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# Contemporary Political Theatre in Poland: From Criticism to Commitment

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**Abstract:** Politically engaged theatre has a long tradition in Poland, and today this kind of theatre is an important artistic stream. The first generation of artists whose debuts were after 1989 dealt with the aftermath of a number of political, social and economic changes on the topic of morality, rather than with analysing and assessing political decisions and the shape of democracy in Poland. At the beginning of the 21st century, there were artistic debuts for Monika Strzępka and Jan Klata, who have set the course of political theatre in Poland. The theatre proposed by Strzępka and Klata was primarily critical of the economic and political system, dealing with Polish myths and fantasies, often used in political games.

Another stream of political theatre, which has become increasingly important, is attempting to influence the shape of society. Artists who had been working in the last three years in Teatr Polski w Bydgoszczy [Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz] (Bartosz Frąckowiak, Paweł Wodziński) and cooperating with various institutions (Wiktor Rubin), ask questions about the shape of democracy in Poland, civic engagement, and solidarity in their performances. They often provoke spectators during their performances to express their views and make decisions. This article discusses contemporary political theatre in Poland, and in particular its roots, transformations, and variations.

**Keywords:** Monika Strzępka, Jan Klata, Wiktor Rubin, Marta Górnicka, contemporary Polish theatre, political theatre, socially-engaged art

Political theatre in Poland has a long tradition, although in the past it was primarily associated with the names of distinguished playwrights and directors. It was only at the beginning of the 21st century that this type of theatre evolved into a wider stream of artistic exploration. According to Patrice Pavis, theatre is political in two ways. Firstly, as a tool of social impact, and in this sense every kind of theatre is political. Secondly, it is political when it becomes involved in political actions through its performances, and thus it is ideological in its programme. The stage is then considered to be a place of human intervention and indirectly becomes a model of the world's transfor-

mation by man.<sup>1</sup> Paweł Mościcki, a Polish philosopher, essayist, and translator, distinguishes three types of relations between art and politics, which are also three types of artists' reaction to the political reality. This, in turn, is understood as the exercise of power by a certain group of people in a specific historical and political context as well as a "conceptual frame and conditions for the functioning of politics"<sup>2</sup>. The first of the strategies listed by Mościcki is a defensive reaction, when artists avoid politics, considering it as morally evil. They are then more interested in general human issues: moral or existential rather than social ones. They create performances in isolation from the social context, trying to break away from the rules of politics. The other two types are quite similar to each other and are related to the need to speak on issues affected by politics. Engaged art breaks with the idea of "art for art's sake", recognizing the necessity of direct participation in the public space; it enters discussions and disputes, thus crossing "the border which separates artistic practices from other social practices, fully and responsibly integrating art with public space"<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, engaging art, derived from the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, assumes that "there is a structural homology between the field of art and the field of politics"<sup>4</sup>. Political effects are triggered by means of an artistic revolution. A change of the artistic language used to talk about reality can lead to a change in the perception of this reality. While engaged art speaks out on old issues, engaging art tries to seek and invent new division lines and enter new areas. Its task is also to question the limits of art itself.<sup>5</sup>

Mościcki's diagnosis in a sense coincides with the typology of Jacques Rancière, who in *The Emancipated Spectator* makes references to two models of theatre: one is theatre which continues Bertold Brecht's line dealing with criticism of the dominant political, economic, and artistic system. It is theatre which reconstructs and recreates phenomena to subject them to critical reflection. The other model originates from Antonin Artaud's art and has the ambition to engage the viewer in changing the existing social,

1 PAVIS, P. *Słownik terminów teatralnych*. (Ed. and translation Sławomir Świontek). Wrocław ; Warszawa ; Kraków : Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2002, p. 533.

2 MOŚCICKI, P. Zaangażowanie i autonomia teatru. In MOŚCICKI, P. *Polityka teatru. Eseje o sztuce angażującej*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2008, p. 17.

