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/ THEATRE CRITICISM

Sniff Like A Dog Sniffs The Wondrous

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Teraz Poliż

"warsaw's daughters #100lat"

held to mark the centenary of Polish women's right to vote and 10 years of the group Teraz Poliż

September–November 2018

"I sniff like a dog sniffs the wondrous," says Lunatic in Anna Świrszczyńska's dramatic miniature (2018, p. 212) *Black Square*, which served Teraz Poliż and Wojtek Blecharz as a basis to create a "music game" presented as part of the series of arts events and workshops "warsaw's daughters #100years" [córy warszawskie #100lat] held in autumn 2018. This short line, coming from the previously unstaged grotesque one-act play whose author is primarily remembered as a poet, could be the motto of the whole series, which had at its core an artistic search for the wondrous and extraordinary – at various levels, ranging from text, form and subject to the relationship with the audience, but also an attempt to persuade the audience to "sniff like a

dog sniffs the wondrous" both during and after the performances.

"warsaw's daughters #100years" is a continuation of the artistic efforts launched by Teraz Poliż in 2017 under the banner of "córy warszawskie #dziwystołeczne" [warsaw's daughters #wondersofcapital], aiming to open Polish theatre to women's work. This goal has been pursued by the group since its inception ten years ago. It is not without reason that Teraz Poliż describe themselves as "Poland's only professional feminist theatre." The company, which is an all-female ensemble and mostly works with women directors (this is not an iron-clad rule though) often probes the subject of female experience and, importantly, uses texts written by women authors, both contemporary plays and dramas reclaimed from the past.

It seemed only natural that the series should be accompanied by research and outreach components, such as workshops, walks and talks centered around the often forgotten, perhaps even repressed, women's dramatic writing. No wonder then that Teraz Poliż teamed up with HyPaTia, a research group led by Joanna Krakowska, who work under the auspices of the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, Warsaw, especially to find women's dramatic texts. Some of these texts have recently been published in the volume *Rodzaju żeńskiego: Antologia* [Feminine: Anthology] and are now presented as part of the "Stage of Independent Women" series at the Theatre Institute, but some of the "finds" were previously produced by Teraz Poliż as audio dramas in 2017 and as performative reading in 2015 as part of another project of the group, "Polish Wonders".

The previous installment of the "warsaw's daughters" series (2017) resulted in four audio dramas, all based on women's plays that are now known only to a handful of theatre buffs, cutting across a variety of themes and using a wide array of formal effects. It was then that Teraz Poliż first took on

Świrszczyńska's grotesque plays – which are pivotal to this year's edition of the series – by producing *Conversation with Your Own Foot*, directed by Wojciech Faruga, and then mounted audio dramas based on Irena Krzywicka's unknown but shattering drama, *Life Despite Everything*, set in the ruins of post-war Warsaw (dir. Ula Kijak) and on Magdalena Samozwaniec's black comedy about suicides, *Hotel Belle Vue* (dir. Aleksandra Jakubczak), a work which, unlike most women's plays, had already been staged, at Warsaw's Teatr Ludowy in 1958. First played to a live audience at CK Kadr in the Warsaw district of Służewiec, these audio dramas are perhaps the most enduring outcome of the series. They are now available on ninateka.pl for anyone to play them back at home.

This turn towards the audio and the focus on sound, phrase, melody, and voice, which was already apparent during the first edition of "warsaw's daughters", was continued this year, not only in the form of a number of audio dramas, but also two one-off creations that are difficult to define – the "music game" mentioned above (*Black Square*), and a peculiar 'concert' based on Świrszczyńska's another one-act play, *Man and the Stars*, which was directed by Barbara Wiśniewska as *Appetite on the Execution Day*. But while the audio dramas could be recorded, making it possible to savour the created soundscape in a private space (the linking of female voice, backstage, and intimate reception, willy-nilly, makes one think of an attempt to intercept – often in an oppressive manner – the identification of the feminine with the private), *Black Square* and *Appetite on the Execution Day* were predicated on the idea of an event, a flash, a physical confrontation, or perhaps just a meeting with the audience in a situation that was only partially subject to artistic control. The idea is not to contrast a supposedly ephemeral, "unique" performance with an audio drama that can be archived in the traditional meaning of the word, which makes it recordable and

“reproducible” – the problematic nature of this approach, which has long dominated the discussion of theatre and performance, has been sufficiently demonstrated by the works of Rebecca Schneider and Diana Taylor. Rather, it is the question of a scalable inclusion of the relations between sound and space and between sound and body in the conditions of coexistence between actresses and spectators during an artistic activity, while the relations – paradoxically – become obscured and dispersed in a situation of private listening. Not without reason all of the audio dramas had public “premieres” at which at least some members of the artistic groups were present, giving rise to a kind of corporal “co-existence”.

