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# didaskalia

GAZETA TEATRALNA

English Issue 1/2012



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DOROTA OGRODZKA

## OCCUPATION AS ART

### Public Space for Creating

In an interview for *Krytyka Polityczna* in February 2012 Claire Tancons – an American curator and art historian who has been researching and describing the Occupy Wall Street movement, was asked by Jakub Majmurek whether “these protests and the European Indignados – with their masks, banners, happenings – are they a form of art?”<sup>1</sup> We can easily glean that the suggested cause of this question was the theater props and signifiers identified by Majmurek, which, he believes, immediately make us think in terms of art. A sign of art from this perspective turns out (we might assume, considering the set of instruments the journalist names) to be a formal obligation.

In the cited question, which throws us with its interpolative openness, yet holds a strain of diagnosis, an aesthetic structure is entered through recognizing gestures, symbols, and language as proper to art – something which comes across as a natural and unambiguous decision. Decor, sparkle, and costumes – we focus attention on the mimetic tools used to build the illusion, even the banners, which are borderline forms, on the crossroads between politics and masquerade, are listed in one breath with happenings, and cited as more evidence of the supposed “artisticness” of the events on Wall Street.

Majmurek asks about New York and the Indignados, but in this conversation the horizon of interest is significantly broader: it includes the current events in Warsaw, the ACTA affair,<sup>2</sup> and the riots around the squats. When in January 2012 Polish government announced Poland’s inclusion in ACTA, an avalanche of commentaries and harsh words of disapproval spread through forums and social web-sites, while several official state sites were plunged into blackness with remarkable speed as a hackers’ boycott. The “NO to ACTA!” symbol was like a flag in the days that followed. It was swiftly taken out into the streets – the emotions which had theretofore remained on the screen now appeared as a fact in the city space.

The crowds spilled out into the streets, and the commentators stressed with astonishment that suddenly what had been the main nerve of the collective events – the mutual reluctance of communities with polarized ideological affiliations, mutual aggression and struggles over particular points of view, hermetic languages – ceased to be of importance. “At the anti-ACTA demonstrations soccer fans and LGBT activists stood arm in arm, along with anarchists and union representatives – as well as people who were coming to a demonstration for the first time. They were not just protesting against certain copyright regulations – but against the arrogance of the authorities and the lack of social dialogue,”<sup>3</sup> wrote Witold Mrozek on his blog, which was, *nota bene*, devoted to the Warsaw Theater Meetings festival. The context of theater returns.

This situation of collective excitement, the materialization of Turner’s *communitas*,<sup>4</sup> for some reason tempts us to keep pairing it

with art, and to place it on overriding level, stressing its reality. If it is effective, is it still – or was it ever – art?

Majmurek directly asks for and marks the need to gain irrevocable solutions – are the protests and all their equipment art, or not. Tancons initially seems to get mired down in categories, but swiftly reverses the situation, problematizing how the category of “art” is understood. She points out less the masks and the performative nature of the gestures than the activists themselves, whom she sees as artists. She aims her gaze at their space and their intellectual, environmental resources. “The meetings of the future Occupy Movement activists, where protest strategies were established, generally took place in a place called 16 Beaver. This is a space for meetings, activities, and discussions. The artists who created it were to a large extent formed through devotion to political art in an open course organized by the Whitney Museum in the 1990s – they received very solid training in Marxism, feminism, and post-colonialism.”<sup>5</sup>

The “isms” listed here to some extent serve as a banner, as a mask – as a background for a message, simultaneously concealing and revealing. It appears that they give an identity to those who carry them, and Tancons sees this to be the identity of an artist and intellectual. They link their carriers to the political art system, like a pass or a stamp left at each of their actions, giving it the rank of symbolic efficacy and artistic critique. The discourses mentioned in the researcher’s argument reveal a similarity to the masks previously exhibited – they signal a structure in which everyone who grasps for it and uses it can be included.

Following this lead, we might come to the conclusion that actions are named art because their initiators have the correct status, while the place where they work is a space as they define it. This is, however, neither a gallery nor a museum – whose ambivalent nature has been repeatedly exposed in visual culture studies – places that are markedly non-neutral, inflected. Not through the gesture of whitening the walls and tying ropes to keep the viewers from the objects, but from tying ropes of the relevant discourses. 16 Beaver is not consecrated by its name, nor by its rank as an art institution, yet it is loaded with significance, saturated with the language and standpoints forged there. “Made” as a space for art events, produced as a field for social demonstrations. In itself it stands as a foundation for art conceived differently from the production, presentation, and observation of artifacts. It is the materialization of the definition, the spatial model of the paradigm.

Though this shift might seem insignificant, Tancons stresses that it is key. “The OWS movement is art not in the sense of producing a work of art, but in that it has reinvented social relations; it teaches us to think of art in categories other than the production of objects for display in galleries.”<sup>6</sup> The essence has become new relationships, a



reformulated division of strengths and alternate forms of communication. The freshness and performative efficacy of the creator appears in the production of dissent, opposition, presence, and perhaps critically, in the spirit of Henri Lefebvre<sup>7</sup>: the production of a space, in this case, a public space. It is no longer masks, but a solid course in Marxism combined with visual tools imported from the sphere of discussion and action in the public interest that qualify art, providing scaffolding for its political nature. The artistic aspect of these actions reveals itself in the production of social relations and as an execution (to recall Artur Żmijewski's famous statement) of the postulate of social applied art *per se*.<sup>8</sup>

There is a suggestive image in a recent documentary film by Tony Gatlif,<sup>9</sup> whose title is derived directly from the movement that shook Europe in the past months: *Indignados*. It is a word taken from the pages of a famous book by Stephen Hessel, *Time for Outrage*,<sup>10</sup> which leaves no room for indifference. It is as powerful as a fist, and its simplicity has caused millions of arms to raise skyward.

A sea of waving hands has become a manifestation of presence, which is even more clearly marked in the silence. There is a compelling silence over the center of Madrid, one of the main fires of the outrage. Body next to body – the camera records an enormous concentration of young people with a fluid movement, their stubborn resilience, which demands attention and the right to decide upon public space. Thousands of fingers ripple almost inaudibly to make a sign of solidarity. In the dictionary of the Indignados' gestures, this sign

means agreement. The alphabet is very simple, made up of only a few elements, and it spreads quickly, intuitively. And it has a real meaning – it is not only a postulate, it is also performative – it produces a particular kind of unity, beyond discussion, deliberations, and reconciling positions.

It makes a slogan that is beyond language, without the laborious work of transcending differences and negotiating a common program. Wherever the Indignados appear, they are sure to mark their presence.

A few sequences later we see another action by the occupants – as if it were nothing, they enter the hall of one of the biggest banks in Brussels. There are over a dozen of them. Here, in the glass and aesthetically refined interiors of the Dexia Bank, in the very heart of the city, their stretched shirts, sneakers, and kerchiefs worn round their necks issue a challenge to the white of the collars and the glistening cufflinks. The action is swift, well prepared, and skillful. Without shouting or excessive emotion, almost coldly. Practically without speaking they unrolled the pre-prepared banners. The canvases were spread over the windows, the markers started moving – ordinary pieces of paper were filled with these slogans: “We won't pay for the crisis!” and “Down with capitalism!” A moment later the glass walls of the bank turned into a remarkable gallery of indignation. The transparent glass facades were covered with a dense patchwork of accusations in spray-paint and marker.

Though Gatlif's documentary is a quick montage of dynamic scenes of protests, police interventions, and loud demonstrations, it is

these two images that are the most powerful. They are battle scenes of a sort. “The right to a city is like a cry and a demand,”<sup>11</sup> wrote Henri Lefebvre, and the concision of this slogan appears to run through Gatlif’s narrative and render the climate of the events he has filmed. Here the claim is the readiness to take over a place, to occupy a space, to stand arm in arm – persistently, until someone comes to take them by force. The cry comes less from the throat than from the entire body. The occupation becomes a production – a simple creative act, but a very powerful one.

We cannot deny that Tony Gatlif has a fine aesthetic intuition. We might say that his characteristic manner of linking images and building a narrative makes every story a visual poem, an aesthetic masterpiece, and that whatever perspective and subject he chooses changes, in his construction, into a story about art. This time the impression is particularly strong that the material itself requires such a way of looking. And that Gatlif has insightfully discovered the need to interpret the dramaturgy of the occupation actions occurring in the public space according to newly conceived categories of joined aesthetics and politics. The director’s delicately though consistently introduced method – the concept of showing the Indignados’ demonstrations and interventions as a work of art, as a creative process – is not, it seems, accidental. It is an ideological and intentional choice, which allows us to inquire into the status of the events and to locate them in a redefined framework of art, in its new paradigm, of which Tancons spoke, not involving the production of works or the arrangement of the process of aesthetic expression. In another of the film’s scenes, a young man says to a friend: “Come to the square tomorrow, we’re staging an artistic brawl!”<sup>12</sup>

In his famous book on the connections between art and public space, *The One Place after Another*,<sup>13</sup> Miwon Kwon proposes three paradigms of art in public space. In the first he draws examples from the 1960s – art projects, installations, and sculptures brought into the city squares and streets. In exploding the white walls of the museums, Kwon sees a critical act against the exhibition paradigm, a demystification of the illusions of transparency and the traditionally falsified neutrality, which is questioned as a very defined structure for dominating the gaze and delimiting the body; and as less a void than a symbolic utopia. Art in the public space is an insertion that challenges, often nonchalantly undermining the nature of what it invades, a foreign body, but it quickly gives way to another model: art as public space.

Making a field for the presence, the interference, or invasion of the viewer and participant is key. In this way of thinking artistic projects and products are not put in a spatial framework, they create its scaffolding themselves. Finally, Kwon says that public interest enters the arena. Projects whose themes are key aspects of social tension, works in which, as Suzanne Lacy writes, “public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language,”<sup>14</sup> are defined as art in the public interest. Exclusion, injustice, violence, and homelessness are terms from the pocket dictionary of the art of the 1970s and 80s. Kwon draws upon this theoretical model immediately thereafter, as he convincingly defines public interest. It would seem worthwhile to explain some examples of art which adopts a parrhesian model<sup>15</sup> – which speaks in the interest of the minority, reveals controversies that have been swept under the carpet of social indifference, pricks

the all-too-smooth surface of democratic self-contentment. And yet in asking if a protest in itself can be seen as a work of art, he supplies no answers.

We ought, therefore, to risk one more shift and propose a fourth paradigm, wherein the very production of public space, such as Lefebvre understands it – with its relations, tactics, language, forms of communication – becomes art. The public space as art – this might be how the term sounds.

It would seem that recent events in Warsaw allow us to appreciate the paradigm of the production of space, for which an important project, and we stress, an artistic form of expression, was in fact the occupation. The Prasowy on Marszałkowska Street in Warsaw was, for many years, one of the most well known milk bars [diners] for the inhabitants of the downtown area. Following the liquidation of the famous university Karaluch on Krakowskie Przedmieście, and then the Familjny on Nowy Świat, one of the last of its kind to serve Russian-style dumplings, homemade *kompot* and pork chops with potatoes at low prices, for less than ten zloty. In the fall of 2011, the manager of the diner retired, and shortly thereafter the place was closed. The Municipal Council for Real Estate Management was to declare an auction to rent the space, but at this point the residents took an interest in the affair. Young people from the Syrena squat on Wilcza Street, in the heart of the city, activists fighting for years against the gentrification of the local downtown streets, began asking about the principles of the competition, suspecting that the sole criterion for the decision would be the price, which would lead to another luxury restaurant or chain coffee shop. They called attention to the rents, which had been rising for years, and the elimination of small companies, businesses, services, and residents from the central districts of the city.<sup>16</sup> They did not so much belong to a certain community that could be easily named or identified; they rather appealed to the category of the commonality of the city space and to the idea of “what is public.” With strong rhetoric, to the rhythm of chanted slogans, they declared on the blog they created: “The closing of a diner, the plans to develop Jordan Gardens on Szara Street and AK Ruczaj Square, the reprivatization of buildings (over two thousand in the city!), are only a few examples of the gentrification of the Warsaw core. We are staunchly against such policies. We believe that a city is for all its inhabitants, and the authorities should consider the needs of the whole society, including the less wealthy and less influential. We do not believe a city should be managed like a company! We do not agree to inhabitants being treated like commodities!”<sup>17</sup>

After plastering up simple, provisional posters and mobilizing their forces, for whom the Syrena was the main base, the activists moved in to take the site. The squat, in existence since 2011, is a building from which the inhabitants had been gradually evicted. The activists participating in the collective – the language itself is a precise and deliberate base for the ideology – are largely affiliated with the Warsaw Tenants’ Association, yet they firmly reject labels and unambiguous affinities. The program of Syrena’s operations is like the graffiti in the staircase of a building in which it is located; the various layers pile one on top of the other and fill in the picture. There is no coherent plan, just a free, palimpsest structure growing out of a collage which acknowledges no dominant pre-established perspective, but absorbs one element at a time. English lessons are given by way of assistance,

there is a day-room for children, social cooking, a grocery cooperative, i.e. an attempt to circumvent the middleman of the supermarkets in the economic chain of transaction linked to buying food. The common denominator is the idea of exchange and lateral relations

– the slogan of democratization crops up in all of their activities. On the ground floor is a mini-library that collects carefully chosen items that define the intellectual horizon of the place. Solid courses in feminism, Marxism, and post-colonialism are provided here as well. Moreover, the ideological roots go back to traditions which are key to all contemporary young leftist communities, and which are also important to contemporary non-government organizations and creative groups that link art with social involvement. We might say that the social movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were a prehistory of sorts for squatting and the creation of Warsaw's Syrena. On one shelf there is Andrzej Mencwel's *Ethos of the Leftist*, alongside Bogdan Cywiński's *Origins of the Brave*. The position they take of responsibility for shaping social bonds and their response to unfulfilled needs arising from civic rights, of members of society, seem to hover in the air. These references situate the activities of the squat inhabitants in a logical world-view network and give an ideological point of support. The tradition that links practical action with theoretical reflection, a social sensitivity with an intelligent ethos of self-development, allows us to place this in the structure where Cywiński locates the activities of the Flying University,<sup>18</sup> and where Andrzej Mencwel situates the confrontational standpoint of Waclaw Nalkowski or the postulates of Stanisław Brzozowski.<sup>19</sup> Where there is no opportunity for systemic justice it should be created outside of the system, in its cracks, exploding the structure and forming alternate practices. Breaking up strategies with tactics.<sup>20</sup>

The Prasowy action took place on a cold Monday just before the holidays – on 19 December 2011. At around 3:00 p.m. a group of over a dozen people entered the diner. The red-and-white tablecloths returned to the tables, water boiled in dented kettles, and cabbage was cooked in saucepans. On the menu boards they wrote in colored chalk: pudding with juice, cabbage coleslaw, *zurek* soup. For several hours, according to a spontaneously developed plan, those who wanted to did the cooking – volunteers, activists, accidental arrivals, anyone who cared to. The diner not only served food again for half the day, it also turned into a day room of sorts, where passers-by and residents of the local buildings, lured by the noise and the sight of Prasowy crowded once more, joyfully dropped in and stayed a while. The dumplings made by tattooed hands disappeared in a flash – ultimately two hundred and fifty meals were served. With the slogan “democracy and dumplings,” in colored aprons, the occupant cooks bustled about the pre-prepared jars with groats, lentils, and coleslaw. “Down with the privatization of squares, down with the raising of rents for communal real estate spaces like diners. Now is the time that our needs got noticed, and our voices heard,” said an organizer of the action to the camera documenting the event. “We’re going to cook – we and the other inhabitants of the city – until they throw us out, or until they recognize our right to this city.”<sup>21</sup> The occupation lasted only a few hours. The occupiers’ rhetoric was built on just a few slogans, of which the most important seemed to be the right to the city, the issue of public space, and democracy. What was heard even more often was the declaration that they were not moving, that

they would stay and cook. As if the very act of being there, appearing in that space, was more important than solemn speeches and refined discussions. Occupation instead of deliberation, live *agon*.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently there was the atmosphere of carnival, without the masks and fans, but with many other attributes: checked aprons, wooden rolling pins, and haystacks, like signs of belonging and identification, with simple gestures, restoring the original function to the diner. Not through balanced discussions, but through action, staging the diner, effectively setting it in motion.

Masks appeared at the moment of intervention, but with a new function. “The officers who blocked the entrance to the Prasowy Diner regained by the inhabitants last Friday covered their faces with plastic visors. The bureaucrat from the Real Estate Management Council who assisted the police and locksmith to restore order was also reluctant to show her face,” Roman Pawłowski reported in the *Gazeta Stołeczna*.<sup>23</sup> The occupants were taken away, a few names were written down, others managed to retreat. The police response was swift, much swifter than the response of the bureaucrats who had been called upon to discuss the rental offer. “The contrast between the mass police force and the peaceful occupation of the diner, the dumplings with lentils, and the people who, when asked about their subversive activities against the municipal authorities, listed the food that was consumed, created a very grotesque image,” wrote Joanna Erbel.<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically, however, in the occupiers’ logic the intervention of the police cordon, which appeared in all its splendor, in uniform and with all the equipment, seems formally appropriate. Though one might not like it, it uses the same language – producing a spatial quality by using the body.

The occupation was dispersed very quickly. Before this occurred, however, the terrain was really taken and a space produced which could not be attributed to the community, and could not even be tied to a concrete language. They called out the playful slogan “One-two-three! Dumplings!,” which was on their mouths as the creators of this public episode left the diner after the police intervention. It might be treated as a sign marking the ironic presence of those not gathered, temporarily bound by a common cause, than as a real argument, a voice of accord.

Nonetheless: it was a political and, we dare say, artistic gesture. This simple activity, an invasion and commencement of seemingly ordinary activities in the space of the diner, restoring it to its function, became an effective performative gesture that mobilized the public. In a sense these were theatrical activities, creative acts in the sense that Claire Tancons mentions.

What is more applicable to the term “site-specific art” than this – the creation of public space, the reforming of social relations?<sup>25</sup> It is impossible outside of where it happens, unnecessary and meaningless outside of its context, creating context and content together at the same time.

The occupation of the diner was a stroke of a non-integrated public, not entirely organized, more *being* than speaking. Using their bodies and their techniques of action – against the strategies of the city and the authorities – demanding their rights to the city. This claim is materialized in spaces: the occupied diner and the squat. As a thing established on a pre-existing place through occupation, and marking

territory, the squat might be the clearest emblem of the public space as art. It could be treated as a laboratory of meaning, which functions in the physical matter of a place. Henri Lefebvre comes to our aid here, with a term that sparks the imagination: “spatial manufacture.”<sup>26</sup> The slogans that kept coming from the mouths of the creators of Syrena, defenders of Warsaw’s most famed squat, Elba, and the conquerors of the most recently discovered abandoned building, Przychodnia, concern the necessity of changing housing policies, the fight for residents’ rights, support for refugees, the poor, ethnic and economic minorities, and populating, diversifying, and democratizing the opening of fields of cultural activity for all those interested, regardless of origins, views, and the contents of their wallets. Why “spatial manufacture”? Because all these postulates less express themselves in a lecture and a set program than are expressed and realized – one would like to say: staged – by building a space. The painted walls are covered in graffiti – that free intervention in buildings, in a permanent space, which is susceptible each day to appropriation by “the terrorist power of [...] signs and the dominant culture.”<sup>27</sup> Above all, however, the squat as a work expresses, builds, and forms a policy of its existence: the reigning rules, means of self-organization, and the initiatives taken are performative postulated ideologies, and are – to recall the words of Żmijewski – interpellations into the city space and policies.<sup>28</sup>

The occupation emerges as a way of producing space, through its being made visible and public, populated to allow bodies to appear alongside one another.<sup>29</sup> The space and relations become real through occupation, physical gestures and the presence of people acting arm-in-arm. The occupation is not a kind of being here – it is an appropriation, a sign in itself, calling to life a new quality. To recall classical sign theory – it is the excess of the *signifiant* over the *signifié*, indeed, the ultimate identification and gradation of these structures.

In an essay entitled *The Space of Community: Between Culture and Politics*<sup>30</sup> German theorist Michael Hirsch goes back to the year 1968 and to the streets of Paris – he treats this moment of student protests as a symbolic caesura, not only because of the scope and dimension of its riots, but because of a new quality which, in his view, was born in the course of the event. Hirsch calls attention to the triple dimension of the Parisian May. First, he is struck by the absence of a shared program, the characteristic softening of the postulative tone, the suspension of the burning question of concrete tasks and a clear ideology. In its place: a message of discord, resistance, and opposition against the existing order. This lack of program, in Hirsch’s opinion, puts political efficacy in doubt, while it is the driving force behind another aspect. Namely, for the first time, a situation occurred on a mass scale, in an urban environment of a modern European society, in which co-existence itself became key – this became the core of the act, it was the heart and autotelic message. This was also noted by Maurice Blanchot, whose poetic essay *La communauté inavouable* (The Unavowable Community) insightfully analyzed: “May ’68 has shown that without a project, without conjuration, in the suddenness of a happy meeting, like a feast that breached the admitted and expected social norms, explosive communication could affirm itself (affirm itself beyond the usual forms of affirmation) as the opening that gave permission to everyone without distinction of class, age, sex or culture, to mix with the first comer as if with already loved being,

precisely because he was the unknown-familiar.”<sup>31</sup> Blanchot most empathically stresses the gathering as natural-born and disinterested, and succumbing to rapture (*effervescence*), communicates itself. This autotelic gesture with which the crowd indicates itself, wanting nothing other than the experience of its own power, seems to Blanchot (and to Hirsch) a new means of existence for the collective identity. This self-reflexive vector of communication bestows a name, a figure of subjectivity. The stakes are less concrete demands than the postulate that the political and factual existence of the community be recognized.<sup>32</sup> From this point of view the work of art is the community itself – with its energy, its ability to join the bodies of strangers in a momentary effervescence of closeness, solidarity, and shared interests. This excess of communication is, according to Blanchot (and Hirsch in his wake), what is essentially new. Much like the quality of the birthing space, which is only emerging, previously not existing as public, now created through the gestures, presence, and positions taken in it, the shouted words, and above all, through its use in spite of prohibitions, against all the previous customs. Not pragmatic or in accordance with an architect’s design, a civil code, or a traffic regulation, but in effervescence and the profane desire to occupy. The space also autonomizes, achieves subjectivity and the value of an artifact.

Writing of Paris 1968, Hirsch separates the political and the cultural structures. He recalls the great philosophical and symbolic significance of these events – the first time the public presence of people acquired a form of momentary community and a social community thus conceived. He does not, however, believe in the political efficacy of the phenomena he describes. The line of demarcation between these two orders seems to remain tense. Paradoxically, in the cases of the Indignados or the creators of the Syrena squat the stress falls differently: few doubt the social dimension of their actions, and their efficacy becomes increasingly objective – with the appearance of Mayor Bartelski on Wilcza Street the number of people who see that the affair is taking on a more real, formal dimension is growing, as reflected in the reactions of the decision makers. The auction for the empty diner venue will ultimately be profited, while the initial threats to evict the squatters from the building gave way to negotiations on housing policies and the question of affordable restaurants in the city center. These activities are still reluctantly called “art,” however, as if to thus deprecate their seriousness and the efficacy of these gestures, and their potential for influence is disdained. Tancons’ thought, which points toward a particular conception of the artistic quality of the occupation activities, their focus on creating new connections, new ways of communicating, allows us to suspend, or at least somewhat blur the border between art and politics, the effective and the ineffective, the symbolic dimension from the political. The squat and the diner are staged not because of decor or sets, but because of their ambiguous status. They are, so to speak, spatial designs, set designs, environments for effective spectacles, created in the real fabric of the city, with real effects on social relationships. Real food was distributed in the diner, while the squat is a place where everyday life goes on, a residence. Though this is a space that is constructed, invented, occupied, imposed on the map of the city like paint on plaster, it definitely also soaks into its texture. Implanted into the urban fabric, it becomes a part of the city itself, deciding upon its political dimension. As regards such places, the categories of illusion and authenticity seem

inapplicable and serve no purpose. Much like the division between the political and the artistic. The public space as art is a formula to which one can attribute the principle of the backlash effect. It not only once and for all reveals the non-neutrality of aesthetics, and the creative process along with its political dimension and power. It also exhibits the public space as a result of a concrete process, of radical involvement, a product of vision and action. It allows us to destroy the illusion that public space is given to anyone. In exchange, it stresses the need to act – without action neither space nor the collective exist. Space without the bodies present in it and occupying it, gestures, language – has no chance to be a space that is really public. This product only comes about if one is able to mobilize the values which post-Habermas theorists and proponents of radical democracy (such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) claim to be an indispensable condition for perceiving the public dimension of space, i.e. the potential for conflict, clash, and the meeting of different points of view.

The-public-space-as-art is not, to this way of thinking, a construct that opposes art-as-public-space; but nor is it synonymous with it. It appears as another quality. It is based on producing and reproducing terrain (through occupation, for instance), social relations, language, and communication. This is the core of the creative process, the aim of the artists' activities – though they would be unlikely to call themselves by the name. Art thus conceived less demands that the body enter it – it begins with the body, and cannot be created without it. It does not require neither sites prepared as a concept, nor a performative operation, conceptualized as an act upon the performer's body. It is subordinate to and identified with social efficacy, or with social fiasco.

The-public-space-as-art is ephemeral, a performative act that occurs. Its status hovers on the border between categories – public, political, and artistic – showing their relativity, their slippery dynamics, which in a fascinating manner evade discourse and disarm the impatient desire (worthy of semiotics and logic) to gain a foothold in the question of constitutes a work of art. ■

<sup>1</sup> “Karnawał przeciw kapitalizmowi.” An interview with Claire Tancons by Jakub Majmurek, *Krytyka Polityczna*, 5 II 2012, <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Wywiady/TanconsKarnawalprzeciwkapitalizmowi/menuid-77.html>, access: 03 XII 2011.

<sup>2</sup> ACTA, i.e. Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement – an international agreement which Poland was to sign on 26 January 2012; the information supplied in the media reached public opinion in a flash, causing a wave of protests, demonstrations, and interventions – initially on the Internet, later in the public areas of Polish cities.

<sup>3</sup> Witold Mrozek, “Pani prezydent przyjeżdża do stolicy,” <http://witoldmrozek.blox.pl/html>, and <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/WitoldMrozek/Paniprezydentprzyjezdzadostolicy/menuid-351.html>, access: 10 V 2012.

<sup>4</sup> For Turner the concept of *communitas* is central, appearing in many places in his work, cf. above all: Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, Aldine Transaction, New Jersey 1995.

<sup>5</sup> “Karnawał przeciw kapitalizmowi.” An interview with Claire Tancons by Jakub Majmurek.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cf.: Henri Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell Publishing, Malden-Oxford-Victoria, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Cf.: Artur Żmijewski, “Stosowane sztuki społeczne,” <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/dmdocuments/kp11-manifest.pdf>, access: 12 X 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Gatlif, *Time for Outrage*, production: Princes Production, Eurowide, Herodiade, Rhones-Alpes Cinema, France – USA 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Cf.: Stephane Hessel, *Time for Outrage*, trans.: Marion Duvert, Hachette Book Group, New York 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “The Right to the City,” quoted in: Dean Mitchell, *The Right to the City. Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, The Guilford Press, London – New York 2003, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> This scene appears in another film by Gatlif, a play on fiction and documentary, produced at the same time as *Indignados*, dir. Tony Gatlif, production: Princes Production, France 2011

<sup>13</sup> Cf.: Miwon Kwon, *One place after another. Site-specific art and locational identity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts – London England, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Susanne Lacy, “Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,” in: *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Wash. Bay Press, New Bay 1995, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Cf.: Krzysztof Wodiczko, “Miasto, demokracja, sztuka,” in: *Krzysztof Wodiczko: doctor honoris causa Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Poznaniu*, ed. Janusz Marciniak, Academy of Fine Arts, Signum Foundation, Poznań 2007.

<sup>16</sup> One question raised by the initiators of the action was the disappearance and mysterious death of Jolanta Brzeska, a founder of the Warsaw Tenants' Association. Brzeska often took part in protests against rent hikes, after which the building in which she lived was given to the heirs of the pre-war owners in April 2006. 1 March 2011 the family registered Brzeska's disappearance, and a few days later her scorched body was found in the Kabacki Forest. The case was never solved. The slogan “Remember Jola Brzeska – You won't burn us all” accompanied the action to occupy the Prasowy diner. Jolanta Brzeska, her tragic death, and the whole issue of the Tenants' Movement have been the subject of many press articles (including: Iza Michalkiewicz, “Jolanta i ogień,” *Gazeta Wyborcza – Duży Format*, 1V 2011, Cezary Łazarkiewicz, “Łowca domów,” *Polityka* 22 IV 2011). Both affairs – the taking of the Prasowy diner and the death of Jolanta Brzeska – served as the backdrop for the play *Who Killed Alona Iwanowna?*, directed and written by Michał Kmiecik, premiere: 25 II 2012, Dramatyczny Theater in Warsaw.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. [www.prasowy.waw.pl](http://www.prasowy.waw.pl), access: 16 I 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Bogdan Cywiński, “Mędracy,” in: Ibid., *Rodowody niepokornych*, Świat Książki, Warsaw 1996, pp. 55-79.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Andrzej Mencwel, “Forpoczta i sumienie,” in: *Etos lewicy: esej o narodzinach kulturalizmu polskiego*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warsaw 2009, pp. 10-29.

<sup>20</sup> The difference between strategies and tactics in spatial practices is described by Michel De Certeau, who proposes that the former be seen as systems and established solutions, imposed by the authorities and legal or social regulations, while the latter are attempts to cross normative strategies, the free action of individuals, often straddling the line between legality and permissibility in terms of the principles accepted by society. Cf.: Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall, University of California Press 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Statements come from the film documenting the actions in the Prasowy diner, which can be seen on a blog, [www.prasowy.waw.pl](http://www.prasowy.waw.pl), access: 23 I 2011.

