

Towards Agency: The Role of Employees in Democratization Processes in Public Theatres in Poland

ANETA GŁOWACKA, DOROTA FOX

University of Silesia in Katowice, Faculty of Humanities, Poland

ABSTRACT: The article concerns the changes currently taking place in public theatres in Poland. They primarily concern changes in the conditions for producing and reproducing art, and therefore in the ways of managing theatres and creating better working conditions. This involves moving away from the director-director model of theatre, with the empowerment of employees and the socialization of theatre as an institution. Trade unions, increasingly established by workers who are active and aware of their rights, play a major role in these changes.

KEYWORDS: contemporary theatre, public theatres, theatre as an institution, institutional criticism, theatre employees, antiviolence practices

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the article is to describe current changes in Polish public theatres concerning the way of managing and organizing work in such institutions, related to both the process of preparing a premiere and their daily functioning. Changes in theatres in Poland are part of processes which are also noticeable in other European countries, as evidenced by research conducted on the basis of the institutional critique¹ and in the area of management, concerning, among others, working conditions, power relations, violence in theatre, and finally the processes of democratization of cultural institutions and culture itself.² Due to their dynamics, we have described the changes in question as revolutionary, and they result from the growth of self-awareness of both employees and people managing theatres, and are introduced as grassroots initiatives, anticipating systemic solutions at the level of the state.

Critical institutional boom in Poland took place in 2015 and was associated with the celebration of the 250th anniversary of Polish public theatre, which provoked the community of theatre researchers and critics to discuss the tasks and role of institutional theatre.³ The publication of Polish translation of Dragan Klaić's book *Gra w nowych dekoracjach. Teatr publiczny pomiędzy rynkiem a demokracją*⁴, which discusses the status of theatre subsidized with public funds, as well as Bojana Kunst's book *Artysta w pracy. O pokrewieństwach sztuki i kapitalizmu*, which was published in Poland in 2016,⁵ were also significant for developing the theoretical foundations of institutional criticism. For several years many articles by Polish authors have been published, examining various aspects of the theatre system, working conditions in the theatre and various types of abuses resulting from the still lingering effects of the environmental hierarchy, the defective system of organizing culture,

1 Institutional critique is a current of reflection and artistic practice focused on analysing, exposing, and challenging power structures, norms, mechanisms, and ideologies operating within art and cultural institutions, such as museums, galleries, theatres, art academies, or festivals. The origins of institutional critique date back to the 1960s and are associated with the actions of visual artists who questioned the modernist paradigm of art in North and South America as well as in Europe. In contemporary times, this line of reflection on the conditions of art production has been particularly advanced by the works of artists and theorists such as Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke.

2 See, among others, SCHMIDT, Th. *Theater, Krise und Reform. Eine Kritik des deutsche Theatersystem*. Wiesbaden : Spinger VS, 2016; SCHMIDT, Th. *Macht und Struktur im Theater*. Wiesbaden : Spinger VS, 2019; HADLEY, S. *Audience Development and Cultural Policy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. In Poland, the necessity of conducting institutional critique was justified by Marta Keil. See KEIL, M. Do czego jest nam dzisiaj potrzebna krytyka instytucjonalna? In *Polish Theatre Journal*, 2015, No. 1. It is also worth mentioning the book by KWAŚNIEWSKA, M. *Między hierarchią a anarchią. Teatr-instytucja-krytyka*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019.

3 The ongoing debate was evidenced by texts published in the monthly magazine *Teatr*, 2015, No. 5. [online]. [cit. 27 April 2025]. Available at: <https://archiwum.teatr-pismo.pl/5131-teatr-to-nie-przedsiębiorstwo-ale-przedsiewziecie/>.

4 KLAJĆ, D. *Gra w nowych dekoracjach. Teatr publiczny pomiędzy rynkiem a demokracją*. Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Konfrontacje Teatralne/Centrum Kultury w Lublinie, 2014 [*Resetting the Stage: Public Theatre between the Market and Democracy*. Bristol : Intellect, 2012].

5 KUNST, B. *Artysta w pracy. O pokrewieństwach sztuki i kapitalizmu*. Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Konfrontacje Teatralne/Centrum Kultury w Lublinie, 2016. [*Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism*. Zero Books, 2015].

the constant lack of amendments to legal provisions which do not fit the specifics of a theatre institution. However, there is a lack of large-scale field research that would provide a more nuanced picture of the theoretical findings to date and would allow for a comprehensive presentation of the actual working conditions in a theatre institution, taking into account marginalized groups, such as administrative and technical employees.

