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/ HISTORIES

Let’s Play the Peasantry Again: The ‘Folk Turn’ in Stage Adaptations

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The article is an analysis of the latest stage adaptations of books that contribute to the phenomenon of the so-called ‘people’s turn’ in Polish culture: narrating the history of Polish society as well as individual biographies from the perspective of underprivileged classes. The author discusses the performances by Jędrzej Piaskowski and Hubert Sulima, Agnieszka Jakimiak and Mateusz Atman, Piotr Pacześniak and Wera Makowsx, Romuald Krężel and Wojtek Rodak, and Szymon Adamczak in relation to a play from over a decade earlier, *In the Name of Jakub S.* by Paweł Demirski, considered foundational for the ‘people’s turn.’ Special attention is given to the recognition or lack thereof of the class character of the theater medium and its affective impact.

Keywords: Paweł Demirski; class struggle; people’s history of Poland; ‘people’s turn’; stage adaptations

Jakub Szela ‘cuts off Howard’s fingers – at least he wants to believe he does, because in the end it turns out that he only imagined it, just as many others imagine that they’re doing something, but they’re not’ (Demirski, 2024, p. 68). This action-inaction, this fantasy of stage action, is recorded in the stage directions of the final scene of Paweł Demirski’s drama *W imię Jakuba S.* (In

the Name of Jakub S.). Its 2011 staging, directed by Monika Strzępka at Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw (a co-production with Teatr Łaźnia Nowa in Krakow), has, at least in certain circles, the status of a cult performance. In discussions about the 'folk turn' currently underway in humanities, literature, and cinema, the premiere of *In the Name of Jakub S.* recurs as an important announcement, a foreshadowing, or even one of the founding moments of that turn. Demirski's quote above suggests both theatrical illusion (the 'wanting to believe'), the psychological identification with the character on stage ('they seem to be doing something, but they're not'), and finally, the question of the effectiveness in general – of theatre? of political action?

In this article, I would like to examine the political (in)effectiveness of several plays created more than a decade after *In the Name of Jakub S.*, on the wave of the triumphant march of the 'folk turn' through publishing houses, editorial offices, and television and cinema screens. This includes performances based on books that were either key to the concept, or deeply rooted in it: *Ludowa historia Polski* (A Folk History of Poland) directed by Piotr Pacześniak based on the book by Adam Leszczyński (premiere: 17 Sept. 2021, Teatr Nowy in Łódź), *Chamstwo* (The Boors) directed by Agnieszka Jakimiak based on the book by Kacper Pobłocki (premiere: 28 Jan. 2023, Teatr Współczesny in Wrocław), *Skok wzwyż* (The High Jump) directed by Wojtek Rodak based on the book *Hanka: Opowieści o awansie* (Hanka: Tales of Advancement) by Maciej Jakubowiak (premiere: 5 July 2024, Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw), *Chłopki. Opowieść o nas i naszych babkach* (Peasant Women: A Tale of Us and Our Grandmothers) directed by Jędrzej Piaskowski and inspired by the book of the same name by Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak (premiere: 9 November 2024, Helena Modrzejewska Theatre in Legnica).

What will be important to me are: to what ends and in what way the theatrical medium is harnessed to tell the story of Poland as a class-based society; whether and how it tries to thematise its own class entanglement; and finally, what political stakes are involved in adapting books that make up the Polish 'folk turn.'

How Art Works

'Powerlessness turned into rage,' wrote Joanna Krakowska, among others, about the characters in Demirski's plays (2019). Also analysing the plays of Dorota Masłowska, Magda Fertacz and Przemysław Wojcieszek, Krakowska argues that Polish theatre at the beginning of the 21st century heralded the rise of the populist right – 'it recognised the problems long before right-wing politicians platformed them in their policy and rhetoric' (ibid., p. 13). Theatre targeted the 'electorate of hurt feelings' (ibid., p. 19), recognising the processes of social shaming and the sense of powerlessness. Grzegorz Niziołek, in turn, wrote that 'the fear of resentment paralysed the processes of recognising social reality and its origins in Poland' (2012, p. 48) – and that the early plays of Monika Strzępka, Paweł Demirski and Jan Klata overcame this fear. At the same time, they revealed mechanisms that were difficult to analyse in official discourse without falling out of it and sliding into areas considered highly risky. Niziołek cites, among others, Klata's 2004 adaptation of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's 1923 play set in Wałbrzych, *Janulka, daughter of Fizdejka*, which depicts European integration as a form of Teutonic colonisation by German EU decision-makers, mixing a range of time perspectives and using images of starving prisoners in striped uniforms as a metaphor for the social hunger of advanced civilisational consumption (ibid., p. 51).

