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## POLITICAL THEATRE

### Revolution beyond politics

Monika Świerkosz Jagiellonian University in Kraków

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

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

Protest of the Parents of Persons with Disability began on April 18, 2018 and lasted for forty days, during which the parents and caregivers together with their children (often already adult) occupied the corridors of the Polish parliament building. In the beginning, it emphasized economic demands: a rehabilitation allowance of 500 PLN per month (for the last 12 years the state has been paying them only an attendance allowance, which is 153 PLN) and increasing the social allowance to the lowest allowance resulting from complete inability to work (which would mean raising it from 865.03 PLN to 1029.80 PLN). In time, the protesters formulated 21 demands, based on the

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

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

an artistically successful interception of the discursive perspective in speaking about disability, one which is a precondition for restoring the presence of people with disabilities not only in theatre or art, but also in the broader space of social relations<sup>2</sup>. The process of broadening the field of visibility which began in the UK or the USA in the 1970s (which gave rise to the Disability Rights Movement and disability studies) never lacked strong, provocative performative actions. They usually took place in the urban agora and their main tool was an individual or collective body with disability, which used to be shut within the space of the home, either private or institutional. Its return to the order of visibility and audibility seems to be the most important stake of the revolution we are talking about.

## **The laughing body, the angry body**

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

most basic lesson of manners, when the parents and teachers repeat time and time again “you should not laugh at such unfortunate people”?).

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

In her essay *Disabled Women Performance Artists and Dynamics of Staring* Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, one of the leading representatives of disability studies, describes ways in which this ambivalent power of the gaze can be used. Artists whose performances she analyses: Cheryl Marie Wade, Mary Duffy and Carrie Sandahl, show their distorted bodies, forcing the viewers to stare at their disability, and so regaining subjective control over the spectacle of staring. Partly through tender (though not without a critical

edge) self-mockery, and partly through Brechtian alienation, they build a slightly uncomfortable connection between the viewer and the viewed (Garland-Thompson, 2010). In the performance by Teatr 21 and Biennale Warszawa something similar happens: we laugh together with those usually laughed at, but not in order to take pleasure in the calming atmosphere of a charity concert “for our wonderful disabled”. *A Revolution That Was Not There* is not a form of theatrical self-therapy, or social therapy aiming to soothe the audience’s consciences, as the laughter is, from the very beginning, accompanied by anger. “I’m angry” – shouts the charismatic Aleksandra Skotarek, suggesting that in the performance, the laughing and angry bodies of the disabled will be a source of two equally important strategies of revolutionary resistance.

## **Where is the agora?**

According to Hannah Arendt, a political action can be defined as any event that happens in the public space: in the street, a square or a municipal park (Arendt, 1998). The German philosopher’s thought, growing out of liberal and humanistic approaches, broadened the understanding of the political, but also missed an important problem: that of the access to the public sphere. In Arendt’s view, civic agency and political power can be attributed only to those, who have entered the agora. But what about those, who are unable to leave their own homes and speak up for themselves (and others) – asks Johanna Hedva in her manifesto *Sick Woman Theory*, lying in her bed and raising her fist as a sign of solidarity with the Black Live Matter protesters outside her window (Hedva, 2016). In her essay *Re-thinking Vulnerability and Resistance*, Judith Butler claims that our first exercise in political thinking is not an analysis of what is discussed in the public space, but the question of who has had the opportunity and the right to enter it in



the first place (Butler, 2016).

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

What seems even more interesting than these desperate attempts at defending the boundaries of the political are the almost farcical strategies of the disabled who are determined to enter the area of visibility. Somebody steps on the guard's toes, another one intimidates him with “foreign” speech, yet another shows an ID or flowers from a prominent politician. Somebody wanted to show the building to their child or came to visit daddy – a member of the parliament. All these funny gags show that the right to access the public sphere, which should theoretically be common, to many of

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

## **Silencing – (in)visibility**

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

Maciej Pesta's monologues, delivered in the tone of vicious hate mail, show not only how extensively the Polish symbolic imagination draws from the cult of a helpless, humble, voiceless victim, but also how lofty myths serve to

exert social control over the unruly and preserve inequalities. The economy of myth is a particularly strong weapon against the economic demands of those who expect the system will provide them with necessary support, not alms. The disabled (and their caregivers) are blackmailed by means of their own, privatized suffering, which becomes the most important measure of their symbolic worth.

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

The vicious comments quoted by Maciej Pesta are answered with poignant monologues of one of the mothers (Beata Bandurska), who consciously plays with the image of a “celebrity” imposed on her, one in which she gains popularity at the expense of her disabled son. The woman shares the pain,

fatigue and frustration linked to her everyday life. We can see she is suffering, although she does not aspire to the role of a “Mater Dolorosa”. We can also see her anger, her sometimes pointless struggle; however, it is not her weakness, but her power that allows her not to yield to fatigue, discouragement or opinions of society.

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

Even though the first part of the performance ends with a forced ceasefire, and the second part begins with the question how to return to living in a

reality where no revolution happened, I did not have the impression that the stage was filled with sadness and helplessness. On the contrary - after the interval, with a new, different energy I watched a surprisingly varied performance of disability that is visible, audible, speaks in its own voice, and uses its own body in breaking through a web of cultural and social clichés.

## **“I am Down!”**

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

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

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

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

Translated by Paweł Schreiber

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## Autor/ka

**Monika Świerkosz** (monika.swierkosz@uj.edu.pl) - Assistant Professor at the Jagiellonian University. Her main interests include gender literary studies and critical theory, problems of body and materiality and posthuman ethics. She is an author of the books: *Within the realms of tradition : prose works by Izabela Filipiak and Olga Tokarczuk in disputes about literature, canon and feminism* (Warszawa: IBL 2014) and *Arachne and Athena : literature, politics and women's classicism* (Kraków: WUJ 2017). ORCID: 0000-0002-1752-6768.

## Footnotes

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

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## POLITICAL THEATRE

# How to Lift the Curse? Oliver Frljić and the Poles

Agata Adamiecka The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw

Agata Adamiecka's article is devoted to Oliver Frljić's affective *The Curse*, a play of unprecedented social impact in the post-transformation history of theater in Poland. Adamiecka chiefly focuses on the closing scene, where a wooden cross is cut down and a noose is hung around a plaster figure of John Paul II, as the clearest acts of symbolic violence, through which the artists affectively work on the audience, simultaneously showing themes that are most powerful taboos in the public sphere. Turning her attention to the wave of violence that actress Julia Wyszynska experienced after the premiere, as well as statements by the Minister of Culture and other representatives of the political right, the author demonstrates how *The Curse* reveals the structure of symbolic power in Poland, with the inextricable alliance between state and church powers, and the permanent marginalization of women in the public sphere and the restriction of their rights, particularly when it comes to deciding about their own bodies.

Keywords: political theatre; Catholic Church; democracy; Oliver Frljić; John Paul II

There is no other production (*Kłątwa* [The Curse], Powszechny Theatre, Warszawa, premiere 18 February 2017) – certainly not in the post-transformation era, probably even in the post-war history of Polish theatre – that has divided Poles with equal force and at the same time create a particular kind of “community clash”. It reveals us to ourselves, grappling to

the death – yet not by providing a mirror in which we'd see our reflection, but rather by activating real, extreme affects, mobilized and made accessible to us in the form of direct, tangible experience during the performance and in the social process it has triggered. By making affect the fundamental field in which art operates, the creative team took seriously Brechtian “lessons against identification and for commitment” (Bal, 2007, p. 6), as theorist Mieke Bal has termed it.

It's therefore difficult to indicate a claim as inadequate to this production as the one brazenly presented in it: “Everything we say and do in theatre is fiction”. The creative team know the case is quite the opposite, for instance when they challenge juridical categories by discarding one fictitious scene of fundraising for the assassination of Jarosław Kaczyński (leader of Poland's ruling Law and Justice party) for fear of real penal sanctions for incitement to crime, at the same time staging the scene in its entirety, on their own terms. They know theatrical fiction causes real effects in the social sphere, including in the form of prosecutorial investigation – but above all in the sphere of powerful affects. I'd like to examine the production's affective mechanisms, as I have also felt its impact deeply. What follows will therefore be a narration from within that experience.

In the finale of *The Curse*, a particular density of “world pictures” occurs, to borrow a phrase from WJT Mitchell: representations superseding one another that could be understood as “synecdoches of social totalities ranging from bodies to families to tribes to nations to monotheistic notions of metaphysical universality” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 196). The theatrical element, fuelled by eruptions of subsequent monologues addressed directly at the audience, slows here and gives way to imagery that definitely – to continue using Mitchell's terminology – “wants something”.

The actress Karolina Adamczyk walks to centre stage and unhurriedly puts on protective gear: boots, trousers, gloves and helmet. Properly safeguarded, she picks up a power saw and proceeds to skilfully, methodically cut down a huge wood cross, which from the opening of the performance has dominated the empty stage. In addition, the cross clearly refers in its form to the monument erected on Piłsudski Square in Warsaw to commemorate John Paul II's 1979 pilgrimage, when these significant words were uttered: "Let your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth, the face of this land!" The cross in question is a symbol of the fundamental role John Paul II played in mobilizing Polish society to resist the Communist authorities, thus contributing to democratic transformations. Therefore it can also be viewed as a symbol of the special alliance subsequent governments of liberated Poland have concluded with the Catholic Church, paying off a symbolic debt in this way. The action performed by the actress lasts a long while, extended in time, which confronts the audience with the inevitability of the action's result. She cuts an initial wedge, proceeds to make an incision on the opposite side, stands behind the cross and slowly pushes it in the direction of the audience.

The image, violating cultural taboo to an extent that it almost constitutes a "critical exception" in Polish symbolic space, aggressively demands an audience reaction – a reaction I'd describe as "affective cooperation" of a decisively relational nature. The image strives to divide the audience into those who feel satisfaction or relief, seeing that such an act is possible in our public sphere so deeply dominated by political influence and symbolic hegemony of the Catholic Church, and those who experience terror, outrage or revulsion at the act of cutting down a cross (those terms – especially revulsion and disgust – recur most in negative comments about the production). The experienced affects condition one another: revulsion at the

theatrical image is stimulated by awareness that for others it's a source of pleasure. Satisfaction is enhanced by the feeling that the cultural transgression here is experienced as violence by others. The reviewer of *Nasz Dziennik (Our Daily)*, a conservative Catholic publication, describes this mechanism well:

And the rest of the audience? Several people sat down with their heads bowed, not looking at the stage. The majority, however [...], welcomed the end of this pseudo-show with cries of approval, giving it a standing ovation. And that was the biggest blow to me (Stankiewicz-Podhorecka, 2017).

I belong to those who experienced euphoria at seeing the image of the falling cross – all the greater for being accompanied by an awareness that, thanks to the institutional context of repertory theatre, this act will be repeated many times by the power of the theatre convention in a cultural city. I find it important that the cross is felled by the actress who in the production delivers a monologue about a woman's right to decide about her body and life: the right that Polish women are deprived of today, as an effect of that same post-transitional alliance mentioned above, between “the altar and the throne”. It is significant that power and confidence emanate from her actions on stage, which I view as a manifestation of the resistance on the part of Polish women to subsequent attacks on their civic rights, safety and dignity. The image, therefore, leads me to “iconoclastic *jouissance*” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 162), to quote Mitchell again, to delight at the destruction of idolatry. In my opinion, the act of cutting down the cross, repeated on the stage of a public theatre, occurs as a replacement for all the acts of cross removal from public space that can't take place – though the presence of a

Christian symbol violates my freedom of worldview. Such is the case with the cross surreptitiously hung in the plenary hall of the Polish Parliament in 1997 by deputies of the Solidarity Electoral Action Party (AWS), which no representative of any political party in parliament has had the courage to remove to date. Therefore, I experience the image of the falling cross as an act of righteous revenge, and it's deeply satisfying – also because being in the audience I feel how much I'm not alone at that moment.

At the same time, inevitably, in the eyes of those whom the image defines as the other, the representation of a falling cross enters the realm of radically “offensive imagery” and defiant calls are made for its own destruction or banning. The image desires to provoke the biggest mobilization possible in favour of its annihilation. It affectedly becomes an object of iconoclasm, “the pictorial counterpart to the death drive” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 75), as Mitchell terms it – thus posing a challenge to the democratic public sphere, with the duty of guaranteeing the right of such imagery to exist.

This is undoubtedly one of the tasks that Frljić's production consciously undertakes, triggering a long-term process of testing conditions of freedom of artistic expression and freedom of speech in Poland<sup>1</sup>. Thanks to deep understanding of the mission of a public institution and to those consequences and its courage, on the day *The Curse* premiered Warsaw's Powszechny Theatre launched a social laboratory the work of which provides knowledge regarding the state of democracy tested on the living social organism through involving key public authorities in the experiment – judicial authorities, the police force, local and central government, the media – and all sides in the culture war that currently rages in Poland. Thanks to this initiative, we can receive daily updates on where we are, transformations our political system is going through, how individual

institutions and authorities understand their role, how they define conditions of civic freedom and what ideological alliances they enter with which social forces. Despite violent attacks, *The Curse* remains in the repertoire – the process goes on, keeps us highly alerted, requires vigilance, demands commitment and understanding of each gesture by the authorities. It's hard in the present situation to find more important tasks for art to perform.

The image of the falling cross, like the entire production, at once affectively mobilizes the community and drastically antagonizes it internally, in which lies by no means any contradiction, according to what Sarah Ahmed proposes in her *Cultural Politics of Emotions*. The stronger the disgust with the other is, the deeper the bond connecting us with them proves, and the stronger are the affects.

Pulling back, bodies that are disgusted are also bodies that feel a certain rage, a rage that the object [or other body] has got close enough to sicken, and to be taken over or taken in. To be disgusted is after all *to be affected by what one has rejected* (Ahmed, 2004, p. 86).

The production makes us experience others acutely, and their deeply disturbing involvement in ourselves. “[Social boundaries and surfaces]: the “I” and the “we” are shaped by, or even take the shape of, contact with others” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 10), argues Ahmed, pointing in this context to the common root of “passion” and “passivity” – the Latin *passio*, “to suffer”. The philosopher associates that root with a loss of active, subjective position: “To be emotional is to have one’s judgement affected: it is to be reactive, rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 3). The

Powszechny Theatre audience can experience that state with particular intensity.

With time, I realize these are effects of the euphoria I felt. The ambivalence of this experience is connected with discovery of its nature of deep resentment. Its reactive character betrays a clear affinity with the Nietzschean concept of “slave revolt”, which in the field of morals:

begins in the very principle of *resentment* becoming creative and giving birth to values: a resentment experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary revenge (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 19).

The scene with a plaster figure of John Paul II situates into a similar affective register: the crowd of actors hangs a plaque around his neck that says “Defender of Paedophiles” then proceeds to add a noose. The drastic nature of that image undermines the possibility of deriving from it rational criticism of the Catholic Church institution, though the issue of paedophilia is one that may result in that institution’s loss of hegemony, as demonstrated by processes taking place in most countries in which Catholicism predominates – in Ireland, government investigative committees’ work has revealed the enormous scale of paedophilia among the clergy along with institutional protection that the church, including the Vatican, grants to perpetrators, has caused more than half of its followers to turn away from the Catholic Church. Yet the production’s creative team chose a shock effect that’s impossible to rationalise. There the highest Polish totem stands, a figure worshipped as tribal deity, embodying great ancestors, founding the unity of



the nation as a family, which is then dishonoured and lynched in ways that bring to mind the worst historical associations. This act of symbolic violence, with which it's hard to identify oneself, is hard to interpret in other terms than those of brazen manifestation of resentment. In Poland, under conditions of such extreme ideological domination and structural censorship preventively restricting the field of public debate, no serious criticism will be permitted in the public sphere of John Paul II and his negligence. All that's left is to perform an act of the "revenge of the weak", the creative team seems to say, to vent one's powerlessness, and find solace in the repulsion and rage felt by others.

In precisely this way, *The Curse* confronts us with the essence of the social body, makes us experience how emotions circulate between individual bodies and groups, how they bind those whose mutual repudiation would most seem to repel one another. The production lets us experience through artistic conditions the nature of our intensifying social deadlock: it reveals the affective basis of the inability to conduct any rational public debate regarding the position of the church and secularism of the state: a debate which, after all, requires recognition of others' autonomous and legitimate positions. The production brutally dismisses not only the Habermasian utopia of a consensual public sphere but also hopes placed in the agonism of democracy and its institutions, able to sublimate passions "at the origin of collective forms of identifications". It also leaves no illusion that art can truly contribute, as argued by Chantal Mouffe, author of the concept of agonism, in "disarming of the libidinal forces leading towards hostility which are always present in human societies" and ultimately to the "renunciation of death as an instrument of decision" (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 22, 26).

Revealing of active mechanisms occurs here not in lab conditions of

observation but in a real process engaging all sides and excluding the position of the objective observer. The creative team doesn't claim that role at any moment. From the beginning, the production makes an unequivocal, extremely keen point: conditions of liberal democracy in Poland are fundamentally disturbed by the power of the Catholic Church and the politically upheld position of Catholicism as the national religion, in the framework of which the nation's phantasmal homogeneity is affirmed. This is why the image of a felled cross that caused me to experience sudden euphoria almost instantly transforms into another "world picture", the significance of which I'd rather had escaped me so as to preserve my previous sense of delight. When the cross falls, on the rear wall of the bare stage, the emblem of a crowned eagle becomes illuminated: the national emblem of Poland<sup>2</sup>. Maria Robaszkiewicz performs a shocking, wordless song that turns into a scream expressing the terror of symbolic violence. One idol is replaced by another, yet the act of iconoclasm won't be repeated – what's more, it will reveal itself as impossible.

Three actors carry ladders on stage and climb them in an attempt to extinguish the emblem, clumsily unscrewing light bulbs with which the shape of the eagle is built. But from the height of their ladders, they can only reach the lowest bulbs. They descend and, with the rest of the cast, kneel before the national emblem. Silent, frozen, unified in the gesture of subordination, they're now the image of ideal people created by ideology: the People that Slavoj Žižek spells with a capital letter to signify that it's a phantasmatically constructed body of the nation that exists as a totality, indivisible by antagonistic ruptures. How can such a totality be maintained? Not by suppressing differences, but by means of a normative definition. This is the People, from the motto "the whole People supports the Party", in which this support for the Party's authority, argues Žižek, is a constitutive

characteristic of the People, because anyone who opposes the authority “is automatically excluded from the People” and becomes “the enemy of the People” (Žižek, 1989, p. 147). We may enjoy the delight of “imaginary revenge”, the production’s creative team seems to say, but ultimately it’s the revenge of the powerless in a society in which a Pole means a Catholic or, at the very least, a child of God.

Here, Frljić uses the well-mastered technique of simplification, which according to Alain Badiou should be named the ability to recognize and reveal basic ideological coordinates.<sup>3</sup> This means getting rid of all psychologism and depicting the essence of tensions and social-situation plans in a structure where all elements aren’t represented, so what’s left out of sight within the system becomes visible. It’s not hard to confirm the final thesis within our reality. I spotlight one initial, sharp critical reaction to Frljić’s production. where Liliana Sonik writes in the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, arguing that the director “insidiously and disgustingly” declares total war on Polish society, foreseeing and anticipating any reaction of opposition to his work then incorporating it in the social spectacle that was his goal. After this otherwise correct diagnosis, Sonik argues that art in Poland is free and that it has full right to touch on taboo subjects, provided of course that it is “true art”. It doesn’t even make sense to ask about criteria for verifying “true art” and whether they shouldn’t by chance include conceptual quality and an effectiveness of execution in an avant-garde dream of abolishing differences between art and social process. However, it’s worth pointing out that by proving how unfair Frljić’s provocation is for Polish society, in passing her judgement Sonik unconsciously confirms both the final conclusion of the production and the necessity of using radical language:

Poland is a country big enough for all kinds to find their place. Some are devout Catholics, others Catholics by custom, Jews or agnostics, still others are Orthodox or they practice Islam (like the Tatars faithful to Poland for centuries) (Sonik, 2017).

In this ecumenical fantasy among the “all kinds” inhabiting Poland, enjoying the fullness of their rights, are God’s exclusive children. No subject can exist outside religion because those who belong to the People, or better yet, the Nation, are defined as “believers”, a category of identity related in no essential way to spiritual condition. Atheists have been annihilated, the actual antagonism abolished. I include this quote as it describes what blocking the political field consists of, the response to which is the language of affects and deliberate transgression of *The Curse*’s creative team, stepping past critical framework and rational debate in an ostentatious gesture denoting lack of faith in their effectiveness under Polish conditions.

The structure of the production, as noted in reviews, is reminiscent of a revue with numbers that follow in the form of monologues spoken by actors in their own names addressed directly to the audience, in large part problematizing power relations within a theatre institution and particularly accentuating irremediable misogyny that also encroaches on contact with the audience. “You don’t like it? Is it too primitive?” asks Klara Bielawka, while naming one of the characteristics of *The Curse*’s language, which is to say sexualisation and overt obscenity. In this way, Frljić attacks theatre convention in a cultural city, along with its intellectual and aesthetic obligations inhibiting political potential. On the other hand, the director also attacks and ridicules compulsiveness and the post-politicality of the theatre of eternal transgression. But sexualisation remains a vital part of the show’s affective work as well, as it is located in a field of tension caused by disgust.

Actors deliberately and provocatively act out their status of “vile bodies” to be used, dividing the audience into those who laugh at the obscene and those who feel disgusted. These affects create communities of the amused and the disgusted, reactively dependent on one another, once again. There’s no doubt, however, that theatre allies itself with the former and ridicules also – perhaps primarily – those who “became united in the shared condemnation of the disgusting object or event” (Ahmed, 2004, p.94) In this way. the director intensifies antagonism but also undermines the mechanism by which disgust, as shown by Ahmed, upholds the position of superiority over disgusting bodies: “Given the fact that the one who is disgusted is the one who feels disgust, then the position of “aboveness” is maintained only at the cost of a certain vulnerability, as an openness to being affected by those who are felt to be below” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 89).

That vulnerability of the disgusted is utterly exploited in the production, becoming another space of retaliation. Sexuality, however, is interesting to the creative team primarily because it is a sphere of life over which the church attempts to extend particular authority yet which the church can’t control within its ranks. This is a theme derived from playwright Stanisław Wyspiański’s *The Curse* (1899), in which a woman is blamed for sexuality the church defines as sinful, then is collectively murdered in a scapegoat ritual enacted to return order to a community in crisis. It’s in this ambivalent space of power and weakness that the production’s most “offensive image” is situated – that is, the scene in which actress Julia Wyszynska fellates the statue of John Paul II with its attached, erect penis. This is probably the most ambiguous image in the production. The figure’s erect penis represents the gender power structure of that ultra-patriarchal institution; it’s a shockingly literal visualization of the obvious fact that the possession of a penis alone grants access to that hierarchical structure. The scene can be interpreted as

a metaphor for church power over women's bodies, the literal and symbolic violence they experience from that institution and its servants. It may also be an image of the boundless adoration and need of love Polish women direct in a compensatory way to the figure of the Polish Pope. One may see in it radical criticism of idolatrous practices, or may opt for a feminist psychoanalytical interpretation and view it as an image of a daughter's relationship with the symbolic father, whom the woman desires to seduce in order to ascertain her worth (See Gallop, 1997).

Regardless of which interpretation we choose, it will not change the fact that in the social process triggered by the production, the image in question has resulted in a structural repetition of the mechanism inherent in *The Curse*, as Wyszynska, the actress, was subjected to professional lynching (which she predicts on stage), including repressions by Polish public television's executive director, who cancelled the premiere of a TV production she was to appear in. The wave of hatred that has focused on Wyszynska is unprecedented in the art world. This situation has shown how simple it is to single out a woman as victim then trigger a mechanism of collective violence against her. It has also shown that even an institution such as a theatre company, conscious of mechanisms of violence against women, didn't foresee and circumvent a situation like this, then perhaps didn't preclude itself from the opportunity of using it.

In one scene, the production slows its radical expression and abandons drastic language. It's a scene in which the cast sits in a row at the front of the stage and talk about childhood experiences of having been molested by priests. They speak calmly, though with visible difficulty; they avoid drastic detail, refrain from accusation, relating an experience. Each introduces themselves by first name, family name and the role they perform in the

production. We're dealing here, therefore, with a demonstration of creating "a reality effect", which doesn't, however, diminish the power of the scene, in which theatre gives testimony about wrongs that befell innocent victims. They're forced into silence: by actions of the direct perpetrators, by the institution that protects the latter, but also by the barrier of social taboo and fear of the real and symbolic power of the church.

At the same time, this multiple confession in which all actors participate takes the scene beyond the psychological dimension, and beyond the act of lifting the taboo on an exceptionally drastic social problem, and directs it toward an extremely significant cultural mechanism. It demonstrates that the experience of a molested child becomes in a sense the experience of all of us, because of the fact that carnality and sexuality are subjects of eager interest and of very early colonization on the part of the Catholic Church. Sexuality, defined as sinful, is a field for provoking a sense of guilt and drastic alienation toward one's own body - a message so widespread in our culture that it's almost impossible to avoid. Before we've built a stable foundation for our identity and acquired critical tools, we're subjected to ruthless interpellation: an onslaught that forces us to identify with a place from which we're observed as sinners, as impure bodies. Being a molested child therefore becomes a universal experience, a fundamental mechanism of infantilization, trapping us into dependency upon perpetrators of both symbolic and real violence.

The outbreak of aggression in the following scene, therefore, in which the actors first stick together models of rifles from mismatched parts into a cross shape, then subsequently in a frenetic dance fire them in the direction of the audience, can be interpreted both as a mocking, parodic image of violence on the part of "officials of the faith" and as an uncontrolled eruption

of children's destructive emotions interpellated via abuses inflicted by an all-powerful symbolic instance.

At the level of open action in reaction to the production, the Polish Catholic Church, taught a lesson by events surrounding censorship of the *Golgota Picnic* [Golgotha Picnic] production directed by Rodrigo Garcia cancelled in 2013 in Poznań (see Polish Theatre Journal, 2), exhibited considerable restraint. An Episcopal Declaration proclaimed that the production was blasphemous, and called on the faithful to perform an "amending prayer" along the lines of the words "Fight evil with good!"<sup>4</sup>

However, the real answer glimpsed from actions of establishment hierarchs reveals a level of hypocrisy that may most clearly depict the deformation of the Polish public sphere and the paralysis of standard critical procedures. The first Friday of Lent, falling on 3 March in 2017 – that is, two weeks after *The Curse* premiered – was declared by Pope Francis to be the "day of prayer and penance for the sin of child abuse perpetrated by the clergy" for the Catholic Church. In many Polish parishes, meanwhile, the day was not put on the calendar at all, while in others it was proclaimed the "day of prayer and penance for the sin of child abuse"<sup>5</sup>. The omission of words indicated by the pope is equivalent to the overt misrepresentation of his intention.

On 13 April 2017, during a mass celebrated at the Poznań Cathedral, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki referred to actions taken by Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński. Gliński had recently announced that, despite previously signed contracts, he would withdraw funding for Poznań's Malta Festival if it was curated by Oliver Frljić, as had been planned and made public by the festival organizers more than two years beforehand. That mass was co-celebrated by Archbishop Juliusz Paetz, the focus of the most



prominent sex scandal for the Polish Catholic Church, who has yet to answer to accusations of sexual harassment of seminary students<sup>6</sup>.

“We believe in Christ, we want no democracy here”, chanted members of the organizations Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny [National Radical Camp] and Młodzież Wszechpolska [All-Polish Youth] during demonstrations in front of the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw on 21 April 2017, in which they utilized aggression and efforts to block the theatre’s entrance. Several days later, Minister of Culture Gliński granted them his support in a bizarre statement in which he declared that the question of the production’s legality should be examined by the judicial branch, at the same time urging Warsaw municipal authorities to intervene with immediate censorship.<sup>7</sup>

Probably neither demonstrators nor the minister supporting them were aware of how meticulously they cooperated with the production, revealing at once a particular structure of symbolic power in Poland. The basic “feature of the democratic order”, argues Claude Lefort, “is that the place of Power is, by the necessity of its structure, an empty space” and is occupied only momentarily, merely as a “substitute for the real-impossible sovereign” (Žižek, 1989, p.147. See Lefort, 1981). Therein consists the “invention of democracy”, negated by protesters massed in front of the theatre.

The last image of the production places before us what in our reality is too obvious to be perceived. In everyday life, we usually don’t think about the fact that in Poland the empty space of power is occupied by several enthroned rulers, who no political power is able to replace or remove. The Virgin Mary has been Queen of Poland for three and a half centuries; in 2007, the Virgin Mary of the Tribunal was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as patron of the Polish Parliament, per the request sent to the Vatican by the Polish Episcopate on behalf of the MPs. In 2016, president of Poland Andrzej

Duda, and numerous high-state authorities officially attended the enthronement of Jesus Christ as King of Poland. These symbolic gestures of the church, validated by secular authorities, are of real importance, as they create the climate for social practice and political decisions, which increasingly interfere nowadays with civic liberties. These gestures also offer symbolic fuel for the most dangerous nationalistic mechanisms, which absolutize Poles as the chosen Nation. The finale of *The Curse* is, at the level of meaning, a manifestation of powerlessness within this situation, yet as long as it is performed within the framework of normal institutional procedures of repertory theatre, the production operates incessantly against those meanings.

Translated by Karolina Sofulak

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## **Autor/ka**

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek ([agata.adamiecka-sitek@e-at.edu.pl](mailto:agata.adamiecka-sitek@e-at.edu.pl)) – theatre scholar, critic and publisher. She deals with gender, physicality and politicalness of art. Author of the book *Theatre and Text. Staging in Postmodern Theatre* (2006), editor of various books on the

Polish theatre and staging culture. She is lecturer and student ombudsman at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. Member of a curators team Forum for the Future of Culture. As a dramaturg she continues to cooperate with director Marta Górnicka on theatre choir projects. ORCID: 0000-0001-8131-2679.

## Footnotes

1. Jakub Majmurek wrote about this immediately following the production's premiere: "Kłatwa" – ta sztuka to koszmar dobrej zmiany, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/teatr/klatwa-frljic-teatr-powszechn...>, accessed 1 June 2017.
2. The crown on the emblem's eagle was reinstated after the democratic transformation of Poland in 1989.
3. Badiou's concept is discussed extensively by Paweł Mościcki (2008). Mościcki terms Badiou's thesis, that 'theatrical work should be the result of simplification', as 'the most controversial, but significant' because it opposes the dominant discourse which, by imposing the requirement of aesthetic and intellectual sophistication on theatre, pushes it to the shallows of psychologism and deprives it of politicality. Meanwhile, simplification 'is a complex and difficult procedure of making understandable that, which appears confusing and unclear' (Mościcki, 2008, p. 47). This is a particularly apt description of Frłjić's strategy, which I mention in the article 'Poles, Jews and Aesthetic Experience: On the Cancelled Theatre Production by Olivier Frłjić' (2017).
4. <http://episkopat.pl/rzecznik-episkopatu-spektakl-klatwa-ma-znamiona-blu...>, accessed 1 June 2017].
5. See Noch, Jakub, 'W piątek Kościół ma przeproszać ofiary pedofilów. Polskie kurie "zapomniały" wspomnieć, że chodzi o duchownych', <https://natemat.pl/202589,w-piatek-kosciol-ma-przeproszac-za-duchownych...>, accessed 1 June 2017].
6. See Cylka, Tomasz, 'Mocne kazanie abpa Gądeckiego. Ostra krytyka m.in. Unii Europejskiej', <https://poznan.wyborcza.pl/poznan/7,36001,21634207,mocne-kazanie-abpa-g...>, accessed 1 June 2017.
7. See <http://www.mkidn.gov.pl/pages/posts/komunikat-ws.-zajsc-przed-teatrem-p...>, accessed 1 June 2017.

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POLITICAL THEATRE

## “Are You Very Stupid or Very Intelligent?”

### Joanna Szczepkowska and the Embarrassing Performance of Announcing the End of Communism

Katarzyna Waligóra Jagiellonian University in Kraków

The article takes a closer look at actress Joanna Szczepkowska’s appearance on *Dziennik Telewizyjny* [Television Daily] on October 28, 1989 when she famously said: “Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end.” Waligóra describes how the statement came about, the first responses to it, and how it was preserved in the collective memory. The author also discusses the actress’ public image in 1989 and the effect her public image had on the reception of what she had spoken on television. The author also explains why she sees Szczepkowska’s appearance as an embarrassing female performance - simultaneously emancipatory and eliciting consternation.

Keywords: feminism, embarrassment, Szczepkowska, communism, June 4, television news

## 1.

In the late 1980s, famous people were regularly interviewed as part of the Saturday edition of *Dziennik Telewizyjny* [Translator’s Note: or *Dziennik*, Television Daily, the major daily news program and a propaganda tool in communist Poland aired in 1958-89], the evening news program. On October 28, 1989, a popular actress Joanna Szczepkowska was invited to the studio

to speak briefly to the host, Irena Jagielska, about her acting career.

Unexpectedly, however, Szczepkowska asked for an opportunity to deliver a message to the audience. The final part of her conversation with Jagielska was as follows:

Szczepkowska: Only I have a favor to ask of you. Since I am already here and in fact have an opportunity to sit at this table, I would like to share some wonderful news, in any case *I* believe the news is true. Could I maybe...

Jagielska: Of course, please go ahead.

Szczepkowska: play a bit and become like...

Jagielska: Me.

Szczepkowska: You.

Jagielska: Sure, but let us remain in our seats if that's ok?

Szczepkowska: Yes, yes that's ok.

Jagielska: Then by all means.

Szczepkowska: Well, if I were sitting in this place, I would say this:

Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end (Szczepkowska in: *Dziennik Telewizyjny*, 1989, Oct. 28).

When Szczepkowska is about to say her announcement, the camera operator zooms in on her face, which she notices and announces the end of communism, in accordance with her desire expressed earlier, directly to the viewers. The last frame of the interview shows the amused smiling actress. The first printed reaction to the words spoken in *Dziennik* appeared six days later (Tym 1989), and the event has not ceased to inspire commentary until today.

## 2.

Szczepkowska has recounted the story of her appearance in *Dziennik* many times. At the core of her narrative there are her three autobiographical books: *June 4*<sup>1</sup>, *Who Are You?* and *You Will Win When You Lose*. The first book (also chronologically) is a collection of memoirs from the communist period of the Polish People's Republic, whereas the other two constitute a diptych. *Who Are You?* tells the stories of the Szczepkowscy and Parandowscy families and the life of Joanna Szczepkowska herself from her birth to October 28, 1989. *You Will Win When You Lose* covers the author's life from that very date to 2014. The announcement of the end of communism is therefore raised to the rank of a turning point in her life by Szczepkowska herself.

The story, as the actress tells it, begins with a telephone invitation to an interview for *Dziennik*. At first, Szczepkowska rejects the proposal. However, she quickly begins to regret the decision because she comes up with ideas of how she could use her appearance in front of the cameras:

"I imagined myself accepting this proposal and turning the *Dziennik* upside down" (Szczepkowska 2014, p. 363). When another invitation to the program arrives, Szczepkowska agrees to participate. She has several days before the interview to prepare.

On October 28, 1989, Szczepkowska arrives at the television studio, where she learns that interviews in *Dziennik* are not broadcast live, but are only played from a recording which is shot on the same day. She immediately decides to say what she has prepared, but assumes that the incident will remain an anecdote and will never appear on television (Szczepkowska on Radio TOK FM, 2014, July 4). The situation has therefore fundamentally

changed: as Szczepkowska initially planned to take everybody by surprise on a live TV show, she now assumes that her performance will not enter the field of visibility.

Another turn of events for Szczepkowska is that the interview is being recorded twice. After the first shooting, the producer asks to repeat the whole conversation, due to the fact that the exchange is taking too long. Szczepkowska interprets the request unequivocally:

I understood that now the anchor's task would be to conduct the interview in such a way that it [announcing the end of communism] would not be possible. After all, that was what it was really all about (ibid.).

It is not certain if Szczepkowska's assessment was accurate. In 2009, the TV presenter stated that in interviews for *Dziennik Telewizyjny* she strictly followed the principle that a guest could say what he or she wanted (Jagielska 1999, p. 36). The first recording is not available (I do not know if it still exists at all),<sup>2</sup> but the actress and the presenter agree that it was not much different from the second widely known version. Both recordings included the utterance about the end of communism, but because the course of the conversation was slightly different each time, Szczepkowska had to improvise twice in order to make her performance happen. Between the recordings, however, she did not have time to think about what she was going to say or plan a strategy, and assumed that the journalist would try to change the course of the conversation. In both shootings, the actress had to exhibit her quick thinking, vigilance, and her smarts.

According to Szczepkowska, right after the shootings, behind the scenes,



Jagielska reacted with an emotional outburst (Szczepkowska 2009). The presenter does not deny it, but explains that she was afraid that the material would not be broadcast, and this would affect her credibility as a journalist. Szczepkowska and Jagielska assumed that the interview would not be made public; despite the success of Solidarity in the elections on June 4, democratic changes happening in Poland were still incomplete towards the end of 1989, and the results of the changes were still uncertain. *Dziennik Telewizyjny* was replaced with a new program called *Wiadomości* [the News] only a month later, on November 18, 1989. The Main Office for the Control of the Press, Publications and Performances was officially liquidated only in April 1990. At the turn of 1989 and 1990, staff exchanges were also carried out in television offices and studios. The very invitation of Szczepkowska to the studio was the result of a calculation, because, as Irena Jagielska says: "At that time, everyone wanted to see people from the other side appear on the daily show." (Jagielska 1999) But on October 28, 1989, the decision to broadcast the interview was in the hands of people who identified themselves with the former political power, so there was a risk that the interview could be censored. The fact that the two women were concerned in itself perfectly shows how unstable the period of the systemic changes taking place at the time was. Nevertheless, the conversation was fully broadcast, as planned, on the same evening.

### 3.

I refer to Szczepkowska's gesture, as well as to other similar gestures, behaviors, and statements as an embarrassing female performance. I borrow the term (though the wording is not exactly the same) from Marcin Kościelniak's article "Embarrassing Performances by Losers: Counterhistories of Political Theater" (Kościelniak 2013). In his article, the

researcher analyzes selected Polish theater performances. He is interested in emerging counter-historical initiatives, which are an attempt to regain one's right to tell and write about one's own past in spite of the official historical narratives codified in rituals and institutions. One of the anti-historical strategies is to include scenes in performances which are cast from the vantage point of somebody who is weak and clumsy. In the performances of Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski, Kościelniak distinguishes the figures of the "excluded" who, on the one hand, are those who lost in a sense, but on the other hand get the chance to deliver long monologues:

I would like to draw attention to the specific manner in which these monologues are conducted. They do not refer to any matter-of-fact, accurate argumentation, they do not aspire to be intelligent retorts, they do not try to convince anyone with iconoclastic rhetoric, on the contrary: usually the monologues are incoherent, mumbling, tearful or simply unsuccessful. [...] In Strzępka and Demirski's embarrassing performances of those who, in a way, lost, it is honesty, sensitivity and ineptitude that become weapons to fight the hypocritical, cynical and effective rhetoric of the winners. (ibid. p. 75-76)

With regards to the productions of Wiktor Rubin and Jolanta Janiczak, the researcher notes that "an actor's performance that breaks the frame of the 'stage - audience - performance' convention is the vehicle of counter-history. This is what also determines the persuasive potency, effectiveness and significance of these projects." (ibid. p. 78) On the other hand, in his discussion of the performances by Krzysztof Garbaczewski and Marcin

Cecko, he mentions, among other things, the partially improvised performance by Justyna Wasilewska in *Balladyna*:

Played each time according to changing and constantly redefined rules, the performance is not a well-oiled machine, on the contrary: it is sometimes convoluted and inarticulate, and Wasilewska – that is the first impression – is ready at any moment to falter, give up, compromise herself. This makes her embarrassing performance extremely effective, and at the same time moving. (ibid., p. 79)

An embarrassing performance is therefore an individual performance within a play which is founded on an agreement between the actor or actress and the audience. What is important is the affective firepower of the performance and not so much its consistency with the discourse. An embarrassing performance is delivered by a subject who exposes one's own weakness, powerlessness, and the possibility of one's failure (and on these grounds the aforementioned empathic understanding with the viewers is built).

