

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



The great and open stage:

Church of God or the Devil,

which one will this temple of art become?

— The Scenery, *Liberation* by Stanisław Wyspiański

An icon of the prewar “Young Poland” movement, Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) — a theatre designer and director, playwright, as well as a visual artist — was later adopted by the burgeoning Polish avant-garde. Called a “pre-Futurist” as early as 1921, Wyspiański created theatre that was synthetic in both form and content, influenced by his knowledge of Polish Romantic poetry, as well as the French and pan-European opera and theatre that he encountered as an art student in Paris. Said to have thought in theatre, rather than for any one of its elements, he was also compared to Wilhelm Richard Wagner — whose performances Wyspiański admired, and first witnessed on an 1890 visit to Munich.

Wyspiański’s texts and ideas have remained central to the repertory of Polish theatre since the premiere of his most famous play, *The Wedding* (*Wesele*), in 1901. His elevation of Polish stories, traditions, and sites, such as Wawel Castle, through influences from Biblical and Greek antiquity to Shakespeare, evoke the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as much as his all-encompassing approach to their production did. By the 1960s and ’70s, however, the prominent director Konrad Swinarski was drawn, during his historic leadership of

Kraków's Stary Teatr, to an inherent “dialectic” that he detected in Wyspiański's writing. Informed by his own experiences with the Berliner Ensemble, where he assisted Bertolt Brecht, Swinarski took up Wyspiański, from the metatheatrical *Liberation* (*Wyzwolenie*, 1903) to a partly documentary drama, *The Curse* (*Klątwa*, 1899), from this perspective.

In 2017, two new productions — one inspired by, and one of Wyspiański's work — came to the forefront in Poland, on and offstage. Both marked by strongly Brechtian impulses, Olivier Frlji's *The Curse*, at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, and *The Wedding*, directed by Jan Klata at the Stary, became explosive in the larger cultural context of Poland and its theatre today. The storm of controversy, debate, and protest that surrounded these shows even pushed their impact toward the vision of Antonin Artaud's “Theatre of Cruelty” — violent, necessary performance that transcends theatre as it probes the deeper, more fundamental conflicts and questions of humanity itself.



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

Frlji's *Curse* plays out in black, white, and shades of gray — both colorful and moral — across the exposed Powszechny stage, adorned with only a giant, looming, wooden cross. In recent performances, the experience is already unsettling from entrance into the theatre, with an unusual security check at the door, and the presence of watchful attendants in the aisles throughout the show — their black shirts emblazoned with a white graphic of a grenade. The production, driven by an ensemble of eight in black cassocks over street wear, takes place in domino-effect episodes that build to a fever pitch. It opens with a hurried phone call to Brecht himself. How does he think the cast should approach this play? They anxiously read him Wyspiański's Wikipedia entry, and summarize the plot of *The Curse*. The German artist's reported response is: “What the fuck was wrong with Wyspiański?” and his 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 Wyspiański by his wife, Teofila Wyspiańska, née Pytko — a woman from the countryside, knowledgeable in local folklore, speech, and song, elements of which feature prominently in Wyspiański’s primarily verse dramas. The work’s parable is a timeless one, an early example in line with Shirley Jackson’s 1948 short story “The Lottery,” or Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s 1956 play *The Visit*. A drought, which has taken hold in the Galician village of Grzboszków, is blamed on the Young Woman, who has had children with the local priest, out of wedlock. This leads to her sacrifice of her own children, and the community’s loss of the Young Woman herself.

Frlji’s adaptation, described as “on the themes” of the original work, only sparingly involves its actual text. Censored in Wyspiański’s Kraków, the work’s claim of church and community culpability proved inflammatory throughout its production history. First performed in Łódź in 1909, two years after its author’s death, a 1922 performance in Lviv transposed its events to antiquity, in order to divert attention from the story’s origins (and, perhaps, 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, his dramaturgs (Agnieszka Jakimiak, Joanna Wichowska, and Goran Injac), and the ensemble adopt nearly the opposite strategy. In this production, Wyspiański’s central theme of hypocrisy is updated for a context that is unmistakably current.

As noted in nearly every review, this *Curse* soon rolls out a life-sized, white-plaster statue of the venerated Polish Pope, John Paul II, on which oral sex is simulated by Julia Wyszowska. 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’s neck. At his feet, a sign is propped up, reading: “*Obrońca Pedofilów*,” or “Defender of Pedophiles.” As the performance lurches forward, it increasingly incites our gut responses to issues of faith and politics, prejudice and power. At the same time, the ensemble pushes and pulls us into the action, with relentless shifts — of subject, tone, and style; in design, from lighting to music; and through unexpected, uncomfortable confrontations with the audience.