In his article, Niziołek also mentions Demirski's *Sztuka dla dzieci* (A Play for Children) (dir. Monika Strzępka, Norwid Theatre in Jelenia Góra, 2009) – a riskily intense attack on the politics of memory, on attempts at cultural domestication or the assimilation of historical traumas. Seemingly, the 'folk turn' and the problems around advancement clearly fit into the circle of topics covered by the 'fear of resentment.' The official condemnation of communism and the ridicule of the People's Republic's rhetoric of social emancipation; the repression of the process of seizing Jewish property as described by, among others, Andrzej Leder; the rise of the concept of *homo sovieticus*; the privatisation of responsibility for one's own fate; and finally, the promotion of the concept of a large middle-class society in order to conceal the true privileges of the upper class ('we pretend to be middle class so that you won't feel sorry' – as Dziedziczka says in *In the Name of Jakub S.* by Demirski, anticipating the scholarly findings of, among others, Maciej Gdula, who later wrote: 'a specific arrangement in which the upper class pretends to be middle class, and the middle class thinks it is in the lead, allows for the merging of the interests of the elites and the middle class' [2018]) – all this should favour the political effectiveness of stage performances referring to this subject. Why this is not happening is one of the questions I'd like to ask myself.

Both Niziołek's approach and Krakowska's make it quite clear that the political power of theatrical narratives on anger – manifested, for example, in the theatre's anticipation of party agendas or discussion on the media – results from their affective nature. I think I can risk a generalisation here that the horizon of theatre's political effectiveness, understood in this way, lies in outlining a conflict that is not currently clearly articulated in the public sphere – and in taking a clear stance, invoking affects that have no place in that public sphere.[1]

To give a clear example: Oliver Frljić's *The Curse* updated the dividing lines that at first glance seemed obvious but were not frequently presented either convincingly or clearly on the Polish theatrical stage, and in social life were subject to more or less unnamed Catholic censorship – within what Marcin Kościelniak calls the 'Catholic paradigm,' which combines the description of communism *en bloc* as a totalitarian and therefore unequivocally negative system and, at the same time, the recognition of the position of the Catholic Church as 'the guardian and exponent of so-called Christian values, which were widely recognised as the universal, absolute, indisputable, and non-negotiable foundation of Polish identity and Polish socio-political reality' (Kościelniak 2024, p. 32–33). In turn, the staged invocation of Felix Dzerzhinsky and Rosa Luxemburg in Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski's *Battle of Warsaw 1920* (premiere at the Narodowy Stary Teatr in Kraków on 22 June 2013) was a violation of another form of censorship stemming from the structure of Polish post-1989 discourse, a brazen disregard for the anti-communist exorcism that cast these figures not only outside the Polish national community but also outside the order of artistic representation.

Finally, even earlier, the aforementioned *In the Name of Jakub S*. not only thematised the class nature of historical conflicts and perceptions of political violence but also linked old historical grievances to the private story of a thirty-something couple taking out a mortgage – something irritatingly mundane from the perspective of a revision of the romantic codes of community that the invocation of Szela's spectre was meant to attack. This generated not only outrage but also embarrassment – it violated decorum. 'Resentment,' wrote Niziołek – treated as a tool of conscious political manipulation – 'must be associated with bad taste in order to fulfil its ideological purpose' (2012, p. 48). One might be tempted to hypothesise that Strzępka and Demirski, though born in the 1970s, became, with *In the Name*

of Jakub S., not only artists who broke taboos, but also elements of the figure of the 'entitled millennial' haunting the journalistic-expert-party discourse of the time (and today, too, though less frequently), at that time a figure frightening the Polish conservative and liberal press alike, which resorted to tastelessly exaggerated analogies. An example of this classification of the duo at the time is Krzysztof Varga's column:

> The message is actually quite simple: Jakub Szela was cool, though he had his flaws; but he was right. The theme that Szela actually did the Austrians' work, I'd say, is a bit understated, if not entirely absent. The play's epilogue tells us this directly. The modernisation, however, seems to be based on the idea that today's capitalism is like the old serfdom, that a mortgage for an apartment (93 square meters, as it's described in the play – one might envy) is today's serfdom, and the bank is today's lord of the manor. The subtle difference, in my opinion, is that no one forces you to take out a loan today, as they did back then (2012).