3 Ibid, pp. 22–24.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

political, and artistic order.<sup>6</sup> It is theatre which interacts with the viewer. By taking advantage of this quality of art which consists in articulating a political field closely related to the existence of the community<sup>7</sup>, it interferes in the emergence of potential models of common realities. It makes visible what was invisible and gives voice to those who have been deprived of it. According to Rancière, “the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular”<sup>8</sup>. A similar view is shared by Bojana Kunst, a Slovenian philosopher and theatre theorist, who believes that art “expresses its relationships with politics, creating models of society and community in the process of active participation and interaction, offering such kinds of encounters that constantly encourage various forms of action”<sup>9</sup>. Theatrical practice shows that authors who deal with political theatre usually oscillate between these different models. They use these models each time to varying degrees, which results in a diversity of forms of political theatre in Poland. However, it is hard not to notice the transformation of this theatre, the growing popularity of some trends and the extinction of others. On the one hand, it is related to the emergence of successive generations of artists and the change in the language of theatre, its aesthetics, themes, and reference points, including artistic ones. On the other hand, it is linked to the changing political situation of the country and the awareness of society, and artists ultimately become part of it.

Theatrical artists who debuted after 1989 did not immediately become interested in politics as material for the stage, understood both in a traditional way as a pursuit to exercise and maintain power and as a certain logic of social life. Krystyna Duniec and Joanna Krakowska diagnosed this situation in the following way:

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6 RANCIÈRE, J. Widz wyemancypowany. Translation Adam Ostolski. In *Krytyka Polityczna*, 2007, No. 13, p. 313.

7 RANCIÈRE, J. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Hoboken, NJ : John Wiley & Sons, 2009, pp. 23–26.

8 Ibid, p. 25.

9 KUNST, B. *Artysta w pracy. O pokrewieństwach sztuki i kapitalizmu*. Translation Pola Sobaś-Mikołajczyk, Dominika Gajewska, Joanna Jopek. Warszawa ; Lublin : Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Konfrontacje Teatralne / Centrum Kultury w Lublinie, 2016, p. 20.

“Celebration of the consensus [primarily in politics and the public debate after 1989], the rhetoric of there-being-no- alternative in the sphere of economy, and at the same time bringing ideological disputes to common sense, challenging the freaks, led to the situation where for at least a few years the basic territories of political and ideological expansion, such as history and historical settlements, national identity, social and economic order, were excluded from serious reflection and social debate.”<sup>10</sup>

The first generation of new theatre (new in terms of aesthetics and ideology) with Anna Augustynowicz (b. 1959), Grzegorz Jarzyna (b. 1968), Krzysztof Warlikowski (b.1962), Paweł Łysak (b. 1964) in collaboration with Paweł Wodziński (b. 1967), and others dealt with the aftermath of a number of political, social, and economic changes in the area of morality, rather than with analysing and assessing political decisions and the shape of democracy in Poland. As a result, among various topics discussed in this theatre there were initially issues related to the body, gender, and sexuality, whose forefront was visual and critical art of the 1990s (with Paweł Althamer, Katarzyna Kozyra, Alicja Żebrowska, Artur Żmijewski and others) as well as the atrophy of interpersonal relationships and the sense of hopelessness and loneliness in a big city.

This was probably because, as Krystian Lupa rightly pointed out, reality forced young artists to look for a new language of theatre “in the areas not only depleted but shameful. (...) Conventions of psychological theatre which show a man closed in the sphere of official expressions lost their credibility.” Hence the need to penetrate marginal human experiences, where, as it turned out, the fears were accumulating and did not only concern marginal social groups. Such a quest made it possible to “anew, almost anthropologically, convince ourselves that what we know about man from nineteenth-century tradition ceases to suffice. (...) This is accompanied by trust in what happens in the body”.<sup>11</sup> It soon became evident that at the turn of the century in Poland, the “Private is political” slogan by American feminists from the 1960s was highly relevant, especially since the works of artists who were

10 DUNIEC, K. – KRAKOWSKA, J. *Soc, sex i historia*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014, p. 232.

11 LUPA, K. Trzeba kondycji wariata. [Interview by Maryla Zielińska]. In *Teatr*, 2000, No. 9. Quote in: WOŹNICKA, J. Między przyswojeniem a odrzuceniem. In *20-lecie. Teatr polski po 1989*. (Eds. Dorota Jarzabek, Marcin Kościelniak, Grzegorz Niziołek). Kraków : Korporeacja Ha!Art ; UJ, PWST, 2010, p. 382.