<sup>22</sup> **These slogans can refer, of course, to the ideological debate occurring within liberal theory between one of its main and most important representatives, Jürgen Habermas (cf.: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger, MIT Press 1991) and Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau – representatives of radical democracy (cf. e.g. Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London 2001.**

<sup>23</sup> Roman Pawłowski, “Przejęcie Baru Prasowego: Czerwona kartka dla władz,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 27 XII 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Joanna Erbel, “Prasowy to znacznie więcej niż bar mleczny,” *Krytyka Polityczna*, 23 XII 2011, <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Serwissamorzadowy/ErbelPrasowytoznaczniewiecejnizbarmleczny/menuid-403.html>.

<sup>25</sup> **Here we mean the concept of site-specific that Miwon Kwon proposes.** Cf.: Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another...*, particularly the chapter “Genealogy of site specificity” (pp. 11-33).

<sup>26</sup> Cf.: Henri Lefebvre, *The production...*, p. 170.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Kool Killer or: The Insurrection of Signs,” in: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, Sage Publications, London 1993, p. 76.

<sup>28</sup> Cf.: “Sztuka publicznej możliwości.” An interview with Joanna Rajkowska by Artur Żmijewski, in: *Rajkowska. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warsaw 2010, p. 237.

<sup>29</sup> On the appearance and introduction to the field of sight of such basic artistic critical strategies see: Rosalyn Deutsche, “Sztuka świadectwa: projekcja w Hiroszimie Krzysztofa Wodiczki,” in: *Krzysztof Wodiczko. Pomnikoterapia*, ed. Andrzej Turowski, Zachęta National Art Gallery, Warsaw 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Cf.: Michael Hirsch, “The space of community: between culture and politics,” in: *Did someone say participate? An atlas of spatial practice*, eds. Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris, Station Hill Press, New York, 1988, pp. 29-30.

<sup>32</sup> Giorgio Agamben also writes of this in his essays in the series *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota Press 1993, particularly in the essay about the demonstration at Tiananmen. “What the State can not tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging. [...] Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be a Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear.” *Ibid.*, p. 86-87.

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 MAŁGORZATA DZIEWULSKA

## CULTURE, STUPID!

### The Media Performances of Artur Żmijewski

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 Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw

**MASS**

project by Artur Żmijewski

artistic collaboration: Igor Stokfiszewski

 premiere: 5 October 2011
 

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#### 1

The first herald, a week before its premiere, treated *Mass* as a kind of joke. “Let us pray – Żmijewski’s *Mass*,” was the headline of an article on the *Wprost* web site, in which the anonymous author expressed a flippant attitude toward religious practices. He treated the topic lightly, writing further on that Żmijewski would do exactly what is usually done in a church: conduct a mass. The ritual would take place in a theater, and the theatrical mass would be led by an actor. “Would the audience reply with the usual ‘Praise the Lord’ at the end? It will depend on the audience.” Just before the premiere, the anti-clerical pranks were counterbalanced by the staunch position of the opposition. On the eve of the premiere, Tomasz Terlikowski expressed his opinions on the *Frona* web site.<sup>1</sup> As on the “Wprost.pl” web site, it was a reaction merely to Żmijewski’s idea, or even simply to the play’s title, because the text contained not a single mention of a theatrical situation or image. The Catholic journalist charged Żmijewski with not comprehending that *sacrum* makes sense only within the sphere of faith – that liturgy and sacred objects do not remain on the level of gestures and signs, and have significance “only if God is there.” Along with his severe admonitions, he expressed friendliness towards “the soul-searching artist,” even making gestures toward his difficult lot. Thus began a play of reception that was like a minor carnival, since it was waged between the clownish and the priestly. Sometimes it was like a religious debate, like those that occurred in the past after weak seventh-grade religion classes. I am not going to elaborate upon how the idea of *Mass* ran aground on the rocks of the Internet, since, first of all, Artur Żmijewski himself did not speak in such categorical tones, and secondly, I am not certain if this spontaneous reception, requiring no literal participation, contradicts his idea, or, on the contrary, is part of it.

#### 2

*Mass* was such that simply hearing about it seemed to be enough. It evoked gestures for and against even before people had seen it or heard what it had to say. In this sense, the play existed solely as its title. And it fulfilled its mission, so to speak, in the mere fact that it had come into being and that it existed – it was not as much a performance, as the idea of a performance. As an idea, it was a provocation. To the serious text that the theater included in the program, the director added, even before the premiere, that it was time to establish if the oldest liturgical script was not just a bunch of malarkey. In this he became a provocateur not only through his actions, but by impulse. The linguistic gesture here was extreme, because using the word “kitsch” in connection with any ritual which has lasted two thousand years is pure provocation.

All of Żmijewski’s work has had an aspect of social defiance which is very hard to predict and which causes trouble by the simple fact that it appears. A basic condition is surprise. It never has the same power when repeated, but before anybody has managed to become familiar with or accustomed to it, to prepare a response, form defensive mechanisms, or adopt a means of adaptation, it is rather electrifying. The unexpectedness of this defiance immediately strips the *raison d’être* from all the conventions that saturate life as such, and theater and religion in particular.

The following reactions are famous in the history of the extreme avant-garde, from admonishment or obduracy, through belittling gestures (“Nothing has happened”), to those of kind willingness to notice good intentions (“Theater is incapable of blasphemy”). Television took advantage of the occasion in its own way. With incomparable cynicism, guests on the *Culture, stupid!* program were singled out according to the logic of a Polish civil war. Everything was planned so that they would immediately go for each other’s throats, which actually happened within the first five minutes.<sup>2</sup> The primary feature of the row over *Mass* was its polarization. On both sides of the dispute some reviewers showed traces of the type of rancor that people bear in religious spheres of life. In the familiar clinch of a civil war, because this was where Żmijewski’s provocation dug up the most dirt. And if an audience member got mixed up in discussing *Mass*, they would

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force him to declare himself on one of the two sides, and this harsh alternative was imposed upon him.

### 3

On the day of the premiere, the “Culture.pl” web site casually described the essence of the meeting at the Dramatyczny Theater, as one can guess: “Right up until the premiere nobody had any idea if the audience would eventually manage to be pulled into the arranged situation, and would allow itself to succumb to the power of the ritual, singing hymns, taking part in the ‘priest’s’ call-and-response, and maybe even taking communion...? In this case the host had not been consecrated, of course. Nonetheless, the power of social pressure or habit can turn out to be stronger. ‘We all know this readily available script, which even I have firmly engraved in my mind. The audience too, I presume. It calls for physical discipline, it demands we kneel, make the sign of the cross, sit, stand... Enter at the right moment, and exit at the right moment,’ states Żmijewski.”<sup>3</sup>

And so perhaps the director really had counted on stimulating experiences through ceremonial gestures. Reviewers were unanimous in stating that this was not the case. We were being cautious. It was impossible to expect ritualistic

or communal acts, since these require that a play activate an autonomous atmosphere of its own. A copy is a semi-automatic action – all the more so if, like Dorota Jarecka, we regard it as a ready-made, in other words, as something which has been made interesting and entertaining due to having been transplanted into a different context. And so if Żmijewski had expected such reactions, it was only as a happener hoping to liberate reflexes.

### 4

This event cannot be viewed in a conventional manner. Such concepts as the idea behind *Mass* have the capacity for a media performance. With training in the art of criticism behind it, with the ability to generate constellations of concepts and topics, giving it a radical expression. Such ideas forge a more real confrontation with the means of communication. Directly providing social and moral justification for their actions, their creators can inquire more openly into how to be heard. Thus, unlike artists using more classical techniques, they are not limited to hypocritical discretion surrounding their promotional activities. They can openly tend to spreading ideas and equipping them for their implementation. Because here both sense and nonsense depend on reactions,



not on the message. It was precisely for this reason that the ideological critique of *Mass*, with its naively direct appeal to values, was so irrelevant.

Żmijewski does not hold the view that art, at best, raises questions. "I believe in the capacity of art. It provides an alternate means of experiencing reality and its transformations. There are possibilities of thinking and acting inherent in art that do not exist in politics or in bureaucratic systems of power. Art inherently contains an 'impossible' inventiveness that can help us to redefine the world. However, art is currently dominated by ideologies of impotence, peripheries, and ineffectiveness," he said in an interview with Adam Mazur.<sup>4</sup>

## 5

According to Internet reports, a debate on theater took place in the theater on the eve of the premiere. For the *Mass* decorations, the theater offered its affluence, authority and passion for ritual. According to reports, reference was made to Grotowski and Osterwa, Witkacy and Artaud, Schiller and Mickiewicz, and the discussion revolved around the fad of renewing ritualistic power that is currently consuming Polish theater. Journalists spread incomprehensible but impressive words throughout the Internet. Meanwhile, as these ideas are not presented in the form of attention-grabbing slogans, they interest only a few hundred people in Poland, while nonetheless wielding the power of suggestion. It becomes slightly insane when this astoundingly powerful ideological inspiration saturates the media with very strange issues... which it is not capable of digesting. Like ripples on the water, sounds, echoes, repetitions and misunderstandings reverberate. In the results of this debate published on the "Culture.pl" web site, we find the astonishing opinion that Żmijewski could be compared to Grotowski and his idea of transgressing the limits of theater, bringing it into the realm of ritual and communal participation. This by no means should be stated, since, ignoring the simple fact of there being a completely different theatrical idiom, Grotowski built a ritual by borrowing from the Church, while Żmijewski merely copied it. Furthermore, he had no intention of creating a ritualistic community, merely a political one. In the more sensible report written by Joanna Derkaczew,<sup>5</sup> Żmijewski said the following: "*Mass* is thus also a question about how far art can influence reality and be a resonant voice in a public debate. Is only religious ritual capable of expressing communal pain, contemplation and joy? Perhaps theater can also rise to the occasion?" However, these two different aims do seem slapped together like plywood. The power of art, according to the director's prepared statements, must manifest itself politically, while the substitution of religious ritual takes place within a symbolic realm and requires completely different competencies. As it seems, this theater was about addressing the latter issue, and so both were combined.

## 6

When, in their commentary on *Mass*, people appealed to the content of the Holy Mass – certain of their own liturgical

initiation or, on the contrary, certain of their own awareness of the emptiness of the ritual – it was treated as an obvious generality. A mass, on the other hand, begins with the declaration of one's sins. In contrast to confession, this act is less sacramental than an expression of one's guilt – in silence and with others' consciousness. This is significant because it allows one to provisionally place the principles of a mass on a moral plane, without falling back onto the religious dimension of participation. The latter is not capable of being discussed, since it is a mystery. When talking about preparing oneself for sacrifice, or in other words, recalling one's sins, we need not conceptually dabble with mystery. In other words, a mass begins with ridding oneself of negative emotions. It is an act of temporary mutual acceptance.

With great interest, rather greedily, I listened to the ready-made at the Dramatyczny Theater. Words, existing as sound reached me as meaning.

One could ask oneself questions during a mass that are rarely asked. The content and meaning were not, after all, one and the same. I do not wish to surrender to conceptual terror and allow myself to be convinced that, even if we roughly adjust ourselves to suspending resentment for a moment, then this moment becomes shorn of content. I cannot believe, either, that the word in the form of a sound which reaches me in a church lacks content. When, not long after watching *Mass*, I attended Holy Mass at St. Anne's Church in honor of Jerzy Turowicz, on the centenary of his birth, I wondered what happens with words. They more implied than signified, as such. What good does art serve if it does not rescue us, if it is not capable of functioning, asks Żmijewski, who has something of the insolent Caliban about him. He is weary of the impotence of art, and believes that it is worth fighting for the domination of ideas over procedures. He wishes to eliminate the fiction of culture with its ideology of "impotence, peripheries, and ineffectiveness." Recently he has been interested in the instrument of theater. ■

<sup>1</sup> Tomasz Terlikowski, "‘Msza’ Żmijewskiego czyli ‘sakralna’ wódka bezalkoholowa," *Frona.pl*, 28 X 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Culture, stupid!*, TVP Program 2, 30 X 2012.

<sup>3</sup> "Artur Żmijewski odprawia ‘Mszę’ w teatrze", *Culture.pl*, 29-30 X 2011.

<sup>4</sup> "Wewnętrzny fałsz sztuki." An interview with Artur Żmijewski by Adam Mazur, *Dwutygodnik.com*, 1 XI 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Joanna Derkaczew, "Teatr musi bluźnić," *Wyborcza.pl*, 29 X 2011.

JOANNA JOPEK

# I WANT YOU OUT OF MY SIGHT, FAGGOT

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Polski Theatre in Wrocław  
Paweł Demirski

**RAINBOW STAND 2012**

direction and light design: Monika Strzępka,  
set and costumes: Michał Korchowicz,  
video: Jacek Zachodny, music: Jan Suświłło,  
choreography: Rafał Urbacki,  
premiere: 5 March 2011

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**I**n an interview following Strzępka and Demirski's receipt of the Polityka Passport<sup>1</sup> Paweł Demirski suggested that many would surely like to see their work in an off-theater, independent and non-institutionalized – to channel (we might suppose) their rebellious power into subversive and outspoken activities in the public and institutional space.

I recall this because *Rainbow Stand 2012* seems based on a similar tension – between mainstream and off, between what can be shown and demonstrated in the framework of culture, the public space, and the everyday, real-life dirt that has no place there. This performance enacts its meaning in a parceled miniature of civic space, in whose framework – depending on one's position in society – the rights to visibility, participation, and voice in public debate are shared. *Rainbow Stand 2012* relentlessly attempts to expose and contemplate a never entirely innocent nor objective situation belonging to a defined class or cultural code. Yet we also could (or perhaps should) look at *Rainbow Stand 2012* in the framework of public and political discourse, a manifestation of critical art, a voice in a debate. And here the problem starts. As a performance, *Rainbow Stand 2012* does a very interesting job of enacting issues concerning the limits of performing one's identity, it splendidly overturns codes of representation and is simply very well done, a play that opens one's eyes at many points. But in social categories, the play is a statement

in a debate that seeks to bring about social change; as a project it is, of course, informative, raising numerous problems to be discussed at once, but misguided in an important (perhaps the most important) part. And an interesting springboard to discussing the real possibilities of political theater.

Perhaps the strongest such tension (and a problem in terms of evaluation – in strictly theatrical and social terms) is rendered by a crucial question in *Rainbow Stand 2012*, concerning the place from which the public debate is spoken. The spatial solutions appear to expose the problematically “subversive” strategy of the artists. The performance is played on the Jerzy Grzegorzewski Stage at the Polski Theater in Wrocław, but it does not use the venue according to the structure suggested by the building's architecture. Everyone (the actors and audience) is placed in the depths of the stage, to one side, separated from the rest of the theater by a wall of plexiglas. The front of the stage and the actual audience area are empty almost the entire time (and if they are used, it is always abiding by this border), but in one of the opening scenes of *Rainbow Stand 2012* the frontal space is used in a significant fashion. It is there, on the large “real” stage that a parody of the opening of Krzysztof Warlikowski's *Cleansed* is played.

If we consider this arrangement from a theatrical point of view, it shows the relationships between the mythologized,

idealized representations of gay love in high culture and the real problems, with all their dirt and grime, that can accompany a coming out (homosexual and otherwise) in a brilliant, condensed fashion. As if from behind the poetic, oneiric, staged frontal image all the difficulties, helplessness, and humiliation of the reality poured out from the back of the stage, where we are sitting, a show of the unprivileged (materially or socially) people, and the price they might have to pay: exclusion, mockery, or being regarded as a nut.

If, however, we look at this solution as a social signal, sent to the audience (intentionally? unintentionally?) along the way, the effect is unintentionally comic. Located in the dead center of town, the most recognizable Polish theater artists at the moment (*Rainbow Stand 2012* is perhaps the only play about which the liberal Fakty TVN<sup>2</sup> shot material for its main program, and several days before the premiere there was a major interview with the artists in *Duży Format*, a supplement to the equally liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza*) have built a kind of conspiratorial partisanship, an “off” back-room, establishing the outskirts of high culture on the stage of the Polski Theater. Libertine (not to say “liberal”) jokes, like the grotesque concept, which fits nicely into the play of liberal power – a performance for Euro 2012, a “reconstruction of system changes,” recreating the roles of “boys from the Independent Students’ Association.”<sup>3</sup>

#### **We too gave it a standing ovation:<sup>4</sup>**

All this might be a self-reflexive strategy or a witty, metaphorical shorthand for the problems with revolutionary and subversive work from within a cultural institution, but it leads us to what is perhaps a more serious issue. The audience is seated to the back of the stage, thus creating a community of those who are outside of the mainstream, beyond the great and remote stage of politics, in the wings of the discourse; in a word, the excluded. The audience clearly feels comfortable in such a situation, because the way we are situated means there is no attempt to undermine our position: It is not the back of the stage that is attacked, but the space in front, while the back is a shelter for various positions. In a theater as socially engaged as that of Strzépka and Demirski, the message and the designed reception are just as important as the real resonance, for which the artists are, to some extent, responsible. This not only concerns the fact that applause rang out after almost all the major issues were raised (perhaps because I saw the premiere), which were often ideologically contradictory, but also the repercussions in the public sphere, which is, after all, what this is all about. As some said following the play,<sup>5</sup> it stands in utter contradiction to the artists’ revolutionary intentions (one opinion is certain to catch on: Demirski and Strzépka support the initiative to organize *Rainbow Stand 2012* at the Euro 2012), however enthusiastic it may be. Why are people so eager to support such a “controversial” play?

The problem again, paradoxically, appears to be tied to the theatrical attractiveness and complexity of *Rainbow Stand*

*2012*: the multiplication of points of view, the show of the multifarious problems of “being a fag,” the constant undermining of standpoints that lead neither to raising responsibility for the social space, nor to any kind of discomfort (in the audience or artists). Quite the contrary – they dulled the blade of the statements, disoriented, and cautiously blurred things, because they universalized the specifics of the problem.

Inspired by a particular initiative, *Rainbow Stand 2012* branches into a whole spectrum of subjects – from the main issue to the limits of democracy, through liberal authority, the utopia of the Euro 2012 championship, historical politics and the capacity for revolution, to questions of national identity, football, the position of gays and football fans in society, and then – inscribed in the framework of *Rainbow Stand 2012* construction – the social repercussions of high or mainstream culture and the reproduction of the models it transmits.

If one should happen to be rather indifferent to gay issues, one will find general complaints in the play about the terrible bureaucratic machine; everyone, after all, is a bit harmed by the “system,” everyone has “gripes,” the authorities are dreadful, obviously, and we all, in a surprisingly single-minded community, sit to one side of the great political scenes being performed near us. Everyone has their own claim to exclusion.

It is hard to concede to such a community of the excluded (the “fags” of the Polish public space): it dissolves the problem, without provoking even the slightest intervention. Incidentally, at one moment the actor playing one of the gays passes round to the audience a paper to send to Premier Tusk, a petition supporting the *Rainbow Stand 2012*; the paper is ostentatiously distributed, the gesture is a powerful one, and serious, but the petition vanishes in the theater audience, and later on, no one wonders at its absence.

In searching for a response to why this revolutionary play is so unrevolutionary, Peter Handke’s analysis and criticism of Brecht’s theater might come to our aid.<sup>6</sup> Shock methods, he claimed, have to be one-time only to indeed take effect; exposing and undermining become as easy as all other repeated methods, an aesthetic rule which the audience swiftly learns (maybe as swiftly as Warlikowski’s “fucking oneiric lights” attacked in *Rainbow Stand 2012*?) and to which they even more swiftly become accustomed, recognizing it as theirs and thus remain in a pleasant state that numbs disquiet and the need to act. And finally – we are perhaps better off offending a concrete audience and making them unsure of their position than striking out at remote and mythical evil “others.”

#### **What are the *Cleansed* cleansed of?**

And now, with some relief, let us return to the theater, and aesthetic satisfaction. Here, in what we might call, strictly speaking, the theatrical frame (and the references and allusions circumscribed by the theatrical space), much more interesting things occur in Strzépka and Demirski’s play.

Abiding by their creative strategy to date, Demirski and Strzépka adopt a definite technique (“all too familiar,” but

this time – we ought to note – not to the wide public, but to an elite theater crowd, participants in high culture), a recognizable myth, to warp it into a paraphrase, tear it apart, untune it, to extract the issues, premises, and the thought patterns it conceals.

The basic point of reference in *Rainbow Stand 2012* would seem to be the work of Krzysztof Warlikowski, not just as a director preoccupied with exclusion and the homosexual identity (in *Cleansed* and *Angels in America*), but also as a figure of the high cultural elite and the untouchable establishment, the pet of the authorities, as personified by the Mayor. A person whose social position makes his sexual orientation (and its manifestation) palatable, almost transparent, who is able to frame his experiences in metaphysical and psychoanalytical categories, far from the grime of bureaucracy, humiliation, and powerlessness of unprivileged gays, from petitions, from going around to MPs and struggling with office workers and authorities. The attack on Warlikowski is surely, to a large extent, unjust – when *Cleansed* premiered in Poland it was an important performance with a rather difficult, murky, and uncomfortable role, while Demirski sets his sights on the production at a time when the blasé “Warlikowski actor” in *Rainbow Stand 2012* can nonchalantly ask, “How many times have we seen this cult performance?” But it is not justice we are after,

rather the status of a generation-defining and iconic work, of a piece that has been labeled (by the audience, not the artists themselves) a “theatrical experience.”

The relationship between *Rainbow Stand 2012* and *Cleansed* is key: the scene parodying the monologue from Kane’s *Crave* performed by Renate Jett not only practically opens the Wrocław performance, but repeatedly flips into reflections, paraphrases, and parodies, as a figure of the idealized, mythologized (“oneiric lights”) exclusion and a falsified cultural model of representation. It looks as if the Warlikowski play behind the plexiglas had suddenly opened to show what lay behind it, as if the idealistic beauty (summarized in a few over-aesthetic signifiers) had cracked, opening the ulcer of real coming-outs of those excluded (through various, and not necessarily homosexual discourses) from the public space. The frontal facade of high culture cracks, and at the back of the Wrocław stage the distant poor relatives of the protagonists of *Cleansed* and *Angels in America* spill out: a group of idealistic gays, attempting (on the one hand) to deal with this model, which explains the play’s numerous scenes of “aspiring” to a higher class of gays and to defeat this tension, this inability to fit in, and the somewhat comical attempts of the artistic bohemians, the drag queen parties, the bright-red pop-art couch inserted in a glum and messy space, and karaoke versions of numerous rebellious punk rock songs.



On the other hand, because of the *Cleansed* sub-plot and the aspirations it introduces, they are consumed by a humorous Romanticism at many points, one that has been lost in Poland's public space. Leading this group is Waiter (Marcin Pempuś), whose almost Romantic tirades inspire action, and who forever confronts sad, pitiful helplessness – a gay man who is seduced and attracted by the (in this case) destructive force of *Cleansed*. The upshot we might easily predict: as in a political fiction, or historical fantasy, we ride into the future – we have an idealistic about-face, and the authorities cynically ascribe the self-incineration of the members of the Rainbow Stand 2012 initiative to being part of the opening ceremonies of the National Stadium. The work of Warlikowski, as a figure of a cultural stereotype, seems to be accused of reproducing a cultural model that is not only false and clashes with reality, but can staunch any possible revolt – either through being locked in a structural framework, or through its inwardness, its becoming introverted, its “sensitive” closure within its traumas, in an “avenue of private frustrations.” And sitting “in front of Youtube after a fourth beer” listening to “songs from high school,” and tagging each of them with “it makes a tear come to my eye.”

#### What does “national” mean, anyway?<sup>7</sup>

This problem with representation, aestheticization, and superficial, destructive myths is found in just about everyone in this odd country, and appears in *Rainbow Stand 2012*. In the very functional space, brilliantly arranged by Michał Korchowiec, we find a microcosm of a divided Poland: a small tribunal covered in clay that also recalls the national mounds, to one side a bit of football turf, and in the center is initially a strip of an aborted, lost highway, though it is easily changed in various ways, creating the interior of a gay club throughout the room, stretching to the “real” audience of the Polski Theater.

This final element shows the clash, the moment when the themes introduced by Strzépka and Demirski (with the one addressed by Warlikowski's work – high culture and reflecting on the nation) join: it is also a piece of the roads Poland diligently built before the Euro 2012 Championship, dead-ends, streets going nowhere (democracy?). In this sign we can also find an incidental allusion to an exhibition at the National Museum in Krakow – *American Dream* – whose images of freedom, the myths and fantasies spun in Socialist Poland, included an almost identical strip of road to nowhere as the main piece of set design.

A great deal is said about this exotic nation, its communal life, and its transformation into theater in the projection that opens *Rainbow Stand 2012*: a fast-paced, powerful montage combining various manifestations and representations of our public space – various freeze-frames appear to the beat of an energetic Jamala reggae tune (*Revolutions*): Jesus de Świebodzineiro, a gay parade, football fans rioting, clashing with a repeating image of a smiling Premier Tusk, signing the contract for the Euro 2012...

The problem of those represented in society and the powers and means of their representation, the strong theatrical issues involved, is linked to the subject of the gay initiatives for democracy and a civic society.

This kind of authority – staged, stripped of reality and taken from an utterly different mode of theater – is the figure representing the ruling powers in Poland: the mayor of the capital city (Jolanta Zalewska), living in Versailles, dressed in a Baroque dress and crinolines, detached from all direct experience, dirt, and life. The cynicism and hypocrisy personified by the Mayor, played out in numerous scenes of caprice, boredom, disdain for all civic initiatives, is nonetheless a superficial, black-and-white solution, which detracts from any potential complex ruminations on the subject of Polishness (represented in the projection that opens the play). This strategy shifts the focus onto a more general coming-to-terms, demanded by all (who, after all, go to create this odd country with its exotic manifestations of public life) from the summary and superficial crushing effect of liberal power. There may seem to be a greater problem in how the concrete grassroots civic initiative (Rainbow Stand 2012) is exploited and overwhelmed by the national issue (with a supposed presumption: this is most important to Poles!). To such a degree that one might watch *Rainbow Stand 2012* not as a “gay” play (in spite of all the gay figures in public discourse that Strzépka and Demirski keep introducing), but – as the first voices following the premiere indicate – as another “Polish self-portrait,”<sup>8</sup> again raising the issue which, now rendered in general terms, scarcely differs either from systemic generalities about the everyday troubles and complications that “normal” people face, or from the introverted, frustrated revolts which the artists seem to attack. And yet the strategy of exploiting and universalizing the theme of the Rainbow Stand 2012 recalls that applied by high culture, with its reproductions of inapplicable models: a superficial, idealistic generalizing structure replaces the painful facts and the real site of the conflict.

#### There was some concern that the Wrocław audiences in the ticket lines would not be able to swallow the title.<sup>9</sup>

And here we ought to return to the original problem: in an interview preceding *Rainbow Stand 2012* Monika Strzépka mentioned that the play was meant to have a different title – *I Want You out of My Sight, Faggot*, but the idea was abandoned. This title has some subversive potential, foregrounding the complex figure of gayness as a position in the framework of public space, instead of (for example) the subject of Polishness that is addressed here. It also alludes to the controversial strategy adopted by Betlejewski, which presents real critical difficulties and has been widely discussed in the media, and which in the first phase of his *I Miss You, Jew* project sought to disenchant, to change the Polish-language associations with the word *Żyd* [Jew] (a mandatory feature in the stairwells of many Polish low-income housing blocks, and on outside walls, a repetition which gives it a negative subconscious connotation), which sounds like a slur,

particularly in Polish stadiums. It is alternated with another word, at any rate: *pedał* [fag]. We can imagine the Strzępka and Demirski play that never was – *I Want You out of My Sight, Faggot* – as a less diffuse effort, not focused on being “off,” in the wings of high culture, through a kind of arbitrary gesture; perhaps braver, a truly subversive and uncomfortable version of *Rainbow Stand 2012*. And we can only regret that it was not made. ■

<sup>1</sup> Aneta Kyzioł, “Salonu nie ma.” An interview with Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski, *Polityka* No. 6, 5 II 2011; read: <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/110626.html>. The *Polityka* Passport is a prestigious award given out by *Polityka* weekly to artists in six categories. Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski received the *Polityka* Passport in the Theater category for their achievements in 2010.

<sup>2</sup> *Fakty* a very popular news program, broadcast by the Polish TVN commercial television station.

<sup>3</sup> Independent Students’ Union (NZS) an association of students that was established on 22 September 1980 as a result of the events and workers’ strikes of August 1980, as a show of the society’s opposition to the political regime in Poland.

<sup>4</sup> A quote from a discussion on Strzępka and Demirski’s play on the *Rainbow Stand 2012* initiative forum; <http://www.teczowatrybuna2012.pl/node/359>.

<sup>5</sup> One significant voice has been Mike Urbaniak’s, enthusiastically reviewing *Rainbow Stand 2012* [“Superb play! Brilliant text by Demirski! (Masłowska will have to struggle to compete). Plus Strzępka in her usual phenomenal form.”]: Urbaniak, declaring himself to be gay and opposed to the *Rainbow Stand 2012* at the Euro 2012 stadiums, was delighted with the performance, which he sees as not supporting “an incredibly stupid initiative, while skillfully addressing struggles against the ‘system’.” Mike Urbaniak, “Hani Tęczowa Trybuna,” <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/112822.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Małgorzata Sugiera, “Peter Handke. Ćwiczenia w estetyce odbioru,” in: eadem, *W cieniu Brechta. Niemieckojęzyczny dramat powojenny 1945-1995*, Universitas 1996, and: Agata Dąbek, “W stronę publiczności. Widz w teatrze Bertolta Brechta, Petera Handkego i René Pollescha,” in: *Publiczność (z)wymyślana. Relacje widz-scena we współczesnej praktyce dramatopisarskiej i inscenizacyjnej*, eds. Agata Dąbek, Joanna Jaworska-Pietura, Księgarnia Akademicka 2009.

<sup>7</sup> A statement by Paweł Demirski, Magda Piekarska, “A to są te koteczki kibice,” *Gazeta Wyborcza Wrocław* No. 49 online; read: <http://www.teatrpolski.wroc.pl/media-o-nas/rozmowy/a-to-sa-te-koteczki-kibice>.