I'm giving examples of these now-historical plays from the past decade because they demonstrate how leftist theatre can (or could?) still violate taboos and provoke strong reactions in the Polish public sphere. The above review is, of course, fragmentary, and the criterion of 'effectiveness' proposed here is open to debate – if only because of the changing way theatre functions in the media, the decline of traditional culture sections in editorial offices, and the transformation of press genres such as the column and the review.

But why don't the theatrical narratives about folk history that have been

created in recent years possess at least some of this effectiveness? After all, as Roch Sulima, one of the most important researchers of folk narratives, wrote: ‘The widespread discussion about shameful origins heralds the founding of one of the most important national clinics for Polish neuroses’ (2015, p. 29). Perhaps within the framework of the public debate, or rather a certain segment of it, these lineages ceased to be ‘embarrassing,’ and within the framework of subsequent discussions of publishing hits about social advancement and the folk history of Poland, origins from broadly understood and not fully defined ‘social lowlands’ became an argument in status games, in imitation of Western discourses (Maciej Jakubowiak, the author of *Hanka…*, was labelled as the ‘Polish Eribon’). Perhaps in such a case they would lose the freshness and subversive power of the recognition that Joanna Jopek noticed in this production right after the premiere of *In the Name of Jakub S.*:

> A man can leave the country, but the country cannot leave him – this formula is used subversively by the creators of the play in a brilliant portrait of the aspiring class, Biff and the Secretaries, laboriously learning the codes of the middle class (the prices of wines to bring to a party, the places to go on vacation, the fact that one should drink caffe latte, carry a Starbucks cup and – probably – watch anti-establishment plays by Strzępka and Demirski (2012).

And while the selection of sample codes may have become somewhat dated, the ‘desperate (in the face of economic crisis) confirmation and consolidation of the capitalist system through the need to constantly prove one’s belonging to it’ diagnosed by Jopek seems to be an even more visible mechanism in today’s reality.

Why the theatre is weakening

I'll venture a hypothesis: in the cases of *The Boors* or *A Folk History of Poland*, the mere act of reaching for the titles of highly publicised and widely discussed books reveals a certain weakness of theatre. It's not just that *In the Name of Jakub S.* by Strzępka and Demirski once overtook books by Leszczyński, Pobłocki or Leder, thus marking the peak of interest in the topic of the 'folk turn' in Polish culture; that to some extent, over a decade ago, 'theatre was on top,' but today it isn't. It's also about theatre's weakening not only in terms of the pace of diagnosis or recognition, but also in its visibility. The series of plays discussed here is also, after all, simply a consequence of the ongoing boom in non-fiction literature and, ultimately, what has been called the crisis of contemporary Polish playwriting, approached from various perspectives. Using titles familiar from press debates, interviews and promotional campaigns by major publishing houses (*Hanka…* and *The Boors* were published by Czarne, *A Folk History of Poland* by W.A.B.) is an attempt to attract the attention of audiences and media, which these days is usually not guaranteed by the name of a director or playwright. At the same time, from the perspective of creating an attractive theatrical product, the situation is not easy. By taking *Hanka…*,*The Boors*, or *A Folk History of Poland*, the creators face the challenge of adapting a fundamentally 'non-stage' text to the stage. In the case of *Hanka…* by Jakubowiak, this task seems relatively simple; the autobiographical essay has its characters and tells – albeit with numerous digressions – their unfolding story. However, staging a history book or an essay on how violence is recorded in language and the social subconscious requires that a strong stage framework be established.

In the case of Agnieszka Jakimiak's *The Boors*, based on Mateusz Atman's script, it's a situation of staged group therapy that is, moreover, divided along gender lines. It consists of two distinct parts with separate casts; first male, then female – which resonates with the imposition of class violence on patriarchal violence in Pobłocki's book. The theatrical structure of *A Folk History of Poland* is decidedly less coherent and clear, described by one reviewer as 'formal syncretism.' 'We glide through absurdity, farce, self-theatre, and even video in a television format,' wrote Maciej Guzy (2021). Even a cursory analysis shows that the division declared by theatres into 'adaptations' and 'inspired plays' is not adequate, or at least not very functional, when it comes to performances created under the banner of the 'folk turn.' For example, the 'adapted' *A Folk History of Poland* contains numerous original scenes developed during rehearsals and absent from Leszczyński's text, while the 'inspired' *The High Jump* in Warsaw's Performing Arts Theatre encompasses virtually the entire framework of the main character from *Hanka…* Perhaps a different division would be more appropriate here. Małgorzata Sugiera has proposed the following distinction between adaptation and rewriting:

> 'Rewriting' concerns rather the transfer and adaptation of content, issues, metaphors, and discourses into the framework of a different way of thinking. It could therefore be said that while adaptation is 'yes,' confirming existing interpretations and merely seeking to convey them through different means, rewriting is 'no,' seeking to emphasise the differences between the accepted and proposed readings rather than remaining faithful to the existing ones (2008, p. XX).