I find the category proposed by Marcin Kościelniak extremely interesting, although the researcher himself uses it to describe the phenomena belonging to the reality of the stage (i.e. the phenomena which are at least partially planned, written down in a script and rehearsed). I believe, however, that his proposal is sufficiently broad and it should also be used to talk about non-theatrical events and performances. What seems valuable to me in Kościelniak's proposal is that he draws attention to the discrepancy between the weight of the message and the form of expression which is inarticulate, imprecise, and prone to failure. However, such a form of

expression does not diminish the intensity of the message – on the contrary, it even strengthens it. The embarrassing performance seems to be a weapon of the weak, marginalized, and disadvantaged. I would like to expose the word “embarrassing” so that it loses its stigmatizing, deprecating, or humiliating character and becomes the name of one of the strategies of appearing in public. Since in my analysis I will only be interested in performances by actresses, I add the adjective “female” to the term “embarrassing performance”.

It seems very important to me that in his article, Kościelniak emphasizes the strength of an individual gesture, because embarrassing performances – as I would like to understand them – are always individual, sometimes selfish gestures, often for various reasons difficult to include in communal postulates or projects, and sometimes standing in clear contradiction to the ideas of the community to which a female performer belongs. Embarrassing female performers act on their own (even if at various stages they use the support of the community, enter into alliances, identify with wider social movements) and, above all, they act at their own risk. This is crucial because for an embarrassing performance in the public sphere, unlike in theater, there usually is a high price to pay.

Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* argues that the fundamental difference between men and women is that the former are marked with value, while the latter remain unmarked. Cultural reproduction in visual and linguistic arts marks unmarked women, whereas it remains indifferent to men. Therefore a man signifies the norm, and a woman is the Other who is marked by a man. Phelan's theory is rooted in psychoanalysis; she refers among other things to Lacan's texts on the power of the gaze, and she recognizes that the mutual gazes of women and men are characterised

by a broken symmetry. For when a man looks at a woman, his position of strength is confirmed, whereas when a woman looks at a man, she must recognize herself as the Other, as a non-man. Phelan also questions the notion that greater visibility entails greater power: if high visibility meant a lot of power, she says, Western culture would be ruled by a naked white woman. In her opinion, the invisible, unmarked, and unutterable should also be appreciated. I think that the key aspect of Phelan's theory is the recognition that power comes from the marking process, therefore emancipation depends upon taking control of that process. Taking control is possible through the skillful use of what is invisible and hidden.

In Phelan's theory, I am interested in the question of the control over the marking process. Embarrassing female performers consciously enter the field of visibility and are always marked in various ways by those who watch them. They are ridiculed, heroized, fetishized, downplayed, and so on. Their performances, however, consist in surprising and embarrassing the audience. Embarrassment is associated with the discomfort caused by the feeling of losing control of a situation, which violates the process of marking – the viewer who is marking no longer knows what to expect from the performer who is being marked. This feeling of uncertainty and lack of control causes frustration and forces the viewer to act towards either inhabiting the embarrassing performance, or ridiculing and discrediting it.<sup>3</sup>

## 4.

Joanna Szczepkowska's message to the viewers was serious, it informed about the political transformation in a matter-of-fact manner, and partially imitated the style of a news release. Precisely the ten-second fragment of her conversation with Jagielska, with the words: "Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th

June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end” was repeated in the media on various occasions (primarily news programs). Szczepkowska, however, closes her announcement with a smile, which blows up the seriousness of her words and establishes an understanding with the audience. The smile reveals that the actress uses the familiar image of the quintessential naif, which I will talk about later. The smile was also commented on many times and in various ways – it was considered stupid, frivolous, triumphant, innocent, joyful. The consternation it caused was part of the embarrassment strategy. It was also caused by Szczepkowska suddenly breaking up with the convention of a TV interview. The performer herself signals the frivolous nature of her message; she also raises a theatrical framework for her performance: she asks Jagielska's permission to “play a bit and become like” a TV presenter. Szczepkowska, in *Dziennik*, is therefore an improvising actress who delivers her message in the conditional mode: she would say something if she was in a position which she only pretended to be in.

Even though *Dziennik* had a large audience in 1989, it seems that the ten-second fragment broadcast in the middle of the program could have been easily overlooked, and most of all ignored. One could have also easily considered the actress's willfulness as a funny or unfunny excess and quickly forgot about it. However, this did not happen. The initial reaction of the press to Joanna Szczepkowska's words was sparse and malicious. I will discuss a few examples. Stanisław Tym in *Gazeta Wyborcza* [t/n: Electoral Gazette, a liberal daily newspaper established before the elections on June 4] published an ironic comment in which he supplemented Szczepkowska's announcement with the exact time of the fall of communism, and then presented the dates and times of other regimes collapsing (a primitive community, slavery, feudalism and capitalism). He ended his text with the sentence:

Historical regularity or coincidence? I hope that a seriously thinking faction of Polish actresses will soon be able to solve this mystery as well. (Tym 1989, Nov. 3-5)

A day later, Jerzy Urban also doubted the actress's intelligence in *Trybuna Ludu* [t/n: People's Tribune, a communist daily newspaper publishing between 1948-90]. In his column, he introduced Szczepkowska as a person known “mainly from the role of the daughter of Szczepkowski Sr.” He also stated that on June 4, communism had not yet become well-rooted in Poland, which was best proven by the elections in which the former ruling party lost. The columnist closed his commentary on the announcement in *Dziennik* with the words to which various journalists, commentators, and Joanna Szczepkowska herself would from then on repeatedly refer to:

A gushing actress, who by design uses only the right, weaker hemisphere of her brain, confuses a complex, long-standing historical process with the one of its episodic outgrowths that she is able to grasp. [...] Insufficiently staged little actresses, in fact it does not matter whether their male or female specimens – will come closer to the truth about what is going on reciting Shakespeare and not their daddy or some dude. (Urban 1989, Nov. 4-5, p. 4)

It is telling that in his sexist statement, Urban assumes that the performer is not the true author of the message: a man must have been behind the performance. The columnist also tries to show Szczepkowska where she belongs – she is an actress, so she should act, not engage herself in politics.

Meanwhile, at the end of the 1980s, the performer's political views were clearly articulated and at least known in certain circles. Szczepkowska, introduced to the opposition milieu by Halina Mikołajska, supported the Workers' Defense Committee. She helped, among other things, in the distribution of the press, participated in discussions and the social life of opposition activists, took part in a television boycott when martial law was introduced, and in 1989 she was involved in carrying out political campaign meetings. Also, taking from the previously quoted words of Irena Jagielska, it appears that Szczepkowska was associated with the opposition community and that is why she was invited to the interview on a television network which was adapting to the new political reality (although the topic of the conversation was only to be her acting jubilee). The announcement of the end of communism was also a political declaration, which the actress emphasized by saying that she would like to share "some wonderful news" – so it was obvious that she was on the side of those who were enjoying the change in the political system. It was also no coincidence that she chose the word "communism", which sharpened the boundary between the order of the past and the new democratic order.<sup>4</sup>

Jerzy Urban's gruesome attack on the performer on the pages of the main propaganda newspaper of the Polish People's Republic was therefore both a political attack on the views represented by Szczepkowska and on her right to take a political stance (as a woman and an actress). Also, Urban's behavior was probably influenced by the fact that he himself had lost in the elections on June 4. Moreover, he was defeated by an actor – Andrzej Łapicki. The columnist also tried to marginalize Szczepkowska's statement, referring to it as if in passing, and devoting the majority of the column primarily to the political activities of the recently created Parliamentary Club of the Polish United Workers' Party. From Urban's perspective,



Szczepkowska was a threat because she was outspoken about what was supposed to remain hidden and unclear; she emphasized the victory of the opposition and the change that, alas, if it was about to happen, then it better be happening slowly and imperceptibly.

With the pens of their columnists, the two newspapers – *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a symbol of democratic changes, and *Trybuna Ludu* belonging to the old system – distanced themselves from Szczepkowska's gesture and unanimously suggested that the actress was not very intelligent. Urban was right that Szczepkowska used the common understanding of the word “communism”, but wrongly accused her of not understanding the complexity of historical processes. After all, the actress wanted to performatively establish a symbolic turning point and not to designate a literal date for the end of a political system.

In Peggy Phelan's theory, white heterosexual men, thanks to the fact that they are marked with value from the start, can act transparently. By this I mean that when they take a political stance or make decisions, what they say or do is not questioned because they have the right to their own voice by definition. Joanna Szczepkowska as a woman and actress (and therefore someone who is perceived, especially at that time, as the one who speaks with someone else's script), appearing on television, however, causes consternation and elicits a reaction, especially since she uses the ambivalent form of an embarrassing performance which in itself causes consternation and embarrassment. Phelan emphasizes the fact that entering the field of visibility involves exposure to numerous dangers. The researcher mentions fetishization, voyeurism, and the colonial gaze (Phelan 2005, p. 6)<sup>5</sup>, but these are only examples of the possessive practices of seeing which are imposed upon an observed subject. She also takes note of the fact that femininity is

always read erotically. (ibid. 63) What comes after Szczepkowska performs her embarrassing performance proves Phelan's theses right. The first comments, issued only by men, mainly treat the actress mockingly and condescendingly. Columnists and publicists gave her either serious or ironic lessons on politics, society, economics, and philosophy. They also tried to act casually with regard to Szczepkowska's message and deferred the possibility of a genuine polemic, although the political content caused them to feel frustrated. At the same time, the actress was fetishized – she was said to be charming, she was called “Mrs. Joasia” [t/n: “Joasia” is a diminutive form of Joanna] (Sceptyk 1989), or some erotic insecurities are expressed towards her, just as Jerzy Urban did. Downplaying and fetishizing were strategies for discrediting Szczepkowska's competence as a performer. For it must be emphasized that the criticism was ad hominem, and the attempt was made to invalidate the performance by combating the performer.

## 5.

Upon reading the newspapers published in 1989, it becomes clear that there had been little threat of a myth starting to surround the appearance in *Dziennik* until Szczepkowska's critics made their voices heard. It was then that the actress's defenders spoke out, supporting the political engagement of her message. For example, in the theater community, Jacek Sieradzki took Szczepkowska's side. On the pages of the weekly magazine *Polityka* [Politics], he wrote that, admittedly, communism “is not subject to magical thinking and is not going to rot under the influence of a spell cast on TV, not even such a suggestive one” (Sieradzki 1989), but the actress's gesture heralds the exhaustion of the paradigm of the theater as a poor substitute for public life and is therefore of great importance.

Bronisław Geremek stood up in a different way in defense of Szczepkowska in his interview for the magazine *Po Prostu* [Just Like That]:

Geremek: This date [June 4, 1989] cut through the post-war history of Poland. That day it became apparent what we could only guess: how many of us [there are] and what the will of the nation really is.

Turski: So the announcement made on TV by Joanna Szczepkowska was not just a trivial joke.

Geremek: I know that Joanna's words aroused great controversy. I do not know if I would articulate it in this way myself. I know, however, that she told the honest truth and I fully share her opinion (Geremek 1990, p. 1-2).

Ryszard Turski (editor-in-chief of *Po Prostu*) and Bronisław Geremek took Szczepkowska's gesture very seriously, admitting that the actress had a good sense of the historical turning point. Additionally, the authority of Solidarity supported the legitimacy of the performance. The extensive interview was printed on the first, second, and fifth pages of the first issue after *Po Prostu* started being published again.<sup>6</sup> Szczepkowska was mentioned only once in the conversation, in the fragment quoted above. Nevertheless, the photograph on the first page featured Szczepkowska, whereas the photograph of Turski's interlocutor was printed on the following page. One could say that it signaled Szczepkowska was, at the time, slowly becoming recognizable as an icon of the transformation.

## 6.

What made it easier to downplay and fetishize Joanna Szczepkowska, but

also glorify her gesture, was the actress's career till then. In 1989, her face was widely recognized, mainly due to well-rated and frequently awarded film roles and numerous appearances in productions done by *Teatr Telewizji* [Television Theater], as well as on the stages of *Teatr Współczesny* [Contemporary Theater] and *Teatr Polski* [Polish Theater] in Warsaw. Her three debut roles were: Irina in *Trzy siostry* [Three Sisters], directed by Aleksander Bardini and featured in *Teatr Telewizji* in 1974; Joasia, a high school love of Stefan Karwowski, in the first episode of the TV series *Czterdziestolatek* [A Forty-Year-Old]; and Zosia from Jan Batory's 1976 film *Con Amore*. They can be considered as one (albeit nuanced) creation. In all of those roles, the actress played heroines who were young, naive, sexually inexperienced, and unlucky in love. She played weepy but flirtatious blondes who looked at men with admiration and gratitude, sometimes smiling amid tears, sometimes stamping their feet like schoolgirls, but eventually always speaking with a sweet, soft voice. It was the kind of image which, apart from inexperience, suggested, if not low intelligence, then at least an inability to hold independent opinions, and being subject to strong and changing emotions rather than being able to formulate rational statements about one's worldview. The subsequent roles largely strengthened the image of Szczepkowska as the quintessential naif.

Thirteen years pass between her debut and 1989, and Szczepkowska gives numerous interviews during this time. She is always cast in a patrilineal narrative - she is first and foremost the daughter of the outstanding actor Andrzej Szczepkowski and the granddaughter of the outstanding writer Jan Parandowski. In interviews Szczepkowska is as modest, charming and gentle as the heroines she plays. And journalists, even when mentioning the strong sides of her acting, put her appearance in the first place:

Not very tall. Petite. Head surrounded by blonde hair, large blue eyes, pleasant-sounding voice, great diction - these are, in my opinion, the qualities that distinguish Joanna Szczepkowska [...]. I had a conversation with a likeable, very serious (above her age) young person. (Szczepkowska 1980)

Szczepkowska built her image of a well-liked, "likeable" actress on two more pillars. First, she was a young mother. She gave birth to her daughters - Maria and Hanna - in 1980 and 1983, taking a short break in her acting career. However, since then she has been eager to emphasize that motherhood is an important life task for her. (cf. e.g. Szczepkowska 1988)

Second, she has always followed an internal moral code which entails selecting her roles restrictively. Apart from committing herself to play only interesting characters, she strictly refrains from appearing naked. For this reason, she was surrounded by an aura of prudishness, which the actress was proud of.

## 7.

Inviting Joanna Szczepkowska to the studio, Irena Jagielska probably expected another pleasant conversation with the actress. Meanwhile, the course of the meeting was unusual from the beginning. Already to the first question about her assessment of her creative path, the actress responded with a deep sigh, adding that she did not care. Then she laughed and apologized for saying what she had just said, adding that now she was not concerned with herself at all, because she was more absorbed by the current events (political and social events, as one might guess). Szczepkowska also explained that she envied Jagielska and that she would rather be in

Jagielska's place "reading from the first pages of post-communist Poland". "I'm starting to think that it would be in line with my temper at the moment," she added. Thus Szczepkowska outlines her aspirations quite safely - placing herself amid those who report, and not those who shape the political reality. Then the presenter attempted to change the subject and, quoting a fragment of one of the actress' interviews, asked about the moral code that Szczepkowska adhered to. The performer replied:

This is not about the choice of a scenario. This is about my way of life. I try not to pay attention to what gives a career, what gives money, because as one of my two daughters says, "God made gold without pleasure" and I try to use this moment - when I think that I should live for my home, when I should have more harmony in my life - use it according to this very feeling, no matter how compelling the propositions I get. I know that these are not artistic choices, but I hope they are human. (Szczepkowska in: *Dziennik Telewizyjny*, 1989, Oct. 28)

Immediately after this statement, the exchange I quoted at the beginning of the article followed, ending with the news about the end of communism.

A moment before her key statement, Szczepkowska was still the same actress that the audience loved - modest, hardworking, approaching her career lightly, focused more on motherhood than work, free from greed and seeking applause. I am convinced that if it was not for her image, built precisely and over many years, Szczepkowska's announcement would not have had such strength and social impact. The image of the quintessential naif, a schoolgirl, an actress from a respectable home, of course, exposed the

actress to criticism and ridicule, but it also earned her the support of her defenders. Szczepkowska the performer – a Catholic, a declared oppositionist, whilst also a mother – was after all an ideal exponent of conservative Solidarity values, and her gesture was also perfectly amenable to reading such as that of Andrzej Urbański:

Mrs. Joanna has been remembered [...] by this symbolic sentence, when, on communist television, with charming timidity, she uttered the famous words [...]. No politician, no opposition member, no moral authority did this before her, but her, a beautiful lady from a very respectable family of actors. With a mass of curly golden hair, as if taken out of a patriotic school book. She has captured many hearts, not only mine, forever. (Urbański 2013)

## 8.

In 2012 Jacek Sieradzki published an extensive article on the life and career of Joanna Szczepkowska in *Dialog*[Dialogue]. In it he wrote about the announcement of the end of communism:

She [Szczepkowska] became, whether she wanted it or not, a personification of the systemic change, a sign of regaining freedom, an embodiment of the need for an emblematic take on what, out of the blue, happened in Poland at the time. Her performance in the communist *Dziennik Telewizyjny* and the message delivered with a sweet voice [...] left an imprint on the imagination of the masses, and committed itself to the collective memory for good. (Sieradzki 2012, p. 158)

This is just one of the many voices confirming that the actress's performance was later considered significant for the collective imagination.

The elections on June 4 seem to have three visual symbols: a cowboy from the *High Noon* movie poster, Tadeusz Mazowiecki raising his hands in a gesture of victory after being sworn in as Prime Minister, and Joanna Szczepkowska's smile in *Dziennik Telewizyjny*. The first two symbols are masculine and grandiose, the third is feminine and ambivalent, but it enters the symbolic space previously reserved for great and heroic gestures. Wojciech Tomasik aptly put it as follows:

Joanna Szczepkowska's statement on TV [...] is like a modest, feminine annulment (cancellation) of a doubly male Communist Manifesto. It is also the reverse of the message which was continuously flowing from TV sets on the frosty Sunday of December 13, 1981. (Tomasik 2008, p. 93)

After the initial discussions about Szczepkowska's appearance in *Dziennik* in 1989 ended, the question of evaluation and interpretation of the actress's performance returned in the press systematically, however, marginally. In the nineties, sometimes jokingly, sometimes slightly maliciously, Joanna Szczepkowska was described as the one who not so much announced the end of communism as overthrew it. She is described in those terms, for example, in 1999 in *Pani* [Lady] – one of the oldest Polish magazines for women – in an article presenting a list of ten “mothers of success”, “Polish women of the decade”, prepared on the occasion of the election anniversary of June 4. (Krajewska 1999) Of course, presenting Szczepkowska as the one who overthrew the political system was a metaphor. However, having put it



in this way is telling, because it not only shows how the importance of the actress's performance had increased over time, but also emphasized its performative character. Szczepkowska was no longer the one who announced the end of an epoch, but the one who established that epoch's end.

Dariusz Kosiński puts forward a thesis that Polish identity “is of an eminently dramatic and theatrical character,” (Kosiński 2016, p. 99) and the foundation for this state of affairs was invited by the romantic artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the situation back then (the lack of state sovereignty), it led to the creation of great patriotic theater that permeated all spheres of life and manifested itself both in great demonstrations (such as patriotic uprisings or funerals for patriots) and in everyday life. However, the dramatic-theatrical trait did not disappear with the regaining of independence. On the contrary, it haunted the Second Polish Republic, was present during World War II, and defined the period of the Polish People's Republic, until 1989, when, according to Kosiński, the dramatic-theatrical aspect of identity was forgotten:

The first Polish governments, and the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki especially, did not care about performances, did not even care to establish a holiday commemorating the great change, and only Joanna Szczepkowska, driven by her acting intuition, had to publicly establish the end of communism, otherwise no one might have even noticed it. (ibid. p. 103)

Kosiński spoke about the actress in a similar way a few years earlier, when he gave an interview in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. At that time, he indicated that the

announcement in *Dziennik* was the only “performance of change”.<sup>7</sup> He included Szczepkowska's gesture in contemporary social practices of taking over public space, setting the stage, and drawing attention to oneself, which in turn results in political change. (Kosiński 2014, Apr. 4)

A performance of change is therefore dependent on its use of media. Szczepkowska focused people's attention entirely on herself, for which many could not forgive her. The ensuing strenuous attempts to legitimize her statement, as well as furious attacks against her, partially resulted from this radical intrusion into the field of visibility. The actress, who had been collaborating with television for years, perfectly sensed the potential of the medium (egalitarian and universal), and also found the most adequate form of expression (a short, easy-to-remember sentence, a perfect bon mot, presented with lightness, irony, and a smile). Szczepkowska was perfectly aware of what a performance of change should look like, because she was an excellent actress and was not afraid to use theatrical technique as a political tool.

## 9.

However, the thesis that Joanna Szczepkowska's performance was a symbolic event, referring, as Kosiński says, to the dramatic-theatrical tradition remains incomplete. The performance of October 28, 1989, does not fit so easily in the patriotic, sacrificial, and predominantly patriarchal history of Polish performances. The announcement of the end of communism is an embarrassing performance, shameful from the male, heroic perspective, as it could be seen from the reactions which were aimed at inhabiting the performance, including the reactions of those who praised the performance and read it in the religious-patriotic key and those who

ridiculed and downplayed it or tried to seriously argue with it. Because something had to be done with Szczepkowska and her appearance on TV. A young woman or, as some preferred to say, "a pretty girl" and at the same time an actress is, due to those qualities, so socially and culturally positioned that when she delivers a serious message, but put in the form of an excess and a prank, she does not so much continue the dramatic-theatrical tradition, as much as she captures and transforms it. Thus, she brazenly breaks into the field of visibility, using the strategy of surprise and embarrassment.

The announcement in *Dziennik* was one of the few performances of change seen after 1989. It means that at least due to the absence of other strong gestures which would clearly mark the division between the Polish People's Republic and the Third Republic of Poland, the announcement must be considered as a candidate for an event of historic importance. And yet it is unthinkable to admit that the founding performance, for the new Poland, was a female performance and that it was embarrassing. Moreover, it was the achievement of an actress who did not consult with any male authorities. A performance which started as a pretend game and was crowned with a smile of ambivalence. Thus, Szczepkowska's performance held the spectators in a clinch between the dramatic-theatrical desire and the rejection of the embarrassing character of the performance.

## 10.

Thus, the actress was quickly excluded from the heroic historical narrative. Although various statements, including those I have quoted, exhibit certainty that the announcement of the end of communism had become, in the collective imagination, a symbol of a breakthrough, it was not part of the

official narrative about the systemic change. The narrative which appears, for example, in history books. Although it might seem that the actress's performance in *Dziennik* could be great material for an anecdote for children and teenagers, and the frame documenting the ambivalent smile could easily be recognized by students, the textbooks do not even mention Joanna Szczepkowska. Although more careful research into this issue would be required, a cursory reading of more than twenty history textbooks published in different years (and therefore having been written according to different historical policies implemented by successive governments) clearly shows that the history of 1989 is shown from a male perspective. In the photographs illustrating the texts in question, men appear almost exclusively (often Tadeusz Mazowiecki raising his hands in a gesture of victory or the cowboy from the Solidarity poster), men are credited with achievements and utterances of symbolic importance.

Joanna Szczepkowska's performance was apparently not serious enough, or perhaps too feminine, to become a symbol worthy of passing on to the younger generation. But the strength of an embarrassing performance lies in its ability to perpetuate itself in another less official and more popular circulation: through citation in the press, re-broadcasting on TV, then posting videos of the interview (videos of different lengths) on websites such as YouTube, by recalling it in social media, blogs, and information websites (the serious ones, such as Onet.pl, and the gossipy ones, such as Pudelek.pl). The performance has also persisted, of course, thanks to having been repeated and paraphrased. The circulation of the images of the performance in various media and in various forms, of course, has built its popularity. The appearance in *Dziennik* became good material for an anecdote, a sentimental flashback, and a question in a game show –an episode of the game show *Jeden z dziesięciu* [One Out of Ten] from February 13, 2017 is a

good case in point.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, the announcement of the end of communism successfully infected collective memory, mocking the official narrative from which it was erased.

## 11.

Szczepkowska, of course, had a claim to be a symbol of change, and telling the story she would eagerly attach heroic value to her gesture, presenting it as a brave act of resistance. However, she also knew how to find herself in the popular narrative and how to ensure that her performance was preserved in the collective consciousness. Hence, she readily repeated and paraphrased her statement from 1989, often for less serious purposes, thus taking advantage of the mocking form of an embarrassing performance. How bizarre these repetitions were is best shown by Maciej Mazur's reportage which was broadcast in the news program *Fakty* [Facts] on December 27, 2017 (Mazur 2017, Dec. 27). The reporter used a fragment of an archival recording from June 4, 2009: it shows Szczepkowska, sitting in the window frame of a tenement house at 27 Mickiewicza Street in Warsaw's Żoliborz (i.e. in Jacek Kuroń's house). The smiling actress, dressed in white, announces through the microphone: "Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end." Applause and cries of "bravo!" can be heard. "And now do what you want," adds the performer. Of course, it is difficult to imagine a similar situation in which Tadeusz Mazowiecki repeats the gesture of victory in front of the cameras, to the delight of onlookers. It shows how frivolous and antiheroic the status of the announcement was – on the anniversary of June 4, 2009, no one even tried to pretend that the performer's repeated announcement was more than a

sentimental joke.

The transformation of the announcement into an anniversary attraction took place not only with her consent, but also due to the actress' inspiration. Thus, Szczepkowska's attitude was schizophrenic – on the one hand, she tried to arouse the conviction that her gesture was an exceptional act that was subject to the rules of honor, and on the other hand, she used it as she saw fit. But it was thanks to the perpetuation of the performance through embarrassing channels that it has retained its joyful vitality and power of influence. It has not succumbed to the megalomania of anniversary celebrations and avoided having been petrified into a patriotic formula.

## 12.

The story of the announcement of the end of communism begins with a television incident staged by an actress who was widely known for playing naive heroines. Joanna Szczepkowska focused attention on herself and uttered a sentence which was one of the few attempts to mark the division between two political systems. “The young lady from a country manor”, “the little actress”, the well-liked “Mrs. Joasia” broke into the field of visibility and took a position previously reserved for men. No wonder that her performance caused frustration and attacks, laughter and mockery, but also attempts to explain and justify the performance. All this happened, although it seemed that thanks to her involvement in the oppositional political activities, the actress had sufficient political legitimacy to take a public stance on an important issue. Szczepkowska repeatedly emphasized that she said the words about the end of communism to check whether Poland was already a free country. The test of the freedom of speech turned out to be deceitfully effective, because the reactions to it showed that institutional

censorship was not the only a mechanism regulating the formulation of statements in the public sphere.

However, Szczepkowska's embarrassing performance was so ambivalent that it remains beyond the reach of its critics. They end up ridiculing themselves, both when they try to seriously argue about a gesture which was intentionally designed to be witty, and when they try to ridicule an action intended to be funny and absurd in the first place. An attempt to marginalize it is also ineffective, emphasizing how insignificant the actress's gesture was, or suggesting that she was not the real author of the words she uttered. Szczepkowska skillfully pointed out that her gesture was intended for people, so it was modest and popular by definition. It is also difficult to effectively marginalize an event that has already entered the collective imagination.

While a female embarrassing performance continues to affect irrespectively of the scoffers, its performer has to defend herself, because attempts to discredit her gesture impact, first of all, the public's perception of her. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Szczepkowska skillfully toyed with the images of her as the quintessential naif, a capricious mother, and a well-liked actress. In a way she agreed to the images with which she was marked. At the same time, her political independence and her desire to rebel were growing. Around 2009, she began to take control of the narrative of the events of October 28, 1989. Although it was one of the few expressive performances of change, her television appearance, due to its embarrassing and troublesome nature, was omitted from the official historical narrative. However, it fueled its own independent circulation in social communication, became rooted in popular historical narrative, and started being perpetuated as an anecdote. From this weak position, however, it radiated with a strong discourse having an ever

greater impact on the collective imagination. It was possible due to Szczepkowska, who was not afraid to use embarrassing and bizarre tools (repeating and paraphrasing herself) in order to remind the public of her announcement.

The announcement of the end of communism intercepted and exploded the heroic dramatic-theatrical identity, creating space for a different identity: antiheroic, mocking, feminine, and embarrassing.

Joanna Szczepkowska will probably never be able to convince the public to start reading her gesture uniquely in a serious tone. The actress has failed in her attempts to become a respected and revered symbol. And yet she has also achieved a spectacular success. In 1989, she was a speaker for a commonly shared conviction, but her appearance in *Dziennik* certainly influenced the recognition of June 4 as the official day of the beginning of democratic changes and restoration of Poland's sovereignty. When SW Research, commissioned by the weekly magazine *Newsweek*, conducted a study on a group of eight hundred Poles aged between sixteen and sixty-four, the majority (68% of respondents) concluded that communism in Poland ended on June 4, 1989. (Szaniawski 2016) However, Joanna Szczepkowska won for yet another reason. Thanks to her embarrassing performance on television, she managed to switch into the role of a public life commentator, columnist, and an authority asked for opinions on various topics. In the context of the discussion on the absence of women in media debates ("Dziewuchy Dziewuchom..." 2018), this is of great importance.

Translated by Lynn Suh



## Autor/ka

Katarzyna Waligóra (katarzynaa.waligora@gmail.com) is a PhD candidate at the Theatre and Drama Department at Jagiellonian University. She has authored the book *Koń nie jest nowy (O rekwizytach w teatrze)/It's not a brand new horse (on the theatrical props)*. She was the curator of XVIII edition of theatre Festival Prapremiery in Bydgoszcz. As a theatre teacher she teaches Contemporary theatre, Performance art and Performance studies in various Polish institutions students for both adults and youths. Her current research interests lie in the embarrassing female performances – a specific form of emancipatory women participation in the public sphere. ORCID: 0000-0001-5297-2889.

## Footnotes

1. The quote used in the title of the article comes from the very book *June 4*. With these words Szczepkowska was reportedly addressed by a random drunk man who approached her in the street asking about her TV appearance.
2. Szczepkowska confirms that the recording repeated on TV and circulating on the Internet is the second version of the recording (Szczepkowska 2014, p. 364).
3. The category of an embarrassing female performance is explained in detail in the article "An Underrated Emancipatory Strategy: The Embarrassing Female Performance." *Teksty Drugie*, 2020, no. 6.
4. In her autobiography, Szczepkowska explains that she had been considering which word would be the right word to choose. Ultimately, she had decided to use the term "communism" because of its recognizability. She had also been aware that "the Polish People's Republic was on an eternal, endless 'road to communism'. The system that was established in our country was called socialism" (Szczepkowska 2009, p. 250). However, the actress had come to a conclusion that "it was socialism that was never to be found here." (ibid.)
5. P. Phelan, op. cit., p. 6
6. Po Prostu had to be closed in 1957 due to the direction of the Main Office for the Control of the Press.
7. One could argue with Dariusz Kosiński's thesis, pointing to another performance of change, which was the exposé of Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki delivered on September 12, 1989, during which the politician fainted. However, the exposé did not become an embarrassing performance - the story appears in nearly all history books and other official history narratives (though it is also present in popular history). Above all, however, an exposé is usually taken seriously.
8. The question that was asked in the episode was: Who was the author of the words "Ladies

and Gentlemen, on 4th June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end"? Unfortunately the contestant provided an incorrect answer by choosing Tadeusz Mazowiecki. It is worth noting that the question appeared in the category "History of Poland". Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5zNUZBzELY> Accessed: 26 Feb. 2018.

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NEW CHOREOGRAPHY

## Dramaturgy Like a Ghost? A Few Remarks on the Dramaturg and Words in Dance

Karolina Wycisk Jagiellonian University in Kraków

The author begins with an observation by André Lepecki concerning the fear of working with a dramaturg. Recalling several concepts that define the role of the dramaturg in dance (Lepecki, Liesbeth Wildschut, Bojana Cvejić, Bojana Bauer, Maaïke Bleeker), the author juxtaposes various interpretations of the scope and forms of collaboration with the dramaturg. She reaches the conclusion that although in a professional context, dramaturgy is most of the time associated with project-based work and the freelance economy, the fusion of various functions and the growing significance of the word in dance productions make the presence of the dramaturg increasingly desirable. At the same time, she notes that the viewer's contribution can also be considered as belonging to dramaturgy, and that the understanding of dramaturgy goes beyond the dichotomy of word/text, and movement/stage interpretation.

Keywords: dramaturgy, dramaturg, dance, performance, words

A few years ago, André Lepecki, in an article entitled “‘We Are Not Ready for the dramaturge’: Some Notes for Dance Dramaturgy,”<sup>1</sup> wondered what was the reason for the lack of readiness to cooperate with the dramaturg in the field of contemporary dance. Based on his own experience (as a recognized researcher, he was a dramaturg in many dance projects),<sup>2</sup> as well as on the responses of various choreographers and dancers whom he had sent proposals of cooperation, he came to the conclusion that the fear of

cooperating with a dramaturg on the production of a performance originates from the dramaturg's potential associates assuming that she or he possesses some (previously acquired) knowledge, as a result of which she or he becomes, in the eyes of those potential associates, a figure of someone who "should know" what the performance is (or is to be) about. Thus, not being ready to cooperate with a dramaturg at the same time leads to postponing the moment when this knowledge is acquired ("Readiness for knowing what the piece is (about)";<sup>3</sup> Lepecki 2010, p. 185), in hopes that when the dramaturg actually comes in she or he will be able to work on some solid portion of material already existing. Such time management – a dramaturg cannot appear "too early" or "too late" in the process of creation – may cause the co-authors of the project to fear that they are going to miss the "right" moment. Although, as Lepecki states, it is everyone's hope that dramaturgy will allow for substantive and formal coherence of the performance, almost no one is ready to invite a dramaturg (the author quotes his interlocutors, with the chorus-like "we are not ready" recurring throughout his article). As a result, one could ask whether it is possible at all to prepare for the collaboration with a dramaturg. Is the dramaturgy of a performance solely the result of the dramaturg's involvement? How are the roles of the dramaturg described and how, in the context of various theoretical approaches, is dramaturgy defined in dance performances?

## **The choreographer's ally versus the ignorant collaborator**

As rightfully noted by Maaïke Bleeker (a researcher and a dramaturg),<sup>4</sup> there are as many types of dramaturgy as there are dramaturgs and their ways of working and establishing relationships with choreographers. (Bleeker, 2015)

What is more, every project requires specific methods of cooperation, adjusted to the specific working conditions and possibilities in terms of time and money, so it is difficult to talk about a single concept of dance dramaturgy. However, it is worth recalling a more classical understanding of the roles of the dramaturg and dramaturgy in dance, in order to present other interpretations in its light.

According to Liesbeth Wildschut, who represents both the theoretical and artistic perspective,<sup>5</sup> a dramaturg is “the choreographer’s ally in their quest to create a perfect performance.” (Wildschut 2013, p. 222) The task of a dramaturg is to search for connections between individual elements of a performance, as well as to stay in touch and mediate between the participants of the project. A dramaturg should participate in all stages of performance production: in the conception stage by asking “checking” questions and offering her or his conclusions to the choreographer “in a clear and inspiring way”; at the rehearsal stage by offering suggestions regarding the structure of the performance; and in the final stage of production and eventual staging of the performance by engaging with the audience. According to Wildschut, the dramaturg can also analyze dance on four levels: 1. the movement of dancers (e.g. muscle tension), 2. the dance composition (e.g. spatial relationships of people and objects, repetitions, expectations of the audience), 3. the relationship between dance and other sign systems (multidisciplinarity), 4. the structure of the performance (transition between scenes, development over time). Despite a number of duties, the dramaturg’s work is in fact invisible, because “as a rule, a dramaturg does not make decisions, but ponders, gives advice and offers suggestions.” (Wildschut 2013, p. 229) Moreover, dramaturgs are present only in so far as they are needed by directors/choreographers, and their attitude is characterized by an appropriate amount of distance. First of all,

dramaturgs should objectively assess the effects of the creative process: “They describe not what they would like to see or what is not there, but what they see, experience and what associations they have in connection with their observations.” (Wildschut, 2013, p. 232) Wildschut also understands the role of dramaturgs as translators who are “usually a link between the dance team and the outside world,” (Wildschut 2013, p. 233) occupying themselves with various activities: promotional (program notes) and educational activities (contact with the audience, post-performance meetings), as well as with documentation and archiving of the performance, and even fundraising (writing grant applications, obtaining funds and sponsors).

The theory gives rise to an almost utopian environment in the process of creating a dance performance, where the division of roles is evident and clear, the position of the director/choreographer cannot be questioned, and the presence of the dramaturg is only a (rational) guarantee of consistency and coherence among the choreographer’s intuitive choices. Collective effort and collaboration are virtually impossible here, as all responsibility is entrusted solely to the choreographer. Wildschut also states that the professionalization in dance dramaturgy has resulted from the professionalization in theater dramaturgy, and she begins her historical overview of this phenomenon describing its inception in theater (first she mentions the repertoire of Ephraim Lessing, then the text interpretation by Bertolt Brecht, and also Peter Stein who collaborates in a team of dramaturgs). Thus, the author confirms the role of dramaturgs as those who mediate between the sign system and its movement and dance interpretation, and at the same time they safeguard the previously adopted dramaturgical concept, almost threatening the director/choreographer’s freedom of choice (which again may cause them to fear the cooperation with

a dramaturg).

Lepecki, mentioned earlier, is opposed to the concept of the dramaturg as a translator of meanings and the “one who should know.” In his polemic, he talks about the shift of emphasis in the creation process – what fuels dramaturgy is not so much the desire for knowledge, but rather the power coming “from not knowing” [A.L.] and, as a result, the potentiality of what may happen (“the work-to-come” [A.L.]). In this light, dramaturgy is not the traditionally understood negotiation between the text/writing process and the stage movement/action, but the relationship between *knowing* and *owning* – between (not) knowing and (not) claiming authorship,<sup>6</sup> because it is difficult to identify the author of thoughts and associations circulating among all the participants of the creative process. By raising the problem of the relation between dramaturgy-ignorance-wandering, Lepecki emphasizes the meaning of wandering itself: “Wandering, losing trace, wrong calculation. Not knowing where to go next, and going anyway.” (Lepecki 2010, p. 194) It is important here to make a distinction – wandering is not the same as the aesthetics of failure, it is rather an exploration of the state of ignorance, allowing for erroneous thinking processes, making unsuccessful attempts and further wandering, and as a result, creating collectively a type of dramaturgy that also does not lead to unambiguous solutions (“dramaturgy that does not know” [A.L.]). Its task is to bring out the tension between many possibilities: (wrong) ways of thinking allowed in the course of work and possible processes of their corporeal adjusting and embodying. (Lepecki 2010, p. 186) Wandering may, among other things, take place at the level of the texts used in the work, but dramaturgy is not limited to the correct interpretation of those texts. It is the reading error that can reveal the valuable meanings and senses hidden in the “right” interpretations.



The dramaturg's task is even to sabotage the accepted ways of working and thinking, to mislead, advise inappropriately – this is the only chance to avoid linguistic clichés. Therefore, the dramaturg is not someone who enters the creative process with a ready-made theory or knowledge, but rather someone who sabotages this kind of thinking, who is in a way acting on behalf of the work itself, “a piece of itself” [A.L.] (also, the dramaturg does not respond to some pre-existing needs, but rather to the needs that result from the actions taken). This changes the nature of the dramaturg's job – carried out not for the choreographer or the team, but for “the performance itself”, even if no one knows yet what the performance is supposed to be about. The dramaturg unearths (and puts into practice) the performative force (“authorial force” [A.L.]) of the performance (“work-to-come” [A.L.]), the performance's longing to be realized, the commands and desires that come from within the performance. Paradoxically, then, the “ignorant” dramaturgs do not pose any threat to other collaborators – they will not expose their collaborators' ignorance, they will not evaluate the implementation of initially adopted concepts. It is not necessary to prepare for the dramaturg's presence, rather one only needs to be ready to wander together and to often make wrong choices together. It is the affectivity and the “work of errancy” [A.L.] that carry the performative potential of extracting the work from mental clichés.

