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The Folk Turn in Polish Theatre

Choreopolitics

The Failure of the Nonexistent

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/ HISTORIES

Choreopolitics and Haunted Bodies

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The aim of this article is, first, to illuminate the history of Polish dance by examining how contemporary choreographers narrate that past in their performances, making significant breaks with tradition while simultaneously reinterpreting it in various ways. Second, it seeks to highlight the analogies between the situation of independent dance in Poland in the twenty-first century and the place of modern dance during the interwar period. The author analyses performances by Wojciech Grudziński (*Threesome*), Edyta Kozak (*Dancing for You Longer than One Minute*), and Iwona Pasińska (*Ostatnia niedziela*), which she interprets as examples of what André Lepecki terms ‘choreopolitics.’ These are performances in which artists critically examine the official narratives of ballet and dance theatre, deconstructing and rewriting their archives with regard to what is absent or distorted within them. The author demonstrates how contemporary choreographers participate in shaping not only the future but also the past of dance.

Keywords: ballet; dance theatre; new choreography; choreopolitics

Hacking History

On the back wall of a smoke-filled stage, an animated inscription in red spells out: ‘The power of three will set us free.’ The phrase undulates across the space in a sinuous, serpentine motion, reminiscent of a retro computer screen. An electronically distorted, androgynous, seemingly multiplied voice

loops the sentence to the rhythm of an enigmatic ambient and darkwave soundscape. The quasi-chant is evocative of an incantation, yet it seems unclear whether this trance-like invocation heralds an exorcism or calls forth a haunting. Collapsed against the wall, as if prostrated, lies a motionless body that appears strangely dematerialised, if not cosmic. It resembles a traveller from some distant universe who, regrettably, has not survived the transfer. The figure wears torn lace panties (it will later become apparent that they cover the genitals but not the buttocks), with fragments of the same fabric partially draping its torso. The face and head are concealed by a latex mask, suggestive of BDSM practices, though the grotesquely enlarged, peculiar ears lend the figure a Teletubby-like appearance. Every element of the costume, including shoes and socks, is blue, akin to an astral glow.

The opening scene of *Threesome*, choreographed by Wojciech Grudziński,[1] made me think of stills from the visual order of the 1980s and ‘90s demoscene, i.e., the avant-garde of early digital art. Its history is tied to the practice of hacking commercial computer games: programmers would break the original security codes and insert their own *intros*, which took the form of animated signatures of a given hacker group. By contrast, Grudziński hacks into the history of Polish ballet, on the one hand, and into the imagery of native folk and national dances, on the other. He seeks to infiltrate these structures with alien bodies – queer, passionate, unabashed – thereby unsettling the normative canon by awakening within it the energies of alterity.

In this text, I wish, in a sense, to replicate Grudziński’s gesture: to peer into the fissures of the history of Polish dance, addressing not only its turning points but also – on the one hand – the ways in which it becomes entangled, sometimes in unexpected constellations, with the *here and now*, and – on the

other – how the *here and now* hacks into the archives, sowing within them the seeds of creative ferment. I will use as my guides not the official narratives of what has transpired, but rather the contemporary choreographies whose authors revisit the past to imprint their own traces upon it while simultaneously summoning its spectres to consider along with them the future of choreographic practices. This will therefore be a history of mutual hauntings, frictions, and entanglements between astral and corporeal bodies. Therein, Grudziński's body-medium will emerge as a conjurer, prompting various strategies for critical alliances with the spectres summoned.

In *Threesome*, Grudziński summons the spirits of three legendary dancers once associated with the Teatr Wielki – Opera Narodowa a in Warsaw: Stanisław Szymański (1930–1999), Wojciech Wiesiołłowski (1939–1995), and Gerard Wilk (1944–1995). He invites them into his own body and, transforming the ballet archive into a chamber of orgiastic encounters, dances with them – or perhaps *through* them – an *oberek*. Grudziński lends himself to these spectres, seeking to displace their biographies and, in a sense, to return them to a queer history of classical dance. Browsing through *Słownik tańca współczesnego* (Dictionary of Contemporary Dance, 2022), one finds entries detailing some of the most celebrated roles, awards, film and television appearances, medals, and pedagogical achievements of these three figures, yet with no mention of who they loved, how they died, or what kind of ferment their eccentric attire and non-normative desires provoked in the public sphere. According to Katarzyna Gardzina, the 1980s saw Szymański 'take leave of the stage and donate all his memorabilia to the […] Muzeum Teatralne' (2022a, p. 595). What she fails to consider, however, is why a man who had danced for forty years chose to sever himself from his own archive. Gardzina cites a passage from Irena Turska's review, which

reported on the dancer's 'extraordinary grace' in the role of Shakespearean's Mercutio. Yet nothing in this biographical entry suggests that Szymański dissolved the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, moving and performing across binary divisions, both on stage and in life. In *Dictionary…*, Gardzina also recounts the vibrant career of Wilk (2022b, p. 688–689), at the same time omitting the fact that he also worked as a photo model, regularly frequented gay clubs, and possessed a beautiful, sensual body which he occasionally harnessed into provocative spectacles in Poland. While little is known about Wiesiołłowski's off-stage life,[2] the fortunes of Wilk have been the subject of numerous captivating narratives, not least of all Zofia Rudnicka's 2019 monograph.

Naturally, one can hardly expect encyclopaedic entries to offer in-depth portraits of their subjects, and the restriction of information to meticulous enumerations of the key artistic and pedagogical moments of their careers seems a strategy inherent to the very nature of such texts. Nevertheless, what strikes the reader in examining these three biographical sketches is that they present Szymański, Wiesiołłowski, and Wilk as they were likely intended to be conceived by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic and by the management of the Teatr Wielki, i.e., as outstanding dancers whose difference and incongruity with hegemonic masculinity could be suppressed, silenced, or exorcised.

Wilk and Wiesiołłowski died from AIDS-related complications. Szymański, who unlike those two chose not to leave Poland – although the Vaslav Nijinsky Award (Paris, 1959) might likewise have open doors for him to join foreign companies – was open about his own non-heteronormativity. By invoking these three biographies and their spectres and staging their tryst, Grudziński constructs an embodied counter-history, a narrative which, in the

words of Michel Foucault, brings to light that which ‘has been hidden, and which has been hidden not only because it has been neglected, but because it has been carefully, deliberately, and wickedly misrepresented’ (2003, p. 72). From his performance we learn, among others, that Szymański was forced to ‘walk the plank’ at the Teatr Wielki, and that, behind his back, he was called a ‘clown’ and a ‘pervert.’ What is crucial, however, is that little textual material features in the performance itself, with the body emerging as the medium of alternative memory.

In *Threesome*, that which was addressed only in whispers in the latter half of the twentieth century serves the point of departure, yet the choreographer’s gesture is more than merely one of reclamation. By establishing for himself a queer ballet genealogy that integrates the experiences of ‘perverts, migrants, ballerinas, outcasts, fags, aunts, and freaks,’ whom he dubs his ‘companions from the past,’ Grudziński composes a history of dance that is sensual, moist, and hospitable to otherness, a history that celebrates the queerness of the bodies that comprise it. Allowing these spectres to permeate his skin and opening himself to the experience of haunting, Grudziński turns into a somatic, living archive. His act of remembering is performative: it not only rescues from oblivion but also – and perhaps above all – partakes in the project of imagining a history and a future of dance and choreography in which alterity is not dissolved but continually breaches and destabilises normative regimes.

The Margins and the Centre

It is no coincidence that I begin the chapter on the constellations of Polish dance history with the story of Grudziński’s performance. I have chosen to do so primarily because the artist brings into collision two orders – classical

ballet and contemporary dance – whose divergent trajectories delineate the principal political tensions (institutional and aesthetic) within the field of Polish choreography. The former is part of a world of privilege, canon, and tradition; the latter is situated in the space of marginality, and consequently, of experiment and resistance, but also of precarity. Secondly, Grudziński blurs the boundary between what was and what is, producing a choreographic *bricolage* and thereby demonstrating how archives of movement continue to affect the *here and now*.

Responding to the question of why dance and choreography 'lack the institutional, infrastructural, and academic surroundings established around other arts' (2019a, p. 276), Hanna Raszewska-Kursa discusses the parallels between the position of the discipline she studies and that of women and minority groups within patriarchy. She addresses historical grassroots initiatives undertaken to autonomise contemporary dance. Raszewska-Kursa devotes particular attention to the efforts of Tacjanna Wysocka (1884–1970), who, in collaboration with fellow female dancers, sought to establish a dance theatre in Warsaw in 1933. The project neither came to fruition nor was it meaningfully commemorated, which Raszewska-Kursa construes in the context of institutional bias ('the initiative was undertaken by a group of women, and therefore attracted less interest,' p. 282) and of entrenched stereotypes juxtaposing the female dancer-performer with the male choreographer-demiurge.

When Szymański, Wiesiołłowski, and Wilk made their debut on the stage of the Teatr Wielki (the first two in 1956, the third in 1965), the ballet company – known until 1964 as the Balet Opery Warszawskiej and from 1965 as the Zespół Baletowy Teatru Wielkiego – was gradually entertaining influences other than Soviet ones. Among others, this process was a consequence of the

Khrushchev thaw, which enabled a partial departure from the communist strategy of isolating Polish culture from Western trends and from the aesthetic and political revolutions staged abroad. However, regardless of what was happening in national and global politics, ballet remained in a privileged position in the sense that it was always, in a way, pleasing to power (and not only in Poland). This was due, on the one hand, to its courtly history and its dependence on the royal body, and, on the other – particularly in the Polish context – from the place it occupied first under the Russian Empire and subsequently in the Soviet Union. In the words of Paweł Chynowski,

> Warsaw […] remained under Russian rule for a hundred years, which devastated the country economically, politically, and culturally. Perhaps the least affected was ballet, cherished by the Russians; nevertheless, the occupying authorities were careful to ensure that, even there, national and patriotic tendencies did not find too strong an expression.

The situation was markedly different for other forms of stage dance, which in the early twentieth century emerged as an alternative to classical aesthetics and the traditional ballet repertoire. During this period and throughout the interwar years, Poland became an important centre for the development of modern dance, and above all of the free dance inspired by Isadora Duncan (1877–1927), as well as the German tradition of the expressionist *Ausdruckstanz*, popularised by the students of Mary Wigman (1886–1973). Among the Polish artists who honed their skills in Duncan's schools were Stefania Dąbrowska (c. 1894–1929), Janina Mieczyńska (1888–1981), and the aforementioned Tacjanna Wysocka. The tradition of

expressionist dance, in turn, materialized, among others, in the practices of Mieczyńska and Irena Prusicka (1911–2001). In Warsaw, Mieczyńska and Wysocka ran two of the most significant schools and companies of modern dance, promoting this new art form as well as Émile Jaques-Dalcrozes eurythmics, central to their respective methodologies. Predictably, World War II brought these initiatives to a halt, and the subsequent communist regime effectively obstructed any return of their former intensities, prohibiting private schools from continuing their activities, and restricting state patronage exclusively to folk and ballet ensembles. The period of socialist realism saw the establishment of companies such as Śląsk and Mazowsze, which transformed traditional folk dances into stage spectacles (see Szymajda, 2013, p. 45-46; Turska, 1962, p. 274-278).

It is nevertheless worth noting that, in 1953, Janina Jarzynówna-Sobczak (1915–2004) founded the ballet company of the Opera Bałtycka, which she directed until 1976. As per Stefan Drajewski,

> She was the first choreographer in Poland to recognise in folklore an opportunity to revitalise stage dance in the wake of socialist realism. She saw folk dance as equal to classical, historical, and modern dance… She believed that one could combine all these techniques and mutually adapt them on stage, drawing from each what might ultimately lead to the creation of one's own movement language (2019, p. 89–90).

Drajewski underscores Jarzynówna-Sobczak's crucial role in the process of democratising the field of dance, yet also confers the status of reformer to Conrad Drzewiecki (1926–2007), whom he recognizes for introducing a new

genre – dance theatre – to the Polish context and for developing his own distinctive style, i.e., a synthesis of neoclassicism, modern dance, and elements of stylised folk movement.

Although Drzewiecki's company first came to be in the same year as the Tanztheater Wuppertal, there are few points of contact between his dance theatre and that of Pina Bausch. In Drzewiecki's case, the ethos of technical virtuosity still prevailed, and the principal shift away from ballet consisted in the blending of diverse choreographic languages within a new genre. By contrast, in Bausch's theatre, experimentation extended to dramaturgical and compositional strategies, while emotion supplanted the now-dethroned technique in its codified form (see Królica, 2011b).

In the subsequent decades of the twentieth century, several Polish cities became host to newly established dance theatre companies, while contemporary dance – owing in part to their activity – affirmed itself as independent and distinct from ballet. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily translate into its economic or infrastructural consolidation. In Poland, there have long existed only three institutional dance theatres, with contemporary dance developing primarily within the independent circuit. Operating within this sphere are artists associated with new choreography; dance theatre companies functioning as non-governmental organisations (such as the Krakowski Teatr Tańca and Teatr Tańca Zawirowania); as well as hybrid forms that elude classification within either of the two main currents.

It is difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when new choreography – historically linked to American postmodern dance that emerged in the context of the countercultural upheavals of the 1960s and to the practices of those regarded as the movement's pioneers (among others Anna Halprin and Merce Cunningham; see Banes, 2013), on the one hand, and to such

tendencies as conceptual dance, non-dance, and critical dance, on the other – entered the sphere of Polish performing arts. Nonetheless, one can regard the year 2004 as a crucial turning point: it was then that Joanna Leśnierowska, supported by Grażyna Kulczyk's Art Stations Foundation, launched the programme *Stary Browar Nowy Taniec* (Old Brewery New Dance, SBNT) in Poznań. For sixteen years, the space of Studio Słodownia +3, situated at the Stary Browar shopping mall, functioned as the Polish counterpart to Western dance houses, albeit one fostered by private rather than state patronage. The term 'new dance' signalled both a generational shift (as SBNT initially focused on supporting debuts) and an aesthetic and political framework, defined by a move away from ballet and dance theatre forms.

Contemporary dance continues to grapple with the problems arising from its marginal position within Polish cultural policies and from its existence in a state of perpetual precarity imposed by a fickle system of grants and fellowships. Nevertheless, one should acknowledge several significant systemic shifts that have energized the field: the introduction of the new Dance Theatre Actor/Actress major at the Akademia Sztuk Teatralnych in Krakow in 2007; the establishment of the Narodowy Instytut Muzyki i Tańca (2010);[3] and, finally, the administrative separation of dance from theatre in the funding programmes of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (2020). One should also note, however, that while these developments ascertain the relevance of dance and choreography, they do not necessarily testify to the authorities' recognition of their autonomy. Training at the department of dance in Bytom (a branch of Akademia Sztuk Teatralnych in Krakow) remains framed within an acting curriculum, and the Institute's very name, with its unfortunate conjunction 'and Dance,' has become the subject of darkly humorous professional jokes: choreography is to be

acknowledged, but only as part of something larger, more powerful, more important. Likewise, an examination of the Ministry's grant programmes reveals a stark disproportion between the budgets allocated to dance and those designated for theatre.

Although the discussion at hand concerns significant operations of power, I should emphasize that the admittedly fragile autonomy of contemporary dance is, above all, a grassroots achievement, an outcome of the sustained efforts undertaken by non-governmental organisations, as well as producer, curator, artist, and researcher collectives and individuals who cultivate relationships with the audiences and institutions fostering the development of choreography (for instance, by providing access to their respective venues), and with the media. The activities of these stakeholders also involve exerting constant pressure on those who determine the distribution of space, capital, and prestige among representatives of different arts (directors of theatres and festivals, policymakers, and organisers of major competitions) as well as raising awareness of the role choreographers play within theatre processes. In doing so, they challenge the persistent stereotype that confines choreography to the mere arrangement of dance scenes.

When I speak of the autonomy of contemporary dance in Poland, I do not mean a modernist utopia of 'art for art's sake,' wherein choreography would be armoured, impermeable, and radically detached from the social sphere and from other artistic practices. Following Marta Keil's formulation, I understand autonomy as the status of 'a subjective, fully legitimate field of art' (2019, p. 1) and as the capacity for self-determination, i.e., 'the ability to decide for oneself, and thus also the ability to speak, to determine the modes of one's own organisation, and to propose one's own solutions' (p. 2). If Keil correctly argues that 'the process of self-determination consists not so much

in positioning oneself in opposition to other art forms, as in delineating a territory that enables development and contact with audiences, and in seeking various forms of agency' (ibid.), then one can rightfully identify the areas in which choreography continually reaffirms and renews its autonomous status.

I have nevertheless referred to this autonomy as 'fragile,' because, as Raszewska-Kursa notes in the context of dance development, 'creation, infrastructure, language: these three factors must emerge simultaneously, which is difficult in and of itself; moreover, the stabilisation of funding rests on the goodwill of the state apparatus' (2019a, p. 278). In Poland, it is of course the middle element of this triad – the infrastructure – that remains most problematic. While this does not undermine choreography's subjectivity, it does leave it in a state of constant vulnerability. Importantly, contemporary dance has developed various strategies of survival. These include the grassroots establishment of venues such as Centrum w Ruchu;[4] the negotiation of a permanent place within institutional structures (for instance, the Lubelski Teatr Tańca operating within the Lubelskie Centrum Kultury, or the Krakowskie Centrum Choreograficzne, part of the Nowohuckie Centrum Kultury); as well as the establishment of long-term collaborations with such institutions, as exemplified by the Krakowski Teatr Tańca, which for the past seven years has hosted the dance presentation programme *Rollercoaster* at Cricoteka.

It would be impossible to list all the areas in which the various potentials of contemporary dance and the agency of those who co-create its universe have manifested themselves; I will therefore limit myself to just two such developments from recent seasons. Firstly, four choreographic productions entered the repertoires of major institutional theatres: *Dotyk za dotyk.*

Dansing (Touch For Touch. Dansing), choreographed by Katarzyna Sikora (Teatr Współczesny in Szczecin, January 2023); *Boa* (Stary Teatr in Krakow, November 2023); *Laguna* by Paweł Sakowicz (TR Warszawa, February 2025); and *Anonimowi performerzy* (Performers Anonymous), choreographed by Ramona Nagabczyńska (Teatr Studio in Warsaw, September 2024). Second, as I write this text, Alicja Berejowska, Renata Piotrowska-Auffret, and Joanna Szymajda – winners in the competition for the curatorial concept of the pilot year at the Pawilon Tańca i Innych Sztuk Performatywnych, located in the former premises of the Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej in Warsaw – are preparing for the opening of this new venue.

(Re)writing History

In sketching this perfunctory and omissive history of contemporary dance in Poland, my aim has been, above all, to map its turning points, but also to indicate that its many tensions, ruptures, and unexpected continuities endure shaping choreographic territories. This is not only because the archives demand our attention, but also because – and despite changing conditions – dancers and choreographers alike are engaged in a shared project of reorganising (or perhaps, more precisely, dismantling) hierarchies within the field of the performing arts. Their efforts seek to ensure that what is different, resistant, or elusive within dominant aesthetic and political configurations of the perceptible[5] may attain visibility and autonomy, one understood, above all, as the right to self-determination.

Both the practices of artists such as Dąbrowska, Mieczyńska, and Wysocka, and those of contemporary independent dance professionals, occupy the position of the Other within this field, for they all share a condition of fragility and precarity. In this context, both the writing of dance history (or

the rewriting of theatre history in a way that acknowledges the agency of women choreographers),[6] and the activist struggle for the infrastructural independence of contemporary dance constitute parts of the same mission.

It is perhaps also for this reason that artists representing new choreography regard the archives of modern dance as invitations to dance,[7] creating performances such as *Druga natura* (Second Nature, 2019) and *Projekt Yanka Rudzka: Wielogłos* (Yanka Rudzka Project: Polyphony, 2018), in which they do not so much reconstruct archival dances as transform them, unearthing within them previously unarticulated potentialities.[8] Contemporary dance also engages in a critical dialogue with the past, deconstructing the dominant narratives of dance history, revealing the silences and distortions embedded within them, and, in opposition to these, establishing its own subjectivity. This is true not only for Grudziński's *Threesome*, but also for pieces such as *Dancing for You Longer than One Minute* (choreographed by Edyta Kozak, 2009) and *Ostatnia niedziela. RE//MIX Conrad Drzewiecki* (The Last Sunday. RE//MIX Conrad Drzewiecki, choreographed by Iwona Pasińska, 2013).

Pasińska currently serves as the director of the Polski Teatr Tańca (since 2016;[9] at the time of *The Last Sunday*'s premiere, the position was held by Ewa Wycichowska). In her performance, produced at Komuna Warszawa, she casts a sidelong glance not so much at the tradition of dance theatre itself as at the cult of Drzewiecki, subverting the narratives of his supposed progressive visionariness. I read her work – created within an experimental framework and, importantly, in collaboration with the independent choreographer Mikołaj Mikołajczyk (formerly a soloist of the Teatr Wieki in Poznań) – as an attempt to unsettle the monument erected to the choreographer of *Krzesany* by historians of Polish dance. As an aside, it is

worth noting that although dance theatre today operates both within institutional and independent circuits, historically (at least in the Polish context) it has been closely connected to ballet, a fact signalled in the very name of Drzewiecki's company. Grudziński and Kozak, who both work in the field of independent choreography, employ an auto-theatrical mode to explore their own encounters with the classical tradition, while also reflecting on the divergent politics of contemporary dance and ballet. Kozak was herself a soloist of the Teatr Wielki in Poznań, whose phantoms haunt *Threesome;* in *Dancing for You…* she recounts her encounters with the aesthetics of Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater* and French *danse critique*, both of which profoundly shaped not only her artistic trajectory but also the broader development of contemporary dance in Poland.

I believe on can examine the tensions between ballet, dance theatre, and new choreography – currently some of the most prominent forms of stage dance – through the dialectic of choreopolice and choreopolitics,[10] concepts first introduced by André Lepecki (2012, p. 13–27), which correspond, respectively, to the practices reinforcing the status quo and to those that articulate resistance to the dominant order. Choreopoliced movement is permeated by hegemonic ideology and aesthetics; one of its most striking manifestations is the communist revue. By contrast, the choreopolitical embodies nonconformist impulses seeking to overturn prevailing regimes of being-in-the-world and the Rancièrian principles of the distribution of the sensible, manifested, for example, in the empowerment of subordinated Others. Choreopolitical practices include both queer and crip dances and the techniques of contact improvisation, understood as a dialogic practice that abolishes hierarchies and suspends relations of power, valuing attentiveness over virtuosity. In analysing *Threesome*, *Dancing for You…*, and *The Last Sunday*, I will discuss certain choreopolitical strategies that lend themselves

to the emancipation of dancing bodies while also generating new historical constellations in their own vein.

Choreopolitics

In the aforementioned opening scene of *Threesome*, theatrical smoke swirls in the air. As the scene brightens, the performer, remaining in a horizontal position, begins a choreography of micro-gestures, as if shyly examining the shapes and materials appearing before him, but invisible to the audience. The musical composition by Lubomir Grzelak and Wojtek Blecharz employed in this segment is evocative a mix of ballet motifs, infused with electronic blips and glitches, which in old computer games signalled interactions or system errors.

The dancer gradually expands the range of his kinesphere, taking on various bizarre forms, until finally, ‘with his legs thrown over his head, as if he had stopped halfway through a backflip, he sticks his bare buttocks high up in the air and supports himself with his hands, his bent neck turning redder and redder as a result of the strain,’ as Agata Skrzypek puts it (2024). Grudziński remains in this position for several minutes and performs a series of peculiar movements. His raised, tense bare buttocks are exposed at all times; they have taken the role of his face.

In *Threesome*, choreography becomes a laboratory of unrecognisability, indeterminacy, and perversity (a type of perversity that is not aimed at pornographic seduction, but rather one aligned with trickster-like shapeshifting and subversion). By exposing his (not his?) body in this way, Grudziński performs choreopolitical gestures. First, it becomes immediately apparent that one will be looking at the figures of Wilk, Szymański, and

Wiesiołłowski from the anal angle, i.e., from a perspective quite unlike that of official dance history. Indeed, the spirits enter the performer's body precisely through the anal route, further grounding the performance within the context of homoerotic desires. Secondly, the choreographer inverts the traditional hierarchy of the body: he conceals his head and face, grotesquely distorting the outline of his figure and thereby thwarting straightforward identification. Thus 'reshuffled,' the body becomes a pliable locus of potentiality rather than a marker of identity. The fact that Grudziński's genitals are also hidden may, I suggest, be decoded as an attempt to reclaim the indeterminacies inscribed in the biographies of his astral companions.

In the following sequences, Grudziński sits down and turns his masked face towards the audience. At times, his hands seem to arrange themselves into successive ballet positions; at others, he appears to bow to invisible forces whose intensity convulses his body. Finally, he stands at the centre of an invisible circle: his neck bent in painful contraction, his sweat-drenched back hunched, his hands pressed dramatically against his face, as if it were about to fall away. The performer faces the back wall, where red inscriptions reappear, this time forming Polish subtitles to a monologue delivered in English by Grudziński's off-stage voice. The choreographer returns to the year 2001 and to his first *plié* in the rehearsal room of the Opera Narodowa, the very space where Wiesiołłowski, Szymański, and Wilk all once prepared for their great roles. He shares fragments of their queer biographies, which seem to seep into his own.

In the course of his monologue, Grudziński removes the mask from his head and face, before finally turning his face to the audience and performing the basic step of the oberek dance, which, deconstructed in various ways, continues for several minutes, until the end of the performance. During this

time, archival recordings of performances by Wilk, Szymański, and Wiesiołłowski are projected onto the wall, edited by Rafał Dominik in such a way that the virtual bodies of the dancers seem to interpenetrate each other, as if one spirit were flowing through another and merging with Grudziński, who becomes haunted and multiplied himself, in a wild, rhythmic vortex. The lights (Jacqueline Sobiszewski) pulsate incessantly, alternately dimming and flaring, eventually exploding dancingly into a delirious lumino show.

Grudziński harnesses the oblique potential of the *oberek* as a trance-like, whirling dance and transforms it into a hauntological, paranormal revel. He queers a Polish national dance and, in a broader sense, the very notions of community and archive as structures that relegate otherness to darkness. He dances both in his own name and on behalf of his companions, turning the *obertas* into a choreopolitical, ecstatic manifestation of liberation (not from spirits, but from the power of the spirit of normative history). The gesture of effacing himself and dissolving into the figures of Szymański, Wilk, and Wiesiołłowski may be construed both as an affirmation of a porous, receptive, and open subjectivity – one ready for creative dispersal into the Other – and as an attempt to intersect multiple temporalities, thereby queering both historical and contemporary spaces of the perceptible.

A strange, alien body also haunts Edyta Kozak in her autobiographical *Dancing for You Longer than One Minute*. It belongs to Tina Turner, who appears on stage like a holographic projection (in fact, embodied by Krzysztof Miłkowski dressed as the American singer) and becomes a symbol of the world from which Kozak, as a ballet student and later a soloist, had been estranged. The performer recalls that she first encountered Turner when the singer ‘was already the grandmother of rock.’ This anecdote serves as one of the signs of a regained contact with reality, with a reality no longer

distorted by the discipline of ballet and its corporeal regimes. Yet the ghosts of the past continue to circulate throughout the performance. Projected on the screen is archival footage of Kozak's ballet appearances, while on stage a young girl performs a classical warm-up routine, attempting to hold a sheet of paper between her buttocks. As the performance suggests, ballet cannot simply be torn off like a plaster.

Kozak created *Dancing for You…* in collaboration with director Roland Rowiński, who also 'plays' the role of the male gaze, an oppressive force that shapes and disciplines the dancer's – and, more broadly, the woman's – body. Although the man remains invisible, his offstage voice guides the performer as if an omnipresent demiurge, an internalised guardian of obedience. The performance is framed as a rehearsal for a 'personal' and 'contemporary' production. Its dramaturgy is strikingly simple: at first, Kozak follows the director's instructions (always with a touch of comic grotesque); later, she begins to resist him, with the successive stages of rebellion corresponding to her progressive divergence from ballet and her attachment to contemporary dance. One of the most spectacular scenes is the cancan, which the performer initially refuses to dance (given its sexist nature). In the end, however, she executes a wild, grotesque version of the dance, beginning with a sequence of sensual leg stretches that gradually morphs into something resembling manic boxing. The process of liberation from the frameworks of classical aesthetics thus interjects with an emancipation from male fantasies.

In the subsequent scenes, Kozak engages in a conversation with Rowiński about the workings of classical dance. She explains and demonstrates everything in a comic mode, thereby exposing the absurdities of ballet, which in her interpretation emerges as one of the agents of patriarchal

power. For instance, she notes that a woman may express fear or love on stage, but not anger or aggression, as the latter belong exclusively to the masculine repertoire. Although Kozak exaggerates every convention associated with the modulation of emotion and the aestheticisation of suffering, it is difficult not to discern (despite her buffoonery) the uncanny effects underpinning ballet's surrealities. The choreopolitical dimension of these scenes lies, among others, in the deconstruction of ballet's supposed extraordinariness, i.e., in revealing and mocking its sleights of hand. While stories of the murderous, dehumanising training endured by ballet bodies are common knowledge (which was also no doubt the case back in 2009), what seems crucial in *Dancing for You…* is the fact that, in evoking these themes, Kozak never romanticises suffering or mobilises the poetics of body horror. Instead, she speaks of the profundity of aesthetic indoctrination. She illustrates this with characteristic self-irony through her reaction to the dance of the Chosen One in Pina Bausch's *The Rite of Spring*(1975), a performance she saw in 1987, while still a ballet student who considered the dancer performing the role to be a scandalously 'fat woman.' *Dancing for You…* features yet another reference to choreographic reinterpretations of *The Rite of Spring*. Kozak recounts Jérôme Bel's *Jérôme Bel* (1995), explaining the radical nature of Bel's deconstruction of Vaslav Nijinsky's legendary 1913 ballet, centred on the search for a zero degree of choreography. Kozak attempts to replicate one of the most provocative gestures from Bel's manifesto-performance, attempting to urinate on stage, but fails, admitting that she is too embarrassed to proceed. She also distances herself from choreographic transgression in other scenes, for example when she throws a piece of raw meat at the audience as part of a task set by the director (to depict contemporary male-female relations). Nevertheless, it is in the field of new dance that she ultimately finds her

place, a fact evidenced not only by *Dancing for You…* itself, but also by her ongoing curatorial work.

Kozak blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, weaving into the performance stories from her family and sexual life. Through these gestures, she not only reveals the irreversible fusion between the personal and the performative body, but also completes a reflection on what new dance is (or can become): a political practice, a critical analysis of social hierarchies and of the systems that discipline the female body and desire, an emancipatory strategy. In *Dancing for You…*, the tendencies that have shaped not only the identity of the Ciało/Umysł (Body/Mind) Festival but also that of the new Polish choreography come sharply into focus.

New choreography, particularly at its inception, positioned itself in clear opposition to the tradition of Polish dance theatre, a stance exemplified by Leśnierowska's 2006 statement, 'It remains excessively emotional, seemingly insensitive to reality, perpetually focused on probing its own feelings, invariably narrating its experiences without distance, often infantile, banal, and naïve' (2006, p. 17). Pasińska, whose artistic biography has been enmeshed with the Polski Teatr Tańca, does not offer such a diagnosis in *The Last Sunday*. Instead, she turns her gaze toward her own remix of Drzewiecki's 1985 production, which, according to contemporary accounts and reviews collected by Stefan Drajewski in *Conrad Drzewiecki. Reformator polskiego baletu* (Conrad Drzewiecki. The Reformer of Polish Ballet) (2014, p. 260–266), was booed at its premiere.

Pasińska's performance, however, is neither an attempt at reconstruction nor even a deconstruction of the original choreography; in fact, apart from the title and the recurring musical motif (invoking Mieczysław Fogg's hit song), it bears little direct relation thereto. Rather, it serves as an analysis of

Drzewiecki's failure, viewed through the lens of his earlier productions. This is already signalled by the final sentence of the performance description, published on Komuna Warszawa's website:

It [the performance of *The Last Sunday* – A.M.] showed that an experiment extending beyond the compositional structures employed by Drzewiecki proved more difficult for the Master than continuing along the path that guaranteed him glory. In referencing *The Last Sunday* and other performances by Drzewiecki (*Adagio for Strings and Organ*, *Krzesany* and *Eternal Songs*; see Drajewski, 2018, p. 142), Pasińska weaves a narrative about artistic risk, at the same time taking it herself.

Drzewiecki's *The Last Sunday* was a performance about war and the reality of concentration camps (the stage was arranged to resemble a barracks). It incorporated pantomimic and dramatic scenes in which dance played a restrained role; according to Jacek Łumiński's account, the choreography also featured elements of postmodern dance, including gestures drawn from everyday movement (1985, cited in Drajewski, 2014, p. 263). In his review, Kazimierz Młynarz recounts one of the pivotal scenes, in which 'the female dancers move lethargically (exhausted? drunk?) in a circle that symbolises death. They are ruled by a woman (a kapo?) with a whip, who humiliates them with sadistic ferocity. Sadism and sex, sadism and music' (1985, cited in Drajewski, 2014, p. 265). This final phrase could just as well correspond to what transpires in Pasińska's thirty-minute *remix*. Drab and somewhat derelict, the stage features several poles from which long ropes hang. From the speakers comes the sound of heavy, pathological breathing that accompanies the opening sequences of the choreography; amplifying the cacophony is the creaking of two life-sized wooden mannequins– one with female, the other with male contours – manipulated by Pasińska and

Mikołajczyk, dressed in tight, flesh-and-earth-tinged costumes.

Although jointed like human bodies, the crude, rigid mannequins resist the performers; they appear obstinate rather than pliant. The attempts to choreograph this wooden matter resemble acts of coercion, of forcibly imposed poses, gestures as persistent as they are violent. In the opening stages, Pasińska and Mikołajczyk arrange the mannequins in a series of postures, pausing after each configuration as though posing for some macabre photoshoots, perhaps akin to those that one once used to take at home with one's recently deceased loved ones. At a certain point, the performers drag the objects across the floor like inert, unconscious bodies (or simply corpses) and, now in horizontal positions, continue this nightmarish photo-theatre. Their faces remain implacably expressionless, as if they too belonged to lifeless (or inanimate) figures. Gradually, the forms assumed by Pasińska and Mikołajczyk grow increasingly spectacular, evoking frozen ballet poses and lifts, imbued with a deep poignancy, for it is clear that the mannequins can never substitute for the warmth of human embrace. As the dancers lift their legs into quasi-acrobatic positions, every tremor of their tensed muscles becomes visible.

This part concludes with a scene in which Mikołajczyk simulates sexual intercourse – or perhaps rape – with his wooden partner, alternately rubbing himself slowly against its body and convulsing orgasmically above it to the rhythm of Hanka Klepacka and Bartłomiej Sowa's music, which for a moment slips into heavy-metal sonorities. Gradually, superimposed on his panting are unsettling reverberations and isolated, truncated tones from various instruments, as well as what seem like corrupted classical melodies: the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* by Claude Debussy and Karol Szymanowski's *Songs of the Night*. Next, Pasińska and Mikołajczyk, roll

frenetically across the entire stage, as if possessed, until they collide, transitioning into a duet in which they fluidly and gracefully repeat the poses rehearsed earlier. This choreography offers only an illusion of release, for soon they begin to move as though cursed, trapped within the bodies of mannequins that have briefly inhabited organic, sentient flesh. They end their duet like discharging robots, their bodies convulsed from within by electric shocks. In the finale, they return to the mannequins and bind them with ropes. Pasińska hoists her former wooden partner and leaves her suspended in the posture of a hanged body. As the hanging takes place, a rasping, grinding version of *The Last Sunday* resounds from the speakers, as if performed by a drunken choir from beyond the grave.

The original song lyrics are changed to, 'This is your last Sunday… / Why did you not venture further? / Why did you pack / Dance and ballet into a hump? / This is your last Sunday… / A grand finale at the summit… / Was this your zenith? / Or were you… / overcome by fear?'

The role of the mannequins in *The Last Sunday* is far from unequivocal. They may symbolise the ballet forms that Drzewiecki sought to loosen by introducing elements of modern and folk dance, albeit never so radically as to break with the regimes of virtuosity. Alternatively, they may constitute Pasińska's commentary on Drzewiecki's entire oeuvre, whose choreographic idiom had become so distinctive over the years that its disruption in *The Last Sunday* met with audience resistance. Last but not least, in what seems to me the most plausible interpretation, Pasińska's *The Last Sunday* is not (or not merely) a critical examination of Drzewiecki's choreographies, but also of his working methods and beliefs on the one hand,[11] and of the entrenched narratives that have portrayed him, on the other, as a revered Master.[12] 'I've been remembered in different ways, yet kindness and understanding for the

difficulties of my character always prevail. […] I love people. For me, every person is like a set of skills that I've honed,' Drzewiecki declares of himself in Robert Ćwikliński's documentary film, tellingly touted as 'an extended interview with the Master.'

Pasińska's performance provoked a strong reaction from Drajewski, the author of numerous books and articles on Drzewiecki, and one of the chief architects of the choreographer's legend. In his article *Remix in Dance Theatre*, Drajewski accuses Pasińska of distorting quotations drawn from Drzewiecki's oeuvre. Among others, he argues that the dancers 'perform the choreography with the full muscular tension characteristic of the degenerate technique of Soviet, rather than (sic!) Russian, classical dance' (Drajewski, 2018, p. 142), as if forgetting that Pasińska's performance was never intended as a faithful citation, but rather as a critical, choreopolitical intervention.

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In the constellations choreographed by Grudziński, Kozak, and Pasińska, counter-histories intertwine with histories of rescue. What we are witnessing, then, is not merely the exposure of omissions or structures of oppression, but also the release of subversive energies. Thus, for instance, Wilk, Wiesiołłowski, and Szymański return not as victims to be heeded, but as embodiments of queer vitality and figures who alter the official narratives of the Teatr Wielki while simultaneously co-creating the future of queer dance.

In discussing *Threesome*, *Dancing for You…*, and *The Last Sunday*, I have sought to demonstrate how contemporary dance artists situate their own

practices in relation to historical contexts and how they engage in choreographic negotiations with the entrenched narratives surrounding the legends of Polish dance theatre and ballet. These negotiations do not take the form of radical ruptures; rather, they invite the ghosts of the past to collaborate in the *here and now* toward the creation of new – open and porous – archives, ones that accommodate critical perspectives, reparative gestures, and choreopolitical interventions, while actively participating in the mobilisation of choreographic autonomies. The choreographies of Grudziński, Kozak, and Pasińska are haunted by the past, yet they also haunt that past in return, wreaking choreopolitical havoc within its archives, much like ghosts who announce neither their arrival nor their intent, who cross thresholds uninvited and brazenly disturb the prevailing status quo. They demonstrate that not only the future of Polish dance, but also its past, remains in a state of becoming, an ongoing process that involves both the uncovering of blank spaces and the rewriting of pages already inscribed.