The plays *The Boors, The High Jump*, and *A Folk History of Poland* are based on attempts to find equivalents or 'other means' for the main ideas of the adapted works. The creators of these performances try to move from adapted book syntheses to the perspective of stage micro-stories, including attempts to derive 'folk' genealogies of the actors or of other people co-creating the performance. They thus draw on elements of collective creation. The gesture of authorial self-analysis is thus dispersed, as is – at least in principle – authorship itself. This seems to meet the criteria of auto-theatre. Joanna Krakowska defined it as 'auto-theatre, or theatre whose creators speak from the stage in their own name and under their own name, not that of a stage character' (2016). However, despite employing devices from this order, in Pacześniak's *A Folk History of Poland* or Rodak's *The High Jump*, theatre is not problematised as an element of a broader field of cultural production. The attempt to tell a story about the class genealogy of Polish society or of a specific Polish intellectual is played out here without noticing the class nature of the medium through which it is told.

Moreover, performances created as part of the adaptation of the 'folk turn' prove to be much more conservative and cautious in this respect than the attempts to address the entanglements of theatrical institutions that have been present in Polish auto-theatre over the past decade. One example is Jolanta Janiczak, Joanna Krakowska, Magda Mosiewicz and Wiktor Rubin's production *Kantor Downtown* (Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz, 2015), which explored actress Marta Malikowska's rural origins and the question of violence in Tadeusz Kantor's practices, but juxtaposed with the stark topic of remuneration in theatre, which is based on pre-determined amounts.

Jakimiak and Atman go the furthest in their attempt to problematise theatre as a phenomenon linked to the theme of the 'folk turn' in Wrocław's *The*

Boors. ‘Hi everyone, my name is Andrzej and I have experienced rudeness in the theatre; I was a victim of rudeness, I was an observer, a participant, I was manipulated into rudeness in the theatre,’ Miłosz Pietruski says on stage. The actor tells the story of a difficult job at another theatre, with which he was previously associated. ‘Fuck, you’re wooden, wooden, not an actor!’ ‘Fucking act!’ Pietruski shouts, kicking a stump and reenacting the violence he has experienced. However, here too, the class entanglement of theatre, the class character of attending the theatre as a cultural practice, remains beyond interest – the performance focuses on the violence behind the scenes, not on who the audience is, where they come from and what their goals are.

In place of confrontation, there is an attempt to build a kind of therapeutic community between the audience and the performers. Thus, once again, a process aptly named by Grzegorz Niziołek is underway:

> Theatre in Poland is an institution that, through complex processes of repression, resistance and exclusion, has constructed the model of a sublime audience, one that perceives itself as representing the national community. The individual experience of the viewer is affectively opened to the experience of community, which no longer denotes a group of spectators gathered for a specific performance (2016, p. 256).

In *The Boors*, the group of spectators sitting in a circle on tree stumps becomes *pars pro toto* a community of victims of patriarchal, ‘masterly’ violence, a representation of a wider community, united in the experience of post-serfdom trauma – contemporary conflicts disappear in a dramatic

gesture that, from the perspective of attempts to narrate the class genealogy of contemporary Polish society, can be read as a measure of self-censorship. Class differences and economic tensions are particularly susceptible to this tactic – in the quoted text, Niziołek himself devalues the leftist analysis of the economic entanglement of theatre, stating, in passing, that 'neoliberal economic censorship simply supports those social aspirations that the majority represents' (2016, p. 261), a point supposedly overlooked by the left (represented in Niziołek's argument by Ewa Majewska). Niziołek thus evades the issue of social class or economic inequality in general – as if the social 'majority' of consumers also possessed the 'majority' of resources.