## **Ignorant friend instead of an “outside eye”**

According to Bojana Cvejić,<sup>7</sup> who works in the field of performance theory and practice, dramaturgy is not necessary in dance production and practice.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, the function of such a pragmatic dramaturgy would only be to control the methods adopted or the effectiveness of the actions taken. Then the dramaturgy would be the effect of orienting the efforts towards the

result or towards the necessity to adhere to some previously established assumptions, which stands in contradiction both with modern methods of work (which see creation as a process, not as a result) and with the role of the dramaturg. The dramaturg “does not enter the creative process solely because there is need to employ one,” i.e. there is a requirement to hire another associate. On the contrary, the presence of the dramaturg who is the “co-creator of the problem” (Cvejić, 2010)<sup>9</sup> is to guarantee an experiment rather than a compromise, the creation of a new language instead of resorting to an existing one, and not the control or supervision of the assumed workflow.

Also, the role of the dramaturg is not to translate and mediate between the artists and the audience. What for Wildschut was the communication between the “language of performance” and the outside world, for Cvejić is a kind of theatrical pedagogy that does not belong to the competence of the dramaturg. Moreover, the dramaturg is entangled in the network of relations linking the methods of production, the ways of exchanging the results of artistic work, the producers and the audience; hence the interaction must not be limited to the dissemination of (objective and pre-existing) meanings between the two parties – the creators and the audience, because many more parties and factors are involved in the process.

Similarly, the relationship of the dramaturg and the choreographer, as presented by Wildschut, consisting in rationalizing the choreographer’s intuitive choices, becomes problematized by Cvejić. Although she claims that it is required of the dramaturg to possess linguistic and literary skills, she also exposes the division of labor between the two figures: the choreographer who “thinks with the body” and the dramaturg who conceptualizes ideas through language and is somehow disconnected from

bodily experience (and yet the dramaturg *is* close to the process and experiences its successive stages). Cvejić is also opposed to the concept of the critical “outside eye”, meaning that the role of the dramaturg is to look at the effects of artists’ work objectively, because she or he is distant from the creative process and relations with artists. The line separating performers and observers also becomes blurred when other collaborators become observers, even temporarily, negotiating their roles and institutionally imposed divisions, which either distance or involve participants. A choreographer, a dancer or a dramaturg can occupy the position of an “outside eye”, thus testing out a variety of perspectives. The anachronistic notions of objectivity and distance are abolished; dramaturgs are in a close relationship with their colleagues. They are allies in experimentation, enemies in the pursuit of complementarity and unambiguity – a dramaturg is “the friend of a problem.” (Cvejić 2010)

This close relationship is based on ignorance and the “production of problems” in a given context, not on referring to previously formulated concepts or asking rhetorical questions. The attitude of ignorance is understood here similarly as in the case of Lepecki – as welcoming one’s own ignorance (unprejudiced by expectations) and as an openness to potential experimentation (“dramaturgy in experiment”; Cvejić 2010). Let us imagine, says Cvejić, the dramaturg and the choreographer reading a book together written in a language they both don’t know. They would have to “rewrite” it together into new codes and meanings. Dramaturgy is therefore a constant collective speculation about possible situations, about the language used to describe those situations, about points of view, influences and factors determining the creation process – it is a production of problems. Colleagues, “friends of problems”, are also aware of the shared responsibility and the affective impact of decisions made in the process – beyond the “here and

now” of the performance.

Almost every theory describing the possible scope of the dramaturg’s activities, attempts to justify the fear of collaborating with one. Cvejić justifies this fear with the multitude of functions performed by dramaturgs and the fact that they transfer ideas and stage concepts to other discursive practices: they cultivate knowledge, journalism, as well as the academic, educational or curatorial work. Additionally, Cvejić often asks questions about professional ethics and the authorship of original concepts (Who would then be the author?). However, an argument in defense of Cvejić’s approach is the specificity of the dramaturg’s work – it is a job that combines many different jobs, and doing the job well requires constant mobility. There seems to be a threat, however, in approaching dramaturgy as if it was a new doxa and employing a dramaturg who is “trained in various discourses” in order to guarantee an interdisciplinary approach to the work, the use of post-structural philosophies and post-dramatic theories. In this perspective, the dramaturg becomes a coach giving advice on how to make performances, who possesses a sort of know-how and only applies it to subsequent projects.

The theorist and dramaturg Bojana Bauer,<sup>10</sup> in turn, claims that the possible fear of collaborating with dramaturgs comes from the fact that they may “bring things closer” too early by naming them;<sup>11</sup> limiting non-verbal communication, trying to verbalize it by means of words and idiomatic expressions, “fixing” what escapes definitions, and as a result limiting the potential multiplicity of meanings. Katherine Profeta, a longtime dramaturg in Ralph Lemon’s projects,<sup>12</sup> points out, however, that the awareness of the “reducing power” of naming can go hand in hand with the potential of transforming the language (see: Profeta 2015, p. 26). The transformation can

take place, according to Profeta, at the level of (in)visibility – something that “has always been there”, something invisible or unnoticed so far, can become visible in the process of searching for its cause and name. This kind of thinking, however, is a consequence of assuming the primacy of the word over movement and action – hence fear would result from the awareness of the performative power of the act of naming.

## **Dramaturgical thinking**

The category of “dramaturgical thinking” appears relatively often in works on dance dramaturgy. Perhaps it is due to the fact that all participants of the artistic process perform various functions interchangeably, including the function of the dramaturg the responsibilities of whom are not reserved only for one person in the team. “Dramaturgical thinking”<sup>13</sup> consists in performing the artistic work consciously, mapping the results in the network of affects, influences and consequences. Maaïke Bleeker expands this category by saying that inviting a dramaturg to join a creative process is tantamount to creating room for dialogue, thinking in motion, allowing interactions to happen between many people. Although she uses an expression borrowed from the linguistic field of sports competition by calling the dramaturg a sparring partner, the relationship between those involved in artistic work (including the dramaturg) is that of friendship and shared mode of thinking. It is the relationship which allows for generating new meanings “among people and between people and objects.” (Bleeker 2015, p. 70) Dramaturgy is therefore not a material practice or a practice rooted in materiality, but the effect of the interaction between many anonymous thoughts (“thinking no-one’s thought”; Bleeker 2015, p. 69). Undermining the category of authorship and the classic understanding of the dramaturg as the author of the dramaturgical concept, Bleeker claims that the viewer,

the recipient, is yet another partner in the process of collective thought creation, engaged in the emergence of meanings.

A new perspective is brought by Bojana Bauer's observation. She claims that dramaturgy is a process of writing and rewriting, and the most substantial portion of that process is producing the memory of the performance. Going beyond the oversimplified dichotomy: the experiencing subject (the performer, choreographer, dancer) versus the knowing subject (the dramaturg), therefore, going beyond the interpretation of dramaturgy as the negotiation between practice and theory, she argues that the dramaturg is "also an acting subject", and the area of the dramaturg's activity is the memory of the performance. The dramaturg tracks the connections between "the material and the way it is remembered, reactivated or transformed." (Bauer 2015, p. 41) While remaining in the relation of closeness to other participants of the creative process, the dramaturg creates opportunities for conversations and interventions that "pause" the action and subject it to reflection. By way of asking questions about the production of meanings and affects, and positioning, in a way, some completed portion of work, the dramaturge "records" the memory of what happens (keeps a "scored memory of the process", p. 42). As Bauer says, it is the "scored memory" that makes the final result possible, and in effect it also justifies the presentation of that result on stage – through dramaturgical awareness of the problems with which the memory can enter into dialogue both within and outside the performance.

## **Production of words in dance**

Dance dramaturgy is considered by many theoreticians as a practice and profession that emerged in European dance in the nineties of the last

century. Dramaturgy is most often defined in the professional context, as a profession, i.e. a project-based economical work of freelancers (Bauer 2015). Changes in artistic production go hand in hand with the growing popularity of the profession of the dramaturg, and it is related to the institutional requirement of producing words at every stage of artistic work. The dramaturg becomes more and more “needed”, contrary to what Cvejić said about the non-pragmatic function of dramaturgy. Indeed, dance has to communicate itself better and better – through research projects, descriptions, grant applications, reviews, and conversations with artists and viewers. Also, the institutional requirements for the coordination of educational or artistic research expand the scope of theoretical reflection, description, and analysis, while grant regulations impose describing art in terms of projects – from the stage of preparation, through implementation, to the evaluation of the assumed goals and results. The focus on language, self-awareness and self-definition of dance activities by their creators in the process of artistic production – and thus, turning towards the non-material side of the performance production – create another opportunity for the dramaturg who becomes increasingly concerned with producing knowledge about a given project (even if the dramaturg is an “ignorant collaborator”, as postulated by Lepecki). The dramaturg, resorting to Bauer’s observation, becomes an increasingly desirable, “creatively productive subject of knowledge” (Bauer 2015, p. 38).

Despite the popularity of the phenomenon of dramaturgy, to which many conferences and publications have been devoted,<sup>14</sup> and the growing role of the dramaturg in the process of artistic creation, the value of text and words in contemporary performative practices, especially in dance and choreography, still remains underestimated. The ephemeral nature of scenarios and other text materials means that they do not exist in the

popular-scientific mainstream. However, undoubtedly, more and more artists use dramaturgic strategies in which the word – written and spoken – plays an important role. Both movement techniques based on words (e.g. *logomotion*)<sup>15</sup> and the popular strategy of self-critical artistic expression (of the *performance lecture* type) are interesting. In a situation where the opposition of movement – word has been abolished, and the self-awareness of dance has increased, the word can also constitute a space of negation – a text from which one is escaping (“escaping language”). After the conceptual turn in dance and choreography, dance became not only a form of (autotelic) theorizing; contemporary choreographers, admittedly, return to the narrative, but in the philosophical context (the work of dance “philosophers”) rather than in the theatrical one (presenting the action on stage). The methodology is created each time within a given project by all its participants (including the dramaturg) who describe their own working methods and conceptualize dance. Therefore, the role of text materials, by means of which artists undertake to explain their motivations, make references to inspirations, quotes, contexts, is often of considerable importance. In the case of texts created in the process of producing dance performances, it is crucial whether they are autonomous materials or whether their content affects the reception of the performance; how projects are described in the program materials; what these descriptions do (whether they are announcements, author’s commentary, or behind-the-scenes texts). The tension between the curatorial commentary, the description of the performance, and the stage event itself, creates yet another opportunity to analyze words in dance performances. Such texts also constitute material elements of the memory of the performance, a kind of archive of artistic work. The production of words in dance is also often the best critical strategy in the face of institutional and conventional practices or more



traditional ways of interpreting dance.

## **“Writing body” against interpretation**

There are strategies of “reading dance as text”, in which the reception process consists in decoding symbols and the dancing body becomes an equivalent of a literary character. Such perspective is represented by Mark Franko<sup>16</sup> and his “reading” of the dance-text. In this way Franko decodes signs in 17th-century ballet, all the while being aware that his approach is a historical one. Thus, he deconstructs the Renaissance manifestation of dance as text, where geometric ballets were constructed based on symbols and codes recognizable in the Renaissance culture. While this strategy is close to the semantic one, which examines the relationship between the sign (the dancer’s body) and the extra-linguistic (in this case, external to the stage) reality, the most interesting part seems to be the figure of a “speechless body”, as Frank refers to it, i.e. the body that wants to escape the narrative and narrative reading. This state would be characterized by moments of expression and instability “between” ballet poses, heralding a new era, a manifestation of modernist independence and the liberation of dance from the convention of having to rely on a plot. Moments of flight somehow free the body from symbolism, however, paradoxically, even then it takes part in the process of (scenic) writing (“Flight is part of the writing process”; Profeta 2015, pp. 53-54). The figure of the “speechless body” is thus part of the narrative, from which the body would like to free itself, while at the same time pointing to the paradox of its existence – within the narrative and thanks to the narrational perception of viewers (Profeta 2015, pp. 53-54). However, it should be remembered that this is a historical strategy of decoding symbols inscribed in dance poses. Today it would be difficult to apply similar categories, especially in contemporary dance. Such “reading”

of a dance also creates the risk of over-interpretation, which is pointed out by another researcher, Martin Randy.<sup>17</sup>

Randy disagreed with “the history of the boom and bust” of dance trying to rewrite the American narrative of the dance revolution of the sixties and the fiasco of the eighties (Randy 1996, p. 177), and incorporate in the historical consciousness the revolutionary moments in the development of dance practices of the following years. Revising both the context of artistic innovations and the socio-political conditions of the emergence of dance (especially *the post-modern dance* of the 1960s), he argued that one cannot interpret dance by simply comparing its circumstances to, in a sense, static and unchanging work (on the contrary, it is important to read “the inner movement” of dance). Overinterpretation, according to Randy, creates the risk of reading more “than a dance can bear” (Randy 1996, p. 178) and surrendering to the significant, yet nonetheless paralyzing influence of history, which influences the reception of the latter dance practices – those dated after the dance boom – regardless of their possible breakthrough character and innovative potential. Doing so places dance in the socio-political context and fits dance in the repeated patterns of internal analysis, which, when perpetuated, create a kind of looped discourse.

The question then arises how to talk about choreography in order to avoid overinterpretation, but also “narrativization”, since the choreography itself aims at blurring the plot, escapes linear structures, runs away from history and characters. Choreographer and researcher Susan Leigh Foster<sup>18</sup> is known for her “dancing” lectures – she talks about choreography, herself being in action, in movement. According to her, the body (the “writing body”), as a specific field of representation, has its own dictionary of meanings, syntactic and paradigmatic tools. Writing (speaking) and dancing

are activities that require bodily presence, they both produce signs and meanings, sense and sensuality, and communicate on a verbal and affective level. The functional and productive relationship/mediation between the body that writes and the body that reads always takes place in a specific political and social context. However, the relationship may be temporary, and the message may be ephemeral in nature.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, Foster herself uses the methods she talks about – movement, action, performance – to illustrate her theory. Perhaps it is one of the most effective strategies of talking about dance, rarely used in the context of academic activity, much more often practiced by choreographers and performers.

Referencing examples of artistic work, it is worth recalling Paweł Sakowicz's *Total*, who even uses the term "text choreography" when talking about this work. (Sakowicz, 2017) In his solo performance, the choreographer experiments with the formula of *performance lecture*, at the same time approaching his lecture on choreography and dance as a kind of artistic manifesto. This is how he begins his performance: "I took the liberty of speculating about virtuosity in dance, since it affects me very much as a dancer."<sup>20</sup> In his lecture, he refers to his private and professional life, his own ballet education and his knowledge of the ballet vocabulary. In this case, the dramaturgy is stretched between the two activities: speaking and dancing, because Sakowicz consciously combines both activities, conditioning them to function together. Virtuosity in dance is associated with the perfection of performance, with the classical ballet, the mastery of precision and the aesthetics of beauty. However, for this choreographer virtuosity in dance becomes a subject of research from other perspectives: ecological economy ("virtuoso economy of movement could be understood as a renewable source of body energy"), individual desire and fantasy, and finally, value attributed to a performative act, including a dance

presentation. The text “choreographed” by Sakowicz consists of quasi-scientific speculations, “four hypothetical, speculative scenarios which define, stage, give an idea of, and perhaps even lead to possibly performing a virtuoso dance.” Perhaps because it is the audience who decides whether the virtuoso dance is to be performed or not in the course of the evening (the performer asks: “Would you like to see me dance?”; In this case, the question determines the subsequent action.). The detail-object, i.e. the notebook he holds in his hands for some time during his lecture, is a symbolic reference to the text that structures the entire event. The material presence of the text is emphasized by the way its delivery is executed (the controlled tone of the speaker’s voice, clear diction, unemotional delivery of the text) as well as thanks to the specificity of the solo performance, a kind of a quasi-lecture or an academic presentation. Sakowicz, being also the author of the script,<sup>21</sup> puts his writing practice to the test on the stage. By means of an almost academic narrative, the choreographer/author builds, in the performance, a kind of “dramaturgy of the word” where the (often ironic) relationship of what is said to what is presented is significant. Especially that his speculations refer to consecutive contexts in which a virtuoso dance could potentially be performed – and question the “obvious”, and thus often invisible, conditions for the reception of a virtuoso dance, such as the possibility of naming and categorizing it in accordance with some human system of orders. What if, as Sakowicz speculates, the category of humanity, hence also the audience of the performance, did not exist – would it be possible then for virtuosity to manifest itself? If so would it take the form of eco-virtuosity, or could the very act of existence, the will to survive, be the manifestation of virtuosity? The answer to this question could potentially be affirmative, because, as argued by Sakowicz: “My body is one cell and it is performing a virtuoso survival dance right in front of you.”

# Beyond the word

The word in dance is often used to, paradoxically, activate non-verbal elements of the performance. As Katja Schneider<sup>22</sup> says, dance is the confrontation of the body on stage with other, heteronymous systems of orders (Schneider 2013, p. 117), with various systems of materialization. Lepecki is of a similar opinion when he says that dramaturgy should participate in all actions, not only those produced by the text or in the writing process; also “objects, temperature, time must be taken into account.” Not only, as Lepecki points out, at the poetic and symbolic level, but as a matter of fact that “objects or temperature also work” (Lepecki 2010, p. 194). In a dance performance, all the elements both mean and are part of the performance. One example of such an understanding of dramaturgy – as operations on the non-verbal, but also non-human systems of orders – is the independent work of Agata Siniarska and her concept of “hyperchoreography”, which she understands as the search for choreographic relationships between the animate and inanimate elements of the natural environment, and the inclusion of micro- and macrocosms of human and non-human organisms under the term “choreography”. Siniarska often uses the format of *performance lecture*, she “lays out” her concepts on choreography in her quasi-experiments with the audience.

As she says in *Hyperdances*, “this lecture is a utopia on building a world”<sup>23</sup> in which the coexistence of many bodies “offers the opportunity to work with a huge number of dancers, in large formats, on large stages.” Siniarska is interested not so much in stage choreography as in the one that takes place with the participation of microorganisms, waves, bacteria, microbes, fluids running in trees – visible and invisible elements of the natural environment. Referring directly to Yvonne Rainer, who gave up dance in favor of film,

Siniarska suggests: “yes, dance should be abandoned, but only the dance of human agents.” According to her, Rainer wanted to limit dance to pure movement, but movement is never pure because it is impossible to rid it of overwritten cultural or social inscriptions. Therefore, she proposes to create new relationships; the hyperdance is supposed to offer new possibilities of experiencing movement – in the non-human dimension. Dramaturgy, therefore, is supposed to include here all the actions that occur during the choreographic activity, without focusing on the body of the dancer, usually situated in the center of attention. Halfway through her lecture, Siniarska even leaves the room, her voice still coming out of the speakers. Immediately afterwards, she starts to comment on the view that the audience is looking at – the park or the street, depending on the place of presentation. Thus, she tries to shift the attention away from the dancing body of a subject to the objects left by themselves: plants, grass, pavements, walls and glass (“here is a deanthropocentric dance happening right in front you”; “this dance is sticky, it sticks to us”; “this dance has no center, and no edges either”). The human body is an element of this hyper-collective of forms and movements (“Maybe you feel a strange tingling on your skin? Bacteria? Virus? Radioactive dust? It all runs and jumps here! It all unites us into one collective! It all dances here!”). Although Siniarska emphasizes the potential of “global choreography”, she is aware that the focus still remains on the dancing human body. At the same time, the existence of human body is possible thanks to the developed linguistic categories, thanks to words and through linguistic experience. The human body also results from collective work, thanks to the circulation of many thoughts and texts (Is this circulation also an element of hyperchoreography?). Siniarska’s notes on another performance, *Ślepowidzenie* [Blindsight], seem to confirm this:

As I write this text, I feel many other texts that have influenced me and what I am writing now. The fact that without them this text would not be what it is. I am not writing it. I give my voice to the collectives of thoughts, ideas, traces, discourses, words, translations... This text is therefore composed of many other texts that were/are important during my work on the performance *Ślepowidzenie* – repeatedly reformulated, sometimes untouched. At the same time, I do not intend to arm them with footnotes – it is more important for me to observe how these texts, their fragments as agents, are active in this text, without referencing their authors. Each solo performance comes to existence the same way this text does. (Siniarska, 2016, p. 98)

## ***Feedback, or the viewer's dramaturgy***

In a situation where words increasingly condition artistic production, whereas texts and spoken word become integral part of the structure of dance performances, the questions on how to talk about dance and choreography, what words and languages to use for their description, become more and more significant. This applies to critical texts as well as the effort of the viewers who are engaged in the reception process. The former seems to be indispensable as feedback provided to artists in a formal way, through reviews, reports and interviews, printed or published online, but the former is also a significant part of the material archive. The latter refers to post-spectacle conversations with authors, feedback sessions organized during presentations of works – they are often ephemeral situations, usually only available to participants of these meetings, rarely recorded and made available to the public. As Liz Lerman,<sup>24</sup> choreographer

and creator of the Critical Response, one of the feedback methods, says, feedback sessions not only help artists find new inspirations or develop their existing material (which allows them, above all, to find motivation to continue their work), but also discover the aesthetic and performative potential of the audience. Of course, participation in the feedback process requires viewers to make an effort of participation, however, this is what usually characterizes most artistic events (Kunst 2016, p. 57). The “power of questions” and the joint effort of dialogue open up new areas of interpretation. According to Lerman, feedback is primarily based on communication and involves “all kinds of interpersonal interactions, from coaching to social dialogue, from artistic collaboration to family conversations.” It is important to highlight that Lerman talks of family relationship in the context of an effective method in the field of artistic production, thus assigning value to close relations between colleagues in the process of creation. Feedback is just one of the methods of jointly creating the dramaturgy of the meeting between performers and spectators; it is the collaborative production of meanings (“dramaturgy of collaboration”; Ruhsam, 2010). Closeness here means being active, connecting to meanings that are active in the performance, it is the possibility of negotiating those meanings through expressing one's individual opinion, speaking from one's own perspective; and finally, it is negotiating one's position. This collaborative work – the joint effort of spectators, choreographers and performers – takes place both at the linguistic and affective-cognitive level; and words, the questioned definitions and rules, turn out to be crucial in negotiating the terms of that collaboration. In this sense, dramaturgy is not so much an interdependence between elements within a performance or between the word and the movement, but rather it is a dialogue between the participants – creators and spectators, active performers. The performance



*Słowa do tańca* [Words for Dancing] by the choreographer Anna Wańtuch is an invitation for the audience to co-create the meeting with the performers,<sup>25</sup> and at the same time a confirmation that the dramaturgy is based on dialogue.

In a small space, the viewer is treated individually, subsequent meetings, intended only for one participant, are held every half an hour. During such a “session”, the viewer is faced with the choice between words and their meanings, because Wańtuch asks directly: coffee or tea, nudity or clothing, full or empty, together or separately, quickly or slowly – reacting to each answer on the choreographic level (also, the music then changes its melody and timbre), performing before the viewer (in a close relation to her or him, minimally engaging her or him to make a move, or leaving freedom to just observe the performer's work). It is the viewer who is the dramatist of the whole event, because she or he makes selections and juxtapositions at the level of not only physical actions (the viewer's response always entails a different action of the performer), but most of all, the meanings following from them, the relations constructed *ad hoc* between words, their material sound and the message they carry. Words used for dancing and activating movement also build a space of associations, reminiscences, emotions and affects: “Because to choose a «cat» is to be in one space with a cat, to «dance» with him, whereas to choose a «mother» is to be physically face to face with someone's specifically defined corporeality. Establish a relationship with her. Listen to her «song».” The words here “open and organize the space between two people”, strengthen the relation of mutual influence and closeness, but also enable collaboration between the choreographer and the audience on the dramaturgical level. Just this one example shows that today it is difficult to limit the understanding of dramaturgy to the work of a dramaturg in the process of artistic work.

Evidently, dramaturgy can also be described as the viewer's effort undertaken during a meeting with the choreographer/performer, with each individual project requiring specific modes of description. As Sandra Noeth<sup>26</sup> concludes, almost ominously: “the dramaturgy belongs to no one. It is like a monster – a ghost.” (Noeth, 2010)

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## Autor/ka

Karolina Wycisk (office@performat-production.com) – PhD student at the Jagiellonian University, dance critic. Producer and dance manager, she runs performat production (performat-production.com) and promotes female polish choreographers abroad. ORCID: 0000-0002-7318-3683.

## Footnotes

1. Lepecki actually repeats the conclusions of this article in his next article, “Errancy as Work: Seven Strewn Notes for Dance Dramaturgy.” [in:] *Dance Dramaturgy. Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, edited by Pil Hansen, Darcey Callison, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2015. However, taking into account their chronology, I decided to quote from the earlier article.
2. In 1992-1998, Lepecki worked as a dramaturg with Meg Stuart, Francisco Camacho, João Fiadeiro and Vera Montero. Lepecki is a performing arts theorist, author of many books and publications, and professor at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. At the same time, he is a curator of exhibitions and events bordering on performing arts, visual arts and choreography.
3. The quotations from Lepecki's articles which are significant in the opinion of the author of the present article, are left in their original [English] language version [marked with A.L. by the translator when necessary]. The remaining quotations have been translated [from

English to Polish] by the author.

4. Professor of the Theater Studies Department at the University of Utrecht, for over fifteen years she worked as a dramaturg with choreographers and directors and led the theater group Het Oranjehotel.

5. Professor of the Theater Studies Department at the University of Utrecht, editor of books in the field of choreography. As a choreographer and dancer, she created dance performances for younger audiences.

6. According to Lepecki, dance entered the theater at a time when he himself was going through the post-dramatic era - hence the dramaturgy of dance uses incoherence and dispersion of elements ("dramaturgy of dispersed atmospheric elements" [A.L.]), because the theater itself has changed its relationship with the text. For this reason, dramaturgy cannot be limited to the correspondence between a word and movement. Lepecki sees the emergence of this phenomenon in the 1980s, when many dramaturgs began working with choreographers, incl. Raymond Hoghe and Pina Bausch, Heidi Gilpin and William Forsythe, Marianne van Kerkhoven and the Flemish choreographers, among them Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker.

7. From 1996, as a dramaturg, she collaborated with, among others, Jan Ritsema, Xavier Le Roy, and Eszter Salamon. Professor of the Philosophy of Art at Singidunum University in Belgrade.

8. Myriam van Imschoot even emphasizes that the professional development of dramaturgy and the position of a dramaturg fulfill the need of an institution rationalizing its practices (quoted from: Bauer 2015; van Imschoot is an artist belonging to the Belgian art scene, co-founder of Sarma, a platform that brings together practitioners and theorists around the most recent issues in choreography and performance). It is important to mention that Cvejić speaks of the independence of a freelance dramaturg, unrelated to the team or institution carrying out the project.

9. Cf. *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2015.

10. Performance theorist, teaches Contemporary Dance and Performance at the University of the Arts in Amsterdam. As a dramaturg she worked, among others with Vera Mantero, Latifa Lâabissi and Mário Afonso, and among Polish artists - Renata Piotrowska during her work on *Śmierć. Ćwiczenia i wariacje* [Death. Exercises and Variations], *Ćwiczenia i wariacje* [Exercises and Variations] and *Wycieka ze mnie samo złoto* [The Pure Gold is Seeping out of Me].

11. Bojana Bauer. *Enfolding of Aesthetic Experience: Dramaturgical Practice in Contemporary Dance*, p. 13, quoted after: Profeta 2015.

12. She has been working with a choreographer and a visual artist since 1997; the book quoted in the article talks about that cooperation.

13. Pil Hansen uses the category of "dramaturgical agent", referring not so much to the work of the dramaturg, but to "dramaturgical awareness" based on adopted strategies and principles. (Hansen 1996, p. 124)

14. Cf. *Embodied Dramaturgies*, edited by Jeroen Peeters, Sarma, 2012, available at: <http://sarma.be>. The anthology contains around thirty texts by dramaturgs (Marianne van Kerkhoven, André Lepecki, Myriam Van Imschoot, Jeroen Peeters, Igor Dobricic, Sandra Noeth) and artists (Boris Charmatz, Tim Etchells, Janez Jansa, Jennifer Lacey, Frans Poelstra, Robert Steijn). Other anthologies gather special editions of magazines devoted to dramaturgy ("Theaterschrift" 1993, "Women and Performance" 2003, "Performance

Research" 2009, "Maska" [Mask] 2010).

15. An improvisation technique that combines simultaneous "unedited" talking about the action being performed. *Logomotion* was started in the 1980s by Simone Forti, and now it is popularized by Nóra Hajós.

16. Professor at the Theater Arts Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, author of many books on dance. Franko was also a dancer, performing for many years with the NovAntiqua troupe (since 1985).

17. Randy was a professor and lecturer at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and in his work he also drew from his education and experience as a dancer.

18. Author of many books on contemporary dance, especially the history of American dance. Professor at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles). I also cite her lectures in the article "Ten performance jest jak..." [This Performance is Like ...] op. cit.. The series of three lectures is available online. Cf. Leigh Foster, Susan, op. cit..

19. I wrote about the performances of Paweł Sakowicz's *Total* and Agata Siniarska's *Hyperdances* in the reportage from the Stary Browar Nowy Taniec 2016 [Malta Festival 2016], *Poza wspólnym obszarem?* [Beyond the Common Ground?], [taniecpolska.pl](http://www.taniecpolska.pl), 4/08/2016, available at: <http://www.taniecpolska.pl/krytyka/366>.

20. All quotes come from the Polish script provided by the author (the English one is being used when Sakowicz performs abroad).

21. During his works on *Total*, Sakowicz did not cooperate with a dramaturg – the work was created as a result of the residency Solo Projekt Plus 2015, organized by Grażyna Kulczyk's Art Stations Foundation. Sakowicz's artistic mentor was then Dalija Aćin Thelander. Working on his next solo production, *Jumpcore*, the choreographer collaborated with Mateusz Szymanówka.

22. She is a researcher and lectures at the Institute of Theater Studies at Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich.

23. All quotes come from the script provided by the author. The lecture premiered as a post-residency presentation as part of the *Let's Dance* exhibition at Stary Browar in Poznań in October 2015, and subsequent shows were possible thanks to the project's tour as part of the program Scena dla Tańca 2017.

24. More information on Critical Response on the website: <https://lizlerman.com>. All quotes come from that source.

25. A dancer and musician. Music performed by Michał Kiedrowski; the co-author of the concept, author of the script and the director was Maria Kwiecień. It premiered in May 2016 as part of the 37th Stage Song Review at the Capitol Music Theater in Wrocław. The quotes come from the description of the performance available on the website.

26. A dramaturg, curator and lecturer, incl. at HZT Berlin – a school which has provided education to many independent Polish choreographers (Agata Siniarska was mentioned in the article).

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NEW CHOREOGRAPHY

## Between the Stage and the Obscene: On the Critical Potential of the Naked Body

Alicja Müller Jagiellonian University in Kraków

The article describes the subversive potential of nudity and pornography in such plays as *This Is a Musical* by Karol Tymiński and *Hundred Toasts for a Dead Artist* by Anita Wach and Bojan Jablanovec, representing critical choreography focused on dominant socio-political order of representation. It also describes the deconstruction of normative models of being in the world to establish new rules of the game in opposition to existing ones and the discovery of mutual private and public influences. The choreographies under discussion can be described as both perverse and subversive, which allows for presenting obscene relationships with emancipation. The author tries to prove that in the space of art, obscenity is often a trickster's strategy, leading to the redefinition of the existing division into what is visible and invisible in the public space.

Keywords: obscenity, dance, nudity, porn, body

### Obscenity as a trickster's caper

Despite the sexualization of the capitalist public space, the image of a naked, desiring body remains a dangerous Other for systems of representation. It is visible in numerous controversies over exhibitions and performances suspected of being obscene. Considering the reasons for the collective aversion to scenes which are overtly, one can refer to Michał Paweł

Markowski's thoughts on the reception of Witold Gombrowicz's *Kronos*. He claims that the reason for rejecting Gombrowicz's notes and refusing to classify them as literature lies in their incompatibility with the bourgeois worldview, based on three fundamental oppositions (in my opinion also characteristic of the construction of the public sphere): life vs. work, truth vs. fiction and the public vs. the private. All three assume an upbringing in a repressive, rather than affirmative code (cf. Markowski 2013). I think one can give a similar explanation to controversies over critical art (including dance), which often refers to the radical aesthetics of body art and establishes new alternative orders, i.e. through abolishing the dualisms described by Markowski or deconstructing their conventionality in accordance with the slogan "private-political". It takes place, among others, in performances representing critical choreography, which aim to dismantle stereotypes concerning broadly understood otherness and destabilize the desired - heteronormative - models of being (dancing), in which the naked body actualizes the patterns of a pornographic, voyeuristic spectacle, at the same time dismantling and transforming them into emancipatory narratives. A perverse subject speaks in a forbidden language, hyperbolizing the political aspect of the body made public by the authorities, which treat it like the Other, imposing repressions and restrictions. It is a trickster character<sup>1</sup>, which comes from the position of a cultural outsider, and is also described as a "clownish figure of mercurial variability and unpredictability" (Sznajderman 2000, p. 26). It both negates the established laws and affirms the possibility of transgressing them creatively, thus blurring the boundary between the stage or scene and the obscene.

In *Passwords*, Jean Baudrillard sets the obscene against the scene, or stage. In the former, he claims, "there is no play, no dialectic or separation, but a total collision of elements" (Baudrillard 2003, p. 28). The latter, on the other



hand, assumes play and a distanced gaze. In this view, obscene actions, characterized by their directness and immediacy, become the opposite of seduction, described by the philosopher as establishing relations which are not instantly fulfilled. Obscenity understood in this way is not a quality of something coarse or vulgar in the common understanding of the words, but rather of the abolished difference between the stage representation and the thing represented, between the signifier and the signified.

Obscenity, which is a synonym of perversion and a quality of pornographic performance, can be explained in a broader way – as a complete transparency/visibility of things, which Baudrillard (2003) describes in his analysis of the strategies and aesthetics of information society and postmodern media. We are dealing with a paradoxical category which refers to the taboo sphere, but can also describe the public sphere and its representation, which results, among other things, from the way in which the porno-chic infiltrates mainstream visual culture (cf. McNair, 2002). The adjective “obscene” should be paraphrased (according to its etymology) as “situated beyond the scene/stage” (*ob scena*), i.e. not suitable for public display (cf. Baronciani 2016)<sup>2</sup>, which is surprisingly parallel to Baudrillard’s idea of postmodernity as a world where the Debordian spectacle can no longer take place, because everything has already been made visible and brought to the surface.

This ambivalence present in the cultural understanding of the obscene – that which is situated beyond the scene/stage – will be discussed on the example of *This Is a Musical* by Karol Tymiński and *Hundred Toasts for a Dead Artist* by Anita Wach (choreographer, performer) and Bojan Jablanovec (creator of the original idea and director), both of which show the critical potential of obscenity and nudity. An analysis of these performances allows to present

the mutual influences of the stage/scene and the obscene, as well as the artistic strategies of transforming the obscene into a domain of resistance, where the subordinated can speak (dance), and thus negotiate with the structures of symbolic violence. I would like to show that the obscene can become a trickster's caper, balancing not on the boundary between chaos (nature) and order (culture), but that between the private and the public, or experience and its representation. It leads to a redefinition of the existing distinction between the visible and the invisible, and, what follows - a negation of the binary divisions into art and non-art, the symbolic and the semiotic.

## **The complete (in)visibility of things**

The question which images will be considered obscene and/or pornographic is always determined by the spatio-temporal context of their situation, which is evidence of the discursive character of both categories, also common in narratives on (non)art, but, while pornography is placed on the peripheries of the world of spectacle, broadly understood "art" - at least in its traditional, "high" form - occupies its center. The scene/stage and the obscene are woven together by the dream of transgression, understood as stepping beyond bodily-subjective as well as systemic boundaries.

Anomalies and deviations from the systemically defined norm require examination and subjugation - not only in the social sphere, but also in art. Perversion, understood as a symptom of an illness, appears to be a synonym of otherness, which is always dangerous in homogenous structures. However, it is worth noting that the verb "to pervert", according to its etymology, means to "overthrow, subvert; turn aside from a right path or opinion" (Hoad, 1996, p. 348), which links it to potentially subversive

practices, meant to criticize the system and expose the hidden mechanisms of control. It is no coincidence that the naked body became one of the symbols of the counterculture of the 1960s – a movement aimed at damaging the “healthy” whole and subverting the existing order through a liberation both sexual and political.

Here it would be useful to convey the idea of the pornographic gaze as a constitutive element of postmodern communication and its surplus of information, whose recipients become passive, making no attempts at deeper interpretation (cf. Baronciani, 2016). In such dramaturgy of the media spectacle the pornographic light, bringing out the details, falls not only on the forbidden, but precisely on that which the dominating discourse wants to make visible. In its shadow one can find subjects and objects which could threaten the homeostasis of collective life and its strictly controlled images. The belief in the adequacy between the world and its representations distracts from that which is concealed for some reason (cf. Baronciani, 2016) – from the traditionally understood obscene.

In their performances, Wach and Jablanovec, as well as Tymiński, combine the obscenity of the postmodern with obscenity understood as a quality of bodies and subjects excluded from the official order of representation, thus emphasizing the subversive potential of the margin. The banal transgression characteristic of the culture of surplus, is set against subversive transgressions involved in strategies of resistance. In this context, *This is a Musical* and *Hundred Toasts for a Dead Artist* are obscene performances, because, as I will show in the following part of the article, they restore visibility to the subjects and objects pushed to the margins of official representations, whose presence in the dominant system of social and media spectacle is undesirable and inconvenient, as it does not suit the categories

of “decency” established by the authorities in order to preserve distinct boundaries between the normal and the deviant or pathological.

## **The musicality of the body**

In Tymiński’s solo choreography, the human body gains the qualities of an instrument, which serves both as a space and a subject of experience. The dancer’s nakedness seems radical, because he dismisses aestheticization and linear narrative, offering instead a manifestation of the pure materiality of existence, not tangled up in symbolic systems, and thus torn out of the power structures. The choreographer introduces his body into the space of obscene engrossment, generating extreme and violent experiences. His actions abolish the distinction into the aggressive and the affirmative; care leads to destruction and vice versa. The performance becomes an (auto)erotic show, accumulating features typical for body art performances and pornographic shows. It is the most visible in the final scenes, which involve a camp visualization of a homosexual anal intercourse between two men, Tymiński and his partner, shown on a screen in the form of an animated rainbow shadow. The performer’s body becomes problematic not only due to its vulgarity, but, first and foremost, because it is so unspectacular, which breaks the rule of theatrical illusion, and thus also the opposition between art and life, which Markowski discussed with reference to *Kronos*.

During the choreography proper, the dancer falls down, begins to shake compulsively, twists his limbs into inhuman, grotesque shapes, hits himself with the microphone and rubs it against his skin, amplifying that which is usually unheard, and transforming into the “musical” mentioned in the title. The choreography is focused on a specific experiencing body, subjected to a

sometimes brutal training which means to extract somatic sounds out of it. This particular musicality of the body is evidence of its openness – the amplified sounds broaden its boundaries; they become a common experience, linking the lonely performer with the community of the audience.

Tymiński's body-musical seems to echo Vinko Globokar's *Corporel* (1984), composed of sounds made by the body through clapping, scratching, hitting and pinching, and serving as a scenario of sorts for performers. Both works discuss the ontology of the body, understood as a hybrid tangle of the subjective and the instrumental (objective), as well as its communicative and meaning-making capabilities. Through examining and amplifying natural bodily vibrations, Globokar and Tymiński point out the open places (the nose, throat, mouth) which break down the concept of the body-subject as a closed whole, set against the chaotic fragmented body from before Lacan's mirror phase. The performances also touch upon the problem of primal communication, eluding the laws of logic and syntax, and thus – according to Michel Foucault – characteristic for the mentally ill, or, more broadly speaking, subjects deprived of discourse. The music of the body can be understood in two ways: as a kind of nonverbal, somatic communication, but also, especially in Tymiński's case, a hyperbolic, acoustic metaphor of exclusion from the normative order. Language allows the speaker to reveal themselves, but acceptable forms of self-expression are strictly defined by the system – a collection of norms and rules determining the clarity of the message. The self, in Foucault's words, "must constitute self through obedience" (Foucault 1988, p. 45); a conscious or unconscious refusal to subject oneself to the rigor of language threatens to turn narrative into babble, speech that is devoid of meaning, and thus pushes the absurd self into social periphery.