dealing with issues related to corporality, customs, and religion began to be subjected to various pressures and forms of censorship. Catholic and right-wing activists demanded the closing of the exhibition, the cancellation of the premiere, and the removal of the show from the playbill<sup>12</sup>, trying to push “controversial” content in the public sphere such as the emancipation of women and homosexuals, the experiences of drug addicts and those suffering from mental illness, and themes of Catholicism’s influence on symbolic space into the void. This also caused tensions in critics’ assessments. When analysing the reception of Krzysztof Warlikowski’s performances from that period, Joanna Woźnicka wrote:

“On one side, there stood defenders of tradition and morals, often using the Catholic religion as the most important criterion that defines social reality, connected sometimes with right-wing political groups; on the other side there were supporters of liberal society, dealing with issues such as gender balance, respect for sexual and ethnic minorities, freedom of expression of different beliefs, and other principles of an open society.”<sup>13</sup>

For quite a long time, artists avoided direct involvement in politics and commenting on the stage of what was happening in the public sphere despite the fact that their performances were revealing fields of tension present in social life and specifically at the intersection of private life and the public sphere. It was only after a while, as new dramaturgy with the art of Paweł Demirski, Dorota Masłowska, and Przemysław Wojcieszek (a director and screenwriter) came along, that theatre became interested in, for example, the victims of political transformation, that is, inhabitants of small towns and post-state farm villages, secret abortions, and homelessness, or in speaking on behalf of those excluded by the state system. This was the time of the first resounding performances of Jan Klata (*Rewizor* [The Government Inspector] based on the play by Nikolai Gogol, 2003) and Maja Kleczewska (*Czyż nie dobija się koni?* [They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?], based on the text by Horace McCoy, 2003), which were both staged in the Teatr Dramatyczny im.

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12 A register of acts of censorship in Poland covering the years 1999 to 2006 was prepared, among others, by Jarosław Miñałto. See MINAŁTO, J. Kronika wypadków cenzorskich. Ostatnie lata. In *Notatnik Teatralny*, 2006, No. 39–40.

13 WOŹNICKA, J. Między przyswojeniem a odrzuceniem. In *20-lecie. Teatr polski po 1989*, p. 392.

Jerzego Szaniawskiego w Wałbrzychu [Jerzy Szaniawski Drama Theatre in Wałbrzych], which soon became one of the most interesting theatres in Poland. At the same time at the Teatr Wybrzeże w Gdańsku [Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk], under the management of Maciej Nowak, Szybki Teatr Miejski [The Rapid City Theatre] started its activities. The theatre's creator and protector was Paweł Demirski, then a novice playwright who, in collaboration with other authors, prepared a series of documentary performances, raising, for example, the sensitive issue of the presence of Polish soldiers in Iraq, e.g. *Padnij!* [Get Down!] (2004). Demirski wrote other texts in a similar spirit, including *From Poland with Love* (2005) about Polish economic emigration to Great Britain or *Wałęsa. Historia wesola, a ogromnie przez to smutna* [Walesa. A Happy Story, Which is Why It's an Extremely Sad One] (2005) constructed on the basis of talks with the first leader of the Solidarity movement. It was owing to these activities that the theatre gained its clearly leftist face, although at that time its role was to give a voice to those excluded from the public debate rather than strive to transform the system of social relations.