From afar, the view is beautiful

Reaching out to the actors' biographies provides an opportunity to confirm the thesis about the peasant origins of the majority of today's Polish society, including in *A Folk History of Poland* as staged in Łódź. This self-analysis, however, focuses primarily on rather ancient roots, and thus leads to a somewhat ritualistic repetition of generalities. Take Przemysław Dąbrowski's monologue:

> From the people or from the elite? The surname Dąbrowski, like Gosławski and many others, those ending in -ski, supposedly indicate higher ancestry. I don't think this applies to all Dąbrowskis. This surname is the sixth most common surname in Poland. There are over six hundred thousand of us, so what kind of elite is this? Half the family is from the Prussian partition, half from the Russian partition. Kalisz is in the middle. I was born there. On my father's side, I suspect my family has peasant roots, but I don't

> know much, as my grandfather died before the war. On my mother's side, my roots are clearly peasant (Pacześniak, Makowsx, p. 230).

In the Łódź production, stopping the family narrative at World War II and the partitions is, in a sense, an intensification of Adam Leszczyński's gesture, who ends his *A Folk History of Poland* in 1989. In the book, Leszczyński explains this decision with the belief that 'the transformation is too close and too well-described (as well as too recently described) to devote space to it here – which would necessarily have to come at the expense of earlier periods that are less relevant in today's debate, but worth recalling because they help demonstrate an important thesis of this book' (2020, p. 528). However, in the case of the subjectivisation and personalisation of the story, which is precisely what happens in Pacześniak's production, cutting off at the postwar period – that is, setting the caesura later than Leszczyński does – deprives this entire auto-theatrical device of its political power. Theatre relents from tracing the closer origins of today's reality – whether out of concern for privacy or fear of resentment – while the post-war reality and its accompanying political and social divisions are far more concrete and far more present in the public sphere than the question of serfdom in Galicia or in Congress Poland. Of course, these two conflicts can be juxtaposed – this was a fundamental gesture in *In the Name of Jakub S.* and is the subject of sociological analysis in the works of Tomasz Zarycki and Tomasz Warczok, for example, who trace the persistence and transformation of the noble ethos into the intelligentsia, as well as the structure of the elites' domination and its entanglement in relation to capital. In Jakimiak's and Pacześniak's plays, such a juxtaposition is absent – instead, a sharp cut is made. History is viewed from afar. The revolution – the closer one – therefore remains

dreamed of; although, as always, not entirely dreamed of. The scene titled ‘The Indiscreet Charm of the Middle Class’ is a videotaped tour of a strikingly decorated apartment. The character played by Przemysław Dąbrowski, called *Star* in the script and *Burgher* in the play’s description, shows a carved table – a souvenir from his travels, an ‘African mask’ and musings on the different types of roasted coffees – this entire catalogue of distinctive artefacts and practices combines to create a rather typical, somewhat exaggerated satire of the bourgeois lifestyle. And then, suddenly, menorahs magically fall out of a black hole in the wall. Even though the building has been renovated, as Star/Burgher notes. ‘That’s the peculiarity of this apartment. As they say, an apartment with soul,’ says the actor, picking up more Jewish candlesticks from the floor. It’s a delicate satire on the repression of the wartime and post-war history of the city and its real estate – it appears and then disappears as a flash in this one scene.

‘And/or Class Advancement’

The stage equivalent of Jakubowiak’s autobiographical gesture from *Hanka…* in Wojtek Rodak’s play was to engage a non-professional performer for *The High Jump*, who would tell her story as part of the performance. The announcement, published on the Performance Art Theatre’s social media, alongside other places, specified the expectations for the candidates as follows:

> The creators address, among other topics, the social advancement of women and class mobility in Poland from the post-war era to the new, post-socialist, capitalist reality after 1989. We would like to invite an ‘expert on everyday life,’ a non-professional actor, to work

on the play. We are looking for:
– A woman over 60;
– With experience of being a grandmother;
– Having experience moving to a larger city and/or moving up in class, willing to share her story on stage;
– Fit and open to physical activity (sports/physical activity is valued);
– Open to new challenges, ready to perform in front of an audience on stage.

As a result of the casting, Ewa Błasiak appeared in *The High Jump*. Rodak and Adamczak try to build a parallel with *Hanka…*, played by Marta Ojrzyńska, by looking for simple analogies – such as moving to a larger city or failing her high school final exams at the first try. A reviewer for *Teatr* magazine attempted to describe the dynamics generated by Ewa Błasiak's presence on stage this way: 'The common points emphasise the universal dimension of the story and at the same time make it personal. Błasiak's charm as a performer and her imperfections as an actress bring us closer to life' (Gac, 2024, p. 33). This extension of the stage function as the 'expert on everyday life' in its ambivalence between 'universal' and 'personal,' between 'story' and 'life,' seems to accurately capture Rodak and Adamczak's intention. This element of self-theatrical style seems intended to increase the possibility of identifying with a specific story. At the same time – like the Performance Art Theatre's casting announcement – it blurs the already broad category of 'social advancement.'

