

Values of the Past, Values of the Present: the Conversion of Values in Sławomir Mrożek's Work and their Message for Today

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Abstract: This study examines the transformation of creative approaches in the work of the Polish playwright Sławomir Mrożek and its influence on the values that his works point to. The transformation of the thinking of society and changes in the political climate and social conditions led to a diverse grasp of the absurdity of everyday life. However, the playwright's work did not stop at the production of one-acts and plays influenced by absurd drama; it continued in the way of revealing real facts and characters and in the effort to achieve the internal motives of both the characters as well as the functioning of social laws.

This article also focuses on the approach to values in Mrożek's creative process. How did he perceive the sphere of values? Mrożek was a playwright who systematically worked, especially in the first period of his work, with irony, paraphrasing, and the absurdity of situations. A logical question therefore arises: Does the relativization of values open a space for new values, or is it just his manifest and protest opposing something and somebody without suggesting a solution, a way out, or even hope?

Keywords: values, absurd drama, co-ordinated absurdity, theatre of the absurd, Central Europe

A playwright from Central Europe who has become recognized and staged on almost every continent is a paradox in the social and cultural context of this region. Sławomir Mrożek was indeed such a paradox, considering that by the end of the 1950s he had immediately become famous for his first play at a time when Eastern Bloc writers were seen as exotic in Western Europe but were not frequent guests there. Soon Poland became too small for him, so he travelled on a holiday that turned into a long-term emigration after 1968. After Italy, France, the United States, and Mexico he then returned to his native Poland only to finally settle in Nice, France. He spent significant parts of his life abroad. He acquired the feeling of an emigrant, he knew how emigrants felt and lived, and this became his lifestyle.

Before we reach the line of development in Mrożek's creative process, let us consider to what extent Mrożek is an authority for the present in bringing current themes or discourses to the cultural space of Poland and Central Europe. Mrożek became one of the most respected figures in Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 20th century. This fact is closely related to his life's peripeteia that voluntarily placed him in the light of the eternal emigrant. In 1968 Mrożek and his wife moved to Paris. From his correspondence with the writer A. Tarn¹ and the theatre scholar J. Błoński² we can sense that he wanted to know something else; he needed a different experience. At that time, Charles de Gaulle was in power in France, but the left-wing world view and the socialist establishment's idealization was becoming increasingly popular. A break in his life as an emigrant occurred in the autumn of 1968, when he published a letter in *Le Monde*³ and in the Parisian newspaper *Culture* protesting the entry of Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovakia. As a result, he earned the displeasure of the Polish government, which ordered him to immediately return to Poland within two weeks. Mrożek responded by requesting for political asylum in France. In Poland, Mrożek's actions met with the support of theatre-makers, but many worried about their own positions. After Mrożek did not return to Poland, the official reaction was almost immediate. Within a few days, all his works in Poland had been banned and his plays could not be staged. They were taken out of theatre repertoires. This ban applied to any kind of public presentation. The government had not intervened against Mrożek's plays before, because they were very popular. But now that he was an enemy of the people, it was a good opportunity to realize this intention.

After the political changes in Poland, he arrived home and was generally cordially received. In 1990 he came to Kraków for a two-week festival of his

1 Adam Tarn (20. 10. 1902, Łódź – 23. 6. 1974, Lausanne) was one of the most important figures of Polish postmodern theatre studies. In 1956 he founded the journal *Dialog*, focusing on international and Polish drama and theatre.

2 Jan Błoński (15. 11. 1931, Warsaw – 10. 2. 2009, Kraków) was a historian of literature, critic, essayist, and translator. He was the author of the extensive analysis of Mrożek's texts, *Wszystkie sztuki Sławomira Mrożka*.