Translated by Józef Jaskulski

In 2026, the Jagiellonian University Press will release the Polish-language edition of the collective volume *A History of Polish Theatre*, originally released by Cambridge University Press in 2022 under the editorship of Katarzyna Fazan, Michał Kobiałka, and Bryce Lease. The following text—previously unpublished—was commissioned as a supplement to the English-language volume and will feature in its Polish edition.

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Footnotes

1. The Polish premiere of the piece took place on 7 September 2024, at Warsaw's Nowy Teatr.
2. Tomasz Ciesielski lists the institutions where Wiesiołłowski danced and taught (2022, p. 685–686).
3. Today, it is known as the Narodowy Instytut Muzyki i Tańca, although, in fact, it has always operated as a state institution.
4. See https://www.centrumwruchu.pl/kolektyw/ [accessed: 13.112024].
5. In this instance, I draw on the terminology of Jacques Rancière (2007).
6. One example of this is the renewed reminder that Tacjanna Wysocka's Ballet collaborated with Juliusz Osterwa's Teatr Reduta and that Wysocka herself choreographed many of Leon Schiller's renowned productions (see Ignaczak, 2017, p. 64–81).
7. In this case, I draw on the thought of Dorota Sosnowska, who, referring to Diana Taylor's theory and her dialectic of the archive and the repertoire, notes that, 'Memory is always

performative (inseparable from action), and the document is an invitation to dance' (Sosnowska, 2017, p. 88).
8. *Second Nature* by Agata Siniarska and Karolina Grzywnowicz is an interdisciplinary exploration of the life and work of Pola Nireńska (1910–1992) and her *Holocaust Tetralogy*. In turn, *Projekt Yanka Rudzka: Wielogłos* is the second (after *LEAVENING*, 2016) choreography by Joanna Leśnierowska and Janusz Orlik to reactivate the practice associated with Rudzka, an icon of contemporary dance in Brazil, who until recently had remained virtually unknown in Poland (b. 1916, d. 2008), and whose practice combined elements of traditional folk dance with contemporary techniques. I discuss these two performances in my article *Opening the Archives: Traces of Modern Dance in New Choreography* (2023).
9. Pasińska joined the Polski Teatr Tańca – Balet Poznański in1989, becoming its first soloist in 1997.
10. This distinction is inspired by the Rancièrian opposition between *police* and *politics*.
11. Drzewiecki stepped down as the director of the Polski Teatr Tańca in 1987 and, according to Drajewski, expected the authorities in Poznań to close down the company. 'He was convinced that with his departure as the founder of an auteur theatre, the latter should cease to exist. Many years passed before he changed his mind.' According to this account, Drzewiecki also doubted that the theatre could survive without him (2014, p. 273).
12. At this point, however, one should duly note that Pasińska herself has been accused of mobbing (see Szymkowiak, 2022).

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/ HISTORIES

Opera in Poland: At the Intersection of Class and Nationality

Marcin Bogucki | University of Warsaw

This article explores the history of opera in Poland through the lens of nationality and class. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the archaeology of knowledge, I analyse canonical operatic works not only as individual artistic creations, but also as theoretical objects in which multiple discourses intersect. My point of departure is the project *Halka/Haiti. 18°48′05″N 72°23′01″W* by C.T. Jasper and Joanna Malinowska, which focuses on national themes while offering limited reflection on the class implications of staging Stanisław Moniuszko's *Halka* in Haiti. I focus on key operatic works, examining the tensions and ambiguities they contain. I raise questions about the changing reception of *Halka* – from a socially engaged poem to a national opera – as well as the possible readings of *The Haunted Manor*, whether through the lens of Polish Biedermeier culture or romanticised Sarmatism. I also consider the complex role of national identity in shaping the image of Moniuszko himself. In the case of *Krakowiacy i Górale* by Wojciech Bogusławski and Jan Stefani, I reflect on interpretations that emphasise either its national or class dimensions. Finally, I examine the early history of opera in Poland, looking at the court theatre of Władysław IV as both a source of entertainment and a tool of political ideology. By taking an 'archaeological' approach to opera, I show how discourse around Polish opera tends to highlight its national aspects while pushing questions of class to the margins.

Keywords: opera; class; nationality; Moniuszko; Bogusławski

‘Why bring an opera to the other end of the world?’ [1]

Stanisław Moniuszko’s *Halka* was first performed in Haiti on 7 February 2015. Excerpts from the opera were staged there by the soloists of the Teatr Wielki in Poznań, accompanied by the Holy Trinity Philharmonic Orchestra of Port-au-Prince and dancers of the village of Cazale, where the presentation took place. At the helm of the undertaking were a Polish conductor, Polish director, and Polish choreographer.[2]

The choice of location was no coincidence. Cazale is home to the *Polone nwa* (Black Poles), descendants of Polish legionnaires dispatched to the island by Napoleon to suppress the revolution. Although most likely only about a hundred lower-ranking soldiers from the several-thousand-strong contingent actually joined the revolt, there is a widespread belief in Haiti that Poles deserted en masse to side with the insurgents, a conviction rooted in the perceived affinity between the struggles of the two oppressed peoples (Pachoński & Wilson, 1986).

The prime movers of the *Halka/Haiti 18°48'05’N 72°23'01’W* project were Polish artists C.T. Jasper and Joanna Malinowska, who, together with the curator Magdalena Moskalewicz, developed it as part of the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The result was a film displayed as a panoramic projection reminiscent of nineteenth-century painted panoramas. *Halka* was staged on a road running through the village, with singers dressed in traditional noble and folk costumes and dancers wearing contemporary festive attire. At the centre of the scene stood a goat tethered to a post.

The juxtaposition of these two worlds produced a surreal effect, as the

performers' fur caps were entirely out of place in the local climate and culture. Jasper and Malinowska thus posed a question about the universality of classical music: is it an art form understood everywhere? On the one hand, the artists explained to the inhabitants of Cazale that the story of *Halka* echoed that of the nineteenth-century Haitian poem *Choukoun*, which likewise centres on a love destroyed by class difference; on the other, it is impossible to overlook in this claim to universality an element of colonialism, underpinned by the assumption of Western cultural superiority.

The Polish artists made no secret that their inspiration came from Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo*, the tale of an attempt to build an opera house in the Amazonian jungle. They took the risk of translating fantasy into reality. In Herzog's narrative, the mission ends in failure, albeit not without a makeshift operatic performance staged aboard a ship sailing the Amazon. One finds a similar ephemerality in Jasper and Malinowska's project: they adapted *Halka* to local conditions, reduced it to key scenes, and staged it without stage design at the heart of a village, with everyday life in the backdrop. In an interview, Malinowska defended herself against accusations of perpetuating the colonial impulses embedded in Fitzcarraldo's dream:

> One might construe the act of bringing opera – an emblem of the elite culture of former colonising powers – into a place with Haiti's history as a contemporary form of colonisation. Yet we differ from the colonisers in that we imposed nothing on the Haitian community. The performance could only take place upon their consent. We visited Cazale several times beforehand to discuss the idea with various local authorities: the headmaster of the secondary school, the village elders, the priest, the peacekeeper, and the youth. We explained the opera's theme and how and why we wished

> to stage it. They did not agree immediately, instead posing many questions, for example, about our output and credentials. Eventually we secured their permission. Given the circumstances, we were more akin to a travelling theatre passing through the village than to colonisers (2016).

Malinowska casts her project as a social undertaking, although it seems above all to have been an attempt to work through her own personal history:

> I grew up in a country that suppressed all forms of otherness. I was weary of that homogeneity and of Polish Catholicism. As a teenager I would travel through the countryside with a friend to listen to local dialects and witness manifestations of local cultures. I would read about North and South America. I was fascinated by different conceptions of the world, by alternative ways of thinking about religion, by the multiplicity of possible models of life (Malinowska, 2016).

The omission of this personal perspective in the final version of *Halka/Haiti* constitutes its greatest weakness. Deprived of its organisational context, one watches the film as a narrative of colonial fantasy, much like Herzog's work. In the words of Dorota Sosnowska:

> Watching *Halka/Haiti* video the viewer feels still trapped in the *Fitzcarraldo* context. White people dressed in beautiful, rich theatrical costumes singing with opera voice, and black, poor people dancing in amateur way or watching the show from plastic chairs. What happened? Why this image is still telling the colonial

> story without braking it’s schemes and critically lever the race category? (n.d.).

In Sosnowska’s view, a critical examination of nationality should be concomitant with an equally probing reflection on class: the artists arrived in Haiti as allies, yet they held symbolic and economic power in the form of cameras and financial resources. ‘By re-enacting famous Western film they re-enacted it’s capitalistic dimension reintroducing race as the effect of class divisions’ (n.d.).

Nationality and class in *Halka*

Despite the apparent universality of classical music, it operates at the intersection of various discourses, of which class and nationality seem the most significant. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of the archaeology of knowledge – albeit in an unorthodox manner – I would like to examine how opera has functioned in Poland:

> Instead of seeing, on the great mythical book of history, lines of words that translate in visible characters thoughts that were formed in some other time and place, we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use) (Foucault, 2010, p. 149).

The objects of my inquiry will thus be operatic works, though I shall not treat them as individual artistic creations, but rather as manifestations – at once

events and solidities – in which various strands of discourse converge (ibid., p. 161). Moreover, by reversing the chronological order, I will examine the superimposed layers of meaning that have accumulated over centuries and continue to shape contemporary perceptions of this art form.

Jasper and Malinowska chose *Halka* for their project as the first Polish national opera. It is worth considering how the story of a highlander girl abandoned by a young nobleman came to bear that designation, and why it achieved such success.[3] This story begins with Włodzimierz Wolski's socially engaged poem about a peasant girl's revenge, which the author refused to publish in a version hobbled by Russian censorship. Persuaded by Moniuszko, Wolski drafted the libretto for the first version of the opera (first staged in Vilnius in 1848), departing from the Romantic trappings and starkness of the original while also drawing inspiration from Daniel Auber's celebrated *La Muette de Portici*. Full success only arrived only with the Warsaw premiere of *Halka* at the Teatr Wielki in 1858: a full-scale, four-act production featuring virtuoso arias, choruses, ballet interludes, and visually striking scenery that appealed to audiences and critics alike (Zieziula, 2020). Did *Halka/Haiti* not meet a similar fate? The authors' radical intentions, initially expressed as a socially engaged project involving the Cazale community, ultimately crystallised as a static film screened within the elite framework of the Biennale and still operating within nineteenth-century national divisions.

Halka marked a breakthrough not only in Moniuszko's career but also in the history of Polish musical theatre (ibid., p. 141). Aiding the consolidation of *Halka*'s stature was its international recognition, driven both by its universal subject matter and by the ease with which the composer tapped into the intellectual frameworks of his era. Overnight, Moniuszko became the

‘founding father of Polish opera’ and the foremost representative of the national school (Allison, 2019). He earned his reputation through critical acclaim and praise from foreign authors. Particularly influential was a favourable review of *Halka* in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* by Hans von Bülow, a conductor of considerable stature in German musical circles. Less often discussed, however, is how the work came to Bülow’s attention: it was Maria Kalergis, a passionate advocate of Moniuszko, who introduced the conductor to the opera. Nevertheless, Bülow’s warm praise carried a note of condescension, as he dubbed *Halka* a work not entirely devoid of flaws, a composition by a novice forced to struggle heroically against external conditions that thwarted his full artistic evolution. This thread is absent from Jasper and Malinowska’s project. Whereas *Fitzcarraldo* invokes the most celebrated masterpieces of Italian bel canto – performed by none other than Enrico Caruso and integral to the operatic mainstream – *Halka* remains for most audiences a repertory rarity, lacking comparable symbolic weight.

It was also Jasper and Malinowska themselves who referred to *Halka* as an export commodity. Its international career in the twentieth century owed much to Maria Fołtyn, who took the piece to Cuba, Mexico, Turkey, Russia, Canada, and Brazil. Often referred to as ‘Moniuszko’s widow’ (Jasper & Malinowska, 2016, p. 64), Fołtyn became a key figure in consolidating the composer’s image, though less has been said about her not-always-conservative approach to direction. Fołtyn adapted *Halka* to the expectations of local audiences. For instance, in the Mexican version she altered the ending so that the grief-stricken Jontek kills Janusz with a highlander’s axe; she also allowed questions of race to resonate in the context of peasant suffering by casting a Cuban soprano in the title role. The potential for such universalisation of Moniuszko’s piece has been addressed by Agnieszka Topolska:

Maria Fołtyn's productions were thus an attempt to undo Moniuszko's localism, so as to detach him from an exclusive association with Polish 'domesticity,' instead branding him as a transnational artist. Yet could Fołtyn truly overcome that vision if, in the Cuban staging, the Black soprano Yolanda Hernández donned traditional Polish highlander shoes and floral kerchiefs? (2011).

A similar ambiguity pervades Jasper and Malinowska's screening: do they treat opera as a symbol of the Western world, or as a national monument erected for Poles who happen to lack Polish passports?

This brings me to the notion of *Halka* as a national opera. How is it possible that the tragic story of an abandoned girl could acquire such a designation? Moniuszko employs *couleur locale*, evident in the rhythms of Polish dances (the polonaise, the *mazur*, and highlander dances). Yet his opera is not a celebration of Polishness or of Sarmatism; one can decipher it as a vehicle for social critique. Rüdiger Ritter, the German author of a monograph on Moniuszko, reflects on the issue, asking whether *Halka* is a political manifesto, a genre painting, or a national monument (2019, p. 256). There is no single correct answer to this question, for the opera's reception has shifted over time. Initially far from being regarded as a Romantic melodrama, the audiences saw it as a social drama, although it was the patriotic interpretation that prevailed over time. But what did the adjective 'national' entail in the nineteenth century? As Ritter observes, *Halka* reflects contemporary debates concerning the concept of nation in its political sense (construed as an affiliation to a particular social group), as well as in a broader national sense (defined by birth and irrespective of social stratification). It was not until twentieth-century productions, however, that questions of social justice first began to resonate.

The Haunted Manor: A Polish Biedermeier Piece or a Case of Romantic Sarmatism?

The second opera Jasper and Malinowska considered staging was Moniuszko's *Straszny dwór* (The Haunted Manor), a work of major significance not only to the history of Polish music but also to the Polish cultural imagination. In 2018, on the eve of the lavish celebrations marking the composer's bicentennial, Jacek Kowalski published *„Straszny dwór", czyli sarmackie korzenie Niepodległej* (The Haunted Manor, or the Sarmatian Roots of Independence). This opulently illustrated A4-format volume of more than five hundred pages, its cover adorned with a traditional Slutsk sash, focused entirely to that single opera and its contexts. As the title indicates, the author argued that *The Haunted Manor* was the most important work for the generation of 1918, the year of recovery of the sovereign state, because of its Polish features, epitomised by the Sarmatian tradition.

Kowalski directs his criticism towards Dobrochna Ratajczakowa (2005) and Alina Borkowska-Rychlewska (2014), who had characterised Moniuszko as a representative of the 'Polish Biedermeier' style. The Romantic hero is hard to find in Moniuszko's oeuvre; instead, predominant therein is a search for an idyll impervious to the threats of civilisation, while society is portrayed as an affectionate family. This corresponds to the composer's own disposition: guileless, devout, and closeted against modernity, as painted by Kowalski. As a nobleman living a bourgeois life, Moniuszko seemed a perfect match for the Biedermeier ideal. And yet, Kowalski inquires as to why *The Haunted Manor* places such emphasis on Sarmatian elements and how it acquired the status of a national drama performed at major state occasions. His answer is

straightforward: despite features that one might term ‘sentimental’ or ‘domestic,’ the opera manifests the influence of Romantic Sarmatism. Although Polish nobility was initially associated with ‘obscurantism’ (a view shared by Enlightenment thinkers and early Romantics), the nineteenth century saw a rehabilitation of Sarmatism, including in the work of Polish national poets. In view of this, Kowalski proposes a compromise explanation: librettist Jan Chęciński sought to combine melodrama with a Biedermeier plot and the *kontush* style, i.e., a stylised language connoting the tales of the Polish nobility.

The opera’s reception, however, testifies to the ambiguity of its interpretation. Before allowing the work to be staged, the censors intervened in the text of this seemingly innocuous tale of the amorous adventures of two young noblemen and two young women, excising every allusion to Polish history. Further alterations were mandated after the premiere itself, yet none of this dampened the public’s enthusiasm: audiences flocked to performances, and the opera was taken off the bill after the third showing. This undoubtedly points to the possibility of a patriotic reading. Quite different reactions emerge when we trace the opera’s reception abroad, for example, in Russia. César Cui discerned no heroic elements, instead praising *The Haunted Manor* as a deft comedy framed in idyllic Biedermeier imagery (Kowalski, 2018, p. 140).

Grzegorz Zieziula identifies *The Haunted Manor* as a comedy infused with epic elements, inviting comparisons with *Pan Tadeusz*, Polish national epic, although Jan Chęciński’s immediate inspiration came from the aristocratic traditions known from the tales of Kazimierz Wójcicki. Zieziula also points to another interpretative avenue, not national but class-based:

For many sitting in the Teatr Wielki audience who were descendants of petty

nobility, the evocation of Sarmatian times served as a kind of analgesic. Thirty years earlier, following the failed November Uprising and the Tsar's introduction of a new heraldic statute, they had been deemed 'illegitimate' and stripped of their estate privileges. Thanks to the opera's neo-Sarmatian myth, they could for a moment return to the realities of a vanished world and forget the humiliation of their social demotion (Zieziula, 2020, p. 188–189).

As with *Halka*, Kowalski returns to the question of the piece's translatability beyond its local context: 'Is this quintessentially Polish opera also – or can it become – a European one, or is it doomed to remain merely parochial?' (Kowalski, 2018, p. 472).

Moniuszko as a national composer?

Agnieszka Topolska has analysed the myths surrounding *The Haunted Manor*, rooted in the perception of Moniuszko as a national composer writing to raise the people's spirits. For many years, it was commonly assumed that Moniuszko composed *The Haunted Manor* in direct response to the January Uprising of 1863, although documentary evidence shows that the process began as early as 1861 and was merely interrupted by political events (Topolska, n.d.). The killing of the 'five martyrs' during an anti-Tsarist demonstration on 27 February of that year prompted an atmosphere inconducive to visits to the theatre or opera. A spontaneous boycott evolved into a general prohibition, disseminated through an anonymous circular calling for a period of 'national mourning.' The battle over the theatre between the Tsarist administration and the Polish underground lasted three years: the former sought to maintain theatre life as a tool of education and entertainment, while the latter warned that attending performances would symbolically legitimise the regime. The situation attains even more

complexity when viewed from Moniuszko's own perspective as a patriot, albeit apparently unsympathetic to the idea of an uprising, and the father of a large family struggling with financial difficulties, which may have shaped his attitude towards armed resistance.

Topolska is also the author of a penetrating doctoral dissertation on the myth-making surrounding Moniuszko (2014). She points to the Romantic clichés embedded in his biography, highlighting the figure of the national bard: an artist who speaks for the collective and envisions the future in a time of lost independence. Considering Moniuszko's modest reputation before the Warsaw premiere of *Halka*, and the difficulties he faced in staging it at the Teatr Wielki, one wonders why he should have become a central figure in Polish musical life. Reportedly dubbed 'an amateur from remote Lithuania' by his Varsovian contemporaries (Topolska, 2020, p. 583), biographers often overlook just how unexpected Moniuszko's rise in stature was. The composer himself once characterised his music as intended for 'domestic use,' although this view would later shift, or at least became ambivalent, as he also sought recognition abroad, both in the West and in the East.

Magdalena Dziadek highlights the difficulties involved in reconstructing Moniuszko's worldview (2020, p. 53). The challenge stems not only from the fragmentary nature of his surviving correspondence, but also from the shifting expectations of the public and the various perspectives of his successive biographers. According to Dziadek, 'it is easy to discern that these interpretations vary from one era to another, always aligning with the current expectations of readers and sometimes even anticipating them, be it in the name of political correctness or simply to satisfy the public' (p. 54). For this reason, Moniuszko was able to take on many different roles over

time: a national bard, celebrant of the noble traditions of the Polish gentry, composer of folk inspiration, and defender of the oppressed.

Elements that do not fit a strictly national narrative were often downplayed or omitted in Moniuszko's biographies. One cannot gloss simply ignore the fact that, after his studies in Berlin, Moniuszko travelled to St. Petersburg, where he unsuccessfully sought a position at the imperial court; that he dedicated some of his works to Russian dignitaries: *Milda* to the heir to the throne (future Tsar Alexander II) and *Nijoła* to Grand Duke Konstantin; that he welcomed the positive reception of his operas in Russia; or that in 1856, during the Crimean War, he composed the *War Overture*. Leaving out such facts simplifies his portrait. As Magdalena Dziadek notes, Moniuszko should be viewed not only through the lens of patriotic sentiment but also through the prism of personal artistic ambition:

> Toward the end of Moniuszko's life, the instinct that had guided his 'national' orientation—first Lithuanian, later broadly Polish—seemed to weaken. The prospects of an international career, whether born of his own aspirations or inadvertently encouraged by friends and patrons, pressured him into conceiving works with more cosmopolitan overtones, intended as more palatable to non-Polish audiences (n.d.).

Moniuszko is readily referred to as a patriot, yet his own national allegiance is considered far less commonly. 'Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, or Russian?' asks Rüdiger Ritter (2019, p. 117), pointing to the different understandings of the word *nation* (ethnic, political, historical). Born in Ubiel (now in Belarus), Moniuszko was a subject of the Russian Empire and a member of

the nobility. He regarded himself as both Polish and Lithuanian – politically rather than ethnically – and grew up in a pro-Polish milieu, with a sense of strong ties to his local homeland. These identities did not always go hand in hand, and today it is also Belarus that claims Moniuszko as its own national composer.

One can attribute Moniuszko's ambivalent stance to his position in musical circles in partitioned Poland. His works were performed within the Warsaw opera scene, which unlike the city's academic institutions remained active in the wake of the post-1830 repressions, allowing the Russian authorities to project an image of normality. Starting in 1833, the opera was administered by Russian officials as part of the Warszawskie Teatry Rządowe (Warsaw Theatre Directorate). Because it offered performances in Polish and carried considerable prestige, the opera house became an important arena for the Polish independence movement. Yet politics were not the only source of frictions. Alongside the struggle between imperial policy and national aspirations, aesthetic disputes flared between progressive and conservative camps (Ritter, 2019, p. 77). Moniuszko's situation improved in the 1850s during the post-Crimean War thaw: the Warsaw premiere of *Halka* and his appointment as conductor of Polish operas were both products of this more lenient climate. Ironically, measures intended by the authorities to defuse subversive ideas proved counterproductive, turning the theatre into a venue for patriotic fervour and outright acts of sabotage.

Given his official exposure, Moniuszko kept music and overt politics carefully apart. He worked in the idiom of 'Aesopian language,' encoding patriotic messages in subtle ways and sometimes condensing them, as is the case in *The Haunted Manor*: the chimes echoing Ogiński's late-eighteenth-century polonaises, the noble motifs reminiscent of *Pan Tadeusz*, the heroic tenor

aria mourning a lost mother (a transparent shorthand for the lost homeland), the national costumes, and the playful revival of the age-old fashion debate between tailcoat and *kontush*. Although his works are routinely labelled 'national,' Moniuszko emerges as a far more complex figure, woven from the strands of patriotic and political engagement.

Cracovians and Highlanders: between national and public theatre

Moniuszko is celebrated as the father of the Polish national opera, an art form shaped by the urge to seek and preserve the 'spirit of the nation.' Yet the impulse to harness opera for patriotic and political purposes predates him. One prime example is *Krakowiacy i Górale* (Cracovians and Highlanders, 1794) by Wojciech Bogusławski and Jan Stefani: a didactic Enlightenment *śpiewogra* (a Polish inflection of the *Singspiel*) in which music played a secondary role. What mattered first and foremost was the words and the political impact of using the Polish language. Thus, in the words of Agnieszka Topolska, Moniuszko built on these early experiments:

> Before him, Poland only knew 'proto-operas,' since pieces such as *The Supposed Miracle* [alternative title of the *Cracovians and Highlanders* – M.B.] or *Poverty Made Happy* were not operas in the strict sense. *Halka* was the first piece to put Polish opera firmly on Europe's musical map, no longer the embarrassed novice when measured against the age-old and profound traditions of Italian or French opera (Topolska, 2011).

As with *The Haunted Manor*, what we encounter in *Cracovians and*

Highlanders is the mythologisation of the premiere. Adding to the legend was Bogusławski himself, although not without the aid of theatre scholars. From the very first performances, the piece became tightly entwined with political events.

Bogusławski claimed to have written *Cracovians and Highlanders* in response to the Battle of Racławice during the Kościuszko Uprising (4 April 1794), although the premiere had actually predated the clash by a month, with the piece first stage on 1 March. Zbigniew Raszewski offered a vivid account of that first production in his book on Bogusławski (2015, p. 278 ff.), piecing it together from the scant surviving evidence: a copy of the libretto (subsequent to the Warsaw premiere), a list of stage sets, and a watercolour depicting the final scene, as Piotr Morawski points out (2017, p. 474). Raszewski's reconstruction is essentially a literary creation assembled from scattered remains, although according to Morawski, the end result was 'a reconstruction of everything but the audience.' What must have been frustrating for a historian seeking hard facts, however, proves intriguing for a cultural historian examining the affective nature of the performance, and the more elusive tension between stage and spectators. After all, why were songs from *Cracovians and Highlanders* taken up and sung in the streets of a rebellious Warsaw?

At the surface level, the plot of *Cracovians and Highlanders* seems a simple romance: Stach loves Basia, Basia reciprocates the feeling, yet she is meant to marry the Highlander, a match encouraged by her step-mother, who herself flirts with the bridegroom. The quarrel between the Cracovians and the Highlanders over the aborted wedding is resolved not through violence but by the 'supposed miracle' devised by the student Bardos (perhaps a subsequent addition to the libretto). Morawski wonders how to interpret the

piece given that, in his view, the real drama unfolded not on the stage but in the audience. He does not regard *Cracovians and Highlanders* as a self-contained work, because doing so obscures the emotional charge it gained when 'dissolved,' as it were, into the context of the Kościuszko Uprising. For example, the vaudeville song with the incipit, *Wy uczeni, co dla cnoty cierpicie niemało* (You scholars, who suffer so much for the sake of virtue) served the same function as *Ça ira* or the *Marseillaise* in France. Strikingly, by changing a single word – *wy uczeni* ('you scholars') to *wy uczciwi* ('you honest folk') – the student's complaint about the hardships of learning turned into a revolutionary anthem. Another Bardos aria, with the opening lines, *Świat srogi, świat przewrotny* (A cruel world, a treacherous world), likewise transcended the stage, as the two verses resonated with the mood of the streets.

Just how open the work was for interpretation is evident in its subsequent reception: between 1794 and 1847, Warsaw audiences saw it performed 144 times. The piece could both fire insurrectionary zeal and help mourn defeat after the uprising's collapse. Bogusławski and Stefani's opera sparked hopes for a native musical theatre, though later composers such as Józef Elsner and Karol Kurpiński never matched its impact. Critics noted the music's limitations, as the nascent Romantic aesthetics demanded that 'national character' emerge not only from text but also from the music itself. It was only Moniuszko that would fulfil that expectation, as stressed by critics who linked *Halka* to *Cracovians*, highlighting both the contiguities and the differences between the two: decoded from this perspective, Stefani's opera appeared as a tentative first step towards full musical fruition, which came more than fifty years later.

In his dramaturgical introduction to Michał Kmiecik's production at Teatr

Polski in Poznań, Piotr Morawski dubbed *Cracovians* as a work that ushered in Polish modernity, envisioning a society gathered around both the myth of concord and the spectre of revolution (p. 439). The challenge of interpretation lies in its very simplicity and deliberate ambiguity. What conflict is really at stake? Are Cracovians and Highlanders a cipher for Poles and Russians, or for rival Polish factions uniting against an external foe? For Morawski, while productions to-date have routinely emphasized the need for harmony, the opera equally opens a space of latent conflict. One must recall the revolutionary fervour sweeping Europe – and Poland – during the Kościuszko Insurrection. How emphatically, then, does *Cracovians and Highlanders* speak of national liberation (freedom), and how much of social struggle (equality and fraternity)?

Morawski views *Cracovians and Highlanders* through the lens of public rather than national theatre. Joanna Krakowska discusses the debates surrounding these two notions in the context of the 250th anniversary of the founding of Teatr Narodowy (National Theatre). She defines the former as follows:

> Thus, the public […] is not divided by class or economy, does not appropriate and does not limit access to cultural heritage, does not apply economic profitability as the main criterion of valuation and does not reduce theatre to the theatre industry and radical artistic creation to a fad of the very wealthy or niche and the shunned[4] (2015, p. 6)

According to Krakowska, the anniversary celebrations were justifiably held under the auspices of this broader, more inclusive category, one that – as

she enumerates – presupposes diversity, accessibility, freedom of expression, shared responsibility, and communal participation. She also enumerates the reasons for which the category of nationality no longer fulfils its purpose: it is too exclusionary, tied to an essentialist understanding of identity and to traditional values; what Krakowska stresses instead is the theatre's openness, discursiveness, and modernising dimension. She wrote her text in response to calls for cultivating the idea of a programmatically 'Polish' theatre involving the interpretation rather than deconstruction of the classics and unstrapped from the muzzle of political correctness.

The question remains to what extent *Cracovians and Highlanders* embodied the idea of a national theatre and to what extent a public one. Raszewski points to the opera's use of folkloric elements, although its language is a synthesis of various regionalisms created by Bogusławski, and in terms of legal and economic realities the libretto is relatively thin (2015, p. 285). Arguments can certainly be made for the work's social engagement, yet the national dimension resonated far more strongly in its public reception.

Opera as a national art?

To what extent, however, can one regard opera as a national art form in the Polish context? The genre's origins stem from the work of humanists at Italian courts of the late sixteenth century. Opera reached Poland very early, owing to the personal fascination of Władysław IV Waza, which he first developed as the heir to the Polish throne during his grand tour of 1624–1625 and subsequently nurtured as King of Poland. The question of nationality is uncertain here: determining it in an era before the modern understanding of 'nation' is somewhat problematic (Markiewicz, 2019, p. 8). Yet one can also argue for a more political conception of national

community: although the works were performed in Italian, they were commissioned by a Polish ruler, identified with the state itself, and served as a vehicle for diplomacy through art (Żukowski, 2013). It was not merely a matter of prestige but of genuine aesthetic and intellectual engagement. In the grain of Western European courts, Władysław sought to create the nucleus of a proto-academy. He personally read and evaluated libretti, tampered with texts, music, costumes, and staging, and supervised the reconstruction of the theatre hall. Opera thus formed part of a broader, theatricalized courtly life that encompassed not only art but also public spectacles, such as entrance pageants, diplomatic ceremonies, even pyrotechnic displays. Through his intermediaries, Władysław recruited musicians, commissioned composers, and searched for singers who matched his taste.[5]

The first documented opera performance in Poland took place on 27 February 1628 at the royal castle in Warsaw. That year's Carnival festivities featured the staging of *Gli amori d'Aci e Galatea*, with a libretto by Gabriello Chiabrera and music (most likely) by Santi Orlandi. Although the work had premiered in Mantua in 1617, the Warsaw production added both a prologue and an epilogue bearing allusive meanings that referred not only to current political circumstances (such as the Jagiellon–Waza lineage) but also to historical and even legendary narratives (invoking figures like Krakus and Lech), thus effectively 'Sarmatizing' the work's substance (Żukowski, 2023, p. 24).

An aesthete and devoted theatregoer, Władysław used opera to enhance both his personal stature and the prestige of the Polish court in Europe, a strategy consistent with his dynastic ambitions, including claims to foreign thrones and the idea of reviving the Jagiellon-Waza lineage. The most vibrant

period for opera under Władysław's rule fell after his coronation in 1633, in particular after the 1635 peace with Russia, inaugurating a period of roughly thirteen years that saw the staging of approximately thirty *drammi per musica* and ballets. Initially, the repertoire was imported from Italy, but from 1636 onward new works were created locally, courtesy of a triumvirate of artists: Agostino Locci as stage director, Virgilio Puccitelli as principal librettist and impresario, and Marco Scacchi as composer, supported by other musicians. Yet the chief architect of the theatrical meanings was Władysław himself. The productions favoured mythological and romantic as well as religious subjects, with occasional historical pieces tied to the king's domestic and international policies, e.g., his dynastic marriage plans (*The Abduction of Helen*, 1636), potential alliances (*The Story of Judith*, 1635; *Andromeda*, 1644), or political sympathies and antipathies (*Daphnis*, 1635; *Supplicant Africa*, 1638; *Aeneas*, 1641; *The Marriage of Amor and Psyche*, 1646). Although few musical sources survive – mostly in the form of scattered libretti – the extant evidence suggests that Władysław's theatre was not merely an imitation of Italian models but their equal. One striking case was *Saint Cecilia* (1637), staged for the royal wedding as a deliberate response to *Saint Alexius*, sponsored by the influential Barberini family in Rome. That same year marks the opening of the first permanent opera house north of the Alps. Despite the esteem Władysław's opera enjoyed across seventeenth-century Europe, the phenomenon is largely overlooked in mainstream Western histories of opera, a neglect attributable both to the loss of musical sources and to Poland's shifting position on the political map.

From its very beginnings, opera in Poland operated at the intersection of national identity and social hierarchy. On the one hand, it served as a tool of diplomacy, projecting the country's stature abroad; on the other, it became entangled in domestic power struggles between the king and the magnate

elite. In the eighteenth century, this tension only intensified. By then, the royal court no longer held a monopoly on opera, which had become an instrument of cultural rivalry, wielded in the contest for dominance between the monarch and the magnate families.

A story to be written

Debates on inclusivity and representation in opera have held a prominent place in Western scholarship since the 1980s, inspired by new musicology, which foregrounds the social context of music. Research has focused on how opera stages gender, national, and racial stereotypes, as well as on questions of access to opera in relation to social background and financial means. In Poland, by contrast, these topics remain peripheral to mainstream opera studies. Moreover, in part because music education is not considered a priority in general schooling (Paprocki, 2020), opera tends to function as a 'temple of art,' one surrounded by an aura of reverence, inaccessible, yet enjoying the highest cultural prestige.[6] Despite recurrent inspirations drawn from the so-called *Regietheater*, which emphasises the vision of the director, the conviction still prevails that contemporary interpretations desecrate sanctities rather than nurture tradition. This is less evident in the reception of *Halka*, which, thanks to the universality of the story of an innocently wronged woman, lends itself to diverse contexts, with its action transposed both to the period of the Polish People's Republic and to the present era. Conversely, the far more idiomatic *The Haunted Manor* continues to ignite controversy, e.g. the scandal surrounding Andrzej Żuławski's 1998 staging of the piece.

Żuławski, who had previously directed a film version of Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, received an invitation to stage Moniuszko's

work from Ryszard Pietkiewicz, General Director of Teatr Narodowy (National Theatre) in Warsaw, who was also in charge of Opera Narodowa (National Opera). As Żuławski recalls with characteristic bluntness, the purpose of his invitation was plain: 'That it was high time to blow the dust off this rot, and that maybe if that lunatic Żuławski showed up, he'd give this bloody termite mound a good kick up the arse and shake things up' (2008, p. 415). The director accepted the proposal, as he himself had fallen victim to the national indoctrination with Moniuszko's oeuvre:

> [And] what was the primal source of my interest in this opera? I remembered it from childhood, when we were dragged, in primary school, to those folksy, compulsory Moniuszko shows. I even saw one in Paris before my school-leaving exams, because some ghastly Polish theatre company had turned up, and I found it absolutely dreadful, since it was obvious this was second-rate culture, second-rate music, and that everything about it was somehow shabbier, duller, sort of hulking and jolly good at the same time: the old clock, the decrepit trash, the very spirit of decrepitude. And it made me curious as to why this was the case (p. 411).

Without entering into polemics with Żuławski over the misleading interpretative tropes tied to a mistaken reconstruction of the opera's genesis – allegedly composed in Paris rather than in Warsaw – one may infer that his aim was a critical reflection on the idealisation of the operatic idyll conceived by Chęciński and Moniuszko on the basis of the Soplicowo from the national poem *Pan Tadeusz*. The director set the action in 1863, at the moment when the insurgents return to the 'quiet little manor house of larch,' which in fact no longer exists, as it was burnt down. This iconoclastic

interpretation, combined with the cuts to the score introduced by the director, caused a scandal that resulted in the production being performed only fifteen times.

When considering the reception of Moniuszko's oeuvre, it becomes apparent that the national discourse prevails. One needs only to quote a passage from the resolution of the Polish parliament, grounded in this very rhetoric, which proclaimed 2019 as Moniuszko's anniversary year:

> Stanisław Moniuszko was a model patriot and, as Zdzisław Jachimecki, an early scholar of his oeuvre, wrote in 1921, 'a Pole through and through.' The composer's works – his great operas such as *Halka* and *The Haunted Manor*, which address the very essence of Polishness on both textual and visual planes – continue to inspire artists to this day. In Moniuszko's own time, they offered a palette with which Poles painted the most vivid shades of patriotic sentiment and national identity (*Resolution*, 2018).

The aforementioned research demonstrates the various attempts to marry the class discourse with the national one, and how thoroughly such efforts came to naught due to the shifting political circumstances and the conflicts brewing within the artistic milieu. Nevertheless, these moments highlight the fundamental interpretative contexts within which the history of opera in Poland has been embedded, ones that foreground its national dimension while relegating the class element to the fringes.

Without a doubt, the *Halka/Haiti* project sought to challenge this narrative, which – as is evident – proved to be an arduous task. Yet it seems to me that Jasper and Malinowska focused too heavily on the question of Polishness,

thereby overlooking the dimension of class, which might have helped to account more fully for the opera's phenomenon in all its complexity. Symptomatic, however, is the trajectory followed by both *Halka* itself and its Haitian reinterpretation: from social engagement to ossification within the national discourse, which, as I have tried to demonstrate, similarly characterises the reception of *The Haunted Manor* as well as *Cracovians and Highlanders*.

An 'archaeological' reading allows one to consider this art form from a different perspective: not so much through the lens of a teleological history centred on musical transformations, but rather through the categories of nation and class, as an institution constituted by overlapping discourses. Opera is most often perceived as a vehicle for love stories; yet, when examined more thoroughly, it emerges as a potentially important function in public discourse. In its earlier days, opera performed a variety of roles: it affirmed Poland's belonging to the foremost European powers, which is why it was so quickly imported as an artistic novelty; it was also employed as a direct instrument of political struggle in the Enlightenment politics of the eighteenth century; and it became entangled in ideological disputes after the loss of independence. To my mind, recognising the social dimension of opera is the key issue in diagnosing its contemporary role, i.e., the extent to which it can serve in the twenty-first century as a means of constructing and deconstructing identity discourses.

