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Angels in America. The Transition and Polish Political Theatre

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The text is an analysis of the Polish premiere of Tony Kushner's drama *Angels in America*. The drama, staged in 1995 as *Angels of America* at the Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk, directed by Wojciech Nowak, has not made it into the history of Polish political theatre. However, the testimonies of its reception today allow for a complex analysis of the entanglement of political theatre in the so-called political transition. With the help of the category of "normality", I am trying to expose the meandering paths of emancipation in the Polish theatre of the 1990s - the time of transition.

Keywords: *Angels in America*; normality; transition; political theater

On 26 March 1995 *Anioły Ameryki* (Angels of America), directed by Wojciech Nowak, opened at Gdańsk's Wybrzeże Theatre. It was the now-forgotten Polish premiere of Tony Kushner's drama *Angels in America*. Krzysztof Warlikowski's 2007 production of the play would become one of the most important performances of Polish theatre after 1989. As British scholar Bryce Lease writes in his 2016 book *After '89. Polish Theatre and the Political*:

> Warlikowski's revolutionary staging […] directly attempted to rectify the lack of a concrete gay emancipatory movement in Poland cited by Kulpa and Mizielińska as a cause of disequilibrium in political struggle and the dynamics of oppression. Warkocki argued that this was the most significant production of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Warlikowski's determining staging provoked a new public discourse around homosexuality that allowed for a crucial representational counterdiscourse to the *Kaczyński' neoconservative Fourth Republic.* He also established a broadly identifiable historical shift in the treatment and perception of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS […] (Lease, 2016, p. 123).

Following the lead of Polish queer scholars, Lease sees *Angels in America* as the culmination of Warlikowski's work, his greatest theatrical achievement, and an important turn in Polish culture. Even if the actual impact of *Angels* on the public sphere was not so significant, the production's role in shaping the discourse of otherness, identity and politicality seems impossible to ignore. As Lease concludes:

> *Angels in America* gave explicit form to a possibility of a theatre that did not attempt to universalisespecifically gay identities but focused on their visibility as *an expression* of their particularity (Lease, 2016, p. 124).

Although this statement is in line with the present-day reception of the performance and even proposes a vision of Polish theatre that is consistent with the latest understanding of politicality, it stands in stark contrast to the meaning ascribed to the production by critics in 2007. Grzegorz Niziołek

pointed to the establishment of a common space by Warlikowski: “common to the actors and the audience, common to the characters belonging to different threads of the story, common to the external and the internal world, common to theatre and life” (Niziołek, 2008, s. 181). Comparing Warlikowski to Badiou, Joanna Krakowska wrote about the project of universalism contained in the performance. She claimed: “Each of the characters copes with something that brings unimaginable suffering in terms of subjective experience and that can be universalized as an immanent component of the human condition” (Krakowska, 2007). Jacek Cieślak in *Rzeczpospolita* even compared *Angels* to Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* (Cieślak, 2007). According to critics, it was this ability to translate an American play, the feelings of homosexual characters and the experience of HIV/AIDS into a universal language of community, the appearance of Prior in a crown of thorns and apurple robe as the suffering Jesus, the reduction of “what is too American, directly political and overly esoteric” (Krakowska, 2007), the metaphorization of eroticism, the removal of racial issues (Belize is not black) and similar devices that were responsible for the success of *Angels*.

So the importance of *Angels in America* for Polish theatre can be seen as related to the establishment of a continuously reactivated field of negotiation between the communal and the individual, as well as to expanding the notion of norm and openly subverting it. Depending on the point of view, the meaning of individual scenes and characters can be constantly renegotiated, reflecting the complex process of social changes in Poland, and the changing understanding of politicality and theatre’s political commitment. From gestures universalizing the experience of an other, trying to integrate non-normativity into the community of Christian values, to the construction of an identity rooted in otherness and celebrating difference as freedom from the community, *Angels in America*, a play open to disparate interpretations,

captures the very essence of the Polish emancipatory project implemented in theatre and this split reveals its deep connection with the political transition and the consequent paradoxes. In this perspective, the play's forgotten prehistory, its rejected theatrical genealogy, seems worth recalling and examining.

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The Polish premiere of *Angels* is virtually the only theatrical performance directed by Wojciech Nowak. The then thirty-year-old artist had already made a successful first film, *Śmierć dziecioroba* (Death of the Baby Maker) in 1990, and three productions for the Television Theatre, an institution he is involved with to this day. He appeared at Gdańsk's Wybrzeże Theatre at a time when the institution was undergoing a transformational crisis. As Joanna Puzyna-Chojka wrote, the early nineties were a period of apathy caused by poor management, lack of funds and ideas for a new repertoire to attract audiences who were trying to find their way in the new reality. Paradoxically, this situation created space for the events that I am interested in.