At the same time, fewer audio dramas were produced as part of “#100years” and they were based on new texts. This time, instead of delving into the archives (which still house dozens of forgotten or undiscovered women’s plays), Teraz Poliż started a collaboration with contemporary authors to produce Zuzanna Bojda’s *Bombshell Girls* and Marta Sokołowska’s *Ritual*, which are different in form, yet both are dreamlike and fairy-tale-like in their own ways. Historically, of course, this fairy-tale- and dreamlike quality is in no way characteristic of women’s art, which, at least to an equal extent, excels in moral realism. It is a peculiar code, though, an alternative idiom underpinned by the seriousness of play used to address themes that are challenging, taboo, glossed over, repressed (e.g. in Maria Kuncewiczowa’s *Thank You for the Roses*, the trauma of domestic violence lurks behind the convention of *Alice in Wonderland*). Staged to mark the event, *Bombshell Girls* is an audio drama that asks for the recognition of women’s place in the pantheon of heroes on the 100th anniversary of Poland’s independence. Women took an active part in the fight for Polish independence and in insurrections, but the mainstream narrative rarely honors their names. In *Bombshell Girls*, historical figures talk to one another. They include Wanda

Krahelska, a PPS fighter and co-founder of Żegota, her niece Krystyna Krahelska, an insurgent, poet, writer of patriotic songs, and the Warsaw Mermaid, Ludwika Kraskowska Nitschowa's statue, which is close to the hearts of the residents of the Polish capital, and to which Krystyna Krahelska had sat before the Second World War broke out. *Ritual* is an audio drama distinctly rooted in the fairy-tale convention, with sophisticated sound effects, filled with silence and understatement, tackling the subject of covered-up mass crimes, hidden violence, uncut social abscesses; it gives center stage to the female perspective and experience.

The premiere listenings of *Bombshell Girls* and *Ritual* were held in a much more intimate and friendly venue than those of DK Kadr – in the small space of the Powiśle-based Młodsza Siostra arts café. Breaking out of the four walls of an arts establishment offered another opportunity to enact the fluid boundaries between the private and the public, the official and the unofficial when it comes to the presence of women in social life. It is also worth noting that both directors, Anna Karasińska and Weronika Szczawińska, are artists apart who follow their own creative trajectory, develop a recognizable style, and at the same time are engaged in the public debate on theatre and performance, undertake stage experiments, work at the interface of manifold forms and conventions and blur the (already dubious) boundaries between theatre and performance art, while at the same time working at institutional theatres. Tellingly, Karasińska, Szczawińska – and Marta Górnicka, whose being "apart" and exploration of interstices, gaps and intersections do not need any reminding – were nominated for *Polityka* weekly's prestigious Passport awards in 2018 and completely dominated the theatre category.

Perhaps the public recognition of women working in the theatre in roles other than actresses is gradually becoming the norm, although the book of

statistics published by HyPaTia, *Agora*, does not seem overly optimistic in this respect. *Polityka*'s Passports had not often been awarded to women artists, but this time not only was the list of nominations exclusively female, but the nominated artists were, so to say, of avant-garde stripe and, in the case of Szczawińska and Górnicka, with a clearly feminist edge. Suffice it to recall, Anna Augustynowicz was the first winner of the Konrad Swinarski Award (established in 1976) for best theatre director of the season (2016/2017). The predicament of Anna Świrszczyńska, whose work determined the shape of the "#100" series, is a vivid and ruthless testament to the situation of women in Polish theatre. Świrszczyńska could count herself lucky: *Orpheus* was well received by critics, *Shots on Długa Street* was a big audience favorite, several of her other plays (for adults) also made it to the stage, and 2013 saw the publication of *Orfeusz: Dramaty* [Orpheus: Dramas], which will allow Świrszczyńska to be also remembered as a "serious" playwright, not only a children's author. Edited by Ewa Guderian Czaplińska, *Orfeusz: Dramaty* is truly extraordinary, the only collection of plays written by a woman among the ten volumes edited and published in *Dramat polski: Reaktywacja series* [Polish Drama: Reactivation], edited by Artur Grabowski and Jacek Kopciński.