3 MROŻEK, Sławomir. "List do Czechosłowacji" In *Le Monde*, 1968: "I am a Polish writer, not an emigrant. I am a member of the Union of Polish Writers. Regarding the active participation of the PPR in the armed aggression in Czechoslovakia, I express the following: I protest this action. I am in solidarity with all Czechs and Slovaks who have stood up against this action. Especially with my colleagues, Czech and Slovak writers, who are being persecuted and imprisoned."

plays on his sixtieth birthday. The Mrożek Theatre Festival was also organized in Amsterdam (1988) and Stockholm (1991). Of the four plays that Mrożek wrote during his stay in Mexico between 1990 and 2000, the most important is *Milóść na Krymie* [Love in the Crimea] (1993). The play captures Russian, Bolshevik, and post-Soviet history. In 1996 he returned with his wife to Kraków. Six years later he had a heart attack because of a head injury. The consequence of this was the loss of the ability to communicate in speech and script. Thanks to therapy that lasted for three years, he regained the ability to communicate and write. Some health problems had already occurred in Mexico, but his exhaustion fully manifested itself in Poland.

In 2006 his autobiography *Baltazar*, written after his heart attack to reinforce his brain activity, was published. This was the name Mrożek heard in dreams. It was supposed to be his new existence and the beginning of a new life. His illness had destroyed his personality, but he was able to evaluate his present life and analyse it from a different perspective.

Between 2000 and 2010, his most prominent pieces included those staged by Jerzy Jarocki (*Tango, Milóść na Krymie*) at the Teatr Narodowy [National Theatre] in Warsaw. Although spectators and critics expressed their interest, as a playwright Mrożek gradually lost contact with contemporary drama and its direction. He lost the status of mentor and artistic authority, particularly in the eyes of the younger generation of Polish theatre artists.

In the 1990s and the early 2000s, Mrożek went through a difficult period. In May 2008 he decided to leave Poland again and “stay forever” in Nice to relax and recuperate. This was obviously a decision influenced by the fact that the performance of his plays in Poland was very rare during the last few years of his life, and the younger generation of directors had an ambiguous, even negative, attitude to them.

In a debate in the *Dialog* journal, the theatre scholar Jacek Sieradzki raised the question more broadly: “Does Mrożek still have a chance in the present times?”⁴ Mrożek undoubtedly asked himself this question during his lifetime. The sense of a negative answer, in addition to his health problems, was one of the causes why he decided to undergo a final emigration and move from Kraków to Nice. After returning to his homeland in 1996, he had become disillusioned with the situation in culture and art. Younger generations often did not find their way to his one-act performances, his most significant

4 JARZĘBSKI, J. – RATAJCZAKOWA, D. – SIERADZKI, J. – SUGIERA, M. – SZCZAWIŃSKA, W. Czyściec? In *Dialog*, 2014, Vol. 58, No. 3, pp. 5–10.

feature-length works, or his more recent metaphysical plays. Mroźek did not get involved in the intergenerational conflict; for the younger generation, he became a playwright whom they accepted as one of the Polish giants, and they do not regularly use his texts. The director Kazimierz Kutz even stood up against the younger generation, particularly pointing out the young Polish director Weronika Szczawińska, and noted that her generation treated Mroźek with enmity. He expressed the hope that when the young ones grew up, they would humbly return to him. Statements such as this increased the intergenerational polarization. According to Jacek Sieradzki, even the death of the playwright did not reduce this problem. The younger generation of Polish theatre artists are not rebelling against Mroźek; they simply ignore him. The theatre scholar Małgorzata Sugiera states that rather than an intergenerational conflict, the problem is more about a natural cultural and social transformation that Mroźek reflects in his texts. As an example, she used the play *Indyk* [Turkey], where the author fragmentizes the storyline and characters in a way that is close to the current understanding of the drama. The interest or disinterest of the younger generation, including directors such as Krzysztof Warlikowski, was very cold. He even said that he would rather emigrate than stage his plays. The rigidity of this position is not aimed at Mroźek personally but rather at the theatrical poetics that he represents.

