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/ POLITICAL THEATRE

Revolution beyond politics

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Monika Świerkosz reviews the performance *Rewolucja, której nie było* (*A Revolution That Was Not There*), produced by Teatr 21 and Biennale Warszawa, directed by Justyna Sobczyk, and first performed on 7 Dec 2018 at Teatr Soho. The author points out that even though the performance was inspired by the 40-day-long protest staged by parents of persons with disabilities, it is more than a journalistic commentary on these events. Świerkosz describes the performance, emphasizing its political aspect. The author mentions specific dramaturgical, aesthetic and formal strategies which make *A Revolution That Was Not There* a space for the voices of Teatr 21's actors. Finally, the author writes that the performance is a clear signal that the revolution has not ended, that it is still on, even though it's far from the corridors of the Polish parliament.

Keywords: political theatre; Teatr 21; disabilities studies; performance

Protest of the Parents of Persons with Disability began on April 18, 2018 and lasted for forty days, during which the parents and caregivers together with their children (often already adult) occupied the corridors of the Polish parliament building. In the beginning, it emphasized economic demands: a rehabilitation allowance of 500 PLN per month (for the last 12 years the state has been paying them only an attendance allowance, which is 153 PLN) and increasing the social allowance to the lowest allowance resulting from

complete inability to work (which would mean raising it from 865.03 PLN to 1029.80 PLN). In time, the protesters formulated 21 demands, based on the standards present in the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities which Poland ratified in 2012, but never fully observed. They focused on the decentralization of the state aid structure, a unification of the system of issuing certificates of disability, abolishing the institution of incapacitation, easier access to rehabilitation services). The chaotic and imprecise declarations of the authorities (i.a. the Prime Minister's proposal to establish a special fund for the disabled, based on a tax imposed on the wealthiest citizens), various statements made in the media by politicians and journalists, stigmatizing the protesters (especially the mothers), as well as more violent means aiming to silence them (the use of the Parliament Guard, blocking access to toilets, an external blockade of the parliament building) revealed deep layers of prejudice and paternalism towards the disabled and their caregivers. The protest was suspended on May 27, but in spite of the President signing two bills (which took only minor notice of the 21 demands), the protesters admitted they were leaving the parliament with bitterness.

The most recent performance by Teatr 21[1] and Biennale Warszawa – *Rewolucja, której nie było* (*A Revolution That Was Not There*) – was inspired by the forty-day-long protest, but it is not a journalistic commentary on the events which took place in the Polish parliament's corridors in the spring of 2018. The writer (Justyna Lipko-Konieczna), director (Justyna Sobczyk) and the actors managed to go beyond the formula of socially engaged art and created a message full of artistic power and critical energy. It features voices of the disabled and their loved ones, who, with teasing irony, but also with overt anger, speak about their experience of being an ignored and marginalized political Other: either an eternal child, subject to occasional

patronizing care, or a symbol of suffering, beautiful because of its humility. Despite the provocatively defeatist title, *A Revolution That Was Not There* is an artistically successful interception of the discursive perspective in speaking about disability, one which is a precondition for restoring the presence of people with disabilities not only in theatre or art, but also in the broader space of social relations[2]. The process of broadening the field of visibility which began in the UK or the USA in the 1970s (which gave rise to the Disability Rights Movement and disability studies) never lacked strong, provocative performative actions. They usually took place in the urban agora and their main tool was an individual or collective body with disability, which used to be shut within the space of the home, either private or institutional. Its return to the order of visibility and audibility seems to be the most important stake of the revolution we are talking about.

