

Wyspia?ski: From Wagner, Through Brecht, to Artaud? *The Curse* and *The Wedding* in Poland Today



The great stage is now ready:

Church of God, or the Devil,

what will this temple of art bring to life?

— The Scenery, *Liberation* by Stanis?aw Wyspia?ski

The Polish theatre artist Stanis?aw Wyspia?ski (1869–1907)—a director, designer, and dramatist, as well as a visual artist—was, by the 1920s, firmly associated with the European avant-garde. Called a “pre-Futurist” as early as 1921, Wyspia?ski created works marked by his encounters with Polish Romanticism, and the opera he loved as an art student in Paris features a synthetic formal approach. He was said to have thought in theatre, rather than in any one of the art form’s elements. He was sometimes compared to Richard Wagner, whose operas first delighted the Polish artist on an 1890 visit to Munich.

Wyspia?ski’s plays and ideas have remained central to the repertory of Polish theatre since the sensational 1901 premiere of his most famous play, *The Wedding*. By the 1960s and 1970s, the director Konrad Swinarski—who became the artistic director Kraków’s Stary Teatr after collaborating with the Berliner Ensemble, where he assisted Bertolt Brecht—took up such works as Wyspia?ski’s 1899 drama *The Curse* (*Kl?twa*). Wyspia?ski’s elevation of Polish stories, traditions, and sites, such as Wawel Castle, through influences from Biblical and Greek antiquity to Shakespeare, evoke the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his

approach to production. Swinarski, however, was drawn to an inherent “dialectic” in texts such as Wyspiański’s theatricalist *Liberation* (*Wyzwolenie*, 1903).

In 2017, two productions—one inspired by Wyspiański’s work—came to the forefront in Poland, both on and offstage. Both influenced by Brecht, Olivier Frlji’s *The Curse*, at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, and *The Wedding*, directed by Jan Klata at Kraków’s Stary Teatr, were explosive in the larger cultural context of theatre in Poland today. The storm of controversy, debate, and protest that surrounded these shows pushed their impact toward the vision of Antonin Artaud—a violent, necessary performance that transcends the culture of written drama as it unearths and explodes fundamental conflicts and questions.



Olivier Frlji’s *The Curse*. Photo: Magda Hueckel.

Frlji’s *Curse* plays out in black, white, and shades of gray—in terms of its visual palette and its morality alike—across the exposed Powszechny stage, adorned only with a giant, looming, wooden cross. The experience is already unsettling from the moment of one’s entrance into the theatre, given the unusual security check at the door and the presence of watchful theatre attendants in the aisles throughout the performance—their black shirts emblazoned with a white graphic of a grenade. The production is driven by an ensemble of eight, in black cassocks over street wear—and is presented as a series of episodes, which build like a domino-effect to a fever pitch. It opens with a hurried phone call to Brecht himself. How are they, they ask him, to approach this play? To start, they anxiously read to him from Wyspiański’s Wikipedia entry in order to summarize the play. The German artist’s repeated response is: “What the fuck was wrong with Wyspiański?” and a recommendation that “because we’re in Poland, we should ask the Pope.”

The Curse is said to be inspired by a true story related to the playwright by his wife, Teofila Pytko—a woman from the countryside, knowledgeable in local folklore, speech, and song, which mark many of Wyspiański's works. Its parable is timeless, an early example aligned with Shirley Jackson's 1948 story "The Lottery," and Friedrich Dürrenmatt's 1956 drama *The Visit*. A drought, which has taken hold in the Galician village of Grzbosów, is blamed on the Young Woman, who has had children with the local priest. This leads to her sacrifice of her own children, before being stoned to death by the community.

Frlji's adaptation, described as built "on the themes" of Wyspiański's play, involves the drama's text sparingly. Censored in Kraków, its claim of church and community culpability proved inflammatory throughout its production history. It was first performed in 1909, two years after its author's death. A 1922 production at the City Theatre in Lviv transposed its events to antiquity in order to divert attention from its documentary origins (and perhaps its continued relevance). While the 2017 *Curse* includes an exaggeratedly insistent disclaimer from the actors — "everything we say and do in the theatre is fiction"—Frlji and the ensemble adopt nearly the opposite strategy, as he transposes Wyspiański's central theme of hypocrisy to a context unmistakably present.