REASONS FOR TRANSFORMATION IN THEATRES

The need to take a critical look at how people work in theatres, at least in Poland, is caused by several factors. The first is the global #MeToo movement, which has also provoked discussions in the Polish theatre community about power relations in artistic institutions (until recently mostly run by men), their hierarchy, preferred management models and the conditions for producing art. This factor has been additionally strengthened by the need to describe the experiences of artists and artistic institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic and immediately after its end, to discuss the challenges related to the crisis experienced and to indicate the lack of systemic solutions supporting the stable functioning of theatres and creative people. Of no small importance in changing the way we think about working in the theatre is the generational change on the labour market and appearance of younger generations of artists and employees in artistic institutions, who are more sensitive to irregularities and abusive situations, and who react to them quite quickly: they establish trade unions, formulate demands to the management, contact the authorities supervising the theatre and, in the absence of a reaction from them, inform the media about the crisis. Much space in the discussions of the theatre community held during discussion panels and at scientific conferences organized by art schools, theatres and industry associations,⁶ is devoted to the need to introduce changes both in the organization of everyday work in the theatre and in the production process of performances. Their goal is to empower employees of the institution and people involved in the creative process. The last factor changing the perception of working conditions in the theatre by people employed there is cooperation with international production teams and theatres. Since discussions in Western countries on the functioning of institutions, working conditions of artistic teams, accepted and non-compliant behaviours of creators and people managing theatres took place earlier, they are now a good point of reference for similar discussions held in Poland.

It is worth adding that the first information about abusive behaviour against theatre workers in Poland appeared in the media in 2019 and concerned the director of one of Kraków's theatres, whom female employees accused of sexual harassment and mobbing. Shortly afterwards, similar accusations were made by former

⁶ It is worth mentioning here the series of conferences organized at Teatr Polski in Poznań since 2021 entitled "Teatr OD}{NOWA" (three editions have been held so far), the conference *Zmiana – teraz!* [Change – now!], organised in 2021 at Akademia Teatralna in Warsaw, or the project *Granice w teatrze* [Boundaries in Theatre], implemented in the same year by Akademia Sztuk Teatralnych – branch in Wrocław, in cooperation with industry associations: the Association of Theatre Directors and the Guild of Polish Theatre Directors.

colleagues against Włodzimierz Staniewski, founder and director of the Centre for Theatre Practices "Gardzienice." Despite witness testimonies, the investigation into this case was discontinued by the prosecutor's office due to the statute of limitations. Both of these events, along with the testimony of actress Anna Paliga, who, during a session of the Advisory Council at the Łódź Film School, spoke publicly about the violence she had allegedly experienced during her time as a student, triggered a broader wave of disclosures regarding acts of abuse. The names of people, including theatre directors and art school teachers began to appear in the press and on social media, accused by the injured parties of various types of transgressions, abuse of power and violent behaviour: from aggressive statements and insults, to manipulation, mobbing and sexual harassment. The scale of these revelations made it clear that violence in art schools and theatre institutions does not only concern individual cases, but the entire environment and is systemic in nature.

This was confirmed by interviews conducted by journalist Iga Dzieciuchowicz with artists and theatre employees representing various professions, collected in the recently published reportage book *Teatr. Rodzina patologiczna*⁷ [Theatre. Pathological Family], as well as survey research conducted by Dorota Ilczuk and a team of collaborators on behalf of Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw. The analysis of 721 surveys (out of 1,600 received) shows that 60% of respondents experienced unequal treatment or discrimination (including 66% of women and 50% of men),⁸ while 47.5% of people experiencing violence did not receive any support. Slightly less than half, 42.5% of respondents, could count on their colleagues at work for help, while only 2.3% of respondents⁹ used anti-mobbing and anti-discrimination procedures. These findings are confirmed by the results of the 2020 report by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, which shows that artistic institutions not only fail to support victims, but also underestimate the number of reported cases of mobbing, harassment or sexual harassment.¹⁰

HOW WE CONDUCTED OUR RESEARCH?

Our article on the revolution of dignity, i.e. employees demanding and enforcing their rights, as well as initiating necessary changes in institutions, is based on research conducted as part of the grant *Democratization Processes in Institutional Theatres in Poland. Procedures, Mechanisms and Power Relations*, financed by the Polish National Science Centre. The most important assumption of this project is to listen

7 DZIECIUCHOWICZ, I. *Teatr. Rodzina patologiczna*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Agora, 2025.

8 ILCZUK, D. – KARPIŃSKA, A. – MAJEWSKI, P. – PŁOSKI, P. – SZCZEBLEWSKA, A. *Scena polska 2024: Pracując w teatrze. Raport z badań. Badanie sytuacji zawodowej pracowników i pracowników teatru w Polsce w nowej, pocovidowej odstonie*. Warszawa : Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2024. [online]. [cit. 27 April 2025]. Available at: <https://www.instytut-teatralny.pl/dzialalnosc/raporty-i-badania/scena-polska-2024-pracujac-w-teatrze-raport-z-badan/>.