Angels of America was based on the first part of Kushner's play *Millennium Approaches*, translated by Marta Gil-Gilewska and published in *Dialog* in 1994 (Kushner, 1994). In the Wybrzeże Theatre's 1995 production, the characters appeared on the stage with an impressive set design by Marek Chowaniec. According to the original drawings, large black plates of Plexiglas now stood for the walls of modern high-rises, now for sterile hospital interiors, and at other times for the streets of a big, oppressive city. But the gaps and small doors in those surfaces revealed vibrant life, symbolized by warm light and objects of everyday use. As Joanna Chojka, then a twenty-six-year-old theatre critic, wrote for *Teatr*:"Marek

Chowaniec's set, built from huge, moving planes of black Pexiglas and mirror-maze panels of reflective foil, allowed for […] the manipulation of depth – New York's cage, formed by the glass walls of skyscrapers, exposed its cracks, leading to other, parallel worlds" (Chojka, 1995). But she objected to the changes of scenery which she thought disturbed the rhythm of the performance:

> Kushner demands that the stagehands enter to replace the furniture in full view of the audience – without any fade-outs. But this idea doesn't work, despite a certain consistency that suggests – at least in the Gdańsk production - a special role for these black-clad "cleaners" (mourners? gravediggers?) (Chojka, 1995).

Anna Jęsiak saw this device differently in *Dziennik Bałtycki*:

> Excellent set by Marek Chowaniec, who has expertly handled the constant changes of location, frequently simultaneous events and supernatural episodes, a good score by Brian Lock, and, above all, at least a few very good roles (Kiszkis, Labijak, Gzyl, Nieczuja-Urbańska as the transvestite Belize) (Jęsiak, 1995).

The atmosphere of New York was also created by Briton Brian Lock's score, mentioned by Jęsiak and universally praised by reviewers, a kind of landscape "with single piano notes trickling like raindrops" (Chojka, 1995).

Roy Cohn was played Jerzy Kiszkis. Alina Kietrys wrote in *Głos Wybrzeże*: "Jerzy Kiszkis's role (Roy) is probably the biggest surprise because it sees the actor's personality metamorphose. Roy is manipulative, ruthless"

(Kietrys, 1995). Though, as Chojka pointed out, another key to the character as played by him was the grotesque. Roy, wearing an elegant black suit and overcoat, has grey hair, a bald spot on the top of his head and a moustache. One of the photographs shows him falling onto the stage laid with shiny Plexiglas just by a park bench that unexpectedly animates this soulless space. Leaning over him is Ethel Rosenberg (Wanda Neuman) in an old-fashioned costume, gloves and a veiled hat.

Louis was played by Grzegorz Gzyl. Dark blond hair, a round, gentle face. Dressed in a leather jacket and denim shirt, he came across as someone modern at that time. As Kietrys writes: “Louis’s fear when he is still healthy and his search for a new partner have the ring of psychological truth” (Kietrys, 1995). In one of the documented scenes, before Louis leaves, he hugs Prior with his powerful arms. Their heads touch. The image is thoroughly unerotic, devoid of sexuality.

The role of Prior was given to Jacek Labijak. Small and lean, he appears on the stage in elegant, though slightly over-the-top clothes, wearing a hospital gown and an embroidered bathrobe. His image is the most plastic and changes over time, conveying the progress of the disease. Chojka writes: “Another standout was Jacek Labijak, whose Prior is built mostly out of fear of death, signalled by a nervousness bordering on hysteria” (Chojka, 1995). Małgorzata Jarmułowicz notes in *Gazeta Studencka*: “Jacek Labijak emerges as the star of the performance […] movingly authentic (thanks also to his physique) in his expressive portrayal of human loneliness and fear in the face of death” (Jarmułowicz, 1995, pp. 12-13). One of the most riveting photographs from the play shows Prior in a bathrobe and a woman’s wig putting on lipstick as he looks at a matzevah as into a mirror. It’s probably the tombstone from the first scene, when Louis was burying his grandmother

and listened to the Rabbi's speech in the cemetery. Here, however, it becomes the medium of death and the disease that both marks and emancipates Prior's sexual identity. The picture also surprisingly prefigures the themes of an ongoing political debate in Poland, one in which anti-Semitism and the exclusion of non-heteronormative feed each other with language and images of hatred. At the same time, socially marginalized identities – sexual, national, religious – would be at the core of Polish political theatre. Importantly, Jacek Labijak recalls[1] that the application of lipstick on the stage – his own idea – was like breaking a taboo, an act of liberation and transgression. What was at stake was not the actor's individual identity, but an attempt to show otherness, to create a mirror for those others to look into and recognize themselves, to discover his body and corporeality in a new context on the stage. Labijak remembers the gesture as joyful and celebratory, performed with a sense of the power and social impact of the theatrical image, but also formative of new acting in the new reality.