Tymiński solo performance is a tale about those excluded from the patriarchal order, where heteronormativity is the necessary precondition of visibility (and audibility). The author of *This Is a Musical* escapes the pressure of rigors, not only linguistic, but also aesthetic, and thus directs the process of his own exclusion from the boundaries of discourse. The substitution of verbal narrative with embodied sounds, unaccompanied by symbolic meanings, seems both a radical refusal to subject oneself to processes of normalization (and deformation), which finds its reflection in the poetics of the performance, and an attempt at embodying Bataille's eroticism, set against the culturally sanctioned practices of romanticizing love experiences, and instead assuming first and foremost cruelty and desolation (cf. Bataille 1986, p. 170).

Linguistic exclusion concerns subjects which violate the linguistic prohibitions existing in social communication, referring to the code or meanings of speech (cf. Foucault, 2006, p. 545). The meaningless sounds Tymiński extracts from his body could be seen as an equivalent of language faults made consciously as a gesture of refusal to participate in the linguistic community. It has to be pointed out, however, that he does not perform the process of rejecting the babbling Other, but rather embodies a radical and premeditated rejection of meaning, thus revealing the violence of symbolic systems and resisting the pressure to create (produce) narratives and representations, separating the self from experience and forming the condition of subjectification, understood as imposing meaning. From a normative perspective, both the (anti)aesthetics of the performance and the visualization of a homosexual intercourse at the end could be considered as a form of blasphemy. They manifest an effort to substitute the homologous culture, whose foundations are determined by the principles of reduction and unification, with a culture of heterology, praising, as Michał Sikora

writes, “everything that is scandalous, impure, tempestuous, leading to the destruction of norms which only limit, uniformize and trivialize existence” (Sikora, 2013, p. 108)

## Gay porn

Tymiński’s solo performance is complemented by the controversies around it. Edyta Kozak, head of the Ciało/Umysł Festival canceled its premiere at a one day’s notice<sup>3</sup>, because, in her opinion (as related by Paweł Soszyński in *Dwutygodnik [Biweekly]*) it proved to be “too destructive” and “lacked the presence of a subject” (Soszyński 2015). Finally, the first performance took place at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute on November 14, 2015, and it proved divisive both among the public and the critics, with the most heated debate concerning the final scene of “gay porn”<sup>4</sup>. Even though Tymiński is accompanied by a rainbow shadow, the situation is obvious and leads to a clear, naturalist solution.

What seems more relevant that the investigation into the actual character of this scene (pornographic or not) is an attempt to reflect on it within the context of the whole performance, in which a body-subject looking for fulfilment loses its contours and dissolves itself in a total experience or/and dreaming about it. *This Is a Musical* becomes a record of a twofold transgression. In the first part of the choreography, the dancing, shouting, singing, and – above all else – desiring subject leaves its own boundaries, sharing the experience of bodily sonority. In the second, final part, he loses himself in the Other. This meeting is particularly dramatic, because the self-involved is nonheteronormative, and its desire for contact is tabooed and repressed by the patriarchal culture. Resigning from artistic conventionality and letting art be literal and obscene, Tymiński symbolically liberates

himself from oppression by hyperbolizing the visibility of the forbidden. The principle of hypervisibility and hyperobscenity organizes the (micro)world shown in the performance, which seems to be driven both by a need for contact as a desire for delight.

The performer demonstrates his obscene pleasure and otherness, inseparably intertwined. In order to understand this dependence, it is crucial to emphasize the difference between the normative pleasure and delight, already belonging to the prohibited territory. Lacanian psychoanalysis presupposes an antinomic, but at the same time strongly unified, relationship between these two categories. Delight (*jouissance*) is defined as a perverse transgression of the principles of the more neutral pleasure (*plaisir*). Its experience involves a particular dramaturgy – a tension resulting, on the one hand, from its intensity, and on the other – from the risk. It is no coincidence orgasm is sometimes called “a little death” (*la petite mort*), i.e. a brief loss or weakening of consciousness. According to Bataille, the loving subject discovers in the Other its extension, but also loses its energy in them.

*Jouissance* leads to transgression, and thus damages the integrity of the subject, which, if it functions within a normative order and makes its experience visible, risks social exclusion. By staging the pursuit of desire, Tymiński breaks taboos and rules of communal life. The regained right to delight is linked to the right to transgress, conditioning the transformation of a homogenous system into an open space which affirms otherness. The rainbow shadow-lover becomes a synecdoche of a Utopian universe of suspended difference, and the pornographic clip itself completes the narrative of a queer body as a place defined equally by delight and rebellion as well as trauma, expressed in autoaggressive motion, actually changing



the dancing body (the artist dances close enough to the audience to let them notice the bruises and scratches on his skin).

The choreographer consciously provokes charges of obscenity leveled against his dance, using strategies typical of pornographic spectacle, casting an “extremely strong light at the bodies and details of the intercourse” (Baroncini, 2016), whose purpose is not the creation of a narrative, but the act of revealing itself (Baroncini, 2016), transformed by Tymiński into a critical gesture. In this solo act, exposure seems to be the precondition of starting an alternative narrative, created against established principles and leading to an emphasis on the political aspect of the body and the subjectification of the Other. It turns out that in the field of art, pornography understood as “casting an intense light on that which should not be seen” can become an emancipatory strategy through which the nonnormative subject obtains power over the discourse which excludes them, thus transforming the invisibility imposed on them into hypervisibility.

Here one can refer to the notion of the pornographic gaze and its dramaturgy according to Baroncini. Even though Tymiński does not explicitly refer to these observations, and his choreography is not a direct critique of information society, the theory of illuminating and obfuscating information seems flexible enough to apply also to mechanisms of producing (in)visibility and (non)normativity typical for patriarchal cultures. In this case, a pornographic, and thus fetishizing gaze would be directed towards normative (or normalized) bodies which are overrepresented in the public sphere, and would omit those which do not fit the broadly understood canon. In *This Is a Musical* Tymiński reverses the direction of the sharp light described by Baroncini, and here illuminating the margin does not involve objectification, but a subjectification identified with making visible. In this

way, perversion reveals its second meaning - perverseness. The Other intercepts strategies of (not)speaking about him something/someone obscene and transforms them into an element of its own identity project.

## **Trickster - a perverse prankster**

The bitter, scathing sense of humor present in the performance, and further strengthened by the poetics of the obscene and scandalizing buffoonery, make it possible to view Tymiński as a dancing trickster, coming from the world of cursed carnival players, taken from folk imagination and representing the social periphery. The clown, once banished from the space of the visible due to the bodily nature of his profession, as well as his physical otherness and grotesqueness (cf. Sznajderman 2000, p. 13-17); a trickster character – ambivalent, and a perfect, or, one could say, total embodiment of otherness. Twisting his joints and ironically manifesting his non-heteronormativity, Tymiński seems to be a dancing, perverse prankster, and the whole performance becomes a subversive choreography, whose dramaturgy is based on the imperative of transgression and hyperbolized, camp obscenity.

In *This Is a Musical*, the stage is a space of subversive sacrilege, the kingdom of Dionysus. Eliade describes the trickster as a figure who is, on the one hand, related to gods because of their primality and special powers, and on the other close to humans in regard to gluttony, excessive sex drive and amorality (1984, p. 156-8). Tymiński, whose “special power”, visible in the amazing intensification of the stage experience, is the ability to blur the boundaries between the stage/scene and the obscene, the representable and non-representable, disturbs oppressive binarisms, which condition the violent exclusivity of the normative space of the visible. Basing his

choreography on desire, he not only abolishes and deconstructs the taboo, but also utilizes the stereotype of a “promiscuous gay man” (Mrozek, 2017), which is repeated and subversively rewritten in the performance. Here, the foreground is formed by things which are normally concealed and repressed. This makes visible the subversive potential of the poetics of the obscene, which can become a tool for redefining the public sphere. The ostentatiously obscene performer includes that, which is prohibited in terms of public morals, into the theatrical space, which, by assumption, represents official (i.e. not pornographic) art/culture, thus abolishing the boundary between the private and the public, and materializing the subconscious.

## **A shaman at an obscene forefathers’ eve**

The duality present in the figure of the clown is the point of departure for the (auto)satirical performance *Hundred Toasts for a Dead Artist* by Anita Wach and Bojan Jablanovec. The minimalist, ironic choreography unfolds in the space of a spectacular installation, devised as a banquet, which should actually be considered an anniversary wake. The performance, while preserving its formula, is versatile and open. In its Polish version, created for the *Kantor Now!* project, the audience toasts Tadeusz Kantor, in the Slovenian one the remembered and celebrated figure is the Romantic poet Franc Prešeren, the Italian version deals with Dante Alighieri and the American one with George Washington<sup>5</sup>.

As the party hostess, the performer welcomes the audience in a skimpy, provocative costume whose main element – a black mesh shirt – alludes to subculture aesthetics, but can also be associated with the stereotypical image of a street prostitute. Her face is covered with clown makeup, which refers to Kantor’s Market Stall and becomes a visual confirmation of the role

played by Wach, an embodiment of the trickster as a joker, negating the established order.

By combining the elements characteristic of the popular images of the clown and prostitute, the choreographer and the director refer to the common ancestry of these figures as individuals who belonged “to the group excluded from *familia christi*” the longest (Sznajderman 2000, p. 15), and thus were “typically trickster-like” (Sznajderman 2000, s. 23) – always aliens and outsiders. The clown and the prostitute are also linked by common symbolism, determined by that which has to be concealed in a normative (and rational) system, i.e. the bodily taboo, encompassing both abjectness and passion. Moreover, the prostitute, just like the clown, is a figure that is “typically trickster-like, marginal, ‘excluded’” (Sznajderman 2000, p. 23), always an alien and outsider, and so mediating between life and death, both human and animal. Using the attributes of both these figures, Wach speaks and dances from the margin, which in *Hundred Toasts...* becomes also a space linked to independent choreographers, with no ties to any institution. This creates a hybrid of multilevel exclusions, manifesting its own otherness and incompatibility with the normative system. The performer’s body seems to become a visual allegory of Kantor’s lowest rank and a variation on the theme of one of the most ambiguous, wandering characters of the Theatre of Death – the Cleaning-Woman.

In the figure of the prostitute-death from Cricot 2 Theatre, carnival is mingled with mourning. Wach builds her character from these apparent contraries, becoming the mistress of an ironic ceremony, during which the viewers celebrate the death of the artist-producer and the birth of the artist-consumer. The dancer, toasting Tadeusz Kantor, functions as a shaman at an obscene forefather’s eve ceremony, where contact with the dead is not a

mystical ritual, but turns out to be carnivalesque – subversive and anarchic – tomfoolery. The performer's actions echo the medieval Feast of Fools, explained by Jacques Heers as “a revenge of the subordinated, a reversal of hierarchy and unceremonious aping of sacred gestures” (Heers, 1995, p. 75). The obscene dancer builds a synecdoche of the carnivalesque reality described by Bakhtin, but here the subversion takes place predominantly within the space of art, which Wach reclaims for herself, and, in a broader perspective – for new dance artists. Even though carnival is by definition a collective action, the enhanced grotesqueness and forwardness of the performer's gestures, made more coherent by the clown makeup, points towards a transfer of the carnivalesque strategies of “aping” into the space of critical choreography and uncovering the political aspects of the carnivalesque in individual experience.

The stage can be seen as a visual allegory of the society of the supermarket and the surplus associated with it. The dance floor is filled with symmetrically arranged trays with cakes and wine mugs, and the dancer strolls among them, like Kantor did when directing his “room of imagination” from the middle of the stage. In the Theatre of Death the Cleaning-Woman was the great absent figure in the background (cf. Skrzypczak, 2013), while the demiurge director was always visible. In *Hundred Toasts...* this is reversed – the dirty “tart” finally got her moment of glory, promised in *I Shall Never Return* (Kantor 2005, p. 110). Borrowed from Kantor's universe and put in a new context, the figure of the prostitute in Wach's performance is on the one hand a symbol of carnivalesque rebellion, and on the other – as a product of a male demiurge, she takes control of it. Perversion as a structure organizing the dramaturgy of the performance seems a necessary precondition for the emancipation of the female subject, which gives herself agency in the process of an obscene desecration of cultural symbols.

However, the artist mockingly deconstructs the model of patriarchal culture, demanding the worship of fathers-patrons, and not the work of Kantor himself. Referring to one of the basic functions of the carnival, a temporary reversal of the social order, the choreographer establishes a new order in which the private sphere manifests its political aspects, and the taboo traditionally linked to the feminine – the bodily lower stratum – (re)gains visibility. Symbolically dethroning the male demiurge, Wach causes the birth of a female subject endowed with agency and realizing the notion of female writing, or rather choreographing, which is, however, viewed from an (auto)ironic point of view.

## **A pornographic spectacle**

Elements of body art are crucial for the poetics of the performance; the artist covers her bare breasts with plastic cups and sits naked on a chair so as to expose the most intimate orifices of her body (which she then drenches in wine), in order to blur the boundary between the private and stage self, reality and its representation. The strangeness of the transformations undergone by Wach's body allows to make it visible again: the transgression lies in the fact that the pornographic formula is both repeated and grotesquely distorted, which allows to go beyond it and intercept it for emancipatory purposes. The trickster performer, ostentatiously showing her intimacy and embodying the hybrid mixture of the clown and prostitute (whose bodies can be understood either as prisons or spaces of resistance) surrenders herself to objectifying gazes. Through taking the role of the hostess, creating an atmosphere of familiarity, and an ironic play with the tradition of pornographic spectacle, colonized by the patriarchy, she is able to liberate herself from this oppressive dependence.

I think the scene in which the nude dancer exposes the most intimate areas of her body can be a reference to Annie Sprinkle's *Public Cervix Announcement*. In her 1990 performance, the famous post-porn-modernist, sitting on a chair dressed up as a coarse pin-up girl, she invited the audience to come on stage and examine her cervix with the help of an endoscope and a light. One of the participants of the performance, quoted by Philip Carr-Gomm, said that the artist "had gone beyond nakedness to a supernakedness that transcends sexuality" (Carr-Gomm, 2012, p. 251). Starting from a situation typical of a pornographic spectacle, where the mode of existence of the female body is determined by the pornographer's fantasy, Sprinkle, through the gesture of a radical opening of the vagina and its secret, deconstructed the dialectics of hiding and revealing, crucial for porn dramaturgy, and thus transformed her seemingly erotic show into a performance which could be said to realize the assumptions of anatomic theatre. Crucially, the performer's body was not objectified, because the strangeness and campiness of the situation, with a visibly amused Sprinkle in its center, excluded the possibility of a medical neutralization and de-subjectification. In order to look between the performer's legs and see "there are no teeth there", one had to stand in line, and thus become subjected to observation. The act of voyeurism became public, and the body, causing both discomfort and curiosity, dominated over the audience; it regained power over the gazes directed at it.

In her book *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum*, Terri Kapsalis sets Springle and her cervix display against the way in which the organs of Saartije Baartman, known as "Hottentot Venus" were exposed. The European colonial discourse transformed her into a body-spectacle, a process that found its bizarre conclusion in the posthumous exposition of her skeleton, genitals and brain at the Musée de l'Homme in

Paris. Kapsalis points out that even though the displays of both bodies redefine the space of representation through revealing that which would traditionally be concealed, the ways in which they function within the politics of visibility belong to two different orders: subordination and emancipation. Kapsalis identifies the act of creating a performance, and thus taking on the role of a demiurge, with power – both in the context of making someone or something visible, and redistributing the right to watch.

Visibility can be a sign of oppression or liberation, or both (cf. Kapsalis 1997, p. 7). Baartman's exhibited body tells the herstory of its appropriation, and Sprinkle's exposed cervix becomes the visual confirmation of emancipation. In *Hundred Toasts...* Anita Wach seems to connect both these topics. . The performer sitting face to the audience so that her labia would be visible, on the one hand repeats the formula of a female erotic nude, characterized by its frontality and a particular sexualization, referring to the sexuality (and fantasies) of men as spectators and owners of the image (cf. Berger, 1990, p. 55), and on the other – exposing that which remained concealed in traditional representations of nude women. She takes control over the cultural taboo, and with it – over the gaze. The dancer's agency – just like that of the author of *Public Cervix Announcement* – is expressed already in the process of creating the performance, i.e. giving birth to an alternative world, which is additionally emphasized in *Hundred Toasts...* by the role of shaman/hostess, played by the choreographer on the stage. Both Sprinkle's performance and Wach and Jablanovec's choreography confirm John Berger's thesis, crucial for understanding visual culture in its traditional and postmodern form, assuming that power relations regulate ways of looking.

Both works involve a disruption of the patriarchal mechanisms described by Berger, as they abolish the opposition between the man as the gazing



subject and the woman as the object of the gaze. By making absurd the situation in which a woman transforms herself into a spectacle, Wach and Sprinkle annihilate the symbolic presence of the male observer who defines the ways of their being in the visual world. This shift also characterizes the current of new pornography for which Sprinkle serves as a matron – the woman, who used to be merely a sexual object, transforms into a person in charge of the situation.

The stage situation in which a nude woman becomes an element of a feast can be understood as an ironic reference to the classic repertoire of erotic scenes and/or as an allegory of mechanisms of appropriating the female body by patriarchal discourse and the archetype of the female victim, but I think at the same time Wach puts her narrative in the context of the sexualization and pornographization of contemporary culture as such. Overtly caricatural images in *Hundred Toasts...* are both a critique of the systemically subordinated female subject and an ironic commentary on surplus, typical of the society of late capitalism, which makes the body its condition and hostage at the same time, as well as practices of overproducing goods and signs lacking reference. The grotesqueness of the performer's actions is linked to the transgressive character of contemporary culture, characterized by excess and thus, according to Adorno, monstrous by definition (cf. Adorno, 1999) as it overflows the boundaries of our perception. In *Hundred Toasts...* the borderline experience is shown as a clash with a surplus that is impossible to utilize, which is shown in the scenes where the performer steps on elegant desserts, a gesture which can also be read as a symbolic act of resistance against practices of subordinating life to objects of consumption.

# The democratization of desire

In *Hundred Toasts...*, the subject of the absurd surplus typical of postmodernity is combined with a narrative about the surprising, paradoxical link between the pornographization of postmodern reality and emancipation, as described by Brian McNair in *Striptease Culture* (2002). Even though the British thinker seems not to notice that what he describes as emancipatory processes happening because of erotic capital, could also be seen as a multiplication of inequalities, consisting in another commodification of women, the notion of the “democratization of desire”, lying at the center of his thought, reflects the character of capitalist society, totalizing the bodily experience, which is visible in the ubiquitous porno-chic, i.e. images referring to porn aesthetics, which have dominated the mainstream, and, at least by assumption, nonpornographic system of representation.

McNair describes sex as the most publicized cultural commodity, determining the pornographization of the public space, which consists in, on the other hand, the liberalization of access to hard pornography and a diversification of its repertoire, now encompassing not only heteronormative male viewers, and on the other – the penetration of porno-chic into the official reality of the media and the market. Here, the erotic capital, in regard to which women are not only objects, but above all subjects and clients, strengthens their position in society and liberates them from male dominance (cf. Hakim, 2011). It also gives them the opportunity to negotiate existing discourses. Today, the emancipation of women is connected to the pluralist model of consumerist culture, where pleasure becomes democratized, as it acknowledges the diversity of the needs of its participants. Traditional – patriarchal – capitalism diversifies itself through

giving consumerist agency (and freedom) to all subjects (cf. McNair 2002, pp. 11-12). As official culture becomes sexualized, the intimate sphere, i.e. aspects traditionally attributed not only to private (or home) spaces, but also to women, infiltrates the public sphere and redefines its *status quo*, which is why McNair writes about the subversive power of pornography, idealistically assuming a connection between the heterogeneity of pornographic representations (mostly films) and the growing social tolerance of broadly understood otherness. Although McNair clears both postmodern pornography and late capitalism of the charges of objectification of female bodies, his idea of the subversive potential of the presence of pornographic representation in the public space appears to be correct.

It is clearly visible in the case of *Hundred Toasts...*, where the democratization of desire is presented as both helping emancipation and only seemingly liberating. Wach embodies the woman-consumer, who manifests her sexuality openly and shamelessly, but at the same time reminds of the irremovable possibility of appropriation and commodification. However, it seems that the performer creates a subject endowed with agency, whose power over the consumed and deconstructed world is by all means real. Here, emancipation does not consist in the blurring of the boundaries between the intimate and the public or giving the consuming woman the right to desire, but by intercepting the pornographic narrative and deconstructing it in a grotesque way. If the pornographic has been incorporated into official culture, the trickster performer distorts the image of this fusion, restoring the obscene as something that does not fit the normative system and, as an undesirable element, can again destroy patriarchal social and political structures.

The pornographic body in *Hundred Toasts...* is at the same time a feminist

body, and the obscene becomes synonymous with an alternative, liberating narrative. Wach and Jablanovec highlight the subversive potential of the art of sexual transgression. The consumer artist, who both experiences the obscene (and forbidden) pleasure of surplus and transforms her body into a quasi-erotic spectacle, transforms eating/consuming into an action which is not only an expression of a pursuit of ludic intoxication, but above all – a form of liberating the female body from an oppressive structure, positioning it as dependent on the male gaze. Wach and Jablanovec restore visibility to the feminine, which in traditional systems of representation functions as the material and bodily lower stratum. In their performance, the female subject, endowed with agency, appears to be carnivalesque by definition, as it negates divine and human laws, and so dethrones the male demiurge who established them. In the carnival, one became perfectly free (Bakhtin 1984, p. 8), in *Hundred Toasts...* the woman becomes perfectly emancipated.

## Staging the obscene

Even though the poetics of *This Is a Musical* and *Hundred Toasts...* focus on obscene transgression and blurred boundaries between the real (life) and the represented (fiction), and both works refer to the mainstream aesthetics of porno-chic as the dominant visual feature of the public space, characterized by the “complete visibility of things”, in the case of these performances one cannot speak of immediacy, understood as indifference and a lack of reflection. In Tyimiński’s choreography, the dancing subject actively seeks fulfilment, and the final, quasi-pornographic scene in which he assumes the posture of a passive lover, seems to be another stage of this search. In Wach’s and Jablanovec’s performance, the gestures referring to the pornographic repertoire have an added layer of ironic distance, which allows the performer to both project and break the fetishizing gaze. The

visual radicality of these performances forces the audience to abandon the comfort of not seeing that which the homogenous system wants to conceal, and their obscene literality turns out to be a form of broadening the boundaries of art with images which only seemingly negate practices typical of Baudrillardian seduction. Here, obscenity is not a negation of the stage or scene, but rather signifies an attempt to destroy the established state of things, and, which follows – to transform the invisible into the hypervisible, and the obscene into the stage. Perversity, both in *This Is a Musical* and *Hundred Toasts...*, turns out to be a tool serving the deconstruction of subversive mechanisms of removing the non-homogenous elements from the common space. In both performances the carnival is not a time of suspension of rules, which has been established by patriarchal authorities. It seems to be an unalienable quality of the margin (obscene) as an alternative reality which, on the one hand, does not admit of the pornographic light, organizing the dramaturgy of normative social and political orders and their practices of illuminating and obscuring information, and, on the other, restores the subversive potential of perversion, made banal by capitalist porno chic.

The narratives of the performers, deliberately situating themselves in the perverse and countercultural positions of trickster subjects, lack clearly establish boundaries between life and art, being and creation, desire and telling about it. Thus, they become a negation of the rules organizing the order of the androcentrically designed public sphere and make safe voyeurism more difficult. In this context, the obscene, understood as a quality of space revealing the displaced, reveal its twofold subversiveness: it is an emancipatory technique and a danger to the identity of the onlookers, who have to face the phobias and prejudices produced by normative society.

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## Autor/ka

Alicja Müller (alicjamuller@gmail.com)– dance critic, educator, author of the book "Self-dancing. Between narration and choreography", PhD student at the Department of Anthropology of Literature and Cultural Research at the Jagiellonian University. ORCID: 0000-0002-3490-1419.

## Footnotes

1. In this article I do not focus on the ambiguity of the trickster and its social and cultural functions. I understand it as an ambivalent character which functions against an established order to disturb its integrity (cf. Struzik, 2014, p. 241).
2. Such a definition of obscenity is parallel to the definition of pornography by Jonathan Elmer (quoted by Lech M. Nijakowski), who refers to it as "a term of public discourse, serving to mark representations of sexuality and the body as unsuitable to function in the public sphere" (Nijakowski 2010, p. 46). It is worth noting that the epithet "obscene" is not reserved exclusively to everything connected with representations of sex; it refers to all phenomena which, for some reason, are excluded from the official representational order.
3. In an official statement, Kozak explained her decision referring to the performance as not ready to show to the audiences, at the same time saying that "canceling the performance is not an attempt at interpreting it", [www.cialoumysl.pl/pl/aktualnosci/informacja-](http://www.cialoumysl.pl/pl/aktualnosci/informacja-) [DOA: 6 Feb 2019].
4. This division is visible in the polemic between two reviewers from *Gazeta Wyborcza* – Marta Odziomek and Witold Mrozek (cf. Odziomek, 2017, Mrozek, 2017).
5. Depending on the place, it is not only the addressees of the toasts that change, but also the more or less subtle allusions to their work. In the version devoted to Kantor, the famous director appears, for example, in fragments of documentary videos projected on the screen, and elements of his writings, especially those about metaphysics in art, become an important reference for the stage actions of Wach – performing an artist-consumer. Moreover, the Polish version of the performance is tailored to local contexts – in Cracow it included comments on the Cricoteka building, absent in the performance in Białystok. Thus, I think it is justified to read *Hundred Toasts* with reference to Kantor's work, which is embedded in the dramaturgy of the performance in a more than purely instrumental way.

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THE BODY AND THE ARCHIVE

## Of the Body and Flesh: The Animals of Romeo Castellucci

Marcelina Obarska

The author takes a critical stance against director Romeo Castellucci's powerful self-narrative. Her skepticism toward Castellucci's trademark poetic reveals the materialist dimension of his theatre, in light of which such notions as relationality, indiscernibility, simple observation, and giving ground to an animal were revitalized and led to an open, unhampered directorial discourse, in a "thinking-out-loud" style of analysis. The article joins post-anthropocentric thought inspired by Donna Haraway, Jacques Derrida's gentleness toward animals, and Deleuze's take on the work of art in all of its relational complexity.

Keywords: animal, Castellucci, relationality, materialism, post-anthropocentrism

### 1.

The Charolais bulls are the heaviest and biggest of all cattle breeds – intensely fed males weigh up to one and a half tons and measure up to one and a half meters at the withers. Their characteristically very distinct and well-developed muscles are covered with light (defined as “cream-colored”) skin. The Charolais cattle (bulls and cows) compete in international competitions and win medals, they are also bred and slaughtered for meat, appreciated by connoisseurs for their unusual texture and taste resulting

from a careful diet based on good quality grains and vegetables. A Charolais bull appears in *Moses and Aaron*, the unfinished three-act opera by Arnold Schönberg, an adaptation of the book of *Exodus*. The giant bull appears on stage in Act Two, representing the biblical golden calf. The bull rides in a lit plexiglass display case set on a platform. After a while, the bull is led out of the case by two keepers dressed in black: one of them “supports” the side of the bull's body, the other walks the animal on a special harness attached to its head. Both men wear black gloves. They make a circle and place the bull in front of a choir (a crowd of Israelites) and a naked woman lying on the stage, her back facing the audience. The crowd recedes leaving the powerful bull and the defenseless female body at the center of the stage. The scene of making offerings to the golden calf follows, which becomes rhythmical and choreographic in Castellucci's interpretation. The keepers accompany the bull all the time, supervising its behavior. The animal, probably according to the director's wish, remains motionless, only the tail, which the bull moves from time to time, does not yield to the power of the trainers. Then, the man assisting at the side of the animal pours black paint over its back – which, in turn, is a metaphor for the flaw of language (previously Aaron, who in Schönberg's story represents symbolic order, is covered with it). The paint slowly covers the back of the cream-colored bull. Shortly afterwards, the keepers retrace their footsteps and walk the animal back to the transparent showcase.

The bull in *Moses and Aaron* based on Schönberg's work appears to be an ideal melancholic because, according to Castellucci's narrative, it represents asymbolism, therefore, it is incapable of expressing anything by means of human language based on a system of signifiers and signified. Immersion in asymbolism is, in turn, according to Julia Kristeva, a characteristic feature of the melancholic condition, at the source of which there is the inconsolable

feeling of lack. Castellucci upholds the definition of an animal as a being which lacks something, and this definition is implemented in his staging of *Moses and Aaron*. The opposition between Aaron, capable of language, and Moses, who is unable to express anything in words, emphasized by Schönberg in the libretto, is close to Castellucci's way of thinking. However, the dichotomy, to which Castellucci is so faithful, arouses my resistance. The juxtaposition of language with what is (in common understanding) “metaphysical” is, in my view, in this particular case subjected to the practice of *close reading*,<sup>1</sup> suspiciously too simple. As a consequence, also the presence of an animal on stage in such a context seems to be surrounded by a highly simplified (and at the same time consistently elevated) discourse. According to Castellucci's narrative, the bull would be a “pure being”, which also ultimately becomes contaminated – I treat the pouring of the paint as the violence of the symbolic order into which the mute animal is incorporated. At the same time, its presence on stage is strongly marked with meaning,<sup>2</sup> as it represents the biblical figure of the golden calf, an idol to whom people pay homage in Moses' absence. The consistency of Castellucci's meta-narrative falls apart. The bull clearly communicates something in the performance – it represents the image of a god. It is not a “pure being” also because it does not enter the stage alone, but first it enters in a showcase, like an object from an ethnographic museum. The keepers-trainers do not step away from it even for a moment, making sure that its choreography is consistent with the established score. Therefore, on the one hand, in the performance, the bull is a sign from the order of metaphysics, because it appears as an idol. On the other hand, its appearance on stage resembles a circus situation where an animal makes an impressive entrance assisted by trainers wearing gloves. Its “entry” is therefore not pure and unconscious, but designed, and is part of a complex

operatic machine in which there is no room for the unknown. Looking at the mighty bull, at its muscular body which weighs over a ton, I wonder if it is under the influence of sedatives that could “tone down” the potential threat of some unforeseen behavior. When asked about this, Castellucci strongly denied it:

It's unacceptable to me, it's terrible. Those who say that don't know animals. This kind of bull is completely calm, moves as if in slow motion. [...] The bull on stage behaved completely naturally, like every animal, always.<sup>3</sup>

But it does not take careful observation to see that the naturalness of the animal's behavior is questionable in the case of *Moses and Aaron*. Here the bull is part of a huge production and remains under constant supervision. Incorporated into a glamorous spectacle so typical of an opera, it unfortunately also becomes a moving decoration, one of many striking elements. Castellucci declared that the bull was an extremely important presence for him due to its “vitality and carnality”. In the archaic sense the director so often refers to, it is a fascination with *zoe*, a particle of life unlimited by any particular *bios*. Moreover, *animality* also carries the following meaning: not only “animality” [t/n: a quality or nature associated with animals], but also “vitality”. The Latin source, *animus*, means spirit, mind, soul, feeling, life, consciousness, breath, and therefore all the qualities standing in opposition to bodily and material substance. But in *Moses and Aaron*, I see an animal with a body harness that restricts its natural movements. I see two men walking it back and forth in a circle and pouring black paint over it. Restrained, its vitality becomes threatening, as if lurking there. Full-grown, massive muscles are tamed, and become part of the scenario. But even with the use of such extensive control, the bull's body arouses anxiety, and is associated with possible danger. However, I do not

feel that this potential was used in *Moses and Aaron*. The aseptic presence of the bull, its precision, placed the animal among a number of other signs appearing in Castellucci's opera.

The huge animal was placed in a tight transparent cage. The bull appeared on stage as an exhibit, an isolated and separate object to be looked at. Deleuze, in the context of Bacon's painting, wrote about isolation as a tool to escape narration. According to Deleuze, following Bacon's thought, the communicativeness of a work of art can be negated in two ways: either by moving towards pure abstraction, or through isolation, bringing the figural to the extreme (Deleuze 2003: 6). It would then be in contrast with figurativeness as a model of simple representation (therefore the figural means a radical *extraction* of the Figure).

Isolation is thus the simplest means, necessary though not sufficient, to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick to the fact. (ibid.)

Perhaps this is the "purity of being" Castellucci spoke of: it is an isolated laboratorial presence, a seclusion. Purity not as "non-mediation" of being and mythical "innocence" perpetuating the opposition between nature and culture, but as putting a being into a frame, as its extraction. The plexiglass cage with the bull is unveiled, the bull is led out onto stage; accompanied by the keepers, it makes a small circle in the center of the stage, it is doused in paint and led off the stage. Within the complex machinery of an opera, this is perhaps the highest degree of "purity" and "exactness" possible to achieve when an animal enters the stage. Although the bull is cast as the golden calf and occupies such a place in the narrative, due to this extreme and distinct isolation, Castellucci distorts the representativeness and figurativeness. A bull surrounded by a parallelepiped, like Lucian Freud in Bacon's triptych,

may therefore resemble a subject of laboratory research kept behind glass, but may also be treated as a figure abstracted from the background (the container with the animal inside emerges in the background, as if “behind the action”). Isolation is also associated with the inability to move, with being limited to viewing, to one's gaze. When the animal, assisted by its keepers, leaves the showcase and stands in front of a naked woman, a relationship is immediately established between them. It is hard to ignore the gender aspect of this setting. The massive body of the bull is facing the naked woman (who is lying with her back towards the audience) and is towering above her. The choir withdraws, leaving them on the white stage. Motionless bodies confronting each other. Castellucci, by deciding to make this gesture, by making such a choreographic choice, imposes a certain perspective, and certainly provokes one. Taking the bull out of the cage, withdrawing the choir – these are gestures emphasizing the relationship of these two bodies, these two presences. The director makes room for them as if he were saying “look, look at this”. In this way, he includes the bull and its stage presence into his system of meanings. Rather than its “vitality and animality”, Castellucci uses the spectrum of meanings that the bull's presence can potentially produce. In the context of the simple dichotomy used by Castellucci in *Moses and Aaron* based on Schönberg's libretto, the emergence of the bull is accompanied by easy, “pre-established” associations. If the main theme and the essence of this performance is the tension between language and image, between the inexpressible and the symbolic, then the animal in this constellation falls automatically to the side of the semiotic, “extra-linguistic”. Its stage presence becomes embedded in a system of meanings, entangled in interpretation. I would even say, taking from the presence of the bull in *Moses and Aaron*, that Castellucci works not so much with the shape as with the contour of the body; not with the three-

dimensional solid that a body is, but with the two-dimensional image and the association it evokes.<sup>4</sup>

As I am watching, I notice a certain conflict: a powerful bull is under control, his immobile body is subjected to violence, since pouring paint over it could be considered violence (the animal cannot defend itself because it is tethered). Perhaps, as the director declares, the bull was treated as “king” (whatever that means) in the preparation process, but here it is an animal whose every step is consistent with the predesigned structure. The bull acts according to the score. Castellucci engages the bull's body, but submits it to his own vision. Of course, he points out that full control is not possible, but the same is true for the actors. At this level, instructions for human actors and those for animals belong to the same power structure. The claim that “an animal cannot be fully controlled” is like a rhetorical game that legitimizes incorporating that animal – with its nervous system fully exposed – into the enormous mechanism of a work of art. It is an excuse, embedded in the language, for using an animal as a sign: “I want it, I need it for my construction.” Just like the bodies of the anorexic and obese were needed in *Oresteia*. Castellucci thinks about shape, not vitality. He creates a smokescreen through which I begin to see his use of animals as morally “better” than any other artistic gesture of this kind. This narrative is a trap.

Looking at the bull, I also wonder how this huge, majestic animal feels in the overpowering machine of the spectacle, where several hundred people work. While preparing the opera, Castellucci sought the presence of this animal. The process of including it in the production was long, complicated and, as the director says, “strange”. At an early stage of production, the animal became accustomed to the operatic music to which it listened at its place of residence in France. Tests were then carried out with lights and actors – all

to minimize stress and shock. It took Castellucci a long time to persuade the producers, technicians, the opera authorizing officer, as well as the actors and members of the choir, some of whom exhibited animal phobias of varying severity (in any case, it is interesting that fear resulting from the risk of involving the bull in the performance appeared on both sides of this relation. I see this as part of the attention sharing process here: shared attention is focused on fear, threat, uncertainty). The presence of the bull was a necessity for Castellucci, an indispensable part of the script and the pre-designed stage construction. Doubts about this gesture were not only of an ethical and technical nature, but also economic – the performance of the bull (borrowing it from the breeding farm and providing it with appropriate care) entailed enormous costs.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the director got his way. He also declared that his ethical concern was not about the team, but about the animal “because it is innocent.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, he refers to the bull as “king” and “star” as a result of the care it received in the production process, but that does not seem like anything special. If one were to look at the whole situation pragmatically, one could say that it could not be otherwise in the case of a bull weighing over a ton and involved in an enterprise of that scale. After all, seeking the bull's participation was also part of the implementation of the director's plan. The bull was supposed to meet specific requirements.

## 2.

According to Rancière, art comes close to politics when it becomes operational, that is, when it “consists in bringing about a reframing of material and symbolic space.” (Rancière 2007, p. 24) In this way, an aesthetic event, including a theatrical one, becomes a kind of a military action associated with negotiating the territory. According to Rancière, there



is no contradiction between the modernist vision of art for art's sake and the relational idea of art as an attempt to reconfigure the community. These are two forms of the distribution of the sensible, two interrelated modes of the presence of bodies in space and time (ibid., p. 26). Thus, theatre both creates and divides the perceptible because it is identical with the system of actions in space. This is interesting in the context of thinking about experiencing theatre communally – Castellucci sees theatre as a collective experience of a mythical procession,<sup>7</sup> while Rancière points to the poietic dimension of theatre, which as a medium establishes a community in a process of distribution. Just like a zone of indiscernibility signifies a common field in difference and not a merging into one, the political community of theatre is not created out of a feeling of identification and phantasmal unity, but precisely in the practice of dividing, delineating, and recognizing borders. It is not the space that is shared, but the process of distribution. Such thinking also breaks with the perception of a theatrical space as a “home” governed by the principle of equality and shared responsibility. Theatre is not a safe place, but a zone of military activities where a community is established that is impermanent and fluid (which is what Samuel Weber says about the theatre audience pointing to the political weakness of such an ephemeral community). (Weber 2009, p. 3)

Castellucci strongly and radically distances himself from the political nature of art and remains suspicious of artists involved in socially engaged activities. However, in reality, the artist employs a number of practices of allowing and isolating, separating and delineating boundaries. These activities are intensely present in his art, although hidden behind a veil – often literally (it is worth considering the cultural and traditional meaning of a translucent veil, a veil on a woman's face; it is a protection against lustful glances, a symbol of innocence, and belonging to a different “pure” world ).