9 Ibid., p. 95.

10 GERLICH, J. – JARZMUS, K. „Być albo nie być.” *Pracowniczki i pracownicy polskich instytucji artystycznych wobec zagrożenia mobbingiem, molestowaniem i molestowaniem seksualnym. Raport z badań. Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka*, 2020. [online]. [cit. 27 April 2025]. Available at: <https://hfhr.pl/publikacje/-byc-albo-nie-byc-pracowniczki-i-pracownicy-polskich-instytucji-artystycznych-wobec-269874433>.

to the voices of people working in theatres in various positions and representing professional groups included in the structure of the institution as an artistic, technical, administrative team and the management. While preparing this article, we primarily took into account the statements of employees and representatives of trade unions. We were interested in their experiences and opinions on working conditions and professional status, in short, stories which have not had the space to be heard, which were omitted or not reported at all in serious publications, of which there are few.¹¹ The material obtained so far consists of 45 in-depth and semi-structured interviews, conducted with representatives of trade unions and with people belonging to all theatre teams (artistic, administrative and technical) and representing various professions, such as actors, stage managers, artistic coordinators, technical managers, lighting engineers, sound engineers, set builders, theatre craftsmen, assistants to the director, people responsible for ticket sales or promotion of theatre events.

When arranging interviews with persons employed in Polish theatres, we chose to talk to representatives of various professions as our interviewees. The selection was therefore deliberate, as we wanted to include representatives of various positions and obtain statements from various specialists. We searched for potential interviewees using the “snowball” method, asking friends from various theatres about potential interviewees. We also asked our narrators the same question. At the same time we used the help of artistic coordinators, assistant directors and producers. We talked to young people who were starting their professional careers in theatre and to people with long work experience. We wanted to capture the changes taking place in theatre and the generational differences in the approach to the workplace and working conditions. The age of our interviewees ranged from 28 to 62. The meetings were arranged in places they had designated, most often in the theatre’s service rooms, foyer, theatre buffet, director’s office or conference room. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then anonymized. The interviews were partly structured and partly free-form. Not forgetting the issues we were particularly interested in, we tried to follow the interviewees, giving them the opportunity to talk about topics related to their work in the theatre which seemed important from their perspective. We developed the interviews using Kathy Charmaz’s advice on grounded theory methodology.¹² She suggests first conducting and analysing a small number of interviews

11 At this point, apart from the previously mentioned reports, it is certainly worth mentioning Zofia Smolarska’s work on theatre craftsmen, see SMOLARSKA, Z. *Ekologie teatru. Analiza relacyjna instytucji teatru z perspektywy rzemieślników teatralnych* [Doctoral Thesis]. Warsaw : Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2020. It is also worth adding that in 2013, quantitative and qualitative research was conducted in Warsaw theatres on the contemporary situation of theatre craftsmen, see [BYRSKA, O.]. *Rzemieślnicy teatralni 2013. Raport Instytutu Teatralnego im. Z. Raszewskiego*. Warszawa, 2013. [online]. [cit. 28 April 2025]. Available at: <https://www.instytut-teatralny.pl/dzialalnosc/raporty-i-badania/rzemieslnicy-teatralni-2013-raport-instytutu-teatralnego/>. Interviews with theatre employees belonging to various teams were included in the monographic edition of *Notatnik Teatralny* entitled *Ludzie teatru*. See *Ludzie teatru*. In *Notatnik Teatralny*, 2024, No. 94.

12 CHARMAZ, K. *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks : Sage Publications, 2006.

through coding, and only then continuing the interviews and further coding, i.e. conceptualizing the data, until the categories emerging from the analysed material are saturated. The coding process, to put it very simply, is intended to lead the researcher from the level of empirical data, i.e. what is the “ground” (interviews with individual people) to the theoretical level, allowing for the presentation of processes and phenomena occurring in the research area in the form of a theoretical model.¹³

The analysis of interviews using the grounded theory methodology allowed us not only to delve into the management processes of a theatre as a cultural institution, but also to recognize various aspects of the management culture, its determinants, with particular emphasis on the gradual but also successive process of democratization in its aspect of empowering each person employed in the theatre. The results of our research allowed us to put forward a thesis, included in the title of the article, which, after being clarified, would sound as follows: the dignity revolution in public theatres in Poland as a catalyst for changes in the methods of managing a cultural institution, the course of which depends on the self-awareness of all theatre employees and their right to agency granted by themselves.

THEATRE AS AN INSTITUTION

Functioning of public cultural institutions in Poland is regulated primarily by the *Act of 25 October 1991 on the Organization and Conduct of Cultural Activities*,¹⁴ amended in subsequent years. Under this act, public theatres have legal personality and operate as artistic institutions. The basis for the existence of such institutions is the act of establishing a cultural institution and its entry in the appropriate register. Other issues concerning the seat of a given theatre, scope of its operations or management and its advisory bodies are included in the statute granted by the organizer. In turn, the internal organization of an institution is specified in its organizational regulations, which are created by the director of this institution after consulting the organizer, as well as the trade unions and associations of artists operating in a particular theatre. The set of documents cited here not only creates a legal framework for the functioning of such institutions, but also indicates the areas of authority, related decision-making power and responsibility of individual actors in the field of art.