As noted in nearly every review, this *Curse* soon rolls out a life-sized statue of the venerated Polish Pope, John Paul II, in white plaster—on which oral sex is simulated by Julia Wyszyska. Later, after she shifts into the Young Woman, and the show presents painful moments of scapegoating from the original play, a noose is hung around the lauded religious figure, with a sign that reads: "*Obroca Pedofilów*," or "Defender of Pedophiles." As the performance launches forward, it increasingly incites our gut responses to issues of religion and politics, prejudice and power. At the same time, the actors pull and push us into the action, with relentless shifts—of performance subject, tone, and style; in design, from lighting to music; and unexpected, uncomfortable confrontations with the audience.

After Klara Bielawka takes a turn as the Young Woman, she breaks her role in order to rail against sexism and misogyny in contemporary, supposedly political theatre—and facetiously offers sex to individual audience members. Karolina Adamczyk announces that she is pregnant, and will travel to the Netherlands in search of a safe and legal abortion. (The procedure has historically been, in most cases, illegal in Poland, and a proposed 2016 ban launched a global wave of women's protests.) She asks the women in the audience, innocently enough, to raise their hands, and then asks the same of those who have had abortions.



Olivier Frlji?'s *The Curse*. Photo: Magda Hueckel.

In another scene—after a Brechtian break, in which one actor summarizes everything we have seen so far—an intimidating Jacek Beler gives a simultaneously patriotic and anti-Muslim speech. Abruptly, he leads a live pit bull onto the stage, which he claims has been trained to detect Muslims. Rather than unleash the dog on the audience, the actor, even more alarmingly, instead releases himself, sniffing his way around the room and “catches” a few “Muslims.” Beler asks us how many terrorist attacks Poland has seen—the correct answer, readily given, is zero—and his views, he claims, are why. This frightening image clashes with Poland’s homogeneity—the direct result instances such as the Nazi genocide of its Jewish population—and the 2015 decision of the majority Law and Justice Party’s refusal to admit a European Union-assigned quota of refugees from the latest waves of migration to the continent.

As the audience shifts roles from abuser to target, dependent on our responses, we all (even critics) fall under the shadow of the play’s pointed finger: Teatr Powszechny refers to itself as “the theatre that pokes”—presumably somewhere that hurts. In one slow-motion segment set to music, the cast crafts machine guns out of crosses, then aims them at the audience. Frlji? himself is called out repeatedly, most harshly by Barbara Wysocka, for his privileged position. The play’s director—a foreigner who works in prominent positions in institutional theatres across Europe, with salaries paid in Euros rather than the Polish *z?oty*—is not actually dependent on Poland’s largely state-funded arts institutions. His collaborators in Poland, however, very much are. Thus while he has initiated and controls what happens on stage in *The Curse*, he avoids the precarious fate of the Polish cast of his own show—who report damage to their

careers and fears for their safety within the show itself.

Throughout, the production toes the line of what the actors will dare to do, and what the audience will accept, in a bumpy ride that evokes both fear and laughter as it compels us to hold on tight. One scene posits what might happen if a hypothetical campaign to raise funds for the assassination of Jarosław Kaczyński, the unofficial leader of the Law and Justice Party, were part of the show. In one of many grotesque moments, and with a twist on the play's most shocking early scene, Michał Czachor puts a certain body part of his own through a large, color print-out of Frlji's face. Although performed within a proscenium, *The Curse* appears to pop out at us from the places we least expect—we are never quite sure if we are ahead of it, behind it, in agreement or in conflict with it, not to mention with ourselves and those around us.

