruct,” in Ubersfeld’s phrase, “the totality” of the story and their experience. Furthermore, just like theatre spectators, they have to be active and engaged; the only difference is that the spectator can rarely control the pace of the performance. A comics reader, however, is in control over the reading pace, can ponder over a single panel or re-read some fragments. Despite this difference, the closure typical of comics functions in theatre in a similar way: events on the stage are perceived like those on the page, which brings the two media closer together.

### Theatre → Comics

So far, the main focus has been on the potential relationship between comics and theatre – how the former influences the latter. However, the theatre and its theory have found their way to influence comics. In his PQ Talks presentation Randy Duncan discussed the ways in which theatre has influenced comics. For instance, the famous U.S. cartoonist, writer and entrepreneur Will Eisner admitted that his work was heavily influenced by theatre and theatre practices in setting the mood or expressing emotions. A good case in point is his “Hamlet On A Rooftop,” an adaptation of the monologue “To be or not to be.”<sup>27</sup> Eisner exaggerates the theatricality of the soliloquy, prolongs it and shows Hamlet altering his position, gestures and facial expression.

Many examples of the use of theatre signs can be found in comics adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. The three works to be briefly discussed here are Frank Flöthmann’s “Hamlet” from the *Shakespeare ohne Worte* (Shakespeare without Words) collection, Nicki Greenberg’s *Hamlet*, and *Kill Shakespeare* by Conor McCreery, Anthony Del Col and Andy Belanger. Due to its comments on the nature of theatre, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a particularly good choice for illustrating the theatre – comics relationship.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre*, ed. Paul Perron and Patrick Debbèche, trans. Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 23.

<sup>27</sup> Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from a Legendary Cartoonist* (New York and London: Norton, 2008) 92-101.

### Frank Flöthmann's "Hamlet"

Flöthmann's comics book<sup>28</sup> is an adaptation of five plays by Shakespeare based solely on visual language and signs, whose interpretation is necessary for understanding the comics. All panels are drawn in only four colours, black, white, green, and gold, and the signs are often encapsulated in speech balloons: for example, a saw sawing a log appearing in a balloon above a sleeping character indicates snoring instead of the widely used sign "zzz." Flöthmann has devised his own technique in order to convey a story only through images and to preserve its plot.

"Hamlet"<sup>29</sup> is an abridged version of Shakespeare's play. The comics focuses on the revenge story. There is no place for philosophical pondering as there are no words. As a result, the tragic plot with a limited number of characters (Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, King Hamlet – the Ghost, Ophelia, Laertes, and Polonius) is of predominant interest. From the theatrical viewpoint, the final page is the most intriguing: after the death of all characters the director and the stage manager suddenly appear and it becomes clear that the characters were actors rehearsing the play. A green spaceless background vanishes, revealing a brick wall in front of which the play was performed. There are spotlights above the 'actors' and the fly gallery with ropes is visible.

The last panel of the comics thus alters its atmosphere: the tragic coda of Shakespeare's play gives way to a more casual situation. The onstage setting of the comics also refers to *The Mousetrap* and the reflections on theatre and acting in Shakespeare's tragedy. Moreover, this ending destroys readers' preconceptions about the story, transforming the comics into meta-comics. The reader finds out that a comics panel can function as a theatrical stage and discovers similarities between comics and theatre as different forms of human creativity. The direct reference to theatrical elements is enhanced by the absence of the verbal component of the comics.

### Nicki Greenberg's *Hamlet*

Greenberg's comics book<sup>30</sup> widely differs from Flöthmann's work. It includes the text of the entire play and refers to its theatrical and dramatic features.<sup>31</sup> The author subtitled the work as "Staged on the page," which positions the text and the comics closer to the theatrical environment. As Leonie Jordan outlines,

<sup>28</sup> Frank Flöthmann, *Shakespeare ohne Worte* (Köln: Dumont, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Flöthmann 27-44.

<sup>30</sup> Nicki Greenberg, *Hamlet* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Apart from using the text of the play, the comics keeps all *dramatis personae* and the division into acts and scenes.