When Klara Bielawka takes a turn as the Young Woman, she breaks her role in order to rail freely 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 soon travel to the Netherlands for an abortion. (The planned termination of pregnancy has historically been, in most cases, illegal in Poland, and a 2016 proposed outright ban launched the “black protest” women’s movement.) After she reveals the price of the procedure, written across her stomach, and holds up what she says is her sonogram, Adamczyk asks all of the women in the audience, innocently enough, to raise their hands. She then asks the same of those who have had abortions themselves.



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

In another scene — after a Brechtian break, in which one actor summarizes everything we have witnessed so far — an intimidating Jacek Beler delivers a simultaneously ironic, Islamophobic, and patriotic speech. He mockingly derides a stated assignment from Frlji? that the actors imagine how those affected by the American “travel ban,” enacted by President Donald Trump during the show’s rehearsals, must have felt — as well as what Beler claims are Teatr Powszechny’s “pro-gay, pro-Muslim” policies. How can we be sure, he asks provocatively, that a Muslim employee wouldn’t attempt to blow up the theatre? His violent demeanor, of course, only highlights the danger of such prejudiced beliefs and rhetoric.

Abruptly, Beler leads a live pit bull onto the stage, which he states has been trained to detect Muslims. Rather than unleash the dog on the audience, however, the actor, even more alarmingly, releases himself. He tears and sniffs his way around the room, and successfully “catches” a few “Muslims” — in this performance, several white members of the overwhelmingly white audience. The frightening scene, which teeters between satire and a too-close-for-comfort representation of recognizable hate, clashes with Poland’s social uniformity — arguably the result of related views, in instances such as the Nazi genocide of its significant pre-World War II Jewish population. The contemporary, continued refusal of the leading Law and Justice Party to admit a European Union-mandated quota of refugees into the country also hangs in the air. Beler asks us how many terrorist attacks Poland has seen; the correct answer, readily given, is zero. This ideology, he claims, is what keeps it safe.

Teatr Powszechny refers to its work as “theatre that gets in the way,” or meddles — presumably, given this *Curse*, in places where this is wholly unwanted. As we shift roles from abuser to target, dependent on our responses, we all (critics, too) fall under the show’s pointed finger. One slow-motion segment, set to music, sees the cast craft machine guns out of crosses, then recite the Lord’s Prayer, before they “fire” the “weapons” directly at the audience. Frlji? himself is called out repeatedly, most harshly by Barbara Wysocka, for his privileged position. As a Croatian artist, who works at prominent theatres and festivals across Europe — with salaries in Euro, not the Polish *z?oty*, to match — he does not personally rely on Poland’s largely state-funded arts system. His collaborators on *The Curse* largely do. Thus, while Frlji? has initiated and controls what happens on stage here, he avoids the precarious fate of those whom he has tasked with enacting it all — who report real damage to their careers, and fears for their own safety, within the show itself.

Throughout, the performance toes the line of what the actors will dare, and the audience will accept, in a bumpy ride that evokes both fear and laughter, as it compels us to hold on tight ... but to what? One scene posits what might happen if a hypothetical campaign to raise funds for the assassination of Jaros?aw Kaczy?ski, the unofficial leader of Law and Justice, were to be presented onstage. In a grotesque twist on the play’s shocking early scene, Micha? 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* seems to pop out at us from the places we least expect — we are never quite sure if we are ahead of it, or behind it; in agreement, or in conflict with it; as with ourselves and those around us.

More than a year after its February 2017 premiere, it is unclear whether the show’s highly engaged audience is responding more to what they are seeing, or how this affirms or subverts their expectations. Situated near the National Stadium, in the historically working-class Praga district, Teatr Powszechny has seen sold-out crowds, religious groups engaged in vigil, and even police intervention — when the far-right National Radical Camp attempted to block its entrance — amid *The Curse*’s performances. A government-led legal investigation has explored any possibility that the production may have sought to incite murder, while the national television station has claimed that its content constitutes hate speech toward Catholics. Last December, Powszechny temporarily closed its doors, after a suspicious substance was discovered to have been left, mysteriously, upon its stage.

In 1938, Antonin Artaud envisioned a theatre that, similar to a plague, would sweep through its context, taking hold of a culture at the core. Amid outcry around *The Curse*, Frlji? stated 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 its text. In this case, it is one of Wyspiański's most staged, and beloved by audiences — inspired by the nuptials of his friend and fellow Kraków poet, Lucjan Rydel, to Jadwiga Mikołajczykówna, a local woman from the village of Bronowice, where the play takes place. Set in 1901, *The Wedding*'s premiere that same year proved sensational, not only for its up-to-the-minute themes, but its depiction of real members of the community.