The roles of Joe, Harper and Belize are not mentioned in the reviews. Photographs show a man (Jacek Mikołajczak) in a suit, with dark facial hair and a shiny earring. He holds a leather briefcase. The girl (Katarzyna Łukaszyńska), wearing a baggy shirt and a skirt in subdued colours, has dishevelled hair and a slightly vacant gaze. Belize (Marzena Nieczuja-Urbańska) is extravagance incarnate. In the surprising casting of a woman as a transvestite, femininity is exaggerated, conveyed by means of a ball gown, long false eyelashes, jewellery and an elegant shawl.

Although they praised the set design, music and acting, none of the female reviewers liked the performance. Małgorzata Jarmułowicz wrote:

> The director of the Gdańsk performance, Wojciech Nowak, did spare the audience (and the actors) the more graphic images and rightly shortened the fragments overfilled with the characters' political arguments. It didn't change the fact that the primary carrier of meanings in his production should have been the play's text […] enriched, of course, by all those qualities that the actors should have contributed. Sadly, only a few of the performers [Kiszkis and Labijak – author's note] went beyond detached correctness; as a result, the play's three acts were not deeply moving, but deeply tiresome (Jarmułowicz, 1995, p. 12).

Another bored spectator was Barbara Kazimierczyk, who felt that the play "dragged on" (Kazimierczyk, 1995), an impression shared by Anna Jęsiak:

> The blandness of otherwise obvious messages presented in a context that nevertheless seems alien not only to the audience, but also to the creators […]. I had the impression that they approached both the text and the subject on tiptoe, with some distance. And that must have affected the whole, which came apart in the second act, losing dramatic momentum (Jęsiak, 1995).

Joanna Chojka, also bored by the performance, stated that Nowak had failed to "put this dramatically imperfect, cinematically constructed text together into a convincing and interesting whole" (Chojka, 1995). In her opinion, Kushner's drama – completed in 1993 – was no longer politically valid. She asked rhetorically:

> Can Kushner's work, with its explicitly political ambitions, but also

> a marked allegorical and mystical dimension, matter to us as well? Can the exotic mores be translated into a different way of feeling, into the peculiar "European" sensibility? […] What could *Angels of America* be about in the puritan Poland of 1995, where the problems of a sexual minority and AIDS continue to be pushed to the distant margins by the whole gamut of issues tied in with national mythology which still seems more important? (Chojka, 1995).

Alina Kietrys's summary clearly identified the reason for the alleged failure of the Gdańsk production:

> In short, we have a play about a controversial subject (the problems of homosexuals continue to stir up public emotions), but we are also dealing with a rather flat text that couldn't be saved by theatricalization (Kietrys, 1995).

Let us briefly consider the boredom and weariness felt by the authors of all five reviews. We can certainly assume that Nowak's theatrical debut posed challenges that were not fully met by the director. The production may have been poorly paced and the tension may have waned. Confronted by a language and characters that were completely new, the actors may have not risen to the challenge and given dull, unconvincing performances. But, as indicated by the quotations, it was not the direction or the acting, not the decorations or the music, that resisted the spectators the most. They found Kushner's text to be "bland" (Jęsiak, 1995), "flat" (Kietrys, 1995), full of "political reasoning" (Chojka, 1995), alien to the Polish reality and sensibility[2]. Though shortened and free of "graphic images", the drama

refused to be absorbed. The escape into boredom was an escape from what Joanna Chojka claimed was to remain "on the distant margins" in the "Puritan Poland of 1995", a country concerned with the national cause and a common identity. In his book *Polska do wymiany*, Przemysław Czapliński analyzes Julian Stryjkowski's *coming out*, or rather *coming off*[3] in *Milczenie* (Silence), offering an insightful look at a similar reaction of the readers. Although critics saw the book as an act of "catching up" and an important gesture of breaking with the intolerance characteristic of totalitarianism, the "silence", the inexpressibility of male-male desire and its invisibility were a condition for the acceptance or integration of otherness into the collective identity. The work and its criticism „preserved the Outsider's existence[4] but situated him on the margins; they encouraged him to confess while setting the limits of his expression" (Czapliński, 2009, p. 307). Though in Czapliński's view nineties literature would ask increasingly difficult questions about sexual identity and depict "various sufferings resulting from the domination of heterosexual normality" (Czapliński, 2009, p. 308), one of the paths of assimilation, apart from the emancipatory attempts at "dethroning normality" (Czapliński, 2009, p. 308), would be to keep Outsiders on the margins and treat their artistic work as an "exotic statement about experiences alien to any normality" (Czapliński, 2009, p. 308). In this perspective, the reviewers' boredom turns out to be an affective response relegatingotherness to the realm of strangeness, exoticism and silent indifference.