<sup>8</sup> Marta Wróbel, “Polaków portret własny,” *Polska Gazeta Wrocławska* No. 57 online; read: <http://www.gazetawrocławska.pl/kultura/378206,swietny--spektakl-teczowa-trybuna-2012,id,t.html>.

<sup>9</sup> A statement by Monika Strzępka, Magda Piekarska, “A to są te koteczki – kibice,” *Gazeta Wyborcza – Wrocław* No. 49 online; read: <http://www.teatrpolski.wroc.pl/media-o-nas/rozmowy/a-to-sa-te-koteczki-kibice>.

ANNA R. BURZYŃSKA

**S/T****RAILWAY OPERA**

project by komuna//warszawa and Liquid Theatre  
 premiere at the Kievsky Railway Station in Moscow  
 12 March 2011  
 part of the Polish Theater in Moscow  
 program at the Golden Mask Festival

**A**ssessing the effects of such a large and difficult undertaking as the three-week-long Polish Theater in Moscow program, which was co-organized by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and accompanied this year's Golden Mask, is just as complicated as calculating at what point two trains setting off at different speeds from stations A and B will converge on each other: it is hard to predict at what point they might run into each other or collide. While the Russian party was eager to converse on post-memory issues, while posing questions about post-dramatic theater and performance theories and pondering acting methods, the Polish party rediscovered the tradition of the Soviet avant-garde, holding discourse on the paintings of the Constructivists, Futurists and Supremacists they had viewed at the Tretyakov Gallery. This was quite unexpected for the hosts, who were taken aback by the intensity with which the Polish artists (from Krzysztof Warlikowski to Wojtek Ziemilski) experienced this art during meeting after meeting at which they confessed their fascination with the power of the Black Square against the white background or the deception in Rodchenko's collages.

The greatest surprise must have been evoked by the premiere of *Railway Opera*, a coproduction by komuna//warszawa and Russia's Liquid Theater, which was specially prepared for the festival and staged at Kievsky Railway Station, an action apparently directly derived from the avant-garde spirit of the 1920s, when the likes of Dziga Vertov, Alexander Mosolov and Arseny Aavramov believed that it was possible to improve the world by projecting art into public space. Aavramov's *Symphony of Factory Sirens* macroconcert was arranged for orchestra and choirs and... two artillery batteries, twenty five steam locomotives, aircraft and automobile engines and last but not least, suitably pitched sirens belonging to ships and all the city's factories. On this occasion, the monumental station building and its platforms were supposed to serve as a resonance box, while the artists, viewers, train announcers, travelers, homeless, cleaners and policemen were meant to become performers.

As is its custom, komuna//warszawa created a trilogy whose successive parts comprised a dialectical whole: at once anarchically unpredictable/open to chance and error and backed up by a steely intellectual construct reinforced by prominent rhythmic elements. The first (musical) part of the production is given over to the Poles, while the Russians take responsibility for the second (dance) part, and in the third part, which takes place on a platform rather than in the station building, the two groups join forces. The finale goes on to combine two layers of libretto: abstract philosophical reflections on the nature of time and space and a plot that is powerfully allied to a specific time and place and imbued with private emotions.

Those entering the station hall receive headphones. These are not absolutely necessary to take in the production, though they greatly facilitate the process by making the music and soloist's voice audible over the noise of the surroundings and announcements coming from the megaphones, hence altering the balance between what is random and planned, necessary and original, pragmatic and disinterested. The first place of action – not, as it turns out, selected by chance – is a raised platform installed under the timetables.

Under the information board, a large screen has been placed, on which a clock and music staves are illuminated. When the clock hands begin to rotate, the musical notation scrolls across (a little like in modern computer programs for learning to play instruments, in which the automatic note scrolling frees the player from the obligation of turning the pages of the score, helping him maintain a suitable tempo). Everything appears as it would in the classic musical notation for an orchestral score – there are treble clefs and time signatures, while bar-lines and (mainly quarter) notes are clearly marked – except that each of the staves, apart from the name of an instrument, bears the name of one of Moscow's stations (Yaroslavsky, Belorussky, Paveletsky, Kursky, Rizhsky...), while times and place names are placed under the notes.

The creators of the production decided to create a soundtrack for the exquisitely synchronized timetables for trains arriving at and departing from Moscow's stations. The dynamics of their motion have been translated into electronic wooshing and clattering as well as frenetic violin parts, which are overlapped by the names of consecutive stations, platforms and departure times (shouted out by both members of komuna//warszawa and station workers) and also station sound signals and, naturally, the sounds of trains coming from the platforms. The vocal parts have been entrusted to soprano Olga Mysłowska (also the composer of the choir parts

in the third part of the production), who usually divides her time between music that is more (especially interpretations of Baroque music) or less serious (she is the other half of the electronica duo Polpo Motel, co-created with Daniel Pigoński, who may be familiar from the rock group Pustki and for his collaboration on Michał Borczuch and Piotr Cieplak productions).

Standing motionless behind their music stands with the large screen in the background and manipulating electronic and traditional instruments (violins) while singing consecutive passages from the score, the *komuna//warszawa* artists' resemblance to the musicians from Kraftwerk was anything but coincidental. Acknowledged inspirations include their *Autobahn* as well as Brian Eno's *Music for Airports* (the creator of *Oblique Strategies* – a set of randomly drawn cards that aid the creative process by introducing an element of chance to it – would undoubtedly appreciate the Moscow performance) and John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen's actions. However, without question the roots of this opera are more deeply bedded down in the tradition (no matter how oxymoronic that sounds) of atonal music, i.e. the disruption of the classic system of tones and semitones by opening it up to the boundlessness of liberated total chromaticism, which not only contains an infinite number of tones and tonal combinations

(both harmonious and dissonant), but also light, motion and scent. This is a species of macroconcert in which everything is music – and the music proves to be the invisible backbone behind everything. The Railway Opera concept unites contradictions: randomness and precisely conceived structure, the most well-ordered mathematical construction and unpredictable interventions from reality, unadulterated poetry and intellectual speculation. The concept is amazingly avant-garde but also, even more surprisingly, quite simply beautiful and moving.

The English libretto sung by Mysłowska is composed of short statements: philosophical reflections on being (or non-being) in time and space, physical definitions and mathematical equations. In the artist's words, this is a "dissertation on a place 'in between' – a special category of time and space which is not subject to the laws of day to day life." That paradoxical "in-between" which essentially denotes non-existence and only has one aim – to serve as a boundary for that which exists. A black hole or utopia, or maybe a paradise. A station conceived as a space that is beholden to nobody yet communal, a journey conceived as both the loss and multiplication of time. The trains whose timetables are illuminated on the screen head off in all directions through successive time zones; time "speeds up" and recedes, ultimately warping by



degrees. The staves also warp – presumably this reflects the appearance of a score from an epoch that is not only post-Schönberg, but also post-Einstein.

The station essentially turns out to be a place “in-between”: it’s beholden to nobody yet communal, both a crossing and destination point. By definition it is the antithesis of a home, yet for a certain group of people it is a home. It is a neutral, free, anarchic space, yet it is carefully guarded and militarized at the same time – following explosions in Moscow, electronic gates have been installed at all the building’s entrances, and the police and army dog handlers keep order. This is a place in which precision planning is particularly important, yet all the while continuous obstacles to these plans are accumulating, the real threat of chaos and catastrophe. Essentially, in the artists’ own words, the station generates a particular kind of time beyond time while being an enclave, a zone; a world beyond a world.

This “world beyond a world” is the setting for the second part of the Railway Opera – the dance part. The dancers of Moscow’s Liquid Theatre lead viewers to the heart of the station’s voluminous main hall, between the benches in the waiting room and the row of ticket offices. A small group of young people dressed in everyday clothes and carrying backpacks and suitcases interpret (to the accompaniment of insistent shouts and conversation snippets) choreographed routines conveying haste and confusion, encounters and farewells, joy, exhaustion, cold and fear. The members of the theater will be rousing previously prepared onlookers into action and directing spectators, i.e. inviting them to take a close up look at their actions before pushing them back again to expand the performance space. The performance spontaneously merges with reality: at one point, a genuine passenger hurrying with suitcases breaks through the cordon of spectators and unceremoniously tramps through the middle of the “stage” with suitcase, weaving through the dancers, and at another, the very young son of one of the onlookers, delighted by a break-dancer’s display, starts spinning around the station floor surface and at another, curious homeless people and station cleaners once again become part of the action.

An almost carnival atmosphere reigns among the spectators: the crowd draws back and returns, obediently rocking back and forth to the rhythm transmitted by the dancers. The joyful atmosphere of the encounter and communal fun is, however, fraught with a sense of unease – behind the audience’s backs stand rows of not so amused people in uniform, police dogs keep guard and security gates let off an unbearable piercing sound. The station, regarded as a space for joyful greetings, exciting journeys, encounters and conversations that rise above national or cultural divisions, turns out at the same time to be a disturbing and dangerous place, a potential trap.

Although no one in the performance will directly allude to terrorism or the issue of social divisions, this gesture of resignation from a debate of a topical or political nature is meaningful in itself: a bitter expression of lack of faith in the

power of “engaged theater” to improve the world and doubts about revolutionary avant-garde ideals pertaining to the transformation of public space and social life into a work of art. Walking through Moscow, it is possible at every step to see for oneself how brutally history has judged the optimistic and exalted plans of the artists whose works can be seen in the Tretyakovsky Gallery. A bleak Nine Inch Nails cover surges through the headphones and the dancers nestle up to each other or shiver from cold or fear. And how pleasant it could be, if only for a moment, to believe, with the naivety and trustfulness of the boy joyfully twirling amidst the crowd of strangers, in a beautiful Polish-Russian social-artistic utopia...

After leaving the hall, the final part of the opera takes place between two massive platforms. This is a genuine grand finale: the soloist’s arias will be accompanied by a choir standing at the rear and flanked by seated instrumentalists extracting cosmic sounds from huge instrument-cum-installations (poles or perhaps pipes furnished with strings and megaphones) while the dancers occupy “front stage.” The artists from komuna//warszawa and Liquid Theatre, acting as a unit, employ recitation, song and dance to tell a story (exhibiting philosophical musings that are truly Beckettian) relating to a certain occasion when a train turned left instead of right leading to its passenger “derailing” and becoming dislocated from the trajectory of his day-to-day life. He is thus forced to disembark in order to wait for a return connection, and finds himself in a time and place bereft of everything. In-depth analysis of the situation leads to reflections of an existential nature relating to time and space, nothingness and the extreme (“nothing before me / nothing behind me / before me and behind me / nothing”). The anonymous (and collective) protagonist of this tale, deprived, due to the error of a point operator, of a future and past and powerless to either head towards his destination or return to the point of departure, is incarcerated in an eternal “now” and pristine “in between.” He renews his efforts to localize his subjectivity in relation to time and space. Having been cast aside from the order they impose, he feels liberated and even to some degree becomes the wellspring of a new order: by singing and dancing he creates his own sense of time and parallel space. The last scenes of the opera are accompanied by an astonishing cast – trains come clattering into the station and crowds of travelers with suitcases flood out of them onto the platforms, nonchalantly forcing their way through the singing choir and twirling dancers. They have not been dislocated from their trajectories – and have no intention of being so. Any viewers expecting a revolution will be disappointed. Quite possibly art is no more – or less – as an outcome of the splitting of space by time. A perfect “in-between.” ■

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KRYSTYNA DUNIEC, JOANNA KRAKOWSKA

## DIDN'T THEY MOURN THEM?

“They didn’t mourn them. After seven hundred years of sharing the same land, Poles didn’t shed any tears over the Jews turned into ash. For their sons and brothers who survived, the most painful thing was the silence – the silence of their Polish brethren after the Holocaust. Not during the time of the Holocaust itself, but just after, after the war. No memorial services, no flowers. They moved into empty Jewish apartments and homes; cemeteries were overgrown with grass. The Church and the nation remained silent. They decided to forget, to pretend that the Jews had never been there.”

This is what Kazimierz Brandys wrote in *Months* in 1982. It is rhetorically powerful, but is it not, indeed, too rhetorical? It is not particularly difficult to confirm this with similar rhetorical flair, adding that they did not mourn them because they were pillaging down comforters and apartments, organizing pogroms against survivors, chasing away those who returned, and digging through ashes in search of gold. Or one could contradict him, by recalling to the shared martyrdom, that under the Soviet boot there was only room for internationalist mourning, and that at this time the heroes of the Polish underground were being imprisoned, deported to the East, and dumped in mass graves, without services or flowers. The task at hand, however, will be to verify, prove or disprove Brandys’ words, or, in other words, to use them as a point of departure to delve into both the Polish consciousness of the fate of the Jews and the process by which the Polish national identity was formed after the Holocaust. Because just how is it that they “didn’t mourn them?”

More precisely, when didn’t they mourn? Polish memory of the Holocaust and Polish consciousness of the fate of the Jews were not, and are not, homogeneous or continuous. They were activated and deactivated, sacralized and profaned; they conformed—they were both a ball and chain and an obsession. They were suppressed and discovered anew; they were appropriated and restored, fictionalized and instrumentalized. Simply put, they underwent conditional transformations, not only political, but above all psychological, ideational and ethical. They were used in settling history, for political purposes, but also became inalienable elements of the Polish constructs of identity – self-recognition and self-definition.

### 1

One of the transformations that Polish consciousness of the Holocaust underwent was its *universalization*. Zofia Nałkowska had already presented us with “People dealt this

fate to people” in the spring of 1945. This appeared in various forms, was developed, strengthened and cultivated, and became naturalized over time, which in turn led to a loss of the feeling of the Jewish fate being somehow exceptional. It is not therefore particularly surprising that it underwent a fundamental critique. Half a century later Henryk Grynberg wrote that “humanity dealt this fate to Jews,” believing that it was obscene to call the Holocaust a crime against humanity, since it was humanity that committed this crime against the Jews.<sup>1</sup> Michał Głowiński believes that this universalization threatens to strip the Holocaust of its historical uniqueness, making it just one of many awful events in human history.<sup>2</sup>

One could treat this as just another round of verbal sparring over the Holocaust, or a debate about the ethnicization or politicization of genocide, or, in the best case scenario, a philosophical debate, were it not for the fact that this or any other debate will be ahistorical, because it does not take into account the variable contexts or the various periods in which attempts at universalization of the Holocaust were undertaken. Generally a philosophical dispute about universalization as a means of framing this experience employs well-known philosophical, historical and sociological concepts in a situation where the Holocaust is a unique experience that eludes any recognizable ethical framework. The universalization of the Holocaust could, however, not only testify to the reconstitution of a universal order in a post-apocalyptic world, but also simply constitute a fundamental objection to the linguistic and ideological framework of the Holocaust.

In Nazi propaganda Jews were members of an inferior race, multiplying like vermin; they were parasites, tuberculosis bacteria, human animals, insects, snakes, and spiders marked by the Star of David. In 1945 Nałkowska’s “people dealt to people” formula therefore constituted an act of objection, the context of which was not some ideal universal moral order annihilated by the Holocaust which could be reconstituted, but rather the systematic dehumanization of the Jews in Nazi hate speech. Nałkowska’s universalization was therefore an exceptional response to the question Primo Levi raised in *If This Is a Man*. This question was raised many times during those years: “I have to help him, so he can... I don’t know. I mean he’s a man, right?” says the protagonist in Maria Zarębińska’s *The Children of Warsaw*, who found a small ghetto escapee in the ruins. “You’re a good and courageous person,” says the old doctor in the ghetto to his foster child in Andrzej Wajda’s 1990 film *Korczak*. The child reacts, astonished: “Do you really think that I am a person?”

Calling them people, however, was at that time not only an act of re-inclusion in a community of human beings. It was also an act of exclusion from their specific communities – ethnic or national. This is, in fact, the trouble with universalization: one belongs to the human race, and at the same time belongs to a nation.

Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stage* (1947), many fragments of which approach documentary evidence from Auschwitz, shows the drastic difference between the Jewish situation and those of all other nations. And yet the film's opening credits begin with the following information: "More than four and a half million men, women, and children from all the occupied countries of Europe perished in Auschwitz." The universality of the phrase, in which one sees the total number of victims in the camps, or focuses on their countries of origin or the languages they spoke, has two aspects: universalist and political.

American film expert Stuart Liebman focuses on the political aspect when writing about how, in both the East and West, early documentary films about the extermination camps did not underscore the fact that most of the victims were Jews, and sometimes failed to mention it altogether. During the war, Western Allies consistently downplayed the "Jewish question," fearing a potential loss of popular support in their societies, which could withhold support for a war "waged in defense of the Jews." Liebman writes that once the war ended, "official recognition of the Jewish genocide was tempered for similar reasons. In its place a universalist rhetoric emerged that encompassed the Jews even as it deferred acknowledgment that their fate had been distinctly different from that of the other suffering peoples of Europe [...] An oddly similar rationale prevailed in the East."<sup>3</sup>

Despite Stalin's politico-propagandistic needs, Polish awareness of the Holocaust was not radically manipulated in the early years after the war, despite what people today sometimes think. Universalization was rather an antidote to the Nazi, as well as Polish, propaganda that had its roots in interwar anti-Semitism, which survived World War II only to dramatically, and sometimes criminally, reveal itself on several occasions. In 1946 intellectuals writing for official weeklies such as *Rebirth* and *The Forge*, which were no doubt friendly to the new political order, were outraged by Polish anti-Semitism in the context of, as Kazimierz Wyka wrote, "the horrific massacre carried out by the Germans against the Jews." At the same time they attempted to show, as Jerzy Andrzejewski wrote, that "without respect for man, without seriously thinking about man, without solidarity in the face of the truths for which millions lost their lives, a nation that deserves the right to be respected cannot exist after the experiences of recent years."

In Poland the universalization of the fate of the Jews, aside from its symbolic and didactic dimensions, also shaped Poles' understanding of the world around them. Toward the end of the 1950s, Maria Orwid, professor of psychiatry, who herself had survived the Holocaust, participated in

a research program that sought to explore the post-camp trauma experienced by survivors. As improbable as it may seem today, she recalled that at that time psychiatrists had not differentiated between the experiences of Jewish survivors and those of other prisoners. "We had yet to address the specifically Jewish experiences of the war. Perhaps this was because we were a left-leaning group of thinkers with a very internationalist outlook. Nobody even thought about addressing national questions in our research, that we should separate Jewish suffering from non-Jewish suffering," she writes.<sup>4</sup> This internationalist outlook, which led in turn to the universalization of Jewish suffering, led science astray, but it also demonstrated the awareness of a group of intellectuals that was influential in the 1950s and 1960s. It suffices to say that research on those who survived the Holocaust began after 1989.

Universalization has, therefore, a variety of aspects, which allows a community to include those who had been drastically excluded, while at the same time denying them a unique status among the aggrieved. This allows one to control the collective trauma, while at the same time manipulating historical memory. It forces even the innocent to bear some responsibility, while simultaneously diminishing harm done to individuals. As mentioned earlier, this ambivalence of universalization is partly the result of its historicity—the historical variability of its convention. An *a priori* rejection of universalization would, however, constitute a rejection of its revolutionary – democratic and emancipatory – potential. In *Excitable Speech* Judith Butler writes:

Indeed, it seems important to consider that standards of universality are historically articulated and that exposing the parochial and exclusionary character of a given historical articulation of universality is part of the project of extending and rendering substantive the notion of universality itself.<sup>5</sup>

In light of this quote, it seems that an expanded universalization of the fate of the Jews did not emerge in Poland, despite several attempts. It was not possible to remove the notion of universality from its parochial, national axiology and broaden it with content other than pompous and narcissistic narratives. Instead, the Holocaust was written into the local, i.e. Polish, martyrdom, and the Jewish experience was left to its own. This is not particularly empathetic, but the narcissistic inclusion of experiences of the Other in one's own self in apprehending the fate of the Other is a means that serves to discover one's own identity.<sup>6</sup> This kind of appropriation does not have to signify a falsification of history and the acceptance of a foreign narrative; it can simply allow their instrumental usage as a pretext to spinning one's own narrative. This helps to explain the dual motifs of the helpful Pole in Polish film: the armed participation of Polish youths in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (in Wajda's *A Generation*, for example), and Polish families hiding Jewish girls (e.g. in the television series *Polish Ways* and *Decalogue*).

With the exception of Aleksander Ford's *Border Street*—in which Jews and Poles living in Warsaw were presented as equal heroes who employed a variety of strategies against the occupying power, and who had a wide range of attitudes toward each other—we struggle to find a Polish film from the communist era whose story gave equal weight and value to the Jewish perspective. In Polish films, the subjectivity of the Jewish experience was often reduced to tragically stigmatized outcasts (most often portrayed by actor Włodzimierz Boruński). Andrzej Munk's 1963 film *Passenger* did not even address the question of the Holocaust head on, even though it took place in a concentration camp. The existence of Jews, or rather their non-existence, was signaled by the camera as it descended upon the items stored in the Canada warehouses – piles of prayer shawls and rows of menorahs.

The hero of Jerzy Zarzycki's *White Bear* (1959) is a Jew in hiding (Gustav Holoubek) who posed for tourists in Zakopane in a white bear skin, but it is not so much his fate as it is his intellect and the game he plays with the German officer that becomes the focus of the film. Andrzej Brzozowski's *By the Train Tracks*, finished three years later and based on Nałkowska's *Medallions*, presents the story of a Jewish woman who was injured while escaping from a Nazi transport to a concentration camp. Unable to count on any support, she asks local onlookers to shoot her. The film was withheld by the censors, and was not shown until 1989. The authorities were equally intolerant of another film that portrayed Poles' attitudes toward Jews during the occupation in a less than heroic light: Janusz Nasfeter's 1967 film *Long Night* was also not allowed to be released. Both films present a sharp contrast to the patriotic narrative, showing that even if Jews did receive help (as was the case in *Long Night*), it was always against the popular will.

At the same time, the most powerful scene presenting Polish anti-Semitism comes from Stanisław Różewicz's 1961 novella *Drop of Blood* in his movie *Birth Certificate*. A girl who has escaped from the ghetto runs into some Polish youngsters, who make her prove that she is not Jewish by forcing her to kneel and recite a prayer. (The Nazis later pick out the same girl from a group of children in an orphanage as a model of the Aryan race, just as Solomon Perel was in Agnieszka Holland's film *Europa, Europa* thirty years later.)

It was surely these films and television series (those that passed "inspection," of course) and some of the required reading (Nałkowska's *Medallions*, Szmaglewska's *Smoke Over Birkenau*, or Bartnikowski's *Childhood Behind Barbed Wire*), along with the antiwar neurosis of school assemblies and state propaganda—whose starting point was reference to the German occupation, concentration camps and wartime destruction—that shaped the consciousness of the Holocaust for those born in communist Poland. It was not completely false, but it was definitely warped, much like the sources from which it drew.

The first Polish accounts of life in the concentration camps, like *Smoke Over Birkenau* (1945), provided detailed and



realistic knowledge about life in the camps, but not about the machine of the Holocaust. The very nature of the witness, that is, he who survived, made his testimony by definition false. At the same time, on page thirty-one of her book, Szmaglewska writes that “Every Polish woman knows that she can meet death here, but also knows that death can be avoided, and she will try every means to resist it. On the other hand [Jewish women] know that only extermination awaits them.” In the accounts of life in the camps found in *Childhood Behind Barbed Wire* (1969), destruction could equally be hunger, illness, humiliation, and suffering of Polish children, and Auschwitz was a place “where Jarek’s father died; you know, my friend from school,” where an uncle and teacher died. At the same time, a few Gypsy children appear, or a two-year-old Jewish boy, who had no chance of survival. In most Polish films about the German occupation – from *Forbidden Songs*, *Generation* and *Landscape after a Battle to Kornblumenblau* – Jews make equally sporadic, though meaningful, appearances.

Statistical accounts of the Holocaust listed the various nations who had fallen victim alphabetically, yet placed Jews at the end. Other accounts counted them in the totals for Polish citizens. Regardless of any kind of manipulation, one can paradoxically say that Polish consciousness of the Holocaust underwent a “non-obvious obviousness.” Direct testimonies, both literary and filmic, did not exactly *hide* the truth about the exceptional nature of the fate of the Jews, but nor did they exactly go out of their way to demonstrate it. It was almost as though they were applying Wittgenstein’s seventh thesis: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”

All of this meant that the Holocaust was included for many years – in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – in the Polish national trauma, without being studied in terms of the Other’s experiences. This is the reason we have increasing numbers of admissions by people born and raised in communist Poland that, as Piotr Pacewicz said, “I grew up in Warsaw, in Muranów, playing in the ruins of the ghetto; I was enthralled by Borowski, but for many years I did not realize that I had not experienced the Holocaust as the Holocaust, because it had been obscured by Polish martyrdom.”<sup>7</sup>

Let us once again stress that the Polish national consciousness’ loss of the sense of the exceptional fate of the Jewish people was not only the result of the influence of propaganda and the overarching discourse of Polish martyrdom, but also the very nature of the accounts of the camps and the German occupation, since they are the voice of the living, and not the dead. Artistic accounts also added to this, as for a long time they presented universalist interpretations which have only recently begun to track down and decipher the traces of the Holocaust.

This in particular applies to the theater, beginning with Otwinowski’s *Easter*, directed by Leon Schiller in 1946, followed by the works of Grotowski and Kantor, and later Grzegorzewski’s 1991 play *The City Counts Dogs’ Noses*. The

theater occasionally addressed the question of the Holocaust in an intense or radical fashion, but in some way it was inaccessible to the audience. This could have been the result of a selective deafness or a lack of readiness to deal with the problem. Neither *Akropolis* nor *The Dead Class* was able to stir up Polish consciousness of the Jews, despite having stirred things up artistically and existentially. This is why theater performances, which did not employ any social model of experiencing the Holocaust, remained, until the beginning of the new century, the best example of the under-articulated, insufficiently worked through, and enduring trauma of the Holocaust, which remains in the Polish subconscious.<sup>8</sup>

## 2

The process of recovering and articulating the memory of the Holocaust as a Jewish experience began in the 1980s. It is not surprising that it was then (and only then) that Kazimierz Brandys wrote the words quoted at the beginning of this essay.

On the one hand, the rediscovery of Jewish topics was aimed at the nationalist “Grunwald” faction and anti-Semitic attacks on the democratic opposition. On the other hand, it was a result of the need to penetrate the area between official and concealed history, in search of themes that were not so much forbidden as simply inconvenient for the authorities. Dealing with the Jewish question in some sense sublimated political contestation and became a form of oppositional discourse, thus introducing potentially subversive themes and characters with complex biographies.

In 1981 Hanna Krall’s *To Outwit God* was directed by Andrzej Brzozowski (author of the above-mentioned *By the Train Tracks*, which did not pass the censors) for Television Theater. Zbigniew Zapasiewicz played the role of Marek Edelman.

In 1982 Jerzy Kawalerowicz filmed one of his most ambitious movies – *The Inn*, based on the novel of the same name by Julian Strykowski, an author at that time associated with samizdat. The story presents the life and culture of Polish Jews threatened by a Cossack pogrom. The three stagings of *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1983 and 1984 testify to the general interest in Jewish culture, albeit in some sort of state-sponsored form. Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Nobel Prize in 1978 generated enormous popularity for his Polish language editions.

In 1983 the State Publishing Institute released its comprehensive *Anthology of Jewish Poetry*.

In 1984 Waldemar Dziki released his debut film, *Postcard from a Journey*, a poetic story from of the ghetto. Four years later, Television Theater aired Adina Blady-Szwajger’s *Supernatural Medicine*, with Maja Komorowska playing the role of the doctor working in a children’s hospital in the ghetto. In 1986 state television aired extensive fragments of Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*.

In this same period, Andrzej Szczypiorski’s underground novel, *Beginning* (1986), garnered a lot of attention, addressing Polish-Jewish relations during the German occupation.

Not long thereafter, Alina Cała's pioneering work, *The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture* (In Plus, 1988), which deals with Polish anti-Semitism, also appeared in samizdat.

Finally, in 1987 Jan Błoński's famous article, *Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto*, appeared in the pages of the weekly newspaper *Tygodnik Powszechny*. He used a language that had not been heard in forty years, ever since Ossowski and Wyka protested against the Kielce pogrom. "I think that in relation to our Polish-Jewish past, we ought to stop defending ourselves, justifying ourselves, and haggling," Błoński wrote. "We ought to underscore something we have not been able to do since the occupation, or even longer, blaming political social and economic factors. We ought to first say: Yes, we are guilty."<sup>9</sup>

Andrzej Wajda did not address the question of blame directly in the film that crowned this decade-long exploration of Jewish themes, but in 1990 he told his story of Korczak from the perspective of a "poor Pole looking at the ghetto."

In the 1980s there were of course more varied indications of interest in Jewish culture and history and its identity, both independently and in connection to Polish history. The most important aspects of these developments were neither ethnographic nor cultural, nor was this the discovery of previous taboos; it was rather the introduction of the fate of the Jews into the discourse on Polish identity. This brought a unique opportunity to the fore, on the eve of independence, when questions arose concerning Polish aspirations, national complexes, guilt and achievements, particularly in the context of settling historical accounts, of a pluralist democratic discourse, and of the confrontation of Polish identity with both the indigenous mythology and the memory of others. The question of Polish awareness of the fate of the Jews seemed to be key from the very beginning, with particular stress on the Polish consciousness, and not on the Jewish fate.

