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Inside Virtual Rooms

Katarzyna Lemańska

Balladyna

by Juliusz Słowacki

produced, adapted and directed by Oskar Sadowski; music by Baasch; editing by Adrien Cognac and Wojciech Kaniewski; animations by Sebulec, Pavlo Mazur; additional dramaturgy by Monika Winiarska; co-produced by As Media, Agnieszka Sznajder-Leśniak; sound engineering by Kuba Sosulski.

premiered online on May 28th, 2020, on VOD player.pl

In March 2020 in the midst of social isolation, Oskar Sadowski suggested to his friends that they read *Balladyna* in a group video chat. The reading sparked the idea of making what the creators call a “virtual video-based show” (*wirtualny wideospektakl*) as an alternative to streaming pre-recorded performances. As a result, *Balladyna* was made entirely online with the aid of video conferencing tools. The motto of the show, which is available on VOD player.pl, are the words from the Prologue to Juliusz Słowacki’s play: “That we know how to fly to visit each other in thoughts is a gift from God.”

With theaters shut down across Poland, actors have produced many projects from home with online audiences in mind. Two such shows, assembled from cell phone recordings, were pilgrim/majewski's *Field150 sq.m.* (*Pole 150m2*) directed by Seb Majewski at the Dramatic Theater in Wałbrzych and *The New Decameron* helmed by Jacek Głomb at the Modjeska Theater in Legnica. The novelty of Sadowski's project lies in its juxtaposition of insight into the private life of actors in isolation – a metatheatrical mode of accessing theater online – and the play's rather unorthodox form. The screen is split into windows in which we see individual actors in a gallery view. The actors play scenes that they recorded themselves and were later edited using social media effects by Adrien Cognac and Wojciech Kaniewski. A case in point is the nymphs Chochlik and Skierka (Rozalia Mierzicka and Karolina Staniec), who appear in chat windows modified with filters, masks, and emojis. The artists recorded their scenes with cell phones in private spaces, when driving, and in a number of outdoor locations. Katarzyna Figura (Goplana) is seen on the shore of the Baltic Sea and in an unfinished loft, Sandra Korzeniak (Widow) appears in the countryside in a wooden mountain cottage, Marta Zięba and Maja Pankiewicz (Balladyna and Alina) pick raspberries in the woods. The camerawork, which follows Sadowski's ideas, is consistent throughout, which helps achieve the enticing effect of film polyphony and simultaneity. The actors gaze directly at their phone screens, some of them holding their cameras very close to their faces; the intensity resulting from looking into the camera and the direct contact with the audience help establish the online audience as an equal partner. To make it possible to combine many scenes in one master shot, the performers delivered their lines while listening via headphones to the audio track of the video that Sadowski edited from footage of a rehearsal involving all actors, which included cues and director's comments. There are no cuts within the

scenes, which adds tension to the dialogue. This is clear in the second act when Zięba performs three scenes – raspberry picking, Alina's murder, and conversations with Goplana impersonating Alina – in one master shot.

Unlike *Homemade*, Netflix's anthology of short films, and HBO Europe's *At Home*, *Balladyna* is not intended to share a personal experience of forced confinement. However, the work was, in a way, self-therapeutic – the actors had the chance to engage in artistic work when no theater or film jobs were available (Sandra Korzeniak admits, "I was beset by all sorts of demons, severe crises. I was moping around the house"). Sadowski's *Balladyna* centers on the theme of loneliness, both interpersonal and artistic. The show begins with an off-stage reading of an excerpt from the Prologue addressed by Słowacki to another poet, Zygmunt Krasiński. The parable of the old, blind and lonely harpist who mistakes the rumble of surf for a crowd of listeners ("So he leaned on his harp and sang to the deserted seashore: and when he finished, he wondered why there was no human voice, no sigh, why the song earned no applause") at once places us in the current context of pandemic isolation and presents a vision of a future where actors perform without a live audience. Though Sadowski insists that the play is not a "Covid work," he adds the following sentence to the original text: "Come, I'll take you to the theater." These words are spoken by the Hermit, the exiled King Popiel III, who is voiced by the director. In Sadowski's work, the Hermit becomes an animated avatar, the Golden Elephant, who receives the protagonists in a virtual theater rather than in his hermitage (animations by Sebulec).

The show's premiere on a streaming platform was designed as a community experience. All audience members watched the play together ("You will be part of a remote Audience scattered all over Poland who will experience

something utterly new together!") and the performance was followed by a Q&A session with the creators. Once the show ended, the director prompted the actors to bow despite the absence of applause. With this simple gesture, Sadowski gave a nod to the story of the lonely harpist in Słowacki's *Prologue*.