Among the research incipient towards a more in-depth reflection on the class dimension of operatic theatre in Poland has been the work of Sławomir Wieczorek on the Workers' Opera (Opera Robotnicza) – a short-lived and now forgotten institution run by Stanisław Drabik in Wrocław (1947–1949) and Cracow (1954–1957), in whose repertoire Moniuszko's works *The*

Raftsman (*Flis*) and *Halka* featured prominently (Wieczorek 2017; 2020). Wieczorek's studies reveal a number of attempts to combine the class discourse with the national one, and how such efforts ultimately fizzled out due to shifting political circumstances and conflicts within the artistic community. At the same time, however, Wieczorek highlights the basic interpretative frameworks within which the history of opera in Poland has been embedded, ones that underscore its national dimension while effectively sidelining the class element.

Translated by Józef Jaskulski

In 2026, the Jagiellonian University Press will release the Polish-language edition of the collective volume *A History of Polish Theatre*, originally released by Cambridge University Press in 2022 under the editorship of Katarzyna Fazan, Michał Kobiałka, and Bryce Lease. The following text—previously unpublished—was commissioned as a supplement to the English-language volume and will feature in its Polish edition.

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Footnotes

1. One of the questions posed to participants in the project *Halka/Haiti 18°48'05'N 72°23'01'W* (Jasper, Malinowska, 2015).
2. The list of participants is available in the project catalog (Jasper, Malinowska, 2015, p. 213).
3. The pieces in question constitute part of the Polish opera canon, hence only a brief summary of their plots is provided here. Those interested may consult the summaries available, including Józef Kański's *Przewodnik operowy*, published on the Polish Theater Encyclopedia website: https://encyklopediateatru.pl/sztuki/3608/halka; https://encyklopediateatru.pl/sztuki/2309/straszny-dwor;https://encyklopediateatru.pl/sztuki/3047/krakowiacy-i-gorale-wojciech-boguslawski-jan-stefani [accessed: 24.05.2025].
4. Another among the organizers of the anniversary, Dariusz Kosiński, took a different approach in responding to the emerging polemics, opting for a conjunction rather than an alternative with respect to the terms 'public' and 'national' (b.d.).
5. For the most recent bibliography of the subject, see the latest study *Triumfalna harmonia. Teatr Władysława IV. Eseje* (2023, p. 319-333).
6. According to the National Centre for Culture's report on participation in cultural life in 2023, opera houses and concert halls were the least frequently visited cultural institutions in Poland (Głowacki, 2024), https://nck.pl/upload/2024/08/komunikat_z_badania_uczestnictwo_w_kulturze_2023422.pdf [accessed: 9.02.2025].

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/ HISTORIES

Let’s Play the Peasantry Again: The ‘Folk Turn’ in Stage Adaptations

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The article is an analysis of the latest stage adaptations of books that contribute to the phenomenon of the so-called ‘people’s turn’ in Polish culture: narrating the history of Polish society as well as individual biographies from the perspective of underprivileged classes. The author discusses the performances by Jędrzej Piaskowski and Hubert Sulima, Agnieszka Jakimiak and Mateusz Atman, Piotr Pacześniak and Wera Makowsx, Romuald Krężel and Wojtek Rodak, and Szymon Adamczak in relation to a play from over a decade earlier, *In the Name of Jakub S.* by Paweł Demirski, considered foundational for the ‘people’s turn.’ Special attention is given to the recognition or lack thereof of the class character of the theater medium and its affective impact.

Keywords: Paweł Demirski; class struggle; people’s history of Poland; ‘people’s turn’; stage adaptations

Jakub Szela ‘cuts off Howard’s fingers – at least he wants to believe he does, because in the end it turns out that he only imagined it, just as many others imagine that they’re doing something, but they’re not’ (Demirski, 2024, p. 68). This action-inaction, this fantasy of stage action, is recorded in the stage directions of the final scene of Paweł Demirski’s drama *W imię Jakuba S.* (In

the Name of Jakub S.). Its 2011 staging, directed by Monika Strzępka at Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw (a co-production with Teatr Łaźnia Nowa in Krakow), has, at least in certain circles, the status of a cult performance. In discussions about the 'folk turn' currently underway in humanities, literature, and cinema, the premiere of *In the Name of Jakub S.* recurs as an important announcement, a foreshadowing, or even one of the founding moments of that turn. Demirski's quote above suggests both theatrical illusion (the 'wanting to believe'), the psychological identification with the character on stage ('they seem to be doing something, but they're not'), and finally, the question of the effectiveness in general – of theatre? of political action?

In this article, I would like to examine the political (in)effectiveness of several plays created more than a decade after *In the Name of Jakub S.*, on the wave of the triumphant march of the 'folk turn' through publishing houses, editorial offices, and television and cinema screens. This includes performances based on books that were either key to the concept, or deeply rooted in it: *Ludowa historia Polski* (A Folk History of Poland) directed by Piotr Pacześniak based on the book by Adam Leszczyński (premiere: 17 Sept. 2021, Teatr Nowy in Łódź), *Chamstwo* (The Boors) directed by Agnieszka Jakimiak based on the book by Kacper Pobłocki (premiere: 28 Jan. 2023, Teatr Współczesny in Wrocław), *Skok wzwyż* (The High Jump) directed by Wojtek Rodak based on the book *Hanka: Opowieści o awansie* (Hanka: Tales of Advancement) by Maciej Jakubowiak (premiere: 5 July 2024, Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw), *Chłopki. Opowieść o nas i naszych babkach* (Peasant Women: A Tale of Us and Our Grandmothers) directed by Jędrzej Piaskowski and inspired by the book of the same name by Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak (premiere: 9 November 2024, Helena Modrzejewska Theatre in Legnica).

What will be important to me are: to what ends and in what way the theatrical medium is harnessed to tell the story of Poland as a class-based society; whether and how it tries to thematise its own class entanglement; and finally, what political stakes are involved in adapting books that make up the Polish 'folk turn.'

How Art Works

'Powerlessness turned into rage,' wrote Joanna Krakowska, among others, about the characters in Demirski's plays (2019). Also analysing the plays of Dorota Masłowska, Magda Fertacz and Przemysław Wojcieszek, Krakowska argues that Polish theatre at the beginning of the 21st century heralded the rise of the populist right – 'it recognised the problems long before right-wing politicians platformed them in their policy and rhetoric' (ibid., p. 13). Theatre targeted the 'electorate of hurt feelings' (ibid., p. 19), recognising the processes of social shaming and the sense of powerlessness. Grzegorz Niziołek, in turn, wrote that 'the fear of resentment paralysed the processes of recognising social reality and its origins in Poland' (2012, p. 48) – and that the early plays of Monika Strzępka, Paweł Demirski and Jan Klata overcame this fear. At the same time, they revealed mechanisms that were difficult to analyse in official discourse without falling out of it and sliding into areas considered highly risky. Niziołek cites, among others, Klata's 2004 adaptation of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's 1923 play set in Wałbrzych, *Janulka, daughter of Fizdejka*, which depicts European integration as a form of Teutonic colonisation by German EU decision-makers, mixing a range of time perspectives and using images of starving prisoners in striped uniforms as a metaphor for the social hunger of advanced civilisational consumption (ibid., p. 51).

In his article, Niziołek also mentions Demirski's *Sztuka dla dzieci* (A Play for Children) (dir. Monika Strzępka, Norwid Theatre in Jelenia Góra, 2009) – a riskily intense attack on the politics of memory, on attempts at cultural domestication or the assimilation of historical traumas. Seemingly, the 'folk turn' and the problems around advancement clearly fit into the circle of topics covered by the 'fear of resentment.' The official condemnation of communism and the ridicule of the People's Republic's rhetoric of social emancipation; the repression of the process of seizing Jewish property as described by, among others, Andrzej Leder; the rise of the concept of *homo sovieticus*; the privatisation of responsibility for one's own fate; and finally, the promotion of the concept of a large middle-class society in order to conceal the true privileges of the upper class ('we pretend to be middle class so that you won't feel sorry' – as Dziedziczka says in *In the Name of Jakub S.* by Demirski, anticipating the scholarly findings of, among others, Maciej Gdula, who later wrote: 'a specific arrangement in which the upper class pretends to be middle class, and the middle class thinks it is in the lead, allows for the merging of the interests of the elites and the middle class' [2018]) – all this should favour the political effectiveness of stage performances referring to this subject. Why this is not happening is one of the questions I'd like to ask myself.

Both Niziołek's approach and Krakowska's make it quite clear that the political power of theatrical narratives on anger – manifested, for example, in the theatre's anticipation of party agendas or discussion on the media – results from their affective nature. I think I can risk a generalisation here that the horizon of theatre's political effectiveness, understood in this way, lies in outlining a conflict that is not currently clearly articulated in the public sphere – and in taking a clear stance, invoking affects that have no place in that public sphere.[1]

To give a clear example: Oliver Frljić's *The Curse* updated the dividing lines that at first glance seemed obvious but were not frequently presented either convincingly or clearly on the Polish theatrical stage, and in social life were subject to more or less unnamed Catholic censorship – within what Marcin Kościelniak calls the 'Catholic paradigm,' which combines the description of communism *en bloc* as a totalitarian and therefore unequivocally negative system and, at the same time, the recognition of the position of the Catholic Church as 'the guardian and exponent of so-called Christian values, which were widely recognised as the universal, absolute, indisputable, and non-negotiable foundation of Polish identity and Polish socio-political reality' (Kościelniak 2024, p. 32–33). In turn, the staged invocation of Felix Dzerzhinsky and Rosa Luxemburg in Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski's *Battle of Warsaw 1920* (premiere at the Narodowy Stary Teatr in Kraków on 22 June 2013) was a violation of another form of censorship stemming from the structure of Polish post-1989 discourse, a brazen disregard for the anti-communist exorcism that cast these figures not only outside the Polish national community but also outside the order of artistic representation.

Finally, even earlier, the aforementioned *In the Name of Jakub S*. not only thematised the class nature of historical conflicts and perceptions of political violence but also linked old historical grievances to the private story of a thirty-something couple taking out a mortgage – something irritatingly mundane from the perspective of a revision of the romantic codes of community that the invocation of Szela's spectre was meant to attack. This generated not only outrage but also embarrassment – it violated decorum. 'Resentment,' wrote Niziołek – treated as a tool of conscious political manipulation – 'must be associated with bad taste in order to fulfil its ideological purpose' (2012, p. 48). One might be tempted to hypothesise that Strzępka and Demirski, though born in the 1970s, became, with *In the Name*

of Jakub S., not only artists who broke taboos, but also elements of the figure of the ‘entitled millennial’ haunting the journalistic-expert-party discourse of the time (and today, too, though less frequently), at that time a figure frightening the Polish conservative and liberal press alike, which resorted to tastelessly exaggerated analogies. An example of this classification of the duo at the time is Krzysztof Varga’s column:

> The message is actually quite simple: Jakub Szela was cool, though he had his flaws; but he was right. The theme that Szela actually did the Austrians’ work, I’d say, is a bit understated, if not entirely absent. The play’s epilogue tells us this directly. The modernisation, however, seems to be based on the idea that today’s capitalism is like the old serfdom, that a mortgage for an apartment (93 square meters, as it’s described in the play – one might envy) is today’s serfdom, and the bank is today’s lord of the manor. The subtle difference, in my opinion, is that no one forces you to take out a loan today, as they did back then (2012).

I’m giving examples of these now-historical plays from the past decade because they demonstrate how leftist theatre can (or could?) still violate taboos and provoke strong reactions in the Polish public sphere. The above review is, of course, fragmentary, and the criterion of ‘effectiveness’ proposed here is open to debate – if only because of the changing way theatre functions in the media, the decline of traditional culture sections in editorial offices, and the transformation of press genres such as the column and the review.

But why don’t the theatrical narratives about folk history that have been

created in recent years possess at least some of this effectiveness? After all, as Roch Sulima, one of the most important researchers of folk narratives, wrote: ‘The widespread discussion about shameful origins heralds the founding of one of the most important national clinics for Polish neuroses’ (2015, p. 29). Perhaps within the framework of the public debate, or rather a certain segment of it, these lineages ceased to be ‘embarrassing,’ and within the framework of subsequent discussions of publishing hits about social advancement and the folk history of Poland, origins from broadly understood and not fully defined ‘social lowlands’ became an argument in status games, in imitation of Western discourses (Maciej Jakubowiak, the author of *Hanka…*, was labelled as the ‘Polish Eribon’). Perhaps in such a case they would lose the freshness and subversive power of the recognition that Joanna Jopek noticed in this production right after the premiere of *In the Name of Jakub S.*:

> A man can leave the country, but the country cannot leave him – this formula is used subversively by the creators of the play in a brilliant portrait of the aspiring class, Biff and the Secretaries, laboriously learning the codes of the middle class (the prices of wines to bring to a party, the places to go on vacation, the fact that one should drink caffe latte, carry a Starbucks cup and – probably – watch anti-establishment plays by Strzępka and Demirski (2012).

And while the selection of sample codes may have become somewhat dated, the ‘desperate (in the face of economic crisis) confirmation and consolidation of the capitalist system through the need to constantly prove one’s belonging to it’ diagnosed by Jopek seems to be an even more visible mechanism in today’s reality.

Why the theatre is weakening

I'll venture a hypothesis: in the cases of *The Boors* or *A Folk History of Poland*, the mere act of reaching for the titles of highly publicised and widely discussed books reveals a certain weakness of theatre. It's not just that *In the Name of Jakub S.* by Strzępka and Demirski once overtook books by Leszczyński, Pobłocki or Leder, thus marking the peak of interest in the topic of the 'folk turn' in Polish culture; that to some extent, over a decade ago, 'theatre was on top,' but today it isn't. It's also about theatre's weakening not only in terms of the pace of diagnosis or recognition, but also in its visibility. The series of plays discussed here is also, after all, simply a consequence of the ongoing boom in non-fiction literature and, ultimately, what has been called the crisis of contemporary Polish playwriting, approached from various perspectives. Using titles familiar from press debates, interviews and promotional campaigns by major publishing houses (*Hanka…* and *The Boors* were published by Czarne, *A Folk History of Poland* by W.A.B.) is an attempt to attract the attention of audiences and media, which these days is usually not guaranteed by the name of a director or playwright. At the same time, from the perspective of creating an attractive theatrical product, the situation is not easy. By taking *Hanka…*,*The Boors*, or *A Folk History of Poland*, the creators face the challenge of adapting a fundamentally 'non-stage' text to the stage. In the case of *Hanka…* by Jakubowiak, this task seems relatively simple; the autobiographical essay has its characters and tells – albeit with numerous digressions – their unfolding story. However, staging a history book or an essay on how violence is recorded in language and the social subconscious requires that a strong stage framework be established.

In the case of Agnieszka Jakimiak's *The Boors*, based on Mateusz Atman's script, it's a situation of staged group therapy that is, moreover, divided along gender lines. It consists of two distinct parts with separate casts; first male, then female – which resonates with the imposition of class violence on patriarchal violence in Pobłocki's book. The theatrical structure of *A Folk History of Poland* is decidedly less coherent and clear, described by one reviewer as 'formal syncretism.' 'We glide through absurdity, farce, self-theatre, and even video in a television format,' wrote Maciej Guzy (2021). Even a cursory analysis shows that the division declared by theatres into 'adaptations' and 'inspired plays' is not adequate, or at least not very functional, when it comes to performances created under the banner of the 'folk turn.' For example, the 'adapted' *A Folk History of Poland* contains numerous original scenes developed during rehearsals and absent from Leszczyński's text, while the 'inspired' *The High Jump* in Warsaw's Performing Arts Theatre encompasses virtually the entire framework of the main character from *Hanka…* Perhaps a different division would be more appropriate here. Małgorzata Sugiera has proposed the following distinction between adaptation and rewriting:

> 'Rewriting' concerns rather the transfer and adaptation of content, issues, metaphors, and discourses into the framework of a different way of thinking. It could therefore be said that while adaptation is 'yes,' confirming existing interpretations and merely seeking to convey them through different means, rewriting is 'no,' seeking to emphasise the differences between the accepted and proposed readings rather than remaining faithful to the existing ones (2008, p. XX).

The plays *The Boors, The High Jump*, and *A Folk History of Poland* are based on attempts to find equivalents or 'other means' for the main ideas of the adapted works. The creators of these performances try to move from adapted book syntheses to the perspective of stage micro-stories, including attempts to derive 'folk' genealogies of the actors or of other people co-creating the performance. They thus draw on elements of collective creation. The gesture of authorial self-analysis is thus dispersed, as is – at least in principle – authorship itself. This seems to meet the criteria of auto-theatre. Joanna Krakowska defined it as 'auto-theatre, or theatre whose creators speak from the stage in their own name and under their own name, not that of a stage character' (2016). However, despite employing devices from this order, in Pacześniak's *A Folk History of Poland* or Rodak's *The High Jump*, theatre is not problematised as an element of a broader field of cultural production. The attempt to tell a story about the class genealogy of Polish society or of a specific Polish intellectual is played out here without noticing the class nature of the medium through which it is told.

Moreover, performances created as part of the adaptation of the 'folk turn' prove to be much more conservative and cautious in this respect than the attempts to address the entanglements of theatrical institutions that have been present in Polish auto-theatre over the past decade. One example is Jolanta Janiczak, Joanna Krakowska, Magda Mosiewicz and Wiktor Rubin's production *Kantor Downtown* (Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz, 2015), which explored actress Marta Malikowska's rural origins and the question of violence in Tadeusz Kantor's practices, but juxtaposed with the stark topic of remuneration in theatre, which is based on pre-determined amounts.

Jakimiak and Atman go the furthest in their attempt to problematise theatre as a phenomenon linked to the theme of the 'folk turn' in Wrocław's *The*

Boors. ‘Hi everyone, my name is Andrzej and I have experienced rudeness in the theatre; I was a victim of rudeness, I was an observer, a participant, I was manipulated into rudeness in the theatre,’ Miłosz Pietruski says on stage. The actor tells the story of a difficult job at another theatre, with which he was previously associated. ‘Fuck, you’re wooden, wooden, not an actor!’ ‘Fucking act!’ Pietruski shouts, kicking a stump and reenacting the violence he has experienced. However, here too, the class entanglement of theatre, the class character of attending the theatre as a cultural practice, remains beyond interest – the performance focuses on the violence behind the scenes, not on who the audience is, where they come from and what their goals are.

In place of confrontation, there is an attempt to build a kind of therapeutic community between the audience and the performers. Thus, once again, a process aptly named by Grzegorz Niziołek is underway:

> Theatre in Poland is an institution that, through complex processes of repression, resistance and exclusion, has constructed the model of a sublime audience, one that perceives itself as representing the national community. The individual experience of the viewer is affectively opened to the experience of community, which no longer denotes a group of spectators gathered for a specific performance (2016, p. 256).

In *The Boors*, the group of spectators sitting in a circle on tree stumps becomes *pars pro toto* a community of victims of patriarchal, ‘masterly’ violence, a representation of a wider community, united in the experience of post-serfdom trauma – contemporary conflicts disappear in a dramatic

gesture that, from the perspective of attempts to narrate the class genealogy of contemporary Polish society, can be read as a measure of self-censorship. Class differences and economic tensions are particularly susceptible to this tactic – in the quoted text, Niziołek himself devalues the leftist analysis of the economic entanglement of theatre, stating, in passing, that 'neoliberal economic censorship simply supports those social aspirations that the majority represents' (2016, p. 261), a point supposedly overlooked by the left (represented in Niziołek's argument by Ewa Majewska). Niziołek thus evades the issue of social class or economic inequality in general – as if the social 'majority' of consumers also possessed the 'majority' of resources.

From afar, the view is beautiful

Reaching out to the actors' biographies provides an opportunity to confirm the thesis about the peasant origins of the majority of today's Polish society, including in *A Folk History of Poland* as staged in Łódź. This self-analysis, however, focuses primarily on rather ancient roots, and thus leads to a somewhat ritualistic repetition of generalities. Take Przemysław Dąbrowski's monologue:

> From the people or from the elite? The surname Dąbrowski, like Gosławski and many others, those ending in -ski, supposedly indicate higher ancestry. I don't think this applies to all Dąbrowskis. This surname is the sixth most common surname in Poland. There are over six hundred thousand of us, so what kind of elite is this? Half the family is from the Prussian partition, half from the Russian partition. Kalisz is in the middle. I was born there. On my father's side, I suspect my family has peasant roots, but I don't

> know much, as my grandfather died before the war. On my mother's side, my roots are clearly peasant (Pacześniak, Makowsx, p. 230).

In the Łódź production, stopping the family narrative at World War II and the partitions is, in a sense, an intensification of Adam Leszczyński's gesture, who ends his *A Folk History of Poland* in 1989. In the book, Leszczyński explains this decision with the belief that 'the transformation is too close and too well-described (as well as too recently described) to devote space to it here – which would necessarily have to come at the expense of earlier periods that are less relevant in today's debate, but worth recalling because they help demonstrate an important thesis of this book' (2020, p. 528). However, in the case of the subjectivisation and personalisation of the story, which is precisely what happens in Pacześniak's production, cutting off at the postwar period – that is, setting the caesura later than Leszczyński does – deprives this entire auto-theatrical device of its political power. Theatre relents from tracing the closer origins of today's reality – whether out of concern for privacy or fear of resentment – while the post-war reality and its accompanying political and social divisions are far more concrete and far more present in the public sphere than the question of serfdom in Galicia or in Congress Poland. Of course, these two conflicts can be juxtaposed – this was a fundamental gesture in *In the Name of Jakub S.* and is the subject of sociological analysis in the works of Tomasz Zarycki and Tomasz Warczok, for example, who trace the persistence and transformation of the noble ethos into the intelligentsia, as well as the structure of the elites' domination and its entanglement in relation to capital. In Jakimiak's and Pacześniak's plays, such a juxtaposition is absent – instead, a sharp cut is made. History is viewed from afar. The revolution – the closer one – therefore remains

dreamed of; although, as always, not entirely dreamed of. The scene titled ‘The Indiscreet Charm of the Middle Class’ is a videotaped tour of a strikingly decorated apartment. The character played by Przemysław Dąbrowski, called *Star* in the script and *Burgher* in the play’s description, shows a carved table – a souvenir from his travels, an ‘African mask’ and musings on the different types of roasted coffees – this entire catalogue of distinctive artefacts and practices combines to create a rather typical, somewhat exaggerated satire of the bourgeois lifestyle. And then, suddenly, menorahs magically fall out of a black hole in the wall. Even though the building has been renovated, as Star/Burgher notes. ‘That’s the peculiarity of this apartment. As they say, an apartment with soul,’ says the actor, picking up more Jewish candlesticks from the floor. It’s a delicate satire on the repression of the wartime and post-war history of the city and its real estate – it appears and then disappears as a flash in this one scene.

‘And/or Class Advancement’

The stage equivalent of Jakubowiak’s autobiographical gesture from *Hanka…* in Wojtek Rodak’s play was to engage a non-professional performer for *The High Jump*, who would tell her story as part of the performance. The announcement, published on the Performance Art Theatre’s social media, alongside other places, specified the expectations for the candidates as follows:

> The creators address, among other topics, the social advancement of women and class mobility in Poland from the post-war era to the new, post-socialist, capitalist reality after 1989. We would like to invite an ‘expert on everyday life,’ a non-professional actor, to work

on the play. We are looking for:
– A woman over 60;
– With experience of being a grandmother;
– Having experience moving to a larger city and/or moving up in class, willing to share her story on stage;
– Fit and open to physical activity (sports/physical activity is valued);
– Open to new challenges, ready to perform in front of an audience on stage.

As a result of the casting, Ewa Błasiak appeared in *The High Jump*. Rodak and Adamczak try to build a parallel with *Hanka…*, played by Marta Ojrzyńska, by looking for simple analogies – such as moving to a larger city or failing her high school final exams at the first try. A reviewer for *Teatr* magazine attempted to describe the dynamics generated by Ewa Błasiak's presence on stage this way: 'The common points emphasise the universal dimension of the story and at the same time make it personal. Błasiak's charm as a performer and her imperfections as an actress bring us closer to life' (Gac, 2024, p. 33). This extension of the stage function as the 'expert on everyday life' in its ambivalence between 'universal' and 'personal,' between 'story' and 'life,' seems to accurately capture Rodak and Adamczak's intention. This element of self-theatrical style seems intended to increase the possibility of identifying with a specific story. At the same time – like the Performance Art Theatre's casting announcement – it blurs the already broad category of 'social advancement.'

As the title of the play suggests, Rodak and playwright Szymon Adamczak further expand the story of the failed sports career of *Hanka* – the mother of

the book's author. Even in the book, the high jump, a discipline practiced by *Hanka* in her youth, is used extensively as a recurring metaphor for advancement. On stage, this metaphor is expanded, embodied and looped. And while the jump performed in a loop in the finale by Marcin Wojciechowski (playing the narrator – repeated with the bar raised ever higher, until failure – is a vivid, memorable stage image, yet in a play where so many words are spoken, there are surprisingly few about advancement itself. Social realities are reduced to occasional slogans.

'Inflation, hyperinflation, transformation. I'm left out in the cold:' this is Hanka's account of the political transformation. 'I work hard, sweating my brow, / and we know / that the country must be rebuilt, / the capital must be cleared of rubble, / and a sandstone palace built:' this is an image of the Polish People's Republic as seen in the context of Marian, Hanka's father. There are also no on-stage situations that would more directly address this topic. Ultimately, although there is a great deal of narratorial meta-commentary in *The High Jump*, it does not address these themes.

Social situations signalled by such emblems seem purely pretextual, as if they merely evoked a convention already familiar and recognised by the audience – 'the game of elite and people,' as Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak put it. Analysing one of Grzegorz Sroczyński's radio broadcasts, the researcher observed, in her words, 'attempts to justify the uniqueness of the encounter between the elites and the common people. This triggers generalised assumptions about the participants in the discussion and the differences between them, which essentialise the subject positions assigned to them in the discourse' (2021, p. 107). This essentialisation means that the 'production' of the intellectual, the writer, the participant in the literary field – the critic, the award juror, the editor of the literary section of a major

magazine – disappears from view in both *Hanka…* and *The High Jump*. The point of arrival here is ‘human:’ a humanities class in high school and, later, the Jagiellonian University. The distance between these achievements and the intelligentsia position from which Jakubowiak speaks remains entirely unexamined.

In their study of the hegemony of the intelligentsia in Poland, Zarycki and Warczok point out that the identity of many intelligentsia circles functions on the principle of ‘denying one’s own intellectuality, or at least avoiding direct references to it’ (2014, p. 46). Karolina Kulpa, in her review of *Hanka…*, has already pointed out the apparent historicisation of Jakubowiak’s narrative: ‘The fundamental paradox is that [Jakubowiak] speaks without revealing how he came to speak. He finds it easy to describe his mother’s moods, but less so when it comes to criticising the circle he so readily bought into’ (2024). I draw attention to this critique of the literary original because Rodak and Adamczak’s adaptation seems to deepen the problem I mentioned above – the medium of theatre doesn’t so much dialectically clash with it as it oscillates with a vibrato-like resonance. In this respect, the presence of the ‘expert on everyday life’ in *The High Jump* becomes a functionally classic fetish – intensely obscuring what is missing. ‘Hanka becomes an empty proper name, filled with arbitrary content,’ wrote Kulpa, critical of the portrayal of the titular heroine of Jakubowiak’s book. It is telling that what was once a criticism of the book returned in the reception as a praised advantage of the Performance Art Theatre’s production. Dominik Gac appreciated that the play transforms Jakubowiak’s story into ‘not a class parable about a boy from Żory who becomes a metropolitan intellectual, but a universal story of struggle. Not so much with Bourdieu’s habitus, but with the prose of life in Poland over the past seventy years’ (Gac, 2024, p. 32).

And so, the specific becomes submerged in the ‘universal,’ social antagonism extinguished, resentment pushed into the shadows, and the mechanisms of symbolic power obscured by emotion. ‘Common folk,’ in turn, to use the term (Pol. *Lud*) used by Roch Sulima, following Czesław Hernas, is celebrated as ‘the humanist sacred.’

Forced Reparations

Threads and quotes from Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak’s *Peasant Women* appear in various, sometimes unexpected places in the text of Jędrzej Piaskowski and Hubert Sulima’s play. However, the entire plot – this play does have a plot – is written and draws on the poetics of a docu-soap. Here’s a jam factory and its employees with their everyday problems – late paycheques, junk contracts, an office romance and a misalliance. Simple situations are framed by a series of onstage parentheses; from the fact that some of the female roles are played by men, to the sketching of the scenes with a very thick, campy line, to the over-emotionalisation of supposedly realistic situations. Finally, there’s the lynching of a middle-level manager, the chief accountant who’s late with a transfer. This is shown in a clearly exaggerated manner, combining grotesquely depicted sexual violence, the severing of body parts with an axe, and the use of firearms – all in a slapstick style. This violence may be reminiscent of the finger-cutting scene described at the beginning of *In the Name of Jakub S*. However, while in Strzępka’s play it bordered on shocking drasticness and somewhat gaudy artificiality, here the accumulation of ostentatiously theatrical, conventional violence, visible primarily in the intensity of the perpetrators’ actions, seems like a staged illustration of fantasy, a form of class role-play.

If, according to Małgorzata Sugiera, ‘rewriting’ is a ‘no’ – in contrast to ‘adaptation,’ which conveys the work’s ‘message,’ then Sulima and Piaskowski’s work is an attempt at precisely such a rewriting of Kuciel-Frydryszak’s book, and even an attempt to dialectically overcome the ‘folk turn’ in its current form. The reception of Piaskowski and Sulima’s Legnica production seems to simultaneously demonstrate an expectation of adaptation, a demand for ‘fidelity to the author.’ The theatre and its creators, of course, contributed to this expectation, both with the title (significantly, albeit subtly altered) and the production’s visual identity, which alludes to the cover of a bestseller. This approach is sometimes perceived by reviewers as an abuse. The play *The Peasant Women* indicates the recognition of tales of advancement as a certain convention; it plays around with this, capitalising on the market demand for such stories.

It is worth noting that a theatre performance in a provincial town is a ‘weaker’ medium than a widely discussed non-fiction bestseller by a well-known publisher (a recurring claim in media reports, a testament to its success: ‘over half a million copies sold’). If the response to the return to the narrative of class violence in mainstream Polish public debate was first denial, outrage and ridicule, then an attempt to engage in critical discussion, and finally, a commodification of the ‘folk turn,’ so the stakes of *Peasant Women* are to demonstrate the ambivalence of the Polish mainstream’s embrace of a discourse built around the slogans of ‘class,’ ‘peasant roots’ and ‘advancement.’ There is an enthusiasm with which stories about peasant roots are received and an ease with which egalitarian, emancipatory slogans are adopted by the language of marketing – for example in cultural marketing. Finally, Piaskowski and Sulima’s *Peasant Women* restore resentment to the ‘folk turn’ – at a time when its place in conversations about the description of society has been taken by ‘sensitivity’ as an

instrument easily harnessed in the discourse of modern management; a tool of control.

In one of the earlier scenes, the aforementioned chief accountant, Basia Niecnota (Paweł Palcat), holds the employees at gunpoint and forcibly orders them to rest – immediately, or she will shoot. She cuts straight to the gun-threatening scene from a scene of relaxing meditation: ‘It is she, simple Arleta, who, before our very eyes, is committing an act of active resistance. An act of reparation. Look, Nina! Here Arleta is receiving reparations for all the centuries of toil, the master’s whip, and tuberculosis. And you will receive them too! Get down. Now. Immediately. Lie down!’

Perhaps this rather suspicious attitude toward the bookish *Peasant Women*, discernible in Piaskowski and Sulima’s play, though not explicitly expressed on stage for most of the performance, also explains the resistance the play encounters in critical reception.

The Legnica play has been described as ‘a fairly standard counting-out’ (Kyzioł, 2024), a ‘superficial’ performance where ‘little comes from attempts to discuss the folk turn,’ in which the voices of the protagonists are ‘almost completely inaudible. Or even worse: they are drowned out, filtered, distorted’ (Rewerenda, 2024), so ‘the titular peasant women and their stories […] disappear’ (Pajęcka, 2024). Meanwhile, one could view the *Peasant Women* of Legnica not as an attempt to pass on the voices extracted from the archive by Kuciel-Frydryszak, but as an attempt to reflect on the gesture of ‘giving voice’ and the position of the one who gives voice. In Piaskowski and Sulima’s play, the class nature of using cultural institutions also appears as a theme. While the scene in question isn’t about theatre, but rather visual arts, it bluntly and grotesquely points to how practices of cultural participation are also tools of aspiration:

> Darlings, hello, hey, hey. Listen, what a story!, because I was at the opening of the Museum of Modern Art yesterday, right? It was a VIP tour. Mayor Trzaskowski invited me. So, you know, I had a haircut beforehand. And I'm sitting there, looking in the mirror, and I realise that I look like Iga Świątek's daughter. Incredible. And this museum is nice, a museum as white as me, but a bit empty. I took a few photos with Rafał for Instagram… basianiecnota, have you given me your hearts already? Because I'll check…

Art, presented as a vehicle for emancipation and participation, becomes a mechanism of distinction. The mockery of the museum building resounded at the premiere of *Peasant Women* on November 9, 2024, at a significant moment: barely two weeks had passed since the opening of the new MSN headquarters, while the Culture Congress, renamed the 'co-Congress,' was taking place in Warsaw simultaneously. The quoted line about the MSN opening directly precedes the lynching of Basia Niecnota by her colleagues at her workplace, described above – violence, resentment and the discourse of concern present in contemporary art institutions all converge in a single nexus.

The MSN also appears in a new television production, *In the Name of Jakub S.*, directed by the author himself. One scene in the television production is accompanied by the inscription, 'New MSN headquarters. The 334th meeting on the topic of the folk turn.' What was emotionally intense in Monika Strzępka's production has turned into a kind of discussion panel in TV Theatre, with participants speaking in tired, subdued tones – as if aware that their words lack the power to transform.

Why is the MSN, and not any other theatre institution, becoming the

emblem? In the case of *Peasant Women*, in the character of Basia Niecnota, who orders their forced emancipation and the vindication of rest, one can discern subtle allusions to Monika Strzępka and the conflict surrounding her management at Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw – where, on the one hand, the director emphasised her peasant origins; on the other, the (para)therapeutic discourse was intensively exploited (starting with the first season's slogan 'Therapy for All') and on the third, accusations of psychological abuse were levelled against Strzępka. As for the new version of *In the Name of Jakub S.*, the motivation for choosing the MSN seems simple. No other venue, no location associated with theatre today evokes such emotions or is so intensely used in political disputes – so it would not provide such affective fuel for a television production. The question is whether theatre simply matters less to people or is perhaps less marked by class distinction in Poland than contemporary art is. Note that in the case of the second most hotly debated cultural institution – Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw under the direction of Monika Strzępka – the class theme has completely disappeared, obscured by sharp criticism of the failure of this 'feminist cultural institution' (cf. Kwaśniewska, 2025).

Out of Place

A final digression: theatre can still appear as an element of autobiographical narrative. Romuald Krężel's *All that I Left Behind Is Here* – a solo dance created at Uferstudios in Berlin. Krężel, director, choreographer, actor and performer, returns in this performance to the early 1990s, the time when, as a child, he attended dance classes in primary school, sent by his mother, a manual worker in a shop. The strength of this intimate narrative lies in its specificity and precision: the shop is a specific shop, located on the map of present-day Wrocław. The attempt to reconstruct processes occurring over

the course of a single life, three decades, is not forced into metaphor or synecdoche. The performer Krężel repeats on stage the specific steps Krężel the child took.

In *All that I Left Behind Is Here*, the issue of class is presented in a rather surprising way, if we remain within the framework of the upward mobility narratives established by contemporary French classics, adapted in Poland. Krężel asks his mother if she feels shame when attending his performances. ‘You used to go to the theatre – did you ever feel out of place in the theatre?’ the performer asks in the recording. ‘No,’ the mother replies. ‘As a place that doesn't belong to you, not to this class?’ Krężel asks. ‘No, no. Because I liked it, I always read a lot. And I still read a lot. I liked going to the theatre, to the cinema. I was recently at the Forum Muzyki, and I really liked it too. So, no, I didn’t feel bad in such places,’ the mother says.

The scene of Romuald Krężel’s conversation with Irena Krężel leaves the viewer unanswered, questioning the son’s presumed lack of class discomfort, but also a sense of being pushed beyond the safe confines of his own life. Is this a fact whose expression is generally still considered illegitimate in post-communist Poland: the fact that, to some extent, emancipation truly took place in the Polish People’s Republic?

Translatated by Mark Hoogslag & Tim Brombley

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Footnotes

1. If, following Victor Turner, drama is rooted in social reality and reflects a simmering but unexpressed conflict within it, the premiere of *In the Name of Jakub S.* would be a dramatic revelation of disagreement with the norms governing social relations, or at least official social discourse, and would belong to the third phase of Turner's schema – reparative procedures. The increasingly intense revelation of antagonisms leads to the fourth phase – reintegration – but may also lead to 'apparent reconciliation' – cultural representations of the 'folk turn' on stage in recent years seem to bear the hallmarks of precisely such a process. See Turner, 2008, p. 50–57.

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/ INSTITUTIONS

The Failure of the Nonexistent? A Collectively Managed Feminist Cultural Institution as Exemplified by Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw

Monika Kwaśniewska | Jagiellonian University in Krakow

The collective management of Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw – as a feminist cultural institution co-directed by the Dramatyczny Collective – under the leadership of Monika Strzępka was an unprecedented phenomenon in Poland. Based on media reports, supplemented by insights from Iga Dzieciuchowicz's book *Teatr. Rodzina patologiczna*, this article explores the reasons behind the project's failure. The theoretical framework is provided by Thomas Schmidt's concept of the 'ethical theatre.' The author attempts to reconstruct a hypothetical picture of the transformation process within the theatre and the challenges that emerged, highlighting, among other issues, the absence of formal legal status for the Collective, hierarchical management practices, and crisis-driven responses. Both internal and external factors – from resistance to change to media backlash – are considered. While Strzępka's programme aligned with the principles of an ethical, participatory cultural institution, its implementation diverged from its original ideals. The article also invites reflection on the practical and legislative possibilities for collective management of public theatres.