This is particularly evident in film. After *Korczak*, films that wanted to express a disinterested representation that placed the subjectivity of the Other above oneself were no longer made. Films produced in the first decade of independence that address the problematic of Polish-Jewish relations illustrate the process of negotiating Polish identity in the discourse of assistance and guilt, a negotiation that really takes place in one's own memory, rather than, as LaCapra would say, on the plane of an empathic encounter with the Other. Jan Łomnicki's *Just Beyond This Forest* (1991), Andrzej Wajda's *Holy Week* (1995), and Jan Jakub Kolski's *Keep Away from the Window* (2000) are all stories embedded in the typical "assistance" discourse: an older woman leads a Jewish girl from the ghetto for a handsome fee; or Polish married couples shelter young Jewish women. As much as they are stories of assisting, they are also stories of blame – about the primitive anti-Semitism of both the Polish masses and the intelligentsia, who are pleased that "Hitler took care of our Jewish problem for us." The clash of providing aid with verbalized antipathy was new to the assistance narrative previously present in Polish narratives, except that then it is was at most the bad *szmalcownik*s (someone who blackmailed Jews) who troubled the good Poles

saving Jews. (The *szmalcownik* made his first appearance in *Forbidden Songs* – the first Polish movie made after the war.) Here we have practically a vivisection of the conscious and unconscious of the culturally and historically justified abjection of the Other.

In *Holy Week* Andrzej Wajda seems particularly active when it comes to negotiating the Polish identity. In this film an ardent Catholic woman takes a Jewish woman under her roof; just like her, she has lost loved ones during the war – her father and two brothers. Before the war her husband belonged to a student organization that had smashed Jewish shops; her brother-in-law goes to fight in the ghetto; a neighbor woman informs on the Jewish woman; another neighbor wants to rape her; and the owner of the house is a coward. The Jewish woman knows this all too well:

People don't change. Maybe they just won't want to kill me. They won't make any more gold five ruble coins off me. We're going to be hated even more, because we'll be able to freely walk about the streets; we'll return to our apartments. And we'll have rights.

The apartments she is referring to are the ones Jews were expelled from when they were forced into the ghettos, often after having been reported to the Germans by neighbors seeking to improve their standard of living, as was shown over fifty years ago in *Boarder Street*.

There is a certain paradox that the movies which talked about saving Jews simultaneously downplayed the ruthlessness of Polish anti-Semitism, as well as Poland's narcissistic martyrdom, which essentially prevented Poles from acknowledging the fate of the Jews. In order to bear testimony on someone's fate, Agamben has said that it is necessary to reconcile his presence in one's soul, a place that Jews at that time were not offered. This is why Polish narratives of the Holocaust and the fate of the Jews were infrequently testimonies to those truths, but rather Polish identity narratives, negotiating our achievements and our failings. At the same time, the traumas and delights which are inseparable elements of these narratives have an erotic nature, which seems to be to only real space in which Jewish-Polish encounters took place.

The trauma embodied in Lacan's notion of *jouissance* – which results from experiencing a relationship as forbidden or impossible in a given set of circumstances, therefore placing it beyond the pleasure principle – is the essence of the protagonists' relationships in both Janusz Kijowski's *Warsaw 5703* (1992) and Jan Jakub Kolski's *Keep Away from the Window* (2000). A sexual bond as a struggle for, and not realization of, life is a traumatic experience, and pertains to the horror of the Real. At the same time, it is the only experience in reciprocal Polish-Jewish relations that can lead to a transgression of otherness.

In *Holy Week* the potential erotic perspective appears as a possibility of moving beyond these reciprocal complexes.

In *Warsaw 5703* the erotic relationship transforms, over time, from one of dependence into one of equality. In *Keep Away from the Window*, 2000's film of the year, the fruit of the relationship is a Polish-Jewish child who, when he grows up, consciously raises questions of his own identity, while at the same time opening up the possibility of a further transformation of Polish consciousness.

The past decade was marked by a profound reinvention of Polish identity, for which the Jew is no longer so necessary, but whose inspiration has been irreversibly and forever transformed. It is no accident that toward the turn of the decade the character of Weiser Dawidek appeared in the prose of Pawel Huelle, and later in Wojciech Marczewski's film adaptation in 2000. Someone who had existed, but who irrevocably disappeared; it is hard to know whether he is an illusion. Someone who has disappeared from memory, but returned to her after thirty years. Someone close who remained forever a secret. Someone foreign, yet who belongs to the community. Marczewski's film speaks of how Dawidek Weiser is an integral part of the memory and identity of Polish friends, and his disappearance is a weight they must endure for the rest of their lives. Then there is an explosion. *Weiser* is set in the 1960s, and it is hard not to recall the last scene of *Boarder Street*, in which young Dawidek, who has escaped from the ghetto, walks into a dark tunnel in order to return to the ghetto and to take part in the uprising, while his friends remain at the opening of the sewer.

### 3

At the turn of the twenty-first century, we have a great deal of literary and theatrical evidence that allows us to recognize that Jews are genetic, biographical, ethical and political facts *in Poles*, and not some kind of illusion. The time of direct representation of the Holocaust has past; and evidence of the fate of the Jews is now relocated to the realm of academic inquiries, family sagas, and mediated narratives. Despite appearances, Strzépka and Demirski are wrong to make light of the fashionable "Polish-Jewish relations" topic in *Long Live War*:

there could be a scene about Polish-Jewish relations  
and Polish anti-Semitism  
but there has already... been so much of that in the theater  
lately  
that the Polish-Jewish question has perhaps already been  
resolved for good.

The question of Polish-Jewish relations remains, however, unresolved, and would demand the existence of two separate subjects with clear unambiguous identifications. One of them does not exist in Poland for obvious reasons, while the identity of the other, as it turns out, has been "dybbuked," and is pressured by a guilt, weight, and presence, and thus the discourses, in Poland's current narcissistic consciousness, lead to a desire for a break, for ambiguity. However, instead of "a scene about Polish-Jewish relations" there should be



a scene about a Pole working through his Polish-Jewish identity. And this would not be so difficult, as a new generation of writers experiences, as Dominick LaCapra calls it, “a psychic burden regarding events for which they are not responsible but for which they may nonetheless feel in some sense answerable.”<sup>10</sup>

Above all, it seems that aside from this discussion another question remains, concerning the ethnic identities of the victims of the Holocaust, which still appears as a problem of a manipulated consciousness in Marian Pankowski’s play *My In-laws’ Trip to Treblinka*:

TOURIST I: I’m wondering about some something included in the

information. It’s missing one, one word... which one could call the ethnic identity, and above all religious identity, of the thousands of victims...

GUIDE: [...] The administration... that’s just administration... They didn’t think to include... let’s say... encyclopedic information...

The current internalization of the unique fate of the Jewish people in the context of the Holocaust carries a radical transformation of the base of Polish memory. This could even mean accepting a “*dybbuked*” Polish-Jewish identity, which necessarily includes abandoning tribal identification for that of an empathic community, the division between self and other, messianic fantasies, and the cultivation of difference for the search of a common place of memory. This is, at the same time, the key to the success of the project presented in Yael Bartana’s film *Nightmares* (2007): “Jews, return to your own country,” which as a political project is perhaps utopian, but is most certainly real as a historiographic proposition, a revision of the past that brings a necessity to tell history anew. In its most desirable form it functions as an identity proposition – a recognition of the fact that Jews cannot be themselves without Poles.

In Marek Baczewski’s play *Don’t Use That Fire* (2008), Jews from a village in Podlas who have avoided the transports to the Białystok ghetto are able to hide in the swamps with the help of their Polish neighbors, and are killed by a Pole who wants to become a *volksdeutscher*. The Gestapo commander declares that “Just as you betrayed the Jews and you betrayed the Poles, once you’re a *volksdeutscher* you will betray the Germans. I will not register you as a *volksdeutscher*; I will only send you to Auschwitz.” The Jews in the swamps are killed, but “then they start to walk like the living,” haunting the village, visiting the farmers as if they had opened a door into another world.” They opened those doors for themselves, but in so doing they also opened them for others. For this reason dead Jews mingled with dead Poles, and the dead with the living: “We have to have some device to differentiate between the dead from the living, because both of these nations live here together and neither of them really knows who is who.”

Unlike in the *City of the Living and the Dead*, it is well known who is Dead in Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk’s play

*The Mayor* (2009).<sup>11</sup> The Truth, announced by the Mayor in the presence of citizens and invited guests, raised them from their graves:

MAYOR BEFORE: We killed those people lying there. That’s the Truth.

MAYOR OF NYC: The Jooz?

MAYOR BEFORE: Those people lying there.

TOWNSPERSON: Whatever. It’s the German that killed them.

MAYOR BEFORE: I told you the Truth would come to us in the end. / Those who left, Those lying there / In the cemetery that isn’t there / Were killed by our fathers / Not by THE GERMAN Not by THE GERMAN.

Unlike in the cursed village in *Don’t Use That Fire*, where the dead Jews “are people, too,” residents of the village – no doubt Jedwabne – want to have nothing to do with the dead, because those are “foreign skeletons and they rattle differently.” They do not want to speak with them; they do not let them into their homes; they do not let them sleep in their armoires or basements. “Cast them out, Mayor!” they say. “You have to protect us from the Truth!” But the Mayor does not want to drive them away:

I won’t cast them out! I won’t cast the Townspeople of my Town out of my Town.

I don’t know what to do. How do I talk to them?

I don’t know what they’re here for. Their children have left.

They don’t have their children anymore. We’re their children now. Right?

In recent years *dybbuks* have appeared in Polish literature and plays. We should now look at how this new “*dybbuked*” Polish identity has manifested itself, other than in hauntings of villages and small towns.

It has been expressed through, for example, genealogical experience – through the discovery of one’s own roots, as was the case in an exchange in the play *Nothing Human* (2008), when strange comments by some friends about the hair color or the expression of someone’s eyes lead a young woman to realize her Jewish heritage. As in Jarosław Kamiński’s play *The Purge* (2009), when an anti-Semitic joke costs one committed communist her job: “I once thought that I was Polish; then, when they accused my parents of embezzlement, I found out I was a Polish Jew. More and more often I think I’m simply a Jew.” As when Joanna Bator describes the forbidden love of a Polish woman and the Jew whom she was hiding in her novel *Sand Mountain*, where the young girl unexpectedly finds out about her Jewish grandfather, from whom she inherited her darker complexion and her mathematical skills. As in Piotr Paziński’s novel *The Boarding House*, in which the narrator lives with the awareness that “he is the last chain of the generations, hooked in place at the very end.” As in Monika Rakusa’s *39.9* (2008), with a typical popular identity narrative in which the forty-something-year-old narrator struggles with

anxiety mainly born of the post-traumatic stress syndrome she inherited from her mother. As in Bożena Keff's narrative epic poem *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland*, which says, "I don't exist here as myself; I'm a sound booth." (One could say that Rakusa's novel is, in a certain sense, a lighter version of Bożena Keff's poetry, in which day after day the trauma the mother inflicts resonates repeatedly, turning her daughter's life into hell.)

Genealogical recognition is not limited to self-identification; above all it is marked by a burden, like the one found in Piotr Paziński's *The Boarding House*: "I wanted to run away, but I felt that some kind of power was keeping me there, chaining me in place, not allowing me to move, as if my legs were bound by rope, like I belonged to the generation of Mr. Abraham and Mrs. Mala, as if there were no difference in age between Uncle Simon and myself, not even the slightest crack that could allow our fates to separate from one another. They kept me in a steel embrace." This steel embrace is the subject of the most important Polish identity narrative of recent years – *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland*, which is at the same time a Polish rendering of one of the most important American identity narratives, Philip Roth's 1967 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*. The central theme of each piece is the struggle for the recognition of one's own humanity, though no longer in the face of the Holocaust, but rather in relation to the memory of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust, not only as an untold and undepicted history, but also as a point of departure – a framework of a certain experience, irrespective of whether it refers to what happened before or what happened after. "They forced me [...] to live in the past," says the protagonist in Zyta Rudzka's play *Tacking Thread* (2008), the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. Zyta Rudzka is, at the same time, one of few contemporary authors attempting to confront the experience of the camps. "I support representation," she says, searching for the language and sensory register that would give access to this experience.

In *Doctor Joseph's Little Beauty* (2006), a novel that takes place in a present day retirement home where Holocaust survivors are waiting to die, Rudzka acquires this access through contrasts, through a confrontation of conditions. The physiology of old age and youthful anatomy. Descriptions of the decline into dementia and memories from Auschwitz. The disintegration of an aged shell with the girlish body, when "for the first time a naked twenty-year-old girl stands before Doctor Joseph." One can pride oneself on the title of Miss Auschwitz among the abjectified bodies of pensioners in a nursing home.

In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva confirms that one can express the essence of the Nazi crimes, confronting them with an affirmation of life: "In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children's shoes, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is

supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things."<sup>12</sup> This is exactly what is unacceptable for the Guide from the Auschwitz Museum in Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk's *The Suitcase* (2008):

Children  
The children are still crying  
Or they're laughing  
But the worst is that they will never grow up  
They won't get married  
Toys lie there  
Every morning they're still lying there  
No one will ever  
Come for them  
[...]  
I don't know why all this is here  
In this museum  
Maybe  
So I would go crazy  
So a wreck of a human being will remain in me  
Maybe  
That's why everything is here.

In today's Jewish-Polish narratives the Holocaust is present not so much as a historical face, but rather as a moral context, allowing for assessments, revisions, and the shattering of Polish flaws and guilt. In *Tykocin* (2009), Paweł Demirski and Michał Zadara present a group of young journalists on their way from Warsaw to Tykocin to prevent the awarding of a Righteous Among Nations medal to someone who is not authorized to receive it, and moreover in a city where Poles staged a pogrom against Jews in 1941. In one journalist's opinion, "this honor is impossible to grant / because since 1943 nobody has saved anyone / no one was buried / I know because / I wrote a piece about this / actually an entire book."

The ironic perspective from which the authors of *Tykocin* present today's overzealous rediscovery of the dark side of Polish history and their compatriots' struggle to feel good is one of the many forms of contemporary Polish masochistic vivisection. Artur Pałyga's *Jew* (2008) could serve as a source of inspiration for them. It collects the majority of myths, common opinions, prejudices, and stereotypes that comprise Polish anti-Semitism. It recalls the majority of the crimes committed by Poles against Jews: prewar pogroms; the barn in Jedwabne; murders committed by the National Armed Forces; digging through ashes in Treblinka; stolen down comforters and buildings; the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968. Andrzej Bart's radio drama *Boulevard Voltaire* (2010) is based on a similar constellation of stereotypes. A woman who emigrated after the March 1968 anti-Semitic campaign and another immigrant need one another, despite mutual prejudices.

It is worth creating such catalogues of stereotypes in order to expose narratives that hinder the transformation of Poland's "dybbuked" identity into a new and heretofore unknown quality, an integral piece of which will be the conviction expressed

in the words of Persephone in *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* that:

I took my general direction after my parents.  
But they – I don't know if they'd recognize it.  
My destiny is foreignness  
and closeness.

Today's autobiographies and family sagas, with their struggles with biographical experiences as well as personal and mediated memories, follow this genealogical narrative. Autobiographical testimonies by writers and intellectuals – such as those by Maria Orwid, Ewa Kuryluk, Joanna Olczak-Ronikier, Agata Tuszyńska, Michał Głowiński, and Anda Rottenberg – are priceless for Polish culture, revealing its hazy, heterogeneous, and anti-essential identity, while organically shaping it from the bottom up. At the same time, they are inextricably placing the fate of the Jews into Polish history, and in so doing, making it imperative that this history is written anew. Andrzej Bart does this in his *The Flytrap Factory*, changing the course of history:

“What about the workers from *Rien ne va plus* who ran out of the factories and stood guard on the streets in order to protect Jews from the Black Hundreds? Please admit that you made this up.”

I nodded yes, but I immediately asked what that had to do with anything.

“Nothing, except that, from a distance, is smelled like a lie born of love.”

All the texts referenced here were published in the last few years, which is the best evidence that the Holocaust and memory of the fate of the Jews has finally become internalized in the Polish national consciousness as an experience free of Polish myths.

The homogenization of Polish memory in the first decades after the war, feverish attempts at recollection in the 1980s, negotiating memory between feelings of guilt and victimhood during the first decade of independence, and the current internalization of Jewish memory and its inclusion in Polish thought, experienced as a burden – this is a brief history of the construction of Polish identity after the Holocaust.

And so they do mourn them, though the tears of the mourners are always shed for themselves. ■

this essay appears in English in Dagmar Herzog, ed., *Lessons and Legacies*, Vol. 7 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), pp. 333-351].

<sup>4</sup> Maria Orwid, *Przeżyć... I co dalej?*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Krakow 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge Press, New York 1997, p. 89.

<sup>6</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, Cornell University Press, New York 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *Tęczowa rewolucja*, eds. Mariusz Kurc, Krzysztof Tomasiak, Adpublik, Warsaw 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this topic see Grzegorz Niziołek's articles about Polish theater of the Holocaust: “Publiczność zgnieciona. Kantor i kres dramatu społecznego,” *Dialog* 2009, No. 4; “Scena pierwotna,” *Dialog* 2010, No. 1; “Kantor i ‘żydzi’,” *Didaskalia* 2010, No. 96; “Katastrofa, czyli punkt bez dalszego ciągu,” *Didaskalia* 2011, No. 102.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Błoński, “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto,” *Tygodnik Powszechny* 1987, No. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Dominick LaCapra, op. cit, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, *The Mayor*, trans. Artur Zapalowski, [in:] *(A)pollonia 21<sup>st</sup> Century Polish Drama and Texts for the Stage*, edit.: Joanna Krakowska, Joanna Klass and Krystyna Duniec; in print.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1982, p. 4.

<sup>1</sup> Henryk Grynberg, “Ludzie Żydom zgotowali ten los,” in: *Prawda nieartystyczna*, Archipelag, Berlin 1984, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> See: Michał Głowiński, “Wprowadzenie,” in: *Stosowność i forma. Jak opowiadać o Zagładzie?*, Universitas, Kraków 2006.

<sup>3</sup> “Les premières images des camps: l'Exemple de Maïdanek.” *Les Cahiers du Judaïsme* No. 15 (a special issue edited by Anne Grynberg and Christian Delage) (Winter 2004): 49-60. [A revised version of

MARTA BRYŚ

## ART DOES NOT COME FROM JUSTICE

An interview with BOŻENA UMIŃSKA-KEFF

**Reminiscing on *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland*, you said, “I phoned my friend to say: ‘Listen, I have written a sentence addressed to my mother and I am scared.’” What sentence was that?**

“Fuck you, you hyena!” I was scared by my need to overstep boundaries relating to one’s mother that should not be overstepped, whether she is liked or not. It horrified me that, despite this, I could so nonchalantly raise and level a sacred hierarchy.

**Was this meant from the beginning to be a story of your Mother?**

I am not denying that my mother was the template here, and some passages are a close record of her speech. Later, however, I attempted to universalize the text and move from my mother to the Mother and then to the Parent, and an even more general level. But if you are asking about the creative process, it began with the daughter, a laced up expression and emotions. I sensed that my mother awarded herself the right to attention, for she had the right to a history, narrative, misfortune, and tragedy. But I have no history or narrative, and my emotions are completely subordinate to hers. In short, this is a slavish relationship in which, at one point, the daughter has to become aware of the need to stand up for her own identity. My actual mother or the Mother from *A Piece*... bars access to history for various reasons, including the fact that she wants to defend the Daughter from the cruelty of the past.

**But at the same time she bombards her with traumatic tales, installing them as a point of reference for reality. The historical narrative is fused with the figure of the Mother.**

The point here is that attention is supposed to be focused on her. Unfortunately, there are no courses on how to be a parent. If history has ridden roughshod over a parent, forcing him or her to crawl through life, it is difficult for a child to become isolated from this. Of course, the historical narrative of the real mother is based on fact and relates to real events, so it should be spoken using her language, phrases and emotions. For me, the problem was to liberate myself from this language while maintaining the drama of her experiences. What language could I use, since these are not my memories? I was looking for a form that would allow me to break away from the language of the Mother.

**After all, the Mother’s language naturally flows from her experience.**

Which mother are you asking about – my actual mother or the one in the text? In the case of the Mother, the exalted

language speaks for itself, but I, as the author, was unable to endure it, as it was making me vomit. But since I felt that I had to tell this story, I had to invest it with a sense of irony, reserve, and universality. When the Narrator speaks of the Mother’s wartime experiences, she uses the language of pop culture. I used language of this kind so that I could slot it into the story, while avoiding the culture of victimhood. I turned to *The Lord of the Rings* and had images in mind of the swelling army of evil from the book and the film adaptation.

**The Mother tries to place the Daughter in the position of a victim. Is empathy only possible in a community of victims?**

The Mother completely fails to comprehend any other aspect of closeness. For her, only another victim can be someone close. A victim is experienced, knows what is most important, the victim is sacred.

**You pose the radical thesis that a lack of historical narrative denotes lack of identity. How does the Daughter fit into this relationship?**

This is not my thesis. Everyone has their own histories and their own historical narrative. History goes on. It didn’t stop in 1945, or in 1989, as Fukuyama claimed. The Daughter’s identity is probably more sharply outlined than the mother’s, as it was formed in a battle for identity waged against the closest person, at least in formal terms, to her. If this was not the case, she would not know how to label the situation in which she found herself and, as a result, dissociate herself from it. The problem resides in the fact that the Mother perceives the Daughter as an extension of herself, a biographical vermiform appendix. She thinks that her daughter is a natural continuation of herself. The Daughter is unable to either cultivate or affirm her own autonomy in her Mother’s presence, and at the same time needs to stick by her, for it seems that her presence is a necessary condition for her Mother’s survival. To the Daughter, it appears that if she refuses to hear her mother out, she is performing an act much like cutting off the Mother’s oxygen supply. It appears that if she leaves her, then the Mother will die, choking on her own memories.

The Daughter has her own story and identity, but this is not the matter at hand. The question is: What is the value of a culture in which History, with a capital “H,” is made up of aggression, suffering, and bloodletting? And “history” is of little account? Does that mean that anything that is private, reflexive, critical or individual is completely insignificant? This is sick. This is historical policy. For historical policy also relies on the fact that the meaning of some events is created by depriving others of their meaning.

**In *A Piece...* you contrast the tragic personal story of an individual with a somewhat simplified vision of an intolerant, nationalistic Poland.**

A nationalistic Poland (and such a Poland actually exists, and on what a scale!) is in itself a reification of all manner of human content. I live in Warsaw and I observe the annual commemoration of the anniversary the Warsaw Uprising with increasing bitterness. Scores of young people of both sexes, dressed up in the uniforms of insurgents, celebrate this festival of death. They are envisioning or enacting something, but do they know exactly what? For they can only envision their own deaths, as this is what the experience of the Warsaw insurgent amounts to. What are they celebrating? It's turning into a kind of Totenfest. In 2010, I saw parents who had dressed a three-year-old child in a German uniform with a big helmet and given him plastic grenades. In the Old Town, by a church. But what kind of message does this send? By the Monument to the Little Insurgent, which I personally regard as a disgrace, for it serves as an affirmation of lack of accountability for the life of child who should be protected and not exposed to danger, the parents got their child to pose for photos. This is simply thoughtlessness, a lack of historical reflection. Does this mean that the Polish identity accrues to you when you change into an insurgent's uniform and wave a red and white flag? Are you only a Pole if you become part of the bloodletting community? Is there no other way of gaining access?

While writing *A Piece...*, I became hardened in my conviction that art does not come from justice. At least in the sense of weighing arguments and diplomatic forms of expression. A play is meant to clearly, and indiscreetly, show that, rather

than being a space for statistical surveys, it is instead a place for establishing identities and finding a way to label my problem. Feelings are often unjust, in the sense that in order to ultimately feel and articulate something important, one must stop worrying whether or not it is going to hurt anybody. Art can introduce themes that were previously invisible, that were often opaque, with the force of a poster. From the outset, I knew that I would have to ruthlessly drive my point home, in order to demonstrate that enslavement at the family level is a norm inscribed into culture and that a relation exists between what is in the family and what is in the public sphere. The Daughter's problem is that she lacks the courage to stand up for herself, so is losing her autonomy and is faced with the need to personally redefine how to recover what she has lost in her relations with the Mother.

**Emancipation for the Daughter is death for the Mother?**

Not at all! Liberation is consciousness of the human rationales which are there to support her. After all, she understands the Mother, but she can no longer remain in this relationship based on maternal rights. She may demand accountability from the Mother as she would from an adult. The Daughter has to state, "I am a person, like you, and my experiences are just as important as yours." The death of the Mother is not necessary at all. What is needed for the Daughter is to withdraw from her internal bondage and reject her residual convictions. My book takes the side of individuality and not hierarchy, which in this case is engendered in the sacred role of the Mother, and it is so difficult to defy this, to direct the Mother toward the human dimensions of the particular person.



**No doubt it is more difficult to block the memories which the Mother is attempting to pass on.**

Do you know how easy it is to splatter a child against a wall with a story about how I SUFFERED? A story about an illness or about the fact that the mother got pregnant, so couldn't have a career as a singer, or that her husband was mean, and besides, everything's getting expensive. A martyr's narrative smoothes the way to enslavement and the narrative is less important than the actual slavery itself. It makes no difference what the cudgel of choice is, although, in my book, this cudgel has steel studs and is blood-stained, because the story of the Holocaust is no lark and both of them know this. I confess that I was uncertain whether the Holocaust can be spoken of in this manner. I knew that I wanted to give an account of it, but I didn't know what form or language to use.

**You decided on an atypical form.**

I call this text "poetically organized," meaning that its import is expressed in sentences and words. At the beginning is the sentence: "this was the Jewish demise that was less than human / attested to by facts, archives and documents." This, for me, is a sentence written in a serious tone. It is a very serious sentence and there is none of the Daughter's irony in it yet. The irony and fun begin three verses later and the emotional atmosphere between the Mother and Daughter continuously changes, almost from verse to verse. In Jan Klata's production, this sentence is uttered with detachment, as if the narrator is already mocking the Mother from the outset. While writing, I was afraid that I would give cause for sentences of this type to be treated with a lack of gravity. In fact, that interpretation was troublesome for me.

**Klata evokes the musicality in your text.**

I really liked this idea, because, although I was not writing it with theater in mind, my book does have a whiff of the operatic. The production begins with texts that are sung in rhythmic repetition, sung extremely beautifully in fact. Klata set the text to music in an interesting way. I liked it very much.

**How did you take the idea to feature five women and a "feminized" male character?**

I adore this male character who is feminine, as there is that cultural truth that no one is "born" a woman or man; culture molds us according to this rather than any other model. I think that this is a deeply feminist production. The man/actor shows something that can be found, for instance, in Almódovar's films: gender is culturally constructed and imposed in the form of convention, systems of behavior, and so on. A man can "be a woman," assuming that he has the opportunity to choose between these conventions. For example: He can sit at home and let his wife do the earning, as long as this is a joint decision. As far as the division into several characters is concerned, this is a gesture that reverses what I did. I began with an individual story and went on to add successive layers universalizing the story. However, Klata began

at the cultural level – it is not one story that is of concern here, but rather the general parent-child relationship and how this functions in culture.

**In addition, the actresses swap the roles of Daughter and Mother, also exchanging their lines.**

This is quite an innovative idea. It shows the recursive nature of the Mother-Daughter role in culture, a role which actually needs to be acted out. Today the Daughter is rebelling, but tomorrow she'll be stepping in the shoes of her Mother, she'll have her own Daughter, and so on. I wasn't really writing about this, but I agree with this interpretation.

**Klata also reduced the social context to a single collective monologue and a dance with a flag. I would imagine that this was quite significant for you.**

I think that Klata is most interested in how the martyr paradigm is part of Polish culture and how destructive it is. Indeed, in the production, there is no sign whatsoever of the Holocaust motif, which is immensely important to me, or the Polish-Jewish theme. The epilogue to *A Piece...* – a portrayal of anti-Semitic, homophobic, nationalistic Poland – was excised. Klata didn't take this on and I regret that. The most glaring omission for me, however, was a perspective which would enable the character of the Mother to be presented in a manner that was more than simply grotesque. But this can't be achieved without at least some psychology, but there is no psychology in Klata's interpretation. And the Mother is the oppressor by the simple virtue of playing the Mother role, and for no other reason. Maybe Klata assumed that the historical context is obvious? For me, differences in the interpretation of meanings present the most problems.

**Was some of the book's content more radicalized in the stage version?**

No, I don't think so. Shifted, but not radicalized. The first staging of *A Piece...* was undertaken by Marcin Liber in Szczecin; I adore that production. Of course, the theatrical form in Liber's production is clearly more economical; the director wrote it for two actresses, which gives the production an intimate feel. The social context appeared in a video projection. I'm not so sure whether Marcin Liber radicalized it further, but he certainly highlighted my sociopolitical message. To my delight.

Klata also removed the manifesto to John Lennon's *Imagine*. In Szczecin, the actress Beata Zygarcicka nailed a copy of the manifesto to the stage walls. Do I think that it was very moving if people reacted to this type of – I don't know – sociopolitical idealism? Generally, contempt is shown for anything construed as a proposal to breach the status quo. So this is a country located between the "for fuck's sake brigade" and the Mother of God, the former spurned and the latter unattainable, and anyone who would like to fantasize about anything else is an enemy or lunatic.

**Their exclusion from society on the grounds of descent is, for the Daughter, a kind of evidence for the authenticity of the Mother's story. Is the tragic hope for reunion of Mother and Daughter a sense of real threat?**

But the Daughter's own experiences suffice for her. She is perfectly aware of what it means when someone judges you as if they had known you forever and tells you the unadulterated truth about yourself and about the delusions, prejudice and hostility of their culture and religion towards common conceptions about Jews. A person born after the war is no stranger to anti-Semitism, unless he wants to feel better about it at any cost by claiming that this is a marginal or isolated phenomenon – for Polish anti-Semitism is neither marginal nor isolated. In the afterword to my book, Maria Janion and Izabela Filipiak wrote that the drama of Mother and Daughter is played out in enemy territory, in an anti-Semitic environment. And this is a very apt observation. The Mother and Daughter are locked in a conflict, yet they are able to sense the external forces squeezing them into a single category; they know that out there they'll be "dirty Jews" – end of story. What use are their anguish or groans out there? The Poles are the true martyrs.