Every institution is headed by the director, who manages its organization and represents a theatre externally. All power and responsibility are therefore concentrated in the director's hands. The director reports directly to officials of supervisory bodies, that is the Minister of Culture and National Heritage in the case of a state cultural institution, voivodeship marshals or city mayors, when it is supervised by a local government or it is a city cultural institution. It is worth adding that the aforementioned officials are usually politicians, which leads to a situation where culture

¹³ From our coded interviews, several categories emerged including: implementing corrective actions, initiating work-organization changes, building a community of interests, theatre as a family or employee team, and self-organization. Through problematizing the relationships among these categories, the core corpus of this dissertation emerged.

¹⁴ Act of 25 October 1991 on the Organization and Conduct of Cultural Activities [consolidated text]. In *Journal of Laws*, 1991, No. 114, item 493.

is sometimes used for political purposes, regardless of a political option represented by the minister of culture, voivodeship marshal or city mayor. This is easy because public theatres, depending on their type, are financed from the state, voivodeship or municipal budget and are subject to control by their founding bodies. Although the act ensures programmatic independence for the theatre director, direct financial dependence of an institution on the state or local government authorities means that politicians tend to use economic tools to control the decisions of theatre directors, for example, by reducing subsidies for these institutions, withdrawing their purposeful grants for specific projects or by financially supporting only those projects which are consistent with the ideological line of the party in power in a given place. Therefore, the situation of a theatre and its director frequently depends on good will of politicians and officials, who are practically not held accountable for their wrong decisions. In turn, the fate of theatre employees depends on the director, who, as revealed by occasional crises, such as those at Bagatela Theatre in Kraków (2019), TR Warszawa (2022) or at Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw (2024) may abuse his/her power for years.¹⁵

The Act on the organization and conduct of cultural activities reflects, but also designs, a ladder of subordination which provides entities at higher levels with greater privileges and power, although in practice this does not always mean broadly understood responsibility. Personal financial responsibility of the director/management in front of the organizer perpetuates the vertical hierarchy, strengthens the director's decision-making power, which results in restricting the process of democratization, limiting in principle the influence of employees in individual departments on the decisions made. Staying in this specific clinch between the director and the organizer, theatre employees become hostages whose interests are pushed to the background in the context of implementing specific artistic programs implemented by the director and the theatre's social goals as a cultural institution.¹⁶ This applies in particular to employees of administrative and technical departments, whose agency in this respect, although extremely significant, was and is rarely noticed. The field in which the struggle for recognition of this group's agency takes place is the organization and work culture in an institution which not only performs an important social mission, but also allows its employees to obtain financial resources necessary to meet their life's needs.

¹⁵ In 2019, the director of the Bagatela Theatre in Kraków was accused of violating employee rights and abusing his position to commit sexual misconduct. These abuses had persisted in the theatre since 2009 and were reported by members of the artistic ensemble. As a result of the allegations, the director was dismissed and charged in the district court. Although the trial began in 2021, it has not yet concluded. In 2021, the director of TR [Rozmaitości Theatre] in Warszawa was accused of financial mismanagement, workplace abuse, and poor employee treatment, which led the institution into a serious crisis. Following an audit, the director resigned. The directorship of Monika Strzępka at Dramatyczny Theatre also ended amid scandal. She had co-led the theatre with a collective from 2022 to 2024. Accused by staff of mobbing and abuse, she was removed by the theatre's organizer to, as stated in the rationale, "prevent further institutional chaos and ensure that programmatic goals were met." Strzępka appealed the decision in court, and at the first hearing, a settlement was reached between her and the municipally-run theatre.

¹⁶ See KWAŚNIEWSKA, M. *Aktor w klinczu relacji folwarcznych* [The Actor in the Clinch of Farm Relations]. In *Polish Theatre Journal*, 2015, No. 1, pp. 1–34.

In the conducted interviews the issue of wages and working hours was most frequently raised. The respondents drew attention to the management's disregard for their efforts to obtain due wages or increase their earnings. This was related to the still lingering belief that working in the theatre is prestigious, as it allows for direct contact with art and artists, and that it is inappropriate for cultured people to ask for money and it shows an attitude of entitlement. And yet, as it resulted from the research on the level of wages and conditions of employment in Warsaw's public cultural institutions conducted by members of the All-Poland Trade Union Worker's Initiative (OZZIP/Inicjatywa Pracownicza) at Warsaw's cultural institutions in 2019, employees of the sector of culture were one of the lowest-earning professional groups in Poland.¹⁷ These findings were confirmed by the previously mentioned survey conducted by Dorota Ilczuk and her team on the population of theatre employees throughout the country. The survey shows that the average income in 2023 amounted to PLN 8,134 (EUR 1,936), although the median was much lower, at PLN 5,050 (approx. EUR 1,202), which means that half of the respondents achieved lower and half higher income than this amount.¹⁸ The financial situation was the best in the artistic team, where the median was PLN 1,000 (approx. EUR 238) higher, compared with the administrative and technical team.¹⁹ Statistically, women's income was lower by PLN 913 (approx. EUR 217) on average, and the median in this research group was PLN 500 lower (approx. EUR 119). The lowest median was in the salaries of young employees, known as Generation Z, and amounted to PLN 4,300 (approx. EUR 1,023).²⁰