As the drama's merry reception in a wooden hut is visited by symbolic ghosts from Polish history, Wyspiański diagnoses the failure of his people, across social classes, to achieve national independence. The artist was born, spent most of his life, and died in the Kraków of Vienna-ruled, culturally diverse Galicia, which formed part of the larger territories occupied by Austrian, Prussian, and Russian powers for more than a century. This region's fraught politics were deeply affected by the failed 1846 Kraków Uprising, in which peasants violently repressed a noble-led coup — the events of which echo in Wyspiański's play.

Often staged realistically, which can serve to highlight its rich, folk-inflected, and musical poetry, *The Wedding* has remained popular throughout Poland's continually turbulent history — from two World Wars, through Soviet Communism, to democracy. The standard makeup of a repertory theatre company in Poland is said to be based around its casting needs. Thanks to a long production history, as well as Andrzej Wajda's 1973 film version, adapted by Andrzej Kijowski, the play is by now equally inherent to Polish popular culture. It forms part of the state high-school curriculum, and in 2017, the government promoted the work as the country's annual "National Reading."

Klata's production of his own adaptation of *The Wedding* appeared, in many ways, to reinforce one of Wyspiański's most important inspirations — the *szopka krakowska*, or Nativity puppet-play. Still a mainstay of the Kraków holiday season, the tradition has often incorporated the latest social and political commentary and critique. Much of this influence is present in Justyna Żagowska's precise set, lighting, and costume design. Illuminated 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, all but archetypical to a Polish audience, pop out appropriately starkly.

From the Bride and Groom, both in white, to Katarzyna Krzanowska as Rachel, the celebration's uninvited Jewish guest, in black, the show's robust, unified ensemble appears almost puppet-like in the immediate recognizability of its individual members. Yet, the segments of stark, stylized group dance that weave throughout the performance, often with an eerie humor, function as Brechtian *Gestus*, an interruption to the play's familiar poetry. These moments allow us to fully see, process, and feel the experience at hand — and how this particular *Wedding* is unique to here and now.

In tandem, distinctly modern-day visual choices foster a Brechtian “montage,” or a connotative and critical dialogue with the production's more expected elements. The villagers wear bright-red knee socks, paired with sneakers. A large, white eagle — a storied Polish symbol that today evokes sports, tourist trinkets, or certain political impulses — stretches across the red T-shirt worn by Krzysztof Zawadzki, as the brazen Czepiec. (At this performance, he reveals it to titters from the audience.) Meanwhile, the city groomsman's classy suits, shoes, and man-bun or two feel almost wry in a Kraków far from Wyspiański's angsty Young Poland period, overrun with Anglophone tourists and fancy boutiques.

In this context, Klata puts forward some timely provocations. Notably, the Bride, performed comically wide-eyed by Monika Frajczyk, appears to be about 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's difficult not to think of “500 Plus,” the Law and Justice Party's childcare subsidy. Instated in 2016 to boost an aging population, the policy has been divisive, as the state pension plan and public health-care system struggle to keep up. At the same time, this choice electrifies a passage well-known enough to potentially fall flat with its Polish audience. Relatedly, Żagowska's set also includes a sorrowful central tree, with a traditional shrine to the Virgin Mother, but empty of her image. Sawed off partway up the trunk, the absence of any branches echoes turn-of-the-century struggles to unite Poland — but also, a much more recent conflict in the country, over a government-backed increase in the logging of the ancient Białowieża Forest.

In this *Wedding*, Poland's religious past and present also come into conversation. The Priest, an affable Bartosz Bielenia, sings “*Chrześcijanin ta?czy*,” (“Dance, Christian”), a contemporary Catholic children's song. Above the action, throughout the show, four punk-rock, God- or demon-like electric-guitar players — known outside of this performance as the black-metal band Furia — stand atop huge pedestals, their faces painted ghostly white. Periodically, they interrupt the action to blast text from the drama, such as that originally assigned to the mulch-covered rosebushes, who launch the party's haunting at Rachel's mischievous call. Here, unique twists on *The Wedding*'s other mystical elements vibrate between past and present: The Black Knight appears androgynous, in Polish-flag body paint. Wernyhora, a Ukrainian folk prophet, offers the symbolic “golden horn,” with which the character Jasiek is to rouse his fellow Poles to action, as an empty plastic bag.