"[t]hroughout the text, the reader has the impression of watching a live performance. Photographed collages of sequins, lace, playbills, powder-puffs and feathers decorate the endpapers, giving the effect of a backstage dressing room and immediately establish the key motifs of 'acting,' pretence and trickery."<sup>32</sup> Greenberg treats the page as a theatrical stage and the characters resembling grotesque, dwarfed human figures, who are like "animated inkblots" that "leap, fly, expand,"<sup>33</sup> are treated as actors performing their lines on the stage. The comics/play begins with a prologue which reveals the protagonist's and the author's intentions. The six-page opening sequence develops slowly, a black silhouette appears against a green and ornamented curtain in order to literally put on a face. The drawing becomes an actor playing Hamlet, when the faceless character dons an actor's mask, which may refer to Hamlet's remark addressed to Ophelia: "I have heard of your paintings too well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another." (*Hamlet* 3.1.141-43)<sup>34</sup> While in the play Hamlet means women's duplicity symbolized by putting on make-up, here the words may refer to actor's make-up and impersonation of a character. Throughout the comics, there are a few moments when the reader is able to look behind the scenes and take a peek at the preparation of the actors/characters including their make-up. Here "the actors are seen shrugging off their on-stage roles and behaving like 'ordinary' people recognisable to the audience."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, a theatrical reference can be found in the opening sequence which starts with the words:

I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play have by the very cunning of the scene been struck so to the soul that presently they have proclaimed their malefactions. For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ.<sup>36</sup>

This passage is from Hamlet's third soliloquy (2.2) when the protagonist turns to the audience to talk about the nature of theatre and his role in it. Hamlet perceives himself as an actor who has a part to play. As a director of *The Mousetrap*, he expects the power of theatre will force Claudius to reveal his bad conscience. Not

<sup>32</sup> Leonie Jordan, "Structure and Style," *Teachers' Notes by Leonie Jordan: Hamlet by Nicki Greenberg* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2011) 3.

<sup>33</sup> Nicki Greenberg, "Author Commentary," *Teachers' Notes by Leonie Jordan. Hamlet by Nicki Greenberg* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2011) 6.

<sup>34</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Methuen Drama, 2006) 291.

<sup>35</sup> Jordan, "Structure and Style" 4.

<sup>36</sup> Greenberg, *Hamlet* iv-v. The passage is a quote from *Hamlet*, 2.2.523-29.

only do the lines anticipate a specific response to a theatrical performance staging a murder, but they are also Hamlet's direct appeal to the audience's attention to what is about to happen on the page/stage. Moving these lines to the very beginning of the story/play, the author alerts the audience about the coming events. Once the prologue ends, the story/play begins with the curtain rolling back. Actually, the curtain as a theatrical sign appears at the beginning of each act and scene, as a reminder of the presence of the stage, so that the reader is reminded of the theatrical source of the comics.

Although *Hamlet* is inherently linked with place, namely Elsinore Castle, the setting of Greenberg's comics does not represent the castle itself. Elsinore is referred to but not depicted. Even though the story unfolds on a pseudo-theatrical stage symbolized by the curtains, it actually happens outside of time and space. The panels are fragmented, revealing only parts of the stage and the readers have to fill the gutters and interpret the signs. Their task is difficult, since the background rarely shows where the characters are. Like a theatre audience, readers have to assume that what they see in the background of a panel is Elsinore.

Finally, Greenberg's comics also offers a backstage view after the conclusion of each scene and act, which breaks the theatrical illusion and also echoes the concept of the play within a play, which is crucial in *Hamlet*.<sup>37</sup> The backstage is a liminal space where the actors are preparing for their role before entering the stage. At one instance Ophelia is depicted sitting in front of the mirror just before the final call.<sup>38</sup> Other characters are joking around and seem to be the best of friends. The backstage view breaks the illusion; it can be compared to the instances from films which break the fourth wall to reveal the author and the screening process. Breaking the illusion and stressing the theatrical elements, Greenberg reminds the reader of the historical sources of his *Hamlet* and also that reading comics may be similar to experiencing a theatrical performance. Both presume active reception and interpretation of a work of art.

### ***Kill Shakespeare* by Conor McCreery, Anthony Del Col and Andy Belanger**

The last work to be discussed is Volume 2 of the *Kill Shakespeare* series which uses an intertextual approach to Shakespeare's plays. The authors have brought together most of Shakespeare's characters and sent them on an adventurous mission to find a mythical and god-like figure: Shakespeare. Whereas the first volume questions comics forms, Volume 2 challenges the relationship of these forms with theatre. The division into acts, but not scenes, has been preserved, and

<sup>37</sup> Jordan, "Structure and Style" 4.

<sup>38</sup> Greenberg, *Hamlet* 51.

the volume begins as if on a stage, which is also indicated by the presence of curtains. However, in *Kill Shakespeare* the 'stage' has to house a limitless space. Unlike in Greenberg's *Hamlet* or in Flöthmann's comics, the setting of the plot is quite meticulous and realistic. *Kill Shakespeare's* panels are more detailed and planned and the authors leave less interpretative responsibility to the audience.