As shown in our research, low wages do not allow people from the province to maintain themselves in the capital city or in larger urban centres, who are forced to rent an apartment and support their families, and they also pose a problem in obtaining a loan. The level of wages, especially of administrative and technical staff, lower than the minimum national average is a source of frustration and often results in resignation from work in theatre institutions, despite their passion and fascination with the art of theatre. In order to support themselves many specialists employed full-time (sound engineers, lighting technicians, stage managers), people with university degrees (theatrolologists, sociologists, graduates of culture management) are forced to take on an additional job outside the theatre. Also, they get involved in better-paid projects, although they do not necessarily guarantee a steady

17 All-Poland Trade Union Workers' Initiative report: *Pełna kultura – puste konta*. Warsaw, 2019. [online]. [cit. 12 April 2025]. Available at: <https://www.ozzip.pl/dla-mediow/item/2555-publikacja-raportu-pelna-kulturapuste-konta>. As it was written: "(...) the average median from individual public cultural institutions in 2018 in Warsaw amounted to PLN 4,536 gross [approx. EUR 1,066]. PLN 3,227 net [approx. EUR 758] – this is how much or less 50% of us earn, provided we are employed under an employment contract. At the same time, the median salary in Warsaw was PLN 6,100 gross! [approx. EUR 1,433 – exchange rate from day 01.09.2025]."

18 ILCZUK, D. – KARPIŃSKA, A. – MAJEWSKI, P. – PŁOSKI, P. – SZCZEBLEWSKA, A. *Scena polska 2024: Pracując w teatrze. Raport z badań. Badanie sytuacji zawodowej pracowników i pracowników teatru w Polsce w nowej, pocovidowej odsłonie*. Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2025, p. 77.

19 Ibid., p. 79.

20 Ibid., p. 78.

income. As the survey shows, the largest number (as many as 20%) of respondents from the artistic team admit to doing additional artistic work outside the theatre as their second source of income. An additional source of income outside the theatre is sought by 15.6% of employees from technical teams and 10.6% from administrative teams.²¹ The disproportion between the artistic and administrative team results not only from entrepreneurship of artists, but above all from the administrative employees' lesser time management. The latter sign employment contracts, according to which they must be available for eight and sometimes more hours a day (with a forty-hour working week).

Theatre is often perceived as the so-called peaceful job, which provides more entrepreneurial people with a minimum wage and paid contributions, such as pension, health and social insurance, allowing them to seek additional income outside the institution, often by performing occasional work. However, such an approach does not compensate employees for other needs, such as the need for self-development and satisfaction from work performed in the form of fair payment, as well as other forms of recognition and appreciation of theatre employees and their involvement in the development of this institution. Such crisis is additionally deepened by the attitude of the management, which ignores employees of departments other than the artistic one in the payment of overdue pay rises. The financial means granted for this purpose by the organizer are arbitrarily allocated to cover various deficits of the theatre or used to finance implementation of some more prestigious projects. The lack of respect of the management for the employees is demonstrated in other ways, for example through disapproval of their professional activity outside their place of employment and outside their working hours, for instance during holidays. According to the interviewees, such activity is frowned upon and is considered by the management as betrayal, which makes them feel that their right to freedom and self-determination is being restricted. Treated as the "property" of their own theatre, they feel objectified. There are directors who claim that employees should know their place. Besides, additional activities undertaken by theatre employees are interpreted, often with good reason, as a threat to their effective performance of work in the institution.

The management's concerns about lower work efficiency resulting from the fact that a number of employees undertake additional assignments are related to work schedules which are difficult to structure and standardize, as well as varied working hours of various teams. While the administrative team usually works from 8:00 to 4:00pm, the artistic team usually works in a split-time system, from 10:00am to 2:00pm and from 6:00pm to 10:00pm. The technical team's situation is unique in a sense that employees from this department sometimes work in a split-time system (like actors), especially in the period preceding the premiere, and sometimes like administrative employees, with shifted working hours from 2:00pm to 10:00pm, if there is a performance in the evening. Some theatres introduced task-based working hours, which allows technical employees to use their time more flexibly and adapt

²¹ Ibid., p. 82.

it to the tasks they perform. Time commitment in work and the resulting workload were important issues also raised in the interviews. Most respondents attributed work overload to the availability required by the management and the expectation that in the period preceding the premiere or in connection with the organization of an important event, e.g. a festival or other events, they would work overtime, sacrificing their private time.