The "music game" based on the dramatic miniature *Black Square*, which could only be joined for a few hours on 16 October 2018, turned out to be extraordinary, too. Blecharz's *Black Square* draws liberally from the practice of immersive theatre, which has been particularly popular in the United Kingdom for some time (especially thanks to Punchdrunk). Blecharz and Teraz Poliż – in line with the basic tenets of immersion theatre – invited people to join the game individually or in pairs, privatizing the experience of theatre and music (or rather making it more intimate). Świrszczyńska's *Black Square*, i.e. a conversation between Lunatic and Sweeper, which ends,

of course, with Lunatic's death, is a dramatic miniature about the need for laughter and the importance of absurdity in our ordinary and extraordinary life struggles. Following the clues left by the creators throughout the DK Kadr building (on the walls, but also in elegant black square envelopes), participants immerse themselves, like *Alice in Wonderland*, in the world of the absurd: absurd humour and laughter, absurd characters and absurd situations whose essence remains a direct encounter with the performers as well as sound experiment. In this game, music is understood, quite obviously, broadly, it is all-encompassing and multiform. One of the stages of the game takes place in the building's garage where the humming of a fan, to which the participant is led by an actress, plays a key role. The constituent parts of the experience are very ordinary sounds, which we ignore every day but start to hear when immersed in the game, as well as sounds produced on various devices and instruments (from electronics to violin) by Teraz Poliż actresses, deadly serious guides in ridiculous costumes, always appearing on their own and a bit unexpectedly. Thanks to their physical closeness and involvement, the game was both totally absurd and totally true, along the lines of the warning spoken by Sweeper and contained in the last black envelope left by the artists: "You are a human being after all. If you cannot actualize the absurd, you will die." (Świrszczyńska, p. 114).

The production of *Man and the Stars* took the form of a concert entitled *Appetite on the Execution Day*, clearly divided into performers and audience, but preserving the form of communication with the audience typical of pop music concerts and old theatre practices). Playing the roles of Executioner, Oedipus, and Libra, the actresses sing and speak, most of the time to the audience rather than to one another. The show brings out the musicality of Świrszczyńska's text, in which the author embeds, in a way, ready-made musical phrases and short songs. Again, it is absurd, both at the level of

dialogue and performance: exaggerated, grotesque costumes (e.g. Executioner rollerblades) intensify the resonance of the looped, rhythmically repeated, torn, broken, distorted words that make up a story about the meaning and meaninglessness of life, about total enslavement that gives freedom, and boundless freedom that proves to be enslavement.

It is a shame that *Appetite on the Execution Day* was performed only once. The show could developed and become more refined in regular contact with the audience. The problem was that there was almost no audience – a small group of spectators who somehow made it to Służewiec on a Saturday evening sat in DK Kadr's big main auditorium. The fantastic energy spilling off the stage had no one to resonate with and no chance to multiply. It seems that this type of show/concert needed a full house to attain its intended effect, and above all, a different, less formal and less sterile space than DK Kadr could offer. It is a pity especially as Świrszczyńska's text was brilliantly translated into musical form, and in other circumstances some of the "songs", for example, *Jestem galaktyką* [I Am a Galaxy], could have become fringe "hits".

Finally, a few words about *Who Is Afraid of Sybil Thompson?*, based on the play *Sybil Thompson's Lover* by Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, the hottest Polish women playwright of the interwar period. The show, directed by Ula Kijak, was mounted in 2015 and performed at Zamek in Poznań. In 2017, the Warsaw premiere was held, this time directed by Julia Szmyt as part of the first edition of the "warsaw's daughters" series. The analysis of *Sybil* could both begin and end the rundown of Teraz Poliż's project, as the show lays down its key ideological and formal tenets.

In *Sybil*, the audience walks through the DK Kadr building, following the singing – the siren voice of the actresses calling out "Sybil…" – and stop in

different spaces to immerse themselves deeper into the reality of a futuristic dream. The different parts of the show differ from each other, sometimes significantly, especially in the artistic media used. The show begins with a fragment in which the lines spoken by actresses are intercut with previously recorded dialogue, played back as if in an audio drama. The actresses' voices surround the audience from all sides: both the actresses and the loudspeakers are distributed all over the space, empty and shorn of decoration, with the spectators sitting wherever they find a free spot, mostly on gym mattresses. At another time, actresses remove themselves from view, while the audience watches a video documenting Sybil's visit to a rejuvenation clinic. Instead of a third act, Teraz Poliż invites the audience to a party in the corridors of DK Kadr, directly interacting with the audience, encouraging them to talk about Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska's text, blurring the line between audience and stage, but also between private and public, as in other projects of the series, and at the same time opening up discussion about the potential hidden in fusty old plays by female authors.

"Warsaw daughters #100years" was a wide-ranging, ambitious and, importantly, constructive, creative and risky project. It was focused, first, on a search for alternative women's texts and the theatre idioms and solutions and that could bring these texts to life in the 21st century and, second, on working with contemporary theatre women and listening to their voices. These were also the objectives of the series, which was conceived as an essentially joyful holiday – both to mark the centenary of Polish women's right to vote and ten years of the group Teraz Poliż. It is only regrettable that the holiday was so small and took place on the distant outskirts of Warsaw's cultural life that only a handful of spectators could "sniff like a dog sniffs the wondrous" in autumn 2018. It is hard to say whether this was due to the relatively peripheral location of DK Kadr in the capital or the relatively

peripheral position of women's art in the theatre.

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