Keywords: collective management; feminist cultural institutions; ethical theatre; institutional transformation

Introduction

The collective management of Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw[1] – as a feminist cultural institution co-managed by the Drama Collective – under the general directorship of Monika Strzępka's was unprecedented in Poland. Strzępka, a renowned Polish director and recipient of numerous awards, was appointed to this position in September 2022. Her victory was supported by a letter to the theatre's management, the city authorities, in which she requested that her many years of directing experience be required of the successful candidate for the position: 'at least five years of experience in managing a theatre company' (Strzępka, 2021), as well as a bold, overtly feminist programme proposal. Her general directorship began with the performance *Sabath dobrego początku* (The Sabbath of a Good Beginning), during which Strzępka was crowned with a wreath. At that time, she also introduced the Drama Collective, with which she intended to run the theatre, and provided a breakdown of the tasks and responsibilities assigned to each member. The beginning of her term was disrupted by the political intervention of the Voivode, Konstanty Radziwiłł, who invalidated the order of the Mayor of Warsaw appointing Monika Strzępka as director, resulting in her being suspended for six months, from November 2022 to April 2023 (Kyzioł, 2022). A subsequent favourable court ruling allowed her to return to her position.

After another six months, in December 2023, she dissolved the Drama Collective, assuming sole control. In January 2024 – after a season and a half as general director and, in reality, about ten months active in the position – she was dismissed (Felberg, 2024). Each of these stages was widely commented on in articles of an incredibly wide emotional range: from euphoria to hate. Now, as the excitement gradually subsides,[2] it is worth considering the factors that may have contributed to the failure of the

project to transform Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw into a collectively managed, feminist cultural institution. To do this, I will address the concept of ‘ethical theatre’ proposed by German researcher and practitioner Thomas Schmidt. I will then compare his considerations and postulates with the competition programme of Monika Strzępka and the Drama Collective. Next, based on press reports, I will attempt to reconstruct a hypothetical picture of the transformation process at Teatr Dramatyczny and the problems that emerged during that process. I will consider the extent to which the conflict within the theatre may have been influenced by the resistance to the change typical of a transition period and to a change in the long-established model of directorial theatre. My focus will be on the relationship between the theory and practice of collective, ethical management. By concentrating on this aspect, I will omit many other important aspects of this issue.

This article is based solely on media materials and an excerpt from Iga Dzieciuchowicz’s book, *Teatr. Rodzina patologiczna* (Theatre. A Dysfunctional Family), based on interviews with various parties to this conflict. It is important to remember that the processes unfolding at Teatr Dramatyczny were influenced by many factors that were either somehow distorted by the media or did not reach the public at all. I also realise that journalistic narratives are influenced in various ways by the interests of specific individuals (the authors and those voicing their opinions), institutions (editorial staff, theatre, city hall), and their shared political and ideological beliefs. While reading the materials on this case, I frequently identified inconsistencies. However, my text does not aim to provide a detailed verification of this archive. Nor do I supplement it with the results of my own ‘field’ research. My use of sources is intended rather to extract information about the theatre’s operational problems and the conflict flashpoints concerning management strategies.

New Management Models

The authors of the report *Scena polska 2024. Pracując w teatrze* (The Polish Stage 2024. Working in Theatre), summarising a study on the professional situation of theatre employees, point to the dominance of the authoritarian directorship model in Polish theatres, in which 'key decisions are made mostly by a single person (or in tandem – the general director and artistic director)' (Ilczuk et al., 2024, p. 106). More horizontal and team-based strategies are currently being tested. The results of these attempts are often negative due to directors lacking 'the knowledge, competences, and tools to reform the theatre directorship system' (Ilczuk et al., 2024, p. 113). One of the most important experiments of this type in Poland can be considered the 'feminist cultural institution' of the Teatr Powszechny, dedicated to Zygmunt Hübner (*Feminisation, Democracy, Labour: Towards a Socialised Cultural Institution*, 2020). The documents that were to form the foundation for the transformation of this institution advocated a shift from a hierarchical and authoritarian model based on competitiveness towards empathy, solidarity and equality. This was to be achieved through democratisation, participation and strengthening the subjectivity of the ensemble, as well as the socialisation of the theatre. An important step towards this was the appreciation of both productive and reproductive work. The former is creative and artistic work and is therefore directly linked to the production of performances. The latter, in turn, constitutes part of the institution's intangible resources, reproducing collective existence. Reproductive work in theatre is therefore performed primarily by those working in the theatre, but not as creators. In a broader sense, incorporating elusive values such as atmosphere, quality of relationships, and communication, it encompasses all employees, including those performing artistic functions. Reproductive

labour is the essential foundation of productive work.

A feminist cultural institution, therefore, was about valuing the small, the unspectacular, the everyday, and based on broadly understood relationships, and feminisation meant ‘replacing models of social coexistence associated with a masculine attitude with those associated with a feminine stance’ (Adamiecka-Sitek, Keil, Stokfiszewski, 2020). However, the Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw was led by the traditional directorial duo of Paweł Łysak (artistic director) and Paweł Sztarbowski (deputy director for programming). After several years, Łysak commented with reservations on the ‘feminist’ nature of the theatre he ran as an ideal impossible to fully realise (Chmielewski, 2023, p. 24; e-book). According to Łysak, the implementation of this project is hampered by the collective perception, entrenched by tradition and practice, of the need for centralised authority in the theatre, as well as the provisions of the *Act on Organising and Conducting Cultural Activities*, which assign all agency and responsibility – legal and financial – to the director. Łysak, therefore, had no illusions about implementing a new directorship and operational model at Teatr Dramatyczny requiring time, which he estimated at ‘at least two seasons’ (ibid.).

A feminist cultural institution, as envisioned in the Teatr Powszechny’s manifesto, is difficult to implement due to its theoretical nature, which still requires a development towards practical solutions. In the case of the theatre under Łysak and Sztarbowski’s direction, the manifesto was accompanied by two documents: the ‘Zasady współpracy twórczyń i twórców z Teatrem Powszechnym im. Zygmunta Hübnera w Warszawie’ (Principles of Cooperation between Artists and the Zygmunt Hübner Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw) and the ‘Rada Artystyczno-Programowa Teatru Powszechnego im.

Zygmunta Hübnera w Warszawie. Regulamin' (Regulations of the Artistic and Programming Council) (*Didaskalia*, 2019, p. 5–9). While their pioneering nature cannot be denied, they do represent a contribution to full systemic change, requiring expansion, deepening and practical testing. This form of continuation and verification was also intended to occur at Teatr Dramatyczny, managed by Monika Strzępka and her Drama Collective. Before examining the provisions of Monika Strzępka's competition programme (co-created by the Drama Collective) and its implementation, I will cite proposals for theatre reform at the managerial and organisational levels developed in Germany, where the reflection and practice on collective directorship and participatory theatre directorship is more developed and systemic than in Poland.

Thomas Schmidt, an academic lecturer with experience as a director, mentioned in the introduction, comprehensively described the problems of managing public theatres and outlined a possible direction for change. His work, which provides a theoretical foundation for thinking about reforming the management of theatre institutions, is firmly rooted in reality, as it is based on a survey completed by 1,966 people representing the theatre industry.

Schmidt's personal experience and expertise and the broad scope and empirical-theoretical nature of his research make this a pioneering work in the field of theatre. Therefore, although it focuses on German theatre, it has gained international renown thanks to the English-language edition of his book *Power and Structure in Theater: Asymmetries of Power* (2023). The national nature of his research does not prevent him from outlining recommendations for the transformation of the theatre system that transcend the local context. The researcher calls for a reform of the system,

not for developing strategies to operate within the existing one.

Schmidt's research addresses both violence and abuse of power within institutions and alternative models that would help build an 'ethical theatre' in the future (see Schmidt, 2024). Schmidt points out that one of the key causes of abuse of power in German theatres is the omnipotence of the theatre's managing director (seventy-seven percent are men), who single-handedly manages the theatre's capital, including employment. Schmidt wrote that an authoritarian directorship style combines self-confidence with carelessness and ignorance. However, a sense of omnipotence also comes with assuming a vast number of duties and responsibilities, which in turn stimulates the need for control. He therefore recommends changes in the directorship of theatre institutions (Głowacka, 2022) and proposes two directions: a team- and process-oriented structural reform and a new ethical directorship model (Schmidt, 2023, p. 352).

In his proposed model, based on participation and a balance of power, leaders would serve as knowledge moderators, sharing responsibility with the team and limiting the tools of control (ibid., p. 360-361). To achieve this goal, highly developed emotional intelligence is essential, which should be one of the criteria for selecting a director (ibid., p. 364–366; 393–396). According to Schmidt, the best solution is to abandon single-person directorship in favour of directorial teams in which all members have equal rights. These groups should consist of at least three members but no more than eight, and their size should be adapted to the size of the organisation so as not to hinder a smooth workflow (Schmidt, 2023, p. 381). He advises against illusory solutions in which the management team is led by a director and *de facto* reports to him. The leadership group should share competences at the artistic, organisational, programmatic, production and management

levels but establish an efficient procedure for knowledge flow and make all important decisions jointly (ibid., p. 394). Effective communication with the theatre team and the media is crucial (in this area, team members should represent each other; ibid., p. 345), for which designated individuals should be responsible. Schmidt also advocates for greater gender balance in management positions and cites the example of women's collectives managing theatres in Zurich. He points out that Theater Neumarkt and Theater Gessnerallee are managed by collectives composed of three women in equal positions, who share roles (in the latter institution) in the areas of dramaturgy, communication and organisation (ibid., p. 394). This state of affairs, with some changes, persists to this day. Theater Neumarkt is currently managed by Hayat Erdoğan, Julia Reichert and Tine Minz, while at Theaterhaus Gessnerallee, Michelle Akanji, Julianne Hahn and Rabei Grand have been succeeded by Kathrin Veser and Miriam Walther, who serve as equal artistic and general directors.[3] According to Schmidt, an ethically managed institution should be characterised by, among others: shared responsibility of the management team; the development of strategies and concepts for the future concerning the theatre's social responsibility; fair (including economically) working conditions; avoidance of corruption and nepotism; focus on education and development in contact with the audience; cooperation with social organisations; and ecology (ibid., p. 358–359).

It is also important to carefully navigate any conflict situations, especially those resulting from changes taking place within the institution, and to use disciplinary and rewarding tools sparingly. He considers it essential to implement codes of conduct, ensure the participation and professional development of the team, and gradually increase the salaries of the lowest-paid – including technical and administrative staff. As Schmidt points out, such a management model is based more on respect and reciprocity than on

exerting influence or sanctions (ibid., p. 382–383). A similar restructuring of the theatre system, in his opinion, requires a smooth, long-term transformation of the entire system, encompassing theatres, cultural policy and the media alike. This transformation could take as long as ten or twenty years (ibid., p. 384).

As Aneta Głowacka notes, Schmidt's research has generated considerable interest in Germany (Głowacka, 2022). At the same time, as Artur Duda emphasises, collective management models also aroused resistance. Duda notes that opposition to new management models in Germany is strengthened by every failure, even partial, in their implementation. He cites examples in which programmes based on democratisation and/or collectivity failed to curb institutional violence, hampered decision-making processes and distracted from artistic work. He draws attention to the 'double morality' in which the equality declarations made by theatre managers did not align with their actual practices (Shermin Langhoff at the Maxim Gorki Theatre; Duda, 2022). In the discussion about Monika Strzępka's directorship of Teatr Dramatyczny, both themes mentioned above – the discrepancy between theory and practice and the abuse of power in collective management – proved crucial. Below, I will examine both the programme that defined the theoretical framework and the complaints concerning management practices presented in the media. By comparing these issues with Schmidt's proposals, I will highlight hypothetical reasons for this project's failure.

A Feminist Cultural Institution and 'Ethical

Theatre’

Monika Strzępka’s winning competition programme outlined a project to transform Teatr Dramatyczny into a ‘feminist cultural institution’ that would accommodate the expression of female subjectivity, sexual minorities, identity minorities (LGBTQ+ groups), nationalities and ethnicities, for people of all social classes and ages. A similar inclusiveness was to characterise the theatre’s aesthetic and repertoire. The programme designated a space for contemporary and classical drama, stand-up comedy, female rap and hip-hop, and theatre engaging children and youths. The programme envisioned ‘confronting collective traumas’ and ‘therapy for all’ (Strzępka, *Koncepcja programowa*). The declarations regarding the theatre’s management were crucial, and they seem consistent with Schmidt’s ideas, as they focused on teamwork and were process-driven. These were included in the programme sections titled *In a Safe Process: The Artistic Work System* and *Organisational Structure*. The former described a model of collaboration between the institution and artists. The plan was to open the theatre to diverse models of creative work, according to the principle: ‘less work, more reflection’ (Strzępka, *Koncepcja programowa*, p. 12).

Emphasis was placed, for example, on the need to support the collective work practised by creative individuals in permanent creative teams, often extending beyond the period of rehearsal and exploration (including in the form of participatory work with communities outside the theatre). The development of a permanent acting ensemble was also envisaged, which the programme called one of the theatre’s ‘greatest potentials’ (ibid.). This approach was intended to counteract violence in the theatre, in line with the belief that ‘stress, (self-)exploitation, and suffering are not necessary for the creation of valuable art,’ and that well-being and safety are the foundation of

creative courage (ibid.).

Announced was the practical application of various tools, procedures, and documents developed in the theatre community in response to the #MeToo movement, which sparked a broader discussion in Poland about violence in creative processes. This passage concluded with a strong and rather obvious thesis about the relationship between artistic and social practices (ibid., p. 13).

Similar ideas guided organisational plans aimed at achieving a participatory, ethical cultural institution (ibid., p. 15):

> Effective implementation of the organisational and financial plan will be possible with a team of committed and appropriately qualified collaborators – people who have clearly defined areas of responsibility, a precise division of tasks, feel freedom in decision-making, and take responsibility for their areas.
> I want cooperation to be based on cooperation, not competition. […] My goal is to move from a strictly hierarchical management style to a model of self-organising teams […]. Such a change should be a smooth transformation, and its pace must stem from an internal process of negotiation, discussion, and maturation for change (ibid., p. 15).

The establishment of a Theatre Council – composed of representatives from all the theatre's organisational structures – was intended to serve these goals; a Programme-Artistic Council composed of artists collaborating with the institution; and a Programme Team responsible for implementing the artistic and social programme. A key value guiding the work of all these

bodies is transparency (ibid., p. 16).

Theory and Practice

The ideas presented in the competition document meet many of Thomas Schmidt's postulates. In practice, these assumptions were to be further developed, especially in the area of collective management. The programme was signed by Monika Strzępka, and she won the competition for the theatre's directorship. Strzępka's programme concept[4] makes no mention of collective management, even though – as the artist repeatedly emphasised – it was the collective work of a group that formed a year before which resulted in winning the competition (Romanowska, 2023):

> I am very keen to speak of this management in the plural. […] This programme was written with a social energy demanding change. I understood the causative power of community, especially a community of women. I opened myself wide to this experience and understood what it means to live harmoniously and act harmoniously. […] With the girls with whom I wrote the programme, we have developed a very effective and harmonious way of working together. We have common goals – they constitute us as a collective entity (Niedurny, 2022).

The collective authorship of the programme is also evident in its content. The feminist cultural institution is a concept co-created by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek as part of the *Porozumienie* (The Agreement) project at the Teatr Powszechny. The programme incorporates many procedures, ideas and formulations inspired by those developed in 2019. Monika Dziekan

previously served as Natalia Dzieduszycka's plenipotentiary for organisational development at TR Warszawa, introducing a management model similar to the one described in Strzępka's programme.[5] The extensive theatre pedagogy programme, which encompassed not only the production of performances for children and young people but also close collaboration with these groups, was likely brought to the programme by Dorota Kowalkowska, an experienced and respected theatre educator. Despite this, the names of the women from the Drama Collective do not appear in the competition programme. Apart from sporadic and enigmatic Facebook posts, the first public appearance of the Drama Collective – composed of Agata Adamiecka, Małgorzata Błasińska, Jagoda Dutkiewicz, Monika Dziekan, Dorota Kowalkowska and Monika Strzępka – took place, as far as I know, only after the competition results were announced (in January 2022) but before they took over as directors (September 1, 2022). This was a message for International Theatre Day, delivered on March 27, 2022 (*Kobiecy Dramatyczny kolektyw i Monika Strzępka*, 2022; *Orędzie…*, 2022). One might therefore get the impression that the existence and role of the Drama Collective were not explicitly stated until the competition results were announced. Was this due to a fear that the concept of collective management would prove too revolutionary to convince the organiser, or due to internal arrangements within the women's group, or were there other reasons? It is difficult to determine today. Such an action, however, seems to contradict the idea of transparency, which is essential both in the concept of a feminist cultural institution and 'ethical theatre,' and as declared in the programme.

The ceremonial inauguration of the directorship, dubbed *The Sabbath of a Good Beginning*, could have raised many doubts – both aesthetically[6] and due to the act of coronation mentioned in the introduction, suggesting a single-person authority. However, Monika Strzępka then presented the

Drama Collective, outlining the division of functions and responsibilities, which was subsequently repeated many times: ‘Dr hab. Agata Adamiecka – plenipotentiary for the institution’s transformation; Monika Dziekan – deputy for organisational and financial affairs; Dorota Kowalkowska, who will head the programming department; and Małgorzata Błasińska, who will be responsible for productions and the Warszawskie Spotkania Teatralne festival organised by Teatr Dramatyczny’ (Mrozek, 2022). At the press conference inaugurating her directorship, she provided similar information and, in a humorous and somewhat risky style, commented on the importance of collective management in a hierarchical structure:

> And this simply happens when there is trust. […] I mean, I don't want to live […] in a world based on distrust, on suspicion. That if I don’t read this stack of contracts myself every day, I can’t sign them. But Monika reads them, Agata reads them. I can sign them. […] Ultimately, I'm responsible. I do it consciously. I consciously expose myself, girls [laughter] (Romanowska, 2023).

This division of responsibilities resembled the organisational structure described by Thomas Schmidt. According to Schmidt, collective management is intended not only to prevent the accumulation of power in the hands of a single person but also to evenly distribute responsibility. The researcher argues that managing a theatre is currently a very complex task, requiring a variety of knowledge and skills (Schmidt, 2023, p. 345). At the same time, however, he writes about the division of functions embedded in the theatre’s organisational structure, and no such a phase occurred in the legitimisation of the Drama Collective. As Strzępka stated, ultimately, she was the one who had to sign all the documents and bore full legal responsibility. In this light,

the declaration that she would not read some of them sounds downright frivolous. However, this indicates a contradiction between the directorial and collective models.

It is worth noting that Polish law allows for an alternative to a sole directorship by entrusting the directorship of the theatre to a legal entity,[7] such as a foundation, association, or company.[8] Theoretically, a public theatre could be managed by a team of individuals who together comprise such an organization.[9] However, this option is not utilised by public theatre organisers. When a theatre organiser announces a tender for a directorial position, it is already excluding an alternative solution, because the directorship of the theatre to a legal entity is not being bestowed through a private-sector-like recruitment process, but through a public procurement process. However, if the theatre were managed by a legal entity named the Drama Collective, selected through public procurement, the documents could be signed by several designated individuals.[10]

Time is also an important issue here. It should be noted that the Collective was established a year before winning the competition (Romanowska, 2023). One might wonder whether this is sufficient time to develop a programme and methodology for joint action. Marta Jalowska, a member of the independent collective Teraz Poliż, which has been operating since 2008, argues:

> But I am thinking, in the context of Teatr Dramatyczny, where a very specific structure already exists, that the process of preparing for the role of director, or rather the collective managing of an institution that is one of the largest theatres in Poland and located in the very centre of the capital, should take about two years, and

> overlapping. You have to learn to work with the programme, your immediate team, and all the other professional groups in the theatre, and you should also be paid for it, as in the British model. Systemically, in Poland, such a time is not planned for (*Feministycznie, kolektywnie, horyzontalnie – czyli jak?*, 2024).

A process inspired by Jalowska's idea might look like this: a Drama Collective is formed at least a year before the competition. After winning the competition (or tender), it enters the institution for a two-year induction period (time to get to know the institution, prepare new documents and regulations) and, only after that, takes over directorship. The first stage allows the group to form without the pressure of deadlines, documents and accountability, or even mutual – formally determined – obligations and declarations, to, as Bojana Kunst puts it, consider the motivation for working together (2016, p. 74). This is a time to focus on immaterial work 'utilising communicative and human potential' (ibid., p. 82). This could then lead to the preliminary development of methods for joint action, including principles of discussion, decision-making, information flow, and action in the face of conflict. In the second stage, a team thus formed could come to understand the institution's mechanisms thoroughly (including their economic, systemic and customary conditions) and verify whether the previously developed tools are adequate or require any verification. During this time, the collective and the theatre's employees would have the opportunity to get to know each other better. It is also conceivable that such preparation would provide the future management team with an opportunity to understand the theatre's financial situation and clarify any unclear, problematic or difficult issues with the city authorities as the organiser. A process spread over several years and stages would allow for a thorough rethinking and verification of

the management team's composition and the division of functions, as well as the identification of competency gaps and their potential remediation.

Iga Dzieciuchowicz's book, however, indicates that, in the case of the Drama Collective, it was only during the directorship that the initial assumptions in this regard were revised. Monika Strzępka says: 'I am grateful to the girls for many things. It was a good adventure. However, my conclusion is this: in the theatre, it is better to work with people who know the theatre than with civilians. In my team, it was 50/50' (Dzieciuchowicz, 2025, p. 290). Two members of the Collective who spoke with Dzieciuchowicz say that, while working with Strzępka, they realised that 'in some respects, Strzępka truly lacked management skills' and speculate that 'she would have been a much better artistic director of the theatre than its general director' (ibid.). It should be noted, however, that if the process of establishing the Collective and implementing the new directorship had proceeded as described above, Strzępka and the Collective's term of office would not yet have begun at the time of their dismissal.

Returning from the realm of speculation to the realities of the situation, it is worth noting that not all the people who signed the International Theatre Day Message joined the Collective, whereas Mariusz Guglas (Deputy Director for Technical Affairs) was included in the management team.[11] Furthermore, during Monika Strzępka's directorship, no new work regulations were developed at Teatr Dramatyczny to sanction the assumed division of functions and responsibilities. In response to critical reports,[12] in December 2023, Teatr Dramatyczny Directorship (without their names) published a statement admitting that they were still in the process of amending the organisational regulations intended to formalise the division of functions and responsibilities within the Drama Collective.[13] A year and a

half after the director's inauguration, there were no documents legitimising the collective management of the theatre. This demonstrates that the organisational changes were not formally prepared at the time of the management's takeover. This was most likely related to an attempt to develop new regulations as a group, which was also mentioned in the above-mentioned statement.[14] However, this does not change the fact that the actual situation did not correspond to the legal situation.

The delay in working on the document may also have been due to Monika Strzępka's six-month suspension from her position as director, which occurred shortly after her appointment. In November 2022, Voivode Konstanty Radziwiłł invalidated the order appointing Strzępka as director of Teatr Dramatyczny, claiming that her feminist programme did not meet the requirements described in the competition announcement (Cieślak, 2023b). This rationale had all the hallmarks of a backlash. The media reported that Strzępka had been dismissed for her feminism (Mrozek, 2023). This was also a reaction to the director's performative inauguration, which included the bringing into the theatre of Iwona Demko's gold-painted sculpture, *Moist Lady*, resembling both a vagina and the figure of the Virgin Mary (Gazur, 2022). The city authorities suspended the new director from her duties but referred the case to the Administrative Court. From November 2023 to April 2024, when the Provincial Administrative Court overturned the voivode's ruling, the theatre was officially managed by Monika Dziekan (Kyzioł, 2022). Collective management was then described as a remedy for the crisis. A photo of Monika Strzępka, dressed in gold and hanging on a hook above the stage, appeared on the theatre's Facebook page, along with the message:

> These conditions, although forced, allow for a more complete realisation of our concept of a collectively run institution. The

> Drama Collective is implementing a new model of theatre management and continuing to implement its winning programme […]. Is it possible to run a theatre outside the strict managerial mould? Is it possible to manage an institution differently than under single-handed management? Fingers crossed! The direction: a feminist cultural institution. Therapy for all.[15]

It seems, however, that the Collective, instead of gradually implementing new programmatic assumptions, new procedures, and new management and organisational practices, had to secure the theatre's operation during a period of crisis, the duration of which was difficult to clearly define, as the situation was unprecedented in Poland. During the 'suspension,' Teatr Dramatyczny produced four premieres and prepared another edition of the Warszawskie Spotkania Teatralne. One wonders whether, in such circumstances, production work did not dominate over immaterial, reproductive work and, if so, what alternative scenarios existed.

Teatr Dramatyczny's problems did not end with the director's return following a court victory. In an October 2023 interview with Magdalena Rigamonti, Monika Strzępka reported a 1.5 million zloty structural debt that the new management supposedly inherited from the previous one. The artist claimed that she had not been informed of the institution's actual financial situation, either before or after the directorial competition. In later statements, Aldona Machnowska-Góra, representing the city authorities, defended herself, saying that 'Monika Strzępka, as someone with no experience in managing cultural institutions, did not know how to exercise her right to inspect the theatre's financial situation before taking office' (Dudko, 2023). Another significant problem was the oversized ensemble of actors, which the previous director failed to reduce following the sale of one

of the theatre's stages in 2020. The theatre's situation, when recognised a few months after taking over as director, prompted Strzępka and the Collective to make savings – including through layoffs.

Although the interview sparked a storm of negative commentary, in Iga Dzieciuchowicz's book, Monika Strzępka claims that it was initiated by her and the Collective. Guided by the principle of transparency, the theatre's managers wanted to share the reasons behind their decisions with the public, aimed at rationally managing public funds. They were reportedly satisfied with the interview, but by revealing the secret about the debt, according to Strzępka, they had fallen foul of the city authorities (Dzieciuchowicz, 2025, p. 284–285). From the perspective of collective management and transparency, it is puzzling why only the director participated in the interview, speaking on her own behalf and not mentioning the Drama Collective in her statements. In this context, it is difficult for the reader to determine to what extent her statements actually represented the opinions and attitudes of the other members of the Collective (which would be consistent with Schmidt's recommendations), and to what extent they were solely her own. And indeed, the first wave of criticism hit Strzępka directly. The situation was only slightly changed by Romanowska's reportages (Romanowska, 2023a; Romanowska, 2023), which also covered the Collective's activities. Ultimately, one might get the impression that responsibility for the negatively perceived decisions and actions of the Collective members was attributed solely to Strzępka as the theatre's director. At this level, therefore, in my opinion, a disconnect arose between collective management and individual representation.

Based on interviews and reports, the management of Teatr Dramatyczny was accused of the dismissals that took place at the beginning of the season

(which were legal, but whose timing made it difficult to find work in the season that had already begun), in humiliating circumstances (e.g., a few hours before a performance), with reasons given that questioned professional competences (e.g., lack of so-called performative skills), and showed signs of discrimination on ideological grounds (Strzępka's repeatedly cited argument that she could not imagine working artistically with people whose value system differed from hers; Rigamonti, 2023). Questionable cost savings were also pointed out: hiring new people to replace those dismissed (balance sheet: 28 actors dismissed, 27 employed; although, as the audit showed, the entire theatre staff was reduced from 144 to 136 people (*Wystąpienie pokontrolne*, 2024, p. 9), but also: accumulating the responsibilities of both male and female employees; the removal from the repertoire of well-received performances that had been produced under the previous directorship; skimping on hygiene products, coffee and – above all – safety (health and safety) issues. All of this, according to those interviewed by Romanowska, created an unpleasant, tense atmosphere in the theatre.

Romanowska's reports also devoted considerable space to criticism of the actions of the Drama Collective. In addition to indecisiveness (or an excessively lengthy decision-making process, which negatively impacted time and work hygiene, as well as employee stress levels), the group's members were accused of poor management, passive-aggressive behaviour, a downwardly critical approach to what had been developed under the previous directorship, and a lack of transparency in the division of responsibilities. According to the people in Romanowska's reports, collective management did not flatten the hierarchy; it only reinforced it. This fostered increased control within the theatre (exercised not only by the director but also by her team), created a power imbalance during discussions with employees, and potentially blocked complaints regarding the actions of the

general director or Collective, as they were supposed to be directed to one of its members, Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, responsible for the institution's transformation. However, when considering the credibility of these allegations, it is important to consider that they were made largely by individuals no longer working at Teatr Dramatyczny, including those who had been dismissed, and some were anonymous.

The Collective did not respond to some of the allegations, referring primarily to financial matters in a statement issued by management. It cited a series of cost-intensive abuses by individuals who had worked under the previous directorship, which occurred at the theatre, resulting in one person being dismissed for disciplinary reasons, one being given notice of termination and two leaving voluntarily[16]. The layoffs Strzępka was accused of, therefore, did not concern only the acting team and were not solely based on artistic or ideological considerations. Also pointing to other cost-cutting measures (on coffee, taxis, etc.), the directorship argued that the theatre had been financially mismanaged for years (a subsequent audit, which also covered the final stages of the previous directorship, partially confirmed this thesis[17]). While it is difficult to reject this argument, it is impossible not to notice that the language of ideas contained in the programme here morphed into the language of economics. However, we do not know who wrote the statement signed by Teatr Dramatyczny management. A division likely arose between Monika Strzępka and the Collective. This is evidenced by Strzępka's statement from 18 December 2023, in which she reported that she had been blackmailed by several actresses performing in a play she was directing called *Heksy* in the presence of Collective members. The aim of the blackmail was to persuade Strzępka to sign a resignation from her position as general director (the actresses allegedly said they would not leave for rehearsal until she signed the document). In the same statement, Strzępka

dissolved the Collective and announced that from that moment on she was ‘the independent general and artistic director of Teatr Dramatyczny’ (Cieślak, 2023). Ultimately, under the influence of the escalating crisis, Monika Dziekan resigned. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek resigned from her concurrent position as the Student Ombudsman at the Akademia Teatralna in Warsaw (Theatre Academy). In her resignation, she wrote about the failure of the collective management project (Felberg, 2023). The dissolution of the Collective clearly demonstrated Monika Strzępka’s superior position as director. Collective management thus proved to be an idea with very little grounding in reality, either legal or practical. The model of collective management of such a large institution as Teatr Dramatyczny, especially under unfavourable legislative conditions, is unprecedented in Poland, so it would essentially have to be invented from scratch – perhaps inspired by the knowledge developed on this subject in Germany.

At the conceptual level, as I have indicated, the competition programme successfully described a model of a feminist, democratic and participatory institution. The Collective’s lack of adequate preparation for managing such a large and complex theatre, along with the mounting crises, hindered the implementation of changes and the development and practical implementation of a collective management methodology. All of this – as can be inferred from the reports – negatively impacted ethical issues. Ultimately, the collective and ethical management at Teatr Dramatyczny proved to be a sham, as criticised by Schmidt. But can we say it failed if it never truly emerged at the practical level and during a period of relative stability? And can collective management be practised in a hierarchical system?

Resistance to change?

Monika Strzępka's directorship of Teatr Dramatyczny was not the first failure of attempts to flatten the hierarchy at this institution. Similar efforts were undertaken under Paweł Miśkiewicz's directorship (2008–12). Dorota Sajewska, then deputy artistic director, reflected on the situation years later:

> When Paweł Miśkiewicz and I joined Teatr Dramatyczny, our first move was to swap jobs […]. We wanted the structure to be more 'horizontal,' and it seems to me that work is much more efficient if people can communicate in parallel, horizontally, and not just through the director. It was a rather utopian assumption. I worked in a tailoring workshop for a year, and during that time, no one from the old team treated me as a director. Only when I took over Piotr Cieślak's room was I noticed and was able to start making decisions, issuing orders and signing documents (*Reżyser(ka)…*, 2013).

This may indicate that the management model based on traditional hierarchy has become strongly normalised in Poland. Although the accumulation of power can lead to abuse, it provides a sense of security. People who have worked in such relationships for years are familiar with them and know how to navigate them. Changes, even if seemingly accepted, can in practice evoke feelings of discomfort, disorientation, fear and, consequently, resistance. This reaction is understandable and has been described in psychological literature, including in the context of professional organisations (see, e.g., Centkowska, 2015; Wybrańczyk & Szromek, 2018). In the case of such an entrenched management model, as prevailing in

Polish public theatres, one can speak of structural inertia, which ‘results from the nature of the organisation as a factor stabilising organisational behaviour’ (Centkowska, 2015, p. 14).

Similar factors may have negatively impacted the restructuring of Teatr Dramatyczny under Strzępka and the Drama Collective. The transformation process was significantly hampered by some employees' fear of renewed destabilisation in the post-pandemic period and by a long-standing conflict within the team, which, in the face of change, divided into those who supported the new management and the Collective, and those who were sceptical. Romanowska’s reports feature individuals from the latter group, most of whom were dismissed after the change in management (see Dzieciuchowicz, 2025). In this context, it is worth noting the opinions cited there, which don’t point to abuses of power but, rather, to the change itself:

> But after the season begins, the team quickly realises that – as she puts it – ‘nothing will be the same as before.’ […] It becomes clear to the administrative staff that a ‘feminist cultural institution’ means the theatre is transforming into a cultural centre where the production and operation of performances take a back seat, and various events, workshops, meetings and simple dances become more important (Romanowska, 2023a).

The decision to offer free coffee only in the director’s office – for theatre guests; group mushroom-picking trips; Iwona Demko’s sculpture in the theatre foyer;[18] the change of name from *gabinet* (*office*) to *waginet* [a word-play on the Polish for ‘vagina’]; and the fumigation of the theatre with sage also generated resistance. An episode was criticised in which an actor

sprained his ankle and the performance was interrupted to send the injured man to the emergency room instead of administering painkillers and splinting his leg to complete the performance. Letters intended to draw the attention of trade unions to the problem in the theatre warned that ‘the creativity of this theatre is being wasted’ and that ‘the theatre of the middle ground should be preserved’ (Romanowska, 2023a). Reports on irregularities at Teatr Dramatyczny are also openly sceptical of the idea of collective management – revealing the resistance to attempts to transform the hierarchical management model, which is very visible in some circles (Romanowska, 2023). They insinuated, for example, that such a model is significantly more expensive than the traditional one, a claim denied in a statement by Teatr Dramatyczny Directorship.

Some of these narratives have a hidden agenda: additional events organised at the theatre caused problems with work hours, and, in the case of the sprained ankle, there was no paramedic in the theatre to treat it and allow the performance to be completed; people who didn’t want to go mushroom-picking felt excluded (Romanowska, 2023a). However, it seems that such issues could have been resolved without escalating the conflict. Thomas Schmidt points out that, during periods of transition, careful conflict-management and the relaxing of critical and disciplinary tools are particularly important (Schmidt, 2023, p. 382–383); it seems to me that these postulates were not implemented here. The resistance, so obvious in a situation of fundamental change, was not mitigated; on the contrary, it gained further reasons to escalate. Magdalena Centkowska, in her text *Theoretical Foundations of Resistance to Organisational Change*, emphasises that resistance increases the less well-planned the transformation process (2015, p. 11) – and, as media reports suggest, this was the case at Teatr Dramatyczny. Distrust of change is also typically fuelled by a lack of

information: ‘about the methods, means, causes, course of implementation, and the purpose of the planned changes; the consequences of the changes for employees in financial, social, and especially material terms; the current and future position of the company; […] numerous misunderstandings in the flow of information’ (ibid.). While, in the case of Teatr Dramatyczny, the direction of change was described at the ideological level in the programme, its actual course was probably not understood by everyone. This was due to the contradiction between assumptions and actions and the lack of new documents formally legitimising the changes. Furthermore, resistance is intensified by increased demands on employees and fear of additional burdens (ibid., p. 12).

In the case analysed here, these included, for example, the expectation of performance acting from the ensemble. Strzępka explained it as the opposite of ‘embodied’ acting, which involves obediently performing directorial tasks. Performance acting, in her opinion, requires the personal engagement of the performer, who is willing to reveal their attitude towards the themes addressed in the performance and does not hide behind stage illusion (Rigamonti, 2023). Strzępka believes that this type of stage presence is based on qualities such as ‘emanation,’ ‘performance’ and ‘improvisation’ (Dzieciuchowicz, 2025, p. 281–282). Although many people mocked Strzępka’s statements on this topic, claiming that all acting is ‘performative,’ this type of acting has a long practical and theoretical tradition – it has been described by esteemed scholars of contemporary theatre such as Philip Auslander (1997) and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008). The new expectations, however, may have caused confusion, and dismissals based on these expectations may have led to resistance and questions about why the actors were not given the opportunity to acquire such competencies. Resistance is also exacerbated by wounded professional ambition (Centkowska, 2015, p.

11–12), which undoubtedly arose as a result of the criticism of various aspects of the theatre's operation under Tadeusz Słobodzianek's managament, directly attacking the competences of those responsible for their implementation (Romanowska, 2023). Another factor is a lack of trust in those implementing the change. The management team, with the exception of Guglas, were not well known at the theatre, as they had not worked there during Tadeusz Słobodzianek's ten-year directorship. The feeling that the situation was getting out of control (Centkowska, 2015, p. 12), which occurred, for example, during rehearsals for *Heksy*, directed by Strzępka, also negatively impacted the dynamics of change. This is evidenced by the reaction of actresses who urged Strzępka to sign the letter resignation and then presented sick leave certificates two days before the premiere (Cieślak, 2023), as well as by Michał Sikorski's statement: 'In the face of the events that took place during rehearsals in recent days, I felt it was impossible for me to continue working in conditions that deviate from the standards of a healthy, safe process' (Dróżdż, 2023), and finally Agnieszka Szpila's statement, who announced that she would not attend the premiere, writing: 'The enormity of the mental and emotional suffering that the acting team has recently endured is so devastating.'[19] As a result, even those initially supportive of the new director or those employed by her withdrew that support.

Techniques for overcoming resistance to change vary, though they primarily involve providing information, engaging employees in the transformation process, and analysing techniques that support it. Above all, however, resistance should not be viewed as a negative factor, but rather as an inherent phenomenon accompanying any transformation in work organisation (Centkowska, 2015, p. 17). At Teatr Dramatyczny, the capacity to avert the crisis and work through the resistance were certainly not

increased by the escalating media storm, or even smear campaign, surrounding Monika Strzępka's directorship.

The Return of the Same

The beginning of Tadeusz Słobodzianek's leadership, which preceded Monika Strzępka's resignation, triggered similar institutional mechanisms. In 2013, the press reported that the theatre company was losing a quarter of its cast, and that those dismissed by the new director considered his decisions unfounded and were taking their cases to court. The team appealed to the Warsaw City Hall's Office of Culture and to the Deputy Mayor of Warsaw for intervention. Słobodzianek was accused of violating workers' rights, disrespecting theatre employees, creating a hostile atmosphere, exerting pressure and intimidating employees during staff talks. The reason for the dismissal of the actors was that 'their stage style is unnecessary in the theatre repertoire' and 'the directors' lack of interest in this part of the ensemble' (Szewczak, 2013). The new director was also blamed for financial losses resulting from the removal of performances produced under the previous management, despite their success. Słobodzianek assured that 'the procedures for terminating employment contracts were carried out in accordance with the labour code' and that 'the process of building a new acting company is a normal phenomenon, especially since my vision for the theatre differs from that of the previous directorship.' Decisions, including those regarding the repertoire, were driven by necessary cost-cutting measures (Szewczak, 2013). It is hard not to notice the parallels between the accusations against Słobodzianek and those against Strzępka. The arguments dismissing them also seem similar.