The last issue which emerged from the interviews concerned working conditions and work satisfaction. The interviewees pointed out that working in a theatre is extremely absorbing and mentally burdensome. That is why it requires proper mental hygiene and sufficient time to rest, although days off during the most productive period in the theatre are extremely rare. Employees from various departments complained about being overworked and feeling burnt out, which resulted from an excessive number of premieres and additional cultural events. They found it frustrating not to be able to enjoy a premiere afterwards, because one is already in the process of working on another one. Many theatre people perceived their work as fulfilment of their passion, without which working in the theatre for many years would not be possible, primarily due to a huge time commitment and relatively low earnings. For many, recognition and appreciation from the theatre director, stage director or other producers, as well as from the audience, were just as important as financial gratification. Recognition of effective task performance, appreciation of their commitment by the management, possibility of expressing constructive criticism from the management and the employees alike, as well as a sense of security were considered to be very important elements which affect the level of job satisfaction. The most difficult situations at work were associated by our interviewees with an experience of humiliation from the institution's managers, direct superiors or directors. Lack of good communication with an efficient flow of information and working under great time pressure were identified as the most important factors causing a conflict. They noticed the hierarchy of a theatre, considering it beneficial in a situation when it facilitated a decision-making process. Representatives of the younger generation seemed more interested in teamwork and a flattened organizational structure of a theatre, simultaneously declaring that they were willing to earn less provided that the atmosphere at work was good.

NEW PRINCIPLES IN OLD INSTITUTIONS

Trade unions, which operate in Poland today under the *Act of 23 May 1991 on Trade Unions*, began to demand more subjective treatment of employees by management staff. In accordance with this act, these voluntary and self-governing workers' organizations established to represent and defend workers' rights and their professional and social interests were also established in theatres.²² As our research

²² The rich tradition of trade unions established among people of the stage and entertainment, as well as the history of the trade union movement has been discussed in the article GŁOWACKA A. – FOX, D. Związki zawodowe i stowarzyszenia twórcze w polskim teatrze. In *Czas Kultury*, 2021, Vol. XXXVII, No. 4, p. 65–75.

shows, currently theatre employees belong primarily to three trade unions. The first one is ZASP [Związek Artystów Scen Polskich – Union of Polish Stage Artists], which has a long tradition and brings together actors, the second one is NSZZ Solidarność, whose units were established in many theatres in the 1990s as a result of social enthusiasm for an independent trade union organization, as well as the need to manifest an ideological attitude. The third, much younger, is Ogólnopolski Związek Zawodowy Inicjatywa Pracownicza [All-Poland Trade Union Workers' Initiative], which, although it was founded in 2004 by employees of Zakłady Hipolita Cegielskiego in Poznań and representatives of local social movements, over time it also gained popularity among employees of various industries, including employees of artistic institutions.

In the first decade of 2020, the activity of unions in theatre institutions gradually decreased. Poorly identified by employees, they were noticed and used only in a serious crisis, such as conflicts between the theatre team and the director, in the case of layoffs or when a new director was elected. However, these were occasional situations. In general, union membership was rather formal in nature. Trade unions did not enjoy great recognition among theatre employees, which could have stemmed from the feeling that they had little influence on real change in the organization of work in a theatre as an institution. They were perceived rather as a representation of a limited group taking care of their own interests or even as an organization representing the interests of the chairman of the union, and not as a body looking after all employees' interest. As it resulted from research on the professional situation of theatre employees published in the form of a report in the union magazine "Scena Polska" in 1924, this situation did not improve significantly. Only 21.9% of those employed in theatres in the administrative and technical departments declared trade union membership, slightly more, i.e. 39.2% of employees from the artistic team declared trade union membership, primarily in the artists' association (ZASP) and the organization for collective management of copyrights, which plays a significant role in their career and protection of their rights.²³

However, our interviews show that for several years, thanks to young employees, the union movement in theatres seems to have been reviving, and importantly, despite resistance from some managements who perceive the union's activity as a threat to their position in the theatre, an act of undermining their authority or an attempt to disorganize work²⁴ ("Why reach for a tool like some capitalist, resistance tool? Here we create art together and it's great") [D_3_pt_zz_a_F].²⁵ This perception of the theatre as

²³ ILCZUK, D. – KARPIŃSKA, A. – MAJEWSKI, P. – PŁOSKI, P. – SZCZEBLEWSKA, A. *Scena polska 2024: Pracując w teatrze. Raport z badań. Badanie sytuacji zawodowej pracowników i pracowników teatru w Polsce w nowej, pocovidowej odświeżeniu*, pp. 67–69. It should be added that a certain group of respondents refused to answer the question about trade union membership (approx. 3%), which may indicate a lack of interest in this type of activity or a lack of belief in its meaning and effectiveness.

²⁴ This is evidenced by the atmosphere of fear reported by respondents which accompanied the founders of the trade union, regarding possible consequences from the management.

²⁵ In square brackets, after the quotes, we include the speaker's code.

a group of people connected by a jointly implemented mission and thinking about the theatre staff as a family could have inhibited grassroots activities: "Because if you are in a family and a community, then what's the point?" [D_3_pt_zz_a_F]. Paradoxically, however, such an approach by the management mobilized the employees to self-organize and consciously use the union to co-decide about the work culture in the theatre and counteract abuse and manipulation. The increase in employees' involvement in previously established unions, thanks to the influx of young, energetic people, aware of their rights, familiar with the Labour Code and other documents normalizing the principles of work, not attached to traditional styles of work in the theatre,²⁶ clearly seems to initiate a real change, which should be associated with the revolution of dignity: the need for agency and respect for each employee. The category of a mythological theatre "family" has been replaced by the category of a team of people with different competences and scopes of duties, represented by the union, established to negotiate working conditions to meet the interests of all and enable the combination of work efficiency with the well-being of all theatre employees, taking into account the specificity of their work in particular positions.