The theatre scholar Dobrochna Ratajczakowa states that “many of his plays have simply become prisoners of the situation since 1956”⁵. A situation in which, depending on certain freedoms, even dramatic authors might look at political and social conditions with some criticism and irony could allow them to more clearly point to the double-faced nature of the morality and actions of the establishment. The platform of absurd drama seemed appropriate for such a reflection and even inevitable under the circumstances. The audience subconsciously understood the hidden and less concealed connotations that appeared mainly in Mroźek’s one-acts. In the form of a feature-length play, the elements of absurd drama appeared in his most famous play *Tango*. After publishing *Tango* in 1964 in the journal *Dialog*, the play quickly found its way to the international scene (France, Germany, and the United States).

In the play, he criticizes intergenerational conflict and through an absurd situation indirectly expresses his opinion on forms of violence, marasmus,

5 JARZĘBSKI, J. – RATAJCAKOWA, D. – SIERADZKI, J. – SUGIERA, M. – SZCAWIŃSKA, W. Czyściec? In *Dialog*, pp. 5-10.

and the fear of power. Ultimately, the political level provides a very precise and uncomplicated vision of society at the time of totalitarianism. Even with the best formulated ideas, any ideology may shift to totalitarianism and the brutality of power, which is proven in the conclusion of the play. The raw power, represented by Edo, conquers the family and reaches into the social limelight as an undeterred individual and aggressor. Mrożek chose the family setting, because in the second half of the 20th century the socialist establishment called it “the basic cell of society” in a half-life of decay where nihilism was fighting with activism, anarchy with dictatorship, and morality with decline. On the other hand, the norms imposed by the political and social order were entering family relationships. Mrożek submits these relationships to his construct, where the younger generation stands on the side of marriage and fidelity, and the generation of the parents maintains the values of their youth and independence in relationships and lifestyle.

We can say that Mrożek wrote a play where, unlike in the grotesque one-acts, he applies the “co-ordinated absurdity”⁶ mentioned by Jan Błoński, which combines elements of the grotesque and comic opera with the facts of the period. He does not work with accurate facts but uses them to such an extent that it is possible to outline the inner connections and patterns of the family. He uses the real foundation of a family tragedy, but absurdity does not result from the symbol; it is not a woman buried in sand as in Beckett's *Happy Days*, characters in a setting of nobody and nothing. This is analogous to his play *Striptease*, where the omnipresent hand does not create absurdity but rather a situation of two men who let themselves be manipulated or are manipulated by it. His characters live real lives in their home in a specific time; they deal with situations that are close to reality (generational conflict, marriage, infidelity, and relationships), but they are bizarrely locked in them. Everyone defends the philosophy of their lives and personal beliefs. It is this co-ordinated absurdity abstracted in *Tango* that has attracted artists around the world more than any other Mrożek play. The circle of generational differences spirals back to the present, where we witness the various unprecedented misunderstandings growing into conflicts. The values and the message that the grotesque characters carry in them are fragmentary and somewhat distorted. In the case of *Tango*, the symbols become characters; we see them more specifically, but their behaviour is more realistic. Their interpretation thus becomes less clear.

6 SUGIERA, M. *Dramaturgia Sławomira Mrożka*. Kraków : Uniwersytas, 1996, p. 121.

In addition to *Tango*, Mrożek wrote other major plays during his time abroad such as *Emigranci* [Emigrants] (1978) in France and *Milósć na Krymie* (1998) in Mexico. In *Emigrants*, as has been discovered in the current research, Mrożek mainly deals with the feeling of an emigrant who has no choice: he must remain abroad because his homeland will not take him back due to the bad political situation. We named this “internal emigration”. His position as a human being is in the position of an intellectual, outcast, and dissident whose fate is not to return but rather to abide. His thinking and talent are expelled beyond the borders without the possibility of return. It is his identification with the character AA from his play that appears in the conflict with the economic migrant XX, who feels nostalgic for his native Poland. XX is a volunteer emigrant, and AA is the author himself who has been side-lined by his own homeland. On the other hand, being famous and popular abroad (mainly for *Tango* and *Emigranci*) granted him the status of a person whose existence had to be accepted by the representatives of power in Poland itself.

