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Contemporary Polish Theatre: The Voice of the New Generation of Playwrights and Directors

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In my lecture I would like to introduce you to contemporary Polish theatre, but also to help you to better understand the Polish mentality, imagination and values which are reflected on stage. I'm aware I will be speaking about things you know little about and not always fully understandable. China and Poland are divided not only by geographic distance but also by culture, historical experience, and different ways of seeing the world and understanding things. Yet I'm sure we have much in common, to which these international Theatre Olympics are a testament. So, before starting my lecture, I'd like to cordially thank the event organizers for inviting me to Beijing and for their hospitality in this extraordinary city.

So… the theatre in Poland is vibrant, modern, and evolving. Young people improvise, dance, sing, stage new dramas and old masterpieces in a way that enthrals. Theatres are expensive but full. Contemporary Polish theatre is a great success of free Poland. But it should be remembered that its excellence is the product of generations of theatre makers who saw theatre as a way to realize their dreams, perfect the art of acting, cultivate the word, and most importantly, engage in dialogue with audiences.

When I say "new theatre" I mean the era that began in 1989 when Poland again became a sovereign and democratic country. Paradoxically, in these most favourable times, Polish theatre found itself in a difficult position. Granted, theatre makers could speak out about things they had been forbidden to address before. The problem was they no longer wanted to do so. To explain why, let's go back in time for a moment.

Romanticism, absurd and Godot

Before 1989, Polish theatre fulfilled a mission that neither politicians, nor journalists, nor columnists, nor even academics – with rare exceptions – fulfilled. First of all, it helped to create a social bond, in which it resembled the Catholic Church, a

very important institution in Poland at the time. While the Church created a social bond by invoking shared Christian faith, the theatre invoked secular values (though rooted in Christianity): truth and freedom. At the same time it ostracized mendacity, treason, and servility, revealing the tragic dimension of the life of individuals and the whole nation. It could not do it directly, so it did it through dramas written in the past, particularly in the Romanic period, in the first half of the 19th century. It is not easy to explain what Polish Romanticism was. Western European Romanticism was a response to the Enlightenment, which produced a scientific worldview. It emphasized faith, imagination, intuition and emotions, insisting that the world cannot be explained through statistics and scientific experiments. Yet Polish Romanticism also involved a yearning for the lost fatherland. Imagine that China is taken away from the Chinese by three superpowers. The country disappears from the map of Asia, all Chinese languages disappear, Chinese opera vanishes, your famous calendar is replaced with a different one. Polish Romanticism is a faith that even in a predicament like this people can remain themselves, save their memory, identity, culture. “Poland is not yet lost / So long as we still live” run the first lines of the Polish national anthem written in exile. This is Romanticism.

A Poland that had survived in people’s hearts and language was depicted in great Romantic dramas. The dramas were written by uncommonly talented poets: Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Zygmunt Krasiński, who spent most of their lives in exile. In 1795 Poland disappeared from the map of Europe, but its Romantic poets felt responsible for a people deprived of their state, and reminded Poles of their history, castigated national vices, cultivated national identity and foretold a national rebirth. After the First World War, Poland regained independence and for twenty years developed as a modern European state. Sadly, it lost its independence again in the political aftermath of the Second World War. As in the past, Poles split into the pragmatists, who collaborated with the new authorities, and the Romantics, who opposed them. The message of the three great Romantic dramas, Adam Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve*, Juliusz Słowacki’s *Kordian* and Zygmunt Krasiński’s *Undivine Comedy*, became relevant again. Great Polish directors, including such great theatre individualities and reformers as Jerzy Grotowski, staged these plays, engaging audiences in dialogue about issues vital to humankind and the community. The most famous line from Adam Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve* is: “Our nation is like

lava. On the top cold and hideous, but not even one hundred years can extinguish its internal fire!". The greatest Polish theatre makers made it their task to keep the fire burning.