As it resulted from a number of interviews, various unions operating in the theatre today have begun to cooperate closely, not only recognizing the principle of strength in unity as true, but also recognizing the possibility of sharing experiences. Currently, there is a clear tendency to include employees from different departments in the structures of one union, most often under the banner of the All-Poland Trade Union Worker's Initiative (OZZIP/Inicjatywa Pracownicza). Importantly, despite having Stowarzyszenie Artystów Polskich [Polish Artists Association] membership, actors also become increasingly involved in the activities of the union operating in their workplace, which strengthens the negotiating position of technical and administrative employees, but also consolidates the staff, filling the quite clearly marked gap between the artistic team and the rest of employees. Team-building activities initiated by the management, assuming various forms ranging from occasional meetings, breakfasts eaten together²⁷ to summaries of the season, often become an appearance of community, seen as a representation rather than real presence. Formalness maintains relations of power and dependence rather than abolishes them. It is rather the grassroots initiatives of trade unionists that actually engage employees, who can articulate their problems in formal meetings, confront different points of view on ongoing matters at work and look at their own work position from a distance.²⁸ The often faulty system of information flow in a theatre and problems with

26 As one of the young union activists says: "We trained very hard and started educating ourselves. And the actors too. And it simply turned out that the things we were used to – these are not normal working conditions, despite the great results and various benefits that resulted from it, prestigious ones, that you travel or do great theatre and great art that is well appreciated, however, the end does not justify the means."

27 "Common breakfasts not for everyone: "that is, not all employee groups are taken into account and this is an obstacle. The editors have to work then." [D_3_pa_a_F].

28 "When we started talking about what our work looked like and everyone from their perspective told me about the same thing, about the same show, suddenly our eyes were opened to the fact that it's not super easy in terms of editing.

communication between employees of different departments tend to be diagnosed in this way and encourages efforts to change the work organization.

Many trade unions operating in the theatre today are very active not only in a crisis, but also in monitoring current work in theatres in order to improve their organization and transparency of principles and norms adopted. They communicate with the management in writing and force the management to define its position, which is the basis for further negotiations. Moreover, they want to have a real impact on stabilizing the situation of employees, they get involved in drafting work regulations and undertake salary negotiations not only with the management, but also with the organizer. A spectacular achievement of the unions was persuading the organizer to specify in the funds allocated to the theatre a part dedicated exclusively to employee salaries. Our interviewees considered this a great success of the unions, which could encourage more intensive work within the union in the future, as it confirmed their agency. At the same time, they expressed hope that the unions whose members they are or are going to be will not limit themselves to intervening in crises or incidents, but will be careful observers of the work organization, negotiating conditions favourable to the employees, not only those they represent, but also for the entire team, including non-members of the unions, enforcing respect for each employee regardless of their place in the hierarchical structure.

As indicated by some respondents, the cooperation between the union and the management has been upgraded to a higher level. It does not only consist in informing the trade unions about the key foundations of the institution's operation formulated in the relevant documents, such as the statute or work regulations, which must gain the union's acceptance required by law, or in consulting on possible employee dismissals. Such cooperation also concerns the use of proposals formulated by the union to improve work in the theatre and make it satisfactory also for non-artistic employees, in such a way as to curb their professional burnout and give them a sense of security.

CONCLUSION. NEW PRACTICES

Our interviews of theatre employees and union representatives confirm that arts institutions need systemic changes, both at the legislative level and in management issues. In anticipation of systemic changes in the *Act of 25 October 1991 on the Organization and Conduct of Cultural Activities* solutions have already appeared to counteract abuse and negligence in the field of occupational hygiene, which can be described as reparative practices. These include the introduction of employee trust persons in theatres, to whom irregularities can be reported, anti-mobbing committees, codes of ethics, contracts signed by artistic employees with production teams

It seemed to us that colleagues come for three hours and put on a show and then they have nothing to do. The actors thought – What's the problem? Because if they need rehearsals, colleagues can put up the set in half an hour. So it's great that we started talking to each other in these relationships, because we were getting contradictory messages from the management." [D_3_pa_a_F].

(director, set designer, costume designer, choreographer, etc.). Work regulations are being reviewed in consultation with trade unions, and employees are being included in the talks on working conditions. The manager-theatre director model, where one person fulfils both roles, is slowly being abandoned and new solutions in the field of managing the theatre as an institution are being sought. Strategies developed by external experts turn out to be difficult to implement in the institution. Perhaps the change should be provoked from the bottom up by theatre employees themselves, who therefore know their workplace best. The empowerment of employees is associated with their taking on part of the responsibility for the organization of work in the institution as a consequence of the ongoing revolution of dignity.