As the title of the play suggests, Rodak and playwright Szymon Adamczak further expand the story of the failed sports career of *Hanka* – the mother of

the book's author. Even in the book, the high jump, a discipline practiced by *Hanka* in her youth, is used extensively as a recurring metaphor for advancement. On stage, this metaphor is expanded, embodied and looped. And while the jump performed in a loop in the finale by Marcin Wojciechowski (playing the narrator – repeated with the bar raised ever higher, until failure – is a vivid, memorable stage image, yet in a play where so many words are spoken, there are surprisingly few about advancement itself. Social realities are reduced to occasional slogans.

'Inflation, hyperinflation, transformation. I'm left out in the cold:' this is Hanka's account of the political transformation. 'I work hard, sweating my brow, / and we know / that the country must be rebuilt, / the capital must be cleared of rubble, / and a sandstone palace built:' this is an image of the Polish People's Republic as seen in the context of Marian, Hanka's father. There are also no on-stage situations that would more directly address this topic. Ultimately, although there is a great deal of narratorial meta-commentary in *The High Jump*, it does not address these themes.

Social situations signalled by such emblems seem purely pretextual, as if they merely evoked a convention already familiar and recognised by the audience – 'the game of elite and people,' as Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak put it. Analysing one of Grzegorz Sroczyński's radio broadcasts, the researcher observed, in her words, 'attempts to justify the uniqueness of the encounter between the elites and the common people. This triggers generalised assumptions about the participants in the discussion and the differences between them, which essentialise the subject positions assigned to them in the discourse' (2021, p. 107). This essentialisation means that the 'production' of the intellectual, the writer, the participant in the literary field – the critic, the award juror, the editor of the literary section of a major

magazine – disappears from view in both *Hanka…* and *The High Jump*. The point of arrival here is 'human:' a humanities class in high school and, later, the Jagiellonian University. The distance between these achievements and the intelligentsia position from which Jakubowiak speaks remains entirely unexamined.

In their study of the hegemony of the intelligentsia in Poland, Zarycki and Warczok point out that the identity of many intelligentsia circles functions on the principle of 'denying one's own intellectuality, or at least avoiding direct references to it' (2014, p. 46). Karolina Kulpa, in her review of *Hanka…*, has already pointed out the apparent historicisation of Jakubowiak's narrative: 'The fundamental paradox is that [Jakubowiak] speaks without revealing how he came to speak. He finds it easy to describe his mother's moods, but less so when it comes to criticising the circle he so readily bought into' (2024). I draw attention to this critique of the literary original because Rodak and Adamczak's adaptation seems to deepen the problem I mentioned above – the medium of theatre doesn't so much dialectically clash with it as it oscillates with a vibrato-like resonance. In this respect, the presence of the 'expert on everyday life' in *The High Jump* becomes a functionally classic fetish – intensely obscuring what is missing. 'Hanka becomes an empty proper name, filled with arbitrary content,' wrote Kulpa, critical of the portrayal of the titular heroine of Jakubowiak's book. It is telling that what was once a criticism of the book returned in the reception as a praised advantage of the Performance Art Theatre's production. Dominik Gac appreciated that the play transforms Jakubowiak's story into 'not a class parable about a boy from Żory who becomes a metropolitan intellectual, but a universal story of struggle. Not so much with Bourdieu's habitus, but with the prose of life in Poland over the past seventy years' (Gac, 2024, p. 32).

And so, the specific becomes submerged in the ‘universal,’ social antagonism extinguished, resentment pushed into the shadows, and the mechanisms of symbolic power obscured by emotion. ‘Common folk,’ in turn, to use the term (Pol. *Lud*) used by Roch Sulima, following Czesław Hernas, is celebrated as ‘the humanist sacred.’