Monika Strzępka's big entrance into theatre in 2007 as part of a duo with Paweł Demirski, who is a playwright, started a new and dynamic course of political theatre in Poland. Their socially and politically engaged performances presented a criticism of neo-liberalism in the sphere of politics and economics, because the artists took the side of those who did not benefit from the changes after 1989 (*Diamenty to węgiel, który wziął się do roboty* [Diamonds Are the Coal Which Got Down to Work], Jerzy Szaniawski Drama Theatre in Wałbrzych, 2008). They criticized the political and artistic elites for renouncing Solidarity's ideals (*Był sobie Andrzej, Andrzej, Andrzej i Andrzej* [There was Andrzej, Andrzej, Andrzej and Andrzej] in Jerzy Szaniawski Drama Theatre, 2010), the callousness of free-market mechanisms, and the social consequences of the commercialization of life (*Courtney Love*, Teatr Polski we Wrocławiu [Polski Theatre in Wrocław], 2012). Ultimately they tackled identity narratives and the myths of Polishness, proving that collectively a maintained imagery of a heroic past is false (*Dziady. Ekshumacja* [Forefathers' Eve: The Exhumation], Polski Theatre in Wrocław, 2007; *Był sobie Polak, Polak, Polak i diabeł* [There was a Pole, Pole, Pole, and a Devil], Jerzy Szaniawski Drama Theatre in Wałbrzych, 2007). Since their first joint performance of *Dziady. Ekshumacja*, they have treated the theatre as a place for social debate, where sensitive topics are discussed, where obvious judgments and superstitions are undermined, and where you ask questions about the condition of the state. This question also appears in one of their

recent performances, namely in *K.* in Teatr Polski w Poznaniu [Polski Theatre in Poznań] (2017), in which they depict Poland under the rule of Jarosław Kaczyński. The performance does not, however, provide solutions on how to deal with the populist party currently ruling the country. It is rather an expression of civic helplessness and disappointment with the Polish political class. This does not mean that the duo does not believe in the power of collective action and interpersonal solidarity. Such faith was expressed, for example, in the performances of *O dobru* [On Good] (Jerzy Szaniawski Drama Theatre in Wałbrzych, 2012) and *Triumf woli* [The Triumph of Will] (Narodowy Stary Teatr w Krakowie [National Stary Theatre in Kraków], 2016), and it was their faith in the possibility of society uniting in the defence of common values and interests.

Jan Klata accompanied Strzępka and Demirski in this disarming of community-creating narrations and symbols, and in tracking our national obsessions and complexes. He turned parts of our national mythology and history inside out. In *H.*, based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk, 2004), he dealt with the myth of the Solidarity movement and criticized the elites who took power after 1989 (the performance was staged at the Gdańsk Shipyard, where the Solidarity Independent Self-Governing Union was formed). The reflections on power and history became the subject of one of his best performances, *Sprawa Dantona* [Danton's Case], based on a play by Stanisława Przybyszewska (Polski Theatre in Wrocław, 2008), in which the French Revolution became the basis for a reflection on the Polish transformation after 1989. In *Trylogia* [Trilogy], based on the novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz (National Stary Theatre in Kraków, 2009), he pierced a balloon with the name "Polish heroism" on it. In turn, it was *Transfer!* (2006) performed by the Wrocławski Teatr Współczesny [Współczesny Theatre in Wrocław] that launched a debate about the Polish-German past. By inviting natural home-grown actors, that is, current and former inhabitants of Wrocław (before the Second World War the city lay within the borders of the German state), who then performed together with professional actors, Klata gave a voice to ordinary people and their experience of the war, which had until then been overlooked in historical narrations. As boldly as he did with history and national mythology, he also tackled the Catholic Church and Catholicism, criticizing Polish society for its folk rites and religious superficiality (*Lochy Watykanu* [Dungeons of the Vatican], Współczesny Theatre in Wrocław, 2004). Finally, he made an analysis of the national community, showing that it was now lethargic; dreaming about the past, it is detaching



itself from the present, and the symbols around which it builds its narratives are merely an empty frame (*Wesele* [The Wedding], National Stary Theatre in Kraków, 2017).