It was almost impossible to ban the production of old Romantic plays, but each staging was under close scrutiny, especially after Kazimierz Dejmek's *Forefathers' Eve* sparked protests in the streets of Warsaw a few months after its premiere in 1967. It did not even occur to Dejmek this might happen because, as Director of the National Theatre, he had ties with the authorities. The power of Mickiewicz's play, however, proved greater than the director had expected, especially the long soliloquy called "The Great Improvisation". In it, the protagonist, Konrad, who rebels against any form of authority, calls God a tsar. The soliloquy, delivered by charismatic actor Gustaw Holoubek, galvanized the audience. After one performance, a crowd of young spectators marched to the statue of Adam Mickiewicz to protest in the name of the values that the poet reminded his compatriots of. Young director Maciej Prus, who assisted Dejmek, staged *Forefathers' Eve* twelve years later on the boards of Teatr Wybrzeże in Gdańsk. Part III of Mickiewicz's work is largely set in a tsarist prison where young Polish conspirators were held, but Prus situated it in a dark, cold, stuffy room, in which the tsar's soldiers detained Poles en route to Siberia. *Forefathers' Eve* premiered in Gdańsk in autumn 1979. The following summer, workers went on strike in the Gdańsk Shipyard, which is a 10-minute walk from the theatre. In Mickiewicz's conspirators the theatre critics saw the striking shipyard workers. Romantic "fever" was so intense that in 1981, when Martial Law was declared, most actors announced a boycott of television to protest against the authorities. In the following few years, films and theatre productions were cast with second-rate actors and audiences ignored them. The theatre, meanwhile, thrilled everyone.

The theatre makers engaged in a dialogue with audiences on another level too, mostly invoking the prevalent sense of the absurdity of life in contemporary Poland. The contemporary playwrights, led by Sławomir Mrożek and Tadeusz Różewicz, were the directors' allies from as early as the late 1950s. Their work was staged by renowned directors such as Ervin Axer, Konrad Swinarski and Jerzy Jarocki. While the stagings of Romantic dramas created a social bond, the productions of new dramas taught critical thinking and diagnosed the condition of

modern man. Mrożek made his debut in 1957 with the play *The Police*, first staged by Jan Świderski as *The Policemen*. The play is set in a prison. One day its main protagonist, the last oppositionist, pledges his allegiance to the prevailing orthodoxy, putting the policemen in a very difficult situation. Not wanting their jobs to become pointless, the policemen choose an oppositionist from among their midst. Eventually, after an absurd chain of events, they end up arresting each other. Martin Esslin, the author of the book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, published in New York, counted Mrożek among the exponents of this genre. Mrożek, however, explained that it was not human life that was absurd but the system in which Poles lived. Mrożek criticized the system in a perverse way, creating grotesque dramatic plotlines that amazed and amused audiences.

The protagonist of Tadeusz Różewicz's *The Card Index* (1958) is a man who loses his will to live and doesn't get out of bed. Visitors – friends and strangers – come from the street that runs through his room to accuse him and demand explanations. The private protest against the completely passive protagonist aptly reflected the mood of contemporary Poles: their sense of defeat and all-pervading helplessness that was not relieved by consumption (which was severely limited anyway). The same sense of hopelessness was in evidence in productions of the Western Theatre of the Absurd, mainly plays by Samuel Beckett, which were interpreted politically rather than philosophically. In the Poland of the 1950s and 1960s, the title of Beckett's most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, came to mean "waiting for a change that never comes".

Violence, career and God

In 1989 things changed dramatically. The theatre no longer had to create a social bond, teach critical thinking and express the feelings and thoughts of Poles. It appeared this task could be handed over to other institutions: the democratically elected parliament, the universities, schools, press and multi-channel television. Not only average citizens but also many of the cultural elite believed that the social mission era had come to an end as the values the theatre fought for were no longer jeopardized. In the early 1990s our theatre slipped into crisis. Its social role was significantly weakened, and soon large theatre venues began to lose audiences. The new economy meant tough times for theatres, and the standard of living of actors

dropped markedly, some even lost their jobs. Advertising and television, with its endless series (new to Poland), became their new sources of income. The erstwhile heroes of Romantic drama productions became the faces of popular products such as coffee and washing powder. The critics complained but audiences did not care as they themselves tried to get rich as quickly as possible. In the early 1990s Polish economy was in a state of collapse and needed extensive and harrowing reforms, but our optimism was huge and expressed itself in the entrepreneurial spirit. Poles were building their country according to new rules and truly believed they would not face the serious social problems that Western countries had been battling for years. Yet they quickly began experiencing the same problems, and again the theatre became important. Poles realized they had been living in a cage, idealizing the external world they knew little about. Now that they were out of the cage, they faced a new reality.