Months into the play's run, it is unclear how much of the audience's reaction comes from the performance itself, or what has been said about the show—from the audience of one sold-out house to another, from the press, and from the various protests that have played out across Teatr Powszechny's main entrance. Since its premiere, the building, situated across the Wisła River in the historically working-class Praga neighborhood, has seen crowds of expectant audiences, religious groups engaged in vigil, and even police intervention—when, for example, in April, the far-right National Radical Camp blocked the main doors.

Amid a government-led legal investigation into any possibility that the production sought to incite murder, and conflict with the state television station, which has claimed *The Curse* constitutes hate speech toward Catholics, Teatr Powszechny temporarily closed its doors when a suspicious substance was poured onto its stage early last December. In 1938, Antonin Artaud envisioned a theatre that, like the plague, would sweep through its context, taking hold of a culture and its citizens to the core. Amid the outcry over *The Curse*, Frlji said to *The Guardian*: “It is not just what's going on on stage, it's what happens in a broader social context. It would be great if the protesters could understand that they too are part of this performance.” ([The Guardian](#), June 23, 2017.)



Jan Klata's *The Wedding*. Photo: Beata Zawizelli.

For *The Wedding*, Jan Klata adopts a similarly critical approach to both the history and timeliness of Wyspiański's play. In this case, the verse drama is one of the playwright's—and Polish theatre's—most staged, and thus most familiar to audiences. *The Wedding* was inspired by the nuptials of the author's friend and fellow Kraków poet, Lucjan Rydel, to Jadwiga Mikołajczykówna, a local woman from the village of Bronowice, where the play takes place. As the merry reception in a wooden hut is visited by ghosts of Poland's cultural and political history, the play ultimately diagnoses the failure of the Polish people, across social classes, to achieve their country's independence. Wyspiański spent most of his life in Austrian-occupied partitioned Poland, marked by the failed 1864 uprising, during which peasants turned against the Kraków-noble led movement. The artist did not live to see World War I, or the establishment of the Second Polish Republic at its close.

Often staged realistically, which serves to highlight the play's rich, folk-inspired poetry, *The Wedding* has remained timely through nearly a century of Polish independence. The standard make-up of a repertory theatre company in Poland is said to be based on that needed to stage the play. By now, *The Wedding* is intrinsic to Polish popular culture, thanks to its storied production history, as well as Andrzej Wajda's 1973 film version. The drama forms part of the Polish public high-school curriculum, and in 2017, the government promoted the play as its annual "National Reading."

Klata's production of *The Wedding* appeared, in some ways, to reinforce one of Wyspiański's inspirations—the tradition of *szopka*, or Polish Nativity puppet-plays, still a mainstay of the Kraków holiday season. Much of this is present in Justyna Żagowska's precise set, light, and costume design. The dress of the more than 30-actor ensemble features the playful presence of straw-print patterns for the

villager guests, and a ruffle or a stylized peacock feather, symbols of Polish nobility, grace much of the groom's Kraków crowd.

Lit brightly against the sparse set of the dark, at times gloomy Stary Teatr stage—despite the colorful plastic party flags and streamer-like exit hangings—the characters, from the Bride and Groom to Rachela, the uninvited Jewish guest dressed in black, all but archetypical to a Polish audience, popped out in an almost puppet-like fashion. Yet, the play's segments of stark, stylized group dance function as a Brechtian *Gestus*, an interruption to the play's familiar poetry that allows us to fully see, process, and feel the experience at hand—and how this *Wedding*, here and now, is unique to the present.

In tandem, distinctly contemporary elements foster a Brechtian “montage,” or a connotative and critical dialogue with the play's familiar elements and its present performance. The villagers also wear bright-red knee socks and sneakers. A large, white Polish eagle, a favorite symbol of sports fans and tourists, stretches its wings across the Host's red T-shirt. The Kraków crowd's fancy suits, shoes, and the odd man-bun feel almost wry in a Kraków so distanced from the angst-ridden Young Poland period, overrun today with Anglophone tourists and fancy boutiques.