**Are you suggesting a sense of competition in the martyrdom myth?**

We are talking in January 2011. In a month, Gross' new book is coming out and already I am reading the headlines in the papers – "Are We Hyenas?," "Did We Get Rich off Jewish Corpses?" What community would answer: "Yes, of course, we are hyenas!" Why "we"? The author of such statements

is identifying himself with that peasant who, quite possibly, did indeed kill a Jew, and is excluding that Jew without even knowing about it. Is he so bereft of personal identity that he really fears for this imagined collective identity? Clearly, since "no one here was a hyena," this means that the Jews are assailing us again. This means that these events never happened. But why use the word "hyena," why "we" when there is a "he," "they," or "she" who is not me or us? How awful is this powerlessness hindering an individual approach to events, to history. A kind of papering over of the cracks with the collusion of kin, the father, the cousin, and parish priest. This occurs in *A Piece...*, when the Mother avoids all conversation, as she can't bear the thought of responsibility and is only able to withdraw more deeply into the Mother role. "If I am not answering you as a mother, then kill me, go ahead!" The patient complains to the doctor about being neglected or suffering harm, and the doctors reply: "Are we hyenas?" Such opening gambits never whet the appetite for conversation.

**In your text, there is a direct allusion to Elfriede Jelinek. I also see an analogy with Bernhard's *Extinction*. Is the Austrian history and identity context coincidental?**

What connects me initially with Jelinek is my admiration for her. And then there's the identity element – she is half-Austrian, half-Jewish. Jelinek's father was a Jew, a wronged person, and she has a right to say to the Austrians: "Stop cultivating this mythology of your own innocence. I can't listen to it!" Those who do not entirely belong to any community for various reasons, for example their own reflexivity, will always regard mythologizing of the past with suspicion. What is the



Austrian myth? It's somewhat more drastic than the Polish one: "Hitler invaded us in 1938, there was the Anschluss, then the Red Army liberated us, so we are innocent victims." Well not quite: almost all the Austrian parties, apart from the communists, were linked to the Germans. Most Austrians enthusiastically welcomed Hitler, participating in the SS and other Nazi formations, and the national erasure of facts from memory and conscience, as I understand, drives Jelinek to distraction.

Bernhard, however, points to the Austrian victim myth. And I am exasperated by the Polish myth of the victim, the innocent object of universal conspiracies, the myth of innocence. I can't stand this Polish story: we were only witnesses; it was the Germans who murdered the Jews and "we watched, helped, or bit our nails from a sense of powerlessness. Oh, and besides this, we have six thousand trees in Yad Vashem. No other country has so many!" But in no other was there such a Jewish minority. In no other were such a large percentage of Jews killed. Six thousand or three million? What does that mean? That every 500<sup>th</sup> person will help you? That doesn't sound so impressive, but mathematical logic stands no chance against self-satisfaction. And those who saved Jews were not afraid of the Germans, only other Poles, for it was the latter who were handing them and those they were hiding over to the Germans. Many Poles collaborated with the Nazis – acting as informers and employing blackmail and extortion to aid their own survival; even, ultimately, through the mere fact that they were relatively indifferent – for sometimes help would entail not paying attention, failing to notice and keeping their mouths shut.

**You write that "in the ghetto they apparently had great fun, and then said that they were murdered."**

This is an almost faithful quotation from an anti-Semitic publication. The whole epilogue is composed of citations. Only I had a little fun by adding that the president of Israel should come to Poland and crawl off to [the holy shrine at] Częstochowa.<sup>1</sup> The rest is authentic.

**Klata systematically excised the social context from your text.**

He is more interested in Polish martyrdom, family relationships, and power relations than the Polish anti-Semitism theme. Quite possibly that's why I have mixed feelings about his production. On the one hand, I understand his staging decisions, and I am a feminist, as he is in this production, but on the other – I ask myself why this couldn't have been treated as a complete package, as it is in the text. I do understand that Klata has his own interests, however, and I also respect this.

It's a pity anyway. It could have formed a contrast to Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Our Class*, where there is a terrible price to be paid for affirming that Jedwabne happened. A price paid in stereotypes, in myths, and in the peddling of the grossest simplifications.

**The decision to grant this play the NIKE Award showed the approval of the historical narrative and political correctness, which is dangerous in this case, due to its stereotypical nature.**

Even worse, many young people attending this production treat it as a source of knowledge and leave the theatre with such a view of reality, and in this sense you are right, it is dangerous. But I can defend the text itself a little by pointing out, for example, the motif of the Jewish woman who marries a Pole to save her life. This is a story about the ambivalence of being saved at the cost of losing one's identity, silence, and humiliation, for when she testifies at court, she declares that she has "not experienced anti-Semitism" at the hands of these people, although in reality she has experienced nothing but this. I really liked this plot strand, because it most contained an individual story. But I don't understand how the author could combine the story about humiliating marital rape that occurs in this strand with the scene featuring the gang rape of a Jewish girl by her classmates, who afterwards declares that she is satisfied. Could anything be more humiliating? I don't understand how the author connects these.

**Can *A Piece...* be treated as your rebellion against the family hierarchy and the patriarchy?**

I think that with this text I unintentionally tapped into a great, and now ripe need in Poland to express the experience of being a daughter. And of being a child – the experience of submission, muteness, the unheeded protest which gives rise to aggression, like every unheeded protest. Or being dependent on one's parents, who are neglected children themselves yet adhere to the role of parent/mother as a role conferring social authority, some kind of ostensible power. These are the magic roles – mother, father, priest, leader, ruler, god – magic in the sense that they are encoded with the assumption that they facilitate the transmission of some good authority, welfare or kindness, but they usually facilitate the exercising of power, which in Poland is not, in principle, subject to any control; and the further transmission of toxins, deafness, aggression and their own impunity. For when the criticism or "applications to the czar" begin, they are either met by violence, or – if no weapon is at hand – by a "Don't like me? Want to kill me? Are you attacking me?" in other words, shots from the gun of moral blackmail, accompanied by allusion to that moral coercion where morality is only a tool, a monkey wrench, and everything boils down, as usual, to aggression, bone breaking, and who is exercising power. ■

<sup>1</sup> Jasna Góra in Częstochowa – one of the most important sites for the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary, and for centuries the most important pilgrimage center in Poland.

JULIA HOCZYK

## PHYSICALITY, IDENTITY, OR: FIVE YEARS OF SOLO PROJECT

### Head Versus Body, or: The Project Premises

Five years have passed since the initiation of Poland's first program for young choreographers – Solo Project in the Old Brewery (the Old Brewery New Dance project curated by Joanna Leśniewska). Seventeen residents, fourteen solo performances and three underway. Six centers – Warsaw (Anita Wach, Renata Piotrowska, Karol Tymiąński, Ramona Nagabczyńska, Aleksandra Borys, Anna Nowicka, Izabela Szostak), Krakow (Dominika Knapik, Małgorzata Haduch, Magdalena Przybysz, Rafał Urbacki), Łódź (Konrad Szymański, Aleksandra Ścibor), Lublin (Tomasz Bazan), Poznań (Janusz Orlik), and Wrocław (Irena Lipińska). And five years, which can mean a great deal in an individual's artistic development. It is a fairly long time if we consider that for only slightly over twenty years have we been able to form and create contemporary dance in our country. As such, we might attempt to sum up and consider what Solo Project is, how its principles are executed, how the program affects the professional development of the winners, and at what point in their artistic careers they confront their own selves.

The basic idea is contained in the name of the program. The Solo scholarship winners are young artists beginning their choreographic careers. The solo form postulate requires them to grapple with what is thought to be most difficult in dance – with themselves as a performer (material) and creator, a dancer and choreographer wrapped into one. We might say that their performances are meant to strip choreography to the bone – which is particularly visible in the first projects, such as those of Anita Wach and Dominika Knapik – as the performers cannot back themselves with elaborate stage design or theatrical props. All they have is an empty space, light and music, the help of recognized dramaturges or artists (the first consultants were Poles – Wojciech Klimczyk, Iwona Olszowska, and Michał Łuczak, though in recent years these have been outstanding foreign talents, like Bruno Pocheon, Hooman Sharifi, and Peter Pleyer). As such, dance returns once more to the explorations of the avant-garde postmodernists, whose work is being continued by dance conceptualists in their own fashion, regularly presenting their work in the Old Brewery (for example, during the June Old Brewery New Dance series at the Malta Festival).

Does this mean, however, that the work of the Solo Project choreographers, essentially based on experimentation and formal exploration, is strictly re-creative, reviving concepts that the West has long since acknowledged and worked through? Though we ought to agree in part that this program brilliantly demonstrates how we are making up for lost time in contemporary dance, this does not exhaust its functions, of which the most important is stimulating the development of local choreography. Another essential aspect is blazing new trails for dance, focusing on its expressive capabilities, in-depth analysis of the components of movement, grappling with its intentionality, its multiplicity of forms, the presence of the dancer's body in movement, and the reinterpretation of the audience relationship. Solo Project pertains to various aspects of what we understand by the concepts of movement and dance, ostentatiously departing from linear narrative, and often from narrative tied to things external to dance as such (thus tied because of the powerful influence of theatre, which was characteristic of Polish dance for many years). The performances of the young choreographers inquire into the performative dimension of dance and the dancing body, both male and female (Solo Project has had five male and twelve female residents). Thus the analysis of dance and its performative capabilities and dependencies interweave with the research of the (a)semioticity of the body. Though Solo Project supports the statement of the famous British dance conceptualist, Jonathan Burrows – “one needs two legs, two hands, and most of all, a head to create a dance” – the work to date has focused on the subjects of the body and physicality. How far is this issue imposed by the principles of Solo Project important to participants? Is the body still the basis of residents' explorations? Do they create an informal group? Have we arrived at the creation of the solo generation, of which Witold Mrozek has written?<sup>1</sup> Small forms certainly continue to dominate the Polish dance scene, and solo works in particular, but this is a result of both economic conditions and the lack of support from the system. The residents therefore are met with a challenge – they are given time, space, financial security, and the careful eye of an artistic supervisor. What to do with this time, how to hide oneself in this exposure, or reveal oneself in it? How to deal with the body and the space, with inspiration and themes, often those pursued for years?



### The Body

The subject of physicality was tackled by the first residents, beginning with Anita Wach, through Dominika Knapik and Konrad Szymański (due to injury replaced by Aleksandra Borys - subsequent winner in 2010). Although Wach is today known as a co-choreographer of performances in Bretoncaffe Theater, a participant in many interdisciplinary projects (some involving improvisation), and as an outstanding dance and Astanga yoga instructor, five years ago she seemed a somewhat peripheral figure. At the same time, paradoxically, her participation in Solo appeared to many as a confirmation of her capabilities to date, setting the bar quite high for the residents to follow. Solo Project did not have a great impact on her situation: Wach still works with Bretoncaffe, each of her performances confirm her creative potential, and she takes part in projects. *Inch 1.5* was based on a Process-Oriented-Psychology method, toward which Bretoncaffe had been moving a year and a half previously. We might say that both sides benefited from this collaboration – the artist was inspired by

a new work method and the ensemble grasped the influence of the method on the choreographer. This is abundantly visible in Bretoncaffe's following performances – *Dancing Sara Kane*, *Topinambur* and *I, Agaue*. But to return to *Inch 1.5* – the artist seems to deconstruct the body during the performance. The phenomenal body of the dancer and its morphology – long, very slender digits and a highly visible bone structure – are fundamental here. Thus the body transforms into what is adiscursive and amorphous (close to Lacan's category of the Real) – the original body before crossing into the symbolic order, before being inscribed in the binary gender opposition; it crumbles into sections and fragments that destabilize its fixed image. A lack of coherence, parceled gestures that threaten the integrity of the body as an *imago*, a representation supporting the cultural order, and moreover, of the dancing body, making predictable movements based on the idea of flow. Paradoxically, however, energy is released in grasping for taboos – in culture, dance (Polish dance in particular), and society – for the undeniable foundation of raw physicality, and in tackling, according to the principles of process-based work, an individual threshold, to spark an ecstatic dance, a flow from the depths and dusk of the body.

Dominika Knapik, a 2007 resident, put forward another sort of movement and a radically different tone. Instead of an introverted process witnessed by the viewer – an ostentatious revealing of how movement is made, how gesture by gesture it is built before the viewer's eyes – the viewer is joined to the dancer's actions through her gaze and stage presence, generating no extraneous meanings, but a self-affirming presentation. Knapik's dance begins with simple gestures and movements, from which a score that resembles a warm-up gradually emerges. This resemblance comes from the fact that it aspires to no concrete situation, though it is most certainly a kind of construction. A single movement is repeated, becoming a part of the choreography. The repetition constructs the dance, in which the artist appears to play with movement and her own body. She treats the body as a plaything or mechanism, thus alienating it. She investigates its capabilities to move and bend, the motion of the joints, she comes to know herself as a body, and herself through the body.

Her performance oscillates between an objective treatment of the body, which (paradoxically) becomes what defines subjectivity. *How Do You Like Me?* thus becomes the statement of a subject using the body as the only reality available to the individual; something private, though observed, and thus caught up in socio-cultural discourses. Sometimes, perhaps, you don't need to begin with the discourses themselves, in order to shape an individual code of movement and a dancing subject. The question is: Is it the body's imagination, or the body itself, a self-contained existence revealing itself? Knapik's solo moves from the body (perhaps part of the Real, though we cannot be sure) to creating an image of the body, which becomes a medium in the symbolic realm, i.e. in the socio-cultural sphere. This is why even the anti-aesthetic

floor sequence, in which the dancer pulls her T-shirt over her face and head, baring her abdomen, does not obscure the individuality which is being built during the entire performance. It is no accident that Knapik, an actress and dancer by education (previously linked to the Hoplaaa Group), decided on a form combining a public self-analysis of the body and its performative (or self-performing) constitution. Her solo was the first experiment of its sort, and led to her later taking part in *Nothing* by the Gimnastyczne Association, which resembled *How Do You Like Me?* in its conscious play on the process of semiosis and the attempt to collapse it. At the same time, she joined Wojtek Klimczyk in founding Harakiri Farmers and began to work as an independent dancer and choreographer. Knapik and Klimczyk work with other artists, often introducing discourses from outside the realm of dance; these include contemporary literature (*Keret* directed by Szymon Kaczmarek), comments upon Bauman's fluid reality combining free inspirations from Beckett (*We are oh so Lucky* directed by Ana Brzezińska). In Knapik's explorations, physicality has given way to a field of discourse; this does not mean, however, that it ceases to exist. Its existence is not dance-like, but more theater-like, focused on individual gestures, condensed in overstated and very conscious movements, styles, and plays on form.

In a statement I requested from Knapik, she wrote that after years of indecision and chance experiences: "I needed to make a strong artistic decision. And I took the subject of the 'body'. No ornament, a dance that combined lessons, contemporary dance and 'acting'." The chance to focus on a single topic for a month, far from Krakow, in a place entirely new to me and under the watchful eye of Wojtek Klimczyk, who kept asking me "Why?," was a breakthrough experience. I think that participating in Solo Project gave me some real impetus, it allowed me to emerge as an independent dancer on the Polish dance scene (my solo was shown at the Malta Festival, in Bytom, Kalisz, Wrocław, at the Platform in 2007, in the Hague, New York, and in Budapest).<sup>2</sup>

In 2009 the winners of *Solo Project* were three women: Małgorzata Haduch, Ramona Nagabczyńska, and Magdalena Przybysz. Nagabczyńska was educated at the ballet school and Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Frankfurt, supervised by The Forsythe Company, and also in London, and for several years worked with British ensembles (including the Tom Dale Company); at present she is an independent artist working with Kaya Kołodziejczyk's U/LOI Collective. In her solo *Man's Best Friend*, whose title pertains to the body, she undergoes a process similar to Knapik's, though added filters are superimposed upon physicality. The dancer explores the tension between the body and mind, decidedly negating the possibility of harmonious relations and co-dependencies. This is why her dance takes on a dark intensity, and its expression contains sometimes very disquieting scenes, which make the viewer feel discomfort every time her body hits the floor. Allowing the mind to lose control thus gives birth to a destructive force – not unlike in Wach's case – shattering the

perception of the dancing body, seemingly secured from harm through the stage/viewer contract that conditions signification. The quasi-objective modes of perceiving the dancer's body are thus disrupted. Interestingly enough, Nagabczyńska has a negative evaluation of her solo, in spite of the intriguing results (this is why her performance has been seldom shown in comparison to the others). She does, however, stress the educational merits of the project: "Solo Project absolutely WAS an important experience, with a clearly educational purpose. This was one of the first stages in my process of self-definition. For most participants in Solo Project it was (or is) their first professionally produced choreographic piece, which is why it is principally an exercise in confronting the realities of the choreographer. In my case, the constant struggle with myself and with external factors was so powerful that it distorted the image of what I was aiming for artistically and my evaluation of my work. I think that few veterans of Solo Project would see their performance as a ready art product, a trademark of their choreographic identity." This statement prompts us to wonder to what extent the works evolving in the program framework are indeed ready performances, and how far they are more like choreographic exercises. The results can vary. We can most certainly call Wach's and Bazan's solos performances, for example, while others are more etudes, variations on a selected theme or motif. The Solo Project works can also be interpreted as laboratory works that give us insight into the creative process, generally hidden from the viewers' gaze.

In *Zona Segura* Małgorzata Haduch explores the space of the stage with its more or less oppressive areas. The front of the stage, displaying the performer to the viewers' gaze, and its sides and depths, where the dancer is somewhat out of their view. Movement is initiated through a trembling of the body, which gradually increases. It therefore appears as something that needs awakening in the body, or to which the body must be awakened before it can simply happen. The dancer's action takes on the same mark of (self) oppression, incorporating the (impatient? expectant?) gaze of the audience. Haduch also uses spontaneous actions far from dance, such as singing, screaming, and running. Above all, however, the artist plays a subtle game with the invisible/visible and public/private oppositions. She stands for a joyous nudity, invisible through the gloom, though we can hear the sound of her feet hitting the floor and feel the freedom of her body running in the dark. As if full liberation and conquering of barriers were possible only when we are stripped of the Other's gaze, which is liable to appropriate, objectify, and evaluate. Though *Zona* is not supplied with feminist or gender-related descriptions, we can find these themes here, and in the work of several other solo works by young female choreographers, through which the ascetic choreographies of Solo Project become not only written in the sterile space by the body, but also with the female body, or femininity written anew, outside the canons and phallogocentric matrices, becoming a dance *écriture féminine* of sorts. The dancers break established ways

of presenting the female body and the corresponding movements, proposing their own gaze upon the dancing female subject. This is why these choreographies might be called female writing, or feminography. Haduch, a graduate of the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) in Amsterdam, working in the field of choreography and improvisation (her teachers have included Katie Duck, David Zambrano, and Michael Schumacher), was one of the most experienced Solo residents; she works as an independent artist, directing performances and organizing events involving contemporary dance and improvisation all over the world. In 2006 she established the Unfinished Company arts collective, which gathers international artists from various fields.

### Stripping an Onion with... Your Head

The solo by Magdalena Przybysz, a former dancer at Iwona Olszowska's Studio EST, performer and "spatial researcher," departs from the other works in terms of theme and aesthetics. In *My Poland Drive* the artist recalls important childhood memories from the 1980s through some humorous dance/drama etudes, combining references to pop culture, politics, and daily and social life in unexpected ways. She was the first of the residents to create a quasi-biographical and fragmentary narrative, less avoiding the external motivation of her dance than consciously using and processing it. Przybysz sees her Solo Project as an important experience: "The empty stage forced me to discard all my 'gadgets' and face up to the essence. It was a process of stripping the layers of an onion – often unpleasant, but necessary... I also gained more courage in thinking and following my intuition that dance need not be only an ornament, that it can express in itself, it need not be "dancing arrangements," "liking something or not," or merely an aesthetic form. My contact with Joanna Leńnierowska and the coach, Hooman Sharifi, taught me to define my work toward politics, more aiming for and rooting myself in the absurd and a social context."

In 2010 works at the Brewery were prepared by: Aleksandra Borys, a graduate of the Łódź ballet school and Codarts, participant in the Tour d'Europe des Chorégraphes program for young choreographers, Ministry of Culture and National Heritage scholarship winner (2010); Rafał Urbacki, a mover, Krakow directing student, former dancer at the Kierunek Dance Theatre in Bytom, and creator of auteur projects and videos; Anna Nowicka, a dancer and choreographer at the Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance and student of choreography in Berlin, and a participant in a program for performers in Slovenia. I would like to examine two of them.

In *Mt 9.7* Rafał Urbacki continued in the vein of autobiography begun by Przybysz, combining it with a much more radical message. This performance was the first statement to be so political, not only in the framework of Solo, but in Polish dance as such for many years. Urbacki makes his coming out, presenting the three most characteristic attributes of his identity to the viewers: his disability, tied to his body; his homosexuality, tied to his gender; and his religion, which conflicts

with them. He strikes at and mixes discourses rooted in the Catholic faith (the New Testament, religious songs, the songs of Arka Noego, sermons, confession, childhood photographs stylized on kitschy religious pictures), mercilessly isolating them and tearing them apart. In this way he jars the audience out of received conventions, interfering with both our feeling of sympathy and our lack thereof. The situation of a man doubly excluded (through disability and sexual orientation) from society and the religious community, who for years, before the "miracle" occurred through hard work, could in no way be cured by Jesus Christ to get up and walk, undergoes a painful vivisection, and yet is tamed through the framework of lecture-performance. This form, bringing in the notion of critical dance, has been known in the West for many years, but it is only now blazing trails in Poland (its precursors can be seen as the representatives of Polish critical art, interviewed by Artur Żmijewski in *Trembling Bodies*). In response to my question the artist prepared an exhaustive and remarkably interesting answer; I will, by necessity, be able to quote only fragments: "I came because I had something to say and I was looking for a place to make a project. The idea for the *Mt 9.7* performance had been running through my head for several months before I coached with Peter Pleyer. The encounter with the empty space of the *Ślodołnia +3* was initially crushing. On 13 July I began making notes of the process, jotting down remarks on the ten years of my "getting around in the wheelchair." The process of working on a solo was multifaceted. The situation of a disabled man in a Catholic society, critical of the notion of Christian mercy and rejected by the community, which generates the creation of the Other, was a subject developed by my body and its memory over the course of a nearly six-month process of describing and revising my place in the structure of the culture. This process occurred daily, even outside the Old Brewery. Solo Project became a space for maturing to socialization and realizing the significance of my body in the public space and on stage. It was a space where, for over half a year, I felt like an utterly coddled artist, with creative freedom and support from a dramaturg, curator, and technicians. The open space of *Ślodołnia +3* has its special attributes, which I believe has affected many of the solos. A stage with no mirrors, where the sole form of verification is one's sense of the body in space or recordings on film and subsequent recreations of what one sees, which during an improvisation appear to be controlled by someone else, forces you to concentrate intensely, to pour attention exclusively on what I'm doing as a mover. I seldom consider the tableau, more the status of the body vis-a-vis the space, which is quite dangerous for the performer, because, on the one hand, it facilitates deep introspection during an individual process, while it absorbs the presence of the performer in contact with the viewer's gaze. Moreover, the lack of mirrors creates a presence on a level where one does not

think in terms of sketching movement; the me/mover condition becomes most essential.

"[...] This was another performing experience for me, it was not my first time on stage. It was the first such intensive experiment I performed on myself in terms of recollections and the body. It was most certainly a time when security and trust in my process were guaranteed, with no sense of being rushed, at my own pace and according to my own methods. It was a time when I could make many mistakes, seek the language I needed, check that I was working with the space, with myself, with the audience. I found it a very profound experience as an artist and an anthropologist. I set the range of material I wanted to draw from in my future work and what spheres would interest me as a director or choreographer. I also felt how underrated the presence of a dramaturg could be in the process of developing the narrative of a movement performance."

According to Urbacki, "Solo Project is increasingly renowned in the Polish dance community. Producing your own solo at the Old Brewery is a kind of prestige for the dancer and choreographer. Solo Project allowed me to mark my presence on the Polish dance scene, to present my way of thinking about movement and dance as an art dealing with social life, and as a dancer whose body has an identity on every cultural level. I want to make a very concrete execution of this dance concept, which has not clearly existed in Poland as a form of critique of the social or political reality that surrounds us. The political body exists in Poland as part of visual arts discourse, not dance. Right after the premiere I received a proposal to do the stage movement for the latest performance by Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski at the Polski Theatre in Wrocław, and to present my solo abroad. The participation of the artistic supervisor, Peter Pleyer, is important here, as he invited all three of us from the 2010 edition to the 20<sup>th</sup> TanzTage in Berlin. Ideas also cropped up to perform *Mt 9.7* outside of strictly dance-related circles, because the nature of this performance makes it a good match for theater and performance festivals. The social repercussions of my solo are also important, because it paves the way for handicapped dancers in Poland. This is a niche in the local dance scene."

*In the truth is just a plain picture. said bob* Anna Nowicka also tackles the subject of (de)constructing identity, but much less directly than Urbacki. At the beginning the dancer appears on stage as a body stripped of the most obvious signs of her identification – it is a body like those seen in the work of Xavier Le Roy and other conceptualists: back turned and covered, face hidden behind a mass of reddish-brown hair (which turns out to be a wig). Very slowly, with the movement and the appearance of props (a pin-up girl costume, a puppet theatre with characters from fairy tales and pop culture who are given the dancer's face on a screen) and music, identities are projected upon her, though they are never final, they always remain slippery; the moment they are recognized they change into something else. Nowicka also recognizes her participation in the project as an important experience and

challenge, though she was particularly fortunate, because she was given the chance to work elsewhere with her coach, Peter Pleyer – in Berlin: "I was very interested in the theme I chose. I do not normally have difficulty finding inspiration. Peter helped me learn to see the solo as a game, to view the 'problems' as challenges, puzzles to be solved, in order to move on. The process itself was speaking to me, I just had to listen. Peter is a brilliant mentor, he came to the rehearsals, made comments, told me what he saw, and asked questions. He made no attempt to force his solutions, he showed me possibilities, but left the decisions up to me. I felt that it was my responsibility, but there was someone who helped me look at the material from another angle. Suddenly everything began to be inspiring, I could draw from everything. Solo Project helped me realize many things as regards everyday life..."

### Instead of a Summary

What, therefore, links the residents of Solo Project, if anything at all? Sometimes aesthetics, a readiness for formal exploration, and surely a concern with the issues of the body, identity, subjectivity, and finally, an attempt to be open to the social discourse and body politics. And indubitably – curiosity, openness, and creative potential. If, however, we look at the present picture and the changes in the sphere of the contemporary art of dance in Poland, the past winners of the program have been developing much more dynamically than others. Furthermore – they have been or currently are taking part in coaching sessions of the Alternative Dance Academy and other Old Brewery projects (such as Nigel Charnock's *Happy*), meeting, sharing experiences, sometimes collaborating. They are often simply regular viewers of Poznań productions. They undoubtedly have a desire to create, and this could be a force that changes Polish dance in the years to come.

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The 2011 residents were: Irena Lipińska, combining the inspirations of contemporary dance and butoh, Aleksandra Ścibor (Alter Theater, Fizyczna Workshop), and Izabela Szostak. In June we shall be able to see how they deal with their solos – one of the most difficult forms of dance. ■

<sup>1</sup> Witold Mrozek, *Pokolenie „solo,”* NowyTaniec.pl, 29 IX 2008.

<sup>2</sup> All the quotes in the text come from unpublished e-mail statements for which I asked the Solo Project resident artists.



MARTA MICHALAK

## A FEW MINOR SUBJECTS

An interview with MIKOŁAJ MIKOŁAJCZYK

### What is a classical approach for you?

Thinking. Position. Discipline in my daily routine, discipline in life.

### Does a classical approach still determine your daily discipline, your discipline in life?

I would really like it to be that way, but it's hard to attain.

### And if you had the opportunity would you go to ballet classes every day at ten a.m., like dancers in a ballet company?

Yes, absolutely. My technique prevents comparison with other dancers, but I would find somewhere out of the way, I would stand next to the bar and would do all of the exercises. They require great effort and concentration. You do them in a group, but in fact you're all alone when you do such exercises. In his daily ballet class a dancer is able to see how his disintegrating body is nonetheless able to function. It's a test that he presents himself with every day. At a certain age you take lessons in classical ballet not in order to learn something and perfect your technique. Every dancer, even after retiring, should go to a ballet studio every day. Just like an old woman who goes to church for a few minutes every day in order to be able to have the strength to face the sadness of old age. It's easier for her then. It gives her a certain sense of security. And it allows her to maintain some daily discipline. The exercises which I do every day help me to function with all of my injuries and physical problems. But they are only exercises, it is not the prayer-like exercise of classic ballet. Quite frankly I stopped practising. It's religion without practise.

### So you are a non-practising believer?

Yes. But because I no longer practise, love has disappeared.

### And what, for you, is a classical approach in the work of a choreographer?

First of all I make an outline, I sketch it out with the help of *battement tendu*, *plié*, *jeté*, *adagio*, *grand battement*. Then I take my paintbrush and begin to paint, using my own colours. And my dance is certainly not classical, it reflects what remained from my classical training.

### Is classical dance your language?

Yes.

### And do you create neologisms?

I don't think about it. Six years ago, while dancing at the Wielki Theater in Poznań, I injured myself and thought I would never dance again. Asia Leśnierowska prompted me to keep working the fear out of myself which had begun to overpower me. At that point it hadn't occurred to me to create a performance, I just wanted to invite my friends in order to say goodbye to them, in order to tell them how difficult life had become for me because I would never perform onstage again. It was meant to be a single show, untitled, with free entrance. I only wanted every member of the audience to give me their face, to allow themselves to be photographed *en face* and in profile. It was meant to be an exchange between us. And then I decided to dance naked this is my *Lord's Prayer* in ballet exercises. Classical ballet class, exercise after exercise. I wanted to expose myself, to strip away this sacredness, and simultaneously confer a different dimension upon it. Some people began to view me as an explorer, others as a murderer of that which is sacred for dancers. It was a desecration of the dancer's bar. I came out onto the stage and laid bare the liturgy of dance. I did this so that I could show every twitching muscle of my body. So that people could concentrate not

on the dance as a whole, but rather on the parts of my body, on the uncontrollable twitching of my knee. The viewer can focus on one element, an element that is not aesthetic.