The laughing body, the angry body

Before the revolution begins and we move to the corridors of the parliament, the audience of Teatr 21 is welcomed by Maciej Pesta[3] who delivers a monologue in the convention of a lecture on laughter, in which, in full academic seriousness, he describes the physiological and psychological phenomenon of laughing. He is soon joined by two actresses of Teatr 21 (Aleksandra Skotarek and Teresa Foks). As they demonstrate the phases and kinds of laughter, it is only for a moment that they seem a corporeal illustration of his wise words. The infectious power of laughter begins to connect everyone – both the actors on the stage and the audience. However, something disturbing lies below the surface of this successful performance, not only because in a moment the laughter will be interrupted by a long list of illnesses which one of the actresses with Down syndrome has been suffering since her childhood. The ambiguity of this theatrical situation also

consists in the fact that we are provoked to break a cultural taboo which forbids us to laugh at the sight of another person's disabled body (isn't it the most basic lesson of manners, when the parents and teachers repeat time and time again "you should not laugh at such unfortunate people"?).

However, this situation, combining laugher with disability, reflects something more – like a distorting mirror. A feeling of shame, hidden under the veneer of civilization and progress, but reaching the roots of our culture. Here, I do not mean only the tradition of freak shows, where bodies of people described as freaks – deformed, incomplete or simply different – were exhibited as a curiosity, both funny and scary. I remember the embarrassing scene in *The Iliad* (problematic also for philologists) where the "Homeric laughter" of the gods resounds over the head of the lame Hephaestus, clumsily serving them during an Olympian feast. Commentators of the epic refer to the ancient Greek ideal of *kalos kagathos* ("beautiful and good"), which equated physical and spiritual beauty. The lame Hephaestus was not only disabled, he was simply ugly, and thus deprived of loftiness and prone to become the laughing stock of his companions at the feast, as well as the almost equally divine Homer. A curious gaze and laughter, combined with a disabled body causes (or can cause) objectification and ridicule, so – for the sake of our consciences, more civilized than those of ancient Greeks or the audience at freak shows – it should be avoided, stifled, and we should look away.

In her essay *Disabled Women Performance Artists and Dynamics of Staring* Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, one of the leading representatives of disability studies, describes ways in which this ambivalent power of the gaze can be used. Artists whose performances she analyses: Cheryl Marie Wade, Mary Duffy and Carrie Sandahl, show their distorted bodies, forcing the

viewers to stare at their disability, and so regaining subjective control over the spectacle of staring. Partly through tender (though not without a critical edge) self-mockery, and partly through Brechtian alienation, they build a slightly uncomfortable connection between the viewer and the viewed (Garland-Thompson, 20108. In the performance by Teatr 21 and Biennale Warszawa something similar happens: we laugh together with those usually laughed at, but not in order to take pleasure in the calming atmosphere of a charity concert "for our wonderful disabled". *A Revolution That Was Not There* is not a form of theatrical self-therapy, or social therapy aiming to soothe the audience's consciences, as the laughter is, from the very beginning, accompanied by anger. "I'm angry" – shouts the charismatic Aleksandra Skotarek, suggesting that in the performance, the laughing and angry bodies of the disabled will be a source of two equally important strategies of revolutionary resistance.

Where is the agora?

According to Hannah Arendt, a political action can be defined as any event that happens in the public space: in the street, a square or a municipal park (Arendt, 1998). The German philosopher's thought, growing out of liberal and humanistic approaches, broadened the understanding of the political, but also missed an important problem: that of the access to the public sphere. In Arendt's view, civic agency and political power can be attributed only to those, who have entered the agora. But what about those, who are unable to leave their own homes and speak up for themselves (and others) – asks Johanna Hedva in her manifesto *Sick Woman Theory*, lying in her bed and raising her fist as a sign of solidarity with the Black Live Matter protesters outside her window (Hedva, 2016). In her essay *Re-thinking Vulnerability and Resistance*, Judith Butler claims that our first exercise in

political thinking is not an analysis of what is discussed in the public space, but the question of who has had the opportunity and the right to enter it in the first place (Butler, 2016).