The mid-1990s saw the emergence of a young generation of directors who came of age in the new Poland and were closely observing the changes in the life of contemporary Poles. I'm talking about artistic personalities such as Anna Augustynowicz, Krzysztof Warlikowski, Grzegorz Jarzyna and Piotr Cieplak. To understand and express these changes, the young directors made conscious use of a new theatre idiom that they developed thanks to their familiarity with new Western drama, theatre, film, music and video art. Some of them were fascinated by Western culture which they used to explore problems that Poles started experiencing too. The critics accused them of ignoring Polish theatre traditions and blindly imitating Western theatre, but one could sense their earnest desire to approach the totally new social landscape with a language of the present rather than the past. For many spectators it proved to be quite shocking, not least because the new idiom also meant a new, controversial theme, previously unexplored in Polish theatre.

The new theme was the decay of familial and social bonds manifested in the ever increasing violence that very young people used against their parents and loved ones. In 1996 at the Contemporary Theatre in Szczecin, a city located closer to Berlin than to Warsaw, Anna Augustynowicz directed the drama *Young Death* by young playwright Grzegorz Nawrocki. The play unfolds over three scenes, each inspired by events reported in the press. In the first scene a young boy from a wealthy family knives and kills his father; in the second, young boys hang a teenage girl at a party in an apartment block; in the third a schoolboy, egged on by his friend, uses a hammer

to kill his teacher in her apartment. The perpetrators were not degenerate criminals but ordinary teenagers who proved capable of committing the most brutal crimes. Nawrocki did not analyze the causes. He only showed, from a reporter's perspective, the familial and social relationships, as well as the mindset, language and emotional state of the young people. Likewise, Augustynowicz did not use any "filter" in her production, placing the whole brutal world onto the stage, which shocked audiences but also confronted them with a genuine social problem.

Soon other directors, too, started addressing the appalling violence perpetrated by young, "innocent" people, introducing to the Polish stage new "brutalist" drama (combining the words "realist" and "brutal"), mostly plays by Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane. In 1999, the much-talked-about premiere took place of Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, in which life in modern Western society was reduced to the two eponymous activities. In Paweł Łysak's production a compulsive lust for goods and pleasure led to a rebellion of young people, unleashing acts of extremely brutal violence. Meanwhile, Sarah Kane's most celebrated drama, *The Cleansed*, directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski, sharply divided the critics. The image of the terrifying "clinic", in which the sadistic doctor Tinker conducts physical and mental experiments on his patients, was seen by some as a metaphor for a society that forces certain behaviours and attitudes on its citizens, violating their dignity and tolerating no otherness. Others accused Warlikowski of missing the real problems faced by Polish society (only just free from external oppression), showing too much violence and resorting to moral blackmail which had replaced rational analysis in the theatre. Warlikowski countered that the problems he addressed were real and that he used an expressive idiom to spark open discussion. In his opinion family and social pathology resulted from the patriarchal structure of Polish culture, so the most hated characters in his shows were those of fathers.

A different look on the problems of contemporary Poles in the time of political transformation was offered by Grzegorz Jarzyna. The characters in his productions were people who quickly achieved success and felt all-powerful and then just as quickly realized the futility of their existence. They included artists, businessmen, financiers, media people. These people resembled the ancient Greek gods – they were young, beautiful but ruthless. In Jarzyna's theatre their luxurious life came to be symbolized by a red leather sofa (the object of universal desire), crystal mirrors and a

turquoise swimming pool. Jarzyna presented the elite of Polish society, who used to comprise members of the intelligentsia – well-educated, critical and humble, as dictated by the previous ethos – but was now dominated by members of the new middle class – egoistic, greedy and domineering. He was always fascinated by the figure of a modern seducer who gains control over people. In 2006 Jarzyna directed *Giovanni*, in which he portrayed members of the new financial establishment who manifest their libertarian beliefs during endless orgies in luxurious apartments, held to the strains of Mozart.