In this context, Klata puts forward some timely provocations. Notably, this production's Bride, performed comically wide-eyed by Monika Frajczyk, appears to be at least eight months pregnant. The Poet's famous line: “*A! To Polska w?a?nie/Ah!* Poland, there it is” indicates her belly, rather than, as written, her heart. It is difficult not to think of “500 Plus,” the leading Law and Justice Party's childcare subsidy. Instated to boost an aging population, the program has been divisive, as its state pension plan and public health-care system struggle to keep up. At the same time, this choice electrifies a passage now well-known enough to potentially fall flat. The set also includes a sorrowful central tree, with a traditional shrine to the Virgin Mother, but empty. Sawed off at the trunk, its absent branches echo Poland's struggle in Wyspiański's period, but also the recent conflict over a government-backed increase in the logging of the primeval Białowieża Forest.

Poland's religious past and present also come into conversation. The Priest, an affable Bartosz Bielenia, sings “Dance, Christians,” a contemporary Catholic children's song—while above the action, throughout the play, four punk-rock, God- or demon-like guitar players, known outside the show as the black-metal band Furia—stand atop large, black pedestals, their faces painted ghostly white. Periodically, they interrupt the play to blast words originally assigned to the mulch-covered rosebushes, who launch the reception's haunting at Rachela's call. Here, contemporary twists on *The Wedding*'s other mystical elements vibrate from past to present: The Black Knight appears androgynous, in Polish-flag body paint. Furthermore, Wernyhora, a Ukrainian folk prophet, offers an empty plastic bag rather than the play's traditionally symbolic “golden horn,” which Jasiek is meant to use to call his countrymen to action.



Jan Klata's *The Wedding*. Photo: Jan Graczyński.

While these choices invite any number of complex responses, the presence of almost the entire ensemble of the Stary Teatr calls attention to the legendary status of not only *The Wedding*, but the institution itself. (Andrzej Kozak, an emeritus member with a long history on its stage, delivers the famous line: “*Mia?e?, chamie, z?oty róg* / Fool, you had a golden horn.”) Both are perpetual places for questions of Polish culture, history, identity, politics, and theatre. In a much larger context, this juxtaposition reached a fever pitch as the production opened, only days after the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage’s announcement that Klata—the simultaneously popular and controversial artistic director of the Stary Teatr since 2003—would be replaced by Marek Mikos.

This decision came as the result of a contest for the position, in which Klata himself was the anticipated selection. Although the process is a standard one, the choice, gauging by reactions from the press and the Stary company, was controversial. This came on the heels of six months of conflict and disarray between the Ministry and another state-funded Polish theatre, Teatr Polski in Wrocław, over the replacement of its then-director, Krzysztof Miklaszewski—which came shortly after a disagreement over on-stage sexuality in one of the theatre’s productions. The move was strongly protested by many of Teatr Polski’s actors and their supporters, under the slogan: “*Nie Oddamy Wam Kultury* / We Will Not Give You Back Culture,” a reference to the illegal status of censorship in Poland since the fall of Communism in 1989. In another echo from theatre history, Wyspiański himself was involved in, and lost, a heated competition for the directorship of the Kraków City Theatre (today, Teatr Słowackiego) in 1905.

In this context, the production's decision to punctuate the play's opening line—"Cóż tam, Panie, w polityce? / What's new, then, Sir, in politics?"—with a burst of raucous laughter sets the tone of a larger, collective experience of Poland, one as fraught and ever-changing as the frustration, irony, and humor that Wyspiański wove into *The Wedding* itself. The production's merging of art and life have continued, as its popularity continues to prompt its staging at the Stary and across festivals in Poland. The actors' curtain calls have brought expressions of sentiment and solidarity, from the actors and the audience alike—and have involved enthusiastic stomping to the raising of protest signs.

Amid this intense energy, there is a palpable, troubling uncertainty. In a November 10, 2017 interview with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in anticipation of the announcement of the Stary's new repertoire, the actor Juliusz Chrzostowski—who plays the Host in the production and has protested Klata's departure—expressed a larger sense of doubt over the theatre's future.

There is a terrible plague among [the company]... [T]oday, this performance is a kind of manifesto for each of us... Each performance is a kind of flight, ours and the audience's, a unique alliance between the audience and the stage.