Forced Reparations

Threads and quotes from Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak’s *Peasant Women* appear in various, sometimes unexpected places in the text of Jędrzej Piaskowski and Hubert Sulima’s play. However, the entire plot – this play does have a plot – is written and draws on the poetics of a docu-soap. Here’s a jam factory and its employees with their everyday problems – late paycheques, junk contracts, an office romance and a misalliance. Simple situations are framed by a series of onstage parentheses; from the fact that some of the female roles are played by men, to the sketching of the scenes with a very thick, campy line, to the over-emotionalisation of supposedly realistic situations. Finally, there’s the lynching of a middle-level manager, the chief accountant who’s late with a transfer. This is shown in a clearly exaggerated manner, combining grotesquely depicted sexual violence, the severing of body parts with an axe, and the use of firearms – all in a slapstick style. This violence may be reminiscent of the finger-cutting scene described at the beginning of *In the Name of Jakub S*. However, while in Strzępka’s play it bordered on shocking drasticness and somewhat gaudy artificiality, here the accumulation of ostentatiously theatrical, conventional violence, visible primarily in the intensity of the perpetrators’ actions, seems like a staged illustration of fantasy, a form of class role-play.

If, according to Małgorzata Sugiera, ‘rewriting’ is a ‘no’ – in contrast to ‘adaptation,’ which conveys the work’s ‘message,’ then Sulima and Piaskowski’s work is an attempt at precisely such a rewriting of Kuciel-Frydryszak’s book, and even an attempt to dialectically overcome the ‘folk turn’ in its current form. The reception of Piaskowski and Sulima’s Legnica production seems to simultaneously demonstrate an expectation of adaptation, a demand for ‘fidelity to the author.’ The theatre and its creators, of course, contributed to this expectation, both with the title (significantly, albeit subtly altered) and the production’s visual identity, which alludes to the cover of a bestseller. This approach is sometimes perceived by reviewers as an abuse. The play *The Peasant Women* indicates the recognition of tales of advancement as a certain convention; it plays around with this, capitalising on the market demand for such stories.

It is worth noting that a theatre performance in a provincial town is a ‘weaker’ medium than a widely discussed non-fiction bestseller by a well-known publisher (a recurring claim in media reports, a testament to its success: ‘over half a million copies sold’). If the response to the return to the narrative of class violence in mainstream Polish public debate was first denial, outrage and ridicule, then an attempt to engage in critical discussion, and finally, a commodification of the ‘folk turn,’ so the stakes of *Peasant Women* are to demonstrate the ambivalence of the Polish mainstream’s embrace of a discourse built around the slogans of ‘class,’ ‘peasant roots’ and ‘advancement.’ There is an enthusiasm with which stories about peasant roots are received and an ease with which egalitarian, emancipatory slogans are adopted by the language of marketing – for example in cultural marketing. Finally, Piaskowski and Sulima’s *Peasant Women* restore resentment to the ‘folk turn’ – at a time when its place in conversations about the description of society has been taken by ‘sensitivity’ as an

instrument easily harnessed in the discourse of modern management; a tool of control.

In one of the earlier scenes, the aforementioned chief accountant, Basia Niecnota (Paweł Palcat), holds the employees at gunpoint and forcibly orders them to rest – immediately, or she will shoot. She cuts straight to the gun-threatening scene from a scene of relaxing meditation: 'It is she, simple Arleta, who, before our very eyes, is committing an act of active resistance. An act of reparation. Look, Nina! Here Arleta is receiving reparations for all the centuries of toil, the master's whip, and tuberculosis. And you will receive them too! Get down. Now. Immediately. Lie down!'

Perhaps this rather suspicious attitude toward the bookish *Peasant Women*, discernible in Piaskowski and Sulima's play, though not explicitly expressed on stage for most of the performance, also explains the resistance the play encounters in critical reception.

The Legnica play has been described as 'a fairly standard counting-out' (Kyzioł, 2024), a 'superficial' performance where 'little comes from attempts to discuss the folk turn,' in which the voices of the protagonists are 'almost completely inaudible. Or even worse: they are drowned out, filtered, distorted' (Rewerenda, 2024), so 'the titular peasant women and their stories […] disappear' (Pajęcka, 2024). Meanwhile, one could view the *Peasant Women* of Legnica not as an attempt to pass on the voices extracted from the archive by Kuciel-Frydryszak, but as an attempt to reflect on the gesture of 'giving voice' and the position of the one who gives voice. In Piaskowski and Sulima's play, the class nature of using cultural institutions also appears as a theme. While the scene in question isn't about theatre, but rather visual arts, it bluntly and grotesquely points to how practices of cultural participation are also tools of aspiration:

> Darlings, hello, hey, hey. Listen, what a story!, because I was at the opening of the Museum of Modern Art yesterday, right? It was a VIP tour. Mayor Trzaskowski invited me. So, you know, I had a haircut beforehand. And I'm sitting there, looking in the mirror, and I realise that I look like Iga Świątek's daughter. Incredible. And this museum is nice, a museum as white as me, but a bit empty. I took a few photos with Rafał for Instagram… basianiecnota, have you given me your hearts already? Because I'll check…