In *Emigranci*, Mrożek describes an external experience with Polish politics and the period of normalization. He is not true to the facts; he is not concerned with documenting a country in which he cannot live, and in the contemporary state of Polish politics he does not want to. Despite his gradual transformation from being an author as an absurdist to an author as a realist who is controlled by a strange logic of circumstances, to then being an author as a philosopher, the truthful representation of reality was of no interest to Mrożek. As a native Pole, he looks from the outside at a country which is gradually affected by political and social convulsions that physically weaken the social organism until a state of emergency is declared. As an emigrant who cannot return to his homeland, he is isolated from it; despite himself, he must seek a new identity in a foreign environment. Mrożek had many years of experience in this, so in his play he was able to draw on the situations he had experienced. In *Emigranci*, he almost microscopically focused on the real situation of two emigrants: AA cannot return to his country due to political emigration, and XX is an economic migrant who decided to solve his family situation by a temporary separation. Mrożek utilizes a real motivation in the text. The characters do not become types but are more sophisticated. AA is an intellectual who spends most of his days in his room with books and newspapers. He may be considered as an alter ego of Mrożek, but only partially. Mrożek did not emigrate from Poland for political reasons. At least in 1963, when he left Poland, it was not so. XX is a typical “gastarbeiter” who

went abroad to financially secure his family in Poland. For him, the basement apartment where he and AA live together is only a transitory place where he simply struggles to survive. He is a “momentary” emigrant, and he knows that his emigration will end at some point. He has no need to settle down. His thoughts are home-oriented to “the people back at home” and his family. In contrast to *Tango*, in *Emigranci* we can observe the collapse of family ties, which are replaced by solitude, the desire to find a balance in life, freedom, and material or intellectual sufficiency. For the present time, which is marked by many problems, including the migrant crisis, the aspect of searching for an identity and roots is very current and provides opportunities for comparison.

Mrożek's shift from absurd dramatic poetics to more psychological plays has already been mentioned: from the characters who carried signs of psychologization, gradually passing to the formation of metaphysical relationships in the characterization and actions of dramatic characters, through to the archetype of characters that possess an essence or attributes. His efforts resulted in one of his most debatable and prolific plays, *Milóść na Krymie*. He wrote this full-length play in Mexico in 1993. In the first act, which strictly adheres to Chekhov's poetics, one can feel logic and thoughtfulness. It is as if Mrożek wanted to get closer to Chekhov, but on the other hand he can be sharper and more focused in certain moments. He moved to the Nice guesthouse (named after the French city where Mrożek moved at the end of his life) in 1910, which is a period when czarist Russia was going through a crisis and gradual decay. The dissatisfaction of the lower classes with their social and economic situation was increasing. The intelligentsia was in a state of marasmus, without the energy to change anything and relying on the memories of times when it was the instigator of change. The Recreation Centre in 1928, where the second act takes place, portrays a period when nearly a decade had passed since the Great Socialist Revolution. The initial revolutionary slogans aimed at the weakest social groups are being implemented through a growing bureaucratic apparatus that is full of corruption, hypocrisy, and an ineffective hierarchy based on bribes and nepotism. The third act reflects the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the search for the lost position of the declining Soviet empire, from where Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov emerges as a demon from the past.

If we wanted to compare *Milóść na Krymie* with contemporary drama, the closest to it thematically would be the play *Czwarta siostra* [The Fourth Sister] written by Janusz Głowacki. Both plays originated in the

1990s.⁷ Like Mrożek, Głowacki experienced life as an emigrant. He was more interested in the reality of Russia during the Russian–Chechen conflict, the wild political situation, and the rise of the mafia and oligarchs. The play has a parade of big and small characters that lived and survived during three historical eras (the imperial, the socialist, and the early capitalist periods) that shaped Russia during the 20th century. The breakdown of the family is tied in with a paraphrase at Chekhov’s reception and a strong nostalgia for times when logic had some sense before we get into the nepotism of the 1920s, when the situational absurdity of bureaucracy comes to the fore.