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However, a brief mention of the performance in Paweł Grochowski's article *Precz z tolerancją* (Down with Tolerance) in the gay magazine *Filo*, published in Gdańsk from 1986 (first as an underground periodical, then legally from

1990 onwards) by printer and activist Ryszard Kisiel, considerably complicates this diagnosis. The author writes:

> I can only say that during the show I was sometimes moved, and I sometimes laughed, I was sometimes intrigued, but also bored, and unfortunately I didn't find any deeper message, any idea important enough to provoke reflection afterwards, in the play as a whole. To the heterosexual part of the audience, the play may have offered some revealing insights, such as the fact that anyone can turn out to be gay, or that gay relationships are also primarily about love rather than just sex (Grochowski, 1995, p.12).

What is even more striking is that Grochowski also attributes his boredom not only to the production's shortcomings, but to Kushner's text:

> I think that *Angels in America* is nevertheless a play that belongs to American folklore and will not be a success either in Poland or in most countries of the old continent (Grochowski, 1995, p. 12).

As we know, the play became a success not only in Europe, but also in Poland. The claim that Kushner's drama belongs "American folklore" may seem surprising in a community magazine dedicated to promoting knowledge about AIDS and building a self-aware gay counterpublic. Grochowski's boredom, which mirrors the women reviewers' response, can be interpreted as a similar feeling of alienation from the play. But what does it mean?

Taking a cue from Magda Szcześniak, who discusses *Filo* in her book *Normy*

widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji (Norms of Visiblity: Identity in Times of Transition), we can assume that what was at stake in the reception of *Angels* was not the visibility of the homosexual minority. The author cites an article published by Sławomir Starosta in 1990, in the last "underground" issue of *Filo*, which formulates the tasks of the homosexual movement in Poland. It turns out that the writer sees "normality" as the ultimate goal of emancipation. Szcześniak comments:

> "Normally" means here "as among the heterosexual rest of society", even if that "normally" then meant living at a time of radical social change and dynamic re-evaluation of the existing systems of practices and references (Szcześniak, 2016, p. 200).

The normality advocated by Starosta thus becomes both a right and an obligation of homosexual people, imposing the standards of current morality, Europeanness, civilization and belonging to a capitalist consumerist society on their behaviours, practices and identity gestures. Starosta writes:

> The point is to convince heterosexuals that we homosexuals are as normal as them, neither better nor worse, there are both geniuses and thieves among us, and, basically, the only minor difference between us is the sex of our sexual partner (in: Szcześniak, 2016, p. 200).

The reception of the stage production of *Angels* highlights an interesting paradox of emancipation. Seeking inclusion in the field of normality, it cancels its otherness as a quality interesting only to "heteros", quotidian, trivial, "minor". On the other hand, from the perspective of normality

otherness is dismissed as acceptable but exotic and marginal. Czapliński argues that this shift of otherness, which in his view differentiated the uniform, identity normality inherited from the martial law era, is closely related to the progress of political and social transition (see Czapliński, 2009, p. 285).

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Jacek Labijak remembers the reactions to *Angels* quite differently. According to him, people were engaged and deeply moved by the performance[5]. Scenes of closeness and suffering spoke to the Catholic sensibility, homosexual characters gave heart to those who concealed their own identity, and the subject of AIDS was, for all the marginality alleged by the reviews, still valid and present, if not in shared experiences, then in the early nineties culture imported from the West[6]. The production would thus define a politically undifferentiated field of freedom before clear attitudes and conflicts developed. This perspective may be similar to the legend of Solidarity's inclusiveness which was brilliantly deconstructed as being tainted by Catholic fundamentalism by Marcin Kościelniak in his book *Egoiści. Trzecia droga w kulturze polskiej lat 80.* (Egoists: A Third Way in Polish Culture of the 1980s; Kościelniak, 2018, pp. 125-172), but also allows us to look from a different angle at the Polish emancipatory project in theatre and its entanglement in the transition. Between boredom and religiously inspired empathy, between the sense of exoticism and alienation and the neutralization of otherness, between hostility towards the Stranger and the need to assimilate the Other diagnosed by Czapliński (see Czapliński, 2009, p. 329), lies a spectrum of reactions and artistic strategies that illustrate the political confusion.