From the aisles of the Stary, there is a sense that this feeling, of despair and hope, resonates even more widely: What is next for the production, the theatre, and Poland itself?

In their Brechtian approaches, both *The Curse* and *The Wedding* remind us of the hand of their directors. Frljić, a Croatian director, at the young Teatr Powszechny, one of Poland's few prominent theatres that operates outside of the state-supported system, brings an outside perspective. Klata, trained at the Kraków State Theatre Academy—itsself renamed after Wyspiański in 2016—brought forth his production at and as the leader of the Stary, a national theatre founded in 1781. Notably, Klata once served as an assistant to Jerzy Grzegorzewski, the director who cemented Wyspiański's centrality to the National Theatre repertory when the institution re-opened in a post-Communist Poland.

Still, Klata and his work have been charged with both radicalism and conservatism. Notably, in 2013, he stopped production at the Stary of Frljić's tendentious *The Un-Divine Comedy: Remains*—a look at the anti-Semitic controversies of Swinarski's 1965 production of Juliusz Krasiński's Romantic poem. The contentiousness around *The Curse* and *The Wedding* thus form part of a complex history, one that spans within and beyond the theatre—as Poland has itself navigated questions of its identity, traditions, and values over more than a decade of European Union membership.

Wagner's theatre, as in Wyspiański's own practice of the art form, synthesized the various elements of performance. Brecht's practice sought instead to individuate and highlight them as a means of instilling political awareness. Artaud, however, imagined a theatre that, like these two productions, exploded cultural meaning and myth to "infect" the audience with an awareness of issues, ignored in daily life, that most challenge and trouble us. With the explosion of Wyspiański's legacy through influences from the European avant-garde, this *Curse* and *Wedding* have, in 2017, simultaneously asserted the artist's continued relevance. Importantly, they have also exposed the urgent reasons that have continued—and only stand to continue—to make his work so.

Lauren Dubowski is a theatre artist, producer, and scholar. She is currently a DFA candidate in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism at Yale School of Drama, where her dissertation focuses on politics in the production history of Stanisław Wyspiański, and includes her English-language translations of several of his plays. Lauren's research has been supported by the Fulbright Program and the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies.



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Table of Contents:

1. [Berlin Theatre, Fall 2017](#) by Beate Hein Bennett
2. [The Homecoming King of Dystopia: Christoph Marthaler Returns to Schauspielhaus Zürich, with *Mir nämeds uf öis \[We take it on\]*](#) by Katrin Hilbe
3. [2018 Berliner Theatertreffen](#) by Steve Earnest
4. [Speaking Out](#) by Joanna Ostrowska & Juliusz Tyzka
5. [Political Theatre Season 2016-2017 in Poland](#) by Marianna Lis
6. [Hymn to Love in a Love-less World: Chorus of Women, Berlin 2017](#) by Krystyna Lipińska Illakowicz
7. [Wyspiański: From Wagner, Through Brecht, to Artaud? *The Curse* and *The Wedding* in Poland Today](#) by Lauren Dubowski
8. [A Theatrical and Real Encounter with Zabel Yesayan: A Play by BGST](#) by Eylem Ejder
9. [Report from Vienna](#) by Marvin Carlson
10. [Motus and Me: In Appreciation of the Italian Theatre Group Motus](#) by Tom Walker
11. [Actors without Directors: Setkání/Encounter Festival of Theatre Schools in Brno, Czech Republic, 17-21 April 2018](#) by Matti Linnavuori
12. [Ghosts, Demons and Journeys: Barcelona Theatre 2018](#) by Maria M. Delgado
13. [Two Samples of Documentary Theatre in Hungary](#) by Gabriella Schuller
14. [Two East European Festivals](#) by Steve Wilmer
15. [The Misted Stage: Eirik Stubø's Stagings of Tragedy](#) by Eylem Ejder
16. [Amadeus in London](#) by Marvin Carlson
17. [Two Significant Losses](#)

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The Graduate Center CUNY Graduate Center

365 Fifth Avenue

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