**Did anyone feel offended?**

Some of my friends from the theater. I heard them say: why did you do this classical dance naked?

**Was it intentionally iconoclastic?**

No, it was only my friends watching me, after all. I wanted to be as defenceless as possible.

**And then what happened?**

The next day I went to Krakow. Doctors did not allow me to return to the theater, and Sławomir Pietras, the director, was not able to extend my contract. After my return from my six-month sick leave, I received a certificate that I was incapable of working. Then followed eight months of depression, hysteria, and a feeling that my life was over. It didn't occur to me to perform *Waiting*, because it wasn't a show. But the telephone rang: come, people want to see it. I came, I performed it, and then I went to Wałbrzych, Opole, Lublin, Poznań, Sofia, Bruges, Lille, Kaunas.

**When did you begin to treat *Waiting* as a dance show?**

Never.

**So it's not a show?**

It's a documentary piece.

**Is it performance art?**

Performance art occurs only once. This was performance art that began to live the life of a choreographed show. But it will always remain performance art.

**And had you always planned, from the beginning, for your second solo appearance, *I Want to Watch the World with You*, to be a choreographed show?**

No, it also arose as a performance piece, at the Rose Festival in Kutno. The idea arose out of pain and rebellion, when my dog abandoned me. Lolka didn't want to live anymore in so many hovels, in the dark rooms of an actor's home, or in hotels, spending whole days in a rehearsal room or lying between the rows of seats in an auditorium. She didn't want to get into my car with me; she ran away and lived with my friend who lives near the sea. That's when I began to think for the first time about how sad her life was without a place of her own where she could have her own blanket and bowl. It had seemed to me that I'd been giving her everything, but it turned out that they were only substitutes. And *I Want to Watch the World with You* came into being. Because she didn't want to watch the world with me. Now, three years later, she has returned to me... and there is no longer a wounded dog inside me now. But this happened, and the show remained.

***I Want to Watch the World with You* is the second part of your *Triptych*, which consists of three solo shows realized within the past six years: *Waiting*, *I Want to Watch the World with You* and *Plaisir d'amour*, which premiered in October of last year. That is when you presented these shows as *Triptych* for the first time. Anna Królika wrote that your *Triptych* is a road that takes you away from dance, through theater, and then back to dance again. *I Want to Watch the World with You* is, for her, more of a theatrical show, while the rest are dance shows.**

The entire first sequence which takes place within squares of light is, above all, physical – it's dance, it's the concept of movement. I divided this show into short monodramas, in which I alternately dance, sing, listen and speak. Each of these is a complete whole. But *I Want to Watch the World with You* is the only part of *Triptych* in which I speak. This show is like a *largo* in a three-part musical form: the first part fast, the third part fast, the second sad.

**Do they differ from each other qualitatively?**

Yes.

**For me, the third part is qualitatively different from the others. It has a different structure, it creates space in a different way, a different kind of communication with the viewer emerges. The first two shows are self-contained within a very definite form, planned geometrically within a plane of movement and space, to a great extent as a result of lighting. And in the third part there's a kind of opening up, some air.**

*Plaisir d'amour* is a show about my normalcy. It's exactly how my day looks. My exercise balls are on the stage. The show contains the set of exercises to which I devote two hours of every day in order to bring myself back to a state of basic functioning. Miraculous nails that take away my pain, and which put me on my feet again. They replace alcohol, which previously anaesthetized me and pushed all of my troubles to the side, so that they were no longer inside me. The space is the same as the space in the first two shows. Only the lights do not form an enclosure, and I am not boxed in. These situations are closed, problematic situations which I had to pit myself against. Not by fighting against them, but by telling people about them. The third part is a response to the first two parts. I found an asylum for myself, and I share this asylum with the audience. In *Plaisir d'amour*, for the first time in a very long time, I perform huge leaps. I was afraid that perhaps my old injury, from six years ago, would return, but I was determined to do it – I was ready for whatever was going to happen. If the injury returned it would also be some kind of response. I wanted to escape these confines of mine, these squares that I had created for myself, in order to have contact with people. The fact that I am so expansive and invasive stems from the fear that I feel in front of people. I felt that I could finally allow myself to breathe.

**And you share with us a small, intimate world of daily activities.**

The first parts also describe my intimate world, but with the difference that they focus on concrete situations and problems. They are, in a certain sense, universal: somebody has left somebody, somebody has been fired from their job and has become unnecessary. And in the third part I look at myself today, enriched by those previous experiences. *Triptych* came into being over the course of several years, during a time in which my orderly lifestyle was turned inside-out. These shows were a kind of self-therapy, and the third part is not only self-therapy but also medicine which I prescribe myself. I share this with people, I tell them about what I do.

**And why is there a red-and-white flag in the show? A Polish flag made out of a pair of white underwear and a red undershirt, turned upside down. And a folk band from the Joy Seniors' Club in Łowicz appears in your projected visuals, dressed in folk costumes.**

It's a reference to the place where I live. Nowadays children are learning how to live and function everywhere and in all types of conditions, and my message is as follows: I am able to and want to live only here. There are no important, manic national subtexts here.

**And would you agree to perform *Plaisir d'amour* as a separate show if somebody asked you to?**

Probably not. I haven't seen this show. I don't have any photos of *Triptych*, which I performed only once, I don't have any recordings of it. I know the structure, the skeleton, of *Plaisir d'amour*, but I don't know how this show functions visually and emotionally. I haven't been able to see it, to touch it. When it all ended, most of all I was amazed that I'd been able to survive it physically. Everything was beyond me in terms of technique, and so the next shock for me was that everything was technically successful. I wasn't even capable of analyzing

what had happened. Happy, thrilled that it had turned out well, but also a bit sad because I hadn't been able to consciously experience it. I didn't put *Triptych* to rest in the same way that I usually put to rest shows that I'm not involved in, at the moment of their premieres. Neither did I put it aside in the way I put aside shows that I am involved in, where I function normally. I don't remember anything. I passed through this performance as if I was in a psychedelic frenzy.

**Did you bring some kind of phase to an end with *Triptych*?**

Yes, I think so.

**And did you begin a new one?**

No. *Triptych* castrated me.

**Will anything change when you perform it again at the Warsaw Theater Meetings?**

I don't know. After such a long time, since October, it will feel like I've prepared a premiere all over again. I'll be afraid that I won't be able to manage it physically. I'm now half a year older, and once again I have to do this same incredibly long, physically exhausting show. And will all of the techniques work?

**Will you continue to dance solo?**

I think so. I have the impression that when I'm alone on a stage, and I'm telling about myself then I can reach people better, I enter into an intimate dialogue with each of them individually. I'm also responsible for everything myself, from beginning to end. Wanting to create a show about my own heart and my own impotence, I have to do it entirely alone. I have to let go of this problem through myself, by going out onto the stage alone. I must map out my entire path on the stage for myself, write it down, design the lighting, the decorations, sometimes costumes. I can't rely on others for support, because then they would create the show for me.

**Is it conceptual dance?**

A concept is a pigeon-hole that I don't want to be trapped in.

**You react very strongly against this pigeon-hole.**

Yes, and sometimes it takes peculiar forms. Sometimes I devote more energy to defending myself from being pigeon-holed than from allowing myself to enter the pigeon-hole. They constantly try to force me into the conceptual dance slot. I haven't given in. In these shows there is a concept, but *auteur* theater is always conceptual. However, in addition to an idea the artist must also have technique. Technique is his language. A person with technique has a base and a range of possibilities. A person lacking technique will be an actor, singer, or dancer with one role and one ability given by God. I know a lot of choreographers and dancers who do solo shows and for whom a concept is the most important, and dance is merely an addition. But a dancer is meant to dance, this is his language, he must act physically in order to create something of quality.



**Is there anyone whom you consider as a mentor?**

Henryk Tomaszewski. I've had many teachers, but only one mentor. I know that I have less right to consider him a mentor than others who have stood by him for many years. But it was Tomaszewski who got me on my feet as a performer. My second mentor is Pina Bausch. But she never taught me in real life. In her case, everything happened between us in my mind.

**And what have you received from your mentors?**

Sensitivity. From both of them. Onstage sensitivity.

**Tell me, please, about when you met Tomaszewski.**

When I was a child I went to a ballet school in Poznań for three years. It was my mother's dream, I didn't like it. After three years I was kicked out of the school. I returned to Kutno, finished elementary school and then highschool, during which I was interested in history. I spent entire days devouring numerous history books. I went to lectures at the Museum of Art in Łódź. I absorbed the knowledge of past eras. It entertained me, it allowed me to forget about the depressing daily reality of Communism. I created my own private world. I wanted to be a monument conservationist and art historian. I went to training camps, I worked at the Monument Conservation Workshop in Zamość, I took part in history and art history competitions. At that point I didn't think about dance in rational categories, it was only a childhood memory— or, actually, a memory of its absence. But something must have hatched then in my mind, in my heart. Something still forced me to see myself on the stage, in reality and in my dreams. It kept pulling me back there cruelly. From my parents' stories I found out that I had been conceived on a mattress on the stage of the Railway Workers' Culture Center in Kutno, where my mother worked. My father also worked for the railway. Kutno is a railway town; everybody there knows somebody who works for the railway. It's a city of travelling, it's a thoroughfare, all the people in that town are either headed somewhere or coming from somewhere. A fast change, a fast ball, escape and pursuit...that's theater. The rattle of wheels stayed in me, it's still in me even now, the rhythm of train trips, the whistle of steam engines, the broadcast speakers at the station – it's perversely pleasant. I've always had the impression that something is about to happen, some train is finally going to be the one I've been waiting for. I used to do ballroom dancing at the Kutno Culture Center, and I was a member of the Od jutra Theater group. I developed myself artistically as much as was possible in Kutno. When I was in my last year of highschool, the Wrocław Pantomime Theater came to Łódź with their show *The Seven-Day King*. It was a great celebration. I didn't know of the Wrocław Pantomime Theater then, nor did I recognize the name Henryk Tomaszewski. Those were different times, pre-internet. In a backwater provincial town there was no way to learn about things. Before the show I went up to him and asked him if he would accept me into his group. I did this because of a bet that my friend made with me. My impertinence was outrageous, since I didn't have any skills at that time. Tomaszewski told me

to go to the Polski Theater in Wrocław the following Monday, and to remind him about myself, and I could audition for him.

**What kind of impression did the show make on you?**

While watching it I already envisioned myself onstage together with those actors. I had the feeling that I had received a green light from the master himself. I went to my audition in Wrocław and Tomaszewski accepted me into his theater group. I was stunned by the fact that suddenly I found myself there. I had no skills, and the specific movement of pantomime theater was very difficult for me. Tomaszewski's actors were either dancers with classical training or graduates of pantomime studies. I was given tasks on stage that would not reveal that I didn't know what I was doing, that wouldn't allow me to compromise myself. And only a few weeks after being accepted into the theater group I appeared onstage for the first time, in the production of *The Seven-Day King*. Then there were other performances – *The Prodigal Son*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And during only one season of work with the Pantomime Theater I performed in 110 shows, both in Poland and abroad, in front of packed audiences. This is much more than what is usually performed by repertoire dance companies these days.

**What was your cooperation with Tomaszewski like?**

His theater was a temple. I haven't experienced anything like it since. Every rehearsal was like a religious ritual. Never since then have I participated in rehearsals during which there was such silence, with everyone listening to the director so attentively. Tomaszewski spoke beautifully and elegantly, in language that was simple and clear but simultaneously very emotional and vivid. Listening to him was a wonderful experience. Everyone respected him very deeply, and trusted him completely. It was real *auteur* theater. Every single rehearsal took place no matter what, nobody faked anything, we always rehearsed in costume, with sets, with all of the props.

**But after only one season you left the Pantomime Theater.**

I wanted to earn some qualifications and become a professional. It was a very rational decision: there was only one professional pantomime theater group in the world. And I thought that when the leader was gone, there wouldn't be anything for me to do. I wouldn't develop further, because nobody needed these skills. I didn't want to play it safe, I wanted to learn. I think I made the right choice because if I had stayed in an *auteur* theater for a long time I would never have been able to fit in anywhere else. A teacher of classical dance in pantomime told me that I was in good enough shape to dance. First I went to the Wielki Theatre in Łódź where one of Tomaszewski's actors worked as a soloist. I was told there that my skills weren't very high, and that I should audition for the Polish Dance Theater because there was a school connected to the theater where I could develop my dancing skills. I had an audition with Ewa Wycichowska and it was the greatest disgrace of my entire life. I stood at the bar and realized that as a dancer

I completely lacked skills. The daily 45-minute dance class at the Pantomime Theater was treated simply as a warm-up, and didn't serve to improve dancing skills. I remember that the dancers in the dressing room where I got changed after my audition laughed at me rather ruthlessly. But Ewa Wycichowska accepted me into the Polish Dance Theater, and Liliana Kowalska, who was the ballet mistress there and also the director of the ballet school, accepted me as a student. And for three years I studied at the ballet school while also dancing in the Polish Dance Theater. Ewa Wycichowska initially gave me two years to prepare myself for the stage, but already after only three months she cast me in Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*. After four months there were two more shows, and after a year I was given my first major role, a solo part in which I had to dance as Wycichowska's partner. Every role that I received was beyond my abilities. I had to fight, I had to live up to the hope that had been placed in me. After three years I received a diploma from the ballet school and became a dancer of the *corps de ballet*, then a coryphée and a soloist. I danced in the Polish Dance Theater for another two years, and I eventually had the feeling that I had achieved everything that was possible there. I was no longer developing my skills. So once again I was unfaithful, and escaped. The immediate reason was that Ewa Wycichowska decided to perform a show for children, *Child of the Sun*. We had always danced in shows that were about essential things, about love and death, and now I was expected to be a bird, a flamingo. I decided that if I had to dance in a fairy tale, it had to be at a higher level: *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*. I was accepted into the Wielki Theatre in Poznań ballet company, and the very next day after I was accepted I was given the role of the messenger in the fairy tale show *Dwarves, Dwarves*.

**How did you feel within the hierarchical structure of a ballet company?**

The whole time I kept teaching myself, and kept feeling an absence. I was always inferior in terms of technique, and because of this I felt that I had to train constantly. Doing exercises gave me a chance to catch up, so I spent many hours every day in the ballet studio. In fact, the hierarchy, with its successive rungs, was confirmation that I was making progress. And after a few years at the Wielki Theatre, I wanted to find out what it was like to work in the West, so I went to Karlsruhe, where I went from being a soloist to an average dancer. Over thirty dancers from all over the world worked there, among which there was only one German. Nobody shouted at anyone, everyone worked on themselves, there was a completely different mentality. Very different than in Poland. There was no sense of danger. If a dancer wasn't good enough, they simply weren't offered a contract for the following season.

**Your career path from pantomime through dance theater to classical ballet is very unusual.**

The order is usually like this: ballet school, ballet, contemporary dance, and then experimental auteur theater.



**In what way have you been shaped by this backwards career path?**

I had to start not with stretching, or breaking my joints, but with my head.

**What does it mean that the dance comes out through a dancer's head?**

You learn to talk as a child, and later you talk instinctively. But when you learn a foreign language as an adult, you have to analyze everything. When you learn classical dance as a child, you don't wonder why a pirouette has to go in this direction, not a different one, and why the first position looks the way it does, and not differently, and what muscles are then used. I had to think about this and learn it, at the beginning in order not to harm myself, and later in order to learn my parts. Even after I had obtained my diploma, I had to prepare the same elements of every role from scratch, from the beginning. I had to learn all over again the same pirouettes for every new role. It was the same with all of the arrangements, the exits from the stage. I spent hours in the ballet studio learning how to execute specific elements of specific configurations. The preparation for every role was a twofold process for me – it was as if I had to build up technique for a given role. It was my private process.

**Was the path from pantomime, through dance theater to classical ballet a formative experience for you in an aesthetic sense?**

Yes, very much so. I've never had time to learn specific techniques thoroughly, I've always had shortcomings, and thus I had to treat every technique selectively in a certain sense, and had to adapt them to my physical abilities, and later also to my artistic capabilities. To let it pass through me. And through this opportunity of working with the ballet company of the Wielki Theater I learned to love opera, too, which I hadn't known previously. After my evening rehearsals I got up onto

the stage and learned opera from the wings. Later I began to watch performances from the audience's perspective. Now opera appeals to me more than classical ballet.

**And dramatic theater? For many years you have worked as a choreographer in dramatic productions.**

Contemporary dramatic theater appeals to me not because of language, but because of its rich emotionalism. It's because of this that I'm able to fit into it well. In theatrical productions I not only arrange formal scenes, but above all I create scenes that open the actors up, and allow them to seek their own means of expression through movement. The theatrical choreography that I create is for the particular actors who work with me in a show. Actors often try to find "hooks" – movements and gestures which help them in their roles, and which become arranged alongside specific sentences and words. This sometimes makes it easier for them to learn a long monologue. This gesture or movement always remains in the same place, and thus becomes artificial. It is also sometimes over-aestheticized. And movement should arise from emotion. Often my task is to remove movements and gestures, despite having sometimes added an hour's worth of choreography to a show.

**As a director, what are you searching for in theater, and what do you manage to find there? At the Jan Kochanowski Theater in Opole you prepared a show based on Pasolini.**

I'm not able to express everything by myself in solo dance shows. And it's not possible to express everything through dance, either. I know what words mean to me, and sometimes they are absolutely necessary. Sometimes they are no less important than the dance. It seems to me that I'm always able to find a language that allows me to join these worlds.

**What is your work method? Do you encourage actors to find psychological motivation for their roles?**

When we worked together on Pasolini, I forced a specific world upon the actors in advance, which I delineated very distinctly. We searched for the meanings of words not through psychological analysis, but only by exploring certain emotional states or tensions. The music of Giya Kancheli helped in this.

**What happened with them between one climax and the next?**

They waited. These emotional states were not generated, they were previously prepared and the actors entered into them immediately, and completely. The difficulty for them was that they were on the stage for the whole performance. In full readiness, like professional athletes before a race waiting for the gunshot, for the announcement: now.

**But the music in the show always determines the phrasing of the words that are spoken. You created an opera.**

Yes, perhaps. A spoken opera in which an actor must not only sing, extract sounds from himself, express a text, situate himself within musical phrases, but also express a given text

and a given situation with full emotion. It's a very affected form, requiring great precision. The audience allowed themselves to be pulled into this cold, distant, artificial, hermetic world. The viewers were not looking for reality on stage. Through this operatic-theatrical artificiality, this text resonating with emotion and hysterical movement, they had to find this truth within themselves. Each actor was an epicentre, and apart from all of the scripted "hooks" he had to create his own rhythm for his character. I presented them with a huge challenge, but we were able to do it without "taking any short-cuts." And this is what interests me in theater. I would like to develop my own unique language not for seeking truth on the stage, but for pure truth in the contact between the performer and the viewer. But perhaps I don't believe in truth on stage, just truth in communication.

**This has been your only theatrical production so far. But you have also considered staging *Nights and Days*.**

Barbara Niechcic...

**"...c'est moi?"**

Sort of. Because I receive a lot of positive energy from outside, and I don't know how to consume it all. I don't know how to consume my own professional success, nor even small, everyday successes. I am constantly dreaming of water lilies. Not long ago my former boyfriend, in anger, as a farewell to me, danced my solos, my typical choreographed steps, and he told me that it's impossible to live with a person like me because I'm always waiting for something or someone, I'm distant, not present in the here and now, always lacking something in present reality.

**Do you think this description fits you?**

I don't know. I just took it as commentary on my work.

**You returned to operatic theater as a choreographer and as a dancer in *Between*, directed by Maja Kleczewska at the National Opera. In this show you danced in a group for the first time in a very long time.**

It was my first time creating choreography for an opera since my accident. My first large-scale ballet production. I didn't know if it would be a pleasant experience for me or not.

**And was it?**

It was. I had to adapt my tastes to those of the director, and vice versa. And I have a different "culinary" sensitivity than Maja Kleczewska. Maja likes spicier dishes, while I am satisfied with milder delicacies. But despite this, we collaborated with each other very well. During *Between*, additional stress was caused by the fact that for the first time in many years I had to be on stage with other dancers, and apart from indulging my own perspectives, I had to indulge others' as well. This was the most difficult thing for me. And some pre-show hysteria also returned. Not as intense as before, but I became a bit infected by the collective stage fright.

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**And can you imagine yourself dancing now to somebody else's choreography? Would you accept such an offer? You haven't done this since you worked in the Wielki Theatre in Poznań, have you?**

I've thought about that many times, and my first reflex has been to think that I would accept such a proposition. But when I've tried to imagine a concrete person, a concrete room, and concrete choreography, I realized that I couldn't picture myself in such a situation.

**Why not?**

I don't know, maybe it's guardedness, fear. There are many things which I can no longer do. When I dance to my own choreography, I can change it at any moment, if some kind of injury pops up. And in carrying out the vision of another choreographer, I would be under additional stress, which I don't want to have. Recently I received a very interesting and twisted assignment – I have to take part in a production in which another choreographer will work with the dance group, the soloists and the choir, while I'll be present at all times on the stage, creating a separate world for myself. Working against the other choreographer.

**For *Plaisir d'amour* you invited the "Joy" Seniors' Club in Łowicz to collaborate with you. In the summer you are going to lead workshops that culminate in a performance involving senior citizens, within the framework of the project *Wielkopolska: Revolutions*. What kind of experience does such work constitute for you?**

I already had a similar experience when working on *The Seagull* with Maja Kleczewska, when we invited some older people to take part in the performance. It's different to work with professionals, from which one can and must demand things, than with ordinary people, who give you everything because, quite frankly, you can't force anything out of them. You receive an assignment and you must realize it within the production, and somebody really gives you something, and it's a huge challenge. I'm afraid that I might cheat them, only because our expectations are going to be completely different. I can do this unconsciously. I'm afraid that the scene I'm going to do will seem to them like manipulation, because they're not actors or dancers, and I might lack the right words to use with them. Some women came from Łowicz to the premiere of *Triptych*. They sat down in the first row, in their work clothes, with scarves typical of the town of Łowicz. Before the filming began I told them what the show was about, and that I would perform naked, and I asked them to sing a song. But nonetheless, I was afraid that they could feel cheated. On Youtube there's a film on *Triptych* in which Hania Bieguszevska says, before she comments on the show, that I'm honest. I had never previously regarded myself in such categories. One immediately feels the responsibility and strength of that word. ■

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 AGATA ADAMIECKA-SITEK, WERONIKA SZCZAWIŃSKA

## THE GENDER OF THE PERFORMER

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### [Człowiek]

The performer, as we know, is “a man of action. He is not somebody who plays another. He is a doer, a priest, a warrior.”<sup>1</sup> But what is the gender of the performer?

This Grotowski does not specify in his manifesto, though the language he used unambiguously indicates the male gender, coded in the noun, but also ostentatiously present in the significance and symbolism of the text. The performer makes himself present through a whole range of male figures: the rebel, the warrior against “Holy Writ,” Castaneda’s Don Juan and Nietzsche’s Don Juan, the young warrior from the Kau village in Sudan and old Gurdjieff, a pupil and his instructor. Like most Indo-European languages, Polish justifies the use of the male form to indicate both the male gender and the whole of the human species, but this decision – though often unavoidable in language practice and used unconsciously – is not innocent. It is language, with the system of gender asymmetry peculiar to its grammar, which – as the analyses of feminist-oriented philosophers tell us – is one of the most powerful tools of maintaining the cultural order of male domination. The mechanism universalizing the male experience has identified “man” with humankind, defining the human norm on the basis of attributes tied to masculinity and acknowledged as positive, the most clear manifestation of which is the equivalent between the word “man” and the universal. The pressure of ideological structure of language makes it so that when we say “man” we think “human,” and the reverse; this is most literally reflected in English, which expresses both concepts with a single noun.

It would seem that at one point Grotowski did start to feel the constraining inadequacy of this equation, which did not correspond with his universal, essential vision of “human process” and a “human act,” his quest for the undifferentiated human being. When gender studies were in bloom at American universities in the 1980s, there must have been questions concerning the place of women in his anthropological project, though in the texts, the great majority of which are transcriptions of his public meetings, there is no trace of them. And yet, in preparing the English edition of his texts for *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, the artist suggested putting the Polish [człowiek] in square brackets after every use of the

word “man.” How to interpret this remarkable, and thus significant gesture? Is this the only response Grotowski had to the gender issue? And did the artist not achieve the opposite effect to what he intended in using this strategy on the surface of the texts and maintaining their structure of meaning and ideology? [Człowiek] does not prevent from the universalization of the male experience and the exclusion of women in the language – and found in all of Grotowski’s texts – it merely bares it, while offering a particular helplessness, or perhaps the unawareness of the writer, who is clearly not in control his message’s gender meaning.

Questions on the gender of the performer were never posed outright, at least not in the Polish reflections upon Grotowski, which are dominated by the model of exegesis that fit the artist’s intentions. His “sexism” was unapologetically outlined by Richard Schechner in *Exoduction: Shape-shifter, shaman, trickster, artist, adept, director, leader, Grotowski*, which merely brings together a few obvious facts: “Grotowski is Hasidic (and not that only) in another way: the «place» of women in his work. Yes there were a few strong women performers in Grotowski’s projects, notably Rena Mirecka in the Theater of Productions and Haitian Maud Robart in Objective Drama. But the principals have always been men. [...] But generally, women have been a tiny minority as performers and absent as inheritors. [...] Grotowski’s «structural sexism» stems from his belief in archetypal differences between the genders and his almost reverential regard for his mother. This attitude fits the Hasidic treatment of women and their view of the Shekhinah. But there is also more than a small dose of Polish Catholicism in Grotowski’s treatment of women. In his artistic work, women are cast along the polar opposition of the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene.”<sup>2</sup> Though Schechner’s text appeared in *Dialog* magazine in 1999, the possibilities it expresses have never been broached by Polish scholars.

Gender research remains a blind spot in reflections on Grotowski, though a gender reading of his texts and plays brings striking results. The theater reformer and radical cultural critic who once defined his theater method as striking at archetypes in order to “shake the whole chain of taboos, conventions, and sanctified values,”<sup>3</sup> to knock the community out of its most widespread convictions and thus confront it

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with the repressed, appears as a staunch defender of the status quo. The patriarchal hierarchy, the mechanisms of exclusion and gender oppression, and the vast misogynist imaginary are resurrected in Grotowski's performances and statements, and still await interpretation.

### Short Circuit

The gender of the performer has not interested scholars, but there were questions on this topic in the public sphere, prompted by the *Performer* exhibition organized for Grotowski Year at Warsaw's Zachęta Gallery.<sup>4</sup> The work of the Polish artist was presented there – perhaps for the first time – outside of the context in which he himself placed his explorations. Apart from the room which gathered material obviously associated with Grotowski's work (e.g. Maya Deren's film on Haitian voodoo), and the space which displayed, among other things, conversations with his collaborators, all the rooms of the gallery were arranged so that the artist's work (or rather, various phases of his work) were contrasted with work by performers who trod parallel paths, and dealt with similar themes (or seemingly similar ones). In the text accompanying the exhibition the curators declared: "A performance artist purges his performance of the function of representing, narrating, symbolizing. Both here and there the subject is visualized as a creative power, the artist attempts an act of ultimate integration, in a process where the performer's body and that which it reveals become one. This tendency is particularly evident in the practice of women performance artists, who restored the female body, until the late 1960s functioning almost exclusively as an object of representation, with its subjectivity."<sup>5</sup> It is the presence of female artists' work at the exhibition that led to a certain "short circuit," opening a space for a gender analysis of the work of Jerzy Grotowski.

"Short circuit" is a term used by Slavoj Žižek in his manifesto that opens a book from his publishing series. Žižek defines the phenomenon as a method of critical reading that causes a disruption to a system through comparing the "essential" subject with an interpretation introduced by what is less important in the general cultural context – not because of its quality, but because of its marginalization, its existence beyond the canon. The effect of such a reading is to confront the piece that would seem to be thoroughly researched with its vague implications. This method would seem to have appealed to the creators of the exhibition, who stated in the above-quoted text: "Grotowski, as a Suspicious Revolutionary, is confronted with other revolutionaries, performers, and actionists, whose achievements, as radical and blasphemous as his, remain at the fringes of mainstream culture." We ought to state here that, in the field of Polish culture, Grotowski occupies a separate, though well exhibited place. Hermetic, though canonical: the suspect and petrified Grotowski might be acknowledged as ideal subject matter for a "short circuit," which is what happened in the Matejkowska Hall of Warsaw's Zachęta.

This hall was the heart of the exhibition – this is where material was presented from the "classic" and most

recognizable stage of Grotowski's work, defined as "performance theater." There we found fragmentary recordings of performances from the 1960s: *Acropolis*, *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus*. The space was visually dominated, however, by the presentation of a male body in an act of transgression: Ryszard Cieślak's concluding monologue from *The Constant Prince*. Along with the enormous projection of footage of training run by Cieślak with the actors of Odin Teatret in the room before it, this picture was a presentation of two complementary ways of transgressing a body appropriated by culture and bound by social conventions, something for which Grotowski constantly strove, and at the same time, two possibilities he had designed for retrieving the body, which was necessary in fulfilling the "human act." In Grotowski's language, this would be, in the first case, the body of the holy actor, stripped of its "everyday mask," the body "frees it from every resistance to any psychic impulse," given in sacrifice, "annihilated"<sup>6</sup> by the total act. In the second case, this would be the body of the master, who has perfected his training to such a degree that he can forget it, and return to the "natural" state which is lost in the socialization process,<sup>7</sup> finding his body free of the corset of culture, capable of using all his human capabilities. In either case the body becomes a bridge – to return once more to the metaphors of *The Performer* – under which the "stream of life" flows.