The confusion was shared by Tony Kushner himself who came to Gdańsk in

June 1995. As Anna Jęsiak reported, he took part in theatre workshops and a discussion of homosexuality and tolerance held at the theatre (Jęsiak, 1995A). This is how *Głos Wybrzeża* described the event:

> The performance of *Angels of America* last Sunday was followed by an unusual meeting of the audience with specialists in social psychology, drug addiction therapy and AIDS prevention and treatment; it was attended by Tony Kushner, representatives of the gay organization Inicjatywa Gdańska, and a Catholic priest, among others. All those present didn't even have the opportunity to speak as there were no fewer than twenty debaters. The whole conversation was pointless because it did not help explain any issues related to tolerance of homosexual minorities in Poland or to church education or the treatment of drug addicts […] (DSG, 1995)

Jęsiak entitled her piece about Kushner's visit *Tony Kushner zaskoczony* (Tony Kushner is Surprised). We can only imagine the impression that the Gdańsk visit made on an artist who described himself as gay, Jewish and leftist, a child of the New Deal and fierce opponent of Reagan's brand of conservatism, a target of homophobia and anti-Semitism, and a believer in the usefulness of Marxism and the genius of Brecht. (Kushner, 1997). After seeing Nowak's production, he allegedly said it was original and different from the ones he had seen so far. He liked the acting and the staging but was surprised by the cuts (so praised by the reviewers) which, in his opinion, removed not only the political issues, but also humour.

> I realize, he said, that the interest in my play is a result of general interest in the problem of AIDS and homosexuality. The popularity

> of this work is a little surprising even to me because I see it as a political text which, alongside the gay question, also addresses the issue of Reaganism. […] *Angels in America* […] is in a sense a product of the public debate about homosexuality that has been going on in the States for years. In a country like Poland, where these issues have only recently begun to be openly discussed, the reception of the performance is specific. My visit to Poland has also made me realize that Reagan, condemned in the United States, was popular in your country, including for his support of Solidarity. But at the same time, he was systematically destroying trade unions in the U.S. Hence, some political aspects of the drama prove untranslatable in another reality (Jęsiak, 1995A).

The political confusion is thus linked to paradoxes generated by the change of context. Not only is Reagan seen in Poland as a champion of freedom and enemy of oppression, not only are homosexuality and AIDS still a "controversial subject", but even Ethel Rosenberg has different connotations. The story of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, sentenced to die in an electric chair on charges of spying for the Soviet Union and providing information about nuclear weapons, was one of the most famous episodes of the Cold War. The Jews, associated with the Communist Party USA, quickly became a symbol of not only American internal policy and oppression of communists, but also an overused example of Western enslavement as opposed to the communist love of freedom. Leon Kruczkowski's play *Juliusz i Ethel* (Julius and Ethel), which depicts them as heroes and innocent victims of the murderous capitalist system, was staged in Poland four times in the year of its premiere (1954): in Warsaw, Łódź, Poznań and by the Polish Radio. So Ethel is not a symbol of Roy Cohn's criminal practices and his

victim, but brings to mind propaganda lies and exaggerations. The meanings are reversed, disrupted and mutable.

While the surprised Kushner looked at Poland's strange political reality from a clearly defined perspective ("I have a friend who goes to the theater with me and has nicknamed me the Bilious Faggot" – Kushner, 1997, p. 25), the rapid and ongoing change of context brought on in the nineties by the installation of capitalism, the class restructuring of society and the transformation of the social landscape generated more and more political paradoxes. The process is so heterogeneous that cultural anthropology and social sciences reject the concept of transition commonly used to describe those changes, regarding it as an empty category that imposes an artificial coherence on a dispersed and fragmentary reality.

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In *Transition Zone: On the End of Post-Communism*, Boris Buden analyzes the fall of the Berlin Wall as the formative scene of post-communism. The pushing masses captured in a state of euphoria "spill through the wall and its gates like grain from a torn sack" (Buden, 2012, p. 17). But from whose perspective are we looking at the overthrow of Communism? Who is watching the fall of the wall? Buden points out that we do not have access to the experience of the active masses. The foundational scene of the post-communist order shows something else. "Our view of the twilight of Communism is divided into a blind event and its symbolic representation, which was created outside it", the author writes (Buden, 2012, p. 17). Citing Kant and his analysis of the destruction of the Bastille, Buden argues that the fall of the wall is produced as a historical event by bystanders on the Western side, looking on passively and constructing the developments as symbols of the new order. What fascinated them so much in the events