Thus, it is no coincidence that also in *A Revolution That Was Not There*, before we see the banners with the protesters' demands[4] and hear them spoken out, we witness scenes from the train journey to Warsaw and the way to the building of the Parliament at Wiejska street. They are presented in the convention of comedy sketches – and quite funny at that. First, two mothers with adult sons (duos of Beata Bandurska and Martyna Peszko with Daniel Krajewski and Aleksander Orliński) have to conduct an absurd dialogue with the ticket inspector, who is visibly worried by the weird fact that "such children" have left their homes. Later, also a member of the Parliament Guard (both roles played by Maciej Pesta) does not know how to react to this intrusion of aliens into the area of political visibility. The agora is trying to defend itself from the invasion of unwanted guests by means of slogans referring to care and safety, concealing its dream in which what used to be exclusively private should remain private. Arguments mentioning the lack of suitable accessibility solutions become a tool of refusal to make the common space accessible to people who are not wanted there. Home is the suitable place for the disabled – not the street, the train or the corridor of the parliament building.

What seems even more interesting than these desperate attempts at defending the boundaries of the political are the almost farcical strategies of the disabled who are determined to enter the area of visibility. Somebody steps on the guard's toes, another one intimidates him with "foreign" speech, yet another shows an ID or flowers from a prominent politician. Somebody wanted to show the building to their child or came to visit daddy –

a member of the parliament. All these funny gags show that the right to access the public sphere, which should theoretically be common, to many of us can only be reachable through coincidence, precedent or as a result of a game played with the system, one that requires cunning, ingenuity, sometimes a clever ruse or throwing elbows. Every revolution is a spatial event and is usually connected to an assault – on the Bastille, the Winter Palace, the presidential residence. The performance shows that in the time of relatively civilized liberal democracies, it may be more difficult to conduct a revolution and bring about social change, because the political center still has numerous elegant ways of silencing and canceling the contesting voices.

Silencing – (in)visibility

The 2018 protest showed that the most common method of avoiding a serious discussion about the social situation of the families of people with disabilities is superficial support, referring to the feeling of solidarity and universal care for the weaker. The actors (with a perfect sense of irony) quote simplistic slogans, promises and declarations made by politicians. These are mingled with comments built on the basis of judgmental opinions (appearing in the media or the Web) accompanying the protest. They are focused around the symbol of the long-suffering Polish mother and the victimized disabled child, clashing with the economic demands of the protesters and their actual bodies, incompatible with the romanticized visions. The mothers have too impressive makeup and hairstyles, their shoes do not suit the situation, they seek attention for their personal tragedies in front of the cameras, and thus harm their disabled children, who remain a tool in the hands of their (disgraceful) caregivers.

Maciej Pesta’s monologues, delivered in the tone of vicious hate mail, show

not only how extensively the Polish symbolic imagination draws from the cult of a helpless, humble, voiceless victim, but also how lofty myths serve to exert social control over the unruly and preserve inequalities. The economy of myth is a particularly strong weapon against the economic demands of those who expect the system will provide them with necessary support, not alms. The disabled (and their caregivers) are blackmailed by means of their own, privatized suffering, which becomes the most important measure of their symbolic worth.

However, when it turns out that all these discursive practices of silencing are insufficient, there always remains another, more physical way of canceling the inconvenient voices of the rebellious "victims". It is metaphorically shown in a scene where the protesters (with banners containing their demands) are covered with a white sheet by an outraged commentator. Like ghosts or visions from a dream (Tymon Bryndal used this association in designing the poster for the performance), the protesters are deprived of their faces, subjectivity, reality: "The parliament is a place of dialogue, but in order to participate in dialogue, one has to be somebody" – shouts Pesta, and in this moment of weakness he exposes the painful truth about treating the disabled as non-persons and non-citizens. How can one react to such rhetoric? We know that on May 27, 2018 the protest was suspended. Was this a sign of weakness, and if so – whose weakness was it? The protesters' or the self-righteous political establishment's? The creators of *A Revolution That Was Not There* – despite the title, suggesting a lost opportunity to change things for the better – chose ambiguity, showing both places of systemic oppression and those of possible resistance.