This research was funded in whole by National Science Centre, Poland, Grant No. 2021/43/D/HS2/01722. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright license to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission.

LITERATURE

- Act of 25 October 1991 on the organization and conduct of cultural activities [consolidated text]. In *Journal of Laws*, 1991, No. 114, item 493.
- BYRSKA, Olga. *Rzemieślnicy teatralni 2013. Raport Instytutu Teatralnego im. Z. Raszewskiego*. Warszawa, 2013. [online]. Available at: <https://www.instytut-teatralny.pl/dzialalnosc/raporty-i-badania/rzemieslnicy-teatralni-2013-raport-instytutu-teatralnego/>.
- GERLICH, Julia – JARZMUS, Krzysztof. "Być albo nie być". *Pracowniczk i pracownicy polskich instytucji artystycznych wobec zagrożenia mobbingiem, molestowaniem i molestowaniem seksualnym. Raport z badań. Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka* ["To Be or Not to Be" – Employees of Polish Art Institutions and the Threat of Mobbing, Harassment, and Sexual Harassment. HFHR report], 2020. <https://hfhr.pl/publikacje/-byc-albo-nie-byc-pracowniczki-i-pracownicy-polskich-instytucji-artystycznych-wobec-269874433>.
- CHARMAZ, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks : Sage Publications, 2006. 208 p. ISBN 10-076-19-7352-4.
- DZIECIUCHOWICZ, Iga. *Teatr. Rodzina patologiczna*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Agora, 2025. 472 p. ISBN 978-83-8380-211-4.
- HADLEY, Steven. *Audience Development and Cultural Policy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 259 p. ISBN 978-3-030-62969-4.
- ILCZUK, Dorota – KARPIŃSKA, Anna – MAJEWSKI, Piotr – PŁOSKI, Paweł – SZCZEBLEWSKA, Anna. *Scena polska 2024: Pracując w teatrze. Raport z badań. Badanie sytuacji zawodowej pracownic i pracowników teatru w Polsce w nowej, pocovidowej odsłonie* [Scena Polska 2024: Working in the Theatre. Research Report.]. Warszawa : Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2025. 225 p. [online]. Available at: <https://www.instytut-teatralny.pl/dzialalnosc/raporty-i-badania/scena-polska-2024-pracujac-w-teatrze-raport-z-badan/>.
- KEIL, Marta. Do czego jest nam dzisiaj potrzebna krytyka instytucjonalna? In *Polish Theatre Journal*, 2015, No. 1. 10 p. ISSN 2451-2966.
- KLAJĆ, Dragan. *Gra w nowych dekoracjach. Teatr publiczny pomiędzy rynkiem a demokracją*. Translator Edyta Kubikowska. Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego,

- Konfrontacje Teatralne/Centrum Kultury w Lublinie, 2014 [*Resetting the Stage: Public Theatre between the Market and Democracy*. Bristol : Intellect, 2012]. 179 p. ISBN 978-83-63276-03-4.
- KUNST, Bojana, *Artysta w pracy. O pokrewieństwach sztuki i kapitalizmu*. Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Konfrontacje Teatralne/Centrum Kultury w Lublinie, 2016 [*Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism*. Zero Books, 2015]. 160 p. ISBN 978-83-63276-64-5.
- KWAŚNIEWSKA, Monika. The actor in the clinch of farm relations. In *Polish Theatre Journal*, 2015, No. 1, pp. 1–34. ISSN 2451-2966.
- KWAŚNIEWSKA, Monika. *Między hierarchią a anarchią. Teatr-instytucja-krytyka*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019. 340 p. ISBN 9788323346470.
- Ludzie teatru. In *Notatnik Teatralny*, 2024, No. 94. 224 p.
- SCHMIDT, Thomas. *Macht und Struktur*. Wiesbaden : Springer VS, 2019. 444 p. ISBN 9783658264505.
- SCHMIDT, Thomas. *Theater, Krise und Reform. Eine Kritik des deutsche Theatersystem*. Wiesbaden : Springer VS, 2016. 465 p. ISBN 9783658029104.
- SMOLARSKA, Zofia. *Ekologie teatru. Analiza relacyjna instytucji teatru z perspektywy rzemieślników teatralnych*. [Ecologies of Theatre: Relational Analysis of Publicly Funded Theatres from the Craftsmen's Perspective]. [Doctoral Thesis]. Warsaw : Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2020. 392 p.
- The All-Poland Trade Union Workers' Initiative [Inicjatywa Pracownicza] report: *Pełna kultura – puste konta*. Warsaw, 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://www.ozzip.pl/dla-mediow/item/2555-publikacja-raportu-pelna-kulturapuste-konta>.

Aneta Głowacka
University of Silesia in Katowice
Faculty of Humanities
Uniwersytecka 4
40-007 Katowice
Poland
E-mail: aneta.glowacka@us.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-4622-6315

Dorota Fox
University of Silesia in Katowice
Faculty of Humanities
Uniwersytecka 4
40-007 Katowice
Poland
E-mail: dorota.fox@us.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-6766-4165