sweeping through Eastern Europe? The point seems to be not so much the "return" of Eastern Bloc countries to democratic ideals because the crisis of liberal democracy was already a known fact of Western life. Quoting Rado Riha, Buden writes: "What fascinated them so much was 'the assumed fascination without reservation with Western democracy on the part of Eastern Europeans – their naive, almost blind faith in it'" (Buden, 2012, p. 18). It is a constructed position, projected and superimposed like a formatting frame on the processes and events that followed the fall of Communism in Eastern European countries. It's this position that is expressed by the concept of political transition. Buden points to the origin of the term in transition studies, a research perspective developed in American political sciences in the 1960s and 1970s to describe the political changes that had taken place in South American countries. But when transition begins to be used to characterize political changes in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the meaning of this category is radically altered. It no longer describes actual social, political and economic changes, but projects them. As Buden writes, „the shift is teleological, that is, determined by its goal (Buden, 2012, p. 36). The logic of transition thus understood qualifies the past as decidedly negative, and the future as determined by an unquestionably positive capitalist and democratic order. And the shift must involve a repetition of the West's path. Buden also links it to the repression of the memory of Communism and the consequent loss of the foundation of social relations that would later bring about the conservative, nationalist-religious turn whereby post-communist societies, still looking through Western eyes, would describe themselves as Outsiders[7].

While transition does not so much describe the processes taking place in Poland after 1989 as imposes on them the artificial frame of an inevitable (and, in the light of Buden's reflections, unrealized) path towards capitalism

and neoliberalism, due to its constant presence in the public space and public discourse it has become a category of experience and memory, as noted in Aleksandra Leyk and Joanna Wawrzyniak's recent book *Cięcia. Mówiona historia transformacji* (Cuts: An Oral History of Post-Socialism). They write:

> We posit a fundamental breakdown of the popular memory of the transition into two narratives: a narrative of modernization, which expresses the market values of efficiency and optimization; and a narrative of "moral economy", which speaks of the crisis of norms, values and the workings of the community (Leyk, Wawrzyniak, 2020, p. 9).

The contradiction between these two narratives captures the paradoxical character of the transitional experience which, to follow Buden's lead, is not documented from the perspective of its actors and as such remains blind and produces symbolic representations that add to the sense of confusion.

According to Bulgarian theorist Alexander Kiossev, this character of transition can be expressed by the concept of "oxymoron of normality". In his opinion, the beginning of the transition period is marked by a dream of a "normal state". But what does this mean? Tracing the history of the concept of "normality", Kiossev points to its "multiple, historically changeable, contradictory, even oxymoronic" (Kiossev, 2008) meanings. In the course of cultural development, "normally" has meant naturally, in line with the ethical order, as before, or ordinarily – as every day. But in the 1990s, normality took on new meanings in post-communist countries.

Kiossev's essay makes substantial use of the comparison between the

understanding of normality in Western Europe and North America and its dominant meaning in Central and Eastern Europe. The author points out that whereas normality in the western context is closely linked to privacy and results from naturalizing the new ways of living associated with technology, consumption and morality, in East-Central European countries it belongs to the public sphere. Kiossev notes the consumerist motives and the desire for individual comfort behind post-communist revolutions, but he also emphasizes their altruistic, public and social dimension. He uses the concept of "imaginary consumption" to explain the split (Kiossev, 2008). Western goods are not only desired; they serve an identity function, shifting cultural boundaries and affording admission into Europe. What is western thus becomes a medium of normality understood as the desirable condition of the state and society. Importantly, it is a fragile and utopian normality, because the intuitive fear of post-communist societies still concerns their own abnormal condition. We want to be like normal people, the anonymous characters of Kiossev's essay seem to be saying, we want to have what they have, to behave and consume like them. But it's still only a performance, hiding the recognition of our own incompatibility, which is captured in the Polish context by the category of *homo sovieticus* – the one who exposes our non-normality. At the same time – to add to Kiossev'scomments – our incompatibility identified by transitional culture provokes aggression and a violent reorganization of the field of normality: it's them who are abnormal when they disrupt our sense of norm, taken from a fantasy about their life. And since this fantasy is mediated through goods and advertising, it is fundamentally conservative. Hence, what is progressive can soon become abnormal.

This insightful analysis makes it possible to formulate a paradox crucial to the reception of theatrical *Angels*. The play by an acclaimed American

playwright, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 and was produced throughout the world (by 1995, the work had been staged thirty times), determined what Western theatre was. According to the "quilting point" (Sowa, 2011) of transitional culture reconstructed by Kiossev, what comes from the West determines what is normal and necessary. As Anna Jęsiak's commentary indicates, a similar motivation lay behind the premiere in question:

> This meticulously crafted production once again inspires reflection on the selection of repertoire and the purpose of fighting for the rights to the Polish premiere. Premiere performances are likely to receive additional financial support so they are worth pursuing by a theatre for economic reasons. But from the audience's perspective, things may look differently (Jęsiak, 1995).