Social isolation also affects Słowacki's characters. They are lost in the virtual world and desperately look for meaning. There is poignancy in the scenes where the characters fail to find common ground and feel lost in technologically mediated relationships. One such scene takes place at a virtual party in a castle, where each guest appears in a separate chat window, and all break into dance to Beverly Craven's *Promise Me*.

The absence of physical contact is heightened in the scene where Balladyna and Kostryn make love, and at the moment of Alina's murder when one feels that the actresses (seen in different windows) are about to come together in the same space. The corporal aspect of sex and murder brings home the agonizing impossibility of physical contact. Touch becomes a divine attribute – it appears only between the naked, entwined bodies of Paweł Smagała and Sonia Roszczuk as they play out the allegory of Love. Strikingly, the show incorporates motifs from an online game, *World War 3*, which depicts a fictional armed conflict. From a gamer's perspective, the audience watches a battle contested by Kirkor (Marcin Kowalczyk) and Kostryn (Jan Dravnel) in a contemporary Warsaw, including opposite the Palace of Culture and Science. The game adds additional levels of reception: the audience gain insight into a gamer's experience, *World War 3* presents the plot of Słowacki's play, and the battle is a virtual experience for the characters in the created world rather than the real one. In the context of the pandemic, the loneliness of social isolation that the play explores documents the time –

Balladyna premiered in the last week of isolation but the problem of human alienation in the virtual world remains relevant.

Sadowski offers a psychological reading of the character of Balladyna. He wonders when evil took root in the protagonist's mind and how Balladyna's relationship with her oppressive, possessive mother factored into this. The Widow, played by Sandra Korzeniak, is Balladyna's recollection, which the audience doesn't find out until the Widow's trial scene when her daughter, played by Gaia Dravnel, spontaneously interrupts one of Korzeniak's lines. This is the most powerful scene, where the line between the character and the actress's private life becomes blurred. The girl tries to pull her mother away from the phone, reminding her she had been promised fun. This scene, added by the director, is a flashback where Korzeniak's daughter becomes a young Balladyna. The actions of the protagonist, portrayed by Marta Zięba, are determined not only by her childhood experience but also by the fact that she's going to be a mother herself – by the time the action starts, she is already pregnant by Grabiec (Maciej Grubich). Both Korzeniak and Zięba create in-depth portrayals of their characters, which, combined with the experimental montage, provides the center of gravity for the show.

Even though *Balladyna* explores a new online experience, its vision of digital performance is strongly undergirded by the 19th-century theater. A camp aesthetic dominates; Balladyna and Kirkor are enclosed in richly decorated golden frames redolent of both historic paintings and a proscenium arch. Each act starts with the raising of a "painted" animated curtain that features Konrad Żukowski's erotic paintings populated with skeletons, human bodies, and fantastic animals. This serves to underscore the illusory nature of theater and the division into stage and audience. Another impressive aspect is the cast of more than twenty performers including theater actors from all

over Poland (supporting parts are played by the likes of Jacek Poniedziałek, Bartosz Gelner, Dominika Biernat, Julian Świeżewski, Magdalena Celmer, Bartosz Ostrowski) and top models, Dominik Sadoch and Ola Rudnicka. Plus, there are extras who serve as Kostryn's queer army lined up in the messenger's gallery view are bare-chested young men. Subtly emphasized, the theme of visibility of queer people seems to be the director's personal commentary on today's Poland.

Sadowski's *Balladyna* is marked by visual excess, flashy animations, camp aesthetics, its unmasking of artificial and theatrical, and conscious use of language, styles, and social media tools. The music, composed by Baasch, reflects the eclectic nature of the show, blending rave-inspired music with electronic and other sounds so the pieces reflect the characters' moods. These span from unease, fear, and loneliness to indignation. They also inject a great deal of humor. The focus of the production, which is a formal experiment, is not so much on interpreting Słowacki's drama (though one should note the innovative take on Balladyna's relationship with her mother) as on the metatheatrical reception of "virtual theater." This does not pretend to be able to fully compensate both the actors and audiences for the absence of live engagement with the arts and other humans. Today, amid a glut of work produced as part of *Online Culture* (*Młodzi w sieci*, a program dedicated to supporting online performance work), we can also view Sadowski's "virtual video-based show" as an interesting document of the work by artists in isolation.

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Author

Katarzyna Lemańska – graduated in performance studies and editing from the Jagiellonian University. Her works have been published in “Didaskalia”, “Dialog”, and taniecPOLSKA.pl and CzasKultury.pl websites. Editorial Assistant of online research journal Performer. One of the judges of the 26th and 28th National Competition for Staging Contemporary Polish Plays.

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