Over time, theatre, which at the beginning of the 21st century was engaged and critical, slowed down. Critics complained that artists had entrenched themselves without provoking social debate. In addition, the style of these performances, which were once considered iconoclastic through a violation of the principles of good taste and theatre conventions regarded as high art, became conventional. Both Strzępka and Demirski, as well as Klata, are considered today to be classic personalities of Polish theatre. The temperature of emotions on the border of theatre and public life has only recently been raised by *Kłątwa* [The Curse] based on the themes of Stanisław Wyspiański's drama and directed by Oliver Frlić (2017). By tackling the problem of the abuse of power by the Catholic Church in Poland, its ignorance of paedophilia among the clergy, the instrumental use of religion for its own interest, and the violation of women's rights, the performance has become a source of outrage among right-wing journalists and politicians as well as those who are involved in the radical right-wing or religious organizations. It was also used by the ruling party in their political and ideological struggle. Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice's] party members unlawfully demanded the right to remove Paweł Łysak from the position of director of the Teatr Powszechny [Powszechny Theatre] and the Mayor of Warsaw, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, from her post. The city is the theatre's organizer, covering its fixed costs and financing its artistic activity. The attack on Gronkiewicz – Waltz was motivated mostly politically since she is a member of the Platforma Obywatelska [Civic Platform], which is the largest opposition party. What is certainly a new quality in the Polish theatrical life of recent years is the fact that in the case of *Kłątwa*, art – just as it was previously the case with critical art – went beyond the walls of theatre. The performance was the most-discussed premiere of the season. Moreover, even people who did not see it at least spoke about it.<sup>14</sup> In the name of the defence of religious sentiments (there is fairly curious and controversial Article 196<sup>15</sup> in the Polish

14 The wide field of influence of *Kłątwa* (social, political, and artistic) is shown in the number of *Notatnik Teatralny* devoted to this performance. See *Notatnik Teatralny*, 2017, Nos. 84 –85.

15 *Ustawa z dnia 6 czerwca 1997. Kodeks Karny* [The Act of June 6, 1997. Penal Code]. [cit. 11. 5. 2018]. Available at: <http://prawo.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19970880553/U/D19970553Lj.pdf>.

Criminal Code to protect them), a number of religious and extreme-right organizations of a fascist character protested in front of the theatre's building. Such a powerful entrance of the performance into the social fabric revealed the fields of contemporary social conflicts which testify to a radical conservative turn in Polish politics and proved the existence of economic censorship and self-censorship in Polish theatre: many art festivals in Poland withdrew their invitation to the performance.

The expectations of critics complaining about stagnation and the subversive potential of art being suppressed by the artists could in this respect be satisfied by the Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz, led by Paweł Wodziński and Bartosz Frąckowiak since 2014. I am writing about it deliberately using the past tense, because in 2017 the local authorities of Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship [Kuyavian-Pomeranian] decided not to prolong the contract with the two directors, who had openly decided to run a political and leftist theatre. A competition for the director was held in 2017, and the winner was a candidate giving priority to a more eclectic repertoire aimed at varied viewers, given that there is only one drama theatre in Bydgoszcz. The artists returned to Warsaw, where since January 2018 they have been running Biennale Warszawa [Biennale Warsaw], a cultural institution where they generate socially and politically involved projects such as meetings, debates, and performances.

In the case of Wodziński and Frąckowiak's theatre, one should not confuse political theatre with party theatre. A few years earlier, Frąckowiak quite skilfully described the idea of their theatre in an article written for *Notatnik Teatralny*:

“Political theatre should designate new lines of demarcation between positions and stances, undermining those set in stone. If theatre merely represents social phenomena, then it reproduces, strengthens, and legitimates the existing order. Unfortunately, political theatre has for too long been a theatre of representation.”<sup>16</sup>

What these two directors managed to do in just three seasons of running the Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz, regardless of the assessment of their

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16 FRĄCKOWIAK, B. Agon, Passion, Profanation: Challenges for New Political Theatre. Translation Aleksandra Sakowska. In *Polish Theatre Journal*, 2015, No. 1. [cit. 11. 5. 2018]. Available at: <http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/issue/view/6>.

performances' artistic quality, certainly makes a change to the perspective from which many Polish issues are discussed. The artists invited by them, including those from abroad, moved the existing axis of the analysis of our socio-political reality from an East–West to a North–South perspective, which completely changed the categories of its description from being national to economic. It became apparent that Poland was not a lonely island but rather located in a global network of dependencies and connections: political and economic ones. Local issues were granted a broader context and were set in a universal perspective. The artists showed the mechanisms which are a symptom of the exhaustion of a certain formula of the world in terms of its economy, politics, and civilization. Among the performances in which the theatre in Bydgoszcz reached for themes which transcend the country's borders, one should definitely mention *Afryka* [Africa], directed by Bartosz Frąckowiak (2014), *Murzyni* [Negroes] (2015), directed by Iga Gancarczyk (both of them raised the issue of neo-colonialism), and *Granice* [The Borders], directed by Frąckowiak (2016), where the director analysed the refugee crisis in Europe as a result of global capital. Finally, it is worth noting that the Bydgoszcz team also undertook a critical analysis of theatre as a sociocultural institution (a certain novelty in Poland) which keeps pace with current humanistic reflections. The directors declared a more democratic model of management of the institution and in artistic creation. Therefore, analysing the state of democracy and diagnosing the civil society and national community appear to be some of more recurrent themes in the performances in Bydgoszcz.