Art, presented as a vehicle for emancipation and participation, becomes a mechanism of distinction. The mockery of the museum building resounded at the premiere of *Peasant Women* on November 9, 2024, at a significant moment: barely two weeks had passed since the opening of the new MSN headquarters, while the Culture Congress, renamed the 'co-Congress,' was taking place in Warsaw simultaneously. The quoted line about the MSN opening directly precedes the lynching of Basia Niecnota by her colleagues at her workplace, described above – violence, resentment and the discourse of concern present in contemporary art institutions all converge in a single nexus.

The MSN also appears in a new television production, *In the Name of Jakub S.*, directed by the author himself. One scene in the television production is accompanied by the inscription, 'New MSN headquarters. The 334th meeting on the topic of the folk turn.' What was emotionally intense in Monika Strzępka's production has turned into a kind of discussion panel in TV Theatre, with participants speaking in tired, subdued tones – as if aware that their words lack the power to transform.

Why is the MSN, and not any other theatre institution, becoming the

emblem? In the case of *Peasant Women*, in the character of Basia Niecnota, who orders their forced emancipation and the vindication of rest, one can discern subtle allusions to Monika Strzępka and the conflict surrounding her management at Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw – where, on the one hand, the director emphasised her peasant origins; on the other, the (para)therapeutic discourse was intensively exploited (starting with the first season's slogan 'Therapy for All') and on the third, accusations of psychological abuse were levelled against Strzępka. As for the new version of *In the Name of Jakub S.*, the motivation for choosing the MSN seems simple. No other venue, no location associated with theatre today evokes such emotions or is so intensely used in political disputes – so it would not provide such affective fuel for a television production. The question is whether theatre simply matters less to people or is perhaps less marked by class distinction in Poland than contemporary art is. Note that in the case of the second most hotly debated cultural institution – Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw under the direction of Monika Strzępka – the class theme has completely disappeared, obscured by sharp criticism of the failure of this 'feminist cultural institution' (cf. Kwaśniewska, 2025).

Out of Place

A final digression: theatre can still appear as an element of autobiographical narrative. Romuald Krężel's *All that I Left Behind Is Here* – a solo dance created at Uferstudios in Berlin. Krężel, director, choreographer, actor and performer, returns in this performance to the early 1990s, the time when, as a child, he attended dance classes in primary school, sent by his mother, a manual worker in a shop. The strength of this intimate narrative lies in its specificity and precision: the shop is a specific shop, located on the map of present-day Wrocław. The attempt to reconstruct processes occurring over

the course of a single life, three decades, is not forced into metaphor or synecdoche. The performer Krężel repeats on stage the specific steps Krężel the child took.

In *All that I Left Behind Is Here*, the issue of class is presented in a rather surprising way, if we remain within the framework of the upward mobility narratives established by contemporary French classics, adapted in Poland. Krężel asks his mother if she feels shame when attending his performances. ‘You used to go to the theatre – did you ever feel out of place in the theatre?’ the performer asks in the recording. ‘No,’ the mother replies. ‘As a place that doesn't belong to you, not to this class?’ Krężel asks. ‘No, no. Because I liked it, I always read a lot. And I still read a lot. I liked going to the theatre, to the cinema. I was recently at the Forum Muzyki, and I really liked it too. So, no, I didn’t feel bad in such places,’ the mother says.

The scene of Romuald Krężel’s conversation with Irena Krężel leaves the viewer unanswered, questioning the son’s presumed lack of class discomfort, but also a sense of being pushed beyond the safe confines of his own life. Is this a fact whose expression is generally still considered illegitimate in post-communist Poland: the fact that, to some extent, emancipation truly took place in the Polish People’s Republic?

Translatated by Mark Hoogslag & Tim Brombley

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Footnotes

1. If, following Victor Turner, drama is rooted in social reality and reflects a simmering but unexpressed conflict within it, the premiere of *In the Name of Jakub S.* would be a dramatic revelation of disagreement with the norms governing social relations, or at least official social discourse, and would belong to the third phase of Turner's schema – reparative procedures. The increasingly intense revelation of antagonisms leads to the fourth phase – reintegration – but may also lead to 'apparent reconciliation' – cultural representations of the 'folk turn' on stage in recent years seem to bear the hallmarks of precisely such a process. See Turner, 2008, p. 50–57.

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