At the same time, by engaging animals in his productions, Castellucci involuntarily introduces his theatre into the sphere of an open and lively debate on the subjectivity of non-human animals. His art transcends the compact framework of his own narrative and produces context. Moreover, when Castellucci says that “the people living in cities do not understand animals,”<sup>8</sup> he himself introduces a thread of politics, because he refers to the *polis*, to a community of citizens. The very use of military nomenclature has the power to entangle art in politics, if one defines politics as actions aimed at seizing and maintaining power. Castellucci's theatre is, thus, politically engaged on many levels, although, of course, not in a publicized and literal way. Again, an animal on stage cannot be completely ontologically “pure”. It is not brought onto the stage without consequences. Associations appear immediately and they freely connect aesthetic images with the seemingly “external” stream of the media content concerning present-day human relationships with other animals. Even if the artist does not want to communicate anything, he has no influence over the associations emerging upon the viewer entering in a relation with the stage phenomena (the director is a weak link in that relation). He is also unable to control public responses such as petitions or protests. The radical separation of the figures and signs he uses from the current events amounts almost to a false gesture of extreme aestheticization of his works. To literally, physically separate a theatrical performance with the translucent veil used by Castellucci is like trying to protect art through isolation: taking it out of time and isolating it in space. As if Castellucci organized a feast which escaped the frames of everyday life. However, this is a utopian vision from the order of wishful thinking. The division into a “theatre of journalism”, employing the poetics of a news program and directly referring to historical events and current affairs, and a “theatre of images” operating with metaphors, is a simplifying,

harmful interpretive cliché which renders looking at works of art primitive. Strong, binary oppositions, supplementing artistic choices with contrasting labels, let one wander the plane of appearances, because each spectacle is both an aesthetic and political event, functioning simultaneously in both these domains, and every spectacle takes a certain position, establishes its own territory in a broader picture. Coming back to Rancière: there has not always been politics, but there has always been power. (cf. Rancière 2007, p. 27) In the light of such thinking, the agonistic dimension of culture is emphasized, in which each artistic statement is tantamount to an act of entering the battlefield.

I get the impression that Castellucci sees the political nature of art (understood as commenting on current affairs) as a flaw to which theatre should not stoop down to. He regards art as prior to and more potent than politics. According to him, theatre should also not comment on reality because theatre is neither able to repair reality nor influence human living conditions. However, theatre does not exist, as Castellucci would like, “outside of time”.<sup>9</sup> It cannot be carried out under sterile conditions, as a process with a closed, separate circuit. There is also no animal “outside of time”, which for a director would be like a messenger from a world “uncontaminated” by the present communicated by means of language. If, as Castellucci claims, a Greek tragedy was a “laboratory for the *polis*” because it eased potential tensions within the community by working through aggression and violence on stage,<sup>10</sup> then it is difficult to consider Castellucci's theatre merely an aesthetic means of getting in contact with the theatre audience. Castellucci constantly takes ancient Greece as a point of reference, which allows, however, to consider his work in a context reluctantly raised by the artist himself.

Social protests have clearly shown that art also affects those who are not its audience. This is what we have experienced in recent years in Poland – on the occasion of *Golgota Picnic* [Golgotha Picnic], *Śmierć i Dziewczyna* [Death and the Girl] and *Klątwa* [The Curse] – and that was what Castellucci experienced when animal rights activists opposed the presence of the bull on the opera stage. This is evidence of the political and social agency of theatre – not as a place of aesthetic representation, but as the aforementioned laboratory of collective moods and a space for negotiating territory.

### 3.

Where is the animal in all this? I return to the stage presence of the bull in *Moses and Aaron*, which caused perhaps the greatest controversy. The animal's body is in dispute. Its body was hired from a farm, paid for, transported. I think about this body and its nervous system exposed to a multitude of stimuli. At the same time, I realize that I don't know much about it. I do not know exactly what the conditions of its everyday life are and how, on the neurological level, the bull reacts to what happens to him on stage. Hence the thesis that the animal “does not belong” to the stage can be easily challenged. Anyway, thinking so would only petrify the division into separate spheres of nature and culture; it also artificially creates spheres of strangeness. The animal is not a “stranger” on stage the same way a human is not a “stranger” on top of a mountain. Belonging can only take place if there is a certain coherent whole – in that case, part of what ecosystem is this bull traveling along with the opera? Easy Rider, because that is the name of the bull hired from the French breeding farm belonging to Jean-Philippe Varin, is a champion, which means that transport, the presence of people, flashing cameras, and noise are nothing new. Easy Rider does not live in the wild in the sense that he has not been not captured for artistic

purposes. Its life is subject to human rule on a daily basis, it has been appropriated by humans. The performance in the opera (although, of course, as exceptional as it is rare) seems to be a continuation on the path that the bull-champion has long followed. However, the ethical argument that an animal brought onto the stage is suffering is also a misappropriation, though concerning the emotional sphere. How do we know that an animal covered with paint during a performance is suffering?

One of the articles in the German daily *Die Welt* had a humorous title, suggesting that for the bull the Schönberg's dodecaphony itself was probably a real torture. Protests against Easy Rider's presence in Castellucci's production took place both in Paris (the performance premiered on October 20, 2015 at the Paris Opera) and in Madrid (where it was co-produced by Teatro Real). The artists also complained – dancer Jousa Hoffalt pointed out that the bull was paid for each performance an amount equal to that which he and his colleagues earned in a month.<sup>11</sup> In France, over thirty thousand signatures were collected on an *online* petition, addressed directly to the then Minister of Culture, Fleur Pellerin – the virtual letter unsuccessfully called for ceasing to exploit the animal in the performance. At that time, the Paris Opera issued an official statement denying the claim that the rights of the animal were violated in the course of works on *Moses and Aaron* (*inter alia* the suspicion that the bull had been given tranquilizers). In the face of the controversy, Castellucci decided to issue his own open letter in which he explained his artistic decisions in a way characteristic of him. It is difficult to say for whom these words were intended and whom they were supposed to convince. With the formula of an open letter, Castellucci, so to speak, defended himself against entering the contemporary order of the everyday. He stood on the threshold of this order, but wanted to remain an artist who expressed himself through the work itself and through his own

poetic narrative. The letter was therefore part of his creation, just as the language of this statement.

In my conversation with Castellucci,<sup>12</sup> he insisted that the animal had been treated well, like a star, but the protests did not only concern the supposed treatment of the bull with sedatives, but the overall question of exploiting animals in the name of art and entertainment. The exploitation of animals as such (even in “good faith”) is a phenomenon against which animal rights activists and vegans are advocating. The authors of the petition stated that animals do not exist to satisfy our business-oriented needs, and therefore were against the treatment of animals as objects in general, even while maintaining sterility, safety, and compliance with legal regulations. In his open letter, Castellucci argues that theatre should not be seen as a place of entertainment, but “the last temple where people and animals coexist.”<sup>13</sup> However, the director also perceives the dangers lurking in providing animals with special care: here too, he sees violence creeping up. If we recognize that an animal needs our protection, we automatically create a hierarchical relationship in which a human is the superior being, in command, knowing how and in what conditions the animal should live. This is what Castellucci means when he says that today the city does not understand animals and their nature. At the same time, he speaks as if he himself had a certain secret, exclusive knowledge, thanks to which he is able to read from the animal's eyes the fear of entering the stage or the desire to perform. He creates a barrier between himself and the “city”<sup>14</sup> disturbed by his artistic ideas. It is a very spatial, topographic thinking: his theatre as a place where people and animals unite, a dreamland where, without language, one can “understand” animals and coexist with them; as an enclave in hostile territory. Castellucci promises (and announces) a return to an undefined state of “primal unity.” According to him, modern living

conditions have led to a loss of closeness with animals – and he, through theatre, attempts to restore common ground. Thus, he creates the myth of his theatre. He also designs an emblematic, melancholic image, an atmosphere of lack, which entails the need for return.

Castellucci opposes thinking which sees humans as the “saviors” of animals who will decide what is most appropriate for their subjects. He does not agree with defending animals, which he sees as a contribution to establishing the relation of subordination. His letter can be viewed as a declaration that animals do not need our help. We are the ones who need the proximity of animals. Perhaps Castellucci's power is an institutional minimum necessary to attempt the return he describes. However, I cannot – once again – resist the impression that his rhetoric has performative power; I begin to perceive his theatre as more of a relief. Bacon's two-dimensional painting tells me more about the body and meat than a spectacle in which the body is actually present. It's a sudden burst of intuition, but I decide to follow it (and I'll come back to it later).

## 4.

According to Castellucci, an animal visits us, haunts our lives to give them the mythical meaning of a common destiny (which is a destiny towards death). He claims that we need the presence of living animals in close proximity, also in order to learn acceptance and communication on a different level than the language available to us. Castellucci then speaks of a certain misunderstanding which is the source of opposition to the presence of the bull in *Moses and Aaron*. In his letter, he states that we do need animals, but not as objects for our amusement (which he was accused of), but as *zoe* messengers and companions in our march towards death. In this

way, an animal on stage is presented by Castellucci as a medium that transmits knowledge about human life in a non-verbal way. According to him, an animal illuminates cognition, invoking mysterious, mythical elements forgotten by the city. In this way, a animal can be seen as a shepherd, in this way, we can interpret the aforementioned reversed subordination.

Moreover, Castellucci likes this kind of interesting subversions in thinking: theatre, he says, is not about showing, but about hiding; man appears as a humble pupil of an animal.<sup>15</sup> There is, of course, something deceptive about these counterintuitive theses. The question is why we should maintain any power relationship at all. After all, the rhetorical reversal of subordination can be nothing more than a conscience-soothing consolidation of the hierarchy. Why cannot taking an animal seriously, stepping aside and giving ground to an animal, entail mutual learning from each other? What else – apart from rhetoric – is the declared “reversal of subordination”? As Antoinette Foque argued in the context of bourgeois feminism, inversion does not facilitate a transition to a different type of structure. (hooks 2013, p. 37) Paradoxically, the image of an animal having a symbolic advantage over humans on stage is constructed by a human. The dogs jump at Castellucci on cue and walk away on cue. Likewise, the bull’s choreography is fully designed and executed, in an obvious and explicit way the bull is subordinate here. If we are dealing with “reversed subordination” on stage, it is a fabricated phenomenon. It is as if Castellucci rhetorically delimited the extent of animal freedom, as if he located the possibility of making space for an animal’s initiative in the sphere of language.

I also wonder how Castellucci imagines putting into effect the ritual community of people and animals when his performances are usually held on the premises of large, reputable institutions, upholding all elements of theatrical convention (and even social convention); I wonder where he thinks



this ritual takes place. This is where I see the threat I spoke of in the context of Castellucci's annexing self-narrative. The first contact with his words evokes my consent, often a kind of cognitive excitement. Only upon closer examination and, in a sense, suspicious analysis of his words, I notice that what the director says does not correspond to what I see. Such a "close reading" of Castellucci's narrative, paradoxically, brings me closer to his work, it is not an act of counterattack aimed at proving whether the director is "right" or not. I deconstruct his poetic interpretation because I cannot omit it in my thinking and, at the same time, I cannot limit my analysis by adhering to his discourse. But I see this gesture as positive. Castellucci's narrative weighs down on the animal he engages in a performance; he assigns the animal a very serious task, which is to change the perception of one's own human existence in the joint pursuit of death. It seems to me that this "mutuality" [Polish "wspólność"] is better expressed in English by the difference between the adjectives *mutual* (having the same feelings, or shared in common) and *common* (shared by all members of a group, but also widespread). This is a nuance of meaning, but in my opinion extremely important. What is *mutual* is shared by both sides of the relationship, creates a certain field of relational intimacy. While watching a performance, I can experience this mutuality, but for me it is something "weak"<sup>16</sup> – private, small. But at Teatro Real, I did not have the impression that I was taking part in a "common ritual of people and animals" – the conditions at an opera are not conducive to building this kind of borderline experience. An opera building is not something separate from the city seen as a certain project – it is an inherent part of that project, it is regulated by the city. The secret ritual takes place in words. It is beautiful, but it remains confined to words. It is Castellucci's great dream, however, for me it is an allotopy – a phantasmal construction happening parallel to the performance and situated

in the narrative. And like an allotopy – the construction is not false or true, but it is parallel, it is built elsewhere, it is a different place

Again, I juxtapose what I observe with the notion of “pure being” – in the face of such strong terms, fixing the presence of an animal in the space of a myth, and putting the human-animal relationship in the context of a phantasmal “return to the past”, it is difficult to recognize the entry of a bull (or rather, above all, the appearance of the bull in a plexiglass cage) as direct and exact. As I have stated above, Castellucci surrounds the bull's presence with a precisely constructed network of meanings. I do not get the impression that the director is working with the body of the bull, that this body is actually endowed with attention – in tandem with such a powerful explication, the bull's presence dwarfs in my eyes to the rank of a sign with a very specific meaning encoded in it.

## 5.

On March 24, 1997, Societas Raffaello Sanzio received a two-sentence letter from the organizers of the Vienna festival of performing arts, Wiener Festwochen, addressed to the team manager, Gildi Biasini, regarding the loaning of a horse for the performance of *Julius Caesar*:

This is Paula, a friendly and experienced horse (she took part in film shootings), can be loaned to *Julius Caesar*. We figured the easiest way would be to send photos and ask what you think.

Attached to the letter were four photos, developed from film, of Paula in a stable: two horizontal and two vertical shots, showing the mare from both profiles. I gained access to these materials while working at ARCH (Archival Research & Cultural Heritage) – the archive of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio

theatre in Athens. For me, this is the most interesting document I have come across. The archive is like a lining, like exposing the back room, whole expanses of reality. What has so far been the subject of my aesthetic delight becomes a space for technical and pragmatic analysis. I gain access to the traces left behind by the theatrical mechanism. It is a kind of “disenchantment”, i.e. a movement with a vector opposite to that set by Castellucci's meta-narrative – he tries to cast spells with his story, create a highly coherent and isolated image of his theatre (isolated from the order of politics, actuality, tradition, other works of art). Within his story, the “backstage” would be the construction which Castellucci calls his “strategy”: his directorial plan, a kind of scenic score, created even before rehearsals begin. However, all this is also part of the image the director creates – the creational part, an element of the work of art. In fact, the real backstage of his theatre, something that really exposes the poietic and pragmatic dimension of the functioning of theatre, are e-mails, faxed letters, cost estimates of scenography, and invoices. The letter about the mare named Paula evokes in me a kind of excitement, and at the same time having accessed it bears the hallmarks of something forbidden. Certainly, the analysis of this type of documents is part of the practice of misreading, that is, reading that is contrary to an artist's intention. It is like dispersing a nimbus of mystery and grandeur and reaching the most basic, simplest rules governing the organization of Castellucci's performances.

At first, the letter seems funny to me – a mare named Paula is the subject of an assessment, like a model being selected for a collection show on the catwalk. The assessment based on some raw photos of a “friendly and experienced horse” is to determine whether it will be accepted (or not) by the creators of the show. Is the animal also a “king” and a “shepherd” in this case? In the context of the aura Castellucci is trying to create, this kind of

collision with the archive creates an almost grotesque effect. The director usually goes to great lengths to protect his theatre as an autarkic performance behind a veil, a mysterious microcosm functioning separately from “external” reality. Observing the organizational backstage places the show in the institutional hierarchy and, therefore, in the hierarchy of power. In this context, I am beginning to see the animal also as an element of a great production machine. What's more, I see it as a deprived of subjectivity element of scenography, which can be visually documented in simple photographs, and then employed as a tool which is to perform a certain task designed at that time. This kind of communication gives off such an impression.

Working in the archive, however, does not yield many discoveries when it comes to the presence of animals. The letter about Paula is, as I mentioned, the most interesting find because it is the only material in which the name of an animal appears; in which the image (photos developed from film) relates to this particular life – in which *zoe* is put into the frame of an individual *bios*. In the set of materials to which I have been given access, animals are not particularly present: their presence is somewhere between dozens of pages, it is a trace, which is what precisely makes animals seem as elements of the machine and institution. Castellucci's theatre too is like the Societas Raffaello Sanzio – not only the Work of Art, but also a formal organization the backstage of which is the backstage of a company. It is a space where – within a theatre production – a zone of indiscernibility reveals itself in the shared status between a human and an animal. Castellucci has repeatedly emphasized that he is not very interested in the psyche of the actors joining his productions and that he works not with the actors' personalities but with their bodies or shapes. He speaks similarly about the animals he employs, the difference being that in this narrative suddenly there is a moment of

looking an animal into the eyes. When I ask the director how he knows that an animal wants to come on stage, he replies:

I can see it in its eyes. It is clear to me. When an animal is afraid, it is absolutely visible: in the breath, in the eyes, in its steps. And that is, in a way, the answer I get.<sup>17</sup>

I have never heard Castellucci talk like this about people. I wonder to what extent this is just a story sublimating the human-animal relationship, aimed at legitimizing the introduction of animals onto the stage (hard to say if against their will), and mitigating the resurfacing strong relationship of subordination and power.

Translated by Lynn Suh

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## **Autor/ka**

**Marcelina Obarska** (marcelinaobarska@gmail.com) – she holds a master's degree in Theatre Studies (2018, Jagiellonian University) and currently works as a Theatre and Dance editor at Culture.pl published by Adam Mickiewicz Institute. She is focused on a transdisciplinary approach, especially merging theatre and philosophy. She devoted both diplomas (BA and MA) to the oeuvre of Romeo Castellucci and conducted research in ARCH – Archival Research & Cultural Heritage The Soci tas Raffaello Sanzio in Athens. She took part in performative and dramaturgy projects and conferences in Poland and abroad and contributed to several theatre and art related magazines ("Performer", "Magazyn SZUM", "Didaskalia", "Dialog"). Her MA Thesis entitled "Sweetness of liberation. Animals in the theatre of Romeo Castellucci" was awarded with the third award by Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in the annual best master's thesis competition. ORCID: 0000-0003-4996-273X.

## Footnotes

1. The wide spectrum of animals appearing in Castellucci's performances makes it impossible to analyze these performances collectively, because they also differ in the affectual dimension. The emotional overtones of animal presence in theatre are completely different in the case of a dog than in the case of a bull. This is an obvious conclusion, but it definitely encourages close observation of specific cases instead of coming up with general conclusions - it is, however, a challenge in the face of the philosophical, sometimes even "aphoristic" poetics of the director's metadiscourse.
2. Of course, the director consciously uses the meaning evoked by the presence of a live bull on stage, but at the same time he repeatedly emphasized that the animal, according to him, does not communicate anything (and theatre itself is a happening, it is a "fact" devoid of any content), hence the special value of the bull's performative presence. It is here in the meta-narrative that I perceive the dissonance.
3. A quote from an interview conducted and translated from English by the author in September 2017.
4. "Dramaturgy is a geometry in which all signs - soma-sema - body-sign, are integrated into a larger picture that unites them." - this is what the director said about the presence of people and animals on stage in an interview with Dorota Semenowicz during the meeting "Fiction Awareness" as part of the Theatre Olympics in October 2016 in Wrocław. Although Castellucci refers to dramaturgy, in this case he defines it as a relief composition, a kind of plateau. When the director talks about "inscribing signs into a rectangle", it affects the understanding of his vision of the work (here, the director's discourse, which does not refer to a specific performance, but outlines a wider context, allows for generalization or extrapolation). A transcript of the conversation is available at: <http://www.grotowski.net/performer/performer-13/swiadosc-fikcji>, accessed 16 November 2018.
5. *Le Figaro* reported 5,000 EUR for the breeder per one evening.
6. A quote from an interview conducted and translated from English by the author in September 2017.
7. "However, we must seriously contemplate their [animals - author's note] life, because we share the common fate of living beings; we need animal closeness because we feel the need to be better human beings. Theatre is the last temple where people and animals coexist. [...] It is the last modern temple in which the ritual of real life is renewed." - a quote from an open letter, the director's polemics related to the events surrounding the presentation of *Moses and Aaron* in Madrid. The letter in the original Italian language version was made available to the author by the director and was translated into English by Pietro Marullo.
8. A quote from an interview conducted and translated from English by the author in June 2017 in Amsterdam.
9. A quote from an interview conducted and translated from English by the author in May 2016 in Madrid.
10. "A tragedy was a kind of laboratory for polis to prevent real violence. Theatre is a means of mitigating this dark aspect of human nature," says Castellucci in May 2016 in Madrid. The conversation between the director and the author (translated by the author from English) was an annex to the author's BA thesis defended in July 2016.
11. [https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/04/26/inenglish/1461666189\\_421620.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/04/26/inenglish/1461666189_421620.html), accessed 18 May 2018.

12. The interview was conducted and translated from English by the author in June 2017 in Amsterdam.
13. A quote from an open letter, the director's polemics related to the events surrounding the staging of *Moses and Aaron* in Madrid. The letter in the original Italian language version was made available to the author by the director, and was translated into English by Pietro Marullo.
14. I use quotation marks on purpose, because the figure of the "city" to which Castellucci refers is in his narrative a certain imaginary interlocutor/opponent/party to the dispute.
15. "Having an animal on stage is having a king. Subordination is therefore reversed here. The animal is the ruler. When it enters, it brings with it a new kind of time and space, new air. So we have to follow him, not the other way around. The animal becomes the shepherd. The dog is our shepherd. The bull is our shepherd. Ontology meets mythology. In this way, each animal functions mythologically on the stage: it guides us, frees us from language. If the language is the battlefield, the animal is the general, the commander in this battle. " - a quote from an interview conducted and translated from English [to Polish] by the author in September 2017.
16. In the sense given to a weak thought by Gianni Vattimo.
17. A quote from an interview conducted and translated from English by the author in September 2017.

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## THE BODY AND THE ARCHIVE

# Demons and the Body: Ingmar Bergman's "The Magic Lantern" from a Somatopoetic Perspective

Jan Balbierz

The article attempts to show the work of Ingmar Bergman, in particular his 1987 quasi-autobiography *The Magic Lantern*, from the perspective of the medical humanities. Following a slew of Swedish commentators, the article shows the problematic nature of reading Bergman's text autobiographically, instead focusing on numerous representations of the body and illness. The somatic, psychic and psychosomatic insecurities of the narrator not only occupy a central place here, but they are also one of the basic themes of the Swedish director's whole oeuvre (they appear, for instance, in the related narrative of *Fanny and Alexander*). The article also shows how Bergman benefited from the achievements of the American anti-psychiatry movement and how his literary texts fit into wider cultural contexts in the tradition of melancholy, carnivalesque and abject writing.

Keywords: medical humanities; Ingmar Bergman; somatoaesthetics; abject; disease

## 1.

The branch of humanities known as *medical humanities*, situated on the border between literature studies, anthropology, cultural theory and medical sciences, has been experiencing turbulent development for over a decade. Like all the so-called interdisciplinary areas of the humanities, it brings new,



unexpected perspectives to the interpretation of verbal and visual works, but also has problematic aspects, the most important of which is the limited competence of the vast majority of humanists in understanding and describing contemporary medical and natural science practices. On the other hand, the enormous wealth of material – from the deformed pieces of meat in Francis Bacon's oil paintings, through the medical-historical novels of Per Olov Enquist such as *The Visit of the Royal Physician*, to the dissertations on the psychophysical background of disease conditions by the young Friedrich Schiller (a medical doctor by training) – opens up a wide and fascinating field of research for humanists. The terms, theoretical perspectives and sub-branches are, of course, legion. Anna Burzyńska, writing in one of the chapters of *Anty-teoria literatury (the Anti-theory of Literature)* on Barthes' project of transferring the sphere of intimacy and the pleasure of reading category to the theory of literature, notes that “[r]eading has become for Barthes simply a way of experiencing ‘the joy of writing’, and not a compulsion to seek content, paralysing all pleasure”. (Burzyńska, 2006, p. 235). These hedonistic aspects of writing and reading are inseparably connected with the notion of a “reading body” – corporeal, material and open to the sexual (in the case of the French author – homosexual) pleasures of the subject. Anna Łebkowska, in turn, in an article published in the second volume of *Kulturowa teoria literatury (Cultural Theory of Literature)*, proposes the term “*somatopoetyka*” (“*somatopoetics*”) (Łebkowska, 2012). If, in accordance with the author, we assume that somatopoetics is a branch of cultural theory, trying to answer questions related to the possibilities of representation and articulation of our bodily experiences, then the work of Ingmar Bergman will perfectly fit into this research field. The films of the Swedish director are usually interpreted in two contexts. Firstly, Bergman is presented as a dark post-existentialist, showing the tragedy of human

existence in a world devoid of divine instance, and secondly, as a diagnostician of toxic family and partner relations. Both lines of interpretation are, of course, justified; however, I would like to focus on another aspect of the Swedish director's work, namely the threads of corporeality and disease that appear in it.

The quasi-autobiography *Laterna magica (The Magic Lantern)* published in 1987, is an excellent starting point here. It was written during a period of creative flow after the director's return from – largely voluntary – emigration to Germany, where he had worked for seven years in Munich's *Residenztheater*. Maaret Koskinen points out that Bergman's hybrid texts and theatrical productions of the 1980s are directed towards the past – both the personal and the artistic past. In them, Bergman returns to motifs and themes known from early films, but also collaborates with actors from those films. At the same time, he does not shy away from autobiographical allusions: Peter Stormare as Hamlet (1976) appears in a cap and jacket that are deceptively similar to the ones Bergman wore in the 1950s; in Bergman's staging P.O. Enquist's *The Image Makers* (2000) there is a screening of *The Phantom Carriage* by Victor Sjöström, Bergman's former mentor, who played the lead role in *Wild Strawberries*. Two autobiographical screenplays, in a form resembling novels, were also written at that time: *The Best Intentions* (1991) and *Sunday's Children* (1993, cf.: Koskinen, 2001). *The Magic Lantern* fits perfectly into the space of memory, created by Bergman in the last decades of his life. The original version of the text was written with a ballpoint pen in an A4 format school notebook. Proposals for motifs and themes which would later be included in the book appear on the first pages of the manuscript: we will find sections here on the following: “About mother, father and grandmother”, “theatre”, “acting”, “the actor's craft”, “lies”, “sexuality”, “school”, “death and fear of death” and “new fears every

day". For many years, the director of the *Seventh Seal* used to write down his scripts and prose texts in almost illegible writing in notepads; subsequent versions were later re-typed. The differences between the variants are often considerable. The handwritten manuscript and several versions of typescripts of the *Magic Lantern* have been preserved in the Bergman archives. The changes in these versions consisted mainly in the introduction of stylistic corrections and the deletion of some longer – we might guess, overly controversial – fragments. The title of the book changed several times: amongst them, we can find *Gycklarans afton* (*Sawdust and Tinsel*) and *Skala lök* (*Peeling an onion*), which is a reference to the famous scene from Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, staged twice by Bergman (in the eponymous manuscript, the whole scene can be found on the front pages as a motto). In the ever-swelling torrent of academic output on the subject of the Swedish director, *The Magic Lantern* is invariably treated as memoir literature, and information presented in it is repeatedly quoted by numerous biographers *in extenso* as facts from the director's life. However, the fact that Bergman's prose belongs to the autobiographical genre has not been confirmed anywhere in the text. Thus, we will not find any paratextual indications (such as a subtitle) or even Lejeune's concept of the "autobiographical pact", unity of the author-narrator-hero's name. More recent archival research, above all the book by Jan Holmberg *Författaren Ingmar Bergman* (*The Writer Ingmar Bergman*), published recently, shows that the level of fictionalization is no less than in the script for the film *Fanny and Alexander* – inspired by the fantasy stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann, or in the already mentioned narratives *Sunday's Children* and *the Best Intentions*. Holmberg considers that there are several reasons why the memoir *The Magic Lantern* should be placed alongside the historical drama film *Fanny and Alexander* written just before it (Holmberg 2018, p. 165). (Therefore we

should not be surprised that we will find an envelope entitled *The Magic Lantern* in Bergman's archive – something which the Swedish commentator does not mention; however, it does not contain the text of the quasi-autobiography, but an early version of the screenplay of *Fanny and Alexander*). Several key episodes of the quasi-autobiography – the description of his grandmother's home in Uppsala, the first cinematograph as a Christmas present for his brother – appear in Bergman's writings as early as the 1940's. In his 1947 commentary – *In Grandmother's House* – the director recounts how he was very young when he visited her house for the first time, and then never saw it again, which was probably why he subsequently described it through the eyes of a child (as cited in: Holmberg, 2018, p. 164); similar statements return in the essay *The Making of Film* from 1954. In the *Magic Lantern* and *Fanny and Alexander*, descriptions of the house in Uppsala appear again in an almost identical form. Holmberg discusses Bergman's accounts of the “poisonous pedagogy” to which he was supposed to have been subjected by his father, a pastor, suggesting that the unchanging dark image of Erik Bergman presented by the director was a composite – a phantom image – made up of fragments appearing in the whole autobiographical project. Holmberg adds that other sources – more trustworthy than Bergman – claimed something completely different about who Erik Bergman was and what he was like (Holmberg, 2018, p. 173). Equally interesting are the memory gaps and intentional omissions in the autobiographical project. Nowhere in his published writings and manuscripts will we find, for example, any mention of the fact that the director's parents took in a Jewish boy before World War II, who lived with the Bergman siblings for several years; the months when he served in the army as a conscript are not present in the director's writings either. Both the introduction and the end of the quasi-autobiography are examples of

extensive auto-mythologization strategies. (In a short, handwritten note, Bergman commented on his text, stating that he had intended to stick to reality, but that this was difficult for an old hardened martyr of fantasy and deceiver who found pleasure in his practices, for someone who had never hesitated to give reality the form that a given moment required; as cited in: Holmberg, p. 167).

And so, in the first paragraph, the narrator describes his own dramatic birth:

When I was born in 1918, my mother had Spanish influenza. I was in a bad way and was baptized as a precaution at the hospital. One day the family was visited by the old house doctor, who looked at me and said: "He's dying of undernourishment." (Bergman, 1988, p.1 ).

The narrator returns to the subject on the last page of the book, quoting a longer fragment of his mother's diary:

Our son was born on Sunday morning on 14 July. He immediately contracted a high temperature and severe diarrhoea. He looks like a tiny skeleton with a big fiery red nose. He stubbornly refuses to open his eyes. I had no milk after a few days because of my illness. Then he was baptized in an emergency here at the hospital. (Bergman, 1988, p.289).

Bergman's parents held a high position in the social hierarchy and his father fulfilled public functions (he was a vicar in the parish of the Stockholm Church of Hedvig Eleonora, then a pastor at the royal court), so many official

documents linked to their life have been preserved. The diaries of Bergman's mother, written in secret from her husband, which return in late films, such as *The Best Intentions* and *Private Confessions*, provide additional biographical information. These documents indicate that Bergman was baptised not in a hospital, but during a conventional church ceremony, that his mother was never ill with Spanish flu and, most importantly, that an alleged excerpt from her diary was entirely written by the director; there are no such words in the authentic diary. Instead, according to Holmberg, there is simply a laconic entry, giving his Christian names (Ernst Ingmar), date of birth (14 July 1918), and a reference to a psalm in a Swedish psalter (257:10) (Holmberg, 2018, p. 182).

Instead of showing in great detail successive inconsistencies with documents and testimonies left by others, or returning to the – all too obvious – thesis about the inherent unreliability of the autobiographical genre, it is worth noting Bergman's penchant for making use of narrative tricks – known from film – in *The Magic Lantern*. First of all, therefore, he makes use of the well-known mindscape technique, used by him in *Persona* and *Hour of the Wolf*, among others; the whole diegesis here has been subjected to introspective distortion of perspective, internalised and extremely subjectivised. Secondly, he refers to low and coarse forms of culture, for which he had a clear predilection (he loved circus, melodrama, soap operas and commercial silent film); the portrayal of the “I” in *The Magic Lantern* was adopted, I believe, from slapstick comedy – a genre in which the director presents himself in front of the camera in his exaggerated and crude physicality.

## 2.

*The Magic Lantern* differs from traditional memoir literature in that it is

above all a pseudo- (or else a crypto-) autobiography of the body (an astoundingly similar approach was used by Paul Auster in an autobiography published several years ago; in his *Winter Journal* we accompany the narrator from early childhood to retirement age from the perspective of corporeal experiences). From the first paragraph onwards, often in a drastic way, Bergman's text deals with biological aspects of existence and somatic or psychosomatic ailments of the narrator:

I have always suffered from what is called a nervous stomach, a calamity as foolish as it is humiliating. With a never-ebbing and often sophisticated wealth of invention, my bowels have sabotaged my efforts. Thus school was an unremitting misery, as I could never calculate when the attacks were going to hit me. Suddenly shitting in your trousers is a traumatic experience [...].

No medicaments help as they either cause apathy or arrive too late [...] In all the theatres I have worked in for any length of time, I have been given my own lavatory. These conveniences are probably my most lasting contribution to the history of the theatre (Bergman, 1988, p. 62).

As Edward Shorter writes, somatization processes are subject to historically conditioned cultural pressure; hence psychosomatic symptoms also change together with changing concepts and definitions of illness:

The unconscious mind desires to be taken seriously and not be ridiculed. It will therefore strive to present symptoms that always seem, to the surrounding culture, legitimate evidence of organic disease. [...] Psychosomatic illnesses have always existed, because

psychogenesis – the conversion of stress or psychological problems into physical symptoms – is one of nature’s basic mechanisms in mobilizing the body to cope with mental distress (Shorter, 1992, p. X).

The term “psychosomatics illness” does not appear in disease classifications until the 1950’s. The concept itself is – of course – much older. In particular, the period around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries abounds in descriptions of cases of neurotics and hysterics, in whom a spectacular, often quasi-theatrical staging of bodily symptoms (paroxysms; compulsive tics; obsessive, monotonous diets; catatonic freezing in one position) is only a symptom of internal dissonances and anxieties.

Perceiving disease in this way as a sort of translation of internal tensions (“as I harbour a constant tumult within me and have to keep watch over it” – Bergman, 1988, p. 33) into the language of physical symptoms, as a “drama of the id” (as one of the precursors of thinking in psychosomatic terms, the German medical doctor and psychoanalyst Georg Groddeck, referred to it), it repeatedly returns in the Swedish director’s narrations.

He wrote about his brother, who was in conflict with his family and was afflicted at the end of his life with severe paralysis:

To me, my brother’s illness is understandable, paralyzed as he was by rage, paralyzed by two overwhelming twilight figures, suffocating and incomprehensible: Father and Mother [...] He faced pain and humiliation with angry impatience, and made quite sure he was so unpleasant that no one could ever feel pity for him (Bergman, 1988, P. 57-58).



*The Magic Lantern* is in many places a chronicle of the most varied, real and imagined, ailments of the body and spirit:

I went over my actual situation. How was my body, how was my soul and, most of all, what had got to be done today? I established that my nose was blocked (the dry air), my left testicle hurt (probably cancer), my hip ached (the same old pain), and there was a ringing in my bad ear (unpleasant but not worth bothering about). (Bergman, 1988, P. 64).

Diseases of the gastric system occupy a privileged position. Repeated descriptions of digestive disorders fit Bergman's narrative into a long cultural tradition, connected with a melancholic temperament. According to a cultural concept established in antiquity, creativity and a tendency to artistic activity are associated with stomach problems in melancholics. The correspondence between the creative process and the organs and fluids of the human body (in this case: "black bile") has for centuries defined the medical-psychological discourse relating to the genesis of art and literature. Despondency, depression, spleen – these are not only conditions conducive to artistic creativity, but they are also associated with, often highly peculiar, nutritional compulsions and obsessions, as well as notorious constipations and diarrhoeas (these symptoms can be found, for example, in the classic description by Robert Burton). I return to the thesis presented at the beginning of the text: Bergman is not only a post-religious existentialist, but also a writer and director of theatrical productions and films that have been thoroughly carnivalised, a presenter of sick, hideous, abject bodies.

Revealing the sphere of corporeal intimacy, scatological jokes, bodily

degradation, fascination with faeces and regression to the anal sphere occupy a central place not only in his autobiographical project, but in his entire oeuvre. The physicality of death and the ugliness of an ailing body return in characters such as the translator Esther, worn out by illness, in *The Silence*; Agnes, dying in agony in *Cries and Whispers* (it is no accident that Susan Sontag mentions this film as one of the most important representations of the physicality of cancer in 20th century culture: “Contrast these ennobling, placid TB deaths with the ignoble, agonizing cancer deaths of Eugene Gant’s father in Thomas Wolfe’s *Of Time and the River* and of the sister in Bergman’s film *Cries and Whispers* – (Sontag, 1989, P. 17)); the paralyzed Helena in *Autumn Sonata*; or the bedridden Blenda Vergéus in *Fanny and Alexander*. In the spectacle *In the Presence of a Clown*, a play produced for television, and a much earlier staging of *The Rake’s Progress*, by Stravinsky, Auden and Kallman (Royal Opera, 1963), the protagonists are dying in the last phase of syphilis; in the staging of *Hedda Gabler* (Dramaten, 1964), the heroine, disgusted with her own pregnancy, tries to induce a miscarriage with her hand; *Miss Julie* (Dramaten, 1985, re-issue 1991), in turn, for a long time and with disgust wipes the virgin blood flowing down her thighs. Advertisements for Bris soap made during the *lock-out* deal entirely with the fatal effects of sweating. However, the most physical (and most feministic) amongst all Bergman’s films is *Brink of life*, an intimate drama entirely set in a delivery ward and dealing with the subject of unwanted motherhood and absent fathers (the script was written by Bergman’s friend, the excellent writer Ulla Isaksson). Bergman's representations of mental illness occupy a separate place. In numerous interviews, the director spoke about his own borderline states as “my demons”. *Persona* or *Hour of the Wolf* present psychotic episodes of the protagonists. Mental illness appears in a more explicit form in *Face to Face*,

a relatively unknown English language film produced by Dino De Laurentis (the working title was *Psychiatrist*; a broader discussion of the film can be found in: Tapper, 2017, followed by information linked to the creation of the film). The dense network of intertextual references here encompasses Strindberg's *The Defence of a Fool*, Kesey/Forman's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and finally the paintings of Leonor Fini, which Bergman looked at before beginning production of the film. The director was also astonishingly well read in newer, "alternative" psychiatric literature. As early as the 1960's he came across the writings of Karen Horney; two volumes can be seen on a bedside table belonging to the protagonist played by Liv Ullmann in one of the scenes of the film *Prisoners of Psychiatry* (1972) by Bruce J. Ennis, the author of books about the repressive system of psychiatric hospitals, and *The Psychiatric Interview* (1970) by Harry Stack Sullivan. The main source of inspiration, however, was the classic example of anti-psychiatry, *The Primal Scream* by Arthur Janov, which has weathered badly over the years and is today ridiculed in professional psychiatric circles, but in the 1970's was extremely popular throughout Scandinavia. Bergman read this book in 1974, and a year later, during his visit to California (where, incidentally, he always felt terrible) he visited Janov's clinic and met its author. Many years later he reminisced in *Images: My Life in Film* that *Face to Face* had arisen under the direct influence of Janov's *Primal Scream*:

There is no doubt that there exists a huge shout trying to find its voice. Then the question is whether I have the ability to release the shout, to set it free [...] Will I be able to get close to the point where my own despair is hiding, where my own suicide lies in wait? I don't know. This is the true birth: hold me, help me, be kind to me, hold

me tight, why isn't there anybody who cares about me? (Bergman, 1994, p. 75).

Janov's theory derived all mental illnesses from one source – deficiency of maternal love. The remedy for them was supposed to be primal scream therapy (the album *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, in particular the song *Mother*, was created under its influence; Bergman, let us add, was an ardent fan of the Beatles). The theory of the American psychiatrist was a perfect fit for the anthropology formulated by Bergman much earlier, positing that lack of love is the most powerful of all traumas and a universal blemish on human nature.

### 3.

Jan Holmberg writes that Bergman undertook work on *The Magic Lantern* in the mid-1980's largely as a follow-up to *Fanny and Alexander*. Holmberg considers that this is worth noting, as the similarities between the two works are so great that it is often difficult to distinguish between them – apparently even the author himself had difficulty with this! (Holmberg, 2018, p. 173). One of the recurring themes in both texts (as well as in the film production of the story of two siblings from the Ekdahl family of actors) is – often obscene – carnality. Both also form a two-part anatomy of disgust.