What might all this suggest? On the one hand, the similarity of the

mechanisms of power and the tools of resistance to change in theatres following a change in directorship. On the other, although the similarities may be only superficial, it is difficult to speak of a radical shift in the approach to institutional management, from the hierarchical and patriarchal model in Słobodzianek's case to the collective and feminist approach in Strzępka's practice. The difference, however, is fundamental when we consider the beginning and end of both directorships. Słobodzianek did not win a competition, but was appointed to his position by the city authorities; Strzępka won the competition with a daring programme. These two paths were meant to foreshadow the difference between a director by appointment, who introduced his own order, and a director who made a public promise to introduce a new, more horizontal management style. The failure to fulfil this promise became a significant motive for resistance and a source of loss of trust within the institution and the community. Słobodzianek didn't disappoint hopes because he didn't raise them. Despite the resistance and protests from the company, he did not lose his position, as happened with Strzępka, who did not receive a second vote of confidence. This stems, I believe, from the ten years between the two cases, the extensive discussion about violence in the theatre, and the changes in directorial positions prompted by the actors' protests. All of this changed the sensitivity to the voices of those in weaker positions in the institutional hierarchy and taught them how to respond to complaints about abuse. However, such a rapid loss of trust in Monika Strzępka and her Drama Collective also stemmed, in my opinion, from the avowedly feminist dimension of their programme and the expectation, felt through public discourse, that a change could be implemented immediately, without complications or mistakes. Every stumble, every shift in narrative, every complaint became evidence of failure and the impossibility of introducing

new management tools in public theatre. Dorota Glac, a member of the aforementioned feminist theatre collective Teraz Poliż, commented on this atmosphere:

> When crises or violence scandals arise in theatres managed by men, they don't say there's a problem with patriarchy. It is incredible that in patriarchy you constantly have to prove that it doesn't actually work, while in the case of a feminist collective, one situation is enough to prove that feminism and non-hierarchy in theatre do not work (*Feministycznie, kolektywnie, horyzontalnie – czyli jak?*, 2024).

In summary, we can conclude that proven management methods, even if they involve resistance and accusations of violence, do not undermine public trust, because they are what we know and expect. Sajewska and Glac's statements also reveal the influence of gender issues on the effectiveness of institutional managers. The influence of gender stereotypes on the perception of women in management positions, as described in management literature, confirms these findings (see, e.g., Tomaszewska, 2023). It is therefore difficult not to consider these factors when questioning the reasons for the failure of Teatr Dramatyczny's transformation.

Conclusion

Monika Strzępka's competition programme, co-created by the Drama Collective, met many of the hallmarks of an ethical, participatory and balanced cultural institution. However, the actual management of the theatre reproduced, on many levels, the hierarchical model entrenched by

tradition and legislation. Teatr Dramatyczny's operation was not sanctioned, nor was a transparent methodology developed. Instead of empowering the team, developing its competencies and including it in decision-making mechanisms; audits, criticism and dismissals were proposed. The new management also seemed unprepared for resistance, an inevitable factor in any transformation process. At the same time, the circumstances surrounding Monika Strzępka's suspension, the financial problems, the irregularities uncovered by the new management and the subsequent mounting criticism and even hate meant that the management team continued to operate in crisis mode, most likely losing trust among the team (or at least parts of it), all of which was not conducive to balanced decisions and a slow transformation process.

Translatated by Mark Hoogslag & Tim Brombley

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Violence in Theatre; 2025). Her research focuses on performances by discriminated minority groups, especially women, queer communities, and people with disabilities, including individuals experiencing mental health crises or neurodivergence. ORCID: 0000-0003-1913-4562.

Footnotes

1. This large public theatre, managed by the city, is located in the Palace of Culture and Science in central Warsaw. It organises the annual Warsaw Theatre Meetings (WST) festival.
2. However, it was fuelled by the media after the publication of the results of an audit at the Drama Theatre concerning the end of Tadeusz Słobodzianek's and Monika Strzępka's management (Gruszczyński, 2025), and of the case that Monika Strzępka filed against the Drama Theatre, which ended with a settlement – the hearing was held to decide whether the former director was dismissed in accordance with the law (Dudko, 2025).
3. Cf. https://gessnerallee.ch/en/bout-us/team-and-contacts#direction [accessed: 5.04.2025].
4. The competition requires the nomination of a single candidate, but even in this variant, it is possible to designate a person or persons in the competition programme to join the theatre's management team. They may also be the co-authors of the programme.
5. See Niedurny, Morawski, 2022. Let us add, however, that this model and the very attitude of the Dean at TR Warszawa were negatively assessed by the team and were one of the reasons for the rebellion against the management of Grzegorz Jarzyna and Natalia Dzieduszycka and the resulting change of management.
6. Mrozek described it as follows: 'The party at Plac Defilad was a rather peculiar combination of New Age themes, intellectual leftist social criticism, and street celebration' (Mrozek, 2022).
7. Act of 25 October 1991 on organising and conducting cultural activities, https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19911140493/U/D19910493Lj.pdf, p. 15 [accessed: 28.03.2025].
8. *Legal person*, 'INFOR.PL,' https://www.infor.pl/prawo/encyklopedia-prawa/o/273520,Osoba-prawna.html [accessed: 28.03.2025].
9. Cf. *Managing a cultural institution …*, 2012.
10. Cf. *Managing a cultural institution…*, 2012.
11. https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=510817821083917&id=100064671102439&set=a.448512043981162 [accessed: 28.03.2025].
12. *A Year with Strzępka. 'Monika From a Declared Feminist Became a Role Model of Discrimination*' (Romanowska, 2023a) and *'Tentacles Were Everywhere.' Behind the Scenes of Managing the Drama Theatre* (Romanowska, 2023).
13. The Drama Collective's statement is not currently available on the Theatre's website; Jacek Cieślak quoted it extensively in the article: 'Monika Strzępka, director of the Drama theatre, earns PLN 18,500 gross' (Cieślak, 2023a). It can now be read in its entirety at: https://web.archive.org/web/20231210074048/https:/teatrdramatyczny.pl/aktualnosci-9 [accessed: 9.03.2025].

14. https://web.archive.org/web/20231210074048/https://teatrdramatyczny.pl/aktualnosci-9 [accessed: 9.03.2025].
15. https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=510817821083917&id=100064671102439&set=a.448512043981162 [accessed 28/03/2025]. However, in its *Post-Inspection Statement* of 4 October 2024, the committee found that it was inappropriate to employ Monika Strzępka under a civil law contract during the suspension period. The contracts with Strzępka were intended to ensure the continuity of her work at the theatre.
16. See Cieślak, 2023a and https://web.archive.org/web/20231210074048/https://teatrdramatyczny.pl/aktualnosci-9 [accessed: 9.03.2025].
17. *Wystąpienie pokontrolne.*
18. This is stated directly in the book by Iga Dzieciuchowicz (2025, p. 278).
19. https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/agnieszka-szpila-powiedzie-z-udzialu-w-premierze-heksy-podala-powod; see also: Dzieciuchowicz, 2025, p. 299–300.

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/ INSTITUTIONS

The Centre for Prisoner Arts: Participants' Experiences

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This article describes the Centrum Sztuki Osadzonych (Centre for Prisoner Arts, CPA), an innovative project developed and delivered in 2022–2023 by Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan (Womanstate Association) at Krzywaniec Penitentiary. The aim of the project was to launch Poland's first in-prison organization dedicated to sharing experiences and developing methods of rehabilitation through artistic work co-created by prisoners. The work of the Centre for Prisoner Arts, which included women's and men's theatre groups, a women's choir and a band, is discussed here from the perspective of project participants. The study is based on qualitative research based on micro-interviews and it explores the impact of creative activities on participants. Key areas of focus in examining the artistic process included: motivation, group dynamics within the broader prison community, identity, and the influence of participation on the individual's life in prison – especially in terms of their self-esteem and sense of agency. The research findings helped verify the initial assumptions of the project and provided insights into how Konecka's and Bresler's original working method was received. The study also highlights the method's potential for broader application within the Polish prison system.

Keywords: Centre for Prisoner Arts (CPA); Kobietostan (Womanstate); rehabilitation through the arts; prison theatre; prison music; devising; participatory theatre

The origin of the CPA

Centrum Sztuki Osadzonych (Centre for Prisoner Arts, CPA) is an innovative project developed and delivered in 2022–2023 by Agnieszka Bresler and Iwona Konecka of Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan (Womanstate Association) and co-created by people working with them at Krzywaniec Penitentiary. The project culminated in autumn 2023 with the opening of Poland's first centre dedicated to sharing experiences and developing methods in the field of rehabilitation through artistic co-creation in prison (Bresler and Konecka, 2022, p. 7).

The roots of the CPA can be traced back to Bresler's collaboration with Krzywaniec Penitentiary launched in 2017 and the work done at the prison in the following years by the Womanstate creative collective, co-created by Bresler, and then by the Womanstate Collective Association (now Womanstate Association), founded in 2019 by Bresler, Konecka and their collaborators.

Agency

The immediate inspiration for founding the Centre for Prisoner Arts was Bresler's and Konecka's discovery of a dilapidated building adjacent to the penitentiary kitchen.

> 'I remember […] [us] sitting on the balcony talking about this space located in the heart of Krzywaniec Penitentiary, an auditorium […] [and] that it used to be occupied by the army and could be turned into a venue for the arts,' says Konecka in Piotr Magdziarz's film about Festiwal Sztuki Osadzonych (cf. Konecka in Magdziarz,

2023).

While uttering these words, the artist slowed down twice, emphasizing the phrases ‘and could’ and ‘the arts.’ These words encapsulate the paradoxical message of the idea. It was as if articulating a vision of opening a venue for artistic work within an institution of penitentiary confinement, one intended to bring people together, required the speaker to suspend their voice and thus commanded special attention from the audience. Claire Bishop, who put forth a seminal research proposal for participatory projects, discussed an affective dynamic ‘that propels artists to make these projects and people to participate in them’ (Bishop, 2012, p. 5). This affective impulse can be found in Konecka’s words. Presumably, it was related to the artists’ initial realization that a creative space could be added to the topography of a total institution. It is highly likely that the affective dynamic inspired the artists to undertake activities that made it possible for a dream to begin germinating (cf. Bresler in Magdziarz, 2023).

Agency was one of the key notions that the Womenstate co-founders addressed when applying for funding. Looking back on their previous work in penitentiaries, the artists concluded that many prisoners felt ‘robbed of dignity’ and a sense of agency ‘rather than being rehabilitated’ while incarcerated (Bresler and Konecka, 2022, p. 8). Konecka pointed out that after release, former prisoners

> would have to […] manage their […] liberty, i.e. decision-making, more wisely. When doing time, they are cast as inferior and immature. Everything is provided, [all] hours […] are set. There is extremely little leeway for decision-making, for sharing in the

process of making decisions about anything.[1]

Therefore, the primary mission of the planned centre was to work towards restoring a sense of agency to the prisoners ('I can cope with what's happening to me and have an impact on the things around me'[2]), coupled with the experience of subjectivity and independence (ibid., p. 7, 9). In the same text, Bresler and Konecka add

> The aim of our methods is to make each individual an independent creator, which will strengthen their sense of agency, self-esteem and responsibility for their own and the group's efforts (ibid., p. 12).

The ways in which the work that would later lead to the founding of the Centre for Prisoner Arts was initiated may suggest that the leaders' approach agency not unlike the feminist physicist Karen Barad, who believes that 'agency […] is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements.'

Barad notes that

> in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies […] emerge through their intra-action (cited in Rick and van der Tuin, 2012b, p. 161).

and that

> Agency is about possibilities for worldly re-configurings. So agency is not something possessed by humans, or non-humans for that matter. It is an enactment. And it enlists, if you will, 'non-humans' as well as 'humans' (cited in Rick and van der Tuin, 2012a, p. 55).

One could hypothesize that if it hadn't been for the intra-action entanglement of Konecka, Bresler and the artistic wasteland within the prison, the idea of Poland's first centre for rehabilitation through the arts would not have arisen. The 'germination of a dream' (Bresler) about a space like this required the two artists to invite an intra-active entanglement of further elements, in particular the consent of the prison director Daniel Janowski. His approval came at a time when, for political reasons (the rule of PiS in Poland in 2016–2023) initiatives involving rehabilitation through the arts were dramatically curtailed in the Polish penitentiary system. Yet, at Krzywaniec a contract was signed in which the creators of Womanstate undertook to raise funds for artistic and educational efforts and the prison committed itself to renovating the dilapidated building with an auditorium, dedicating it to arts and education and to providing organizational and logistical support for all Centre-related initiatives, including a planned Festiwal Sztuki Osadzonych. This enabled Womanstate to work with Krzywaniec prisoners and liaise with its educators and officers (particularly Ewa Igiel, Natalia Górska and Kornelia Kaziemko). The intra-action entanglements also included partnerships with the Frontis Probation Officers Association and the Zielona Góra-based Teatr Lubuski (Lubuski Theatre).

Bresler's and Konecka's symmetrical planning of creative activities for prisoners and of a theatre course for prison educators is proof of their relational perception of agency in the CPA's efforts.[3] The project leaders

were not the first people in Poland to recognize that bringing theatre to prisons required systemic change, that is, engaging penitentiary staff as well as working with prisoners and their families,[4] but they were the first to undertake a project engaging both of these groups. Providing tools for educators is the first step towards introducing rehabilitation through theatre on a wider scale in Polish prisons. And as far as prisoners were concerned, Bresler and Konecka strove to build agency in the prisoners through art. Conceived in the spirit of the affirmative humanities, the agency was intended to strengthen

> the subject and the community […]. In this project, the subject is considered an agent who has the potentiality to […] bring about change. […] It is important, however, not to infantilize them anymore or castrate of their agency (the concept of victim tends to imply passivity on the part of the subject). […] Instead of victimization of the subject, I prefer to speak of their vitalization, i.e. […] the potential for transformation and surpassing negativity (Domańska, 2014, p. 128).

The two leaders sought to use collective work to enable the prisoners to experience individual and group empowerment and, alongside vitalization, regain the innate potential of transgression and rebirth after going through the negative experiences related to their criminal acts and the resulting penitentiary isolation. This was to be attained through co-creation within the CPA. The planned model not only provided space for co-deciding but made it a necessity.

The process of planning the centre involved a further reconfiguration of

entanglements. After Womanstate secured funding for the project, Bresler and Konecka formed a team of collaborators including Urszula Andruszko, Martyna Dębowska, Wojciech Maniewski, Magdalena Mróz and myself. Joanna Kondak, Adam Bąkowski, Izabela Morska and Małgorzata Tyrakowska joined us in the final stages of the project, and a number of volunteers came on board for the project's final event.

Participation and *devising*

Over the two years of the project, Krzywaniec prisoners participated in an array of artistic activities. Group participants were accepted on an ongoing basis. Workshops were open to anyone who wished to attend. This policy led to considerable turnover. Five participants were involved from start to finish. Some dropped out, others were released or transferred to other prisons. After completing a course in stage lighting and acoustics, three individuals worked as technicians on two CPA productions, *Sen Rity* (Rita's Dream) and *Królowie* (Kings), staged at the Festiwal Sztuki Osadzonych (27–29 October 2023). About 150 visitors and several dozen prisoners attended performances of two plays and a concert at the final festival in addition to viewing an installation composed of poetry and listening to a broadcast and audio recordings created by participants in radio, journalism and literary workshops.

When seeking contemporary theatre parallels/references for the work done as part of the CPA, one is put in mind of participatory theatre and devised theatre. Both are fit for the CPA's purpose, that is, the involvement of prisoners in the creative process. From the start, the Centre's Advisory Board, composed of rotating representatives of all groups, met every three

months. During Board sessions, the representatives reported on the progress of work, spoke of challenges,[5] took part in making decisions on some organizational matters and voiced their needs related to artistic work. In this context, Konecka pointed to a gradation of participation in the development of the plays put on as part of the CPA. She noted that Womanstate's work process was positioned somewhere in the middle between the role of the director who decides about all aspects of a play and the choices of a collective whose members make all decisions together.[6] A similar 'middle ground' can be also found in participatory theatre as defined below.

Participatory theatre comprises performance developed in the field of socially engaged art using theatre tools. Creative work in participatory theatre is inclusive and engages the community. To large extent participatory theatre activities reflect the ideas of emancipation through art (Kocemba-Żebrowska, 2017, p. 1).

At the core of this kind of theatre is the idea of the creative involvement of both professional artists and amateurs from 'specific social groups' (Bishop, 2012, p. 229).

Konecka emphasizes that she would not work as a theatre-maker in prison if the work did not enable her to grow as an artist. Being creative as an individual protects her from burnout.[7] This is why it is so important to strike a balance between collective co-creation and individual original creation.

As for Bresler, her meeting with Jess Thorpe, a lecturer at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, who uses devised theatre methods in hep work in Scottish prisons, was an important inspiration for her theatre work with prisoners (cf. Thorpe, 2019, p. 47–52; Oddey, 1994; Heddon and Milling, 2006). 'Devising' is 'a process for creating performance from scratch, by the

group, without a pre-existing script' (Heddon and Milling, 2006, s. 3). Although creation should be collaboration-based, this does not exclude the presence of a director (ibid., p. 5). Thorpe points out that, in addition to the fundamental values associated with collaboration and co-creation, devising makes it possible to experience different ways of learning in the creative process (Thorpe, 2019, p. 50) and to explore the links between performance work and collaborative creation and the resulting community building (ibid., p. 52). Devising is therefore sometimes regarded as hierarchy-free collaboration, a means to incite social change, even an opportunity for 'taking control of work and operating autonomously' (Heddon and Milling, 2006, p. 4–5), which makes it suitable for encouraging and developing performers' agency. The ethical and the aesthetic perspectives are equally important in Bresler's and Konecka's work, as demonstrated by their sources of inspiration and comments.

It should be stressed here that the goals of the CPA's theatre groups, band and choir have never been limited to rehabilitation impacts.[8] They were always regarded as artistic facts. At the same time, Konecka dissociated herself from the perception of her work in prison as art for art's sake. Like Bresler, she emphasized that making artistic work is not her sole aim when working with people at risk of exclusion. Rather, she wants to 'practise responsibility, being in a community, in collaboration, good communication and [the habit of] revealing conflicts' (Konecka in Kędzia, 2024, p. 88). The idea was to try new things and achieve small successes, strengthening the self-esteem of those engaged in the work.

> If the theatre work composed by the two directors affects both its creators and audiences, it is not only due to its high aesthetic

quality.[9] It is important to stress that the quality is attained by working with groups in a participatory and transparent fashion, i.e. under rules agreed by everyone (the ‘contract’) and using transparent communication. When working with amateur artists, the more co-creation the process involves, the clearer the arrangements need to be. Individuals with little experience of artistic work feel safer working within the bounds of mutually developed rules.[10]

Research and creation

Bresler and Konecka planned to work with four groups: two groups of women (one with a focus on theatre, the other on literature), two groups of men (also focused on theatre and on literature) and a radio group (which was to collaborate with the prison radio station). In addition, as part of the CPA, they planned to conduct an evaluation via individual interviews with participants from all groups to learn how they perceived their own agency in prison and during CPA activities and their work with Womanstate. The two leaders were keen to explore individual opinions as well as group level communication. Already at the stage of writing the project proposal, a qualitative research component was added to the project, and the leaders approached me about getting involved as an internal evaluator.

Far more interestingly, Bresler and Konecka began their CPA work in early 2022 with a research project initiated by Konecka, but the research work was not programmed in the CPA project. In what I consider a particularly important contribution of Womanstate to the field of community theatre in Poland, the artists blended the CPA’s aesthetic perspective, self-evident for

Bresler and Konecka, with a clear inspiration from qualitative research, apparent in the fact that the leaders' turned their attention to diagnosing the needs of future participants before using their findings ij modelling the planned work. This also demonstrates that intra-action entanglement was in play at every stage of CPA work.

Following in-depth one-on-one interviews with the educators and another conversation with the prison director, Bresler and Konecka met with persons interested in joining the project in all residential units of the Krzywaniec coeducational prison. In their extensive surveys, which involved 90 individuals, the artists asked questions about creation and participation in artistic activities. The interviewees were asked about what skills and abilities they would like to develop and what they would like to do at the Inmates Arts Centre if they were its founders. They were asked what they would like to do most in theatre, writing, visual art, music, radio and journalism work sessions and in a vocational course. The artists also asked more general questions, such as 'What do you like?,' 'What's your life's greatest achievement so far?' (Konecka, 2022). Once completed, the questionnaires served as registration forms for group sessions.

Then the artists held a workshop for individuals interested in joining the project, to which they brought a big sheet of paper with a picture of a river. Everyone was given a smaller piece paper to jot down their dreams, fold it into a paper ship and place it on the river. The initial qualitative research concluded with a creative activity and conversations about the dreams. Evidently, the focus on the process and the ethical dimension did not entail dismissing the aesthetic dimension. The focus was always on these two areas. One included the process, context and relationship, the other creation. Importantly, the initial surveys led the leaders to modify the

planned division into groups. Seven groups were formed instead of the formerly planned five: two theatre groups (one for women and one for men); a radio group, a journalism group and a literary group (all three composed of females); a women's choir; and a band (initially all male). Initially, Bresler and Konecka didn't intend to set up a choir and a band, but they did so in response to the prisoners' suggestion. By making changes to the CPA programme to meet the prisoners' needs, they were the first to consider the agency of participants.

Research as part of creation

Starting in March 2022, Bresler's and Konecka's work in Krzywaniec consisted in leading a few days of sessions every two weeks.

The project involved a total of 112 participants (about eleven per cent of the prison population). Twenty of them performed at the final festival. The play of the men's theatre group incorporated video footage of a few participants who had taken part in rehearsals at some stage but were released before the premiere performance.

Bresler led the work of the women's theatre group and the women's choir. Konecka was in charge of the men's theatre group and she facilitated the work of the band. Each assisted the other in conducting the work sessions.

This practice of mutual support and efforts to ensure each other's wellbeing in an extremely demanding environment was not part of Womanstate's work from the collective's inception. Once discovered, it became a tool that increased the comfort of running the workshops[11] and the source of artistic inspiration. The literary group and the journalism group were led by

Martyna Dębowska, with Urszula Andruszko overseeing the work of the radio group. Their three groups worked for much shorter periods that culminated in producing a theatre play, a volume of poetry, prose texts and brief broadcasts. Professor Izabela Morska of the University of Gdańsk delivered a workshop for the literary group.

On average, I visited Krzywaniec once every three months, participating in the work of all groups and attending the sessions of the Advisory Board. I took active part in many workshop activities and watched others. My principal task was to conduct qualitative research through micro-interviews that combined elements of structured and unstructured interviews (non-in-depth interviews with open-ended questions). While the structured interviews were designed to collect data in order to explain the behaviour of prisoners in terms of predetermined notions (agency), the unstructured ones eschewed such notions to avoid narrowing the field of research. The research findings were to help verify the initial project objectives, provide feedback about how the work was received and be used by the leaders to disseminate their way of working with prisoners across the penitentiary system. My participation in the project was in keeping with my academic interests.

When working for the CPA, I was spared two challenges typically confronted by field researchers: how to find informants and how to establish good relationships with them and gain their trust (see Fontana and Frey, 2005, p. 710–11). The project leaders did it for me. I was introduced to the participants as a team member and I had no difficulty establishing relationships with them. When conducting the interviews, I followed the same principles I apply to other interviewees. I tried to listen empathetically. The experience from my previous research on prison theatre in Poland

proved helpful throughout the process.[12] I used a critical interpretive approach in collecting my data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005a, p. XIV). I tried to remain suspicious (with varying degrees of success) of the excessive affirmation that underpins many artistic community projects and to build an awareness of ‘polyphony,’ ‘perversity, paradox and negation’ (Bishop, 2012, p. 386).

I am not a sociologist by training. I used tools from this field as an autodidact. I combined participant observations with interviews and employed autoethnography tools (see Kacperczyk, 2014, p. 53). My interviews were designed to be conducted as part of the workshops. I was allocated approximately twenty minutes at the end of each session, after rehearsals. The conversations were held in a shared space, with the other participants engaged in activities indirectly related to the project. I talked to participants individually, noting down their answers. I didn’t use a voice recorder because I didn’t have a permit to bring it in and wanted to avoid the tedious process of making transcripts.

The constraints of time and space, including the background noise, had an impact on how comfortable I felt. The most discomforting aspect was the awareness that I had to talk to several people in a short span of time. These limitations, however, didn’t appear to affect my interlocutors. I had good conversations with the vast majority of them and I found them to be open and engaged. I found it more challenging to talk to those who were about to be released and those who were not as interested in the project activities as the others. The conditions prevented our conversations from evolving into longer narrative interviews except for one narrative mini-interview, which occurred beyond my will. Without my prompting, I was told a story of a person’s life in the context of their participation in the project. Susan Chase

notes that ‘some interviewees tell stories whether or not researchers want to hear them’ (Chase, 2005, p. 661). It is sometimes the case that by merely talking about an important event one can bring about positive change. ‘Self-narration can lead to personal emancipation – to “better” stories of life difficulties or traumas’ (2005, p. 667–8). During my seven visits to Krzywaniec, each lasting a few days, I conducted 69 micro-interviews with 52 individuals from all groups.

Opening up space

After completing my evaluation of the CPA project, I felt responsible for the voices I was entrusted with. Inspired by Susan Auerbach’s suggestion, I decided to produce and utilize research that ‘can help to create public spaces in which marginalized people’s narratives can be heard even by those who normally do not want to hear them’ (Chase, 2005, p. 669). As an evaluator, I sought to become ‘the conduit for making such voices heard’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005b, p. 26), even if they are only fragmentary. This is how the idea was born for writing the text that forms the second part of this article and concerns the participants’ perception of their involvement in the process of the theatre and music work and the work’s impact on them as seen from their perspective. It is worth noting here that my focus will be on the work process, but this doesn’t mean that I dismiss an aesthetic perspective.

My interlocutors were informed that I could use our interviews in my further research work, but they did not authorize them. Hence, I use summaries in some cases, but I don’t refrain from using quotes where I consider them necessary. I have taken extreme care ‘to avoid any harm to them [project participants]’ (Fontana and Frey, 2005, p. 715) and I believe I have

succeeded.

For the purposes of this piece, I have organized my research findings around the following topics and issues: motivation to engage in the work, group experience, co-deciding, identity, new experiences and knowledge gained in the rehearsal process, surprises, challenges, and a summing up the work in the context of the project final event and collective performance.

Motivation

Most of the participants of the theatre and music work sessions joined on their own accord. Some were persuaded by their friends.[13] One by his wife. Not all of them had specific expectations, but a few did. The participants were motivated by a variety of factors, including their desire to kill time, to break up the routine of prison life, let off steam, do something for themselves, take their minds off their predicament or find a place where they could feel differently. This is how they explained their participation: 'I'm part of the underworld. Here it's different. The art of role-playing – it's tricking people too but in a different way. […] Here, the audience are the victim' (Mar.MTG.23.04.2022); 'I was looking for something, I was behind a mask. I wasn't myself, I had no purpose. I want to do something for myself, be proud of myself but also […] for my wife and children, and I'm doing just that by taking part in the sessions' (Mi2.MTG.10.06.2023).

Some participants wanted to work on various mental challenges by practising self-control, patience, assertiveness, overcoming the feeling of embarrassment or shyness. Some joined because they feel good as part of a group, others to learn teamwork,[14] still others to gain knowledge or discover a talent. Some hoped to have a good time,[15] others were motivated by

curiosity.[16]

A considerable number of participants chose theatre and music work because of their artistic interests and/or experience, or because they wanted to develop theatre or music-related skills. Some had previously performed in prison theatre plays. Others had used to play music or sing and they missed these activities.[17] There were also those who wanted to use the time to develop creativity and learn about theatre. A number of individuals wanted to show their families a different side, proving that they were not as bad as others might think.

A female participant – who, together with three others, was involved in the work for the whole duration of the project from 2022 to 2023 – said in April 2022: 'I'd like to work on strengthening my self-confidence […] so my parents can see me in a play like this. I'd like to surprise them' (D.WTG.22.04.2022). After months of rehearsals, during two days of performances (of the plays and the work-in-progress concert) by the four CPA groups in December 2022, staged for fellow prisoners and outside visitors, the same woman said: 'We're more open now. The work has strengthened my self-esteem. My loved ones – my parents, my husband – are proud of me. I'm proud of myself. I've overcome tons of inhibitions. It gets easier every time I perform' (D.WTG.09.12.2022).

The group

For many people, their involvement in the work, particularly in the theatre groups, involved overcoming inhibitions or shyness/embarrassment. One participant admitted that he had to work on his self-control to be able to take part in the work (A.MTG.3.09.2022). Some felt nervous and feared criticism

when joining a group whose work was already in progress. Others were appreciative of being accepted by close-knit groups. Some female choir members were especially adamant that no one should be excluded, even those who attended the sessions irregularly (including mothers of young children), so they found them a niche as background singers (Ani.CHK.02.07.2022). Regular attendees argued that even attending a single session was valuable for such persons. ‘Singing […] is good for mothers with babies, they can take a break’ (Wer.CHK.02.07.2022).

Many participants of the theatre and music groups acknowledged that there was a friendly atmosphere during work sessions and that the group members got on well with each other. This helped one participant to gain self-esteem. Another said she experienced friendship in prison. One actor said that ‘In prison I have mates. In the theatre group, I feel like we go back a long way, even though we first met a week ago’ (An.MTG.09.12.2022). In two consecutive interviews conducted over a span of eight months, a co-founder of the women’s theatre compared the group and its leaders to a family (A1.WTG.22.04.2022; A1.WTG.09.12.2022).

The following observation by a member of the women’s choir is particularly relevant in the context of my involvement in the project: ‘The work helped us build relationships with each other. We’ve grown closer. There’s more trust and support between us’ (Mar.CHK.09.12.2022). Building this sort of relationships in prison is potentially transformative. Many participants described mutual help and collective support as a particularly significant experience.[18] When one of the theatre members was about to drop out, her friend from the group, known under the alias of Motyl (Butterfly), asked her for help in rehearsing her part by saying other performers’ lines to complete the dialogue. This was a ruse that led to the person rejoining the rehearsal

process and performing in work-in-progress shows. Experiencing respect[19] and rebuilding trust in people[20] were regarded by many participants as equally important as help and support. The group contracts agreed at the start of the rehearsal process were instrumental here. Some participants said there were no conflicts within their group.[21] Others didn't deny that conflicts existed, but they said that they were learning to resolve them.

Opinions on the differences between how participants functioned in the CPA sessions and in their units varied. While some discerned no such differences, many others viewed the two environments as polarly opposed. It was repeatedly stated that prisoners tended to have contact with only one or two people in the prison units, whereas during CPA sessions they could talk freely with anyone. It was pointed out that the hallmarks of the groups included friendliness, mutual encouragement and positive criticism that did not cause serious upsets (Il.WTG.10.06.2023). This contrasted with the units, where participants experienced mean treatment. Many individuals felt more relaxed and joyful during their work sessions.[22]

One of the theatre co-founders cited two reasons for the differences: 'There are different people in the work sessions and different in the cell. Here we work together, we're in motion. There we sit. There's stagnation' (N.WTG.10.06.2023). This diagnosis seems correct, because the CPA sessions were attended by those for whom their daily prison experience wasn't sufficient. The opposition of movement during rehearsals and immobility or very limited movement in cramped cells is an interesting topic for possible elaboration. It is no coincidence that serving time in prison is colloquially referred to as *siedzenie* (sitting) in Polish.

It is interesting to note that despite the differences between the prison units and CPA rehearsals, an interaction between them developed. A choir

member said she had brought a song from the rehearsals to her cell and everyone in her whole cell started to sing *Cementerio* (*Patio de Godella*).[23] Another choir member performed the song in her workplace. Yet another said that what happened in her rehearsals was an important topic of conversation with her co-prisoners (mothers with children up to three years of age). A degree of osmosis, fashioned by the prisoners, developed between the CPA and the prison.

The CPA group work inspired several individuals to begin artistic collaborating outside the project. They started to believe they could achieve something together, which strengthened them.[24] One of the choir members noted: 'I see that despite our differences, the girls in the choir and I have something in common. […] When we are together, there's power. Each of us brings something different. A group is more powerful than one person' (I2.CHK.09.12.2022). Her friend addressed the integration process: 'With each new session […] we gradually open up. There's a growing understanding among us. The sessions bind us together. It takes time to open up' (I1.CHK.09.12.2022). The band leader made similar comments: 'The process of connecting with each other is important […]. For us, art is a challenge but also an opportunity to do things together, collaborate, deepen our relations, resolve conflicts, develop talents' (S.BD.09.12.2022).

Co-deciding and agency

In my interviews I also asked about the CPA's mission of restoring a sense of agency. Most participants contrasted the CPA with the prison. They emphasized that during rehearsals they could make decisions and propose initiatives, even if some of the decisions and initiatives were not accepted by

the group.[25] The interviewees said that the group leaders, unlike the prison wards, respected their opinions. ‘Here our voices are heard,’ said a choir member. ‘We are listened to. We are asked questions […] and that gives us freedom. We feel we matter. We are women, not prisoners’ (L.CHK.04.09.2022). Others shared similar observations. ‘In prison we can only ask. Here we can do something or not – we know that we can refuse and that expands our perspective,’ said a female actor (And.WTG.22.04.2022). Another choir member pointed out further differences in decision-making: ‘Decision-making in the group and in prison are a world apart. Here [in the work sessions – M.H.] the artistic soul matters. There [in prison – M.H.] you’ve got to be strong. If you show you’re weak, you’re done for. Here it’s easier to be yourself. We can show we’re sensitive’ (I1.CHK.04.09.2022).

Despite the contrasting opinions, the same person said that she and her friends took what they learned back to their cells. At the prompting of the leaders, some participants (mainly the band members) worked together independently of their leaders between work sessions. In addition, the theatre and choir participants did a number of things on their own initiative (including painting a cat for the hospice). One woman attributed her newly gained agency to the influence of the theatre: ‘Theatre has taught me how to do things – to move forward, pursue my goals. Leave the past behind’ (S.WTG.09.12.2022). Many other participants expressed similar sentiments.

Yet there were also prisoners who believed that one could make their own choices in prison too and that if there was will, one could do things that mattered to them (Mo.WTG.22.04.2022). Such voices, however, were rare.

Shaping identity

One of the problems of convict rehabilitation in Poland is the fact that prisoners' complex identities tend to be replaced with a label indicating their social position. The criminal acts they've committed not only start to define their core identity but also reinforce and fix it (cf. Hasiuk, 2015, p. 222).

This is why it's so important to inspire individuals to build their own identities based on other activities. I raised this question in my interviews, assuming that through the experiences of decision-making and agency, participants of the artistic work can discover new social roles as CPA co-creators and use these roles in building an identity other than that of a prisoner. When asked whether they felt to be co-creators of the plays, many of the theatre and choir members I interviewed answered in the affirmative. Even if some found the word 'co-creator' problematic, they noted that they contributed their voice (I2.CHK.09.12.2022), their active role and felt important: 'Each of us mattered here. This is our hard work. The theatre work and rehearsals, which we did for the first time, were a challenge for us, but we succeeded. I'm proud of all of us, proud of the fact we were afraid, but we worked' (D.WTG.09.12.2022). The participants spoke of their sense of responsibility for their collective work and their desire to develop it (L.CHK.09.12.2022).

'These sessions awaken normality'

In addition to producing theatre plays, a music concert, texts, recordings, and an in-prison theatre space, the aim of the CPA work was to allow participants to gain experience. The following two questions encapsulate two other topics raised in our conversations. Have the work sessions given their

participants anything? Have they learned something new about themselves?

The participants' opinions on whether activities such as the ones offered by the CPA are needed in prison ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'no opinion.' According to my observations, in order access a broader range of experiences, participants needed to overcome their scepticism and fully engage in the work.

Many participants pointed out that the sessions took their minds off them being in prison. The rehearsals felt like so many hours of freedom.[26] 'I feel open in the sessions, closed on the block. They don't even have a shrink you can talk to,' complained one of the female actors (S.WTG.09.12.2022). The experience of freedom in prison meant freedom of speech, freedom of spirit and freedom of mind for the participants. The artistic work was also the source of existential support: 'the music work lifts my spirits, keeps me from thinking about how much time I'm going to be here […] and to fight for every day, fight to get up in the morning' (I2.CHK.09.12.2022); the sessions help prisoners not to lose themselves in the prison reality (Mi2.MTG.10.06.2023); they structure time and make it easier to live between sessions (Mt1.MTG.10.06.2023).

Bresler and Konecka are not therapists, but they make use of theatre and music tools, theatre pedagogy tools, group processes and individual aptitudes. Workshop participants noted that the artistic work allowed them to overcome numerous internal barriers.[27] They also spoke of the psychological competences they had gained through rehearsals, such as greater openness to people and new situations,[28] higher confidence,[29] courage,[30] reduced anxiety, experience of peace, feeling recharged,[31] lightness and happiness induced by appreciation.[32] The theatre work gave some participants self-esteem.[33] (Z.WTG.11.11.2023). A woman whose family

and friends had often told her she was talentless said: ‘Now I can prove to my family that I’m worth something, that I’ll be of use’ (Z.WTG.11.11.2023).

Far more interestingly, some of the effects of the artistic work were identical to those of therapy. A female actor said: ‘This work has made me feel much better, I don’t feel bad emotions. I’ve learnt not to take everything personally […] [I’ve learned how – M.H.] to tell the difference between emotions. I know I have emotions and I know when I’m afraid, when there’s sadness, joy. I didn’t know that before’ (S.WTG.09.12.2022). One male actor pointed to the sense of strength brought about by progress in the theatre work. Rehearsals enabled him to release emotions and get rid of stress (D.MTG.10.06.2023). Others became aware of their own competences and the benefits of working on themselves. Discovering creativity in themselves and others was an important aspect of the work. At the same time, there were those who claimed that they hadn’t learned anything new about themselves during the workshops (A2.WTG.09.12.2022).