Polish premieres of western plays were attractive to theatres not only as a sign of catching up and building "normal" cultural circulations, but also because they provided an opportunity for financial success and finding a place in the new, "normal" capitalist reality. On the other hand, "from the audience's perspective, things may look differently" (Jęsiak, 1995), because Kushner's drama is, as noted before, an expression of an identity that enters into tension with "normality". *Angels* is a celebration of non-normativity, otherness and difference. No wonder then that when a deeply political drama, even in an abridged version, is staged in a theatre that tries to shake off the "burden of the past" to offer its audience "normal", "world-class" performances, the production provokes resistance in the form of insurmountable boredom. Labelling it as a politically "invalid" failure thus emerges as a symptom of the desire for Polish "normality": both that which

can be linked to the need for tradition and being rooted in morality and that which results from the belief in the emancipatory character of capitalism and the free market[8].

Of particular note in this respect is the context provided by the production's programme, especially the assortment of essays, which, read together, clash sharply with the boredom declared by the reviewers. An excerpt from Philippe Ariés's book *The Hour of Our Death* indicates the antagonism between medicine and rationalism and the spiritual forces that find expression in the fear of death and in sex "in unusual and untamed forms" (Ariés, in: *Anioły Ameryki*, 1995, p. 3).

Ariés diagnoses their denunciation as near-sightedness. In his view, the Church and medicine now stand silent and helpless in the face of death because they have rejected these "untamed forms". A passage from Karl Jaspers' *Philosophy of Existence* examines human consciousness and freedom in the face of death, discussing tragedy, guilt and innocence, community and solidarity. An excerpt from a book by American sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson attempts to debunk prejudices against homosexuality. It not only points out the biologically natural status of non-heteronormative orientations, but also reconstructs the reasons for exclusion and oppressive practices rooted in religions and regimes. *AIDS – wprowadzenie medyczne* (AIDS: A Medical Introduction), an article by Jan Suchowiak, until 1987 director of the Department of Sanitary Inspection at the Ministry of Health and Welfare and one of the first Polish AIDS specialists, indicating the immense scale of the epidemic that makes no distinction between homosexual and heterosexual people, and an excerpt from *Seksuologia. Zarys encyklopedyczny* (Sexology: An Encyclopaedic Outline) round out the whole that, by drawing on Western texts, practices,

values and Christianity as well as on biologically defined naturalness, takes the discourse of normality to its limits. Gay culture not only allows us to see identity in otherness, but also draws attention to the cultural and philosophical potential of difference. At the same time, particularity and the value generated by it remain under the cover of naturalness, normality and biological commonality.

I believe the "oxymoron of normality" is the field of politicality that Polish political theatre will try to exploit. Like Nowak's *Angels of America* and Warlikowski's *Angels in America*, it will continue to produce a rift between the transitional pro-Western aspirations and the demand, formulated on both capitalist and Christian or assimilationist grounds, to recognize non-normative identities as normal on the one hand, and the emancipatory gesture of showing the non-normative as radically and joyfully different on the other. The logic of normalization fails to include the most important theatrical medium: the body which, due to its both universal and strictly singular character, can never be a medium of normality. Prior applying lipstick in the reflection of the matzevah embodies otherness regardless of the normalizing order imposed on him by the performance, its programme and reception.

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Let us now take a closer look at the production's director, Wojciech Nowak. His subsequent artistic career raises a few crucial questions about the transition and Polish political theatre. Nowak's 1990 film debut, *Death of the Baby Maker*, was generally regarded as a success. Set in the late 1980s in a small provincial town where the most powerful figure is an secret policeofficer, the film tells the story of Januszek, a local ladykiller. The protagonist returns from his military service after the above-mentioned

secret police officer, the father of Blada, had pulled some strings to secure his discharge. Blada is pregnant with Januszek and wants to marry him. As soon as he returns, the man starts to run away, trying to prevent the wedding at all costs. Along the way, he has sex with one woman after another, borrows some money, steals equipment stolen from Russian transports and is chased by other thieves. Blada, her father and finally the police are after him too. The wedding almost happens – blackmailed with the threat that his fiancée's father will arrest the whole town, Januszek eventually turns up at the church. At the last minute he and his best man get into a car and flee "for America". But before they can leave town, the car stops; eluding pursuit, Januszek jumps into the river and drowns. The film won several awards at the 16th Gdynia Film Festival and sparked controversy.