Chapter 1 from Volume 2 (#7), depicts a performance of *The Mousetrap* on stage which looks like a 'theatre-within-comics.' Here, some characters become comics actors and other characters are spectators. Thus, the reader not only watches the theatrical performance but also sees other characters watching it. Moreover, apart from onstage events, the reader can see what happens offstage, since one of the characters, the Harlequin, seems to manipulate and control all the characters. The figure of the Harlequin, which is inherently linked with the history of theatre, also appears at the end of the volume, when the curtain – a sign of theatre – is seen on the margin of the page as if framing the events of the comics within a theatrical setting. The jester looks directly at the audience as if reminding it of his manipulative nature. This gesture creates a shared understanding of which other characters cannot be aware.

*Kill Shakespeare* has had an intriguing afterlife which contributes further to the discussion of the comics – theatre relationship. The comics has been turned into a dramatic reading, which was first performed in 2011 by actors from Soulpepper Theatre in the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto. The reading was accompanied by images from *Kill Shakespeare* comics.<sup>39</sup> While the display of separate and juxtaposed images may lose its narrative potential in this context, it has a supplementary and explanatory function. Moreover, the performative nature of the reading may become a prelude to a future stage adaptation of the comics. As a result, *Kill Shakespeare* has laid the foundations for an even more complex link between comics and theatre. The project inscribes itself into the adaptive process of comics on the stage, enhancing the hybrid nature of comics and its cooperation with other media.

The creators also took a step forward exploring the performative capabilities of the comics. Originally intended as a video game, *Kill Shakespeare* finally became a board game which allows players to re-enact the story and lead the battles among Shakespearean characters. The game may be of interest to game studies, since it meets the constitutive rules formulated by Roger Caillois: unproductivity of the game, limited space and time, voluntary participation, applicable rules,

<sup>39</sup> Most of the information about *Kill Shakespeare: The Dramatic Reading* comes from production notes sent to me by Conor McCreery.

fictitious reality, as well as an unpredictable ending and outcome.<sup>40</sup> Apart from these qualities, *Kill Shakespeare: The Board Game* also realises the adaptive potential by embodying fictive characters and acts in the manner intended by the authors of the story. While this element is not crucial for the enjoyment of the game, it is a welcome addition which may improve the players' experience. *Kill Shakespeare* is a significant example of a complex adaptive path – from Shakespeare's ideas and plays, through comics and dramatic reading, to a board game. It is clear that the links between these entities are not direct; however, the authors of *Kill Shakespeare* may have been influenced by theatrical productions and films, as well as by other works unrelated to Shakespeare. *Kill Shakespeare* establishes a link to theatre in a slightly different way than Flöthmann's and Greenberg's works, but at the same time it stimulates a further development of approaches to comics leading to performative and game studies.

## Conclusion

Continuing the discussion initiated during the panel at the Prague Quadrennial Talks in 2019, the article has traced the relationship between comics and theatre. Although the initial idea to compare the two media may have seemed unrealistic, a closer inspection of their relationships has revealed their surprising complexity, reaching far beyond mere staging or adaptation. Establishing the links between the two media has also provided a basis for further investigations and explorations. The discussion first concentrated on the influence of comics on theatre, focusing on adaptation. It documented numerous examples of theatrical performances inspired by comics, either as source texts or as an aesthetic inspiration. The latter part of the article has examined the influence of theatre on comics including the theatrical elements found in comics. A particular attention was paid to the comics adaptations of Shakespeare's dramas, especially to *Hamlet*, because of the play's references to theatre and theatrical performance.

The research outlined in the article is by no means exhaustive as it has chiefly concentrated on textual examples. It would have to be supplemented and expanded with analyses of theatrical performances showing the traces of comics influence, as well as of the theatrical elements in comics that have not been adapted for the stage. The link between comics and theatre has revealed even greater possibilities of interdisciplinary and inter-arts creativity, which spreads across various media, such as the *Kill Shakespeare* project. All instances of the

<sup>40</sup> Roger Caillois, *Men, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 9-10.



discussed relationships can be subsumed under the heading of “comics scenography” which emphasizes the interrelationships between the two media. Although comics explorations in theatre, as well as theatrical ones in comics, still need to be developed and refined, the term comics scenography has proved itself a useful general reference to those influences and relationships.