In the Matejkowska Hall, as in Grotowski's theater, the male body was located in the center of the performance, presenting unlimited potential literally for "salvation," capable of freeing man from the existential trap. The narrative, seemingly marked by the emblematic image of the Grotowski theater, was undermined by the remaining works placed on the other walls. Apart from the materials devoted to the Viennese Actionists, most of the space was given to the work of female performers (including Marina Abramović, Ana Mendieta, Joan Jonas, and Gina Pane). A peculiar juxtaposition was found in the space where a fragment of work on *Gospels* with the participation of two Laboratory Theater actresses, Maja Komorowska and Rena Mirecka, was shown. Below it was a recorded performance of *Gestures* by Hannah Wilke, a classic of feminist art.

The tape, which lasted several dozen minutes, shows an artist performing a repeating series of procedures upon her own face. Wilke pulls, stretches, and rubs the skin, hitting and slapping. Her actions model the face, which takes on various expressions – as if, by treating her body like the material of a sculpture, the artist was stubbornly testing her facial expressions, relentlessly checking and creating. The gestures of the title, tiny physical acts, are passionlessly, mechanically performed. Faces, grimaces, and possible shots appear – the face in profile, partly obscured with hair, the face with an open mouth, et cetera.

Incidentally, the kinship between the strategies of feminist art and the concepts of Bertolt Brecht have been analyzed by Griselda Pollock in her essay *Screening the Seventies*. The author indicates the role of dissimulation, revealing the

strategy of ideology, undermining threadbare means of representation, and above all, the viewer's engagement against the illusion of art.<sup>8</sup> Wilke's work is a brilliant example of this strange alliance: *Gestures* is a laboratory of alienation toward one's own body – the artist's ostentatiously beautiful face is shown as a blank sheet of paper upon which meaning is written. It is an attempt to find how signs on the surface of the body form the female social identity. In training her face, Wilke performs a compelling deconstruction of the invisible process of “becoming a woman.” Like many other feminist artists, she addresses the subject of the “social body,” based on a series of performances in which alleged naturalness is exposed as a process of making facial expressions, and thus models for forming gender identity. Wilke's body is ostentatiously non-universal, marked. If – to refer back to the Grotowski text mentioned at the outset – the performer is not a man who plays another, then we ought to say that female performers like Hannah Wilke do not fit this definition. Their work does obviously not involve an actor “pretending,” it breaks down the opposition between “acting” and “being,” and “being active.” The female body, marked by a series of performance acts, constantly plays the other – consecutive versions of itself, constituted according to a socially acknowledged model.

The tape of the Brechtian performance was placed directly beneath the several-minute-long film of work on *The Gospels*, which includes the scene of Mary haunting the Lord's tomb, which was a touchstone for European theater, and reactivated the archetypal woman motif. The polar discrepancy between the physicality of the performance and the meanings it evokes is striking here, both in terms of the transgressive male body, and the “alienated” body of the female performer. Cieślak's nearly naked, ecstatically “open” body is opposed by the presentation of the “closed” body, which vanishes before our eyes, hastily dressed in the folds of black cloth. The foot-washing scene that opens the sequence clearly evokes the washing of genitals, which makes it allude less to cleanliness than permanent dirtiness, revealing the unbearably somatic, “secretious” nature of the female body, which requires continual ablutions and never comes fully clean. Women's bodies remain in the realm of the foul and repulsive, in the sphere of the abject. Drawn out, anonymous gestures and petty, everyday “busy-work” activities are thus stereotypically linked to femininity – washing, dressing, gathering practical items – done by women under mutual observation and with evident hostility. Here the presentation of the body, whose cultural destiny, as Pierre Bourdieu put it, is to occupy as little room as possible, undergoes material and symbolic reduction. In the actress's poses we see the effects of the process of disciplining the female body that the sociologist described, the somatized dispositions decisive to its portrayals: arched back, sucked in stomach, legs together, gaze dropped. These are instructions with moral significance of various kinds, reading female physicality as a threat to the social order. Such directives, says Bourdieu, build the female habitus, which, retroactively



naturalized and located in a religious or biological system, situate the woman within the “internal, damp, low, curved and continuous.”<sup>9</sup> The actresses build no distance from this sort of femininity, they do not exhibit the cultural staging of the body as a “stage of inscription,” as performative gender theory terminology would have it, but actualize the “female archetype,” meticulously executing roles long assigned to them in the cultural script. Unlike the female performance, theater shows itself to be a tool for naturalizing gender, as the author of *Masculine Domination* suggests.

The stage can essentially serve as an illustration of the sociologist's thesis that in Western culture femininity is the “art of ‘shrinking’ [...] women are held in a kind of *invisible enclosure* [...] circumscribing the space allowed for the movements and postures of their bodies” Their allocation to the space of the home, the finite space of the material world, means that “women can only *become what they are*.”<sup>10</sup> It would be hard to find a more apt commentary on the male and female constructs revealed here, which are sketched out in Grotowski's theater just as the curators showed it in the Matejkowska Hall. The great “human drama” is reserved for the male subject, while women are left with the roles of Mary and Magdalene.

### The Courtesan Actress

The “short circuit” created in the space of the Matejkowska Hall revealed not only the fundamental gender essentialism in Grotowski, but primarily indicated the its well-known asymmetry, assigning the woman the domain of low and soiled physicality, as a den of corruption and destruction, a source of constant danger for the male subject. This conclusion is confirmed by an analysis of gender relations in *The Constant Prince*, which should be preceded by a close gender reading of one of the passages in *The Theatre's New Testament*, the manifesto of the period. As in other texts by Grotowski, both the subject and the reader are exclusively male. For a moment the male subject is, however, replaced by the female subject. This

takes place at the point when the artist, describing the low, morally ambiguous condition of the actor, compares theater with prostitution. “The actor is a man who works in public with his body” Grotowski begins, only to change the grammatical form: “The words ‘actress’ and ‘courtesan’ were once synonymous. Today they are separated by a somewhat clearer line, not through any change in the actor’s world but because society has changed. Today it is the difference between the respectable woman and the courtesan which has become blurred.”<sup>11</sup> In the very next sentence Grotowski returns to the male subject, describing the possibility of transforming the “wretchedness” of the acting profession into holiness, through sacrificing oneself in a total act. This sort of experience of salvation is accessible to men alone, however – in Grotowski’s writing, in his theater, and in his later post-theatrical explorations – as tellingly, though surely unintentionally expressed in the play with grammatical forms shown here.

It is astonishing that an artist so sensitive to the sources and origins of physical and spiritual practices so easily parroted a common, stereotyped notion of prostitution. Grotowski is blind to the cultural process which led from prostitution as a holy ritual tied, to the cult of female fertility, to prostitution as a male-controlled procedure to profit from the female body – at any rate, the institution of prostitution we all know is based on male/male relations, on a contract between the pimp and the john, where the goods are the female body. (An intriguing parallel emerges here with the process of the secularization and institutionalization of both prostitution and theater in Greece in the 5<sup>th</sup> century b.c.e.; both took place in the framework of ultimately defining and reinforcing the patriarchal paradigm, actively co-creating this paradigm through the radical degradation of women’s position in the culture.) But it is not these simplifications that are most striking in the cited fragment. The comparison between the actress and the courtesan imperceptibly ceases to pertain to the world of the theater and extends to social reality. Grotowski is no longer speaking of actresses, who appear for this sole moment in his discourse, but of all women: the identification of the actress with the courtesan is interchangeable with that of the woman with the courtesan. “Today it is the difference between the respectable woman and the courtesan which has become blurred”. What precisely is Grotowski seeking to tell us in this unusual statement? What is the essence of this difference that was blurred? Does he mean that women are no longer held in the framework of a legible system of the “women on the market,” of which Lucy Irigaray wrote, developing the idea of Claude Levi-Strauss?<sup>12</sup> As objects of an institutionalized system of exchange created by the foundations of culture, women went from their fathers’ control to their husbands’. As such, the object of exchange was the woman’s body as much as the symbolic capital attributed to her; both “goods” could be consumed only through the correct execution of the social rituals. The unofficial exchange of women through the framework of prostitution was deprived of these symbolic values. Today, Grotowski seems to claim, this clear structure is being

shaken, and woman has ceased to entirely fit the position assigned her as an object of exchange. But what will become of the social order without the exploitation of women? What unsettling modifications will the patriarchal reality undergo – we ask further, in Irigaray’s language – if women abandon their positions as goods to be produced, consumed, evaluated, and organized by the men, and take part in how the exchange develops and functions? Is it not an unconscious, anxiety-ridden projection that dictated this aggressive, misogynist insertion to the artist?

Grotowski’s texts are full of such moments of unconscious expression of anxiety and aggression toward women. A holistic reading from a gender perspective remains a challenge for scholars. Let us return, however, to *The Theatre’s New Testament*, to more clearly emphasize that the flip side of the holy figure of the actor is a figure who threatens the structure of the woman’s world, doubly ensnared – in a fallen body and in the corrupt, hypocritical, and false space of social games. It is precisely such constructs of masculinity and femininity that we can see in *The Constant Prince*.

### **The Capricious Princess**

The play underwent meticulous dramaturgical processes, as was always the case in the Laboratory Theater. Ludwik Flaszen’s article, featured in the program, conceived the play in musical terms: the script of the performance was to Slowacki’s play what a variation is to an original melody.<sup>13</sup> This variation orbited, however, around one precisely defined motif. The central concept, organizing not only the script, but also the form of the performance itself, was to focus on Don Fernando, at the expense of the other characters. It is significant that in Flaszen’s above-mentioned text the Prince is the sole character to receive a name; the others are the faceless crowd, “the people surrounding the Prince” or the “society.”

Consequently, a line of tension is built between the individual and the collective. This definition of the dramaturgical dominant allows us to indicate the most significant alteration with regards to Slowacki’s play – the drastic change in the function of Princess Feniksana.

The main subject of Slowacki’s play unfolds, in part, through the clash between two protagonists, Fernando and King Fez’s daughter. This is a figure that binds the play in a particular way. Feniksana appears in the first scene, presenting her melancholy vision of the world in a monologue; her character also organizes the close of the play and resolves the dramatic conflict. Despite the Prince’s dominant role, Feniksana is the second, hidden protagonist of the play (Paweł Goźliński has described this extensively in his book *God Actor: The Romantic Theater of the World*). The Princess, whose name holds the promise of resurrection [Phoenix], actually allows the Prince’s transgressive project to carry through.

Slowacki gives us an ambivalent sketch of her character. It is the body of Feniksana, “ailing of beauty and sorrow,” that is traded in the performance’s finale as a guarantee for the body

of the dead infant. As such, it is subject to patriarchal law – though on the other hand, it is she who holds one of the performance’s most subtle philosophical debates with the Prince, and is given a voice of her own. Fernand and Feniksana (the alliteration is significant) present two extreme approaches to the main theme of the play. As Goźliński has indicated, the subject of Feniksana closely mirrors the shifts in Słowacki’s own world view.

The female characters in Słowacki’s plays often have special kind of status. It suffices to recall the female protagonists of *The Silver Dream of Salomea* to show that this is a practically unprecedented situation in Polish dramaturgy – women are often a medium for communicating critical discourse, creating a rift in the official model of historiography. Grotowski, reducing and significantly reshuffling the character of Feniksana, interferes in curious ways. Paradoxically, he follows the dominant, mainstream reception of Polish Romanticism, obscuring whatever is situated outside of “Konrad’s cell.”

In his article *Let Grotowski Sacrifice Masculinity Too*, Charles Ludlam claims that the central image in Słowacki’s play is the comparison of Feniksana’s beautiful body and the cadaverous body – a prophetic image that foreshadows the scene when the Princess is the ransom for the Prince’s body. In reference to Grotowski’s performance, the author briefly addresses the interpretative shift the director made in handling the Princess character. He notes that all the characters are given equal strength, and Feniksana – the only woman – could just as well be a man. Ludlam concludes as follows: Grotowski sacrifices “femininity,” which functions in the play as a symbolic counterweight to the Prince’s perfection, in favor of exploring bodily suffering.<sup>14</sup> These conclusions are surprising; once again the “blind spot” mechanism takes effect, preventing the critic from perceiving the complex gender problems in Grotowski’s work. Ludlam’s example is characteristic: the author notes the erasure of Feniksana’s structural role, yet automatically equates her with the other, male figures in the play (glossing over the ambiguous role of Maja Komorowska as Tarudanta). Meanwhile, it is precisely the Princess, played by Rena Mirecka, who has the most ambivalent status in the performance. It is the result of the profound gender conditioning of this role – Feniksana cannot be like the male protagonists, because her character is rooted in a structure of unsettling stage images, closely tied with fantasies of the destructive role of femininity. Quite significantly stripped of her courtly ladies who accompany her in the play (Zara, Estrella and Roza), an odd choir of melancholics, Feniksana simultaneously gains a strangely dominant status. The performance transforms the key structural function of this character in the play, her passivity, her refusal to enter the world (only altered by the Princess’s encounter with the Prince), into a series of aggressive acts. It is Feniksana who initiates the court’s violence in the performance; she is the figure most powerfully associated with the images of Don Fernando’s physical torture. The “body in the body” of the Princess and the Prince, the corporal attachment of the

characters, is to some extent key to a gender analysis of the performance.

Feniksana’s actions are often centered on acts of physical aggression. The very beginning of the performance positions the character splendidly, assigning her the superior role in the process of establishing the court rules. The Princess executes symbolic castrations (first on Don Henryk; then she tries to subject Fernando to this procedure, which, for obvious reasons – given that he transcends others’ state of lack – is effectively based on mutilation). Hard to imagine a more compelling image of feminine monstrosity threatening the male subject.

Feniksana also plays a key role in the court entertainment. Castration and tormenting prisoners are essentially how the Princess indulges her caprices. Flaszyn’s description of the performance leaves us in no doubt:

- A conflict between a possible pretender to the throne and the King; the pretender demands the Prince for himself. [...] Feniksana also joins in this fight for the Prince; she pits the King’s aide-de-camp against the rival.
- The fight is stopped for a while by the Constant Prince’s words that sound like Job’s lament.
- The pretender is killed. The aide-de-camp becomes independent and demands the prisoner for himself. The King uses Feniksana as his militant beast.
- The fight is ended by a monologue by the Prince.<sup>15</sup>

Feniksana – the capricious castrator – becomes an animal. Her monstrosity is stressed by her animal aspect. Woman reveals her inhuman nature. Here we can see the mechanism of a peculiar substitution: Słowacki’s Feniksana, who is idealized, passive in her beauty, and trapped in her body, is swapped for an active Feniksana, physically supervising the man, threatening him in the most literal fashion. From another perspective this mechanism illuminates the recollection – and sometimes, in the performance, the transgression – of the convention of courtly love present in the play. Elements of courtly convention play a significant role in Grotowski’s performance. In his attempt to describe *The Constant Prince*, Tadeusz Kornaś noted: “The world of the court is a world of conventions. All the gestures are marked by stereotypes. [...] Feniksana and Mulej hold a romantic dialogue. Again filled with stereotypical gestures and associations. As if everything, including love, were falsity and pretending. When they talk this way, as if to emphasize the sentimentality of these conventional courtly love games, birdsong rings out.”<sup>16</sup> This description seems to obscure a much more important problem: courtly love and castration pertain to the same female fantasy. In the psychoanalytical interpretation of courtly love, the idealization of the woman and her deprivation of physicality are meant to conceal the horror of physicality and the trauma of the sexual act. The woman remains a constantly evasive and unattainable object of desire, which by definition cannot be fulfilled. Both the possible variants of the female protagonist

in this convention – the “capricious princess” who multiplies impossible tasks, or the angel, the “unearthly ideal” – are in fact a mask of the woman as the radical, traumatic Other, with whom no relationship is possible.<sup>17</sup> Feniksana is such a woman in Grotowski’s performance. Her overt position as the cruel ruler, whose whims decide upon the life and death of the men surrounding her, combined with her strikingly mechanistic actions, the repeating gestures of castration and torture, make her an automaton that reveals radical otherness.

### *Imitatio Christi and sponsa Christi*

The narrative construction of the performance is based on the scapegoat drama, or rather its triumph performed in the Christian drama of the Lord’s suffering. Dariusz Kosiński described the various acts of this drama, indicating a remarkable analogy between the structure of the performance and a concept by René Girard, who interpreted the suffering of Christ as a revolutionary act that reveals the sacrificial mechanism through indicating the victim’s innocence, and his willing acceptance and fulfillment of his fate.<sup>18</sup> In Grotowski’s performance the various acts of the Christian drama of sacrifice were stamped with blasphemy, and summoned parts of the Catholic liturgy with its peculiar defilement. The repulsive machinations of the court at the body of martyr, the realness of the tortures dealt by a woman in time to the litany to the Holy Virgin Mary, the scene of the cannibalistic feast, during which the court sucks the blood and eats the body of the Prince, while making gestures associated with the taking of the Communion, the figure of the Pieta, in which the figure holding the dead body – an animalistic monster with face eternally concealed in hair, and vague gender identity – bends over the genitalia of the Prince in a manner that suggests oral sex. All this struck powerfully at the heart of the symbolic order, evoking unrestrained repulsion in the viewer. This strategy to profoundly destabilize the viewer

had its counterpoint here – as Grzegorz Niziołek has aptly noted – because the performance only superficially “upheld the blasphemous impetus of Grotowski’s theater, and in fact was a therapeutic metaphor [...]. In the images of «constancy» (constructed according to the traditional religious iconography of the death and suffering of Christ), Grotowski restored the audience their right to feel total identification with the victim.”<sup>19</sup> We should add that the stronger it was, the greater the repulsion separated her from the animalistic mob, led by the radically in-human Feniksana.

Girard’s version of *imitatio Christi* enacted here allowed for the exposing and transgression of the violence mechanism at the base of the community, simultaneously bringing a liberation from the attached sense of guilt. This therapeutic work was performed, at any rate, in a communal space with an unambiguously marked gender construction, especially taking into consideration the multiple collisions the performance had with the “sweet” Virgin Mary archetype, of which the figure of the Pieta mentioned above is the most drastic example. Didn’t restricting femininity to these threatening and loathsome fantasies inhibit the therapeutic power of the performance? Didn’t the violence revealed and transgressed here return in the form of another, covertly supported form of violence?

Within the dramatic martyr/victim structure enacted in and for the community, Grotowski placed a total act. An act, as he wrote, of “self-sacrifice,” “devotion to something that is incredibly difficult to describe, incomparably higher, which transcends us, is above us.”<sup>20</sup> Fulfilled in front of witnesses, aiming to transcend the individual “I,” but simultaneously an infinitely intimate experience – the total act opened a radically different space of experience, because the score for Cieślak’s physical actions was born, as the director put it, “from the recollection of a particularly joyful and ecstatic experience in his youth in which prayer and sensuality overlapped.”<sup>21</sup> It was this combination, the merging of erotic and religious experiences, that returned in the artist’s statements on Cieślak’s role, clearly the core of the experience around which it was built.

This ecstatic “prayer of the senses,”<sup>22</sup> to use Grotowski’s words, hidden inside the tale of a martyr who freely accepts his sacrifice refers to the ecstatic experiences of the female mystics, pairing the *imitatio Christi* formula with another: *sponsa Christi*, the betrothed of Christ.

If, therefore, Cieślak’s role openly summoned the traditional iconography of the death and suffering of Christ, at the same time it secretly alluded to the ecstatic women present in the culture of images, led by St. Teresa as depicted by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. In this most famous representation of female ecstasy the sculptor staged this vision of the saint, in which physical delight merges with physical suffering: “I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me by thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all



on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.”<sup>23</sup> It is precisely such a strongly rooted in culture vision of the female body, passively open to penetration and smothered in masochistic delight, exceeding all sexual experience available to men, that illuminated Cieślak’s role and made it somehow full.

The femininity of the experience of ecstasy should not be conceived in an essentialist manner. It is, as Jean-Noël Vuarnet stresses, “unified femininity, that of both the man and the woman”. The femininity of the subject turned directly toward God, merging with Him in an act of unifying love, cannot take the male position: “No male role is possible in the face of God, when we stand before God.”<sup>24</sup> As an imitator of Christ and a spouse of Christ, Ryszard Cieślak’s Constant Prince occupied both a male and a female position in the symbolic order, and indeed gave the audience an opportunity to fully identify with the victim. This construction of the role allowed him to render a masochistic fantasy with undeniable strength, which – as Niziołek proves – is at the core of Grotowski’s theater.<sup>25</sup>

According to a Freudian interpretation – though Grotowski systematically tried to hide signs of this influence on his work, erasing direct references to psychoanalysis in consecutive edits of his texts, there is masochistic delight at the source of theater, supplied by the emotionally moving but utterly physically safe observance of a defenseless man’s suffering from acts of violence, primarily divine violence.

Through staging the torments of a “great personage” with whom the viewer can identify – “it assuages as it were the beginning revolt against the divine order which decreed the suffering”<sup>26</sup> – theater gives the viewer an experience of masochistic pleasure in secure co-suffering. Grotowski managed to maximally intensify this experience by joining the “male” suffering of the victim, which brings a community of redemption, and the “female” delight of ecstasy, which is at the same time a corporal culmination and a spiritual transgression. The communal, intimate, and transcendental met here in a single act, while the blasphemer, a rebel against the divine order, whose classical incarnation remained Faust from the Opole performance, was transformed into an ecstatic martyr personifying the female and male twonity.

Grotowski erased his psychoanalytical inspirations, as Niziołek proves, in order to conceal his masochistic fantasies and to withhold tools for understanding his theater in a way that would leave the viewer “silent, i.e. defenseless.”<sup>27</sup> It was surely for similar reasons that he also removed references to ecstasy from later versions of his texts. Leszek Kolankiewicz tracks these changes,<sup>28</sup> indicating Bernini’s group as a model of the poor theater that much more precisely renders the experience he was after than the circus course for animals or anatomical theater of Doctor Tulp evoked in Flaszen’s commentary. It is indeed remarkable that Flaszen did not follow

this lead, though in his descriptions of Cieślak’s role sensual ecstasy appears multiple times,<sup>29</sup> while the iconographic motif used in the poster for the production both unambiguously and discreetly testifies to inspiration from the texts of Saint Teresa and her closest spiritual brother, Saint John of the Cross. Bernini presents a theater of ecstasy *par excellence*, showing us both its stage and its audience. From the side walls of the holy chapel, figures of members of the founding family are raised to powerful effect, evoking as much the sight of suffering as its compelling *mise en scène*. This model exhibits the delight provided by theater founded on masochistic fantasies and reveals the source of its affective power, but also points toward a shift that is vital to Grotowski’s theater. At its core we find not the body of the woman immersed in an act of transgression, but the body of a man, designed as a figure of twonity.

Is this not the realization of the central archetype that Grotowski sought, to which he returned in *Action*, which opened with the words of Christ from the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*: “When you make the two into one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the upper like the lower, and thus make the male and the female the same, so that the male isn’t male and the female isn’t female. When you make an eye to replace an eye, and a hand to replace a hand, and a foot to replace a foot, and an image to replace an image, then you will enter the Kingdom.”<sup>30</sup>

Instead of repeating opinions that the artist distances claims about the social human being and delves into the human essence, let us ask one more uncomfortable question: has not the unity of the male and female, the full undifferentiated person, been achieved here through projected fantasies and real exclusion, fit into the course of exclusions that are infinitely reiterated toward women, whom the patriarchal culture is so eager to remove from the stage?

One part of research devoted to the gender complexities of Jerzy Grotowski’s work could be an analysis of work by artists who furthered the inspiration they drew from him, but on their own terms.

It seems that many independent groups coming from this tradition simply multiply the formula wherein the theme of gender roles is masked by a discourse of the universality of the body and experience.

This is a subject that demands detailed analysis and great delicacy (due in part to the complicated mechanisms involved in transmitting traditions and work methods), which is why it can only be addressed here in a cursory fashion. One example of a characteristic complexity of the gender issue is the discrepancy between the training work and the artistic message visible in the performances, whose striving to be organic and “transparent” stands in contradiction with the final effect – often an incarnation of a cultural stereotype. Women are most often assigned the “archetypal” roles of mothers, incarnation of Mary Magdalene, and so on. Their roles are often built from petrified gestures and poses, such as a characteristic bending

of the whole body that recalls birthing in the standing position. The effect of “body training” is therefore frequently the internalization of norms and stereotypes, which function as a transparent and universal image. ■

<sup>1</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, “Performer,” in: *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 374.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Schechner, “Exoduction: Shape-shifter, shaman, trickster, artist, adept, director, leader, Grotowski,” in: *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 486.

<sup>3</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Możliwości teatru, Materiały Warsztatowe Teatru 13 Rzędów*, Opole 1962 No. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Performer*, an exhibition at the Zachęta National Art Gallery, co-organized by the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute and the Jerzy Grotowski Institute, curators: Magda Kulesza, Jarosław Suchan, Hanna Wróblewska, 13 February – 23 March 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Magda Kulesza, Jarosław Suchan, Hanna Wróblewska, *Performer*, a text in the publication accompanying the exhibition.

<sup>6</sup> “The Theatre’s New Testament.” An interview with Jerzy Grotowski by Eugenio Barba, in: idem, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, edited by Eugenio Barba, Methuen Drama, London 1991, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, “Wędrowanie za Teatrem Żrodeł,” *Dialog* 1979 No. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Cf.: Griselda Pollock, “Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice – a Brechtian Perspective,” in: eadem, *Vision and Difference*, Routledge Classics 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Stanford University Press 2002, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, 30.

<sup>11</sup> “The Theatre’s New Testament.” An interview with Jerzy Grotowski by Eugenio Barba, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Women on the Market*, in: *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, New York 1985.

<sup>13</sup> Cf.: Ludwik Flaszen, “The Constant Prince,” in: Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theater*, Routledge, London 2002, p. 81 or Ludwik Flaszen, “*The Constant Prince*. Footnotes to the Performance,” in: idem, *Grotowski & Company*, trans. Andrzej Wojtasik with Paul Allain, eds. Paul Allain, Icarus Publishing Enterprise, Holstebro – Malta – Wrocław 2010, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Cf.: Charles Ludlam, “Let Grotowski Sacrifice Masculinity Too,” in: *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Lisa Wolford, Richard Schechner, Routledge, 1997, p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> Ludwik Flaszen, “*The Constant Prince*. A Scene by Scene Synopsis,” in: idem, *Grotowski & Company*, p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> Tadeusz Kornaś, “Aktor ogołocony: Książę Niezłomny Teatru Laboratorium,” in: *Misterium grozy i urzeczenia. Przedstawienia Teatru Jerzego Grotowskiego i Teatru Laboratorium*, eds. Janusz Degler, Grzegorz Ziółkowski, Jerzy Grotowski Institute, Wrocław 2006, pp. 347, 348.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Slavoj Žižek, “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing,” in: *The Metastates of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*, Verso, London and New York 1994.

<sup>18</sup> See: Dariusz Kosiński, *Polski Teatr Przemiany*, Jerzy Grotowski Institute, Wrocław 2007. We join the author in stressing that when

the play was being made, Girard’s concepts were not widely known, and his book *Violence and the Sacred* was released seven years after the premiere. “Who knows,” asks the author, “perhaps the inspiration went the other way? Could René Girard have seen *The Constant Prince* in Paris?” (idem, *Grotowski*, Jerzy Grotowski Institute, Wrocław 2009, p. 199.)

<sup>19</sup> Grzegorz Niziołek, “*Hamlet* Grotowskiego, czyli co jest w Polsce nie do pomyślenia,” a text read at the *The Cultural Poetics of the Polish Shakespeare* conference, Warsaw 1-2 June 2010; in print.

<sup>20</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, “Książę Niezłomny Ryszarda Cieślaka. Spotkanie Hommage à Ryszard Cieślak 9 grudnia 1990,” trans. Magda Złotowska and the author, *Notatnik Teatralny* 1995 No. 10, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Virginie Magnat: *Wykłady Grotowskiego w College de France*, trans., ed., notes by Grzegorz Ziółkowski, *Didaskalia* 2004 No. 64, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, “Książę Niezłomny Ryszarda Cieślaka...”

<sup>23</sup> St. Teresa of Avila, *Life*, trans. David Lewis, Echo Library Middlesex, p. 197.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Noël Vuarnet, *Ekstazy kobiece*, trans. Krzysztof Matuszewski, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk, pp. 6, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Grzegorz Niziołek, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage,” trans. Henry Alden Bunker in: *The Tulane Drama Review*, 1960 Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 145.

<sup>27</sup> Grzegorz Niziołek, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Leszek Kolankiewicz, “Grotowski albo granice doświadczenia. Trans i ekstaza w antropologii widowisk,” in: *Granice kultury*, ed. Andrzej Gwóźdź, Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Śląsk,” Katowice 2010.

<sup>29</sup> “The Prince submissively accepts the courtiers’ sick procedures and at the same time he stays independent and pure – to the point of ecstasy.” (“*The Constant Prince*. Footnotes to the Performance,” in: idem, *Grotowski & Company*, *op. cit.*, p. 110). Flaszen referred to ecstasy in describing each of Cieślak’s three monologues, stressing its cultural links with femininity: passivity and sensuality. In the first monologue, “The Prince opposes the actions of the courtiers [...] with passivity and gentleness, fixated on a higher spiritual order” (“*The Constant Prince*. Footnotes to the Performance,” *op. cit.*, p. 110); the second expresses “his ecstatic devotion to the Truth”; in the third the Prince “is reaching the peak of his suffering and ecstasy, combined as if in an act of love-making.” (“*The Constant Prince*. A Scene by Scene Synopsis,” *op. cit.*, p. 114). For more on the subject, see: Leszek Kolankiewicz, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*, trans. Stevan L. Davies, Skylight Illuminations 2004, p. 33.