Nowak's film tells of an attempt to escape normality. The protagonist rejects the model of the family, home and stability offered by Blada. The plot exposes the oppressive character of such normality. "Going to America" is a means of sublimation for the protagonist, an escape from the pattern in which he is stuck. This escape cannot be afforded by the Church, despite his serious conversations with a priest, or any of the women with whom he enters into abusive relationships. Liberation proves impossible – like the heroine of a melodrama, Januszek must die, without ever finding his own "self". Although otherness is an object of desire, it cannot survive in the eighties.

Nowak's next projects were Television Theatre plays. There were thirteen productions between 1991 and 2001, when he began helming the TV series *Rodzina zastępcza* (Foster Family). After this period Nowak worked mostly on television shows. In 2007, which saw the premiere of Krzysztof

Warlikowski's *Angels of America*, Nowak returned to the Television Theatre to direct the play *Stygmatyczka* (The Stigmatic) which aired in 2008. The script follows the life of Sister Wanda Boniszewska, a nun of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Angels who was born in the Vilnius Region and reputedly received the stigmata in the 1930s. After the war she stayed in Vilnius, where she was imprisoned and convicted in the 1950s. In 1956 she was released and came to Poland. The screenwriter used Boniszewska's memoirs, Soviet court records, the security service's operational documents and interviews with witnesses to her life, Archbishop Henryk Gulbinowicz and Reverend Jan Pryszmont. The play had an impressive cast, starring Kinga Preis in the main role, and told of the heroine's spiritual strength which led even her persecutors to convert. The production's creators garnered a string of awards at the Two Theatres Festival in Sopot in 2008.

The Stigmatic was the first in a long string of teleplays that Nowak has continued to direct (the last one in 2017) between successive series about religious and family values, patriotism, Polish history and the obscurantism of Polish society. This repertoire bears hardly a trace of *Angels of America* and the need to show "gay fantasy" on the stage. The question of what happened must remain unanswered, though the direction Nowak's work has taken is an interesting example of the Polish transition in theatre. This political path, opposite to the movement charted by Bryce Lease's book, raises the question of how we understand the history of Polish political theatre and construct a canon representative of it.

Nowak's production, the Polish premiere of *Angels in America* has been erased from the currently written history of Polish theatre. Since Warlikowski used a new translation, there is no trace of that prehistory in his staging either. But the former performance, its context then and now,

can, as I have demonstrated, become a reason for reflecting on the relationship between emancipation and the transition in Polish theatre. It is also useful to ask if the exclusion of this production may be a symptom of normalization – in this case, of the very emancipation? Is the emancipatory path straight and based on the logic of progress or is it more of a meandering among complicated and ambiguous social and political processes? Perhaps in this perspective, it is worth reclaiming *Angels of America* for the history of Polish political theatre?

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Footnotes

1. All references to Jacek Labijak's memories are based on a private conversation I had with the actor over the phone on 14 April 2020.
2. Only Małgorzata Jarmułowicz's review encouraged audiences to read the drama published in *Dialog*, arguing that it's still worth it' (Jarmułowicz, 1995, p. 12).
3. Czapliński explains: "Though sincere, the confession belonged to the poetics of inexpressible desire and was not to be followed by a real change.In this context, it becomes clear that the writer regarded his *coming out* as a *coming off*" (Czapliński, 2009, p. 306).
4. In Czapliński's lexicon, the Outsider is a culturally produced Other, and later Stranger. This category includes the Jew, the Woman, the Homsexual, the Postmodernist, the Ubek [secret police officer] and the Capitalist.
5. In terms of the audience's reaction, it may have been important that a Polish translation of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* came out in 1995 (see Michel Foucault, *Historia seksualności*, trans. B. Banasiak, T. Komendant, K. Matuszewski, introduction by T. Komendant, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1995). Another indication of the production's popularity is Grochowski's mention of a crowded audience (Grochowski, 1995, p. 5).
6. It suffices to recall the immense popularity of Jonathan Demme's film *Philadelphia* which had its Polish premiere in 1994. As Andrew Beckett, an AIDS-infected lawyer fighting in court against discrimination on medical grounds and homophobia, Tom Hanks, regardless of the Hollywood production's effectiveness in advocating emancipation, became one of the most recognizable popular culture figures of that era.
7. This process is indicated by Przemysław Czapliński: "In response to the identification of the new formation as both a permanent ('it's not going to change') and labile ('it can happen to anyone') strategy of exclusion, and as a reaction to the numerous actual exclusions (particularly unemployment) literature performed a simple manoeuvre: it extended the condition of Outsider to the social majority" (Czapliński, 2009, p. 323).
8. Belief in capitalism as an instrument of emancipation in the identity narratives of Polish homosexuals is analyzed by Magda Szcześniak (Szcześniak, 2016, pp. 198-214) and Przemysław Czapliński (Czapliński, 2009, pp. 309-310).

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