Rehearsals helped many of the participants gain or develop various skills. One female actor confessed that she had used to have a fear of speaking in public, but it vanished after the rehearsals (As.WTG.01.07.2022). Another noted that ‘confidence grows when you learn so many lines by heart,’ adding that she enjoyed herself. Most of her part was her idea (Na.WTG.27.10.2023). Some participants found it easier to talk about themselves after the workshops. They learned new ways of working with their voices, practised mindfulness and paying attention to gestures, situations and the presence of others, confronted acting challenges and overcame their anxiety about reading aloud in public. They also learned how to give a massage. A book-loving actor appreciated the inclusion of Shakespeare’s work in the rehearsals (Mt2.MTG.10.06.2023). The leader of

the band Sygnatura Akt (Case Number) expressed his gratitude for being able to write music and lyrics and to share them with people he knows. The band influenced his everyday life: ‘Now, with Jacek [his bandmate – M.H.], we rehearse, record music and play it back every day. […] Sometimes I spend half a day playing guitar’ (S.BD.09.12.2022). Natalia, who after 18 months of working in the women’s choir became a singer in the men’s band – which seemed impossible at the start of the project due to the lack of consent on the part of the prison authorities – said about her new challenge: ‘It was hard at first, an unknown. Now [after five months of rehearsals – M.H.] I feel braver, appreciated and fulfilled. I used to sing [on stage – M.H.], but I never sang heavy stuff like this. This is what I’ve learned’ (N.CHK.11.11.2023). Their artistic work motivated participants to work on their values and not revert to what they did when they were free. A musician briefly involved in the band’s rehearsals commented that the presence of leaders who brought passion to art and life, and a clearly defined objective, make the CPA a space that could ‘bring growth’ (A.BD.10.06.2023). His bandmate felt satisfied with his work, which motivated him to improve (S.BD.11.11.2023). The band’s first singer, who was also an actor, shared similar observations. He noted that regular theatre and music rehearsals helped him develop responsibility, assertiveness and discipline. They taught him to start from what is possible, from the person himself. Unlike the laziness and criticism that often dominates in prison, ‘here [we have] an open mind, an open heart, creative use of time. Many positive values’ (D.BD/MTG.03.07.2022). One of his fellow theatre members said that he did more for himself during three work sessions than he had done for four and a half years of his time in prison. ‘These sessions awaken normality […] we learn ease, heart, sensitivity’ (Mi2.MTG.10.06.2023).

Surprises

What participants found most surprising about the CPA was the commitment exhibited by outsiders, collective creation of something valuable, and the relations between the work leaders and participants. Comments included: ‘here they are interested in us’ (To.WTG.03.09.2022), ‘they don’t hold us accountable for everything we do’ (I1.CHK.04.09.2022), ‘they don’t condemn us’ (L.CHK.09.12.2022). ‘At last, someone looked at us as human beings at the CPA’ (S.BD.11.11.2023); [during rehearsals – M.H.] ‘I was treated normally, like a free person. […] I felt someone supported me, was behind me, respected me’ (D.WTG.09.12.2022); the leaders ‘looked at us with compassion, and that opens the heart’ (I2.CHK.09.12.2022). One of the choir members concluded:

> It helps prisoners a lot to know that someone on the outside […] tries to figure out how to help us. The leaders did a massive job. We feel we’re not alone. The participants [of the CPA – M.H.] discovered, confirmed, that they’ve each got their own personality, individuality. The leaders’ involvement proved this. They made us realize we’re worth something. Their influence made it happen (D.WTG/CHK.11.11.2023).

Some participants pointed out that praise and appreciation propelled them to work. The way the tasks were suggested made them feel safe and able to open up.

The choir members pointed out that the work sessions would support them after release: ‘Caught up in the cycle of stealing and doing drugs – here

[during rehearsals – M.H.] you can see that there are people in the world' (L.CHK.04.09.2022). 'These sessions give hope for a tomorrow. I see a good world. I don't see lost people […]. The sessions are an escape and proof that a normal life is out there' (Ani.CHK.02.07.2022).

Challenges

For most participants, the project was a big challenge and a commitment to a new field. The men found it easier to talk about the challenges, which stemmed from organizational issues, including high participant turnover and, especially early on, uncertainty as to whether participants would be escorted to the sessions.

The latter happened only rarely and was due to the prison staff's excessive workload, occasional disruptions in the flow of information between prison officers, or omissions. Because of high participant turnover in the men's theatre group, Konecka had to significantly change the play's composition and modify its structure by including a video component. Some changes in the group composition caused friction, but this isn't something I witnessed often. One participant expressed disappointment in his fellow prisoners who dropped out after attending a number of rehearsals: 'I don't know what people really want out of these sessions' (Mt2.MTG.10.06.2023). Some felt overwhelmed by their fellow prisoners' contempt at them taking part in rehearsals.

Another set of challenges concerned the theatre work itself. Some participants found it difficult to grasp the theme of the plays, deal with their lines, or find a part they could identify with. Completing the tasks suggested during rehearsals, getting into character, and stage fright before the show

also proved challenging.

The audience's reaction was the source of another type of anxiety. Questions were asked. Will the actors get a positive reception? Will they face ridicule? Will they stick out unfavourably against other members of the cast? Will they seem too stagy? For some the challenges proved so steep that they gave up rehearsals. Most of them did not seek support from the leaders. Yet there were also individuals who continued despite considerable difficulties and expressed satisfaction at the end of the process.

From the perspective of the final event

When asked about the impact of working with Womanstate from the perspective of the final event and the final gathering of all groups, several participants gave complementary answers.

One of the three performers in the play *Kings* considered his involvement in the CPA sessions to be the greatest challenge he'd ever confronted. The actor contemplated leaving the project more than once but was happy that he stayed until the premiere show, which enabled him to discover the value of keeping his word. The new experience made him more open and more communicative, he learned to work as part of a team and not fear challenges. The rehearsals affected both his daily interactions in prison and the relationships with his loved ones. His self-esteem and inner strength grew. He succeeded in overcoming his stage fear and noticed that he found it much easier to perform in front of an audience of strangers (Mt1.MTG.10.11.2023).

A performer in the play *Rita's Dream* confessed that the rehearsals helped her find the motivation to fight for what mattered to her and not give up. She

learned acting skills and improved her self-esteem. She stopped giving up easily after developing a fighting spirit. She used to be too trusting, but after engaging in the collective work, she gained distance and self-confidence. When she doesn't want something or is not going to do something, she is open about this. She isn't submissive. She wouldn't describe herself as assertive, but she strives to become so. The CPA enabled her to reclaim her own voice (Il.WTG.11.11.2023).

A younger participant felt extremely appreciated after the show. She'd never thought her performance would be so well received. Her self-belief grew and she gained some distance to herself. She delt with her pre-show stress on her own, discovering the power of dance and breathing. She expressed her desire to keep learning and developing, including artistically, when the project is over (Na.WTG.11.11.2023).

The CPA work helped one performer in the women's theatre and choir to overcome her fear. She decided to perform on stage to prove to herself that she could do that. She is a secretive person. For her, the theatre is something different. It brings her great joy and she feels a surge of energy after each show or rehearsal. The work also helps her to connect with others. The steps she's taken have helped her become more confident. She is now ready to do something, which was not necessarily the case before (Ki.WTG/CHK.11.11.2023).

After the project ended, the choir member who became the band's singer said: 'I don't have that disbelief [anymore]. I feel a stronger sense of responsibility. If I don't come to rehearsal, others won't be able to work. I feel needed and part of a community; I have more confidence in myself and my own opinion. Before, when I had something to say or disagreed with something, I kept this to myself. [At CPA – M.H.] I've learned to speak up

and set boundaries. The work taught me that I don't have to be quiet. I've experienced the power of women' (N.CHK.11.11.2023).

After the performances

The shows at Festiwal Sztuki Osadzonych and the recording of a music video by the band played an important role.[34] They were not merely the culmination of the work or an opportunity to show its results to other people, including the prisoners' families and prison staff representatives. The theatre shows, the concert and the music video were seen by their creators not only as an expression of collective strength, a source of satisfaction or a shared success but also as a way of repaying for the confidence placed in them. The focus of the actors and musicians on something other than themselves can be perceived as an expression of transgressive potential (cf. Frankl, 2010, p. 39). The appreciation of the audience and work leaders[35] as well as self-appreciation within and between the groups had a strong positive effect on all participants (J.BD.11.11.2023). This is how one musician described his experience as a spectator: '[I was – M.H.] hugely impressed by the men's theatre. The women's theatre provoked emotions. I was moved at the end […]. It's been twenty years since something like this happened to me' (J.BD.11.11.2023).

My research demonstrates that the CPA's objective of increasing the agency and self-esteem of the project participants – at least those who co-created the festival or were strongly involved in the project at some stage – was attained. It shows that something else, equally important, was also achieved: the participants succeeded in building closer interpersonal relationships. 'This project has taught me to connect better with people,' admitted the leader of Sygnatura Akt. The participants spoke of a 'sense of community,'

an experience of integration and how, through the activities, individuals found ‘support in each other.’

Konecka and Bresler supported each other in their work as co-leaders. Working with the groups in a transparent, co-responsible and non-hierarchical manner while exhibiting care (for themselves and others), they established a model relationship, which was later adopted and developed by the participants without the leaders’ involvement.

This is how Dariusz Kosiński defines a theatre company/ensemble:

> a group of theatre-makers working together for a longer period of time […] and forming a community united by a peculiar bond. The fact that a theatre production is the work of many artists leads to the assumption that all those involved in its creation should be united by a sense of responsibility and, at the same time, they should work closely together for the good of the whole [project]. […] The condition for the emergence and longevity of a theatre company/ensemble is a community of ideological and artistic beliefs, or – at least – trust in the group leader, a belief in the value of his/her ideas and actions. Further consequences include a community of style and mutual inspiration to undertake intense artistic work (2009, p. 223).

For the most part this definition can be successfully applied to the work done as part of the CPA. Furthermore, the work embodied the principles of the affirmative humanities[36] and inspired situations in which individuals (at least some of them) could experience self-transcendence (Frankl, 2010, p. 31).[37] It therefore had an impact both in the social dimension and on a deeply

personal level. One of the reasons why this this subject is difficult to write about is the fact that after Bresler and Konecka left Krzywaniec, the agential entanglements and intra-actions they had set in motion ceased to operate as they had before. Having completed their project (financed with funds they had raised), Bresler and Konecka wanted to continue the collaboration as part of another European project, but their idea was not accepted by Krzywaniec due to its director's retirement plans. Moreover, the renovation of the prison staff hotel building that Womanstate used for their work would significantly complicate the logistics and increase the cost of further work. After a hiatus, Womanstate will return to Krzywaniec for a few days in autumn 2025 with the participants of the 'Theatre that Breaks Down Walls' course, who want to work with the prisoners. A second instalment of Festiwal Sztuki Osadzonych is planned for 2026.

Regrettably, the unique practice of the CPA has not yet inspired a transformation of penitentiary work in Poland. No efforts have been made to make such initiatives part of the systemic solutions supported by sustained funding. Krzywaniec Penitentiary uses the name Centre for Prisoner Arts and the space regularly hosts music performances, theatre shows, lectures and public discussions with invited guests. However, prisoners are rarely seen on its stage, which was the purpose of the Centre. The members of Teatr Lalka w Trasie (Doll On Tour Theatre) would come to Krzywaniec for some a period of time, which resulted in the development of two new plays with female prisoners, but this collaboration came to an end, too.

The CPA co-creators remaining behind bars cannot continue their work in a form similar to that introduced by Bresler and Konecka. A number of them expressed a strong desire to do so, but the prison officials did not give their consent.[38]

I was leaving my job at the CPA with the following words on my mind – spoken by an CPA co-creator in reply to my question ‘What would help in prison?’ – ‘Someone who’d listen attentively’ (And.WTG.22.04.2022), and with the goal of making initiatives such as the Womanstate-run Centre for Prisoner Arts a reality in Polish prisons.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

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Footnotes

1. Iwona Konecka’s words in an interview conducted on 4 March 2025 via instant messaging.
2. Ibid.
3. Cf. the work of Teatr Po Drodze (On the Way Theatre) at Kłodzko Penitentiary in 1998–2010.
4. Such activities were planned after 2000 by Krzysztof Papis, a director with Teatr

Więzienny Po Drodze (On the Way Prison Theatre), but they were not enacted. Source: an unpublished interview with Krzysztof Papis, held in June 2013 in Wrocław.
5. Topics included difficulties in escorting prisoners to rehearsals or organizing sessions where the groups worked independently, changes in group composition, including the declining number of participants in some groups. For example, on 9 June 2023 the Advisory Board were advised that a theatre group participant wanted to quit after a job accident but, through the efforts of other group participants, the prison staff and the two leaders, she rejoined rehearsals and performed in the plays.
6. Based on Iwona Konecka's words in a conversation with Agnieszka Bresler and Iwona Konecka held on 28 February 2025 via instant messaging.
7. Ibid.
8. Bresler and Konecka are critical of the idea of rehabilitation defined as the process of 'adjusting individuals who are maladjusted or have lost contact with society to life and functioning in society' ('resocjalizacja,' *Słownik języka polskiego*, https://sjp.pl/resocjalizacja, accessed: 3.03.2025). If the social readaptation of individuals released from prison is to be successful, the work required to achieve this needs to be done by both former prisoners and society.
9. These qualities were examined in articles written after the Inmate Arts Festival (Kisiel, 2024; Hasiuk, 2024, p. 74–77).
10. Based on Agnieszka Bresler's words in a conversation with Iwona Konecka held on 28 February 2025 via instant messaging.
11. The leaders' co-presence during rehearsals had a particularly strong impact when, the leaders had to clearly reprimand the men's group members (despite the contract in place) to respect the boundaries of the leaders' privacy after several months of theatre work. Based on participant observation from 3 September 2022.
12. I conducted the research in 2012–2015 (see Hasiuk, 2015).
13. A.BD.10.06.2023; P2.BD.10.06.2023; T.MTG.23.04.2022. I use abbreviations for all interview references. The first letter (or a letter combined with a number, or two letters) stands for the interviewee's name. If one group included two participants sharing a name, I use numbers. I use two letters for the names beginning with the same letter. The second abbreviation refers to the workshop group: WCH – women's choir, MTG – men's theatre group, WTG – women's theatre group, BD – band. Two different abbreviations divided by a slash, e.g. MTG/BD, indicate that the person was part of two different groups. This is followed by the date of the interview. References include a list of all interviews.
14. Kl.WTG.02.07.2022; Ani.WCH.02.07.2022; M.BD.10.06.2023; Ki.WTG/WCH.10.06.2023.
15. As.WTG.01.07.2022; Na.WCH.02.07.2022; A2.WTG.09.12.2022.
16. T.MTG.23.04.2022; K1.MTG.23.04.2022; M.MTG.09.12.2022; D.MTG.10.06.2023.
17. Wer.WCH.02.07.2022; S.BD.03.07.2022; P1.BD.03.07.2022; P.WTG/WCH.09.06.2023; P2.BD.10.06.2023.
18. A1.WTG.22.04.2022; Mag.WCH.02.07.2022; K2.MTG.03.09.2022; Ki.WTG/WCH.10.06.2023; Na.WTG.27.10.2023; N.WCH.11.11.2023. It should be stressed that some of the prisoners have no outside support. Some have broken off their relationships, others have been excluded. I was especially shaken to hear that one participant had been thought dead in her parents' town for years. During the final round of the project, she said that she felt alive again, that she opened her heart and, thanks to the people in the group, regained her self-belief (I2.WCH.11.11.2023).
19. N.MTG.23.04.2022; Ani.WCH.02.07.2022; P.MTG.03.09.2022; D.WTG/WCH.09.06.2023.

20. Mag.WCH.02.07.2022; To.WTG.03.09.2022; A.MTG.3.09.2022; P.MTG.03.09.2022; I2.WCH.09.12.2022; N.WTG.10.06.2023.
21. M.BD.10.06.2023; A.BD.10.06.2023; Na.WTG.27.10.2023.
22. Mi1.MTG.23.04.2022; T.MTG.23.04.2022; To.WTG.03.09.2022; A.MTG.3.09.2022; Mi2.MTG.10.06.2023.
23. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDntfTYvMuc [accessed: 17.03.2025].
24. J.BD.03.07.2022; L.WCH.04.09.2022; A.BD.10.06.2023.
25. K1.MTG.23.04.2022; Na.WCH.02.07.2022; Mi2.MTG.10.06.2023; Il.WTG.10.06.2023; N.WTG.10.06.2023; Ki.WTG/WCH.10.06.2023.
26. T.MTG.23.04.2022; Mi1.MTG.23.04.2022; S.BD.11.11.2023; Ma.WTG.09.12.2022; P1.BD.03.07.2022; Mar.WCH.04.09.2022; D.WTG/WCH.11.11.2023.
27. K1.MTG.23.04.2022; As.WTG.01.07.2022; A2.WTG.09.12.2022.
28. N.MTG.23.04.2022; Na.WCH.02.07.2022; Mag.WCH.02.07.2022; Ani.WCH.02.07.2022; I1.WCH.09.12.2022; N.WTG.10.06.2023.
29. As.WTG.01.07.2022; N.WCH.09.12.2022; S.BD.09.12.2022; Il.WTG.10.06.2023.
30. Mag.WCH.02.07.2022; N.WCH.09.12.2022; A1.WTG.09.12.2022; Ki.WTG/WCH.10.06.2023.
31. Mar.WCH.04.09.2022; D.WTG/WCH.09.06.2023; Mt1.MTG.10.06.2023; Il.WTG.10.06.2023.
32. Na.WCH.02.07.2022; D.BD/MTG.03.07.2022; Mar.WCH.04.09.2022; P.WTG/WCH.09.06.2023.
33. L.WCH.04.09.2022;N.WCH.09.12.2022; Il.WTG.10.06.2023; Na.WTG.27.10.2023.
34. Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skR29clxN4Y [accessed: 18.03.2025].
35. Summing up the project, Agnieszka Bresler said to the participants of all groups: ‘You have proven that talent opens up when you have the will and give of yourself. Each of you shone and blossomed. It came from within you, and we kept raising the bar, adjusting it to your needs.’ Source: my field research notes, 11 November 2023.
36. In particular, connecting with the potential for mental, physical and perhaps also ethical self-regeneration, since at least a few participants stressed the importance of values in their lives and their willingness to work on their values. (Mar.WCH.04.09.2022; I1.WCH.04.09.2022; S.BD.11.11.2023).
37. The ability to go beyond oneself towards another human being or towards meaning manifested itself in various situations. One participant noted that she began to ‘live not only her own life but also the life of the group’ (D.WTG/WCH.11.11.2023). Another, inspired by choir rehearsals, expressed her willingness to sign her daughter for similar classes (Wer.WCH.02.07.2022). Still others plan to take their children to the theatre after leaving prison to ‘instil in them a love’ for the arts (To.WTG.03.09.2022; D.WTG/WCH.11.11.2023). The band leader, by contrast, found meaning in creativity: ‘Music is my life. It’s what keeps me alive’ (S.BD.11.11.2023).
38. Mt1.MTG.10.11.2023, S.BD.11.11.2023, D.WTG/WCH.11.11.2023.

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/ INSTITUTIONS

Subsidies for Dance: An Analysis of Grant Programmes of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage Run Between 2010 and 2025

Marta Seredyńska | University of Warsaw

The article discusses the grant system in Polish dance from 2010–2025, and analyses the activities of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The starting point for this analysis is 2010, when the Institute of Music and Dance was established, and the priority area of ‘Theatre and Dance’ was initiated. The analysis covers data on the number of grants and their amounts, the types of projects supported, and the geographical distribution of beneficiaries. Consideration is given to the evolution of the system – from the dominance of large festivals and public institutions within the ‘Theatre and Dance’ programme to the more diverse support provided by the ‘Dance’ programme, which was spun off in 2021. The conclusions suggest that the grant system has enabled significant development of Polish dance life, but remains burdened by problems of short-term funding, low grant amounts and concentration of funds. The article identifies both barriers and opportunities for further development, considering dance in the context of culture as a factor in social and regional development.

Keywords: financing of dance; cultural policy; grant programmes; dance

Introduction

2010 went down in the history of Polish dance as a breakthrough year. It was then that the Institute of Music and Dance was inaugurated – the first public institution in Poland whose main tasks included systemic support for the development of dance. At the same time, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage launched the ‘Theatre and Dance’ programme, under which public funds began to be allocated to the production of performances, festivals, educational activities and research projects related to this branch of the arts. As a result, for the first time in the history of the Third Republic, a grant system was created for dance, which for many decades had remained on the periphery of cultural policy (Głowacki, Hausner, Jakóbik et al., 2008; Gierat-Bieroń, 2015; Gierat-Bieroń, 2016).

The introduction of subsidy mechanisms has transformed the institutional and artistic landscape of dance in Poland. Thanks to these mechanisms, it has been possible to create conditions conducive to the development of individual careers of choreographers and dancers, initiate new festivals, and expand educational and promotional opportunities. However, alongside growing interest in individual programmes, systemic problems have also emerged, such as the short-term nature of funding, the lack of long-term strategies for supporting dance, and the concentration of resources in the largest cultural centres. An analysis of the years 2010-2025 allows us to capture both the dynamics of development and the limitations of this support model. This period saw a shift in priorities – from an initial focus on the development of the artistic scene, through support for documentation and research, to international and educational projects.

The aim of this article is to present the development of the grant system

supporting dance in Poland from 2010 to 2025, with particular emphasis on the evolution of programmes implemented by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (the Ministry). The analysis focuses on the nationwide, central dimension of cultural policy and does not cover local government activities or local support strategies. The article poses three research questions: what grant programmes were available for dance[1] in Poland between 2010 and 2025, and how did their assumptions change; what trends do the data on grants awarded reveal; what challenges and limitations are apparent in the current system of support for this field. The study is based on an analysis of publicly available data on the Ministry's grant programmes for 2010-2025 (competition results, programme documents, institutional reports). The material has been compiled and described in quantitative terms (number of applications, amount of grants, repeat beneficiaries) and qualitative terms, through the interpretation of emerging trends in the dance support system. The analysis does not attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes according to predetermined measures, but rather to describe and interpret the available data in order to capture the most important phenomena and changes in dance support policy. The results presented are descriptive and analytical in nature; they are not based on formal performance indicators but on the interpretation of trends noticeable in public data.

The institutional framework of the grant system

Public funding for dance in Poland is multi-layered and extends beyond grant mechanisms. A significant portion of state and local government funds consists of subsidies for cultural institutions operating in the field of dance,

such as Polski Teatr Tańca and Kielecki Teatr Tańca (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, 2021). A separate category comprises artistic scholarships awarded by the Minister of Culture to individuals, as well as residency programmes supporting the development of artists and choreographers (NIMiT, 2025a). Local and regional grant programmes run by provincial and municipal authorities, which enable the financing of initiatives rooted in the local context, are also an important complement to the system (Hausner, 2019). Dance artists also seek funding from foreign sources, including European Union programmes such as Creative Europe and grants from international foundations and dance networks supporting mobility (Creative Europe Desk Poland, 2023).

This article focuses on grant programmes implemented by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage at the central level. These instruments were selected because they are the most structured, with full documentation of calls for applications and results, enabling analysis of long-term trends and revealing the key mechanisms shaping the dance environment in Poland.[2] However, it is important to be aware of this broader perspective, as ministerial grants are only one form of public support for dance – alongside permanent funding for institutions, scholarships, residencies, and local and foreign funding.

It is worth noting that the system of supporting dance in Poland after 2010 was formed on the basis of grant instruments, which are one of the basic tools of the state's cultural policy (Barański, 2016). Grants are a form of redistribution of public funds, based on competition mechanisms and substantive evaluation of submitted projects (Fatyga, 2013-2014). Their aim is not only to provide funding for current artistic projects, but also to stimulate the development of new initiatives, strengthen the competencies of

the community and create conditions for building cultural infrastructure. In the case of dance, which for a long time remained on the fringes of the institutional system, the introduction of separate grant programmes was of particular importance, as it meant that this field was recognised as an area of art distinct from theatre or music, requiring specific support tools. An analysis of the institutional framework allows us to understand both the structure of this system and the logic of its operation, as well as to identify its strengths and limitations.

Since 2010, the dance funding system in Poland has relied on two key institutions: the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (the Ministry) and the Instytut Muzyki i Tańca (Institute of Music and Dance, the Institute) (since 2021, the National Institute of Music and Dance – see Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, 2010, Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport, 2021). Despite differences in their scopes of competence and modes of operation, both entities have developed a coherent mechanism for supporting the dance community, albeit fraught with certain limitations.

The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, as the main public administration body responsible for cultural policy, was responsible for the distribution of funds under grant programmes. The ‘Theatre and Dance’ programme, in operation from 2010, was particularly important, as it enabled systemic funding of artistic activities in the field of dance for the first time (in 2021, it was split into two separate programmes: ‘Theatre’ and ‘Dance’). Until 2010, no such system for competitions had existed in Poland. In subsequent years, the programme evolved, adapting its priorities to the changing needs of the community. These changes included, for example, greater emphasis on research and documentation projects, as well as activities aimed at children and young people. It should be emphasised that

the rules for awarding grants in ministerial programmes were open, and both cultural institutions and non-governmental organisations could apply for funding. It is worth noting that the need to establish a separate programme for dance had already been raised by the dance community before. The proposal to split the 'Theatre and Dance' priority first appeared during the 1st Dance Congress in 2011, and was then re-articulated with greater force during the 2nd Dance Congress, as one of the key proposals of the community (Report from the 2nd Dance Congress, 2020). The decision to introduce a separate 'Dance' programme in 2021 was therefore a response to grassroots demands from dance artists and organisers, rather than merely an administrative recognition of its autonomy. The Institute of Music and Dance, established in 2010, was designed as a specialised institution supporting the development of music and dance in Poland. Unlike the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, whose role was primarily to distribute funds through grants, the Institute was also to focus on expert and strategic activities. Its activities focus on three core areas: research and documentation, information and programming. The Institute acts as a link between artists, cultural institutions and public administration, while also serving as a patron, animator and expert body in the area of cultural policy.

The grant system for dance is among the cultural policy instruments based on a competitive mode of distributing public funds. Its essence lies in combining elements of open enrolment, accessible to various entities, with mechanisms for selecting projects carried out by experts. This structure promotes pluralism in the portfolio of proposals and facilitates the emergence of new initiatives, but at the same time fosters high competitiveness and project-based activities (Hausner, Karwińska, Purchla, 2013). Another characteristic feature of the system is its institutional dispersion: on the one hand, there is central distribution of funds by the

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, and on the other, there are specialised programmes run by the Institute. Such a model ensures diversity of support, but also poses the risk of a lack of a coherent strategy and duplication of certain solutions. An analysis of the institutional framework demonstrates, among other things, that we are dealing with a mechanism with great development potential, whose effectiveness depends on keeping a balance between flexibility and stability and on the skilful coordination of the activities of both institutions.

The development of the grant system – the ‘Theatre and Dance’ programme

The Theatre and Dance programme was launched in 2010 by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage as one of the priorities among the Minister’s subsidy programmes. Its introduction was a breakthrough for the dance community, which gained access for the first time to a funding mechanism dedicated to this field. The programme was addressed to a wide range of entities operating in the field of dance and theatre. In practice, the funds allocated under the programme were primarily used for the premieres of performances and the organisation of Poland’s most important dance and theatre festivals. From the perspective of the development of the grant system, the ‘Theatre and Dance’ programme introduced an important distinction into ministerial practice: dance was given a place among the arts institutionally supported by the state. Even though the scope of support was essentially limited to premieres and major festival events, its very existence provided a framework for building further mechanisms.

An analysis of data relating to the ‘Theatre and Dance’ programme shows a clear disproportion between theatre and dance in terms of the number of

applications submitted. Between 250 and 300 applications were registered annually, but the share of dance projects remained marginal for a long time. In the first years of the programme's operation, the number of dance applications was limited to a few per year, and only in subsequent years did it begin to gradually increase, reaching a level of several applications per year.

Data on the 'Theatre and Dance' programme for 2011–2020 confirm the marginal, albeit gradually increasing, presence of dance projects under this priority. Each year, between 200 and almost 340 applications were submitted to the programme, the vast majority of which were in the theatre domain. Each year, approximately 90–110 entities received grants. In the field of dance, between 9 and 19 projects per year received funding. The lowest figures were recorded at the beginning of the programme (2011: 10 projects) and in the middle of the decade (2015-2016: 10 projects each). The highest level of support was in 2014, when 19 dance projects obtained funding. Compared to the total number of applications to the programme, the share of dance was relatively small, accounting for only a few per cent of all applications. This disproportion revealed the need to create a separate support instrument that would allow the criteria and priorities to be adequately adapted to the specific nature of the art of dance. The creation of a separate 'Dance' programme in 2021 was therefore a response to many years of experience, which showed that when the two fields are combined, dance remains in the shadow of theatre and its potential cannot be fully developed within the framework of a joint competition.

An analysis of the amount of funding allocated confirms that throughout the decade, funding for dance remained at a relatively low level compared to other fields. In the first years of the 'Theatre and Dance' programme, the

budget allocated to dance projects amounted to just over PLN 1 million per year (which was related to the number of applications submitted and grants awarded), and was therefore only sufficient to support a few premieres and several large festivals. It was not until the middle of the decade that there was a marked increase, after which the amounts exceeded PLN 1.5 million and, in the best years, even approached PLN 2 million. It is therefore clear that, although dance was gradually gaining importance in the ministry's grant policy, its share in the total budget remained limited. Stabilisation at a level slightly below two million zlotys per year was evidence of the recognition of dance as an important area of the arts, but it also emphasised its secondary position vis-à-vis theatre, which absorbed most of the available funds. For this reason, the establishment of a separate 'Dance' programme in 2021 was a necessary step to free this field from having to compete with theatre, and to create more transparent and fair rules for the distribution of funds.

Examination of the data presented in Table 1 reveals a distinct continuity of support for several key dance institutions and festivals in Poland. Most often, funding under the 'Theatre and Dance' programme was awarded to large and recognisable events with an established position in the community. In their case, grants were awarded almost annually throughout the 2011–2020 period analysed, confirming their position in the national dance landscape. The second group consisted of entities that regularly, albeit with some interruptions, appeared among the beneficiaries. These projects, although not necessarily present every year, were an important reference point for various trends in dance – from experimental explorations to classical ballet. The examples of beneficiaries cited in this analysis were selected based on their repeated presence in the results of competitions and their significance for shaping the national dance landscape. Both projects with the largest

budgets and with a long-term presence in the grant system, as well as initiatives representing various regions of Poland, were taken into account.

Table 1. Selected entities receiving grants under the 'Theatre and Dance' programme in 2011-2020

Entity / Project	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
The Body/Mind Foundation / The Body/Mind Festival	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lublin Culture Centre / International Dance Theatre Meetings	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cracovia Danza Court Balet / Cracovia Danza Court Dance Festival				x	x	x	x	x	x	x
The Art and Modernity Foundation / Rozdroże Festival	x	x	x	x	x					
Klub Żak / Gdansk Dance Festival	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Podlaskie Dance Association / Kalejdoskop Festival		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Lodz Grand Theatre / Lodz Ballet Festival			x		x		x	x	x	

Source: Author's own analysis

An analysis of data from 2011–2020 indicates that support for dance under the 'Theatre and Dance' programme was selective and concentrated around a handful of major festivals and institutions. Throughout the entire period under review, there was relative stability – each year, funding was awarded to several to a dozen or so dance projects, with a clear predominance of well-

established cyclical projects. This group primarily included the largest and most recognisable events (such as those named in the table above).

The decade saw a clear trend towards a stabilisation of the selection of beneficiaries – projects once awarded a grant gained an advantage over new initiatives, which strengthened the position of several festivals that constitute the pillars of Polish dance life. This made it possible to structure a calendar of events that recurred every year or every two years, providing the community and the public with a sense of continuity. This model also narrowed the opportunities for supporting smaller projects – both local and experimental – which often required significantly lower financial outlays than large international festivals. In practice, the structure of the programmes favoured projects with higher budgets and more complex organisational structures, while small-scale initiatives struggled to obtain funding. As a result, many valuable but smaller projects were unable to compete with large, established entities. This solution led to a concentration of funds around recognised brands and limited the diversification of the offers, hindering the development of more dispersed and grassroots dance practices. It is worth noting, however, that many of these mechanisms – such as the consolidation of the position of regular beneficiaries, preference for large festivals, and limited opportunities for small initiatives – are not exclusive to dance. Similar trends can be observed in other priorities of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, especially in the ‘Theatre’ programme, which also focuses on supporting large-scale festival events and recurring projects. However, the singularity of dance lies in the fact that, as a field with weaker institutional roots, it is more strongly affected by the effects of such a policy of resource distribution.

Another characteristic feature of the period under analysis was the

dominance of festivals. It was large events, often international in scope, that were the main beneficiaries, which reflected the ministry's priority of building the visibility of dance and presenting the most prestigious projects. Premiere productions were financed on a smaller scale than festivals. The preference for festivals resulted not only from their artistic significance but also from their promotional appeal and relatively low investment risk. Guaranteeing the visibility and prestige of the funded activities, large events, attracting renowned artists and a wide audience, were a 'safe investment' for grantors. This type of strategy focused primarily on the short-term staging of performances and attracting audiences through high-profile events, and less often on long-term educational and animation activities that could steadily build an audience for dance and develop local communities.

These trends reveal both the strengths and weaknesses of the system. On the one hand, the 'Theatre and Dance' programme has helped to consolidate the position of several key institutions and festivals, which still form the core of the Polish dance scene today. On the other hand, however, the concentration of funds around regular beneficiaries has revealed structural constraints: a lack of space for new initiatives, difficulties in obtaining funding for smaller entities, and limited contribution to the development of a more dispersed dance ecosystem.

Typologies of the projects supported – an analysis of the 'Dance' programme

The separation of the 'Dance' programme in 2021 was a natural segue of previous experiences of the 'Theatre and Dance' priority. The new ministerial programme was designed as a tool to strengthen the

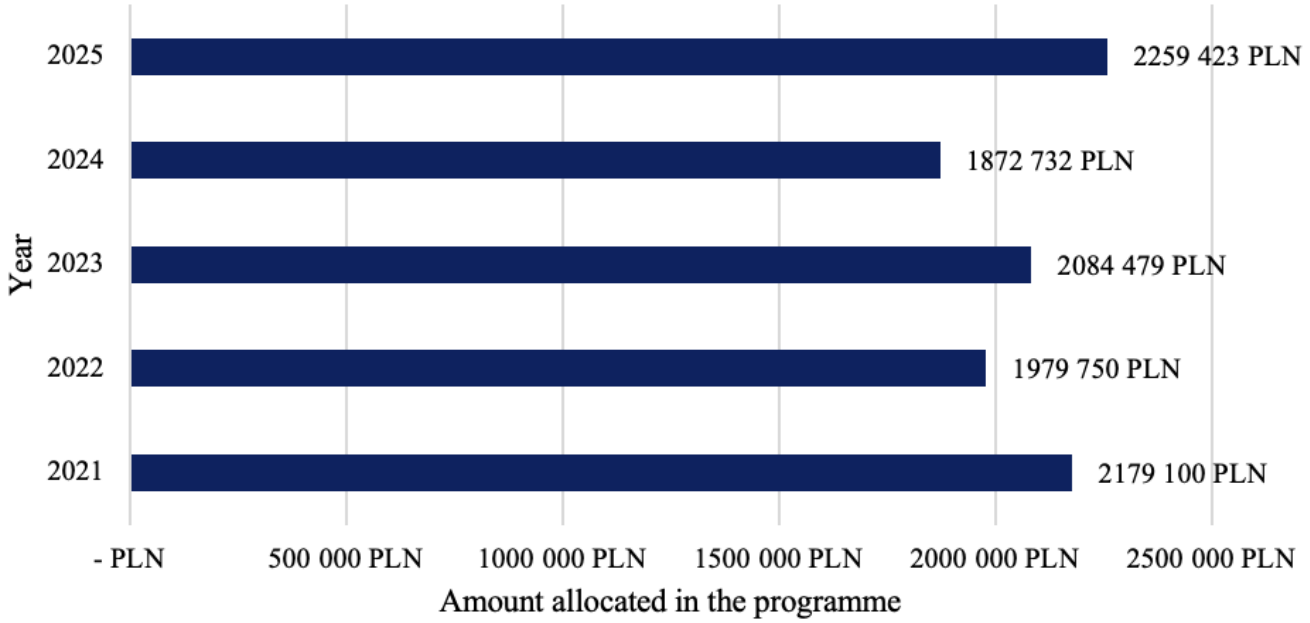
development of the dance community, enabling the co-funding of premieres, festival events and other artistic and educational projects (Portal Samorządowy, 2020). The inclusion of ‘Dance’ in the Ministry’s catalogue of independent programme priorities can be viewed as confirmation of the growing importance of this field in national cultural policy.

An analysis of financial data concerning the ‘Dance’ programme reveals its stable presence in the grant support system since its establishment in 2021. As shown in the chart below, in the programme’s first year, the total amount of grants awarded was PLN 2,179,100, placing the programme among the most important instruments for financing culture from the very beginning. In subsequent years, the amount of funding remained at a similar level – PLN 1,979,750 was allocated in 2022, and slightly more, PLN 2,084,479 in 2023. In 2024, there was a decrease to PLN 1,872,732 – then an increase again to PLN 2,259,423 in 2025. However, it should be noted that maintaining the programme’s nominal budget at a relatively constant level while inflation is rising actually means a decrease in the real value of the funds allocated. In practice, this translates into a decrease in the potential for financing projects – with the same grant amounts, the costs of production and event organisation increase, limiting the scale of activities that can be implemented under the programme.

Such a pattern of change testifies to the relative stability of the programme’s budget, which has remained between PLN 1.8 and 2.2 million per year over its five-year perspective. These are not large sums, especially when compared to expenditure in other areas of the arts, but they do allow for the implementation of several dozen projects of national significance each year. It should be noted that this funding covers premiere productions and festivals predominantly. However, focusing funds on projects with the widest

appeal helps build the visibility of dance in Polish cultural life.