Obviously, the model of political theatre discussed so far does not exhaust all the strategies used by Polish artists today. Participatory theatre is becoming as strong as engaged theatre derived from Brecht's tradition, engaging the viewer in a completely different way. The realization of the idea of being political consists in conscious and active participation in a theatrical event, which can have an emancipatory effect in becoming aware of the mechanisms of power which we are subjected to both as a society and as individuals. Wiktor Rubin (b. 1978) and Jolanta Janiczak (b. 1982), the duo consisting of a drama director and a playwright, have been staging a number of such plays. One of their first joint performances was *Emigranci* [The Emigrants] from 2011 in Łażna Nowa Teatr [Łażna Nowa Theatre], based on the drama by Sławomir Mrożek. The main characters of the play are an intellectual and a labourer who are living in a basement in an unspecified Western European country. One of them left the country for political reasons, while the other one was an eco-

nomic immigrant. Being forced to share a common space, they are brought into various conflicts with each other which deepen their mutual antagonisms and animosities. This Mrozek drama from 1974 touched upon the problem existing in post-war Poland, namely, the gap between the intelligentsia and labourers. In their performances, the artists took a particular interest in the background and consequences of class divisions as well as in the performative dimension of various social roles. They looked at how the categories of “a member of the intelligentsia” and “a boor” are constructed as social roles and used to exercise symbolic power. For this purpose, they seated the audience on jute bags placed in a circle, which clearly marked the tension between the protagonists. Krzysztof Zarzecki, an actor, played the role of the educated person, while Mariusz Cichoński, a gas company collector and an amateur, was cast in the role of the labourer. Halfway through the performance, the actors switched roles and costumes. Although the tension between the actor, who was fully aware of his skills and abilities, and the natural non-professional was rather high, the role swapping and consequently the swapping of different languages used by the protagonists challenged the concept of belonging to a given class. It turned out that there was no difference between them.

In their subsequent performances, the duo tried to widen the viewer's field of activity by consistently engaging him in the game space. One of the duo's recent performances where this idea of participation was realized to the greatest degree is a variation on *Mistrz i Małgorzata* [The Master and Margarita] by Mikhail Bulgakov entitled *Każdy dostanie to, w co wierzy* [Everyone Will Get What They Believe In] in Teatr Powszechny im. Zygmunt Hübner w Warszawie [Zygmunt Hübner Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw], both in 2016. The artists created the theatrical situation of a meeting, freely using the characters and threads from the novel by the Russian author. The audience of the Powszechny Theatre welcomed Woland and his entourage visiting Warsaw which was checking how the nearly thirty-year-old democracy in Poland was doing. In this play, coming to the theatre meant accepting an invitation to the round table; that is, the stage. Being seated at the table was connected with the necessity to speak in public, engage in a conversation with the actor, disclose political views, or at least make a decision about the course of the performance by pressing a button. For example, the questions of society's ability to self-organize and its faith in the effectiveness of grassroots action were resolved by voting (the viewers had to assess whether as a group of individuals they were able to come up with solutions which they would eventually impose on the politicians). They were also asked to rate

their satisfaction with their possessions and assess their social utility. They had to state their earnings and priorities in life. The viewers sitting around the round table could decide how much they wanted to disclose about themselves in public and how far they wanted to go in their interactions with the actors, in a sense imitating the mechanism of social engagement. By reducing the physical distance, the artists tried to change the theatre formula from a mimetic show to one of a social event, with the viewer being its participant and co-author.