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

While such choices invite any number of complex responses, the presence of almost the entire ensemble of the Stary Teatr onstage calls attention to the legendary status of not only *The Wedding*, but that institution itself. (Andrzej Kozak, an emeritus member with a long history on its stage, delivers the celebrated line: “*Mia?e?, chamie, z?oty róg*” — “You had a golden horn, you fool.”) Both are perpetual loci for questions of Polish culture, history, politics, even identity — and, of course, theatre. In a larger context, this resonance reached a fever pitch as the production opened on the Stary’s main stage in May 2017. Days earlier, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage had announced that Klata — also the at-once popular and controversial artistic director of the Stary, since 2013 — would be replaced in this role by Marek Mikos, in collaboration with Micha? Gieleta. The decision was the result of a contest for the position, in which Klata was the anticipated winner.

Although the process is a standard one, this outcome, given reactions in the press and from the theatre’s company, was controversial. The news also came in the wake of months of related unrest at another institution, Teatr Polski in Wroc?aw. Here, the conflict centered around the Ministry’s replacement of the theatre’s at times divisive then-director, Krzysztof Miklaszewski. Preceded by a public disagreement over on-stage sexuality in one of its productions, the move was strongly contested by many at Teatr Polski, as well as supporters. Protests were organized as far as Warsaw’s Palace of Culture under the slogan: “*Nie Oddamy Wam Kultury*” (“We Will Not Give You Back Culture”), a reference to state censorship, illegal in Poland since 1989. In another ricochet from Poland’s theatrical past, Wyspia?ski

was himself a candidate in — and lost — a heated competition for the directorship of the Kraków City Theatre, now known as the S?owacki Theatre, in 1905.

In this context, Klata's decision to punctuate the opening line of *The Wedding* — “*Có? tam, Panie, w polityce?*” (“What's new in politics, Sir?”) — 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 even humor that Wyspia?ski wove into the play itself. This show's merging of art and life only stand to grow, as its popularity prompts regular performances in Kraków and across the country on tour; in April 2018, it took first prize at the “*Klasyka ?ywa*” (“Living Classics”) competition in Opole. The ensemble's curtain calls continue to prompt expressions of sentiment and solidarity — from enthusiastic stomping, to the raising of protest signs, by performers and audience members alike.

At the core of this intense energy, there lies a palpable uncertainty. In a November 10, 2017 interview with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in anticipation of the announcement of the Sary Teatr's next season, the actor Juliusz Chrz?stowski — who plays the Host in the production, and has protested Klata's departure — offered his thoughts on the situation:

There is a terrible plague among us [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 seats in the house at *The Wedding*, there is a sense that Chrz?stowski's feeling, one of simultaneous despair and hope, resonates even more widely: What is next for these artists, this show, its institution, Polish theatre, and the country itself?

In their Brechtian approaches, *The Curse* and *The Wedding* remind us of the hand of their directors. Frlji?, a foreign artist, at the Teatr Powszechny — an institution launched in 1944 at a former cinema, and run by the city of Warsaw — offers an outside critical perspective. Klata, trained at the Kraków State Theatre Academy, itself renamed after Wyspia?ski in 2016, brought forth his production at and as the leader of the Sary, a state theatre founded in 1781. Notably, Klata was once an assistant to Jerzy Grzegorzewski — the director who cemented Wyspia?ski's centrality to repertory of the National Theatre in Warsaw, as he led the institution into a newly democratic Poland.

Still, Klata and his work have been charged with both radicalism and conservatism. In 2013, at the Sary, he halted Frlji?'s *The Un-Divine Comedy: Remains* — which tendentiously took up a 1965 performance, directed by Swinarski, of Juliusz Krasi?ski's Romantic poem, a text controversial for questions of anti-Semitism. Contention around *The Curse* and *The Wedding* thus form part of a complex history, one that spans within and beyond the theatre — particularly as Poland has negotiated its identity, traditions, and values anew, over more than a decade of European Union membership.

Wagner's theatre, as in Wyspia?ski's own practice of it, fused the elements of live performance to evoke and ignite a collective imagination. Brecht's sought to instead individuate and highlight the discrete components and construction of the art form, in order to encourage political dialogue. Artaud, however, imagined a theatre that, like these two productions, mines cultural meaning and myth to “infect” the audience with a new sense of the issues that challenge and trouble us most. With their explosion of Wyspia?ski's legacy, Frlji?'s *Curse* and Klata's *Wedding* have, above all, asserted that — and the urgent

reasons why — their author’s imagination remains essential in Poland today.

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MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER PUBLICATIONS

European Stages, vol. 11, no. 1 (Spring 2018)

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New York NY 10016