Chart 1. Funds awarded for financing projects under the ‘Dance’ programme in 2021–2025

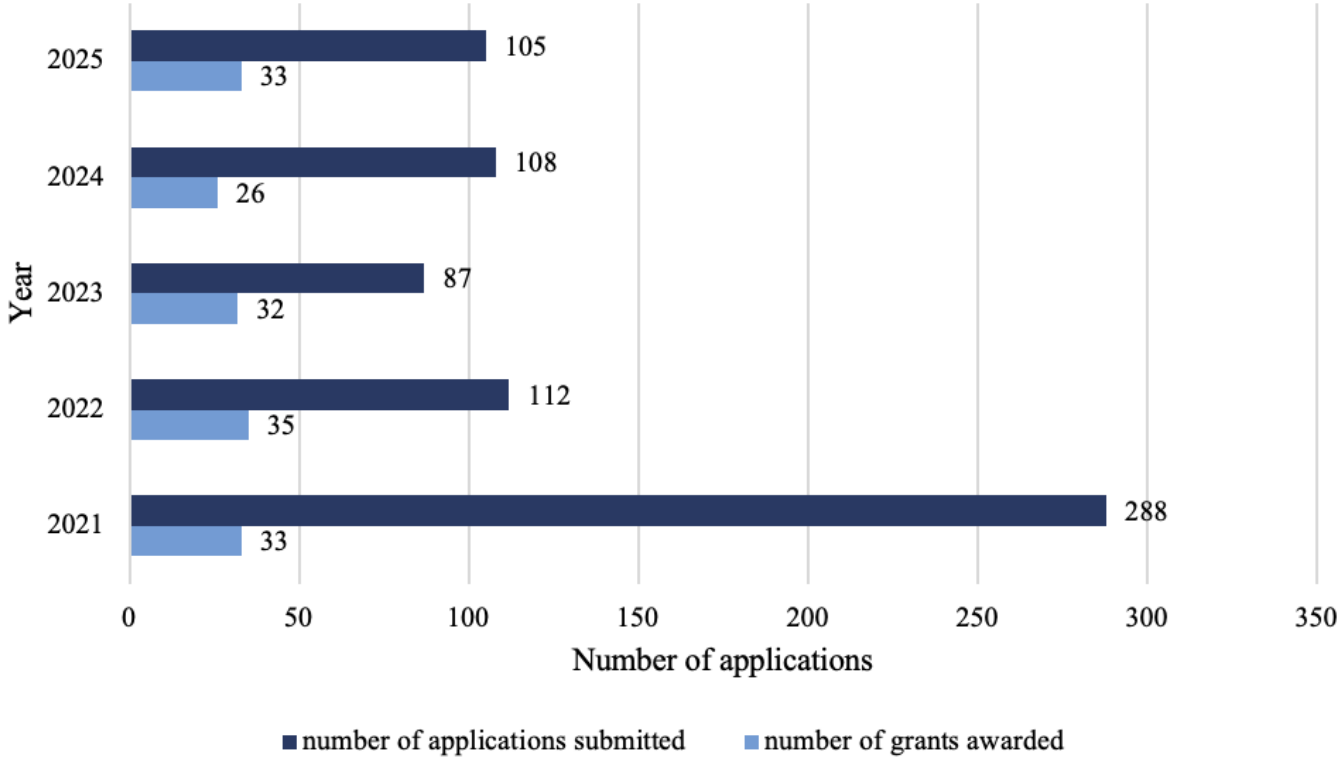


Source: Author’s own analysis

In the long term, the ‘Dance’ programme proves that public funds allocated to this art form are relatively immune to political or economic fluctuations – apart from minor annual adjustments, the level of funding remains stable. However, one could hardly call it complete stability: even entities that receive regular support operate in conditions of uncertainty and short budget cycles, which is not conducive to long-term planning. This mechanism, therefore, ensures repeatability rather than permanence, and its ‘systemic’ nature is based more on the regularity of procedures than on financial guarantees. Stability here is relative: the programme’s annual budget ranges from PLN 1.8 to 2.2 million, indicating that it funds the implementation of a limited number of projects. From the perspective of the development of the culture financing system, maintaining stable but relatively low outlays raises the question of the balance between the

availability of funds and their concentration on prestigious projects. On the one hand, this gives the dance community (in particular, entities organising large events involving internationally renowned companies) predictability and a certain margin of security; on the other hand, it limits the potential for diversifying activities and supporting innovative forms of creativity. In this sense, the 'Dance' programme is an important but still incomplete element of systemic support for culture.

Chart 2. Number of applications submitted and of grants awarded under the 'Dance' programme in 2021–2025



Source: Author's own analysis

An analysis of the number of applications submitted and grants awarded provides a better understanding of the patterns of change in the 'Dance' programme in 2021-2025. The year 2021 stands out most, with 288 applications submitted – almost three times as many as in subsequent years. It can be concluded that the high level of interest was due to this being the

first call for applications after the programme was separated as an independent priority, and the dance community, which had previously benefited from the joint ‘Theatre and Dance’ programme, saw it as an opportunity for new support. Despite the large number of applications, only 33 projects received funding, which translates into a success rate of approximately 11%.

As the chart above demonstrates, the number of applications stabilised in the following years, with 87 to 112 submitted annually between 2022 and 2025. With a relatively constant number of projects receiving funding (26-35 per year), the success rate increased to approximately 25-30%. This means that although the programme’s budget did not increase significantly, the likelihood of each applicant receiving support increased. On the one hand, this has improved the system’s sense of stability and predictability, but on the other hand, it shows that the programme remains highly selective – only a limited number of projects receive funding, and a large proportion of initiatives still remain outside the scope of grants.

Table 2. Selected entities receiving grants under the ‘Dance’ programme in 2021–2025

Entity / Project	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Cracovia Danza Court Balet / Cracovia Danza Court Dance Festival	x	x	x	x	
Lublin Culture Centre / International Dance Theatre Meetings	x	x	x	x	x
The Body/Mind Foundation / The Body/Mind Festival	x	x	x	x	x
Klub Żak / Gdansk Dance Festival	x	x	x	x	x
Podlaskie Dance Association / Kalejdoskop Festival	x	x	x	x	x
Mościce Art Centre / Scena Otwarta International Dance Theatres Festival	x	x	x	x	x
B'cause Foundation / premiere performances	x	x			x
Performa Foundation / ‘Memory of the City’ – modern dance festival		x	x	x	
Kielce Dance Theatre / premiere performances	x	x			x
Nowa Huta Cultural Centre / Kraków Dance Festival	x	x	x	x	x
Opera na Zamku in Szczecin / premiere performances	x	x	x		
Opera Śląska / premiere performances	x	x	x		
Polish Dance Theatre / premieres and ‘Granice Natury – Granice Kultury’ festival	x	x	x	x	x
Kultura u Źródeł Association / Olga Sawicka International Dance Festival in Lądek Zdrój	x	x	x	x	x
Jan Kochanowski Theatre in Opole / Opolska Scena Tańca		x	x	x	x

Source: Author’s own analysis

The data for 2021–2025, presented in Table 2, show that the separation of

the ‘Dance’ programme has enabled the expansion of the catalogue of supported projects. The list includes entities that received funding under the ‘Dance’ programme at least three times between 2021 and 2025, thereby demonstrating a sustained presence in the grant system. This selection allows us to identify both the institutions with the greatest budgetary significance and the organisations that benefit from support on a regular basis and shape the national dance landscape. An effort was made to take into account the diversity of operating models – from large public institutions to non-governmental organisations – and a representation of different regions of Poland. The list reveals the dominance of well-established festival projects, but at the same time, repertoire institutions and professional ensembles staging premieres and performance cycles are gaining an increasing share in the system. While in the previous decade the main beneficiaries were almost exclusively festivals, the new programme clearly demonstrates a shift towards combining presentation and production functions, which supports both the promotion of dance and the development of new repertoire.

Compared to the 2011–2020 period, decentralisation is also evident: beneficiaries regularly include sites outside the largest metropolitan areas, such as Tarnów (Scena Otwarta), Opole (Opolska Scena Tańca), Lądek-Zdrój (Olga Sawicka International Dance Festival) and Kraków/Nowa Huta (Kraków Dance Festival). This dispersion indicates that the programme serves not only as an instrument for the arts, but also for regions, enabling the development of local ecosystems and supporting the process of decentralisation of cultural life in Poland. Support for institutions outside the main centres confirms that the programme has room for activities that respond to the needs of local communities while maintaining a high artistic standard.

The table also shows that once new initiatives, such as the Kraków Dance Festival or the Opolska Scena Tańca (Opole Dance Scene), have been included in the programme, they can count on continued support in subsequent editions. This is a qualitative change compared to the previous decade, when the ‘Theatre and Dance’ mechanism primarily rewarded entities with a long tradition and a strong position in the arts. The new programme, therefore, allows for a more flexible response to changes in the environment and opens the possibility of institutionalising initiatives that have been established relatively recently but have already developed a recognisable profile. The overall picture points to a duality in the system: on the one hand, continued support for the most prestigious festivals, which are the pillars of Polish dance life, and on the other, consistent funding for premieres and institutional projects that expand the repertoire and support the development of professional companies. A mechanism constructed in this way combines the function of stabilisation with the potential to open up to new initiatives and support regional diversity. However, it should be noted that the scarcity of available funds limits the effectiveness of this two-pronged model. The ‘Dance’ programme’s budget allows for the co-financing of only a few dozen projects per year, which, given the number of applications submitted, represents a small fraction of the community’s needs. As a result, the two-pronged system, although conceptually sound, cannot fulfil its function to the full: the insufficient number of projects supported perpetuates the shortage of resources both in the large festival segment and in the area of repertoire production, limiting the possibilities for the long-term development of the artistic infrastructure for dance.

Challenges and opportunities of grant-based support

A review of grant programmes implemented between 2010 and 2025 shows that the dance support system in Poland – while it has undoubtedly developed compared to previous decades – remains an area fraught with tensions and challenges. The problem most often raised is the short-term nature of funding, which is particularly characteristic of the 'Theatre and Dance' programme. However, it should be emphasised that the insufficient funds allocated to dance programmes remain a problem of a more structural nature.[3] Despite favourable institutional changes, the budgets of both the 'Theatre and Dance' and the later 'Dance' programmes remain relatively low compared to other fields of art (e.g. in 2024, PLN 18,333,731 was allocated to the 'Music' programme, PLN 9,453,970 to the 'Theatre' programme, and PLN 1,794,500 to 'Dance'). In practice, this means that even well-designed initiatives receive insufficient support to realise their artistic and organisational potential fully. As a result, the grant system does not so much complement institutional funding mechanisms as it largely replaces them. This situation also leads to excessive pressure on project implementers, who are forced to operate guided by the logic of economic efficiency – achieving the best possible results with minimal expenditure. Instead of promoting the stable development of the community, grants often force intensification of work and competition for resources, which, in the long term, can lead to burnout and limit the community's capacity for innovation and cooperation. In this context, it would be desirable to gradually shift the emphasis from the economics of efficiency to those of ergonomics, taking into account the human and organisational potential of the cultural sector.

Another phenomenon is the concentration of funding on a few regular beneficiaries, mainly large public institutions and internationally renowned festivals. Data from individual programmes show that entities such as Centrum Kultury in Lublin, Kielecki Teatr Tańca, Fundacja Ciało/Umysł and Klub Żak received funding very frequently. On the one hand, this ensured the continuity of the most important events in the country, which was essential for building the recognition of Polish dance in the public and international spheres. On the other hand, however, it led to limited access to funds for new initiatives and smaller non-governmental organisations, which found it difficult to break through the competition posed by strong, recognisable brands. This mechanism could perpetuate existing hierarchies in the field of dance, while reducing the chances of obtaining support for experimental, niche or grassroots activities.

The conclusions formulated during the Third Dance Congress in 2023 confirm that the dance community continues to demand greater stability in the funding system (3rd Dance Congress, 19–21 March 2023. Report, 2023). The most frequently raised demands included: the need for multi-year grants and long-term planning, improving social security for people working in culture, and developing hybrid funding models combining public funds with philanthropy and private partnerships. Attention was also drawn to the importance of permanent venues for dance and infrastructure conducive to continuous work, which shows that systemic challenges go beyond the logic of grants and also concern the material conditions of the sector’s functioning. In the context of the broader debate on culture and development, grant programmes for dance can serve not only as a tool to support artists, but also as a catalyst for social and regional development, contributing to the strengthening of local communities, building social capital, and increasing the accessibility of culture. It is the skilful use of this

dual function – artistic and social – that holds the greatest potential for the further evolution of the system.

Conclusions

The analysis shows that the system of grant support for dance in Poland in 2010–2025 underwent a significant evolution – from marginalisation of this area within the broad programme ‘Theatre and Dance’ to the spin-off of the autonomous priority ‘Dance.’ The new programme has enabled a gradual increase in the proportion of dance initiatives, including primarily premieres and productions staged in repertory institutions, as well as the inclusion of smaller regional centres in the system. Thus, the support began to serve not only an interventionist function, but also a developmental one.

From the perspective of culture understood as a development factor, grant mechanisms in the field of dance prove to have a twofold function. On the one hand, they enable the sustenance of existing institutions and events of key importance to the community’s identity – such as well-established festivals or repertory dance theatres – and thus have a stabilising effect, ensuring continuity of operation and the preservation of established standards. On the other hand, the separation of the ‘Dance’ programme opens up opportunities for new initiatives that introduce innovative artistic forms, broaden the audience and involve various social groups in educational and animation activities.

In the broader perspective, however, the analysed system remains underfunded considering the scale of the tasks it is expected to fulfil. Despite their effectiveness in stimulating artistic activity, grant programmes often take over functions that should be carried out within the framework of

permanent institutional funding. As a result, the grant mechanism acts not as a supplement but as a substitute for systemic care for dance, leading to organisational overload and overexploitation of the community. The further development of cultural policy, therefore, requires not only maintaining but also increasing public spending on dance and a gradual shift in emphasis from economic efficiency to the ergonomics of artistic work and long-term stability.

Thus, the question of the sustainability and consistency of this model is still of key importance. There is still a risk that short-term financial mechanisms will perpetuate the project-based nature of activities, and that the concentration of funds on the largest entities will exacerbate inequalities in access to support. The lack of long-term guarantees for independent artists may result in their marginalisation and hinder artistic diversity, which is one of the foundations of the dynamic development of the field of dance. For this reason, the future direction of policy should aim to develop institutional solutions that balance the need for stability with the need of openness to new entities, forms and practices.

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Footnotes

1. The author construes the term ‘dance’ in accordance with the broad interpretation, as stated in calls for applications of the Ministry, rather than limited to a specific phenomenon or trend.
2. The term ‘dance community’ in this and subsequent paragraphs is used in a general sense. In this article, the author does not focus on distinguishing between specific interest groups within this community, treating them as a single group that is a potential beneficiary of grant funds.
3. The Announcement of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage on recruitment for government programmes in the field of culture and national heritage protection for 2025, to be implemented by 16 December 2024, you can find data on the amounts allocated to individual programmes – the differences between the amount allocated to the ‘Dance’ programme and programmes such as ‘Music’ or ‘Theatre’ are significant.

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Announcement of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage on recruitment for government programmes in the field of culture and national heritage protection for 2025, to be implemented by 16 December 2024.

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/ POST-ANTHROPOCENE

Cultivating Resistance: An Analysis of Exhibitions of Åsa Sonjasdotter's Art in the Context of the Plantationocene

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This article explores the history of crop variety purification and its role in the rise of monoculture. The Swedish artist Åsa Sonjasdotter examines the development of genetics, which evolved alongside the rise of National Socialism. The regime of purification sought to find 'pure' plant varieties following the New Testament imperative to 'separate the wheat from the chaff.' The article traces the creation of 'ideal plant bodies' (J. van der Ploeg) and their contribution to the spread of monocultures in the Plantationocene (A. L. Tsing, D. Haraway). Through an analysis of Sonjasdotter's art exhibitions, the author highlights subversive practices that challenge the dominance of monoculture, a system that benefits a narrow group of stakeholders while harming the environment.

Keywords: biopolitics; agriculture; Plantationocene; Åsa Sonjasdotter

The Earth eventually began to revolt, but it was a silent, slow revolt that humans did not heed, for there was yet more virgin land to conquer. Because they had become divorced from the land, humans could not understand the symptoms and did not see the correlation between cause and effect. They

despised the Earth as much as they impressed themselves with their own power in the belief that they could turn nature into a blind and willing slave to their every command. In Sweden, we are not entirely unaware of the hardships other nations suffer as a result of the protesting Earth. We are, however, exceptionally reluctant to recognise the symptoms when they appear at home.

Elisabeth Tamm, Elin Wägner

The above motto comes from *Peace with the Earth*, a 1940 manifesto penned by two Swedish suffragettes, Elisabeth Tamm and Elin Wägner. Tamm was a committed politician, one of the first Swedish parliamentarians championing women's rights. She was also involved in farming, echoes of which can be found in *Peace with the Earth*. Wägner was a writer and activist for the natural environment, peace and women's rights, and a member of the Swedish Academy. The fervent tone of Tamm's and Wägner's pamphlet, which runs to more than eighty pages, speaks to how relevant its topics were at the time. The issues in question include the future of agriculture, ecologic awareness and an awareness of the human relationship with the land/earth understood primarily as a metaphorical framework including coexistence with telluric and organic matter rather than as relations of ownership (*Archive Journal*, 2020, no. 9, p. 8).[1] Tamm's and Wägner's manifesto serves as the leitmotif of the work of Åsa Sonjasdotter, a Swedish artist who explores relations between plants and humans in the context of different ways of growing plants. I use the word leitmotif in its literal sense too, for its echoes – in keeping with the iteration principle – recur throughout Sonjasdotter's oeuvre.

I first came across Sonjasdotter's work at the 2019 Warsaw Biennale, where I saw 'Floraphilia: The Plant Revolution,' one of the first exhibitions in Poland entirely dedicated to plants conceived as social actors. As the organisers emphasized, the show sought to mark a break from the reactionary perception of plants as motifs or interior design elements, bringing out their 'emancipatory and agential potential.' The work on view included Sonjasdotter's art project whose title, 'The Order of Potatoes,' was a direct reference to Foucault's biopolitical discourse, addressing the primary issue of potato cultivation. 'The Order of Potatoes' tracked the story of how the cultivated varieties of potatoes had been purified, because, as the artist pointed out, the food industry modifies crops to sustain the existence of a handful of the most productive varieties, dismissing others as 'too hybrid' and not including them in wide distribution (ibid.). This strict selection in line with the categories of 'desirable' and 'undesirable' is an act of industrialized management, which serves to capitalise on the knowledge of the adaptability of plants that farmers have grown and harvested for centuries.

In other words, Sonjasdotter's project focused primarily on the New Testament imperative of separating 'the wheat from the chaff' in the context of specific crop varieties in the age of industrial agriculture. In doing so, it revealed the more-than-human biopolitical management of crops, which enabled the development of monoculture crops, thus leading to a decline in biodiversity. This kind of management resonates well with a diagnosis formulated by Foucault, who saw biopolitics as 'a matter of organizing circulation, eliminating its dangerous elements, making a division between good and bad circulation, and maximizing the good circulation by diminishing the bad' (2007, p. 32). Foucault did not address the subject of plant biopolitics, but his diagnosis of the mechanism of division into good

and bad and the elimination of dangerous elements threatening the *status quo* provided direct inspiration for the project of Sonjasdotter, who made more-than-human biopolitics in the context of cultivated plants central to her work.

As only a part of the Swedish artist's project was included in the Warsaw exhibition, I went to Karlsruhe's Badischer Kunstverein to see Sonjasdotter's first retrospective, 'The Kale Bed Is So Called Because There Is Always Kale in It,' which inspired me to reflect on the biopolitical management of crop bodies in an era Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway termed the Plantationocene. This short piece will seek to, firstly, bring order to the work included in the show and, secondly, to contextualize it through subject literature.

Human–plant geographies[2]

Curated by Anja Casser, the Badischer Kunstverien exhibition was a comprehensive selection of Sonjasdotter's work, divided into five sections. There is always a potential danger in this kind of 'comprehensive' selections as they tend to be too cursory and selective. A problematic thing about the Karlsruhe exhibition was that most of the projects on view had been created as part of artist residencies (in Ireland, Sweden or Germany) and combined with site-specific activities. Thus, lifting each project out of its local context and into traditional white cube spaces denied visitors the full experience of it. The first part of the exhibition, 'The Kale Bed Is So Called Because There Is Always Kale in It' (which was also the title of the whole exhibition), featured a project the artist created in 2017–2023 in Ireland in collaboration with the photographer and artist Mercè Torres Ràfol. The centrepiece of this section was a collection of collages depicting black and white archive

photographs of kale cultivation in Ireland, with clippings of contemporary photographs of kale pasted over them. A few specimens of dried kale were placed on these compositions, printed on two huge pieces of fabric. Apart from this striking display (the swaths of fabric were several metres long), however, visitors were offered little in the way of information on the project that had inspired the exhibition. The curatorial descriptions were rather succinct and provided only basic information such as explanations of what was on display.

A copy of *Archive Journal* left at the entrance to the show served as an introduction to the project. The publication, printed in the form of a collection of newspaper pieces (with their typical tone fusing sensation and information), was produced in collaboration with Project Arts Centre, Dublin, as a companion piece to an exhibition mounted in Ireland in 2020. It stated that elements of the art installation referenced the practice of storing seeds of kale and other plants in the farmers' clothes worn at harvest time. One might say that the copy of *Archive Journal* fulfilled the 'archive' promise of the exhibition title, offering information on its historical context.

Kale had been widely grown in Ireland until the 17th century before the country's agricultural economy began to rely on the cultivation of potatoes. Sonjasdotter accessed the archives of the National Folklore Collection, where she found notes on kale cultivation and photographs of kale growing close to farm buildings known in England and Ireland as byre-dwellings. She also gathered documentation on the process of collecting wild varieties of kale by peasant farmers. According to the artist, kale and other species of plants of the cabbage genus, such as mustard (*Sinapis L.*), played a prominent role during the Great Famine in Ireland (Feehan, 2003, p. 161). The famine began in 1845 when the bulk of the potato crop was destroyed by

a fungus-like microorganism, a water mould called *Phytophthora infestans*. The famine predominantly affected the poor classes, who depended heavily on the potato crop. Cereals were also widely grown in Ireland at the time but largely by wealthier landowners, who exported them to Britain (Curtis, 2002, p. 227). It was then that the various varieties of kale, which were spreading in Ireland's coastal areas, became a food staple. Sonjasdotter found photographs showing the harvest of the sea kale, a halophyte from the cabbage family, growing on the sandy beaches and dunes of the Irish coast, which was harvested during the Great Famine. By showcasing this material, the artist traces the forgotten history of plants that were of little interest for agriculture but played a significant role during the famine, which ravaged Ireland between 1845 and 1849. In a report Sonjasdotter found, the plant researcher R.M. Murphy notes that Ireland has a long tradition of collecting and storing seeds of plants of the cabbage genus. Between 1982 and 1984, the researcher was involved in an international study of seeds from Irish farms. As he writes in his report, forty per cent of farmers had given up collecting the seeds of local plant varieties by the 1980s due to the spread of industrial cultivation and the introduction of official lists of licensed seeds and modern plant hybrids in order to ensure better yields (Murphy, 1984). Although the story told by Sonjasdotter has no explicit conclusion, it suggests that she blames industrial food production for the genetic erosion of many species – I return to this question further on in my examination of other sections of the exhibition.

Cultivating Resistance against Monoculture

One of the most enlightening sections of the show, 'Cultivating Abundance,' centred on forms of resistance to monoculture farming and on the industrial monopolization of agribusiness and it included a video Sonjasdotter made in

2022 in dialogue with the Alkorn Association and the plant breeder and researcher Hans Larsson. The documentary outlines the monoculture technology, which started to be developed at the Swedish Seed Association in the 1880s, as researchers associated with the organization searched for the ideal plant, the 'pure' and highest-yield variety of each species.

In the first part of the video, which served as an archival introduction to the story of modern plant growing techniques, a voiceover discussed the importance of gelatine silver prints from the collection of the Swedish Seed Association in Svalöv. These black-and-white photographic positives, which consisted of silver bromide suspended in a layer of gelatine, documented the efforts of scientists in their quest for the 'ideal type of crop' – the prints showed beet and potato tubers side by side and upright ears of cereal, which scientists sought to standardize as much as possible in order to arrive at an identical shape and texture, documenting their results in photographs where each cultivar was measured and compared with the others.

At Svalöv, scientists applied a standardizing method described as a 'complete reversal of the old understanding of breeding.' Instead of collecting and storing selected seeds, a practice that had also served, since ancient times, as a kind of archive of plant adaptation processes in different conditions and latitudes, they worked to 'identify and control uniformity' in the existing seeds. The concept of the ideal plant required many years of controlled cultivation over several generations, which yielded 'pure lines' from which genetic 'impurities' had been expunged (*Sveriges Utsädesförening 1886–1936*, 1936, p. 168). In the process, plants that exhibited interesting traits, and hence aspired to be perfect, were transferred from fields to laboratories where cultivated varieties were crossed with other pure lines to produce the perfect cultivar. The resulting

cultivar was multiplied *en masse*, distributed and legislatively legitimized, thus gaining a monopoly position on the seed market.

The results of the quest for ideal and pure biological plant types were soon translated into a search for perfect human bodies. 1922 saw the opening in Uppsala of the Swedish State Institute of Racial Biology (SIRB), which followed in the footsteps of the genetic work done at Svalöv. Shortly afterwards, in 1927, the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, Menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik was opened in Berlin, followed, in 1928, by the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Züchtungsforschung in Müncheberg, both modelled on Swedish centres (Björkman and Widalm, 2010, p. 379–400).

Sonjasdotter found a private photo album of a former employee of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Züchtungsforschung, containing reprinted photographs made at Svalöv, a testament to the fact that the ideas adopted in Germany had arrived from Sweden. The source of the practice of 'racial and species purity' used to be traced to the ideology of the Third Reich, but similar practices had been pursued earlier, in the early twentieth century, in the field of plant cultivation in Scandinavia.[3]

The genetic pursuit of hygiene in plant bodies would later contribute to the launch of political projects involving the execution of humans (Saraiva, 2016). As noted above, the first part of the video documented the process of crop uniformization. In the next part of the exhibition, 'The Documentation of Research,' viewers could see up close prints of the gelatine silver photographs (which were also included in the video in time-lapse clips) and examine scans of documents found by the artist.

(Bio)diversity of adaptation processes

The next part of the video is themed around the researcher and plant breeder Hans Larsson, who in the early 1990s initiated a project on organic forms of farming at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Alnarp. Housed in a building on the university campus is a seed bank operated by the Nordic Genetic Resource Centre, holding seeds of many local plants grown by Swedish farmers. In contravention of the rules of the seed bank, Larsson and other project participants used some of the bank's seeds to grow plants in the campus in order to observe their properties 'in practice.' He then went a step further and started experimenting with the seeds across Sweden to test their adaptability under varying conditions. This move, Sonjasdotter explains, was an act of resistance against the locking away of all local varieties, which had been grown by smallholder farmers for centuries, and replacing them with ones widely distributed for monoculture cultivation. The significance of the title of this section of the show, 'Cultivating Abundance,' is revealed here – Larsson's activities were an act of resistance against the industrialization and monoculturation of the landscape, first by testing and restoring the vitality of forgotten varieties, then by handing them over to small-scale Swedish farmers for cultivating abundance and biodiversity. Larsson drew on the tradition of farmers passing on seeds of different varieties to other farmers, which was cut short by the advent of the industrial production of 'pure' varieties. Later, Larsson moved on to work with a group of individuals with whom he founded the Allkorn Association to extend the 'test cultivation' of seeds to other climatic zones. In the video, Larsson points out that this practice has brought many varieties, including flat wheat and rye from Fulltofta, back into the fields.

Speaking about his practice, the researcher addressed issues fundamental to

the ecological paradigm underscoring coexistence with the environment in opposition to instrumental approaches to land resources and yield maximization: ‘In order to breed plants, you need to find locations that target the climate and the environment. Everything about the surroundings is important: the trees, the water sources and the wild plants as well. You are, in fact, co-creating an environmental space.’[4] Monoculture farming is predicated on the opposite idea: that of finding ‘ideal bodies’ offering the highest possible yields once the soil has been adapted. As a result, as Larsson points out, monocultures become more susceptible to diseases, which can rapidly cripple whole crops. Along similar lines, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Donna Haraway proposed a new configuration for the concept of the Anthropocene. By introducing the semantic category of the Plantationocene, the researchers pointed to the coupling of the monoculture model with agribusiness and with the colonial vestiges of land ownership and wage labour. At the same time, Tsing and Haraway highlighted the ecological issues addressed by Larsson, that is, the rapid transformations of pests and pathogens that are ‘experimenting’ with the abundance of food available on plantations, coming up with new ways of appropriating and attacking monocultures:

Second, plantations allow sometimes quite rapid transformations of pests and pathogens that create forms of virulence that didn’t exist before. The pathogens are experimenting with ways to make use of the bounty of food in the plantation. At the same time, plantations are linked in global commerce. They are often sending the same materials back and forth across the globe, allowing hybridization across closely related but geographically separated pathogen species. These hybridizations produce pathogens that can attack new hosts and in innovative ways. So we see a proliferation of newly virulent pathogens that is really unheard of in the world as far as I can see. They do

not stay on the plantation. They make other kinds of agriculture, such as small-holder peasant cultivation, much more difficult than they were before (Haraway and Tsing, 2019).

As a result, we are increasingly seeing newly emerged pathogens, and they are moving beyond plantations to other types of crops, including those grown on smallholder farms. It is clear that while the objections of people like Larsson concern the huge food industry at the micro level, they also encompass, at the macro level, the broader ecological paradigm of caring for the wellbeing of all crops and the preservation of biodiversity. I have invoked the conversation of the American researchers for a kind of counterpoint and afterthought, as both Sonjasdotter and Larsson describe the challenges faced by small farms due to the existence of industrial scale cultivation, but they also address the ecological effects of monocultures in an era that Tsing and Haraway call the Plantationocene. The findings of Tsing's research, which she presents in a landmark book for the environmental humanities, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, resonate well with Sonjasdotter's research and artistic work. In her book, Tsing describes the process of standardizing monoculture crops, which are full of 'ideal plant types,' referencing the research of Jan van der Ploeg (Tsing, 2015). In the 1990s Jan van der Ploeg defined two crop models, 'art of the locality' and 'scientific knowledge,' which profile the path of proceeding with crops, revealing the underlying paradigms. For Ploeg, scientific knowledge in this context consists of employing biopolitical practices of partitioning crops into desirable and undesirable species (Ploeg, 1993, p. 209–27). The 'art of the locality,' by contrast, represents a different relationship to the land/earth, one arising from care, which at the same time fosters heterogeneity of varieties by maintaining multiple genotypes across space and time (ibid.). This type of coexistence with the land mostly involves the tuning of plant

varieties to the soil and local conditions. The opposite of this approach, monoculture, is designed for the needs of ideal types of altered plant bodies. In this case, it is the soil that is adapted to the 'improved' plant species with the aim of producing the highest possible yields in the shortest possible time.

Sonjasdotter's investigations that involve the tracing of archival content documenting the process of monoculture development are central to the artist's oeuvre. On the one hand, like van der Ploeg, Sonjasdotter presents the foundation of the emergence of monoculture cultivation seen as the management of plant bodies with a view of ensuring they meet the criteria of ideal quality and productivity, focusing on what Timothy Morton calls the quantitative criterion. On the other hand, the Swedish artist does not leave us with a synthetic diagnosis concerning what Morton refers to as agrologistics, that is, the premise whose nodal point prioritizes scale over crop quality. At the same time, Sonjasdotter seeks other ways of coexisting with the environment, which would correspond to the words of Hans Larsson, who claims in *Cultivating Abundance* that cultivation is primarily about being sensitive to the surrounding assemblage of different actors.[5] In her artistic intervention, Sonjadotter not only brings stories unearthed from archives into a museum space but also explores alternative ways of cultivation, which van der Ploeg would subsume under 'the art of locality.' One such alternative way is Larsson's practice of growing different species at different latitudes to see how the seeds perform in different (including extreme) conditions. This kind of knowledge seems particularly relevant as we face looming ecological crises that make the future even more unpredictable.[6]

Ecological knowledges

The Karlsruhe exhibition shed light on the turn that followed the invention of modern and industrial plant breeding, which was accompanied by the disavowal of traditional farming methods. Sonjasdotter not only collects archival content, such as copies of photographs or diary scans but above all follows the path of ecological knowledge, deliberately ignored by the contemporary mainstream industry, which designs and business-narrativizes its practices to generate surpluses and profit. She traces the forgotten stories of entanglements between people and plants that have been marginalized in the general perception of agribusiness development, such as the harvesting of the sea kale during the Great Famine in Ireland or the cultivation of local varieties by a group of farmers from the Larsson-conceived Allkorn Association.[7] The artist advocates a return to the traditional practice of seed sharing and the cultivation of different plant varieties, resisting the imperative of using nothing but the unified sources distributed by large corporations.

As noted above, the Karlsruhe exhibition provided only a fragmentary view of the artist's oeuvre as it had to be condensed into an overview held at one venue. A venture like this is bound to be fragmentary and only superficially comprehensive. Another problematic aspect was the somehow chaotic narrative arc defined by the selected works: starting in 19th-century Ireland, it moved on to 21st-century Sweden before returning to an archive of documents charting the rise of fascism and showcasing reprints of a Swedish suffragette manifesto written during the Second World War – each of these elements conceived as a different project, a self-contained entity.

It was only later, when I began to piece together my memories of the

exhibition, that I realized that what united all the projects, documents and inspirations was their opposition to the top-down directives imposed by a growing industry, which were slowly leading to the implementation of biodiversity-free crops. The organizers wanted the exhibition of Sonjasdotter's work to be a manifestation of the practice of subversion against this form of domination, which, though highly profitable for a narrow group of stakeholders, has an adverse impact on the land/earth.

The Swedish suffragettes wrote an impassioned manifesto in the name of 'peace with the earth' at a time when agribusiness had already spread across Europe. Sonjasdotter offers a behind-the-scenes look at the creation of this regime of purification, pointing to her native country as the source of the German industry's inspiration. The artist depicts two different paradigms: the industrial and the local (or organic), which coexisted in Sweden. This duality continues to this day, as demonstrated by expanding companies and lists of seeds awarded EU certificates. On the other side are groups of seed bank users such as Hans Larsson. While Sonjasdotter reveals to visitors the roots of genetics, a discipline that developed in parallel with National Socialism, she does not elaborate on the closely related topic of the production of pesticides sustaining contemporary monocultures. As Frank A. von Hippel, Professor of Biological Sciences at Northern Arizona University, points out, 'pesticides also are integral to the history of modern warfare and environmental destruction.' Like Sonjasdotter, he begins his book *The Chemical Age: How Chemists Fought Famine and Disease, Killed Millions, and Changed our Relationship with the Earth* with the history of the potato in Europe and the Great Famine in Ireland: 'a logical place to begin a history of pesticides is with a chronicle of the potato and the famine it brought to Ireland' (von Hippel, 2020, p. 9). The researcher notes that the story of the Irish famine represents one of Europe's first and most poignant effects of

globalization and the introduction of monoculture, one that proved lethal for millions of people.

What I think was missing from the Badischer Kunstverien exhibition was something that would seamlessly combine all the stories scattered across locations and linked to Sonjasdotter's artist residencies. The artist makes visitors realize the existence of two parallel narratives: one calling for coexistence with the land and for organic cultivation and one underpinned by scientific knowledge, which seeks purification and rapid intensification of crop growing, combining discovery with agribusiness. The existence of an ecological paradigm in the first half of the twentieth century is brought into further relief by what Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz wrote in the context of the Anthropocene, pointing out a long-standing awareness of ongoing environmental degradation:

Far from a narrative of blindness followed by awakening, we thus have a history of the marginalization of knowledge and alerts, a story of 'modern disinhibition' that should be heeded. Our planet's entry into the Anthropocene did not follow a frenetic modernism ignorant of the environment but, on the contrary, decades of reflection and concern as to the human degradation of our Earth. Likewise, the Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene after 1945 in no way went unperceived by the scientists or thinkers of the time (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2015, p. 76).

The Great Acceleration certainly did not go unnoticed by female thinkers and activists in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1940 two of them wrote the manifesto *Peace with the Earth*, which I discuss and quote from at the beginning of this article and which inspired Åsa Sonjasdotter to explore the inglorious past and point to the possibility of choosing a better path towards a more sustainable and ecological future.

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Footnotes

1. This brochure accompanied the exhibition ‘Peace with the Earth’ held in Dublin in 2020 and includes pieces by Åsa Sonjasdotter and Livia Páladi as well as excerpts from Elisabeth Tamm’s and Elin Wägner’s book *Peace with the Earth*, from which comes the motto of this article.
2. This phrase comes from Head’s and Atchinson’s ‘Cultural Ecology: Emerging Human-Plant Geographies.’
3. In this context, it is worth recalling the idea of the ur-plant (German: Urpflanze), whose ‘mystery’ Johann Wolfgang Goethe wanted to solve. Goethe envisaged the ur-plant as a plant blueprint that one could use to create new plant varieties (Marder, 2019, p. 684).
4. This quote comes from the film *Cultivating Abundance* (64 minute, 2022).
5. As Morton demonstrates in *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2023), similar values are underlain by agrologistic thinking, which began with the shift from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a settled one. According to the researcher, one of the most important nodal points of agrologistics is the ‘quantitative criterion,’ which assumes that

mass (the amount of crops grown) is better than quality.
6. See
https://www.arc2020.eu/catcher-in-the-rye-breeding-diversity-for-unpredictable-conditions/ [accessed: 2.11.2024].
7. See https://allkorn.se/ [accessed: 3.11.2024].

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/ POST-ANTHROPOCENE

Utopia Embodied: Utopian Impulses in Choreographic Works by Diana Niepce and Agata Siniarska

Maria Treit | Jagiellonian University in Krakow

This work is an attempt to search for and interpret ‘utopian impulses’ in Diana Niepce’s *The Other Side of Dance* and Agata Siniarska’s *null & void*, referring to Fredric Jameson’s ‘method of utopia’ and Jill Dolan’s concept of ‘utopian performatives.’ The author examines how bodies present on stage – whether with disabilities or attempting to embody the experiences of non-human beings – can become a space for the temporary realization of an alternative, utopian reality. The analysis of the functioning of individual performers’ bodies is grounded in Erika Fischer-Lichte’s theory of embodiment and Judith Butler’s concept of vulnerability. The theme of interspecies entanglements, within which choreographies are created and utopian impulses are born, is developed based on the posthumanist ideas of Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti. Finally, based on Randy Martin’s thesis, the political action of experienced performances is reflected upon. The final considerations refer back to the concepts of Jameson and Dolan, emphasizing the possibility of the continuation as well as active influence of utopian impulses and performatives generated on stage and shared within the communal experience of ‘communitas.’

Keywords: Diana Niepce; Agata Siniarska; utopia, subversive embodiment; interspecies relations

Introduction

1.