In a monograph devoted to *Fanny and Alexander*, Maaret Koskinen and Mats Rohdin point out that in this film Bergman's fascination with phenomena relating to the functions of the intestinal tract and with lower regions of the human body in general (Koskinen/Rohdin, 2005, p. 168), and his fondness for Rabelaisian tragi-comic scene reach a climax (Koskinen/Rohdin, 2005, p. 171) reach a climax. In the prologue, after a short introduction in which

Alexander plays with a cardboard model of a theatre and looks at the enchanted interior of his grandmother's flat, the action of the film moves to an outhouse:

A long dark passage with a lofty ceiling goes through the apartment [...]. At the angle of the passage is a secret room. The door has five holes bored in it just above the floor and the walls are covered with red material. On them hang some framed colored pictures representing knights' castles and beautiful damsels in billowing wimples. In the middle of the cramped square room stands a throne with arms and back; it too is covered with red material and has brass fittings on the corners and sides. The seat can be lifted, and under it is a black hole, a bottomless pit, Alexander thinks. Here Grandmamma sits for a long time, groaning and sighing. Alexander has once or twice offered to keep her company in order to divert her, but she has always declined. Alexander's father says Grandmamma suffers from constipation because she is stingy (Bergman, 1982 , pp. 16-17).

A similar scene can be found in working notes to *Cries and Whispers*: "There is Amalia, Aunt Amalia, seated on the toilet, eating a liver pate sandwich, who keeps up an excessively detailed monologue about her digestion, her intestines, and her stools." (Bergman, 1994, p. 88). A penchant for the carnivalesque – feasting images descriptions of the belly and lower bodily regions or parodic descriptions of transgressive corporeality (in Bakhtin's view: "the gay, material bodily cosmos, ever growing and self-renewing" – Bakhtin, 1984, p. 364) permeate both the screenplay of *Fanny and Alexander* and the text of *The Magic Lantern*. Successive episodes of

Bergman's reminiscence prose are arranged around clusters of diseases, misfortunes and all kinds of somatic ailments. Ingrid Bergman, acting in *Autumn Sonata*, dies of cancer; the director's homosexual assistant drinks himself to death after an unsuccessful affair; the young Ingmar's favourite uncle begins to suffer from incontinence. In the whole, very extensive, gallery of freaks and eccentrics appearing in Bergman's reminiscence prose, it is hard to find even a single character who would not one day fall ill with typhus, polio, tuberculosis, schizophrenia or at least – in the best case – with one of the minor venereal diseases. Terror and disgust are often accompanied by erotic pleasure, like in the stories of the pastor with a rotten corpse-like face emerging from a coffin, and of clandestine visits to a mortuary (this motif also appears in the prologue to *Persona*). The key concept here is repulsion; Bergman joins a long line of copro-eroticists and scatologists, but also portraitists of old hags – who are both repulsive and attractive at the same time – appearing in the literature of modernism (compare Menninghaus's analyses in: Menninghaus, 2009). Corporeality dominates the chapter (which was full of digressions and anecdotes) devoted to work on the staging of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* from 1986:

I look through my diary notes from work on *A Dream Play*, not very encouraging reading. I was in bad shape, uneasy, dejected, tired, my right hip hurting [...] My stomach was sabotaging me with cramps and attacks of diarrhoea. (Bergman, 1988, p.41 ).

And a few pages later:

On the Monday night, I had a high temperature and was shaking and sweating, every nerve rebelling [...] I had a high temperature

for ten days, unable even to read, but simply lay there mostly dozing. When I got up, I almost immediately lost my balance. I was so ill it was almost interesting. Dozing, falling asleep, waking, coughing, sniffing, influenza blossoming untiringly, my temperature leaping about (Bergman, 1988, p.44 ).

A month before starting rehearsals for *A Dream Play*, Lena Olin, who was playing the daughter of Indra, asked Bergman for a short talk. It turned out that: “She had been infected by the prevailing fertility rite in the theatre” (Bergman, 1988, p 42) and was pregnant, as a result of which, the run would have to be cancelled shortly after the premiere. It is followed by a series of fragmentary narratives about persons from Bergman’s closest circle. A former lover of the narrator, “this beautiful and brilliant actress lost her memory and her teeth and died at fifty in a mental hospital” (Bergman, 1988, p. 35). A set designer, whom Bergman had hired at the beginning of work on the staging of the play, quickly withdrew from the project:

[H]is partner of ten years left him for a young actor. The stage designer acquired a stomach ulcer and arrived in a wretched state at my home on Fårö just after midsummer. In the hope that work would contain his depression, we started our daily meetings. The designer’s lips trembled and he looked at me with slightly protruding eyes. ‘I want her to come back,’ he whispered (Bergman, 1988, p.35-36).

The flow of memories is consistently linked with illness and death: “A few years ago, I visited a friend who was dying of cancer; he was eroding away, transformed into a shrivelled gnome with huge eyes and large yellow teeth.

He was lying on his side, connected to a number of machines” (Bergman, 1988, p.44). During a school performance of *Macbeth*, one of the actors was struck with a sword “on the head so that blood spattered in all directions. He was taken to hospital after the performance.” (Bergman, 1988, p. 46). At the same time, the body of the director himself was deteriorating: “My nights were sleepless, filled with anxiety and physical discomfort, the influenza leaving me with a depression I did not recognize, living its own poisonous life within my body” (Bergman, 1988, p. 45), and in another place: “My body reacted with cramps and disorders of balance. I seemed to have been poisoned...” (Bergman, 1988, p.61). We will not learn much from *The Magic Lantern* about the fact that the body can also be – at least sometimes – a source of pleasure and delight. Episodes relating to masturbation and first sexual experiences – obligatory in male coming-of-age stories – are almost exclusively limited here to descriptions of physical pain, disgust and the sense of deep shame and inner chaos that accompanies them:

This illness or obsession afflicted me without pity, the action constantly repeating itself, almost compulsorily [...]. In desperation – the narrator concludes this thread – I turned to Jesus and asked my father if I could attend confirmation classes [...]. The night before my first communion, I tried with all my might to resist my demon [...], but lost the battle. Jesus punished me with a gigantic infected pimple in the middle of my pallid forehead. When I received the means of grace my stomach contracted and I almost threw up (Bergman, 1988, p.110).

Bergman’s corporeal fixation and the constantly appearing images of bodily decay in his work (let us recall, for example, the rotting corpse consumed by



disease in the *Seventh Seal*) have a significant intertextual dimension. And so the world presented in *The Magic Lantern* is the world of Strindberg's late plays, in which existence appears as an endless *Gehenna* and, perhaps, as punishment for sins committed in previous incarnations. In *A Dream Play*, Agnes, who has been sent to this earthly plane, lands in a material world permeated by suffering and vulgar triviality, and her disillusionment encompasses successive spheres of human experience. Bergman comments on the circumstances of the genesis of the dreamlike drama – written at the time of the long and painful process of Strindberg's separation from his third wife, the actress Harriet Bosse – in the following way:

The wound is now deep and bleeding profusely. The hurt cannot be turned on or off as in other disasters in life. The pain bores its way towards the unknown room and opens the floodgates. Strindberg writes in his diary that he wept, but the tears cleansed his eyes and he could look on himself and his fellow men with conciliatory indulgence. He was certainly speaking a new language (Bergman, 1988, P 38).

*The Magic Lantern* is not only a meta-commentary on Strindberg, but it also theatricalizes – in diagetic mode – Strindberg's vision of the world as an inferno. At the same time, the narrative forms a passionate story about the agony, death and resurrection of the artist. The turning point here is the day when a cinematograph appears in the boy's life. The moment when the narrator first comes into contact with the medium of film is also the beginning of symbolic liberation. The culture of modernism has fundamentally re-evaluated the opposition: *bios-logos*. The Cartesian anthropological paradigm, according to which the essence of humanity is

thinking, is replaced here by a wide spectrum of views and attitudes, presenting human being ruled by underground impulses and drives not subject to the power of reason. As Birgitta Steene notes, Bergman – although born a few years after Strindberg's death – belongs to the same cultural formation: hierarchical, patriarchal and deeply rooted in the Protestant religion. To this should be added that the director takes pleasure in addressing the great themes of literature of the early modernist phase, such as the belief that it is impossible to express our experiences in words (hence the turn to sounds and images), or the opposition: artist-bourgeois. In a deleted and unpublished fragment from the typescript of *The Magic Lantern*, a conviction – very well-known from Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, for example – appears that the artist is the last link in the evolution of the bourgeois line, which is becoming degenerate and is doomed to extinction. In this unpublished section, Bergman also describes a mysterious and incurable disease of the muscles that afflicted the Bergman family, befalling it in a capricious and inexplicable way, leaving Bergman's father severely incapacitated at the end of his life and his brother completely paralyzed – in the last years of his life he only moved his head. Furthermore, one of his aunts died at a young age. In the unpublished typescript, Bergman goes on to discuss another family condition – the Bergman loss of feelings, which in his view could lead to catastrophic situations if allowed to take over without restrictions. His mother was “infected” by it at an early age, and bravely tried to defend against it, but eventually gave up, though not entirely. Bergman further describes how he himself is a psychological mess – a cocktail of pride, shyness, shallow emotions, irritability, turning away from the world, but also having the need for contact, warmth, joy, anger, tenderness, and desire. (unpublished typescript, Bergman archive).

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The Bergmanesque corporeal aesthetics, present in his pseudo-autobiography, but also in his film and theatre work, is subversive towards the global transformations in mass culture. Contemporary popular culture, mercantiled and oriented towards hedonism – as pointed out by Mike Featherstone, among many others – has created a corporeal aesthetic whose central aspects are narcissism and the cult of beauty and youth. Stylized, idealized, eternally young bodies appearing in advertisements are intended to encourage consumers to maintain their own body in good health through jogging or yoga, consumption of yoghurts, nutritional supplements and fat-free food or by applying various diets. If in turn we look at *The Magic Lantern* in the context of the changes in Swedish culture from the 1930s to the 1970s, then here as well, the text is in clear opposition to the dominant political and cultural discourse at that time. This discourse was based on a functionalist definition of modernity, progress understood in terms of rational, socially beneficial behaviours. Meanwhile, bodily functions were to be subjected to control and regulated through practices such as gymnastics and sport, appropriate dietary regimes and choice of healthy food, limiting consumption of alcohol and contraception. Meanwhile the *corpus* in Bergman's text is transgressive and carnivalesque, the bodily fluids – blood, sperm, vomit, sputum, and urine – are flowing here in streams, and the unsteerable, excessive body is revealed to us in crude materiality and unceasingly gravitates towards the field of abject art, where repulsion and disgust meet with fascination and sexual *plaisir*.

Translation: George Lisowski

## Autor/ka

Jan Balbierz (jan.balbierz@uj.edu.pl) is a professor at the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków. He is the author of *A New cosmos. Strindberg, Science and Signs* (Gdańsk 2008) and other books and articles on Scandinavian Modernism and comparative literature. ORCID: 0000 -0001 -7625 -9551.

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THE BODY AND THE ARCHIVE

## The Bioarchive

Dorota Jarząbek-Wasyl Jagiellonian University in Kraków

This article presents the history of the acquaintance between Irena Solska and Stanisław Eliaż Radzikowski seen through the lens of their correspondence (held in the collections of the National Museum in Kraków, the Czartoryski Library). These documents not only record a relationship, but – through the personal items, intimate keepsakes, and single-sentence letters enclosed in the envelopes – they are an example of an archive that transcends traditional frameworks and classifications. The author suggests using the term “bioarchive” to describe the existential, material, and performative dimension of the biographical documentation.

Keywords: archive; Polish theatre; Irena Solska; Stanisław Eliaż Radzikowski

Between January and March 1902, Irena Solska contracted a severe kidney disease and found herself in the care of Stanisław Eliaż Radzikowski, an assistant at the University Clinic of Internal Medicine in Lviv (see Kuchtówna, 1980, p. 51). A theatre buff, the doctor knew the Solskis from the stage, soon became friends with them, and, in the summer of 1903 (or possibly somewhat earlier), began an affair with the patient. The liaison did not last long and ultimately had a much more disastrous impact on Radzikowski's life than on Solska's. Legend and biography studies link his subsequent mental breakdown and gradual degeneration to the effects of disappointed love. But Radzikowski continued to be the artist's confidante

and advisor on different matters, even when she focused now on her career, now on her maternal duties; nor did Solska forget about the doctor so quickly: there is evidence that she tried to rescue him from alcoholism. Radzikowski's last (unsent) letter to the artist is from 1920 (see Reychman, 1971, p. 198), and the last words in his notebook are also about her. It was a complicated, occasionally dramatic relationship of long standing which, rather than by the clichéd word "affair", would be better described by other terms: friendship, care (it is not without reason that the doctor used the abbreviated pseudonym STER [the word "ster" means "helm" in Polish]), exchange of artistic impressions, but also manipulation, struggle, emotional dependency, fascination, private cult.

Just six years Solska's senior, Stanisław Eliaż Radzikowski proved himself to be a friend and physician of artists as well as an original personality. He inherited from his father both artistic talent and passion for the Tatra Mountains<sup>1</sup>. Prescription forms were interspersed about tour notes, drawings, rolls of film and photographic equipment on the doctor's table. It was Radzikowski who photographed Solska in her seven incarnations as Psyche in Jerzy Żuławski's *Eros i Psyche* (the pictures adorned the play when it was published in Lviv in 1904). Between 1908 and 1910 he also painted a series of then fashionable "silhouettes", or Art Nouveau illustrations, in which forty-three depictions of the artist's profile were framed by an ivy-like, decorative line and an alphabet of erotic symbols. Regardless of the romantic basis of their acquaintance, it should be noted that they were both people of diverse artistic and literary interests. Solska not only had a talent for the visual arts, but also a certain preparation in this area thanks to her mother, Bronisława Poświkowa, a pioneer of women's decorative art and the founder of an art school for girls. Though ultimately the daughter did not follow in the mother's professional footsteps, she continued to paint and

draw portraits, expertly designed her costumes and, above all, astonished her partners with the ingenuity of her stage makeup. She also maintained active contact with the literary world and must have been curious about Stanisław Radzikowski's stories. After all, he was a charismatic lover of mountains and had various ambitions, such as climbing Matterhorn. In July 1903 a discussion on the subject ensued between them, which the artist concluded as follows:

If you want to spend 100 francs on a guide, give it to charity, and stick to seeing Matterhorn on the map. Or some day, some distant day, when I'm great and famous, and old, and you an old man with fifty important positions, we will go there, you know, and look from the foot of the mountain into its maw, which will have by then devoured many good-for-nothings, but not such needed people like you. Shame on you, Stach. I will disown you if you don't stop thinking about it .... When are you going to come over and oil an old machine, that is me, with good advice. (*Listy Ireny Solskiej*, pp. 26-27)

The extant correspondence includes the doctor's accounts of his mountain escapades, which sometimes resembled hunting, and at other times philosophical retreats. I cite three fragments as proof that we are dealing not only with an amorous discourse, but with common interests, a thirst for impressions and aesthetic pursuits:

I haven't been in the Tatras yet, either I didn't feel like it or the weather was bad, or there was some other obstacle, at any rate this week I will probably go further to adapt and then climb higher



above the clouds to the dizzying peaks. I want to spend a few days in Ciemne Smreczyni, in that primeval forest you know from photographs, and to renew my relationship with nature and the Tatras. I pass whole days in conversation with myself or with people, lots of different thoughts, life so much unlike the rest of the year, I soak it up, I rid myself of the city, and there are moments when I scrape through to my inner self, for the third day in a row I feel in touch with myself at least now and then, but even that's something. (letter of 31 August 1903, Radzikowski, ms, p. 77)

The weather's clearing up – I will go in the Tatras for a few days when the fog lifts. Zakop.[ane] has emptied, but it's nicer, less noisy, the landscape is changing for the autumn, and then the place is filled with this great intense delight – burnt mountain pines smell, sunsets glow fierily, rocks sparkle with colours of the rainbow, damselflies – demoiselles – buzz in the air, and lindens are in bloom! At night stars glow in the satin depths of the sky. I hug your dear little bones. STER (letter of 8 September 1904, Radzikowski, ms, p. 39)

The night of 28 September 1904.

Here's what happened: I got hold of two magnificent painted chests, one must be about 250, the other 100 years old – I brought them home and started to clean the painted decoration at night. The chests were redolent of the old world of highlanders and highland robbers, those long-forgotten times, and I wrote the words I sent to you. Yesterday I went hunting again in Kościeliska – and I

struck it lucky. I brought another old painted chest and, most interestingly, a very old painting from a demolished church in Kościeliska Valley to which Kościeliska owes its name (kept in the home of a Bar confederate). I finally removed the layer of dirt and ancient soot from a *pietà*, i.e. the Virgin Mary with Christ in her lap, surrounded by the instruments of the Passion; everything painted very naively, fabulous, even a crowing cock, and, near the cross, the sun and the moon with eyes, nose and mouth! An incredible find. Today I varnished the painting and chests, and I am very rich. The Japanese Manggha [Feliks Jasieński] howled when he saw it, and Wyczół[kowski], kept nodding his head and could have passed for a Chinese if he had pinned a braid to his pate. (Radzikowski, ms, pp. 45-47)

Radzikowski's turbulent life is material worthy of a separate study, suffice it to say here that shortly after Poland had regained independence, his energy inspired some of Podhale and a large group of military dignitaries, leading to the establishment of the so-called Chochołów Confederacy, whose aim was armed struggle for the liberation of the Tatras. Even at the time the effort was announced, it was a semi-fantastical project. The whole affair ended in an embarrassment and compounded the doctor's alienation.

Radzikowski spent his final years (until his death in 1935) in Krakow, where he lived in a squalid and furnitureless room, supported himself by selling his collections, and his former activities were probably remembered only by such enthusiasts as the mountaineer Witold Henryk Paryski. The latter looked after his legacy, which he then deposited at the Tatra Museum in Zakopane.<sup>2</sup> Radzikowski also left a "trunk with which he never parted and which held his dearest keepsakes" (Kuchtówna, 1984, p. 8). It was an

intimate shrine to Solska:

It's an incredible thing: everything that is in any way related to you has an extraordinary charm.

Is it fetishism? No, upon my word, no – I don't suffer from any perversions. But can you believe that from the very beginning – a long time ago – I would keep everything, every scrap of paper, every note – this one, for instance: "One lies like Lazarus in that sickness."

And whenever I received a letter from you – no matter what it said – it also had an air of something utterly mysterious to me – and I kept it. (letter of 13 December 1906, Radzikowski, ms, p. 9)

The trunk with the keepsakes went, as Lidia Kuchtówna established, directly to the National Museum in Krakow and its contents were catalogued as "Correspondence with Irena and Ludwik Solski" (ref. no. MN 903) and in two other collections.<sup>3</sup>

When I visited the Czartoryski Library (a branch of the National Museum) a few years ago, I knew what to expect: an assortment of papers of different sizes, painstakingly sorted, in line with the institutional *modus operandi*, by date, name and basic type (letters and postcards separately, as well as telegrams, bills, calling cards, small keepsakes, notes). In fact, that's what this collection looks like, but only at first glance. On closer examination, in addition to the traditional "archive of words", we get something unexpected: half-legible scraps of undated letters and three-dimensional objects which are rather difficult in the material and cognitive sense. They are more of a fetishistic collection than a neutral conglomerate of documents expanding

historical and biographical knowledge. Viewed as a whole, they disrupt the picture of Solska and Radzikowski's relations that can be found in *Listy Ireny Solskiej*, where he is a silent listener and she a capricious and egocentric star, and the very writings blend graphically with hundreds of the artist's letters to other addressees.

Physical contact with these documents provokes a closer look at three issues: the materiality of the letters and keepsakes (their material, form and visual and typographic qualities), the inner logic and function of the collection (what purpose did it serve for the collection's original owner, and how is it interpreted and used now by more or less skeptical scholars?). The most disturbing of these archive materials go far beyond the sphere of the word and the image, opening up an area of physical and mental presence, hence the suggestion that I will discuss last: to regard the remainder of the contents of Dr. Radzikowski's famous trunk as an example of a "bioarchive".

The first reaction on seeing an autograph is often disbelief that this is what the document "really" looks like. The same goes for Solska's letters. They are remarkable not for their content, but for their handwriting, difficult to reflect in a traditional book edition: the unique ductus, type of paper and writing implements. The actress's autographs do not, to put it mildly, make for easy reading. Using almost everything she could lay her hands on as stationery, from expensive embossed paper to pieces of envelopes, from A5 size to the calling card format, Solska wrote unnaturally large, sharp, right-leaning letters in ink or blurry pencil or crayon. Single words sometimes take up an entire verse, and two sentences fill a page 15 by 10 centimetres in size. The more the author was in a hurry, the bigger characters she wrote. They should actually be read with a reducing glass. More graphically disciplined documents seem, in turn, to have been rewritten from an earlier

notebook, and so subject to a greater degree of authorial control by Solska. But the undated letters, decidedly unpolished, are nothing of the kind. These notes reflect a constant rush, the pressure of the moment.<sup>4</sup> The shaky handwriting may be a symptom of a future neurological disorder. As early as 1906, the actress complained to Radzikowski: "My hands shake terribly, what to do about it? Is "Ferment" [medicament] good for me?" (*Listy...*, p. 79)

Elias referred to Solska's handwriting fondly as "scribbling", and a graphologist identified in the autographs a number of features indicative of strong character (Kuchtówna, 1980, p. 138).

Lidia Kuchtówna, the distinguished biographer of Solska, selected 31 out of her 127 letters to Radzikowski for a collected edition of the actress's correspondence. The editor's decision is justified by her premise: the volume included all of the actress's most important addressees from 1894 to 1958. But as a result, the publication did not reflect the most characteristic aspect of the era's mania for letter-writing, which could be observed in Solska and Radzikowski's relations. During the intense stage of the affair, Radzikowski demanded a letter at least every other day, if not daily, and counted every missive with a miser's passion: "The letter was supposed to come yesterday. It should have, but it didn't. To make me wait three days, 72 hours, 4,320 minutes, 259,200 seconds – it's a scandal!" (undated letter, Radzikowski, ms, p. 107). The addressee replied in a similar tone: "Friday evening. Oh, such a great friend, but really no friend at all. I thought I'd find a lengthy letter, at least a card, but I got nothing. You have my address. I don't know if my letter will find you and that is why I write briefly." (August 1902, Solska, p. 41). Sometimes to confirm that the letter had been sent it was followed by a telegram. Some of the correspondence was passed directly from hand to

hand. Even when the two correspondents were no longer more than friends, they kept exchanging various “little letters”, incomplete sentences, requests, undated brief messages written in the theatre’s dressing-room, during rehearsal breaks and intermissions or in a doctor’s office, after duty hours, with no regard for aesthetics. They must be of little factual value, though they say a good deal about their continued contact and varied social relations, supported through the use of messengers and the railway delivery service. Here are some of those fleeting notes:

[1] Good morning to you,  
Come over for black coffee today. Please do. Ir Sol (undated,  
Solska, p. 141)

[2] Dear Stanisław,  
I don’t want, do you hear, I don’t want you to be so sad if I feel bad.  
(undated, Solska, p. 165)

[3] Dear Doctor, join us for dinner today (a better one than  
yesterday). Good-bye (undated, Solska, p. 5)

[4] Mr. Stanisław,  
I am sending another poor thing, very ill, to you, and I entrust her  
to your kind heart. How are you – is the pain gone?  
I’ll see you tonight, Mr. STER Ir Sol (17 April 1903, Solska, p. 21)

[5] Mr. Stanisław,

What's the point of it all, do come to my husband's dressing room tonight, there'll be room, you'll have a good laugh and enjoy yourself, and you need to take something for the nerves so that your friends don't worry about you; I'll see you in the evening. Ir Sol (24 April 1903, Solska, p. 33)

[6] Don't be angry at me, understand that I have only the concert on my mind now, I haven't learned anything yet, and I'm tired, I can barely catch a moment for myself, please try to understand, don't worry, see me more as an artist, a terribly overworked creature, forgive me everything (undated, Solska, p. 121)

The documents quoted are a trace of everyday life, in the most literal and mundane sense of the phrase: meals, advice, prescriptions, arguments, shopping, banter, business, medical consultations... It seems that these undated short letters, which will never make it into any epistolary anthology, are first and foremost a record of a very faithful and serviceable friendship, and only secondarily, and more secretly, of love, one that was short-lived and discreet on Solska's part anyway. Interestingly, the artist's letters to Radzikowski included two significant slips of paper, awkward in print:

[1] I love (15 April 1903?, Solska, p. 17)

[2] I love despite everything. Do as you please, and what you think is right. (undated, Solska, p. 255)

From the perspective of Solska's artistic biography, these two secret confessions are not very important; they resist classification or verification. Nevertheless, they must have been very valuable to the addressee, as was the entire meticulously preserved correspondence.

Radzikowski not only kept Solska's letters and notes to him (despite numerous appeals for their return), but added his own written communications, which the actress had at one point given back to him (for security reasons or to indicate that their intimate relationship was over).<sup>5</sup> Apart from the letters, the trunk contained other objects. e.g. dried flowers. Plants, especially tropical ones, exuding a strong aroma and intensely colourful, are known to have been among poetic instruments of the era. "In the afternoon I saw an exhibition of exotic flowers. [...] And I spun a thread of dreams; the breath of flowers, the crackling of orchid buds, the language of grasses and leaves, the rustle of tropical creepers touching each other could be heard in the hothouse. Life throbbed ..." (letter of 9 July 1903?, Radzikowski, ms, p. 53). Solska, like other stage artists of the period, was often excited about the "language of flowers": "Lviv welcomed me with a mass of white flowers - maybe I've lost the right to receive white ones, I don't know. [In Krakow] They gave me a multitude of blood-red chrysanthemums, as blood-red as my tears were last year, and marvellously beautiful greenish-gray ..." she wrote in December 1906 (*Listy*, p. 78). Men and women gave flowers to one another; they communicated mood, an intention that was not verbalised and therefore safe from the prying eyes of strangers. "Thank you for the flowers, and as I am not a selfish person, I share the warmest and palest note with you"- begins one of Solska's earliest dated letters to the doctor (22 July 1902, *Listy*, p. 13). Radzikowski sent the actress a red spirea, and interpreted her gift of roses as a declaration of love.



The amorous sacred merges with the religious sacred. Apart from the petals of dried flowers, the doctor also kept pieces of a Christmas wafer wrapped in paper with a date and a number of other items which are only known from references (e.g. the mysterious “links,” probably an element of Solska’s jewellery or stage costume).<sup>6</sup>

The trunk contained other souvenirs, e.g. a miniature envelope with pills, pulverised by time, perhaps some of those that Dr. Radzikowski prescribed for Solska: purgen, endowal or menthol pills. Then there is a bulging envelope with a crumpled fabric captioned ... “2 handkerchiefs of Irena Solska”. Perhaps it was about them that he wrote to the actress on 6 July 1903: “I showed you a bundle of letters from you, your letters to your mother, your bloodied handkerchief” (Radzikowski, ms, p. 39). To this should be added the portraits and photographs Radzikowski made of Solska. “A low relief hangs above the bed, opposite is a crayon drawing, with various photographs of mine on all sides. I carry your profile on me and always the latest letter. Isn’t it dumb? Maybe. But it is what it is. I can’t live otherwise.” (as cited in Kuchtówna, 1984, p. 8).

Clearly, the owner of the collection read the letters many times, annotated them and engaged in dialogue with the past. 7 July 1903: “On returning home I uncover the portrait, I read the letters you’ve returned – and I think, dream and reminisce.” 14 September 1903: “I search my mind for various moments spent together, conversations and looks, and I feed on memories” (Radzikowski, ms, pp. 41, 87). Radzikowski created a private archive that was the scene of repeating, re-enacting situations from the past. The letters form the script of the drama, and the keepsakes function as props which, *pars pro toto*, replace the time, the place and, ultimately, the person. They allowed Radzikowski to relive the finished affair with Solska.<sup>7</sup>

All those bizarre “relics” and accompanying rituals seem to point to extreme fetishism and amorous cult. I don’t want to assess them from a psychopathological point of view (Radzikowski himself was aware that he was becoming obsessed, though he couldn’t really help it). However, since his personal effects have found their way into a museum (as “Correspondence”), I wonder what they are from a scientific and archival perspective? Was the library’s employee who handed me the envelope with the powdered pills so confused only out of concern for the delicate, easily damaged item?

The logic of the traditional archive would not have allowed for the inclusion of such objects: they have no special historical value for the community, don’t document important events or rights, are difficult to classify and definitely transcend the limits of a verbal description. The objects from Radzikowski’s trunk are, even more so than the letters, personal, intimate, extremely individual, not to mention the fact that they contain biological traces. They refer to fleeting moments and events which were clear to two people only, and may have been important to just one person. Looking at the objects in the envelopes, completely mute now, at once pathetic and touching, I couldn’t resist a few insistent thoughts. The value of these objects seems to consist as much in their sentimental association with specific moments as in the very gestures of the collection’s owner, prolonging the life of these keepsakes. They thus bring to mind not death or loss, but, on the contrary, presence, a visualized action. It’s hard not to think about Radzikowski’s temperament and physique when you look at a page on which he traced his fist in crayon: “and my heart is big, like my right fist” (Radzikowski, ms, p. 67). Words disappear and give way to emotions, which are made evident by the handwriting smeared by falling drops (of tears?). Instead of reading a damaged letter, we first notice the gesture of tearing

the page congealed in it. Someone touched and unfolded the handkerchiefs; they invite us to follow suit. The pieces of flowers are wrapped in paper neatly folded into a square, so before you get to them, you have to unwrap the contents patiently, really like a relic. What I mean to say is that if the peculiar collection of Solska memorabilia originated in some intimate ritual, then at the end there is also, inevitably, an interactive dimension to its archival use: these collections force one to act, not just read, and although the items in question are remnants, traces, they strongly suggest the existential reality of the man who left them.

The word “bioarchive” suggests itself to describe this kind of archival materials. Colloquially, a “bioarchive” is a place where genetic traces are gathered and this is, to some extent, the case here – the objects under analysis contain bodily particles: remnants of skin, hair and blood, from which modern pathology could glean a lot of information.<sup>8</sup>

Another meaning seems to be more important: the bioarchive reveals the dynamics of an individual life with its structure, complexity, drama and perspective of an end, in the sense the Greeks understood the word *bios* (contrasting it with the concept of *zoe* – the momentum of infinite and supraindividual existence). The documentation of contacts between Solska and Radzikowski demands to be rearranged in a non-linear, rhizomatous, cobweblike or circular fashion, since their relationship followed a similarly ambiguous pattern.

The biographical archive, which includes letters and keepsakes, is virtually doomed to disorder and complexity, accompanying the trajectory of human existence. At the same time, *bios* is more than the very history of the body and the energy of the body’s impact, irrespective of whether that body should be understood literally as a biological organism or as a metaphor for

materialised and concretised memory (cf. Sajewska, 2015).

Finally, the bioarchive is the place of a dramatic encounter with something immaterial rather than paper or another material: with traces of a person or the resonance of the tension between people – it's a play of imagination where something is repeated at the level of gestures and feelings, in an emotional rather than purely intellectual transmission. In that chain of archival performance (viewing, unfolding, touching, but also being moved, bewildered and upset), first comes the letter's author, then its owner, and finally the researcher who, willingly or not, exposes old wounds of love.

Translated by Robert Gałązka

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## **Autor/ka**

Dorota Jarząbek-Wasyl (dorota.jarzabek@uj.edu.pl) - professor in Theatre Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Author of books and articles on history and creative processes in Polish theatre in the 19th century; editor of historical documents: actors' diaries and promptbooks. ORCID: 0000-0003-3097-9830

## **Footnotes**

1. Walery Eliaż (1840-1905) used, as did his son later, the alias Radzikowski; he was a painter, illustrator and populariser of the Tatras. Stanisław Eliaż (1869-1935), after completing his medical studies in Lviv and working at the city's university clinic, became a health resort doctor in Zakopane; he had a passion for mountain hiking as well as the folklore, onomastics and topography of the Tatras; he wrote guides and studies on the

Tatras and took part in mediation in border disputes (the Polish-Hungarian conflict for Morskie Oko in 1902 and in the Polish-Slovakian dispute over Spisz in 1919), he was interested in alchemy and folk medicine. See Reychman, 1946, 1971.

2. In the winter of 1939, these materials were given to be arranged to the Orientalist Jan Reychman (see Reychman, 1971, p. 109).

3. 'Korespondencja' (Correspondence), ref. no. MN 904 and 'Wypisy z dzieł naukowych (luźne notaty oraz notatnik opr.)' (Excerpts from Scientific Works: loose notes and notebook), ref. no. MN 905.

4. The manuscripts bear various genetic traces of working on the letter, which usually disappear in the printed version: deletions and the location of notes (Solska didn't always place the postscript at the end of the letter, but often on the written page, in the margin or above the line, as though she were re-reading the letter and hastily correcting it); some of the corrections and slips of the tongue or repetitions are indicative of the spoken style. The jocular and chatty tone was supported by individualised punctuation. The actress overused certain symbols (dashes and exclamation marks) and omitted some others, e.g. question marks. Many of the notes don't have any introductory formulas (dates, places, apostrophes), although they certainly served as letters. In print, these out-of-context pages are provided with some commentary or are unfit for print at all.

5. Reading these documents from the perspective of one of the correspondents will always distort the meaning of statements taken out of the context of the entire conversation. Until now, this has been the usual approach to presenting the relationship between Solska and Radzikowski: we only hear the voice of the actress (*Listy Ireny Solskiej*), or that of the doctor, whose correspondence and notes were recently studied by Natalia Jakubowa (Jakubowa, 2008). Under the reference number 903, all those writings are collected in adjacent files and interlinked in a fateful way; the emotions pulsating in them are justified by some event, contagious and virtually incurable. The correspondents play a complicated game of alternating approaches and evasions, reconciliations and breakups, in which everything has a meaning: a flower sent, a note slipped into the pocket, a look or lack of a look. Most interestingly, in parallel with a relationship that can be described as a battle of Eros, the doctor remains in the letters a physician providing medical advice, a friend listening to confessions, a negotiator in Solska's marital issues, and finally, a friend of the artist's husband (*vide* his correspondence with Solski in the same collection).

6. Radzikowski, in turn, entrusted the artist with a great family relic: a cross from the November Uprising. He withdrew the gift after one of their breakups, and presented it to Solska again in July 1904, asking her to wear that historical keepsake in a production of *Warszawianka*. '... I am so taken with your acting that I am giving you a cross worn at Olszynka, in deposit (not as a gift because it has been property of my family for generations) - do you accept?' (Radzikowski, ms, k. 35).

7. Although comparison to historical reconstructions and reenactments may be risky in this case, I would still call it a reconstruction, yet not a collective but a private practice of memory, in which a person 'examines the history' of his feeling, by „the recomposition of remains *in and as the live*” (Schneider, 2011, p. 98).

8. A hair found in one of the manuscripts at the Dutch National Archives was determined to be the only preserved fragment of the body of Johan De Witt, leader of the republican party and creator of Holland's economic independence, who was murdered with his brother in 1672 as a result of an international conspiracy. The discovery was all the more important because there was literally no trace left of the De Witt brothers; their bodies were

deliberately annihilated, 'punished' by quartering and burned. The accidentally discovered hair thus became a political relic. The case was discussed by Ineke Huysman at the conference 'Creative Processes and Archives in Arts and Humanities', held in Helsinki in June 2017. Archives of World War I and II gather similar traces and various material souvenirs have become the object of multifaceted reflection on instruments for preserving the memory of traumatic events. Unlike those holdings, which appeal to collective memory, the shock of the war and the scandal of its inexpressibility, Radzikowski's collection has a unique, private and thus even more incommunicable character – it refers to the intimate world of two people.

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## THEATRE CRITICISM

# Coronatheatre: Polish Theatre In The Plague Year

Magda Piekarska

The coronavirus pandemic is laying bare the ills gnawing at Polish theatres, such as starvation rates, precarious freelance work, people working without contracts, and the inability of some theatre professionals to afford medical insurance and social security. Plus, there's the prospect of the professional hiatus lasting until September.

Since March 11, 2020, everyone in the cultural sector has been affected, be it freelancers, full-time staff or directors of arts organizations. On the fateful day when all arts venues in Poland were ordered to close, everyone at Wrocław's Capitol Music Theater realized that the 2020 Festival of Actor Songs (PPA in Polish) would have to be canceled for the second time in history, the first being a two-year hiatus during martial law in 1981–82. Konrad Imiela, head of Capitol and of the Festival, was in a fighting mood until Wednesday morning but had to give up after the Prime Minister gave his speech at the press conference on Wednesday.

Imiela was loath to do so, knowing that the cancellation would hit audiences, participants of the Song Interpretation Contest, the lineup of artists, and finally – Capitol itself, also because the Festival will cost a lot of money despite cancellation. The event has a budget of 3,100,000 PLN (1 PLN is c. 0.25 USD or 0.22 EUR), of which 540,000 PLN has already been spent: productions are in development, some sets have been built, an advertising campaign has been launched, airline tickets ordered, venue hire costs have been partially paid. “We will try to recoup some of these sums”, says Hubert Zasina, Capitol’s Finance Director.

We don’t know how much will be recovered as calculations and negotiations are still in progress. “We are writing letters to our contractors, terminating contracts.” says Imiela. “The pandemic is a force majeure, the cause of cancelling is independent of us. We will be relieved of some of our obligations, but we have a problem with the productions that have been in the pipeline for months. And there is also something you can’t put a price on – the cancellation hurts, because we were all looking forward to the festival.”

Maybe the event can be saved by moving it to the second half of the year and whittling it down to the Song Interpretation Contest and the OFF Stream – there has been talk of doing this, but it all depends on how things pan out. “I understand the government’s decision, because swift action was needed to contain the spread of the virus, to flatten out the wave,” says Imiela. “But I also understand the plight of the artists who had blocked off dates to do work for us and now we can’t pay them for the work they were prevented from doing. We are aware that many of them operate in free market conditions and have no fixed salary. That’s why, I believe, a ministerial fund should be created for artists with no regular paid employment,



compensating for the money lost due to the government's blanket cancellation of all theatre shows and concerts. They are in a desperate position now. The actor of a theatre closed for the duration of the pandemic who does not perform on stage will earn 50 to 60 percent less than usual, but will be able to survive. The fund should also be in place in the organizer's office, in the city hall or the marshal's office, to reimburse at least part of the losses in this bleak situation. The City of Wrocław is aware of the problem, we are currently in talks with the officials." Jerzy Pietraszek, head of the Culture Department of the Wrocław City Office, chimes in: "We are gathering information about the situation of people employed and collaborating with the city's arts venues. We're developing a plan to compensate for losses resulting from putting programming on hold, aimed at both salaried actors and artists working with theatres on gig contracts, such as actors, musicians, and dancers."

## **Anna Skubik: Nothing To Fall Back On**

The problem is that such assistance will not cover a wide range of people who make a living as freelance artists, deliver workshops or make occasional appearances in TV series. In the space of a few hours, actress Anna Skubik lost hope for any employment or income in the nearest future. Together with Arkadiusz Cyran of Ad Spectatores Theater, she was due to play in the show *Open Relationship*. Trips were planned to Warsaw to the set of the popular science series *Al-Chemist* and to the Astana Theater Festival, Tajikistan. "Everything has been cancelled, including the talks and meetings to discuss further plans," she says. "I have nothing, and there's little hope I'll be able to make any money in the near future." This "nothing" is all the more bitter as Skubik has no medicover or social security. "I work on gig contracts, and my fees are so small that I just can't afford voluntary health insurance, which

costs almost 500 PLN a month these days. Most artists I know are in a similar position. Not long ago, I had a greater sense of security – I worked part-time in a corporation to have the right to medical care and a secure income. But it turned out to be incompatible with my acting in the long run, especially before show openings and when I appeared in TV series. After finishing work in the office, I would get on a train to the capital, I'd come back home at dawn and then back to work. In the end, things came to a head and I ended up in hospital. I said to myself: 'Enough is enough.'

Savings? "If I were the face of a famous TV show, I could probably put something aside for a rainy day. In my case it's out of the question," explains Skubik. "More often than not, my work sets me back than moves me forward financially." Before the pandemic, Anna Skubik's monthly budget was 2,200 PLN when the going was good. "I was able to pay the rent, survive until the next payday and put something aside for the next month," she says. Just enough for a frugal life. A strict financial regime, giving up whims and pleasures, was everyday reality. Eating out? Off limits. Having a coffee in a café? Occasionally. Holidays? I could stay a little longer abroad if I were lucky to be taking part in a summer festival. Or I could find a cheap flight to visit my friends. Everything was dictated by work – if you had a job, no one was thinking about holidays." In her bank account, Anna has a fee for a few days of working on a TV series shoot – 2,000 PLN has to last her for an indefinite time. "I'm not able to plan the coming months without work, everything seems so abstract," she sighs. Anna adds that the current situation has shown that the way creatives are treated on the labor market must change. "The excessively low rates shrank even further when some gig contracts were replaced by professional services contracts which are liable for higher tax. Our frustration is growing, we are also aware that there are many of us and we're facing a real crisis now," says Skubik.