The vicious comments quoted by Maciej Pesta are answered with poignant monologues of one of the mothers (Beata Bandurska), who consciously plays

with the image of a “celebrity” imposed on her, one in which she gains popularity at the expense of her disabled son. The woman shares the pain, fatigue and frustration linked to her everyday life. We can see she is suffering, although she does not aspire to the role of a “Mater Dolorosa”. We can also see her anger, her sometimes pointless struggle; however, it is not her weakness, but her power that allows her not to yield to fatigue, discouragement or opinions of society.

On the other hand, the actors and actresses of Teatr 21 also have different ways of reclaiming for themselves a space for action – boldly and with a great sense of theatricality, they use strategies of mimicry, imitating the behavior and words of particular figures who went to the parliament building, only to leave it as quickly as possible. It is thanks to ironic laughter that they get out from underneath the sheets thrown on their heads, a sign of social invisibility. Magdalena Świątkowska is great at representing Agata Duda, with her charming smile and empty language full of nice platitudes. There is an excellent rendition of the “strong” personality of Lech Wałęsa, who wants to “win, not sit” with the protesters, or the noble, but vague and empty promises made by Jarosław Kaczyński (both roles played by Barbara Lityńska). Once again, laughter sets in motion a critical mechanism – these funny scenes grew out of an awareness of the way in which disability and images of persons with disability are used in the public space to enact various social and political performances. They are not always filled with contempt, violent or inauthentic – during the protest, there were numerous voices of support coming from different quarters, which the performance shows in the form of piles of postcards sent to the parliament in the course of these important 40 days. Is it only a sugar coating, under which both the protesters and the audience can feel the bitter taste of defeat?

Even though the first part of the performance ends with a forced ceasefire, and the second part begins with the question how to return to living in a reality where no revolution happened, I did not have the impression that the stage was filled with sadness and helplessness. On the contrary – after the interval, with a new, different energy I watched a surprisingly varied performance of disability that is visible, audible, speaks in its own voice, and uses its own body in breaking through a web of cultural and social clichés.

"I am Down!"

The definition adopted in the 1990s by the European Disability Forum determines that "A Disabled Person is an individual in their own right, placed in a disabling situation, brought about by environmental, economic and social barriers that the person, because of their impairment(s), cannot overcome in the same way as other citizens. These barriers are all too often reinforced by the marginalising attitudes of society." (Przybylski, 2010, p. 145, emphasis mine). This shift in thinking about disability from a set of innate (or possibly caused by illness, accident, etc.) physical and psychological features of an individual to a situational and socially constructed status of a person with disability makes it possible to notice how relative disability is. It is clearly visible in two scenes of the performance. Martyna Peszko relates situations in which she was addressed to as a "Down"[5] – or she thought about herself using the word. In the next sequence, Maciej Pesta and Aleksander Orliński sit together and try to determine their identities using similar or opposed adjectives. This enumeration leads to a surprising image of two healthy young men, who, each in his own way, feel (or do not feel/cannot feel) self-reliant, mature, responsible and resourceful. The boundary between the fully able and disabled is neither obvious nor stable, as everyone has their own way of experiencing themselves as

individuals endowed with agency and subjectivity.

Why is it then that an unalienable right of others becomes a space of emancipatory fight for others? Are persons with disabilities entitled to love and sex, getting married and establishing families, living on their own, gaining knowledge, drinking alcohol, deciding about their and expressing themselves in their own language? Teresa Foks sings a phenomenally beautiful song – she transforms into a diva and, using her poignant voice, transports the audience to the world of her language. Equally moving is Aleksandra Skotarek's energetic protest-song. Its title is "I'm Bad" – she does not want to be a nice (disabled) girl. The bodily manifesto of Maja Kowalczyk (possibly the youngest member of the ensemble) who bravely shouts "This is my body!" is very powerful – and so is the charmingly sentimental part played by Magdalena Świątkowska, dreaming of a romantic wedding, a party in the rhythm of the hit song "Jesteś szalona" ("You're Crazy") and a trip to the sea with her beloved. It's hard not to be impressed by the sensual, intimate encounters between Martyna Peszko and Daniel Krajewski, who says "I am a man who has everything he needs". The same pertains to the impact of the half-naked male body of Aleksander Orliński, angrily strolling about the stage in a coat made of teddy bears – a symbol of the "eternal childhood" socially imposed on people with disabilities.