The play *Milóść na Krymie* represents another turning point in Mrożek’s career as a playwright. Although it is not influenced by the country of his emigration (at that time Mexico) but rather by detachment figuratively likened to the geographical distance from Europe, he overcomes three periods of European history: before the First World War, the rise of communism, and the turbulent beginnings of democracy in Eastern Europe. Mrożek’s introversion is suppressed in his texts. Through his characters, he expresses his opinion on the social structure and interpersonal relationships, and the absurdity of everyday life that is influenced by a system that changes into reality and that melts away in the metaphysics and allegories of Mrożek’s last play *Karnawał, czyli pierwsza żona Adama* [Carnival or the First Wife of Adam]. Mrożek’s life and works are the history of a country torn by changes of regime, changes in the poetics of dramatic works, and changes in personal life. It is a triangle of significant lines that in Mrożek’s life does not represent a change of attitudes to life but rather how he regards these attitudes and confronts them.

The director and playwright Maciej Wojtyszko used the meeting of Mrożek with W. Gombrowicz in Chiavari, Italy, in his play *Dowód na istnienie drugiego* [The Reason for the Existence of the Other] (2012)⁸. Wojtyszko is known in the context of Polish theatre as a scriptwriter who takes pride in the text; being an author himself, he tries to accept the comments and notes of the author. He staged Mrożek’s plays, including *Milóść na Krymie* (Teatr Stary, Kraków, 1994). He was also the director of his last play, *Karnawał, czyli pierwsza żona Adama*. In *Dowód na istnienie drugiego*, according to the scenic notes from the conclusion of the play, Wojtyszko does not claim documentary precision. The meeting of both writers took place in June 1965 in Chiavari

7 *The Fourth Sister* was published in a journal seven years later (*Dialog* 10/1999).

8 *Dowód na istnienie drugiego*, published in *Dialog* 2/2013.

and Lavagne, where they spent the whole month together. We also know of the meeting in Vence, France.

The work of Mrożek reflects the values that were relativized or celebrated at the time they originated. The value of family in *Tango* alternates with the value of the relativization of freedom in *Emigrants* only to result in the depressed hope that comes with *Milóść na Krymie*. These processes, which appear in his three works, refer to the path and problems that Europe has been struggling with from the second half of the 20th century to the present: alienation, the search for new identity, and an uncertain future on the verge of the relational apocalypse that horrifies us and forces us to subconsciously think about the necessity of ending, but which also gives us a slight hope that everything can change.

The discourse on the values and the impact of various global crises in recent years has once again become a reality. The values that we wanted to eliminate, or at least combat, have not been replaced by anything else. Mrożek is confronted with this finding in *Karnawał, czyli pierwsza zona Adama*, where civilization is returning to the very beginning and the archetype and essence of humanity are redefined. His last play was received by Polish critics and spectators with mixed feelings. It premiered in Teatr Polski in Warsaw and was directed by Jarosław Gajewski (after the director Jerzy Jarocki refused to take part). The plot is situated in a very undetermined place during what appears to be spring. The cast ranges from ancient Prometheus through Goethe and Margaret to Adam and his two wives, Eve and Lilith. The characters deal with the male–female principle of the human being and its existence; the play culminates with a conflict between Adam and Lilith during a carnival when the characters dance in masks. The two main characters mysteriously disappear, and we see only Adam's loneliness when he hears Lilith's voice calling to him.

During the premiere, Mrożek changed his view on co-operation between the author and director; and he gave him more freedom and space. In this last play, we may feel a certain resignation over the possible positive development that society in Central and Eastern Europe should take. This area has become a transition or “purgatory” between East and West, where thoughts are not transformed into values but rather into desires that Central Europe struggles to fulfil as a nationally and historically diverse territory.

Through his not very successful and flawed play, and like many thinkers from all around the world, Mrożek brings into the debate about values an important moment of restarting and redefining the world and its mechanisms.

Although Mrožek remains in the background (this applies to the sporadic presentation of his plays in Poland and abroad) for the coming generation and the period of great changes, the theses that he sketched in his works are reflected in many aspects in the reality of the present.

Translated by Peter Godovič

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