Jarzyna's seducer has many faces. He can be a ruthless and destructive Don Juan or a mysterious Stranger who transforms the lives of the people he meets as in Jarzyna's most important production, *T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T*, based on the play by Pier Paolo Pasolini. In it, a stranger boy enters the house of a rich industrialist, and the erotic desire he awakens in each of the family members becomes an impulse for a complete transformation of their lives. In the case of the father the desire assumes an almost mystical quality. Influenced by the Stranger, the industrialist gives away his factories to the workers, and wanders into a desert like a biblical prophet. In the conclusion he is naked, but the nakedness has religious rather than erotic undertones. Suppressed longings explode in a surprising and often destructive way – according to Jarzyna the radical actions of individuals and societies are a symptom of the spiritual hunger that accumulates in a consumerist society.

Piotr Cieplak has explored questions of religion since his directorial debut. Uniquely in the new Polish theatre, he based his first significant production on a medieval mystery play about the Resurrection. He employed a modern scenic idiom – Jesus Christ wore a white shirt and casual trousers while the devils he fought to save human souls sported biker leather jackets. Jesus fought his fight in a cement warehouse to the beat of noisy music played live by a rock band. Cieplak used the conventions of the gangster movie and of the rock music concert, but he approached the Biblical text with reverence, instructing his actors to speak their lines clearly and respectfully. Thus he tested the power of the Evangelical message in a new context. While Augustynowicz presented family and street violence, Cieplak asked "Do we find the Evangelical message to be just a holiday-season story or the stuff of our everyday life?".

The director realized that Catholic faith was becoming ever more superficial and its moral guidelines were ignored. On the one hand, Poles loved their pope John Paul II, whose pilgrimages to Poland turned into several-day-long national holidays. On the other hand, more and more of them embraced a secular lifestyle which came to be symbolized by a new temple – the shopping mall. In 2004 Cieplak directed a comedy by contemporary Polish author Jerzy Pilch, *Holy Father's Skis*, which addressed the superficial Catholicism of the Poles. When the inhabitants of a small mountain town learn that their beloved Papa plans to live out his days in their little town, they first panic and then contemplate how to exploit his presence. They decide to open a papal museum to exhibit Holy Father's old skis (John Paul II was an excellent skier), but unfortunately the skis go missing, which ruins the earning potential of the project. Though Cieplak's production was a brilliant satire of Polish Catholicism, the director always presents people with kindness and humour. He points out their failings, but he gives them a chance to mend their ways. Despite the failings, stupidity and calculation of the town inhabitants, the news of the pope's planned arrival changes the life. One couple, who haven't spoken to each other for years, fall in love all over again, which the director showed in a subtle and beautiful way.

There is no shortage of scathing critique of Catholicism in the contemporary Polish theatre, but Cieplak does not take this route. He is more interested in how ordinary people, who are neither very pious nor too wise, transcend the limits of their narrow existence, and their lives fill with love, attachment and compassion. Cieplak is the director of small human "miracles", which is perhaps best in evidence in *An Unfinished Story* based on the play by Artur Pałyga. In it, the death of an elderly woman in an apartment block has a mysterious effect on the lives of all her neighbours. They are born again, as it were, and when at the woman's funeral a requiem is played, the sound of a baby crying can be heard.