All this is not about a simplistic assimilative message: look, we are like you, just as healthy, attractive and able. The experience of disability is not concealed or cancelled – on the contrary. Justyna Sobczyk uses different aesthetics to allow the actresses and actors to talk about themselves – how the see (or would like to see) themselves, what is important for them, what saddens them and what makes them happy. However, I think it is not the power of authenticity or the charisma of the actors that propels the

performance and gives it a distinctive edge. The harmonious communication within the ensemble, the care the people on the stage give to each other – these seem to me as important as the artistic individualities of Teatr 21. It was an excellent idea to invite the band Pokusa (Tymek Bryndal, Natan Kryszk and Teo Olter) to work on the performance. The music, sometimes delicate and atmospheric, and sometimes dynamic and humorous, highlights the rhythm of acting. In the final scenes of *A Revolution…*, hearing a rebellious song in which Daniel Krajewski and Aleksander Orliński sing "I am Down" with a wild satisfaction, we see and hear that disability does not have to be invisible, concealed or stigmatizing. It can be something reclaimed – not only for people with disabilities, but for us all, particularly those who lost their fighting spirit on May 27, 2018. And even though I know that the space of a stage is not the same as a political agora, what happens at the "Centre for Inclusive Art DOWNTOWN" is a signal that the revolution has not ended, that it is still on, even though it has moved far from the corridors of the Polish parliament.

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Footnotes

1. Teatr 21, established by Justyna Sobczyk, is a professional theatre ensemble consisting of actors with Down syndrome and autism. It originated from theatre workshops conducted at the Special Needs School "Dać Szansę" in Warsaw, and happenings (such as *Miasto. Manifest*, 2009). Without a permanent home, during the 15 years of its existence, the theatre created over a dozen performances shown both in Poland and abroad – in Wrocław, Poznań, Gdańsk, Cracow, Prague, Berlin, Helsinki and Freiburg. Even though the ensemble goes beyond art therapy or theatre pedagogy, the foundation also deals with education, publishing, and conferences. It cooperates with various cultural institutions and theatres (such as the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN, Biennale Warszawa or Powszechny Theatre). The ensemble is developing a project called Center for Inclusive Art, the first cultural institution in Warsaw which will become a space devoted solely to artists with disabilities.
2. The Teatr 21 Foundation, together with the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw, published a pioneering collection of theoretical texts on disability studies and interviews with theatre practitioners including people with disabilities in their work. Cf. *Odzyskiwanie nieobecności. Niepełnosprawność w teatrze i performansie*, edited and selected by E. Godlewska-Byliniak, J. Lipko-Konieczna, Warsaw 2017.
3. Maciej Pesta is a film and theatre actor, working with various institutions (i.a. IMKA Theatre, the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz, Biennale Warszawa). A vital aspect of the performance is that actors without disabilities are guests invited by Teatr 21 to cooperate on the project. This reverses the usual practice of social theatre, where the actors with disabilities – and amateurs – are invited by professional actors.
4. The stage design uses authentic banners and letters which reached the protesters during their occupation of the Parliament. Only some of the slogans have been moved to a different surface (e.g. from cardboard to canvas). Also the comments quoted here are fragments of authentic remarks made on the protest. This linguistic and material layer of "truth" is of course very important, but – as I suggest in the final part of the text – it is not the only element of the performance that generates a feeling of authenticity.
5. A common offensive term in Poland in the 1990s (translator's note).

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