# Grzegorz Grecas: Airbag Urgently Needed

Founded by actor Krzysztof Broda-Żurawski, the Facebook group (Ir)revocable Artists [Nieodwołal(nie) artyści] has more than 5,000 members. It is used, among other things, to host calls to sign petitions, such as the one addressed to the Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage by the Association of Polish Stage Artists (ZASP in Polish) and the Trade Union of Polish Actors (ZZAP in Polish). In it, the Poznań branch of the Association raises the alarm about ‘the dire predicament of artists during the coronavirus pandemic’ calling for a relief program that would include compensation for canceled events. On the other hand, the actors point out the problem of massive underinvestment in arts organizations and the dysfunctional pay system. Alongside voices of support for the artists, there have also been some overcautious comments from the community, asking: Is it appropriate to ask for help in a situation like this?

“It is,” believes Grzegorz Grecas, a director who became involved in (Ir)revocable Artists in its early days when the projects he had lined up – a performative action as part of Touch Theater and a Non-fiction Theater production became seriously jeopardized. Touch Theater has been put on hold, and the Non-fiction Theater opening planned for June is uncertain too. Grecas expected to make 8,000 PLN in three months but now has little hope to make anything. Like Anna Skubik, he is unable to afford health insurance – he rarely falls ill, so it is cheaper if he sees a doctor privately. Grecas has been living with his partner and paying their rent. Now he will be dependent on him unless he finds a “normal” job. He will be looking for such a job for the second time in his life because apart from a brief spell working in a call center, his professional life has been limited to the theatre. “We had been always putting off the normalization of our situation for later until the crisis

took us by surprise,” says Grecas. “This shock caught up with me at 30 – I discovered that me and several thousand other people working in the industry lacked imagination. I’m going to fix this, but I don’t know to what extent our whole group can do the same. Trade unions can certainly help. If they attract more members, they will be able to influence systemic change. Today, as far as the status of the artist is concerned, we are dealing with negligence dating back to 1989. This is partly our fault, we normally did not think about it. We were affected whenever national mourning was announced, but these spells were relatively short. The current situation may extend until June, and if it does, many of us will not hope to return to work until after the summer holidays, in September. We need to sit down to the table and elicit proposals from all of us. I’m not talking about jobs for everyone, I know this is impossible, but there must be some kind of airbag for such uncertain circumstances. Every civilized country has a safety net for freelancers. We must lobby for that. I hope that we manage to unite and push for some kind of compensation. This is happening in France. The German Culture Minister too has promised to pay compensation to German artists. In Poland we have heard promises from Minister Gliniski. We’ll live and see if this translates into practical assistance – our task now, I think, is to keep a watchful eye on the authorities, monitor their actions.”

## **Agnieszka Bresler: I’m Scared**

On April 16, 2020, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage announced it was developing a relief program to help artists in financial need amid the pandemic. We don’t know the terms of transfer yet. All the Ministry has revealed is that work is underway on a package that will be part of a wider program of safety-net solutions for those engaged in various forms of activity. Reportedly, there are plans to provide support to organizations that

want to expand into electronic communication channels and present artistic work online and to organizers of canceled events, and a program is being created to offer compensation payments to cultural workers hired on gig contracts they cannot perform at the moment. Artists in financial need will also be able – as they were able before – to apply for a one-off payment from the Culture Promotion Fund.

Relief programs are also being set up by a number of local governments, but only some art organizations' collaborators will be eligible. Actors, dancers, set designers, and directors who have had upcoming productions suspended or canceled often have no documents needed to apply for compensation. Contracts? If any are in place, they include a force majeure clause that excludes payment of the fee. In most cases, however, even this is not available as essential documents tend to be signed at the last moment or after the job is completed.

This is the case of Agnieszka Bresler, an actress, and director who works with the excluded – prisoners, domestic violence victims, the disabled. Without a second thought, she names the feeling that she's been experiencing in recent days – fear. "I'm scared," she says. "I know that the projects I had planned for May have been cancelled, I had to cross three months off my calendar. I won't fill this gap with anything. I was set to play a show at a festival in Czechia in April – cancelled; I was due to stage the same show at the Grotowski Institute in early April – cancelled; I was invited with another show to the Kontrapunkt Festival in Szczecin in May – this year's edition has been placed on hold. I've lost a total of eight shows, which would earn me several thousand PLN. Luckily, I get a grant from the Mayor of Wrocław (2,000 PLN a month for a year), which means my livelihood is not at risk. If I wanted to apply for a partial payment of my fees, I have no

grounds to do that – no one signs contracts that early in the cultural sector, so I have no evidence to prove how much I’ve lost. The Italian example shows that our predicament will not be over in two weeks, instead we should rather think of two months, which, given the rhythm of theatre life, means a dead season. That’s why I understand the need for solidarity movements, all those attempts to draw attention to our plight, though we are still in a state of panic. The true crisis is still ahead of us. When it catches up with us, I’ll call my landlord and say that I’m very sorry, but I have no money to pay the rent. I hope he understands.”

## **Angelika Cegielska: Let’s Not Forget Senior Citizens**

The dead season has also hit arts organizations. Group rehearsals for *Alice*, directed by Martyna Majewska, have been suspended in Wrocław’s Capitol due to safety concerns, although sessions are held with smaller groups (individual, musical and choreographic rehearsals). For the same reason, live streaming of shows has been halted, although on March 12, one day after the order to close down all arts organizations in Poland was announced, Poznań’s New Theater streamed *Subfebrile State* [Stan podgorączkowy] on YouTube. The musical piece, directed by Piotr Kruszczyński, drew 24 thousand views. Teatr Nowy Proxima in Kraków provides access to the recordings of its shows on its website, and plans to offer live readings of Marquis de Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, Michał Witkowski’s *Lubiewo*, and *Griga*, based on Chekhov’s short stories. On Saturday, March 21, TR Warszawa announced the streaming of *Pieces of a Woman* directed by Kornel Mundruczó. Marcin Januszkiewicz played a concert on Instagram. On Friday, March 20, the Aleksander Węgierko Dramatyczny Theater in

Białystok invited everyone to watch *Notes of a Red Army Officer* directed by Andrzej Jakimiec.

Wrocław's Układ Formalny launched a series of live readings (available online) starting with Boccaccio's *Decameron*. More events are coming up, but not all theatres decide to establish a strong virtual presence allowing them to maintain a bond with their audiences during the break brought about by the epidemic. "An initiative like this involves bringing together, in one place, dozens of people, actors, wardrobe assistants, musicians," explains Imiela, who gave up the idea of streaming at Capitol. "We thought it unreasonable at a time when we should self-isolate. I realize that in times of oppression people need theatre, art, community and shared emotions – that's why my first impulse was to defend both the Festival (PPA) and the shows. But with each passing day my attitude is changing. At first I thought: let's not panic. Now I believe that the most important thing is solidarity and staying at home, and this is where we, as a theatre, should set an example. That's why on March 20, the day of the planned opening of the Festival, we will launch a Festival TV featuring videos recorded at home."

In Szczecin's Współczesny Theater, rehearsals of Michał Kmiecik and Marcin Liber's *The Queen of Monsters* were put on hold on Saturday, March 14. In the Jerzy Szaniawski Dramatyczny Theater in Wałbrzych on Thursday, March 12, rehearsals for *Cenci*, helmed by Sebastian Majewski, continued. That same day, the farce *The Unseen* was to be performed – the show was canceled after the Polish government decided to close all theatres, but even before that, customers started returning their tickets. Rehearsals were stopped. The actors of the Wałbrzych theatre are scattered all over Poland – they commute from Żywiec, Poznań, Łódź, Wrocław, and Warsaw, so the risk of infection was deemed too high. Work on *Cenci* and on *Cyrano de*

*Bergerac*, directed by Katarzyna Raduszyńska, was halted. “We are freaked out because there will be no shows this month,” says Angelika Cegielska, an actress of the Wałbrzych Dramatyczny Theater. She was due to play nine shows in March, which would add a 1,800 PLN bonus to her salary, but the money will not be forthcoming. Cegielska has two children and wonders how to survive the month for 2,500 PLN with Easter approaching. “But I’m also aware that I’m in a privileged position, because I have a job,” she adds. Wałbrzych actors have been making 2,500 PLN a month since very recently – the recent pay rise of 500 PLN (pre-tax) has been the first substantial rise at the theatre in 20 years. “But even with the higher salary you can’t amass savings for a rainy day,” says Cegielska. “We live day by day, we don’t work in a metropolis, which limits us to weekend shows and makes it impossible to make loads of money from performance bonuses. We can’t afford to not play for a month or two during the season. We have to repay loans, pay nursery school fees, do the shopping. And we have a group of seniors who live on their own. This is the way their lives have worked out – they devoted themselves to their theatre work. Now, they are locked down in their homes, at risk of getting ill. We, their theatre colleagues, are all they have. We remember them and call for others not to forget their seniors in other cities.”

## **Jacek Głomb: Freelancers Have It The Worst**

The decision of the Marshal of the Lubuskie Province to ban events in Zielona Góra and Gorzów Wielkopolski, taken on March 5, came one week ahead of the government’s restrictions. It surprised Jacek Głomb, who was then about to open his production, Aleksander Fredro’s *Help! What’s Going On Here!*, on March 7 at the Juliusz Osterwa Theater in Gorzów. “In my response I stressed the need to be consistent and act across the board,” he



points out. "If such a decision is made by the government and applies across the country, it is right and necessary. But if a Marshal or Mayor rushes on ahead alone to score a few points in politics, that's not OK at all. And I still think that shopping malls and churches, where many more people congregate, should be closed down just as theatres are. But no nationwide decision was taken back then. If we're closed for two weeks, we can deal with it. And we won't question it if the isolation is there to help fight the virus. We exist for our audience – if they are scared, they won't come anyway."

Hiatus means that a theatre's budget is reduced by proceeds from ticket sales. We are talking about 100,000 PLN a month in the case of the Modjeska Theater in Legnica and an average of 590,000 PLN for Wrocław's Capitol. It also means lower earnings for actors who get just their basic salaries which rarely exceed the minimum pay. The pay of salaried actors has two components: the fixed salary and a stage bonus which ranges from a few dozen PLN in the puppet theatres and the Wrocław Pantomime to 500 PLN at the Capitol to 1,000 PLN at some Warsaw theatres. "One way theatres can help their full-time actors is by changing payroll rules and offering rewards," says Jacek Głomb. "Freelancers who work with us are at a disadvantage – systemic solutions are needed. Grzegorz Wojdon and Maciej Rabski were due to make guest appearances in the Modjeska Theater's latest production. What I can do in the present circumstances is pay them 25-percent advances, because rehearsals have already begun. The same applies to other artists working on the show, which will have to be rescheduled for next season."

The Modjeska Theater has suspended operations – the secretary's office and the ticket office are closed but you can return tickets by sending an email

with ticket scans and your account number. Whoever can, works remotely, while others take their overdue days off. Rehearsals for Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, directed by Georgian Andro Enukidze, have been placed on hold with the opening postponed until next season. As part of #teatrнадaje, employees post short videos showing what they do in their pandemic-imposed free time. In the first episode, actor Mateusz Krzyk streams from his secluded lakeside hideaway where he spends his days fishing.

## **Robert Gulaczyk: I'm Trying To Recruit Actors**

His colleague from the company, Robert Gulaczyk, is looking for actors willing to join the Polish Actors' Trade Union. "The hiatus may last until the end of the season, Director Jacek Głomb promised he will try to compensate us for the losses resulting from not playing," he says. "But how long will the theatre's money last? And what happens if the problem recurs? Although the Polish Labor Code says that employees should be paid a 'shutdown pay' in the current circumstances, i.e. 100% of their average monthly salary, but there are certain financial limits and it may soon turn out that the theatre will just run out of money."

What does hiatus mean for a salaried actor? At the Modjeska Theater, Gulaczyk has a salary of about 1,800 PLN a month. One stage appearance earns him between 150 to 400 PLN pre-tax – an average of 220 PLN. "This month I'll probably lose 14 shows, or two thirds of my earnings," explains Gulaczyk. "It's hard to get through a month with only 1,800 PLN even if you don't leave the house. Besides, all hopes for additional income are gone. I've been auditioning for commercials recently, but all production has stopped, as have film and television sets. There are no options to make some extra

money. I know there are many people in a similar position, or even worse, also outside our industry, but now is a good time to start talking about our problems.”

I don't question the decision to close theatres – the current situation is an extraordinary one and calls for urgent steps. What rankles me are periods of national mourning which close theatres, so we can't play shows like *Forefathers' Eve*, while cinemas, which are private enterprises, are happily screening comedies. We are treated as if we are holding a picnic on mourning day, which is not fair, because there is much more of the picnic going on in public spaces after theatres close, and theatres usually offer much more ambitious fare than farces.

Gulaczyk founded a branch of the Polish Actors' Trade Union in Legnica and is trying to get his colleagues from other theatres on board. “Our union has about 700 members at the moment, but we need a minimum of 1,500 to have a sound representation, a pressure force that will be taken seriously in negotiations with the Ministry of Culture,” he says. “This will allow us to influence new rules that should be put in place as soon as possible. For now, we remain powerless in the face of crisis. I know that artists normally push aside the questions of looking after the industry's interests. But then we suffer. When an epidemic strikes, you end up without a pot to pee in, as it turns out that nobody takes us seriously. A law on the status of the artist, which was meant to be adopted at the end of the previous term of the rule of the Law and Justice party, is not in place yet. The question of social and health insurance, which many freelancers cannot afford, has not been sorted out. And before we have all of that, the union is a must, if only because it will give us access to legal aid, which many of us cannot afford.”

The Polish Actors' Union is headed by Maksymilian Rogacki and has a

membership of 550 salaried actors and about 150 freelancers. “This is serious,” he says. “Based on the data we have collected, an estimated 1,200 theatre events have been cancelled all over Poland, and the hiatus has affected about 7,000 actors, the vast majority of whom are freelancers, not to mention other theatre professions. From the information gathered, it seems that the losses of 200 actors from 41 theatres, due to lost fees for cancelled shows, total more than 136,000 PLN.” The Union is still gathering and updating data on an ongoing basis, so this amount does not reflect the full scale of the problem. The Union sent the Minister of Culture a letter requesting him to list the steps the department has taken to assist Polish artists. The union is also collecting data on the extent of individual losses and how many shows have been canceled. It collaborates with the Association of Polish Stage Artists. “The situation is dramatic,” says Rogacki. “Especially for the freelancers, who have lost their sources of income overnight and will lose their livelihood very soon. Nobody expects the hiatus to end in two weeks, and the next potential dates are dangerously close to the end of the season. No one will pay for a job that has not been completed. Salaried actors are a little better off – their basic salary is usually Poland’s lowest, but there are still theatres where salaries have not yet been brought up to this minimum.” Rogacki says the minister’s promises of relief are short on specifics: “They are interesting, but there is a long way to go. We will keep a close watch on the government’s actions, and if need be, we will be ready to inform the ministry of the scale of the losses,” he says. “We hope for understanding, cooperation and effective systemic action.”

## **Judyta Berłowska: Solidarity Above All**

Not only actors have been affected. Director Judyta Berłowska has just found out that the opening of her show in Kalisz, scheduled for September, has

been canceled. The indirect reason is the epidemic – the resulting hiatus has forced the theatre to make savings. “I have no regrets or resentment toward anyone, the director made the decision with the good of the theatre and its staff in mind,” says Berłowska. “The problem is that this season has been extremely difficult for me. Earlier, the director of a Tarnów theatre froze work on my piece a week after it started, and refused to pay me any money for the work I had already done. The matter will end up in court, and will probably take longer than I expected – the courts, too, have slowed down due to the epidemic.”

Berłowska has no permanent employment. Even before last year’s Christmas, she started looking for gigs in other industries – she did some proofreading, taught workshops, and was a babysitter. That allowed her to save a few hundred PLN. “This is how many of my colleagues work – if a number of plays open, you can put something aside, if they are taken down, there is a disaster,” she says. “This has been a problem for years, with an epidemic underway or not, the whole system needs to be regulated, but, of course, the situation is now exacerbated. We’re not secure, insurance is too expensive for a young director. At 31 the economy still keeps me in the ‘young and promising’ file, but I’m an adult who should have the stage of working on a gig basis behind her.”

Berłowska was due to lead workshops and rehearsals and to direct in Kalisz. Today she is counting her losses. “I still find it hard to be feisty about this subject, especially as many people don’t understand our situation, seeing artists as aesthetes who are out of touch with reality,” she explains. “They don’t understand that theatre work is seasonal and that the present month of quarantine can soon stretch to six months. What saves me is that I have family and friends. And I firmly believe that only peace and mutual support

can help us. What is worse from the virus and slumping economy is the fear that we might soon start treating each other as enemies. That's why I'm skeptical about fighting and I consider solidarity imperative."

## **Michał Kmiecik: Monsters In Our Heads**

Until Friday, March 13, playwright and director Michał Kmiecik had been working with Marcin Liber and the Szczecin Współczesny Theater's company on a piece titled *The Queen of Monsters*. Rehearsals were stopped on Saturday, March 14, one day after Kmiecik was told he had to leave the hotel run by the Art Academy as the building was used for coronavirus quarantine.

The show was slated to open on April 18, but now it is clear the opening will be moved to an unspecified date. Only a few people attended the final rehearsal – the actors knew they could stay at home if they did not feel up to coming. Everyone is worried about the future, about what they will see on their payslips. "They realize the gravity of the situation," says Kmiecik.

Michał Kmiecik is financially prepared for the next few weeks. This is because for some time now he has consistently asked for his fees to be broken into portions and paid regularly on completion of the various stages of work. Previously, he had repeatedly needed to borrow money from his friends while waiting for a post-opening payment. "A large part of my income is royalties paid for shows," he says. "I won't get them now, because theatres don't work. If I stop travelling by train and stay stuck at home, I will be secure for two, maybe three months if I really tighten my belt. If it hadn't been for the money that came in from the theatre on Monday, I would be in deep shit now. We will have to wait for the rest of the fee until we can resume and complete our work. But this hiatus has more serious

consequences – we won't be able start working on the next play, which we were to do in Gniezno, on schedule. The prospects are poor overall. When I was starting out in the theatre, I won two dramaturgy contests, which allowed me to build reserves for a rainy day, but I hit the doldrums last season and my savings are now gone."

After returning to Warsaw, Kmiecik continues to work on a text whose idea has shifted radically in the current circumstances. "Initially, we were inspired by catastrophic films, stories of the end of the world, now the story is writing itself, we are infected by what we see around us, and we are much closer to Camus' Plague than to tales about monsters intent on wreaking doom," says Kmiecik. "The things that are happening now, no one saw them coming, no one, me included, understood them at first. I stay in my apartment, look out the window through which I can see, for the first time, a number of distant buildings, previously hidden behind a screen of smog. I observe empty streets – a few dog-walkers, a couple with a pram, silence. As I write the text of the play, I wonder what will happen to us, how this forced quarantine will affect us all. I, for one, being torn out of normal theatre life, feel a very odd change, but it is not the first time I stay in and just write after all."

## Two Months Later

No coherent government program has been put in place to help artists during the pandemic. Most of them, especially freelancers, are not covered by any of the government's successive anti-crisis packages. Freelancers, due to the type of contracts they have or the fact that they have nothing but verbal agreements, cannot apply for shutdown money or any other

compensation. The only form of relief provided from the Culture Promotion Fund of the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, a grant of PLN 1,800, was first introduced as a one-off payment and then changed into a benefit that one can apply for more than once. However, the number of applications has been so huge that many artists are still waiting for the money or for approval. The Ministry also announced a program called *Online Culture* [Kultura w sieci], which delivered assistance to hundreds of initiatives, but thousands of applications have been rejected. Applicants were required to engage in artistic activities and share them online for free. For example, the Ministry supported the Modjeska Theater in Legnica to produce the online premiere of *New Decameron* and Wałbrzych's Dramatyczny Theater to fund its *Szaniawski.FM project*.

On June 6, the government announced the fourth stage of relaxing economic curbs, allowing cinemas and theatres to open, but few theatre directors will let audiences into their spaces, which, according to the new health recommendations, can only be filled to half their capacity. Most will not reopen until the start of the new season in September. One of them is the Modjeska Theater in Legnica, which will launch its season a little earlier, on August 15, with an open-air performance of *The Man on the Bridge*.

A number of smaller-scale events, recitals and concerts are planned for June at the Capitol Music Theater in Wrocław – full-cast shows would be lethal for the theatre's budget, which has been heavily hit by the pandemic. The opening of Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało's and Martyna Majewska's *Alice*, originally planned for June, has been rescheduled to early 2021, also for budgetary reasons. Actors will start their holiday vacation break earlier than usual, on June 22, to be able to return in early August to start rehearsals for David Bowie's *Lazarus* helmed by Jan Klata, which will open earlier than



planned, on September 26. The 2020 Festival of Actor Songs (PPA) is also planned for the fall and will take the form of a mini-festival spanning just a few days. “We cannot afford to stage two openings this season, especially as we used up the money from the first one when we had to manage with no external support,” says Konrad Imiela. “We paid our actors ‘hiatus money’ during the pandemic – they got 80 percent of their average pay from previous months. Surviving the pandemic for a theatre that does not play shows has proven very costly. We operated all through the epidemic with an online presence to maintain contact with the public. This period has forced artists to be active online, search for new forms. With the support of the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute, we shot a film impression about our repertoire, featuring dancers and musicians in order to support artists who collaborate with our theatre but are not salaried employees. The period also proved useful as it let us see things in perspective, rethink the role of the arts in our lives and society and ask ourselves about the artist’s duty and mission. I would certainly like us to be able to record shows in a way that gives the audience the impression of engaging with a fully-fledged work, because, often, even multiple-camera recordings are flawed as they fail to capture the spirit of the performance. This is certainly worth investing in. The pandemic has also demonstrated the extent to which our theatre training is lacking. We want to create a platform to show how theatres work. We did not get funding from Online Culture for this project – our score was short of thirty-four hundredths of a point – but we are determined to organize a public appeal to raise money to realize it.”

Angelika Cegielska, an actress with the Wałbrzych theatre, did not apply for support as she feels privileged as a salaried actress. “I wouldn’t be able to look my colleagues who are not salaried employees in the eye. This job protects me. The managers of the theatre helped us a lot – rewards and

compensation were paid for the shows we did not play in March. We record videos from homes and the theatre pays us for this. Sadly, we have been affected economically by the pandemic too – my husband, Paweł Świątek, was dismissed from his directorial role at the Polski Theater in Wrocław, so our family's financial situation will certainly deteriorate."

Director Judyta Berłowska works as a nanny in Warsaw. She applied for relief at the Ministry but hasn't got any reply yet. She has also submitted three projects to the *Online Culture* program (theatre workshops for children and young people, a website to record memories of people from all over Europe related to key events for their countries, an online show), but none of them received funding. "I think I'm in a really good position – unlike many of my colleagues I can work and make money," she says. "Besides, I like what I do now. Even before the pandemic, I started working in the Ochota Theater as an instructor. During the quarantine I was leading online activities for young people and it is clear that the management wants our work to continue."

After the period in which the pandemic hit the theatre hardest, Agnieszka Bresler can say she has survived it relatively unscathed. "This despite the fact that two of my applications for ministerial support got rejected," she points out. She obtained support from the Culture Promotion Fund and, as one of the chosen few, she was covered by an anti-crisis package. As she had a contract for the production of a play that did not get off the ground, she received a three-month hiatus pay – 1,400 PLN per month. She was also awarded a grant by the Mayor of Wrocław. Bresler could not start her workshop work, but she has been preparing for it for the past two months, reading books and working on a script. "Now, in June, I'm resuming work with the inmates and their children in the Krzywaniec prison. I will also give

workshops for the Yellow Umbrella Foundation and at the Grotowski Institute,” she says. “The pandemic has taught me to make sure contracts are in place, as many organizations sign them after the work is completed, which is unacceptable, and to leap at any chance that presents itself – I have kept my eyes open for any form of relief available. Paradoxically, I also benefited from this time. I had been juggling many things at the same time for years. Now, for the first time in a very long while, I’ve been able to focus on a single task and prepare conceptually for the work ahead of me. Besides, I’ve learned the ukulele and went back to horse riding.”

In early May, Anna Skubik was awarded a support payment of 1,800 PLN. “But from the time the pandemic started, I have survived only thanks to my friends,” she points out. “It’s good they are there!!!” She also obtained funding from the *Online Culture* program and a ministerial grant for online activities. Under the first program, she is preparing online productions of shows created as part of her K.O.T. Association, such as *Broken Nails* and *The Vicissitudes of Dr. Bonifacy Trąbka*. Under the second one, she is translating a play about Marie Skłodowska-Curie from Greek, which she will use for a performative online reading. “Of course, I’m happy I’ve got 1800 PLN, as otherwise I wouldn’t be able to survive, but that doesn’t change the fact that artists get little support, or are last in line for it, and that our situation, with or without full-time jobs, is precarious. It is as if our profession is associated with itinerant theatre and unsettled life. Here today and gone tomorrow.”

Grzegorz Grecas points out that his position is not as bad as that of many other artists, so he did not seek assistance from the Culture Promotion Fund. During the pandemic, he is filming stories for children with his friend who is a storyteller and musician. He’s been awarded two grants from *Online*

*Culture*. One for *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which he is creating as part of a course of *Non-fiction Theater* in Wrocław. The second is a new installment of *Snapshots Project* [Migawki Projekt], which he co-created – Grecas is producing a series of fairy tales and legends told in two varieties of Polish, phonic and sign language. “Of course, I am happy about these grants, but on the other hand, I have a sense of great injustice,” he says. “The situation, in which instead of receiving assistance because the theatres had to close, we were forced to engage in a race for grants, was a dumb idea. This is not what state support should look like. Fancy employees of other industries get an invitation for a race which some are bound to lose instead of just getting relief as part of an anti-crisis package. Not everyone is a dab hand at writing applications and project descriptions. This creates a lot of bitterness, artists see who has been awarded money and how much, which celebrity got a higher grant and how many religious organizations receive funds to work on projects celebrating John Paul II. Congratulations to the Ministry, it has managed to divide people one more time. I feel awkward that I will be paid for working on supported projects.”

It is worth noting what kind of money we are talking about. Grecas will work from June to October on eleven episodes of *A Journal of the Plague Year* and seven stories of *Snapshots Project*, which will make him about 2,000 PLN a month. “And since I’m not a YouTuber or a film director, everything I do online takes two or three times longer to produce than normally,” he notes.

For a few days now, Michał Kmiecik has been in Szczecin, where rehearsals for *The King of Monsters* resumed. The work on the piece will soon finish – the opening is slated for September. “I hardly ever left the house for two months, I was finishing the play, reading, cooking, playing games, I didn’t go out to see my friends and didn’t watch any theatre online, because it was

unbearable,” says the playwright. “I did not benefit from the Minister’s program. Had it been a relief program worthy of a civilized country, I would probably have applied, because two of my plays were rescheduled for next season, financially things look dismal, even if there is no second wave of infections in the fall, but the format proposed by the Polish authorities, forcing artists to go online, is total nonsense.”

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## THEATRE CRITICISM

# Feminisation, Democracy, Labour: Towards A Socialised Cultural Institution

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek

Marta Keil

Igor Stokfiszewski

The below essay is the programme document of the research project *Porozumienie* [Agreement] at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw.

The shape of public cultural institutions has long attracted spirited debate. The theme was one of the pillars of the first Forum for the Future of Culture held on 18–19 November 2017 in Warsaw. In order to obtain the knowledge needed to assess the direction in which the debates should move, the Forum invited a team headed by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Mikołaj Lewicki to undertake a study focused, among other things, on cultural institutions. As the authors note in the study's summary, "[...] the quality of social space must be recognized as the paramount 'project' of an institution and, at the same time, as the crucial transformative force vis-à-vis the existing order; the quality of relations, work on values and the universe of participants' experiences become more important than existing norms in the field (e.g. artistry for art)" (Adamiecka-Sitek and Lewicki, 2017:71).

This means that a cultural institution co-creates its social environment primarily by practicing internal relations and relations with its collaborators and audiences. An institution dominated by hierarchical relationships, authority enforcement and dismissal of other voices produce a culture that transmits these abusive values and contributes to establishing a society founded on them. If we want a community based on empathy, solidarity, and equality, we must strive to create a culture based on these practices and values. This will only be possible in a cultural institution's environment if the institution itself has been shaped by empathy, solidarity, and equality. But how to achieve this?

Adamiecka and Lewicki argue that "it remains vital to democratize institutional management processes and develop mechanisms of participation and of enhancing the agency of the workforce. All this is essential for untrammelled creativity which is not only enshrined in the constitution but also a part of the spectrum of fundamental labour rights of arts professionals. If these conditions are not met, it is impossible to work in the cultural field without experiencing radical alienation" (2017:70). A cultural institution where empathy, solidarity, and equality are practiced is shaped through its democratization, which in turn is closely linked to the fact that each cultural institution is a work environment.

Labour is bound up with democracy, because almost every adult these days has a job and, consequently, the workplace is the primary social environment where we experience power, hierarchy, and alienation. By definition, each employee who seeks to have a say in the managerial decisions that directly affect her is a democratic activist. Therefore, giving more value to the workers' perspective would constitute the first step in the democratization of cultural institutions, of culture in general, and hence of a society based on

empathy, solidarity, and equality. But what does the 'workers' perspective' mean? Who works for public cultural institutions? And why do we choose to use the feminine pronoun ('her')?

The answers to two of the above questions seem obvious: those who work for cultural institutions include the institutions' employees and all its collaborators working on all manner of labour contracts. But there's more to it. The people and things working for a cultural institution also include its surroundings, audiences and event participants. This work is invisible but brings intangible effects, allowing arts and culture to exist and grow. The effects range from a sense of satisfaction (which inspires artists to keep on working) to greater prestige (which enables them to undertake new projects) to legitimizing programmes created by institutions (which is essential to maintaining the continuity of artistic culture and institutional order that provides an environment where artistic culture is created). Thus, giving more value to the workers' perspective in the decision-making processes of a cultural institution also means bolstering the social side, i.e. the socialization of an institution. It also allows to forgo a widespread mechanism that seems to be the greatest headache of repertory theatres: the mismatch between the declared democratic principles and the practice of production and work organization. Stopping the democratization process at well-crafted agendas is perhaps the central problem of today's theatre which would like to see itself as critical theatre.

At the same time, the generation of intangible assets, which fuel the production of material resources, is defined as reproductive labour and seen as the foundation for productive work. The notion of reproductive labour, in turn, refers directly to the 'feminization' of labour, life, and politics, hence in our study we use the feminine pronoun when referring to the 'worker'.



This understanding of ‘feminization’, derived from direct observation of city life, originated in the milieu of Spanish urban activists. Owing to the still-dominant collective perception of social roles, women are the principal users of the city – they move around with prams, use public transport, look after children and the elderly, and shop more often than men. In order to develop a city for the benefit of the well-being of its inhabitants, the way women use it should be taken as a yardstick to measure life quality, and women’s expertise should be accepted as the most valuable in this respect.

At a later step, feminization came to mean using values associated with femininity as a starting point for efforts to effect political and social change. Barcelona en Comú activists Laura Roth and Kate Shea Baird argue that “the feminization of politics, beyond its concern for increasing the presence of women in decision-making spaces and implementing public policies to promote gender equality, is about changing the way politics is done. This [...] dimension of feminization aims to shatter masculine patterns that reward behaviours such as competition, urgency, hierarchy, and homogeneity, which are less common in — or appealing to — women. Instead, a feminized politics seeks to emphasize the importance of the small, the relational, the everyday, challenging the artificial division between the personal and the political. This is how we can change the underlying dynamics of the system and construct emancipatory alternatives” (Roth and Shea Baird, 2017).

At the same time, it has been noted that activities typically performed by women, which involve care, regeneration, and efforts for the common good, are essential for sustaining life. All of them constitute labour for the benefit of intangible resources that serve to reproduce collective life. Further analyses demonstrate that values and practices created through reproductive labour include solidarity, concern for others, community

building and cooperation (Hardt and Negri, 2012:285). Reproductive labour is the foundation of productive work. The latter cannot be performed without the former.

Production and reproduction are at the centre of the debate about the shape of cultural institutions, as public cultural institutions operate under the primacy of productivity and competitiveness, which turns them into competing factories of cultural products and brand prestige. Without reproducing life, however, productivity cannot exist, its powers are being depleted. Feminization, therefore, is about adopting a female perspective as the principal indicator for assessing the quality of life, which, consequently, results in investing reproductive activities with pre-eminence as they are needed to perform production activities; it also means replacing models of social coexistence associated with a masculine attitude with those associated with a feminine stance.

Democratization is a response to the need for cultural institutions to contribute to shaping a society based on empathy, justice, and equality. And it is directly tied to the perception of a cultural institution as a work environment. We need to give more value to reproductive labour as the cornerstone for the delivery of an institution's agenda. Understanding the phenomenon of the 'feminization' of labour, life and politics can make it possible to grasp the importance of reproductive labour. Feminization, democracy, and reproductive labour are pillars on which a new social order can rest.

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THEATRE CRITICISM

## “I Don’t Know What It Means To Be An Actor”

Mamadou Góo Bâ in conversation with Monika Kwaśniewska

**Monika Kwaśniewska: What is your educational background in the arts? Did you graduate from drama school in Senegal?**

Mamadou Góo Bâ: I wasn’t at drama school. I learned through practice. I liked the theatre very much, especially radio drama. I was very interested in it. Together with my brothers and sisters, I created radiophonic plays. I directed my own plays, which were always inspired by our lives. I had a teacher in primary school who organized theatre performances at the end of the year.

Later, when I was a teenager, at the turn of the 80s, I was part of a theatre group working under the auspices of an arts and sports association. This led me to read many interesting books about theatre and texts for the stage. We wanted to make plays about our neighbors’ problems and at the same time organize a kind of celebration. There are drama schools and a National Theater in Senegal, but back in the day they put on the classics like Molière. Plus, they did it in French. We wanted to communicate with people who live

in Senegal, many of whom do not understand French.

**MK: What topics did you address?**

MGB: We were interested in people's lives, so we explored a variety of issues such as living together in a flat or area, sickness and the national health service. We wrote the texts ourselves. Classic literary works were out of synch with our life and times.

**MK: Who watched these plays?**

MGB: Admission was free. We performed in the squares. We built our own arena using wet sand, tarpaulins, wood; we had sound speakers. This required a lot of creativity. We had no money for better technical solutions. We would announce a performance a few days before the event. The audience were seated on chairs (which were rented too) and did not take part in the show. There were always many children in the audience.

**MK: Did anyone act as a director?**

MGB: There were about thirty of us, so there was always the problem of finding a job for everyone. I directed and wrote the texts. There were also people who took care of the organizational side, although everyone was involved in this to a greater or lesser extent. We raised the money ourselves – each of us would pay a “membership fee,” but contributions also depended on individual circumstances. After the group's dissolution, some of its former members still wanted to do theatre. We started a theatre and music group,

but this time around we wanted to earn money.

**MK: When did you leave Senegal and why?**

MGB: I met a Marseille-based artistic group, La Fabriks (LFKs), led by Jean Michel Bruyère. They were giving creative, theatre and music workshops for young people in Senegal... We too, in conjunction with the same foundation, were carrying out a project with troubled youth. We were to join forces and choose two people from our group to take part in a joint project. I did not want to do that, but one of the people we chose fell ill and I took their place.

I knew by then that Jean Michel Bruyère was doing very interesting things. My dream was to combine a number of different art forms. The project Impressions de Pikine (Pikine, where I grew up, is a fifteen-minute drive from Dakar in the Cape Verde region) gave me the opportunity to make this dream come true. I always liked to draw – I made drawings on the walls, portraits of friends and siblings. I also loved to sing. I was active in various fields, but my colleagues advised me to choose one thing and stick to it: just make music, just draw or just write. But even during my work at the arts and sports association, we wrote lyrics, arranged music and integrated dance and slide projections. The underpinnings of multimedia work were laid down at the time, but it was not until we started working with Jean Michel Bruyère that we could take it to a new level, because we had the tools to implement these ideas well.

When the project ended, I was offered to work on another show in Senegal and I agreed. The production we made was invited to Switzerland, then to France... La Fabriks has many studios where shows are produced. And so my

journeys began.

**MK: You were with La Fabriks for many years...**

MGB: During my journey with La Fabriks I was involved in some projects, but not all of them. The company is like a family to me, and we don't always work with our sisters or brothers in a family. I did various jobs in it, depending on what skills and abilities we needed: sculpting, dyeing, calligraphy, sweeping, vacuuming... When you start, everyone – from principal artist to administrator – loads trucks, sews... Everyone is involved. No job is less worthy than another. Hammering a nail is as important as thinking, writing, singing, performing. I assigned myself the role of helping with all La Fabriks activities.

**MK: What kind of artistic projects were you involved when working with La Fabriks?**

MGB: Extremely diverse and hybrid. When we did a project about refugees, *Le Préau d'Un Seul*, which was shown, among other cities, in Berlin, Avignon and Linz, the action took place in a large, nine-meter-high military tent, set up on a roof. In other spaces of the building on which the tent was installed, we placed smaller tents, sculptures, calligraphies. There was also a real doctor, a real cook preparing food, a real stylist who selected clothes for the protagonist... From beginning to end, there was one lone person in the roof tent, Der Hoff. The audience walked past him to observe other artistic actions. The event lasted all day. It had a fixed structure. During each performance some actions were performed in a loop. We had to take great

care of the condition of the tent – if it had become perforated or draughty, it could have got cold inside, and we stayed in the tent the whole day. We set it up ourselves – it was hard work.

It wasn't a theatre piece but a series of events, a preparation of life. Some theatre festivals did not want to invite us because of the hybrid nature of the project.

**MK: What influence did you have in your own actions? Did the director dictate what to do?**

MGB: Jean Michel Bruyère is a designer, a philosopher, a man active in a variety of creative fields, even those related to new technologies. He does everything to ensure that his projects and actions have a useful influence on the functioning of the company. When someone explains what he expects from me and I accept their suggestions, I believe it's normal that they give me instructions how to implement their projects, which are preceded by long-term research, reflection and conversations.

**MK: How did you end up in Poland?**

MGB: I came here because of my wife. She had lived in Senegal for ten years before we met. After the wedding, I was often away which was a real problem. We agreed to move to Poland, because it is a good "jumping-off point" for me. In Senegal, when I wanted to go to France, I had to have a visa, so when I was working on a project, I didn't come home for the duration of it, which could last up to four months.



**MK: Do you still work with La Fabriks?**

MGB: I've worked with them two or three times since I settled in Poland. In 2019, Jean Michel Bruyère worked at the Nowy Theater, where he led workshops as part of the Summer Camp – I worked with him too.

**MK: How did you get to work for the Powszechny?**

MGB: First, I was a waiter here and I worked with Strefa Wolnościowa [Free Speech Zone] – I took part in a number of theatre events. When Strefa came to the Powszechny, Paweł Łysak saw me in a few performances and asked if I would like to work with him. I agreed of course, because I was looking for a permanent job I would like to do. I got a part-time position.

**MK: I understand that this is your first permanent job in the theatre.**

MGB: Yes, La Fabriks functions on a project-to-project basis. I really liked the freedom I had at the time.