History, Romanticism and popular culture

The directors who debuted in the mid-1990s not only rejected the Romanic tradition but also lost interest in history as if they accepted Francis Fukuyama's contention that history had come to an end. For almost twenty years Polish theatre makers rarely examined the past, even though the era of the People's Republic of

Poland was “asking“ to be portrayed. There was no new theatre idiom with which to revise history until the arrival of the youngest generation of directors and playwrights. In Paweł Passini’s and Jan Klata’s productions history was revisited not as a reality to be presented objectively but as a part of human memory passed down through generations. Despite their aversion to historical themes, young artists realized they had been shaped not only by the present but also the past – especially the wartime past. Although 70 years have passed since its conclusion, the Second World War is still present in the Polish imagination and in our language. The young artists noticed that about some past events their parents and grandparents spoke with pride and emotion, about others they remained stubbornly silent, while still other events provoked their anger which they unknowingly passed to younger generations. At the same time the young people learned history from books, textbooks, museums and documentaries, but it was official history, sometimes unreliable and lacking the element of first-hand experience. So history had to be “revised” and “privatized” to become a part of the living imagination.

The theatre was the ideal place for such an experiment, and soon a distinctive kind of productions began to appear. Their starting point was the present, their destination point the past discovered in the same way a detective solves a crime by analyzing documents and hearing the evidence of event participants and witnesses. This analysis was as important as the history that was eventually uncovered. The two productions I want to discuss are linked by the memory of wartime events, people’s evidence and the topography of two cities.

The historical event presented in Paweł Passini’s *Hamlet 44* is the Warsaw Rising, launched a year before the end of the Second World War. The director brings real insurgents to the play space as witnesses and asks them to reminisce. The topography is that of Warsaw – a city where so many streets have a plaque saying “A place hallowed by the blood of Poles”. Yet Passini lays out his own topography – one of moral choices rather than of the victims. In Poland the debate is still on whether the Warsaw Rising, which claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and failed, leaving Warsaw in ruins, was a reasonable move. These doubts are voiced by Hamlet. His famous question “To be or not to be?” really means “To fight or not to fight” (the two sentences sound similar in Polish). Passini does not answer the question but reminds us that for the young insurgents “to be” meant “to fight” – to fight meant to choose

freedom and dignity over bondage and debasement. This is why moral directions are displayed behind Hamlet's back. The arrows pointing in the opposite directions juxtapose two contrasting ideas, such as "pride" and "hubris", "love" and "meanness", "glory" and "disgrace". The director also plays with the names of Warsaw districts: in the name "Służewiec" he recognizes the word "service", contrasting it with "servility"; "Wola" (Polish for will) is the will to live and act, which is contrasted with passivity; "Ochota" (Polish for willingness) contains human "willingness", which the director distinguishes from "coercion". The past battle for the city literally becomes the contemporary choice between different values.

Other younger director, Jan Klata, took on the subject of Polish-German relations which are still haunted by the shadow of the Second World War. He directed *Transfer!* in Wrocław, a former German city in western Poland which became a part of Poland after the war. After its German population had been expelled to the west in 1945. Wrocław was settled by Poles brought from Lwów, an eastern city which had been incorporated into the Soviet Union. The decision to conduct this human, or actually inhuman, "transfer" was made by three politicians: Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. The political debate surrounding this event, held in Poland and Germany, focused on the score of wrongs, questions such as "Who is to blame?", "Who suffered the most?" The facts are indisputable – it was the Germans who started the Second World War and are responsible for the wrongs inflicted on the displaced German citizens. Yet the feelings of those wronged are sometimes out of line with the facts – legacies of pain and loss are passed down from generation to generation. Such a legacy of hurt is explored in *Transfer!*. The director invited ten displaced people, five Polish and five German, to take part in his production, asking them to tell their stories. Their testimonies are extremely poignant, but they don't converge – the participants of the play do not enter into dialogue. As reflected on the stage, the two nations have so far only been able to meet, tell their stories and hear each other out.