This performance did not meet all of the criteria for participative art, as Claire Bishop understands it, as a long-term project extended in time in which the artist is more a co-worker and a producer of situations, while the viewer is a co-creator or a participant.<sup>17</sup> However, in *Każdy dostanie to, w co wierzy* the artists undoubtedly gave part of their area to the audience, allowing them to at least decide on the course of action. By doing so, they undermined the traditional modes of artistic creation and art consumption. Taking into account the artists' other performances, it seems that the purpose of applying this strategy is, above all, to transform the existing institutions and dependencies, including theatre itself. By offering their area to viewers within traditionally written roles, the artists make them aware of their self-agency and power. It is not so much about triggering a revolution, which the counterculture artists of the 1960s dreamed about, but about making an evolutionary change in reality. Besides, this complements the reflections of Philipp Schulte, who analysed the emancipation and participatory initiatives of German artists in this way:

“Emancipated viewers become emancipating co-players – because it gradually becomes clear that the rules which they have to obey are unacceptable, and it is necessary to break them in a conscious and creative way.”<sup>18</sup>

This type of theatre could also be called “performative”<sup>19</sup>, since it focuses

17 BISHOP, C. *Sztuczne piekła. Sztuka partycypacyjna i polityka widowni*. Translation Jacek Staniszewski. Warszawa : Bęc Zmiana, 2015, p. 19.

18 SCHULTE, P. *Patrzenie jest działaniem – lecz jest czymś więcej niż patrzeniem. Emancypacja i partycypacja we współczesnych formach teatralnych*. Translation Tomasz Grzelak. In *Mapowanie publiczności*. (Ed. Anna R. Burzyńska). Szczecin : Teatr Lalek „Pleciuga, 2015, p. 105.

19 FÉRAL, J. *Rzeczywistość wobec wyzwania teatru*. Translation Wojciech Prażuch. In *Diaskalia*, 2012, Nos. 109–110, p. 19.

on things happening and the active presence of the viewer. It is worth noting that this model of theatre has also recently been popular in Poland because it is perceived as the most effective way of encouraging the viewer's civic activity and consequently nurturing democratic ideals. It seems that the basis for thinking about theatre as an institution supporting the idea of democracy was also the creation of the choir theatre by Marta Górnicka due to its form when compared with projects by Einer Schlee, a German director. For every new performance, the director selects a chorus from among individuals who do not engage in professional singing. The chorus singers, varying in terms of experience, age, appearance, gender, and nationality, are "tuned" as if they were one instrument for the body and the voice. They become a representation of the community, representing its needs and expectations and disclosing circumstances in which their voice is heard. This is usually the voice of individuals excluded for various reasons, e.g., women, immigrants, nameless corporate employees, and the Roma. Due to the fact that the content which the choir refers to is commonly known – a libretto consisting of recognizable literary texts, media clichés, and even fragments of commercials and the Polish Constitution – they seem to be the elements of a collective consciousness.

Finally, I wish to mention a special kind of participatory theatre which may have a political dimension, given that the reconfiguration of society and the interference of actors who change the reality outside theatre are to be considered political. It is a multi-annual project called *Wielkopolska: Rewolucje* [Wielkopolska: Revolutions] by Agata Siwiak, who, in cooperation with the authorities of the Wielkopolska Voivodeship, created a space for professional confrontation between artists and non-professionals. In 2012 she persuaded a number of Polish artists and curators to go to the cities, towns, and villages of Wielkopolska, where together with children from children's homes, the residents of old people's homes, pensioners, Roma, and female prisoners, they prepared a number of artistic projects based on the experiences of the community they cooperated with. Mikołaj Mikołajczyk, a dancer and choreographer, prepared a dance and movement show with elements of singing called *Teraz jest czas* [Now Is the Time] (2013) in cooperation with elderly people at the Dom Polski [Polish House] in Zakrzew, which can be regarded as a manifesto of old age that still has something to say. Subsequently, in Kolin, a place where the lynching of Roma took place, Joanna Warsza and Angelika Topolewska had a project called *Kwestia romska. Projekt z większością* [The Roma Question: A Project with the Majority] (2012), which aimed to