MONIKA KWAŚNIEWSKA

## A STUDY OF ABSENCE

### Ophelia, Gertrude, and Janulka Face History, Myth, and Politics in Jan Klata's *H.* and *...Fizdejko's Daughter*

**M**y text attempts a feminist interpretation of two plays by Jan Klata, inspired by the writings of Maria Janion, Agnieszka Graff, Sławomira Walczewska, and Shana Penn on how women function in the sphere of Polish history, mythology and public life. The status of women in Klata's theater is most often ambivalent. The director sets up a range of stereotypical images of women from Polish historical and mythological narratives: Polish Mothers, Holy Mothers, Émigré Women, Women as an allegory of Revolution, and women as guardians of the collective memory. Though it would be hard to accuse him of having an unambiguously affirmative relationship to this type of figuration, it is not always easy to find the charge that clearly and consciously explodes these female symbols and allegories which appear in the public sphere in the lives of real women, who – as Agnieszka Graff demonstrates in her article *Making Women Real* – become hostages to communal fantasies, and pawns shuffled about the political chessboard.<sup>1</sup>

My impression is, however, that Klata often undermines the figures he creates, showing them in a grotesque light, showing them as formulaic and incompatible with real women, who have no place in the range of national symbols. Moreover, he draws not only perhaps from the myths that bind women, but also from the history that has caused these myths to be created, revealing the gap between the two spheres. Klata's plays demonstrate, in my view, the continued existence of these figures in the public discourse, but also show them to be anachronistic.

The two plays I have chosen, both made in 2004, show the process by which women are marginalized in the recent Polish historical narrative, drawing from traditional narratives, formulaic thinking, and symbols. These two plays allow me to compare the diagnoses found in Klata's plays with the real status of women in public life over the past twenty years. Based on *Hamlet*, *H.* addresses the bankruptcy of Solidarity's ideals, while *...Fizdejko's Daughter*, based on a drama by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, deals with Poland's accession to the European Union. While Klata's first play repeats the formula which excludes women from the Solidarity narrative and from the public sphere in free Poland, in the second we see the process whereby real women are replaced by the national symbols that bind them.

Jan Klata's *H.* was created in the Gdańsk Shipyard. The action took place in the hall with the famous Anna Walentynowicz<sup>2</sup> gantry crane. Though the reviews claimed that the play hit home, and that it commented on the

condition of Polish public and private life in spite of its simplicity, almost no one was interested in the fact that, in speaking of free Poland, Klata showed a world in which women are excluded from the public sphere, and power is in exclusively male hands. A consequence of this process is women being phased out of history, including that of Solidarity, which is regarded as a male movement. In Klata's play only the Anna Walentynowicz gantry crane reminds us that the strikes in the 1970s and 80s and the underground movement that spread after Martial Law were a domain of men's and women's political activity. Klata reproduces the formula wherein women are effaced from the history of the opposition, pigeonholed as Polish Mothers, suited for neither leading revolutions nor making policies afterward. In his play women are reduced to the figure of Anna Walentynowicz, who is literally objectified, shut up and silenced in the gantry crane that represents her.

And although, as Sławomir Sierakowski has noted,<sup>3</sup> Walentynowicz's conservative criticisms of the authorities appear to be identified with the views of the young Hamlet, moralized by Polonius through the words of a prayer, Klata prefers to attribute the revolution to a young, attractive male than to an old, derided woman. Small wonder – the Hamlet Marcin Czarnik creates is a charismatic figure, who can inspire, affect, and lead a group. And although Anna Walentynowicz surely once possessed similar power, she was swiftly neutralized – largely because of her gender. Walentynowicz herself, when offered leadership of the strike, apparently said, “things will collapse all too soon if a broad is in charge.”<sup>4</sup> I understand that Klata needed the perspective of someone younger, someone who took no part in the transformation of 1989. I nonetheless wonder why Walentynowicz was entirely ignored in the play, though to a considerable extent she was the ideological patron of Hamlet? The question may be naive, but why is the impulse to act in Hamlet an anachronistic hussar? Is it for the sake of fidelity to Shakespeare's drama that Walentynowicz cannot stand in for the fathers' ghost? The play itself offers no clear response to this question. I would like to recall an interview, however, which Klata gave to Piotr Gruszczyński for *Didaskalia*, entitled *Wawel Castle Has No Effect on Me*; I will not be treating it, here or subsequently, as an explanation of the play, but will rather make an attempt to compare the performance with the director's way of thinking. Reading this conversation, we see that Walentynowicz could not have been the fathers' ghost, nor even a figure who could summon this ghost. The hussar could encompass, as Klata declares, Wałęsa signing the treaty

in Gdańsk with his famous huge pen, which reminded the director of the sword from Grunwald.<sup>5</sup> Klata does not mention, of course, that Walentynowicz sat at the same table, nor that the content of the treaty utterly failed to mention women's rights, for the only two relevant clauses concerned "strengthening the family and family life."<sup>6</sup> Of course, we might see Klata's decision to avoid the issue of female figures in the ranks of Solidarity, both in the play and the interviews he gave on the subject, as natural, and gloss over it as natural. Yet it is precisely this erasure of women – including Anna Walentynowicz – from history, and their rights from the ideals of the opposition, which to a large extent has caused Polish politics to remain a male-dominated sphere following 1989.

"It turned out that in free Poland a woman was not a human individual, but a 'family creature,' for taking care of the home, and not politics. [...] Democracy in Poland is a male term,"<sup>7</sup> Maria Janion said in the late 1990s. As such, I do not agree to return to business as usual, ignoring the erasure of Walentynowicz from Klata's play, because if I did, I would also have to ignore the fact that, although the democracy that Klata shows and criticizes is of the male variety, its sexism is not criticized outright. Quite the contrary – the sexists in this play include Claudius, Polonius, and Hamlet himself.

The women in *H.* are almost utterly deprived of the chance to act – removed from the public sphere, reduced to proverbial "mothers, wives, and lovers," they are often mocked for their gender. In Klata's play, however, the pictures have many cracks, they are sometimes inconsistent, and can be read in several mutually exclusive ways.

Although Gertrude (Joanna Bogacka) takes part in the court sessions, her role is limited to exchanging fleeting smiles with Claudius (Grzegorz Gzyl) and nodding at his every word. When she once attempts to take the initiative and, during a speech by Polonius (Sławomir Sulej) on Hamlet's madness, furiously asks for more content and less subtlety, thus showing her power, Polonius responds ironically, and almost contemptuously: "But my queen, I do not suppose you would suspect me of subtlety," as if trying to belittle a woman who dares to give orders, and who moreover assigns him attributes that are seen as feminine. It is significant that Polonius' words win a laugh from Claudius, who is clearly embarrassed by the inappropriate comment from a woman who had overstepped her competencies. In Klata's play Gertrude also cannot wield power because she is not aware of the situation in which she finds herself. This is evident in the play and confirmed by the director's interview with Gruszczyński; Gertrude is utterly blinded by her love for the much younger Claudius, which makes her a pawn in her new husband's hands. The director sketched this very clearly. Gertrude keeps flirting with Claudius, tossing him admiring gazes when he breakdances on the table. Klata stresses this motif most clearly in the scene where Gertrude childishly skips rope, and at one point Claudius joins in, seduces and excites her, only to run off, leaving her alone. Though such an unambiguously portrayed passion of an older woman for a younger man could have

contained some subversive potential, freeing Gertrude from the role of the mother and caretaker, in my view it does not happen. Gertrude's behavior meets with contempt and indifference, evokes Claudius' embarrassed laughter, and that of the rest of the court. Her passion is exploited to manipulate and coerce her, and keeps her from consciously exercising power. Klata therefore seems, on the one hand, to break the taboo of a mature woman's sexuality, while on the other shows it to be a cause of weakness. And so it is significant that the queen has the power of "liberating" consciousness only after returning to the role of the mother. After speaking with Hamlet, Gertrude begins to rebel – she does not leave the bedroom with Claudius, against his orders, she furiously defends her son in everything he does, drinks poisoned wine to Hamlet's success, against her husband's wishes... But even in the role of mother Gertrude is not capable of much. Her revolt is silent – more symbolic than active. Gertrude only acts toward men – first her husband, then her son. In this way Klata's Gertrude, as an image of a woman, is, of course, present in public life, takes part in political debates, but (firstly) belongs to a minority, and (secondly) is only perceived as part of her gender. The figure of Gertrude is constructed so that the viewer perceives her as a loving woman and mother, but not as a politician, although she debates with the men who wield the power. This situation appears to perfectly correspond with how Agnieszka Graff characterizes the media image of the female politician in her book *A World without Women*. Graff proves that in Poland the word "politician" is strictly associated with men, and "man" with a person in the universal sense. Female politicians are perceived by the media only in terms of their gender. In attempts to evaluate their work, commentators refer to "typical female qualities," in television appearances the camera frame stresses their physicality, and in interviews female politicians are asked about their feelings toward household chores, such as cooking, laundry, and ironing. Graff believes that one result of these attributes of the public language is that women in politics are seen as strange and exotic.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, questions regarding family "are laced with a profound disdain for women who have success in public life. Asking a female politician about her private life makes us understand that a woman's proper place [...] is in the home."<sup>9</sup>

The character of Gertrude in Klata's play, cobbled together from typical female attributes, seems to confirm the conviction that a woman has no place in politics, because her own "feminine" emotions – love, desire, or the "mothering instinct" – are more important to her than power. As Graff writes: "A woman – even one in pants, i.e. in a 'male role' – always ends up being reduced to a woman, i.e. a creature incapable of wielding any sort of power. Instead of ruling, she falls in love, chats with a friend, a neighbor at the hairdresser's, or – as was predicted for American suffragist Lucy Stone – unexpectedly gives birth to a child in the courtroom."<sup>10</sup>

Ophelia (Marta Kalmus), too, is almost entirely isolated from the public sphere. When the men hold a session with the queen, Ophelia waits in her room, squeezed into one corner

of the great hall, separated by chintzy curtains. To see how limited her field of activity really is, it suffices to compare her with Hamlet. Ophelia decorates her room with cards full of love poetry, which play *Happy Birthday*, Hamlet reads to Polonius from prayer books: *Our Father...* Hamlet thus uses a mighty symbolic tool, while she has cheap memorabilia of only sentimental and emotional value. When Polonius tries to use her as a political weapon and reads her letters to the court, he comes across a bloody tampon stuck to one of the pages – this strips Ophelia of the remnants of her dignity, and the letters of their significance. At the beginning it seems that Ophelia wants to fight for her autonomy: she distances herself from what her father says, refuses to break contact with Hamlet, smokes cigarettes and dresses like a boy – yet all her decisions are ineffectual. Her one effective act of will is her suicide. Here too, however, Klata undermines Ophelia's autonomy. From the director's statements in the above-mentioned interview, we can glean that everything occurs beyond the girl's will or knowledge. Klata even attributes her death to Hamlet, saying that: "[...] you have to act, deal with the painful facts, with opponents who aren't going to go away. Concrete action is needed, not symbolic action. And it turns out that you have to murder Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern... Everybody." It is interesting that in naming four people in place of "everybody," Klata lists Ophelia second... And so even her death is not an autonomous decision – it is Hamlet's elimination of an opponent. At the same time, the theatrical signifiers contradict this comprehension of Ophelia. She is the only one whom Hamlet does not blame – and at the same time, he does not mark her for death.

This is not the only signal that lets us see the character of Ophelia in another light. Above all, Klata has cut all ties between Ophelia and the court. In the first scene the girl refuses to be obedient to her father, and speaks no more with him. After quarreling with her father, she does not send letters to Hamlet, but runs to find him. Although Klata suggests that her meeting with Hamlet is overheard, he omits the scene in which Ophelia succumbs to her father's influence

and conspires with the king. The meeting place also seems rife with associations. In the Communist period the Church was a place for oppositionist forces to meet. The conversation in which Hamlet and Ophelia kneel on prayer-desks set in line intensifies these connotations. We might get the impression that, in giving Hamlet keepsakes in a gray sack, Ophelia is offering him help and collaboration. The Church and the lovers' quarrel thus seem a cover for the conspiracy. The cover is arranged not to confuse Hamlet, but Polonius and Claudius. A similar impression comes from the enraged, resigned response of Ophelia to Hamlet's question: "Where is your father?" Shouting, "At home!" and fleeing from the stage, Ophelia furiously signals that Hamlet has misunderstood her. Wanting to conspire with him, arranging the meeting to confuse Polonius and Claudius, she is suspected of treason by the priest. Hamlet cannot imagine Ophelia as his partner in his games with the court. From then on Ophelia is left alone, running about the scaffolding with a large sack like a messenger; but no one is interested in her story, no one (including the viewers) knows anything about her.

In this sense, it might be interesting to compare two later scenes. This first is a conversation between Hamlet and Rosencrantz (Wojciech Kalarus) and Guildenstern (Rafał Kronenberger), stylized on a brutal Secret Services interrogation. The second shows Ophelia tossing scraps of paper from her sack. On the one hand, we might say that apart from Hamlet's political struggle, Klata presents the personal, private tragedy of Ophelia destroying letters from her ex-lover. On the other hand, however, maintaining the association of Ophelia as a messenger and applying it to the history of Solidarity, we perhaps ought to see this scene through the lens of the operations of the opposition in the 1980s, when it was mainly women who were involved in writing, publishing, and distributing the conspiracy press. One of the main tasks of these prints was to scrupulously document the repressions of the authorities, the arrests, and the brutal interrogations. Let's follow this lead: the fact that Ophelia is scattering scraps of paper appears to correspond with the idea that women



immediately destroyed traces of their underground activities out of terror of the consequences. For this reason, today we are short of unambiguous documents confirming their activities.

The above-described scenes clearly, though ambiguously, reflect the mechanism which has made the history of Solidarity a history of men. Read in this way, the scene of Ophelia's death substantially confirms our intuition. The fact of Ophelia drowning, loaded with associations separate from Shakespeare's text, sparks connotations with the legend of Wanda. Such associations, like that of Ophelia as a messenger, are neither directly evoked nor named, working more subconsciously, as powerfully saturated national symbols, often introduced in a surprising and unexpected way; but Klata's theatrical language, in which almost every signifier that is important in interpreting the play has roots outside the theater, facilitates such a reading. We ought to note that the tale of Wanda figures in one of the first investigations of women's political activities in Poland. Wanda did not kill herself only because she did not want to marry a German. Her death was also meant to warn the country of an impending attack by hostile armies – it was a personal decision, but a political one too. Considering that *Hamlet* concludes with Fortinbras' armies entering Denmark / the Shipyard, the death of Ophelia ceases to be a mere act of private grief. While setting such an enormous symbolic charge, Klata does not indicate the political significance of Ophelia's decision. On the contrary: he mainly focuses on the spectacle of the scene and on the confrontation between Hamlet and Laertes (Maciej Brzoska). I cannot shake the impression, however, that we are dealing with another silence as a lack of comprehension. Ophelia's death is, to my mind, a symbolic one, a consequence of the prior scene in which the evidence of her work is destroyed. The lack of historical materials makes the story and death of Ophelia seem incomprehensible, linked by no cause-and-effect chain, full of gaps and half-spoken phrases, which no one wants to fill. We can only see her as the unhappy, manipulated girl driven to insanity and suicide, and even if we perceive symbolism evoked by the character, we are incapable of discerning its real or political significance. Her death is summed up in one sentence by the queen: "I thought you would be my Hamlet's wife," reducing her to the traditional female role.

On the one hand, Klata's *H.* reproduces the mechanism of excluding women from the history of Solidarity; on the other it gives the impression that it is conscious of the mechanism it uses, and thus shows how it works and gestures toward an enormous, ignored sphere which it is incapable of naming.

The other play I have chosen shares with *H.* the absence of women, which becomes a sign of their marginalization. The female protagonist is fairly overtly overshadowed by the male rivalry here – even in the title, where in place of the name "Janulka" Klata places three dots, leaving only ... *Fizdejko's Daughter*. This tactic quite unambiguously shows the position of the female figure, who is recognized only through her relations with men – her father, and later her (would-be) husband. Janulka's (Karolina Adamczyk) dependency on

the male protagonists is immediately signaled in the play. In Klata's play, even more evidently than in Witkacy's text, the girl is a commodity, meant to seal an international alliance. Removing Janulka's name from the title indicates a process like that described by Luce Irigaray in *Women on the Market*,<sup>11</sup> in which women are depersonalized and used as goods. It is thus important that Klata modified the first conversation between Fizdejko (Wiesław Cichy) and the Master (Hubert Zduniak), before the girl ever appears on stage, to resemble negotiations for Janulka. The dialogue begins with Fizdejko's question: "Where is Janulka?," and concludes with the Master's unexpected query: "And so, listen Gienek: Do you want to be a king or not?" Klata seems to indicate that Poland's entering the EU is seen as a national betrayal, symbolized by the transaction of the body of the woman/nation.

We ought also to examine Janulka's metamorphoses during the play. In the first part she is a liberated creature, mostly in terms of her manners: she is loud, sexually charged, and in a scene of perverse fun with the Master, she rides her partner. At the same time, the play shows Janulka's subjugation process. First she becomes a commodity, then the Master halts her erotic liberation – postponing the moment when the bond is "consummated;" later, she is forced into the role of housewife, cooking boiled cabbage for the Master, and finally dresses in the garb of the patriot women from the January Uprising. The process of entering the EU thus corresponds with the process of limiting Janulka's freedom, and her being squeezed into traditional stereotypes. According to the traditional rhetoric, the loss of independence suffered through entering the EU means that women cease to be autonomous, that their interests are subordinated to the good of the nation, and their basic task becomes the cultivation of a national identity. And although Polish female patriots, whether in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or in the present, often stood up for the ideals of emancipation as well as independence,<sup>12</sup> they were generally bypassed in the national historical narrative, which saw them as only the patriotic feminine ideals adapted to myth.

The fact that the symbolic goods in the transaction between Poland and the European Union is Janulka also seems important in another, more real context. I do not know how consciously Klata's play constructed such an insightful and almost prophetic metaphor. Women's rights, after all, indeed became an object of transaction between Poland and the European Union. As Agnieszka Graff points out, in the period preceding Poland's accession to the European Union the Polish media relentlessly addressed the gender issue. There was talk of role reversal, of a crisis of masculinity, and then of the "return of the man." In Graff's view, "talk of gender [...] was debated with doubt and anxiety evoked by European integration."<sup>13</sup> The happy end to this narrative was conditioned by the conviction that the division of gender roles was eternal and timeless, and that the traditional Polish family, along with the Polish national identity, was strong enough to survive joining the effeminate European Union. As a result, female discrimination, which is not permitted by the European community's equality laws,

was acknowledged as a Polish national trait and more or less officially sanctioned.<sup>14</sup> The Polish Mother and dutiful housewife – figures restricting the rights of real women, shifted into the private sphere, becoming bastions of the Polish national identity.

As such, it also seems significant that the omission of Janulka's name from the title and the numerous transformations of the character made none of the reviewers stop and wonder.<sup>15</sup> This lack of interest in Janulka seems only to confirm that women's absence from the historical narrative in the public sphere is perceived as utterly normal. Furthermore, if we track the reviews, we find that the three dots became something of a "hole to be filled." The reviewers remarked upon the role of Janulka that suited their narratives, skimming over the others and modifying the female protagonist's behavior. One example might be the text by Rafał Węgrzyniak for *Didaskalia*, wherein he suggested that Janulka rejects the Master, which is untrue, but fits the title "...Who Didn't Want a German."<sup>16</sup> Tomasz Miłkowski's article in *Przełąd* (2006, No. 2) mentions only the image of the Polish Mother, while Alicja Pawlikowska writes: "A very mousy, Polish Janulka with a long, blond braid."<sup>17</sup> Piotr Gruszczyński lists the contradictory representations of Janulka: "Janulka cooks," "Janulka in national mourning," "debaucherous Janulka," but shows not the slightest interest in what these changes might mean.<sup>18</sup> Janulka thus becomes a figure that can be skillfully used in a narrative without being made the real subject of the tale. In some reviews Janulka even becomes a symbol of Poland.<sup>19</sup> Such a narrative does not seem unjustified, unfortunately. Klata's Janulka can be seen as a symbolic representation of Poland – a barbarian girl who embarks on an unrequited love affair with the West, depriving her of autonomy, and leaving her to recall her own identity in the finale, and to turn into a mourner. Thus Klata replicates the national narrative, in which the woman can only function as a symbol, to carry the collective memory and identity. In this interpretation, the omission of Janulka's name in the title does not pertain to the female figure, but to Poland, which was to be partitioned and to disappear from the map of Europe in entering the European Union. Instead of making us aware of the image of women in the male historical narratives, omitting Janulka from the title only reinforces the traditional stereotypes of the "Polish woman."

It is therefore significant that the political/matrimonial transaction in Klata's play does not go according to plan, and is unconsummated. Janulka does not follow the example of the legendary Wanda, and does not reject the Prince. On the contrary, in the first scene she tosses a white kerchief on her head according to medieval tradition, shouting "He be mine!" Taking advantage of the lady's medieval privilege, Janulka thus chooses the Prince of the Neo-Teutons for her husband. She brings to mind Danusia from Sienkiewicz's *Teutonic Knights*, the ideal woman angel, who can not only defend her lover, but also marry him, in spite of her father's prohibition. Janulka thus enters the traditional male/female relationship only to exploit its privileges. Her unrestrained behavior in no

way fits Sienkiewicz's character. The marriage is not realized, however, because Gotfryd keeps denying Janulka fulfillment, and later, unable to bear the true love which he held for her, commits suicide. The male and female roles, Wanda and the German, are reversed. This happens because of Janulka, who does not submit meekly to the "taming" process in subsequent parts of the play either.

During her erotic games with the Master, she marks his refusal with a contemptuous phrase – "let me mill the grain, you rest" – the first sentence ever written in Polish. Most historians say that this was spoken by Boguchwał to his fat and awkward wife, grinding the grain,<sup>20</sup> which was seen as work that did not befit a man. After the incident, this Czech's neighbors came to call him Brukała (soiled).<sup>21</sup> Janulka thus denigrates the Master, reducing him to a woman's position. The reason the transaction fails is mainly because it is ultimately not the Master who humbles Janulka, but she who humbles the Master, donning the clothes of a homeless man and becoming a Pole. We ought to note that domination comes from Janulka's role as a liberated woman, while in the second part of the play Janulka's entrance in a traditional role coincides with the Master's growing apathy.

Would Klata like to signal the necessity of women renouncing their emancipatory ideals for the patriotic mission? Or is he indicating the power and endurance of the Romantic mythology that lingers in this famed "special" role of the Polish woman, laced with Slavic spontaneity that can be neither dominated or harnessed? Or perhaps he is suggesting that women, through their traditional roles, can paradoxically enter a male position and affect the public sphere? Or, finally, that the traditional female figures are in fact a male-created weapon for defeating enemies or foreigners? I think that all of these hold a bit of truth...

Nor is the play's conclusion clear. First Janulka sings a folk song, *Gdybym ci ja miała...* (If I Had You), which again recalls the Danusia character from *The Teutonic Knights*, then she exits in a black dress, as in the national mourning that followed 1863. She thus becomes a symbol of the national identity protected by women. And Janulka's final monologue, though symbolically rendered, I believe has a certain subversive potential, aimed at women's roles in the death-oriented national mythology. Janulka stresses from the outset that both Fizdejko and the Master have given up on all work. This means the girl achieves autonomy, but also takes on a patriotic mission. In the context of this scene we ought to recall that the national female symbol of the Polish Mother comes from women's authentic activities, which in the 1860s gave women a start in the public and political spheres.<sup>22</sup> The fact that, over time, it was reduced to the local symbol, objectifying women, seems symptomatic of the Polish historical narrative. Much like the reception of this scene in the play, which the reviews only interpreted symbolically. I get the impression, however, that notwithstanding the symbolic burden that Klata places upon Janulka, he also demonstrates the unbearable oppression of her role. When Janulka says that she wants to get married in

a normal way, to have healthy, beastly children and be a part of the beastly society, she speaks of the traditional female roles, but she rebels against the ideal of the Polish Mother sending their sons to the uprising. She also speaks of the right of the individual, the rights of the woman to her own, non-symbolic life, beyond national history, mythology, trauma and resentment, demanding we see a fourth partition of Poland in the accession to the European Union. Dressed in a mourning gown, held by concentration camp prisoners (Ryszard Węgrzyn, Włodzimierz Wróbel), Janulka paradoxically speaks against the macabre dance of corpses surrounding her, which Der Zipfel (Andrzej Szubski) organizes with his depression gasses, against suicide of the Master and the apathy of Fizdejko, in favor of life.

It is hard to unambiguously interpret the position of women in either play, but nonetheless (or perhaps because of this) these performances seem symptomatic of how women are perceived in the sphere of Polish history. Both plays and their reception show that neither the system change of 1989, nor the accession to the European Union have changed the fact that the history of Poland – including the history taking place before our eyes – is annexed by men, a history in which women are gradually erased, displaced, situated in the traditions they are assigned and their roles in the national mythology. The lack of a women's historical narrative translates into their removal from the public sphere. The attempt to break taboos is mocked, liberation from customs is recognized as a national attribute, and the attempt to act is unrecognized or conventionalized. Kłata's plays therefore show the degree to which Polish history and mythology determine the social position of today's women. The ambivalence of the plays is also significant, as is the predominance of signs discriminating and marginalizing women over those which could indicate that these tactics that could serve to reveal the hidden mechanisms. To a large extent, this ambivalence is an intentional directorial strategy, seeking to avoid simple diagnoses and definitions, or giving solutions. It is the ambiguity of women's status that seems to hold considerable subversive potential – it is based on both traditional structures and a certain framework in presenting emancipation strategies. On the other hand, some of the directorial decisions appear to result from falling into the trap of traditional thinking, in which a division into the male (public) and female (private) spheres and particular gender roles in national narratives seems evident. In my view, an essential role is played by an ignorance of how the female narrative and their activity might look, or even contemporary female patriotism that does not replicate mythological formulae. Is Janulka's final declaration sufficient? It certainly is not for me. This might be why in subsequent plays Kłata has increasingly used work written by women, such as Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk's *Amok* or Bożena Umińska-Keff's *A Piece on the Mother and the Fatherland*, polemicizing more clearly and consciously with the traditional image of women in Poland, broadening and deepening the sphere of feminist reflection.... ■

This project has been financed with support from the National Science Centre.

- <sup>1</sup> Agnieszka Graff, "Urealnić kobiety," in: *Magma*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warsaw 2010, pp. 23-24.
- <sup>2</sup> Anna Walentynowicz was a founder of Solidarity. The demand for her to return to work as a gantry operator at the Gdańsk Shipyard was the first postulate of the strike in 1980, in which Walentynowicz actively took part.
- <sup>3</sup> Sławomir Sierakowski, "Uderz silniejszego!," *Notatnik Teatralny* 2005, No. 38. Available at: <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/40442.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf.: *Notacje: Anna Walentynowicz. Niczego nie żałuję*, a documentary series, Poland 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> "Wawel na mnie nie działa." An interview with Jan Kłata by Piotr Gruszczyński, *Didaskalia* 2004, No. 63, p. 17.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf: Shana Penn, *Solidarity's Secret*, University of Michigan Press 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> Maria Janion, "Za waszą wolność i naszą," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4 VII 1999, p. 25.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf.: Agnieszka Graff, *Świat bez kobiet*, pp. 45-71.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>11</sup> See: *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, New York 1985, pp. 170-191.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf.: Shana Penn, op. cit.
- <sup>13</sup> Agnieszka Graff, *Rykoszetem*, WAB, Warsaw 2008, p. 81.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-109.
- <sup>15</sup> Roman Pawłowski, for example, in his "Współcześni niewolnicy historii i stereotypów" (*Gazeta Wyborcza* 2004 No. 299) does not mention Janulka at all; nor does Violetta Waluk in her review "... córka Fizdejki w Dramatycznym," *Tygodnik Wałbrzyski* 2005, No. 3, nor Paweł Sztarbowski in his numerous notes on the play: *Kontakt. Dzień czwarty*, 25-05-2005, <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/12763.html>; "Interpretacja pierwsza," 07-03-2006, <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/22896.html>; "Teatr mój widzę masowy," *Newsweek Polska* 2007 No. 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf.: Rafał Węgrzyniak, "...co nie chciała Niemca," *Didaskalia* 2005, Nos. 65-66.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf.: Alicja Pawlikowska, "Interpretacje Interpretacji," *Opcje* 2006, No. 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf.: Piotr Gruszczyński, "Pochwała niepoprawności," *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2005, No. 7.
- <sup>19</sup> "Janulka was supposed to be an allegory for all that was rotten and provincial in Poland, with all its skeletons in its closet – in the form of emaciated individuals in camp stripes. Poland in a historical bind, between patriotic tradition and attachment to old-world imponderabilia, and its promised marriage with the pragmatic Western civilization." See: Jolanta Kowalska, "Nowy język," in: Elżbieta Baniewicz, Maryla Zielińska, Jacek Kopciński, Jolanta Kowalska, Jagoda Hernik Spalińska, "Wolny dwudziestoletni. Ankieta," *Teatr* 2009, No. 9.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. e.g.: "Polska.pl. Strefa wiedzy": <http://strefawiedzy.polska.pl/pigulka/ciekawostki/article,,id,71914.htm>
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. e.g.: [www.pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Księża\\_henrykowska](http://www.pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Księża_henrykowska)
- <sup>22</sup> Shana Penn, op. cit.

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Jagiellonian University Polish Literature Department



**NARODOWY PROGRAM  
ROZWOJU HUMANISTYKI**

Praca naukowa finansowana w ramach programu Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego pod nazwą „Narodowy Program Rozwoju Humanistyki” w roku 2012.

Academic work financed in the framework of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education program entitled “The National Programme for the Development of Humanities” of 2012.

#### **COVER**

komuna//warszawa and Liquid Theatre:  
*Railway Opera*;  
phot. from the archive of the theater

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Payments for 2012 should be sent to the following account:  
PLN – 61 1090 2398 0000 0001 1346 4234;  
euro – 29 1090 2398 0000 0001 1026 5168  
with the heading: “Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna”  
along with information concerning the number of copies.  
Yearly subscription: in Poland – 40 zł;  
abroad – 40 € or 45 USD.  
Bartosz Mróz: bartek@grotowski-institute.art.pl

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Polish Post, Ruch Ltd., Kolporter Ltd., Garmond Press Ltd.

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