Finally, I would like to discuss the resurgence of Romantism. The most important Polish Romantic drama is the already mentioned *Forefather's Eve* by Adam Mickiewicz. The ritual of "forefathers" (*dziady*) is an ancient pagan Slavic ritual which involves communication with the spirits of the dead. The Christian equivalent of this ritual is All Souls' Day – an important holiday for Poles. That day people travel hundreds of kilometres to visit the graves of their loved ones. Mickiewicz was a

Christian but he knew the ritual of “forefathers” which was still practised in rural areas. He believed it to be the foundation of all religions and of theatre which, in its essence, is onstage communication with the spirits of heroes, whether mythical, historical or imaginary. In this ritual, faith and theatre coalesce into a mysterious whole. We could witness it a few years ago, not in the theatre but in the streets. On 10 April 2010, the Polish president and 95 members of his delegation and crew were killed in an airplane crash. The plane, which flew from Warsaw, was bound for Katyń near Smolensk, a place of particular importance for Poles. In Katyń the Russians massacred thousands of Polish officers and buried their bodies in the forest to hide their crime from the world. Our president and his delegation intended to light vigil candles on the graves of the exhumed and reburied officers. The plane crashed on landing killing all passengers on board. On hearing the news, Warsaw residents began gathering before the President’s Palace. Photographs of the presidential couple and other victims were on display, with vigil candles lit underneath. After a dozen or so hours the street was flooded with light and flowers, and the vigil lasted for many weeks, day and night. The ritual of “forefathers” was being celebrated in the heart of Warsaw.

These events inspired theatre directors. One year later, Mickiewicz’s drama was staged in several theatres, with the shows containing many direct references to the Smoleńsk disaster. Paweł Wodziński’s *Mickiewicz. Forefathers’ Eve. A Performance* was the most original one. Wodziński is one of the middle generation directors who are reluctant to reference the Polish Romanic tradition. They believe this tradition tends to inspire the hubris of Poles and to prejudice them against other nations. Wodziński’s opinion is debatable but interesting. The director is not shy about his left-wing views, and declares that he is less interested in national identity than in the social awareness of Poles, or rather lack of it. He believes that the citizens celebrating their Polishness are unaware of real social conflicts. For most commentators, the events outside the Presidential Palace were a manifestation of patriotic sentiment, but Wodziński saw in them the symbol of the conflict that divides Polish society – the most important part of the set were steel railings. This common safety measure became the sign of the sharp division into the ruling class and ordinary citizens who were treated worse and worse outside the Presidential Palace until they were finally removed.

Wodziński's production reminded young directors of Mickiewicz's dramatic masterpiece. This year only, *Forefathers' Eve* has been staged twice. One of the productions is by Michał Zadara, who spent his childhood and youth in Germany before moving to study in the USA. When Zadara came to Poland and started his directorial work, his attitude to Polish tradition – both literary and theatrical – was utterly unlike that of the artists raised in Poland. He never felt burdened with tradition. A brilliant interpreter of old texts, he enthusiastically set about staging medieval, Renaissance and Romantic dramas. Zadara always asks about the text, not the context; he ponders the meaning of the words and scenes in a play, not how they have been interpreted by his predecessors. He asks "How do I understand these words?" rather than "How are these words usually understood?". Fascinated by *Forefathers' Eve*, he staged three of the four parts of this huge work in the spring without omitting a single word!

Yet Zadara is not a traditionalist. He uses the conventions of popular culture, presenting the Slavic ritual in the style of American horror films like *Blair Witch Project*. Some critics saw this as oversimplifying or even distorting Mickiewicz's drama. Others, however, pointed out that Zadara's use of the horror film convention is a pastiche meant to ignite the imaginations of young audiences. In this he succeeds brilliantly. His multi-hour production rivets the attention of audiences who rediscover Romantic poetry and are mesmerized by it. Of course, Zadara asks about the relevance of *Forefathers' Eve*, and finds modern equivalents for each character, situation and conflict. As a result, Romantic tragedy has a modern resonance, and the modern dimension gains metaphysical depth.

The theatre in Poland speaks of the dangers of a world where the only thing that counts is economic success, and the only value is money. It also addresses the declining religiousness of Poles and their historic memory. Surprisingly, we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in Romanticism, a movement and style in which spirit always prevails over matter. I hope that you have found the subjects I discussed interesting enough to begin your visit to Poland with a theatre experience.

By Jacek Kopciński