bring the Poles closer to the culture of the Roma minority. It turned out that, thanks to the involvement of the curators and the meetings initiated by them, the public began to talk about issues which were crucial yet marginalized such as a lack of trust and difficulties in Polish–Roma coexistence. In the following year, Michał Borczuch was working with sixteen children from the Szamocin Children’s Home and youths from the local Szamocin Station Theatre on the show *Lepiej tam nie idź* [You’d Better Not Go There] (2013), which touched upon the subject of childhood. In 2014 Wiktor Rubin and Jolanta Janiczak, together with Cezary Tomaszewski, a choreographer and performer, prepared a project entitled *Jakiż to chłopiec piękny i młody* [Who is this Lad So Handsome and Young?] in cooperation with the elderly residents of the Social Assistance House in Lisówki. It was a cross between a play, an exhibition, and a meeting, during which the residents talked about their lives and the problems of old age.

The *Wielkopolska: Rewolucje* project saw the creative field work of artists far away from the cultural centre. Owing to this project, the inhabitants of small towns situated far from Poznań, the capital of the region, could come into contact with avant-garde art and meet the artists, who they do not have access to on a daily basis. In turn, the artists could revise their stereotypical ideas about life in the province and the cultural needs of its inhabitants. The artistic undertaking then realized the idea of social communication because, as the curator said: “The people I was doing these workshops for did not go to major art festivals but happened to be creative and hungry for change. I realized that I had been criticizing the system, but without doing much for its democratization.”<sup>20</sup> Also, the activities which were carried out proved to be of great importance to the local communities, because they touched upon social issues which were crucial for them. In a sense, they led to a change in the world on a small scale. However, Bojana Kunst calls such plays “ineffective social practices”, arguing that artistic activities replace the real sphere of participation and thus belong more to the sphere of aesthetics than to politics.<sup>21</sup> Zbigniew Libera, who is a Polish visual artist and performer, is of a different opinion and claims that “politics is not about implementing a certain set of views by means of the state apparatus, but instead is the place where our

20 CIEŚLAK, J. *Wielkopolska: Rewolucje – projekt Agaty Siwiak. Rzeczpospolita*. [cit. 10. 5. 2018]. Available at: <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/1121335-Wielkopolska--Rewolucje---projekt-Agaty-Siwiak.html>.

21 KUNST, B. *Artysta w pracy. O pokrewieństwach sztuki i kapitalizmu*, p. 18.

demands, needs, and desires meet. Politics is therefore art"<sup>22</sup>. Consequently, political art does not necessarily have to be about political indoctrination but rather about actions undertaken for the sake of society, the initiation of emancipatory movements, and the renegotiation of the shape of society.

The panoramic view which I have depicted here includes the most crucial examples of thinking about theatre as a political activity which is meant to lead to change. Theatre directors and authors alike recognize the need to engage theatre in major social issues, discuss them, and intellectually provoke the viewer. This aim is realized by means of theatrical spectacles as well as through meetings, debates, and discussions. The need for building and strengthening civil society seems especially crucial now that power in the country has been taken over by the Law and Justice Party, a populist party which builds its political capital on chauvinism, xenophobia, and social conflicts. On the one hand, over the past twenty years political theatre in Poland has touched upon taboo subjects, violating and undermining the narratives which claim the right to be the only valid interpretation. It is a critical and engaged theatre tackling topics characteristic of capitalist societies. Its aim is to throw light on the most important problems related to the functioning of the state and society and to express important issues concerning the local or national community. On the other hand, it undertakes activities which encourage various forms of civic engagement and disobedience to various institutions of the state which exclude a number of social groups. This kind of theatre aims at building mutual trust and empathy, which will later become a tool of permanent change. It also occurs as a space for confrontation from different points of view, which is when art proves to be a safe training ground for the dispute. Paradoxically, the recent years of Law and Justice rule have brought more plays about the migration crisis and social solidarity with marginalized groups, such as elderly people and small town dwellers, than plays which directly criticize or ridicule the new political power.

*Translated by Zuzanna Cieplińska-Zwonik*

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22 ŻMIJEWSKI, A. Polityczne gramatyki obrazów. In RANCIERE, J. *Estetyka jako polityka*. Translation Julian Kutyla, Piotr Mościcki. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007, p. 13.



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