**MK: Do you feel limited at the Powszechny?**

MGB: No, I don't feel pressure here. I perform in plays, but I'm always free to do other things, like playing concerts. I keep trying to figure out how to find time for everything and to plan it well, because the repertoire is untouchable. Nobody at the theatre minds that I do other things. Just the

opposite, I exhibited my work in the show of work by foreign artists based in Poland, held as part of the Warsaw Biennale, thanks to the fact that I work with the Powszechny. The curator, Janek Simon, designed the sets for *Jak ocalić świat na małej scenie* [How to Save the World on a Small Stage], helmed by Paweł Łysak. While working on this show we would tell many personal stories. This is how Janek Simon found out about my artwork. The theatre saw my participation in the exhibition as a chance to promote itself.

**MK: The exhibition explored, among other things, the difficult situation of foreign artists living in Poland. Was this your experience too?**

MGB: Yes, I faced difficulties early on. I had no formal right to work until I obtained the required documents. This is not just a problem of artists, I think. But I could be active, work outside Poland, with La Fabriks and others. Besides, I was invited as a guest artist to the Lubuski Theater in Zielona Góra. It was a great experience, because we staged high-quality texts written by female prisoners, their poignant stories, under the guidance of Łukasz Chotkowski.

I could give concerts, perform in plays, think and create, write. I could do things which sometimes made people happy. When others are happy, so am I.

**MK: I suspect that you are the only actor at the Powszechny Theater who is not a drama school graduate.**

MGB: Americans say that practical skills are much more important than degrees. At some point, even those who used to put much store by degrees started working with untrained actors because they knew they were more open, less formulaic. They do not know the rules that block some professionals. This is valuable and important for directors who look for something new in the theatre.

**MK: Do you see the difference between yourself and the rest of the ensemble of the Powszechny Theater?**

MGB: This is a difficult question. I don't know what it means to be an actor. Are you an actor if you are a drama school graduate? If you are familiar with Brecht's or Artaud's theories? With the tenets of Grotowski's and Kantor's actor training? (I particularly like the latter's concept of acting.) I don't know whether I am an actor, musician or calligrapher. I think that it is other people who need to find a name for who I am and what I do. For me, the most important thing is what we convey from the stage, what we say from it about society.

**MK: Are your roles creations or do you speak from the stage on your own behalf?**

MGB: It's always an artistic creation, but it is very closely linked to life.

**MK: Do you have any say in which plays you are cast?**

MGB: No, but I like the repertory line of the Powszechny Theater. If I were cast to play in a play I disagree with, I would protest. It has not happened yet. I may disagree with some details, but when I see that it's just some elements of a bigger picture, it's not a problem. I've been more invested in the themes of some plays, less in others. I was grateful I could play in *Mein Kampf*. I knew that Jakub Skrzywanek, even though he is very young (he is probably the youngest director I have worked with), had a vision of how to present it, that he would not stage Hitler's text to promote Hitler's idea but to expose it, analyze it, confront it with today's reality. Together with playwright Grzegorz Niziołek, Skrzywanek uses Hitler's words but at the same time subjects them to ideological critique. They get us to interrogate the nationalist and fascist ideas and their sources. People who are oppressed, for example in an economic sense, rebel and often take up extreme ideologies. The present situation in Poland is similar in many aspects. Deficits are politically instrumentalized. In order to avoid history repeating itself, we have to go back to history, draw lessons from it and take concrete actions. Some people, though, became riled at the idea, even before they found out what it was about.

**MK: Did you read *Mein Kampf* earlier?**

MGB: I read a French translation before our first meeting at the theatre.

**MK: What work models did you encounter at the Powszechny?**

MGB: Everyone is very critical. The actors are very highly regarded here – like stage designers and directors. Everyone talks about the idea of the

shows that are being produced, everyone has a say. When I get a role, I, too, look for inspiration, exploring the subject on my own to understand more and to think about how to anchor the subject.

**MK: You have worked with Maja Kleczewska, Weronika Szczawińska, Paweł Łysak, Kuba Skrzywanek, Krzysztof Garbaczewski. Was working with each of them as team oriented as you said?**

MGB: I don't like comparing directors. Everyone has different working techniques. I listen to directors because I trust that their concept of the play is more deeply considered than mine. They have invested more time thinking about it than I have. It's better to discuss doubts after a scene is acted out than to stop action or discuss something that hasn't been tested in practice. If we rehearse a scene and I do my best to make a director's solution work, but it doesn't, I suggest that we look for another one. If the director asks my opinion, I answer honestly. Experimenting together does not necessarily involve a role reversal. I am an actor, someone else directs. The actor has no external perspective, he doesn't see the big picture for an action.

**MK: The director of *Divine Comedy*, the latest show you play in, Krzysztof Garbaczewski, is said to give much leeway to his collaborators. What did the rehearsals for the play look like? Did you start with Dante's work or with other inspirations? Did Garbaczewski give precise instructions. Did he say what he expected?**

MGB: I think he was very keen for actors to take a participatory attitude. We had a diverse reading list. Before Dante, we read Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo*

*Deus*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (a 1984 novel presenting a vision of true hell in a future world, where man and machine become one), many articles... Fortunately, I managed to find almost all of the books and articles in French. My improved understanding of the subjects gave me more freedom. We also had the pleasure to attend screenings of interesting films. But, of course, everything was linked to the themes of our further work.

**MK: What were these subjects?**

MGB: I most resonated with the subjects of life, love and death, which underpin Dante's text. After all, he wrote it after Beatrice's death, which led to Dante's mental crisis and then to his conversion.

**MK: Did you read and discuss *Divine Comedy*, or perhaps everyone found their own thread to follow in this thematic and textual space?**

MGB: It was a continuous process, which involved reading, asking questions, making suggestions. Rehearsals were held in the rehearsal room and then at the home of DAS (Dream Adoption Society). Some were better, some worse. Everything became clear when we could finally move to the big stage. Garbaczewski is a keen observer. I feel that he offered me my role after he saw my attitudes and actions at the preparatory stage.

**MK: Your presence in the show is closely linked to the music. How was it created?**

MGB: *Divine Comedy* is like a *chanson de geste*, which minstrels and bards would sing while leading adventurous lives. Our presence in the show is closely connected with the music. Composer Jan Duszyński was present at the rehearsals: he listened, observed, made suggestions. I love using my voice, so, like the others, gladly followed his tips. Just before the opening, the director found several recordings of Leśmian's poems, which we had made for an earlier, abandoned project. They came back as mandalas in this play. They were in keeping with the constantly rotating stage, setting the rhythm for gentle transitions from Hell to Paradise through Purgatory. The show is in a constant flux, it's different every day. Just like people.

**MK: Do you feel that your skin color and cultural differences are a factor in the repertoire of roles that you are offered?**

MGB: No, I don't. The roles I play are very diverse, so I don't see any problem here. *Lawrence w Arabii* [Lawrence in Arabia] examines the situation of refugees in Poland, but I don't play a refugee. We spoke different languages, but I myself spoke Polish. My character has power over others... In *Jak ocalić świat na małej scenie* [How to Save the World on a Small Stage], I tell the life story of my father, like the other actors, with our narratives addressing different ways of acting to "save the world", as expressed in the title, regardless of nationality or skin color. In *Mein Kampf* I speak, among other things, about poverty and hunger – these problems are quite common too. At the National Opera, I was a dancer in Maja Kleczewska's *Głos ludzki* [Human Voice]. I played Death wearing white clothes and covered in white clay. No, I don't feel limited or locked in a cliché or stereotype.

**MK: Is this problem ever thematized during rehearsals by the creators and actors (e.g. in order to avoid stereotypical representations). Is it discussed with you?**

MGB: Not that I know of. Or I don't remember. Fortunately, I do not know everything about cultural life in Poland. One thing's for sure, people all over the world ask questions about their own existence. As new technologies develop, we are ever more aware that we are not alone in the universe and that each of us is responsible for ourselves and the world.

**MK: What do you think of the *Agreement* [Porozumienie] at the Powszechny Theater?**

MGB: I like this initiative very much. It gives a platform for the exchange of opinions between actors, directors, technicians, management and administrative staff who all have a different perspective on the situation in the theatre and work in it. The exchange of information between the artistic and technical teams is very important. Directors need to know what equipment they can use before they start working on a concept.

**MK: Aren't you afraid that too many opinions may paralyze the work of the theatre? Just like they can paralyze action during a rehearsal.**

MGB: I don't think that's going to happen. If there is disagreement, there will be a discussion, and the final say will be with the directors.



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*gareto teatralne*

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THEATRE CRITICISM

## Sniff Like A Dog Sniffs The Wondrous

Agata Łuksza

Teraz Poliz

*"warsaw's daughters #100lat"*

held to mark the centenary of Polish women's right to vote and 10 years of the group Teraz Poliz

September–November 2018

"I sniff like a dog sniffs the wondrous," says Lunatic in Anna Świrszczyńska's dramatic miniature (2018, p. 212) *Black Square*, which served Teraz Poliz and Wojtek Blecharz as a basis to create a "music game" presented as part of the series of arts events and workshops "warsaw's daughters #100years" [córy warszawskie #100lat] held in autumn 2018. This short line, coming from the previously unstaged grotesque one-act play whose author is primarily remembered as a poet, could be the motto of the whole series, which had at its core an artistic search for the wondrous and extraordinary – at various levels, ranging from text, form and subject to the relationship with the audience, but also an attempt to persuade the audience to "sniff like a dog sniffs the wondrous" both during and after the performances.

“warsaw’s daughters #100years” is a continuation of the artistic efforts launched by Teraz Poliż in 2017 under the banner of “córy warszawskie #dziwystołeczne” [warsaw’s daughters #wondersofcapital], aiming to open Polish theatre to women’s work. This goal has been pursued by the group since its inception ten years ago. It is not without reason that Teraz Poliż describe themselves as “Poland’s only professional feminist theatre.” The company, which is an all-female ensemble and mostly works with women directors (this is not an iron-clad rule though) often probes the subject of female experience and, importantly, uses texts written by women authors, both contemporary plays and dramas reclaimed from the past.

It seemed only natural that the series should be accompanied by research and outreach components, such as workshops, walks and talks centered around the often forgotten, perhaps even repressed, women’s dramatic writing. No wonder then that Teraz Poliż teamed up with HyPaTia, a research group led by Joanna Krakowska, who work under the auspices of the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, Warsaw, especially to find women’s dramatic texts. Some of these texts have recently been published in the volume *Rodzaju żeńskiego: Antologia* [Feminine: Anthology] and are now presented as part of the “Stage of Independent Women” series at the Theatre Institute, but some of the “finds” were previously produced by Teraz Poliż as audio dramas in 2017 and as performative reading in 2015 as part of another project of the group, “Polish Wonders”.

The previous installment of the “warsaw’s daughters” series (2017) resulted in four audio dramas, all based on women’s plays that are now known only to a handful of theatre buffs, cutting across a variety of themes and using a wide array of formal effects. It was then that Teraz Poliż first took on Świrszczyńska’s grotesque plays – which are pivotal to this year’s edition of

the series – by producing *Conversation with Your Own Foot*, directed by Wojciech Faruga, and then mounted audio dramas based on Irena Krzywicka's unknown but shattering drama, *Life Despite Everything*, set in the ruins of post-war Warsaw (dir. Ula Kijak) and on Magdalena Samozwaniec's black comedy about suicides, *Hotel Belle Vue* (dir. Aleksandra Jakubczak), a work which, unlike most women's plays, had already been staged, at Warsaw's Teatr Ludowy in 1958. First played to a live audience at CK Kadr in the Warsaw district of Służewiec, these audio dramas are perhaps the most enduring outcome of the series. They are now available on [ninateka.pl](http://ninateka.pl) for anyone to play them back at home.

This turn towards the audio and the focus on sound, phrase, melody, and voice, which was already apparent during the first edition of "warsaw's daughters", was continued this year, not only in the form of a number of audio dramas, but also two one-off creations that are difficult to define – the "music game" mentioned above (*Black Square*), and a peculiar 'concert' based on Świrszczyńska's another one-act play, *Man and the Stars*, which was directed by Barbara Wiśniewska as *Appetite on the Execution Day*. But while the audio dramas could be recorded, making it possible to savour the created soundscape in a private space (the linking of female voice, backstage, and intimate reception, willy-nilly, makes one think of an attempt to intercept – often in an oppressive manner – the identification of the feminine with the private), *Black Square* and *Appetite on the Execution Day* were predicated on the idea of an event, a flash, a physical confrontation, or perhaps just a meeting with the audience in a situation that was only partially subject to artistic control. The idea is not to contrast a supposedly ephemeral, "unique" performance with an audio drama that can be archived in the traditional meaning of the word, which makes it recordable and "reproducible" – the problematic nature of this approach, which has long

dominated the discussion of theatre and performance, has been sufficiently demonstrated by the works of Rebecca Schneider and Diana Taylor. Rather, it is the question of a scalable inclusion of the relations between sound and space and between sound and body in the conditions of coexistence between actresses and spectators during an artistic activity, while the relations – paradoxically – become obscured and dispersed in a situation of private listening. Not without reason all of the audio dramas had public “premieres” at which at least some members of the artistic groups were present, giving rise to a kind of corporal “co-existence”.

At the same time, fewer audio dramas were produced as part of “#100years” and they were based on new texts. This time, instead of delving into the archives (which still house dozens of forgotten or undiscovered women’s plays), Teraz Polić started a collaboration with contemporary authors to produce Zuzanna Bojda’s *Bombshell Girls* and Marta Sokołowska’s *Ritual*, which are different in form, yet both are dreamlike and fairy-tale-like in their own ways. Historically, of course, this fairy-tale- and dreamlike quality is in no way characteristic of women’s art, which, at least to an equal extent, excels in moral realism. It is a peculiar code, though, an alternative idiom underpinned by the seriousness of play used to address themes that are challenging, taboo, glossed over, repressed (e.g. in Maria Kuncewiczowa’s *Thank You for the Roses*, the trauma of domestic violence lurks behind the convention of *Alice in Wonderland*). Staged to mark the event, *Bombshell Girls* is an audio drama that asks for the recognition of women’s place in the pantheon of heroes on the 100th anniversary of Poland’s independence. Women took an active part in the fight for Polish independence and in insurrections, but the mainstream narrative rarely honors their names. In *Bombshell Girls*, historical figures talk to one another. They include Wanda Krahelska, a PPS fighter and co-founder of Żegota, her niece Krystyna

Krahelska, an insurgent, poet, writer of patriotic songs, and the Warsaw Mermaid, Ludwika Kraskowska Nitschowa's statue, which is close to the hearts of the residents of the Polish capital, and to which Krystyna Krahelska had sat before the Second World War broke out. *Ritual* is an audio drama distinctly rooted in the fairy-tale convention, with sophisticated sound effects, filled with silence and understatement, tackling the subject of covered-up mass crimes, hidden violence, uncut social abscesses; it gives center stage to the female perspective and experience.

The premiere listenings of *Bombshell Girls* and *Ritual* were held in a much more intimate and friendly venue than those of DK Kadr – in the small space of the Powiśle-based Młodsza Siostra arts café. Breaking out of the four walls of an arts establishment offered another opportunity to enact the fluid boundaries between the private and the public, the official and the unofficial when it comes to the presence of women in social life. It is also worth noting that both directors, Anna Karasińska and Weronika Szczawińska, are artists apart who follow their own creative trajectory, develop a recognizable style, and at the same time are engaged in the public debate on theatre and performance, undertake stage experiments, work at the interface of manifold forms and conventions and blur the (already dubious) boundaries between theatre and performance art, while at the same time working at institutional theatres. Tellingly, Karasińska, Szczawińska – and Marta Górnicka, whose being “apart” and exploration of interstices, gaps and intersections do not need any reminding – were nominated for *Polityka* weekly's prestigious Passport awards in 2018 and completely dominated the theatre category.

Perhaps the public recognition of women working in the theatre in roles other than actresses is gradually becoming the norm, although the book of statistics published by HyPaTia, *Agora*, does not seem overly optimistic in

this respect. *Polityka*'s Passports had not often been awarded to women artists, but this time not only was the list of nominations exclusively female, but the nominated artists were, so to say, of avant-garde stripe and, in the case of Szczawińska and Górnicka, with a clearly feminist edge. Suffice it to recall, Anna Augustynowicz was the first winner of the Konrad Swinarski Award (established in 1976) for best theatre director of the season (2016/2017). The predicament of Anna Świrszczyńska, whose work determined the shape of the “#100” series, is a vivid and ruthless testament to the situation of women in Polish theatre. Świrszczyńska could count herself lucky: *Orpheus* was well received by critics, *Shots on Długa Street* was a big audience favorite, several of her other plays (for adults) also made it to the stage, and 2013 saw the publication of *Orfeusz: Dramaty* [Orpheus: Dramas], which will allow Świrszczyńska to be also remembered as a “serious” playwright, not only a children's author. Edited by Ewa Guderian Czaplińska, *Orfeusz: Dramaty* is truly extraordinary, the only collection of plays written by a woman among the ten volumes edited and published in *Dramat polski: Reaktywacja series* [Polish Drama: Reactivation], edited by Artur Grabowski and Jacek Kopciński.

The “music game” based on the dramatic miniature *Black Square*, which could only be joined for a few hours on 16 October 2018, turned out to be extraordinary, too. Blecharz's *Black Square* draws liberally from the practice of immersive theatre, which has been particularly popular in the United Kingdom for some time (especially thanks to Punchdrunk). Blecharz and Teraz Poliż – in line with the basic tenets of immersion theatre – invited people to join the game individually or in pairs, privatizing the experience of theatre and music (or rather making it more intimate). Świrszczyńska's *Black Square*, i.e. a conversation between Lunatic and Sweeper, which ends, of course, with Lunatic's death, is a dramatic miniature about the need for

laughter and the importance of absurdity in our ordinary and extraordinary life struggles. Following the clues left by the creators throughout the DK Kadr building (on the walls, but also in elegant black square envelopes), participants immerse themselves, like *Alice in Wonderland*, in the world of the absurd: absurd humour and laughter, absurd characters and absurd situations whose essence remains a direct encounter with the performers as well as sound experiment. In this game, music is understood, quite obviously, broadly, it is all-encompassing and multiform. One of the stages of the game takes place in the building's garage where the humming of a fan, to which the participant is led by an actress, plays a key role. The constituent parts of the experience are very ordinary sounds, which we ignore every day but start to hear when immersed in the game, as well as sounds produced on various devices and instruments (from electronics to violin) by Teraz Polić actresses, deadly serious guides in ridiculous costumes, always appearing on their own and a bit unexpectedly. Thanks to their physical closeness and involvement, the game was both totally absurd and totally true, along the lines of the warning spoken by Sweeper and contained in the last black envelope left by the artists: "You are a human being after all. If you cannot actualize the absurd, you will die." (Świrszczyńska, p. 114).

The production of *Man and the Stars* took the form of a concert entitled *Appetite on the Execution Day*, clearly divided into performers and audience, but preserving the form of communication with the audience typical of pop music concerts and old theatre practices). Playing the roles of Executioner, Oedipus, and Libra, the actresses sing and speak, most of the time to the audience rather than to one another. The show brings out the musicality of Świrszczyńska's text, in which the author embeds, in a way, ready-made musical phrases and short songs. Again, it is absurd, both at the level of dialogue and performance: exaggerated, grotesque costumes (e.g.



Executioner rollerblades) intensify the resonance of the looped, rhythmically repeated, torn, broken, distorted words that make up a story about the meaning and meaninglessness of life, about total enslavement that gives freedom, and boundless freedom that proves to be enslavement.

It is a shame that *Appetite on the Execution Day* was performed only once. The show could have developed and become more refined in regular contact with the audience. The problem was that there was almost no audience – a small group of spectators who somehow made it to Służewiec on a Saturday evening sat in DK Kadr's big main auditorium. The fantastic energy spilling off the stage had no one to resonate with and no chance to multiply. It seems that this type of show/concert needed a full house to attain its intended effect, and above all, a different, less formal and less sterile space than DK Kadr could offer. It is a pity especially as Świrszczyńska's text was brilliantly translated into musical form, and in other circumstances some of the "songs", for example, *Jestem galaktyką* [I Am a Galaxy], could have become fringe "hits".

Finally, a few words about *Who Is Afraid of Sybil Thompson?*, based on the play *Sybil Thompson's Lover* by Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, the hottest Polish women playwright of the interwar period. The show, directed by Ula Kijak, was mounted in 2015 and performed at Zamek in Poznań. In 2017, the Warsaw premiere was held, this time directed by Julia Szmyt as part of the first edition of the "warsaw's daughters" series. The analysis of *Sybil* could both begin and end the rundown of Teraz Polić's project, as the show lays down its key ideological and formal tenets.

In *Sybil*, the audience walks through the DK Kadr building, following the singing – the siren voice of the actresses calling out "Sybil..." – and stop in different spaces to immerse themselves deeper into the reality of a futuristic

dream. The different parts of the show differ from each other, sometimes significantly, especially in the artistic media used. The show begins with a fragment in which the lines spoken by actresses are intercut with previously recorded dialogue, played back as if in an audio drama. The actresses' voices surround the audience from all sides: both the actresses and the loudspeakers are distributed all over the space, empty and shorn of decoration, with the spectators sitting wherever they find a free spot, mostly on gym mattresses. At another time, actresses remove themselves from view, while the audience watches a video documenting Sybil's visit to a rejuvenation clinic. Instead of a third act, Teraz Poliż invites the audience to a party in the corridors of DK Kadr, directly interacting with the audience, encouraging them to talk about Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska's text, blurring the line between audience and stage, but also between private and public, as in other projects of the series, and at the same time opening up discussion about the potential hidden in fusty old plays by female authors.

"Warsaw daughters #100years" was a wide-ranging, ambitious and, importantly, constructive, creative and risky project. It was focused, first, on a search for alternative women's texts and the theatre idioms and solutions and that could bring these texts to life in the 21st century and, second, on working with contemporary theatre women and listening to their voices. These were also the objectives of the series, which was conceived as an essentially joyful holiday – both to mark the centenary of Polish women's right to vote and ten years of the group Teraz Poliż. It is only regrettable that the holiday was so small and took place on the distant outskirts of Warsaw's cultural life that only a handful of spectators could "sniff like a dog sniffs the wondrous" in autumn 2018. It is hard to say whether this was due to the relatively peripheral location of DK Kadr in the capital or the relatively peripheral position of women's art in the theatre.

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THEATRE CRITICISM

## For Our Poland They Go Into Battle!

Marta Bryś

The Ester Rachel And Ida Kaminska Jewish Theater, Warsaw

*Berek*

Directed by Maja Kleczewska; dramaturgy by Łukasz Chotkowski; adapted by Łukasz Chotkowski and Maja Kleczewska; stage design by Zbigniew Libera; costumes by Konrad Parol; music by Cezary Duchnowski; choreography by Kaya Kołodziejczyk; vocal training by Teresa Wrońska; premiered on December 7, 2019

Maja Kleczewska's and Łukasz Chotkowski's *Berek* is like a dive into a dark spot of history, a confrontation with facts that are not so much denied as viewed as irrelevant in the Polish historical narrative. *Berek* is not a play about the need to reclaim memory — it focuses on events and people that nobody really wanted to remember. Starting from the figure of Berek Joselewicz, an officer of the Polish Legions who died in the battle of Kock fought against the Austrians in 1805, the creators zoom in on the Jews who joined the struggle for Polish independence — from the Kościuszko Uprising to World War II to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Kleczewska and Chotkowski, however, do not deploy a perspective of commemorative melancholy, they do not seek confrontation or attack anyone as they did in *Dybuk* [Dybbuk] and

*Malowany ptak* [The Painted Bird]. Instead, they set up an alternative pantheon of characters who should be hailed with the shout “Glory to the heroes!,” although those most eager to use this exclamation would be at least dismayed at the Polish heroes of *Berek*.

The bulk of the script is made up of documentary material, including: speeches of Jewish military leaders; rabbis’ calls on Jews to stand up for Polish independence; the Roll Call of the Fallen on April 19, 2013; Jewish Legionnaires’ 1915 appeal to Jewish youth; Yitzhak Zuckerman’s 1944 appeal to the defenders of the Warsaw Ghetto; Polish and Jewish patriotic songs; excerpts from Zygmunt Krasiński’s *Undivine Comedy* and Stanisław Wyspiański’s *The Return of Odysseus*. Chotkowski weaves them together to compose a score with no coherent narrative or division into roles and characters. The viewer has no recourse to the impulses kick-starting individual scenes.

The show begins by the cloak area. In a calm voice fit for a museum guide, Barbara Szeliga, dressed in military uniform, speaks about Berek Joselewicz describing his background, education and how he got into the army. Then she goes to the main space, which is bright, white-walled and complete with columns. The main space and lobby are decorated with replica paintings, photos of the Polish Army’s Jewish units, portraits of members of the Jewish Combat Organization and Polish Army rabbis. Stands with military uniforms and prayer shawls are placed in two recesses. The floor is covered with red carpet and in the center of the room is a large wooden rectangle with a stone frame, which brings to mind a museum, art gallery, or memorial hall setting.

The actors (Marcin Błaszak, Henryk Rajfer, Rafał Rutowicz, Piotr Sierecki, Jerzy Walczak and Marek Węglarski) and actresses (Ewa Dąbrowska, Kaya

Kołodziejczyk, Joanna Przybyłowska, Barbara Szeliga and Teresa Wrońska) gather in front of Henryk Pillati's painting *The Death of Berek Joselewicz at Kock*, while Wanda Siemaszko tells them about the circumstances of the event depicted on the canvas. First, audience members hesitatingly approach to have a close look at the painting and then gradually start moving more freely around the room, following the actors, sitting down on the floor and by the columns.

From the very start, Kleczewska does not let the audience become attached to simple interpretations and keeps on leading them astray — the suggestion that the play is set in a museum is quickly undermined and Joselewicz ceases to be the central figure. The director makes sure that nothing that happens in *Berek* can be easily defined – everything is fluid, elusive, unpindownable: the setting, the status of the actors, the meaning of particular scenes. The men are dressed in different era uniforms, the women in ball gowns, almost everyone has whitewashed faces. The story of the Jewish fighting spirit in the Polish army is built from raw facts interspersed with patriotic songs. The words “Jewish” and “Jews” crop up alongside “patriotism,” “freedom,” “independence,” “homeland” and “duty.” The whole spectrum of examples of Jewish military involvement proves it has not been a marginal or occasional phenomenon but an important and integral part of Polish history. What sets Jewish culture apart is Yiddish. After singing the WWI song *Piechota* [The Gray Infantry] in Polish, the actors break into *The Song of the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters* in Yiddish. The most striking songs, however, are the Yiddish translations of *Rota* and *Poland Is Not Yet Lost*, the latter emotionally sung by Wanda Siemaszko, standing on the pavement outside the gallery together with Jerzy Walczak. The audience inside and outside the gallery listens to the Yiddish version of the Polish anthem.

The space, designed by Zbigniew Libera, is central in *Berek*. The show is performed in the concert hall at 63 Nowy Świat Street, where it intersects with Świętokrzyska Street, in the heart of Warsaw. There is no division between the stage and the audience. Sitting along one wall are brass band musicians, with a small platform with a piano farther down. The actors move among the audience and some spectators choose who they want to listen to (Walczak delivers a monologue from *The Return of Odysseus*, while Marek Węglarski recounts Holocaust stories in the lobby).

The high curtainless windows of the longer wall overlook Świętokrzyska Street. Performed in full light, the show attracts the attention of passers-by, who stop in their tracks to take photos and videos, thus becoming a second audience and a vital part of the performance. The procession of uniformed men, pale women in ball gowns and a Jew in a black coat, prayer shawl and Hasidic hat is an intrusion into the monotonous street life. It bewilders, intrigues, disturbs. It seems that commemorative rituals, repeated for ages, in secret, by a group of the dead, have now been suddenly exposed, brought into view.

While the Jewish fighting spirit is put on a par with the Polish spirit of independence, it seems somewhat inappropriate in the story of the Holocaust and its victims. At the end of the show, Jerzy Walczak recites the open letter that Simcha Kazik Rotem, the last survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, wrote to Andrzej Duda in 2018. In it, Rotem expresses his astonishment at the historical policy endorsed by the Polish President and objects to putting the suffering of Poles and that of Jews during the Second World War on an equal footing:

“I’ve read the speech you delivered last week at the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. I became very frustrated,

disappointed and even amazed by your systematic disregard of the fundamental difference between the suffering of the Polish nation after Poland was seized by Nazi Germany, which I do not disparage, and the methodical genocide of my brothers and sisters, Poland's Jewish citizens, by the Nazi-German extermination machine, ignoring the fact this extermination machine had many Polish accomplices."

He ends his letter with a rhetorical question:

"Do you, the leader of the Polish nation, want to be an accomplice in transforming this unconceivable disregard into the 'new historical truth' passed on from generation to generation?"

Standing in front of the audience and looking at the floor, Walczak speaks with a strong and firm voice. The phrase "I, Symcha Kazik Rotem," which keeps recurring in the letter, has a near-accusatory ring. After the speech, the actors pin a set of medals to his uniform, give him a white-and-red sash, wrap him in a Polish flag and, after hoisting him on their shoulders like a hero, repeatedly traverse the gallery. But Walczak is not triumphant. He sits still with a blank stare. The actors' behavior seems awkward, misplaced, thoughtless.

Kleczewska has mostly built her production around actors' movement. In a bravura feat, choreographer Kaya Kołodziejczyk uses simple routines and precise gestures to lead the actors from dispersion to collective scenes. In one scene, Kołodziejczyk throws herself among the actors walking in a column or cuts in front of them, moving in counterpoint to their marching steps. She tends to stay on the periphery, sometimes joining in for group routines, then breaking away and surrendering to the logic of her own movement. In a scene from *The Return of Odysseus*, Kołodziejczyk leaves the



gallery wearing a white puffer jacket, pants and a hat. She plays one of the sirens encountered by Odysseus – restless and lost, she runs among the people passing by, crosses the street, takes a peek into the courtyard, climbs walls, confuses passers-by. The movement in *Berek* is compatible, in a non-straightforward manner, with the amazing score by Cezary Duchnowski, who created a dark backdrop for the marching pieces by disrupting familiar tunes, stretching out sounds, changing keys, emphasizing the orchestral aspect. His arrangements are disturbing and packed with so much pathos and suspense that almost every scene seems like a climax.

References to Kantor's Theatre of Death are strongly in evidence. The director sets up a kind of séance on the cusp of a "meeting between the living and the dead," which Kantor prefigured in his prologue to *I Shall Never Return*, while *The Gray Infantry* evokes associations with *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*. Not insignificant is also the presence of actor Jerzy Walczak, with whom Kleczewska has worked since starting her collaboration with the Jewish Theater in Warsaw. In the *Dybbuk* prologue, Walczak delivered a Kantor monologue from *I Shall Never Return*, and then reprised it in *The Painted Bird*, where he portrayed Jerzy Kosiński. In one scene, the actor gives Odysseus' homecoming monologue from Act Three of the Wyspiański drama. The same monologue was read in *I Shall Never Return* by Kantor, who sat at the table with Odysseus. Standing in front of one of the windows and looking at the people passing by, Walczak speaks of his disappointment at his homecoming, lost youth, guilt, contrition and lack of forgiveness. He is back in his homeland that is intent on selectively remembering its past. He speaks slowly, with sadness in his voice, as if his Odysseus has accepted his plight. He is not disturbed by the surrounding confusion or the fact that the audience behind the glass cannot hear him. Kantor used elements of History (with a capital H) to build an autobiographical story. Kleczewska opens

*Berek*'s narrative to a biographical theme so that the story of the past becomes intimate and personal for a while, and thus closer to the audience – in the finale of the show the director gives the floor to charismatic Henryk Rajfer. Standing in the middle of the room, the actor speaks of his Warsaw childhood, his Jewish family and its life after WWII, the life of Jews in communist Poland, of 1968 and his mother's funeral where he met his father, who, as it turned out, used to be a private in the Polish army. As the story unfolds, Kołodziejczyk comes among the audience urging them to follow her to the wall covered with photos, which also features Szymon Rajfer's military ID card. Beginning with the story of a saber-wielding, horse-riding Romantic hero, *Berek* ends with one about an ordinary person. The consistency with which Polish history has managed to remain silent about such people is all the more surprising.

*Berek* captivates with the extraordinary intensity of the actors' presence. The actors are physically close but look away as if they do not see anyone, focused on the set and their own singing. The small space makes it difficult to keep the distance — now and then spectators have to get out of the actors' way. At another point, the actors are very close to the audience, staring deeply into their eyes. They take some audience members by their hands and form a column moving to the beat of the patriotic anthem *Rota* [The Oath]. *Berek* is more than just a play. It is an event that invades the city in order to uncompromisingly violate, irritate and disrupt it. It is short but extremely intense, performed with plenty of tension. And despite the fact that there is so much happening at the same time in the multiple dimensions of text, movement, music and situation, it is never distracting, the audience is utterly riveted.

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*gazeta teatralna*

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THEATRE CRITICISM

## Borders, Barriers And Limitations: “Lwów We Won’t Give Up”

Aneta Głowacka

Wanda Siemaszkowa Theatre in Rzeszów, Poland

Katarzyna Szyngiera, Marcin Napiórkowski, Mirosław Wlekły

*Lwów We Won’t Give Up*

Directed by Katarzyna Szyngiera; dramaturgy by Olga Maciupa; set design by Przemysław Czepurko and Katarzyna Ożgo; lighting by Michał Stajniak; music by Jacek Sotomski; costumes by Ireneusz Zajac; Lviv video by Miłosz Kasiura; premiered on 26 August 2018

Standing on the edge of a meadow and a forest, the spreading lime tree in the opening scene of the play is part of a quintessential idyllic landscape. Its photographic image is displayed on a large upstage screen. Against the backdrop or rather in the shade of the tree, the actors of the Rzeszów theatre are unwinding. Some of them are doing yoga, some are lying on the floor listening to the bird song, still, others are sipping fortified tea on one of the platforms. The people enjoying their “luncheon on the grass” might just as well be a group of residents of a border town or village such as Beniowa, which straddles the River San dividing Poland from Ukraine. The identities

of the actors and their characters are constantly blurring, which leads to an overlap of the opinions of the borderland dwellers and the actors, who voice their views on the tasks set by the director. For example, seeing themselves as open-minded, they rebel against playing the roles of chauvinist Poles.

The onstage platform, weaving like a river, marks the interstate border. On one side of it are Poles, on the other a Ukrainian woman, Oxana (a bravura performance by the extremely energetic Oxana Cherkashina), who wants to join the group of people relaxing under the lime tree, but cannot just go and cross the river. Once, Beniowa had a mixed population of Ukrainians and Poles who shared the shade of the famous 200-year-old tree. Now, with the post-war border running through the village, the only way to reach the Polish side is to cross over in Krościenko, but to do so, one needs to make a nearly 70-kilometer detour. Oxana points out this absurd fact, giving a detailed account of her trip to the border crossing, which she tries to reach without a car, relying on GPS and the kindness of the people she meets along the way. The citizens of both countries have to accept the arbitrary decisions of politicians, but animals can afford to ignore them, so Polish wasps fly to Ukraine, while Ukrainian bees cross over to Poland unmolested.

Not only does the story of a village torn asunder by history provoke reflection on state borders, which often cut brutally through people's lives, but its memory triggers mutual prejudice. When Beniowa was split by war, and the German-Soviet demarcation line became the eastern border of Poland, the local Ukrainians were deported in a population exchange. When people were being displaced, the father's nationality was decisive. Polish wives could return home, but in most cases, there was nothing to return to, as everything had already been looted. Politics separated families and punished those who were determined to stay together at any cost by taking

away their jobs. The Poles left the village after it was burnt down by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. The Ukrainians who stayed on and witnessed the so-called harvest operation took shelter on the other side of the river. Since then, a thriving multicultural town with a potash plant and gravel mill has turned into a wilderness on the Polish side, and there are only a few houses left in the Ukrainian part.

The sequence about the old mythical lime tree and the abandoned village in the Bieszczady Mountains is used by the writers, Katarzyna Szyngiera, Marcin Napiórkowski, and Mirosław Wlekły, as a prologue to a broader rumination on Polish–Ukrainian relations. Although the ties between the two nations date back to the times of Bolesław the Brave, whose knights drove Yaroslav the Wise beyond the Bug River – the fact the audience is reminded of through a historical reenactment – the neighborly relations are strained. It seems easier for Ukrainians to cross the state border, even if it means queuing for several hours, than to overcome the mental barriers that the Poles have set in their minds. Oxana is invited to Rzeszów to play “a real Ukrainian”. Nobody knows what that means. The actress pokes fun at her part, drawing on a number of stereotypes. She says that as she is a poor visitor from the East, that she has no car, but she has brought some gifts instead: a bottle of Ukrainian cognac, fudge, and a folk scarf. What can she hope to get in return? Not much, since her compatriots in Poland are often mentioned in the same breath as low paid work, smuggling cheap cigarettes and buying meat in Biedronka discount stores. She is handed a script written in Polish.

The dilemma of Oxana, who would like to act in her own tongue with translations displayed on the teleprompter, ties in with unequal treatment of immigrants from behind the River Bug, the undisguised contempt they often

face in Poland when they are denied the right to dignity. In her mocking song, the actress runs through a litany of Polish prejudices, styling herself as a “heroine of capitalist labor” and “Bandera supporter” who fled to Poland from a country at war to earn a living for her children. Despite her three degrees, she is classed as an illegal worker who tries her hand at various jobs: a raspberry collector, cleaner, maid, dishwasher, washerwoman, even a masseuse with some intimate services thrown in. Not only is she underemployed, but she has to exhibit good health and flexibility above and beyond the requirements of the Polish labor code, which usually means giving up days off and holiday breaks. Jokes about the “black” Ukrainian palate do not fill Oxana with optimism, but she cheerfully observes that “as long as there are Muslims and gays in Poland, there is nothing to be afraid of”.

Before they started working on the script, Szyngiera and Wlekły went to Lviv to shoot a reportage talking to Poles and Ukrainians about their mutual relations. The 1918 battle for Lwów (the former name of Lviv) was the starting point, but they were more interested in contemporary angles than historical events, and in the way in which the past, or actually its historical memory, impacts interpersonal relations at present. They held similar conversations in Rzeszów. Replies of passers-by, interviews with service staff, museum employees and historical reenactors, as well as questionnaires answered by secondary school students resulted in a patchwork of ideas and opinions, which are quoted by the actors or read from the screen. It seems that despite prejudices, Ukrainians have a more realistic attitude towards Poles: they respect them for the way they have developed their country which now offers significant opportunities, but make no bones about the fact that they aren’t treated well in Poland. Poles, on the other hand, are stuck in a bubble of resentment. They harp on about the Volhynia massacre and the

loss of Lwów. They accuse Ukrainians of taking away their jobs. A strong case in point is a street poll shot in Rzeszów, where a doctor from Lviv, while talking about his friends from Poland, is identified as a potential threat and verbally assaulted by a passer-by.

The documentary elements of the play alternate with fragments of fiction revealing the memorial strategies of Poles. The minister responsible for foreign policy would like to see Ukrainians in a folk entourage, dancing the hopak, infantile, “tame”. This vision of the past leaves no room for the perspective of the other side. To give just one example: Poles are also seen as former aggressors. It is worth noting that Szyngiera’s and Wlekły’s previous production, *Svarka*, staged at the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz (2015), which looked at mass murders in Volhynia in the final stages of World War II, was created in a similar fashion, at the clashing point of opinions from both sides of the border. Stepan Bandera, a controversial figure in Poland, which is used to stigmatize the eastern neighbors, is a crucial element of the past in the Rzeszów production. To prove how harmful and untrue the image of the Ukrainian-the-Bandera-supporter is, Oxana gives Bandera, or rather a photo of him, to the Rzeszów audience, saying she will be happy to get rid of him, as he was a Polish citizen at the time.

Szyngiera’s piece touches upon various flashpoints in Polish–Ukrainian relations, mostly stressing the scale of neglect and hypocritical mirages on the Polish side. “What kind of past does the future need?” – this question, which comes from a book by Polish historian Tomasz Stryjek, is left hanging in the air over the stage at the end of the performance. Politicians cannot be counted on at this point in time, but the efforts of civic organizations and social activists give hope for overcoming the existing barriers and limitations, which are often harder to move beyond than state borders.



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