The desire for a better world appears to be inherent in human existence. This desire is known as utopia, particularly if it transgresses the boundaries of the real. Etymologically a combination of ‘a good place’ (*eutopia*) and ‘non-place’ (outopia), the term ‘utopia’ was originally used to describe a literary genre. Utopian writing took issue with the established social system, instead portraying ‘an ideal society, place or state of existence.’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In the early twentieth century, Ernst Bloch offered an alternative understanding of utopia in his book *The Spirit of Utopia*. Pondering ‘the darkness of the present moment’ (Czajka, 1991, p. 56) becomes the starting point for Bloch’s hermeneutics. The potential of the present day is anticipatory in nature, enabling us to imagine an as-yet-non-existent reality. We are able to overcome any crisis in hand by focusing on the future and attempting to grasp the meaning of existence (cf. Czajka, 1991). This approach was disputed by Frederic Jameson: in his book *Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future* (2011) Jameson describes utopia as genealogy in structural reverse which is not meant to bring us closer to grasping the meaning of existence. Jameson argues that, rather than a thing of the future, utopian bits of reality are barely fulfillable glimpses of alternative experience which can emerge in the present day. For Jameson, an utopia-based analysis is a logical operation:

> The operation itself, however, consists in a prodigious effort to change the valences on phenomena that so far exist only in our own present and experimentally to declare positive things that are

> clearly negative in our own world, to affirm that dystopia is in reality utopia if examined more closely, to isolate specific features in our empirical present so as to read them as components of a different system (Jameson, 2011, p. 42).

Some phenomena – bits of the present as we experience it – call for 'the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real' (p. 26). These clues can take the form of 'utopian impulses' whose hermeneutic analysis supersedes any specific description and any attempt to make sense of a self-contained image of alternative reality (see p. 25).

To illustrate his method, Jameson looks into the *Wal-Mart* phenomenon in the US. Rather than highlight the (unquestionably negative) implications of the dominance of a single company (such as the impact on climate and economic monopoly), Jameson emphasises the positive consequences of the growth of a store network: job creation and making a wider range of products available to people in smaller cities and the countryside, who may not have had easy access to shopping facilities before. In his analysis of *Wal-Mart,* Jameson puts the utopian fragments to work by focusing on job creation and the democratisation of the market. Having drawn our attention to the positives of *Wal-Mart*, Jameson goes on to suggest we should reflect on how corporate organisations can be transformed to become more ethical, while remaining beneficial to society (cf. 2011, p. 29–34).

In her book *Utopia in Performance. Finding Hope at the Theater* (2005), Jill Dolan echoes Frederic Jameson in her search for contemporary traces of utopia. Dolan regards utopia as an '*approach toward*,

a movement beyond set limits into the realm of the not-yet-set' (p. 7). Dolan analyses selected productions, looking for clues in the form of 'utopian performatives' she describes as 'small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like' (p. 7).

The feelings shared by audience members as part of their *communitas* may transform the audience's mode of being after the performance has finished (cf. Dolan, 2005, p. 1). Hence the affective form of utopian performatives equipped with the power of active *doing* (p. 6). The 'doing' consists in arousing hope and the desire to recreate this experience in other areas of life. Rather than stage a political revolution, the point is that those taking part in the performance themselves emerge out of it transformed (cf. p. 19). To recognise utopian performatives as affects is to render them distinctly real because the 'hope and desire (and even fantasies)' that are part of the common experience 'are real' (p. 7).

In my dissertation, I have decided to combine Jameson's concept of utopia with Dolan's approach. Both scholars turn to the opportunities (and the hope) potentially emerging from Jameson's utopian interpretation of impulse and the 'doing' of the performative as described by Dolan. The utopian impulse stems precisely from the desire for change and the hope for a better future which may be possible within the established system, even if that system oozes negativity. The performative is an ephemeral glimmer, an illumination, bringing with it the hope that the feeling that emerged while we were experiencing the performance can be transposed to other areas of our lives. Neither the impulse nor the performative are the means to any specific goal; what is more, utopia can never arrive at its definitive form,

being as it is of a processual and fragmentary nature. That which is ‘currently negative’ (Jameson, 2011, p. 32) and ‘the most dystopian theatrical universe’ (Dolan, 2005, p. 8) can be utopian in nature. Residues of utopia and dystopian fragments intertwine in all processes and phenomena. This ambivalence and the indeterminate nature of utopia / dystopia, and the fact it is impossible to experience performance as an objective phenomenon will set the tone for my dissertation. I shall avoid unambiguous judgement and analysis; instead, I will reflect on the opportunities, and potential for change, inherent in the experience provided by *The Other Side of Dance* by Diana Niepce and *null & void* by Agata Siniarska. My aim will be to demarcate the areas where utopian impulses emerge in the two productions. When interpreting specific choreographic strategies, I shall focus on their subversive potential in particular, demonstrating how on-stage reality may create a favourable environment for generating and developing an utopian impulse, which, through the performative action of audience members, has the potential to further transform reality and shape the future.

2.

Diana Niepce is not only a dancer and choreographer, but also a disabled emancipation activist. In her artistic practices, Niepce seeks to undermine ableist beliefs and scripts which depict disability as a stigma and pity-inducing suffering. When addressing the subject of animals in distress, Agata Siniarska seeks to present non-human beings as something more than subjugated by, and dependent on, humans (though she does admit this objective is impossible to achieve) (cf. Siniarska, 2022). I have decided to discuss the two works together, as they seem to depict different modes of embodying temporary utopias which offer a different perception of reality. What Niepce and Siniarska have in common is their desire to portray a new

kind of relationship that emerges between different kinds of materials; their depictions of the entanglement of human and more-than-human beings undermine the established norms and hierarchies which tend to sideline animals and people with disabilities.

The Other Side of Dance premiered in 2022, eight years after a fall from a trapeze left Niepce quadriplegic. Following her accident, Niepce was compelled to redefine her identity. In her post-2014 works – which include *This is not my body* (2017), *Duet[o]* (2020), *T4* (2020) and *Anda, Diana* (2021) – Niepce puts the body with a disability centre stage, while using strategies meant to expose the ableist attitudes prevalent in society. Niepce addresses human relationships and the public presence of a non-normative body; she also questions the conventions imposed on dance. Having reflected on relationships and the public presence of a non-normative body, Niepce went on to revise dance archives. *The Other Side of Dance* may be seen as a manifestation of an individual dance language she arrived at after her accident. *The Other Side of Dance* was shown in Poland in December 2023, as part of the international Centre for Contemporary Art 'Pokaż język / Show Us Your Tongue' programme.

null & void by Agata Siniarska was first presented in August 2023, as part of Berlin's Tanz im August festival. *null & void* is another instalment of a series of productions made by Siniarska and her collaborators as part of the 'Anthropocene Museum' project, launched in 2022. *null & void* directly references the war in Ukraine. As Siniarska has stressed, talking to Marcelina Obarska about her inspirations for the production, her aim had been 'to give voice to those who are denied it in anthropogenic situations' (2025), and to check whether she was capable of 'imagining non-human narratives of war or any sort of military intervention' (2025).

3.

In the opening section of my dissertation, I shall focus on how Siniarska and Niepce's individual corporealities operate in the productions in hand. I will also highlight areas in which how performers present themselves reveals utopian impulses, and thus demonstrates an innovative approach to the human body. I will reflect on how strategies of embodiment (as described in *The Transformative Power of Performance* by Erika Fischer-Lichte, 2008) make the restrictions imposed on the body on stage less airtight, making space in which utopian impulses can be set to work.

Although both productions I describe here are solo choreographies, Siniarska and Niepce's bodies do not exist in a vacuum. Matter is present on stage alongside Siniarska and Niepce's phenomenal bodies, and the two come together to form an utopian landscape made up of entanglements of different sorts of matter (I shall look at these entanglements in Part II of my dissertation). Although it would seem both productions are anthropocentric in nature, Niepce and Siniarska's stage presence brings about tiny gaps in the performance's structure; illuminations highlighting a democratic trans-genre alliance and equality of different types of matter.

Finally, I will attempt to offer a summary of how the on-stage reality of *null & void* and *The Other Side of Dance* affects viewers, as it kindles the hope that the world may actually become a different place: audience members are made to feel as if the potential future had already happened. Further growth of utopian performatives is made possible by the political nature of dance, described by Randy Martin as 'good to think with' (2011, p. 30) and conveying 'visions of how we can move together' (p. 42). I will do this with the help of the following keywords: opportunity, potential and hope. All of

these enable the utopian performatives experienced as part of the *communitas* to spread further, onto other areas of social life (cf. Dolan, 2005, p. 165).

The body in motion

1.

I would like to examine, first, how strategies used by Siniarska and Niepce to present their corporealities contribute to the emergence of utopian impulses. The terms I will be using - 'body in motion' and 'the dancing body' – are not simply meant to describe the movement of the figure on stage. Instead, they are equivalents of the French phrase *corps dansant*, used by dance scholar Joanna Szymajda to describe a category comprising 'a collection of all possible "bodies"' (2012, p. 27). Perceived in this manner, the body is both the subject and the object of expression (cf. ibid., p.69). It takes the form of a tripartite entity, comprising 'the system, the image and *signifiant*' (p. 65). It would be impossible to discuss Siniarska and Niepce's performances and view different aspects of the dancing body independently of each other. The unification and merging of the different functions enables many ideas to be embodied at once. As a result, one system may be the source of different utopian impulses, referencing, all at once, Siniarska and Niepce's individual stories, the issues addressed in their productions, and the state of society at large. Diana Niepce's stage presence is that of a specific individual, shaping her identity in front of her audience, and in the context of dance history. In broader terms, Niepce defines her place in the world, in that she steps beyond the framework imposed by ableist norms. In *null & void,* the dancing body becomes an ontological device, used by Agata Siniarska to make sense of her being in the world as members of other species die. (Her performance

gives voice to animals who perish in the war.)

In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that a performer's phenomenal body (the body that enables them to be in the world) is inextricably linked with their semiotic body which is part of the fictitious layer of representation (cf. 2008, p.95). Niepce and Siniarska exploit the potential of the two aspects coming together: as a result, the affects generated by their performances become more intense, and utopian impulses affect audiences on many levels. Types of embodiment, as described by Fischer-Lichte (cf. 2008, p. 96), are being put to use in *The Other Side of Dance* and *null & void*, but without aiming to arrive at any fixed identity. Instead, Niepce and Siniarska use embodiment to portray the process of change and transgression, where questioning the current state of affairs is intertwined with an affirmative approach to a potential future. A change of perspective, from the substantional to the processual, opens up the potential for the emergence of utopia, meant to be a malleable alternative rather than a completed project (cf. Jameson 2011, p. 37).

2.

Diana Niepce deploys the individual strategy of 'emphasizing and exhibiting the individual performer (-body) [and] highlighting the performer (-body)'s fragility, vulnerability and shortcomings' (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 82). From the very first scene, which has her pulled onto the stage by an assistant performer (who only makes an appearance for the first few seconds), Niepce draws the attention of the audience to her condition and her physicality. The other performer's departure is followed by a sequence of slow, intermittent movements, as a result of which Niepce turns and lies down on her stomach. By various means (including using her arms), she then lifts her upper body.

Her head moves intermittently as she does this: up, down and sideways, as if she wanted to show us the mechanics of her body. A sequence of poses follows: Niepce holds each of them for a few seconds, before sinking back onto the floor, her whole body trembling as she does this. Niepce takes her legs in her hands, thus moving them and causing her body to slide. With her legs set in (reactive) motion, Niepce seems to play with the way society defines disability. If you take a close look at the action on stage, it becomes quite clear Niepce's limbs are not moving the way they would in a person perceived as normative. Even so, it no longer makes sense to observe motionless limbs to identify disability because these very limbs move and acquire agency as they help shape a choreography. The utopian impulse emerges as the established norms become temporarily disrupted: Niepce's pose does not conform to the stereotype of how a person with a disability moves and goes about her daily life. Niepce's sequences comprise common floorwork figures, including a backward roll. This section of the performance concludes with a single gaze which appears to tell the audience they had been looking at the right body in the right place. Niepce freezes in the cobra pose, giving the audience a piercing stare, and thus forcing them to reflect on what they had just witnessed. The body that seemed limp and fragile as it was being pulled on stage, gradually transforms its innate vulnerability (which, incidentally, is part and parcel of Niepce's daily life).

According to Judith Butler, vulnerability and fragility are, by definition, bound up with being alive: these conditions both structure the being of sentient creatures and determine ways in which they depend on the external. In Butler's view, injury is one thing that can and does happen to a vulnerable body (cf. Butler, 2009, p. 33–62). In keeping with this definition, the wound (*vulnus*) may become a source, a crevice from which the utopian impulse emerges. 'A new, affirmative politics and ethics of accountability'

(Świerkosz, 2018, p. 69) may emerge out of these moments – glimmers of a perspective that diverges from the dominant one. During the floorwork sequences, it is the extraordinary fragility of Niepce's lower body that enables her to move so seamlessly between poses. The legs become the centre, organising the movement of the other body parts. Although we are aware these body parts do not move of themselves, their role is being subversively reformulated. In this instance, working with the utopian impulse consists in emphasising the agency of Niepce's reactive legs whose flexibility and weight enable her whole body to move smoothly.

Niepce taking off her T-shirt midway through the performance is a highlight of *The Other Side of Dance*. Niepce uses her hands to violently hoist herself off the floor, in time with the music. Her head and upper body bounce in time with the energetic beat. Niepce moves forward using nothing but her arms and hands. A smile appears on her face, yet it does not seem to convey positive feelings: it is more likely a response to society's expectations. Niepce's facial expression, combined with the tacky background music, places her body within the freak show aesthetics where bodies perceived as 'other' and 'strange' from an ableist point of view, are deliberately placed centre-stage. The texture of sound becomes more dense, the musical motif becoming curtailed to a mere few sounds which become increasingly similar to industrial noise. Niepce comes to a standstill and begins the process of taking off her T-shirt.

The undressing takes an exceptionally long time. The process starts with Niepce's assistant re-entering the stage and lifting Niepce (who was lying on her side, and trembling) to a sitting position. This gesture attracts the audience's attention, in that, having seen the previous section of the performance, they already know Niepce does not need assistance, having

repeatedly moved into a sitting position unaided. The assistant's presence strengthens the impression conveyed by the previous sequences: we are watching a fragile, dependent being, exposed to our inquisitive stares. Moving in bursts, Niepce takes her T-shirt off. Persistent noises and rhythmical shivers can be heard and seen throughout. Niepce stares intently at the piece of clothing she has just taken off. She lifts it triumphantly it with her left hand. The assistant then takes the piece of fabric out of Niepce's outstretched arm. Niepce holds her pose for a moment longer, as if to give herself, and the audience, time to reflect on what had happened. We are looking at Niepce's half-naked body: in this sequence, the subversive presentation of the female body consists in deliberately deviating from dominant representations. No attempt is made to emulate the culturally ingrained tropes and formulas for depicting the human figure. With her hand raised in a powerful gesture, Niepce celebrates her presence and being part of reality. She then turns, with her back to the audience, and raises her arm again, exposing her back, with multiple dressed wounds. Once again she raises her arm, this time facing the audience, exposing her bust and never taking her eyes off her raising arm. Here the utopian impulse manifests itself in the belief that, in the circumstances created on stage, the body that does not conform to social norms, is still good enough in its natural form.

3.

As she attempts to take on the vulnerability of animals, Agata Siniarska (who, according to social norms, is a strong individual with agency) herself becomes potentially vulnerable. At the same time, embodying the suffering of animals in her physical form (regarded as able-bodied), makes the non-human beings she references take over some of her strength and agency. What we are seeing is an utopian landscape, where the hierarchy of visibility

changes: audience attention is drawn to animals who perish in the war, and yet are absent from the public debate on any war-related subject. Siniarska's attempt to let the voice of dying more-than-human creatures be heard on stage is in keeping with Butler's description of vulnerability. According to Butler, The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of al these as well' (Butler, 2004, p. 26).

At the start of *null & void,* we can only surmise it is Agata Siniarska herself hiding under a piece of black fabric. Stage lights are dimmed, revealing nothing but an indistinct outline of the tarpaulin. Both the source of intrusive sounds (which bring suffering to mind) and whatever causes the fabric to pulsate, remain unseen. Even though we may infer that the black mass of fabric covers Siniarska's figure, and it is Siniarska herself making the blood-chilling sounds, the absence of a discernible human body adds to the uncanny atmosphere. The absence of a visible body, combined with the unsettlingly long time in which the lights remain dimmed, becomes a challenge, bringing the audience together in their shared experience of uncertainty. Subsequent sequences, where persistent music and flashing lights appear alongside the sounds coming from beneath the fabric, further add to the audience's sense of befuddlement. The fabric moves ever more rapidly. There follows a series of violent scenes, where the sounds from beneath the fabric are combined with overwhelming, loud music. Suddenly, everything comes to a standstill. The music stops, and the fabric is no longer moving. In the stillness, a human elbow emerges slowly from underneath the fabric. The arm rises at right angle to the floor, exposing a peculiar growth on the shoulder. This extended silence, during which a body part is revealed for the first time, does away with the feeling of uncertainty that was so

palpable earlier. The utopian impulse, in the form of a human-less performance momentarily becoming real, dissipates.

In further sequences, Siniarska emerges from underneath the fabric, moving in slow motion. She moves on all fours, as if exploring the space around her. Her limbs are stiff and unnaturally bent, her head hangs down between her shoulders. Her face can barely be seen throughout the performance. Although we are looking at one person, the hybrid nature of her figure disrupts the audience's perception habits in a similar manner to the cross-casting strategy described by Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008, p. 82, 87). The cyborg-like figure makes it difficult to unambiguously determine what sort of character we are looking at. Siniarska's costume – apparently a collage of the remains of different animal species combined with naked bits of the human body, makes it impossible for clear associations to emerge. Through rapid movements, which come in bursts, Siniarska seems to explore the hybrid figure she is becoming, and the possibility of embodying the experiences of different beings.

The audience begins to share the confusion of this malformed figure. Her movements become increasingly ragged. They bring to mind the shocks caused by the impulses from parts of the body which usually remain inactive during movement, such as the sides of your back. The figure's quivers and convulsions are attractive and repellent at the same time. On the one hand, it is uncomfortable to try to imagine what the quivers and convulsions must feel like; on the other, it is hard to take one's eyes off the weird choreography and the face, emerging briefly, when Siniarska raises her head rapidly, her mouth wide open. As she attempts to portray the fragility of dying creatures, Siniarska exposes her human vulnerability. Bathed in a strong pool of cool light, wearing a pale-flesh-coloured suit, she strikes us as

a fragile and vulnerable being. This manner of revealing and exposing the body's fragility is what makes *null & void* so powerful. The vulnerability of Siniarska's figure enables the nature of the performance to change rapidly. The convulsions into which she triggers her body seem to hold full sway over her, imitating internal injuries. This is how momentary glimmers emerge, and we are as close as we can possibly get to the convulsing bodies of animals. Siniarska's flesh-coloured costume enables us to see any micro-impulses in different parts of her body, and the fact she is moving on all fours makes it possible for viewers to feel empathy as they put their imagination to work, trying to grasp what it feels like to exist in the world as a non-human being. To heighten the affect, Siniarska uses the technique of 'exhibiting the individual performer(-body) […] [and] highlighting the performer(-body)'s fragility' (cf. Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 82). The way Siniarska moves triggers all sorts of automatic responses in her body, including shortness of breath, repeated falls and trembling visibly with the strain of the unorthodox choreography. As they are watching the response of Siniarska's body to the performance, audience members are able to share the affects emanating from the stage.

The closing sequences of *null & void* consist in recurrent series of walking on all fours and then sliding into a recumbent position. The body appears relaxed while moving but begins to tremble as soon as it comes to a standstill. Each fall seems definite, but it is only following fall number eight that Siniarska freezes, lying on her side. Her stomach begins to pulsate rapidly. Siniarska lifts her head above the plane of the stage and, by energetically clenching her diaphragm, triggers convulsions reminiscent of the cramps that precede a bout of vomiting. A dark brown liquid, not unlike blood, flows out of her mouth as a terrifying sound is heard: that of Siniarska's laboured breathing. All the while, her shiny red stare remains

fixed on the audience. For the first time, her face can be seen quite clearly. Finally, the liquid stops coming out of her mouth, her eyes close, her convulsions die down. Her body remains still and the lights become dimmed. In the half-light, lit by nothing by a scattered ultraviolet, Siniarska slowly rises to all fours. She turns around and kneels. Her movements become softer, the atmosphere less tense. The figure she portrays raises her back: not in a convulsion, but as if to snuggle up, once again find her feet in the world around her. Her red gaze remains fixed on the audience until the lights go out completely. These scenes subvert the well-known conventions and symbols of suffering. In Siniarska's performance, suffering becomes a source of power and hope for change. Her repeated falls can be seen as gestures of submission (this is particularly true of the first few instances, when Siniarska raises her arms in a docile gesture). And yet, multiple falls and slight differences in the way she arranges her body can be interpreted as celebrating the endurance of corporeality, and its capability for transgression, symbolically completed after the lights have been fully dimmed.

4.

Vulnerability, repeatedly emphasized in its ambivalent nature, paves the way for an utopian impulse, capable of bringing out any positives in a negative phenomenon. Judith Butler has described a vulnerable body's mode of existence as 'coming up against' (2009, p. 34): a response to the world in which various affects come together. Vulnerability seems an instrument of mobilisation and resistance against the established system, where people with disabilities and non-human beings are pushed to the margins. In this scenario, a celebration of fragility and vulnerability becomes an embodiment of resistance and

a presentation of an alternative utopia, where beings who normally have less agency take centre stage. Both Niepce and Siniarska forge their new identity through movement. The direct and fixed-time nature of their (live) performances, as well as lifting the burden of semiotics, render the characters and situations embodied in *The Other Side of Dance* and *null & void* subversive; a potential source of a temporary utopia about to emerge on stage. According to Bojana Kunst, one vital feature of the dancing body is 'the potentiality of its subversion' (2019, p. 249). This enables us to forge a relationship with the past which is not so much a story with an ending as a means of connecting with the present: being-in-the-world in the here and now (ibid., p. 249–251).

I would argue that this impulse – the desire to discover ourselves in the world – underlies both *null & void* and *The Other Side of Dance*. The dancers' autonomous bodies enable them to fulfil their inner need, and it is out of this need that the impulse for creating a choreography emerges. Bodily autonomy is an utopia whose scope includes 'a possible subversion of the body' (2019, p. 257). Making use of the subversive in Niepce and Siniarska's bodies not only reveals itself 'as a specific aesthetic strategy, but as much more: it is a philosophical, aesthetic, social and ideological utopia' (2019, p. 55).

The way autonomous bodies of the performers are presented in *The Other Side of Dance* and *null & void* puts one in mind of the transition 'from anxiety to affirmation' (2011, p. 37) as described by Frederic Jameson. Rather than changing the nature of our experience, this transition is about acknowledging its ambivalence, enabling perception to shift from negative to positive.

Bodies in entanglements

1.

When setting out to describe the entanglements in *The Other Side of Dance*, I have decided to focus on two instances: the opening and the final moments of the performance. It is there that ‘doing’ in relationships with other people makes the greatest impact on the dramaturgy of the show and offers a glimmer of an alternative reality, where people with disabilities enjoy no less agency than the rest of society.

The on-stage reality created by Diana Niepce is an ‘intra-active field,’ as described by Karen Barad. From this field, different kinds of ‘phenomena’ emerge. The term ‘intra-action’ implies that separate instances with agency do not precede the intra-action between them, but instead emerge out of this intra-action (Barad, 2023, p. 54). Intra-action is the opposite of interaction, which implies the existence of two separate entities (cf. ibid.) In keeping with this definition, we can argue that agency of matter is not born in individual entities; instead, it emerges within a specific phenomenon, or entanglement, whose components are ontologically inseparable (see ibid.) In this kind of relationship, the agency of individual instances becomes purely reactive. In *The Other Side of Dance* human beings (Niepce and other performers) intra-act with non-human bodies: the hoist and the matter of the stage.

I would like to start by examining the opening scenes of Niepce’s performance. I have already touched on this in Part I, and would now like to analyse it in greater detail. A change in what surrounds Niepce on stage is extremely interesting from a relational point of view. After her assistant has

departed, Niepce remains lying on the floor for a while, barely visible in the dimmed light. The silence is complete, except for the sound of various body parts being lifted off the floor and laid down again. This draws our attention to the matter of the stage. There emerges a feeling that the wooden floorboards become partners to the body that rests on them. The sense that action emerges as part of the intra-action with the floor becomes particularly intense when Niepce performs rolls. These dynamic sequences start with an impulse emerging from Niepce's upper body, as she throws herself onto the floor. She then relaxes, giving in to the skid: the result of her t-shirt coming into contact with the smooth surface of the stage. The relationship between the body and the stage floorboards is not simply interactive: instead, it demonstrates, in a series of fleeting glimmers, how the natural properties of the floor activate their agency in entanglement with other beings. This shows clearly what happens when we become mindful of powers different to ourselves; it also brings about a temporary utopian feeling which enables us to rethink our approach to matter. Becoming open to observing Niepce's relationship with a different kind of matter; a change in our perception of the floor – noticing its agency – may also translate into a temporary shift in our perception of Niepce and her condition. Rather than focus on diagnosing Niepce and judging her body, we are being encouraged to look at the human body as reactive matter, responding to what other matters 'do.'

One particularly salient section of *The Other Side of Dance* are the sequences with the hoist, towards the end of the performance. They show great utopian potential: having taken off her T-shirt, Niepce, who lay still, lifts herself to a seated position. This is a cue for an assistant to come on stage again: she puts Niepce's hips in a harness and walks away, allowing Niepce to move nearer the hoist herself (before that, the hoist had been towering over her). Two other performers then enter the stage: they operate

the hoist, lowering its arms, which support Niepce as she pulls herself up. The assistants then go on to lift the mechanism and stop it when Niepce is upright, with her feet on the ground. Her trembling body seems to stand in the middle of the stage, the sole focus of our attention. In conjunction with other beings and other matters, Niepce finds herself in a pose she would never be able to attain unaided. It seems to me that, by doing so, Niepce shows us an alternative way to achieve the vertical posture: the default option in an ableist world.

As she stands, Niepce beings to gesticulate. She straightens her arms and lifts them, as if to see what will happen to her body when she no longer holds onto the hoist. She then turns her back and falls onto her side. She also contributes to the movement of hoist arms (the arms are being held on the other side by an assistant). After a while, the dependency begins to shift: the assistant is now operating the hoist and Niepce gives in to the movement. When the machinery goes up, causing Niepce's feet to be lifted off the ground, she straightens her arms and stretches them sideways. She seems to be going along with whatever the structure she is harnessed to does to her body. She deliberately flexes her upper body and lifts her spread arms, her shape now resembling that of the upper part of the hoist. Copying the shape of the machinery may be read as a visual symbol of the connection with another being. Niepce cuts a triumphant figure: she seems to defy gravity and rise above the real world. Trapped in the spread arms of the hoist, Niepce may also bring to mind the Christian tradition of portraying Jesus' suffering on the cross. This association with religious imagery would seem to imply the impulse we feel exposes as baseless any attempt to make people with disabilities conform to the artificial norm of a human being who moves around on two legs. The utopian impulse makes us temporarily question the beliefs we hold, and encourages us to both feel differently and to question

the way we automatically categorise what we see.

Niepce, the hoist and the performer who slowly operates the machinery are inseparable from each other: they are a hybrid, in which entangled instances intra-act. The form of the machinery determines the movements of an organic body, harnessed to the hoist. As she moves, trying to find her balance, Niepce influences the hoist; the hoist, in its turn, becomes a vehicle for an impulse transmitted to the other performer on the ground (and the other way round: from her assistant to Niepce herself). The weight of the machinery itself contributes to the movement that emerges as a result of human effort: the machinery resists, but also reactively responds to the stimuli it receives from both sides.

As she temporarily transforms reality and enables audiences to look at a body with a disability through different eyes, Niepce shows audience members the direction they can travel in once they have left the theatre. The sequences of her solo challenge the perception of the audience, thus encouraging them to pay greater attention to the different matters around them, and to question any automatic categorisations they are being presented with.

2.

In *null & void* Agata Siniarska explores the entanglements of humans and animals, manifesting as action inside the fabric and the act of ‘fitting’ the human body with organic skeleton fragments. From the very beginning of her performance, Siniarska (and the fabric covering her) work within an intra-active phenomenon. It is difficult to put one’s finger on the source of individual sounds and movement. Siniarska’s activities cannot be perceived independently from the fabric she is enveloped in, and the sound-amplifying

microphone placed above the fabric. In the opening sequences of the performance, stage light comes in bursts, revealing matter in three different textures. The part we can see on stage is not unlike black garden foil. This fabric is sewn together with a more elastic layer: this is what covers Siniarska's body directly, arranging itself into abstract shapes in response to her movements. Attached to this fabric is an intriguing form which brings to mind an outline of a flower cup or a gramophone tube. During the performance, the 'flower cup' is mostly turned away from the audience: the fact that it cannot be seen from the front causes disquiet and anxiety. The act of bringing together various objects which cannot be readily identified creates the potential for the utopian impulse to spread; in this instance, the impulse takes the form of a genuine sense of diverse matters coming together. Both the movements and the sounds coming from the stage are not simply the result of Siniarska's actions: instead, they emerge out of the entire hybrid entanglement. The undulating movement of the whole amalgam is largely the result of subsequent fragments of fabric reactively affecting each other – and Siniarska, hiding underneath. When it comes to sounds, it is a similar story. Once the opening sequences (with Siniarska curled up under the fabric) have been completed, a microphone emerges, dispelling any doubt as to where the sounds have been coming from so far. The cries and hums we had heard earlier where clearly audible thanks to technological support: combined with the rustling fabric and the noises made by Siniarska herself, technology forms a soundscape. Due to the fact that both Siniarska herself and the microphone are enveloped in fabric, at a visual level, the performance is a symbolic representation the primeval nature of the phenomenon (which in this instance takes the form of a hybrid figure made up of Siniarska and all kinds of matter which are there on stage with her). It is within this phenomenon that action becomes possible.

As the performance goes on, entanglements with other beings manifest themselves at the level of imagination. These imagined relationships embody the idea of the post-human condition, as described by Rosi Braidotti. In her book *The Posthuman*, Braidotti describes the subject as 'a transversal inter-connection or an 'assemblage' of human and non-human actors' (2013, p. 45). Consequently, any attempt to know and understand ourselves is the result of the process of facing other beings and striving to embody the post-human condition. The post-human condition is focused on *zoe*: the vital force that runs across species; it also enables us to reflect on existence within a larger whole. The incessant flow of energy and the volatility that is at the heart of existence enable us to search for affirmative, *zoe*-egatilarian alternatives. The point of *zoe*-egalitarianism is not simply to elevate animals, or to anthropomorphise them; what *zoe*-egalitarianism is actually about is recognising common traits in different beings, which enables us to come a step closer to aligning our positions and making sense of them (cf. p. 71). By aligning our positions, I mean a shift in the way we rate the qualities that distinguish human from non-human beings, and elevating the status of any shared characteristics. The point is to become aware of a vital interconnection. 'This vital interconnection posits a qualitative shift of the relationship away from species-ism and towards an ethical appreciation of what bodies (human, animal, others) can do' (ibid., p. 71–72). I would argue it is this approach to post-human condition, based on interconnection, that Siniarska presents on stage. She deliberately forgoes the agency that comes with her privileged position. She does this by changing the nature of her movement and making symbolic room for other beings. Needless to say, this shift in hierarchy and Siniarska putting herself in a less advantageous position only occur at an imaginary level. Yet it is precisely in this imagined change that the potential of utopian impulses lies: it is through these

impulses that we move a step closer to empathy towards animals suffering in the war. As we focus on the process of facing other beings, we are at least able to come a step closer to a symbiotic relationship with our surroundings, and to produce utopian crevices, where currently established divisions into humans and other species break down.

Embodying potential directions of travel for the future

1.

By means of the feedback loop, as described by Erika Fischer-Lichte (cf. 2008, p. 137–164), the impulses generated on stage can make their way to viewers and have the potential of developing further in other spheres of their lives. In the present chapter, I will be focusing on instances in Niepce and Siniarska's performances where utopian performatives emerge as part of the *communitas* between performers and their audience. 'Utopian performatives appear in many ways within, across, and among constantly morphing spectating communities, publics that reconstitute themselves anew for each performance' (Dolan, 2005, p. 17). Thanks to the practices described above, audiences can participate (both directly and indirectly) in whatever is being embodied on stage. Thus emerges a shared experience of reality in which the established hierarchies and stereotypes become distorted.

2.

In *The Other Side of Dance*, Niepce's interaction with her audience is based on a stare game of sorts. Niepce makes subversive use of the staring mechanisms, as described by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson:

> staring starkly registers the perception of strangeness and endows it with meaning. Staring witnesses an intrusive interest on the part of the starer and thrusts uneasy attention on the object of the stare. At once transgressive and intimate, staring breaches the conventionalized anonymity governing visual relations among strangers in modernity (2005, p. 30–31).

Garland-Thomson goes on to argue that staring is ‘the dominant mode of looking at disability in this culture’ (p. 31). It is also a habit, and it ‘constitutes disability identity by visually articulating the subject positions of “disabled” and “able-bodied”’ (ibid.).

In her choreography, Niepce works with the social perception of disability and its connotations, transforming the act of staring into a subversive gesture. First, the very choice of putting one’s body with a disability on stage entails being exposed to stares that define, describe and judge. Due to the fact that no words are used throughout the performance, and music can only be heard in the background, watching *The Other Side of Dance* is mostly about visual perception. The audience takes in the movement on stage and interprets the performance on that basis: eyesight becomes the main means of reception, while constituting a crucial part of the choreography itself. Moments of intense eye contact are a recurrent theme in the performance, with Niepce staring directly at her audience, confronting her gaze with theirs. An exchange of gazes occurs and evolves during utopian performatives. In these instances, a change occurs in the nature of visual interaction, as the social burden of staring at signs of a disability is momentarily lifted. Niepce takes control of the situation: she gets to decide what her audience are going to look at, while forcing them to confront her as she stares at them, directly and intensely. Thus Niepce demonstrates the

reciprocal nature of the stare and makes it abundantly clear to us this is what she has to deal with on a daily basis. She is now the curator of the situation. She is on stage, deliberately risking stares from her audience, and the confrontation this entails. As she moves her gaze from one audience member to another, Niepce seems to analyse them with her eyes, just as, in their day-to-day lives, able-bodied people identify the noticeable symptoms of a disability. There is something paradoxical about this situation: due to stage lighting, it is in fact impossible for Niepce to see the faces of her audience members. Therefore, her gesture becomes symbolic: perhaps of the deficient and senseless nature of the world where people with a disability are described primarily in visual terms, and eyesight becomes an instrument of social diagnoses. The intensity of Niepce's stare provokes her audience to confront their own beliefs and the stereotypes deeply rooted in their subconscious. These beliefs and stereotypes are being temporarily questioned as part of the performative, shared within the *communitas*.

3.

The strategies by which audiences are drawn into *null & void* are twofold. On the one hand, Siniarska's activity [actions] on stage are abstract in nature. They rely on the imagination of the audience and encourage them to empathise with Siniarska while she is on stage. This is neither a finite nor a definite process: it is based on subtle impulses, moments where audience members feel they have formed a relationship with others. Indeterminacy has the potential of the imagination about it: in her book *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan describes imagination as an instrument granting us access to an alternative understanding of reality, and enabling us to focus on what we have in common (cf. 2005, p. 163–165). Dolan describes performances where performers tell the stories of members of

disadvantaged communities: they do so with a view to including these individuals into society (cf. ibid.). These strategies enable audience members to focus on shared experiences which still exist: not despite, but because of the differences that constitute the human condition. In addition, the strategies patently demonstrate the absurdity of dividing communities into 'us' and 'them' (cf. ibid.)

In Agata Siniarska's performance, rather than humanity, the common feature may be *zoe*, the vital force described by Rosi Braidotti (2013). Siniarska's purpose in focusing on the vital force shared by all human and non-human species is to find common ground, based on the indelible differences between species – Siniarska is keen not to turn a blind eye to these differences.

Halfway through Siniarska's choreography, the light shifts decisively from the stage to the audience, keeping us mindful of the hierarchy which is as uneven as it is rigid; and of the fact that animals die in the war because of human decisions and actions. The audience is 'assaulted' with a powerful stream of light and thus 'infected' with the affects emanating from the stage. This only lasts a few seconds: still, it becomes impossible to distance oneself from the subject of the performance and dismiss the structural inequality in inter-species relationships. The act of turning the stage light to the audience compels audience members to reflect on their position in light of the experience of becoming-an-animal which is being embodied on stage. As we experience an utopian performative together, we may come a step closer to really comprehending how we relate to other beings. While inequality is obviously impossible to eradicate, the utopian performative enables us to temporarily reorient ourselves, taking a step closer towards the existence of animals in our imagination, and to reflect on where we stand in relation to

them.

Conclusion

The Other Side of Dance by Diana Niepce and *null & void* by Agata Siniarska generate utopian impulses which, although ephemeral, have real transformative power. Both Niepce and Siniarska deploy strategies which – in keeping with Jameson's hermeneutics of utopia and Dolan's concept of the utopian performative – destabilise the established norms of perception and automatic, instinctive identification, and try to put a finger on a sense of an alternative perception of reality. Niepce and Siniarska use the opportunities provided by the autonomy of the dancing body to create potential communities of human and non-human matter.

Niepce and Siniarska demonstrate that dance has got political potential, as described by Randy Martin. In his essay 'Between Intervention and Utopia,' he argues that 'dance is good to think with' (p. 30) and immediately enables us to realise a better, alternative vision of reality.

> Dance […] makes its own politics, crafts its own pathways and agency in the world, moves us toward what we imagine to be possible and desirable. […] It gathers its public then disperses them suddenly, leaving a sensible residue of what has been and what can only be desired, namely the will to create more (p. 29).

Niepce and Siniarska's artistic practices make an impact on the possible perception of the human body, other beings and relations between species. A temporary change in the nature of our sensory perception is what makes their choreographies political. Through this political act, what is usually

sidelined – people with disabilities, the stories of animals in war – temporarily takes centre stage. As both Jameson and Dolan demonstrate, it is from ephemeral breakthroughs like these that a different future could emerge.

Although *The Other Side of Dance* and *null & void* are quite different from a formal point of view, they share an affective intensity and a subversive potential. I have endeavoured to show instances where the distortion of our established perception of the body and its agency is particularly striking. These ephemeral moments of transformation do not constitute a systemic revolution; instead, in Frederic Jameson's formulation, they amount to an 'imagination of possible and alternate futures' (2011, p. 42).

A temporary 'utopian transfiguration' (p. 39) gives us hope that further transformation will be made possible through a shared aesthetic / affective experience. This transfiguration opens up the space in which, in Dolan's formulation, it becomes possible to 'enact the affective possibilities of "doings" that gesture towards a much better word' (2005, p. 6). This occurs through drawing our attention to the traces of a better future in the present and offering another perspective on experiencing the reality we are all part of. Niepce and Siniarska's performances not only reveal new opportunities in the physical and the relational, but also contribute to redefining the community in its aesthetic and political aspect. The utopian impulses flashing on stage affect the perception of audience members and thus can spread to other spheres of social life. As the experiences of *The Other Side of Dance* and *null & void* demonstrate, the world as we know it is not the only one that is possible.

Translated by Joanna Przasnyska-Błachnio

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