

Modern Polish Theatre in Search of a Radical Language

How do you create a language that describes modern-day reality and write a text that can reflect this reality's complexity on stage? This is likely the biggest challenge facing every playwright in recent years. Of course, I am not referring to those playwrights who still believe in the old tried and tested formula for what a good play should be like. I am writing about the ones who choose a dramatic form and seek a radical language to talk about a world bursting at the seams and rife with nuanced complexity.

My intention is not to find an umbrella term for the generation of writers working in Polish theatre today. I will mention only a few playwrights and attempt to describe their strategies for working in theatre. I will no doubt omit certain names and titles while focusing on the ones that I subjectively selected. After all, I prefer to leave the reader with a sense of wanting more and with a desire to dig deeper rather than giving them a simplified overview of what is happening in Polish dramaturgy in the twenty-first century.

But before we move on to a description of the status quo, it is worthwhile to take a quick look back to how things were twenty-four years ago. Shortly after 4 June 1989, the day of Poland's first democratic elections, we saw the beginnings of a process in which the political system changed and which drastically changed theatre's position. Decades of communism produced a certain complacency on both sides of the footlights. Utilizing Polish romantic dramas, our directors created a communication channel that ran over the heads of the censors and straight to the hearts of audiences. National texts that spoke of years of subjugation and of the road to freedom provided a perfect canvas for discussing the issues that affected society at that time. Growing from year to year was a conviction that an immense shift was imminent. The actors on stage sent indicative winks towards the audiences, who in turn nodded their heads knowingly from their comfortable seats. "We have a common enemy—take your pick: the authorities, the system, the ideology. Cross out the ones that don't apply." Meanwhile, the language of Polish romantic drama, so full of poetics and metaphor, offered abundant room for interpretation. And it was this very thicket of allusions and double entendres that confounded the censors and led them astray, much to the delight of both producers and audiences.

The blissful state of knowing looks and suggestive winks was halted by the change of political systems. Audiences rose from their seats and left the theatre. They headed to the shops, which were suddenly full of goods to buy. Either that or to pick up their passports and set off for the much-longed-for West. Or to set up in business and finally be their own boss. The actors and directors remained onstage. They were surprised to discover that the knowing looks and winks were no longer working and that fewer and fewer people were coming to the theatre. The result was the appearance of new dramas that searched for a new enemy in bloodthirsty capitalism. They showed the world through the convention of realism, producing well-crafted comedies that sought to depict accurately the shift in customs. Yet, what they lacked was an effective tool for criticism in the period of transformation, a tool that could only arise through analysis from the perspective of... communism and socialism. But how do you make use of tools from a system that had just recently been abolished, forty-four years after the end of World War II?

Theatre artists were faced with a crisis of language. The arrival of free speech meant that winking at the audience was no longer necessary. Polish dramas from the nineteenth century were revived but it was a struggle to make them comment on the current state of things. It was a little better for twentieth century literature, especially those works which the more astute censors had kept under lock and key. However,

the plays of Witold Gombrowicz and Stanisław Witkiewicz were still unable to provide a model that would lead to a theatre revival in Poland.

It was only in the late 1990s that something new began to take shape in theatre. Thanks to the availability of quality translations, young directors finally gained access to contemporary dramas from Germany, Austria and the UK. The "Brutalists," as they were dubbed by the Polish media, brought new subjects to the theatre and they staged plays that addressed current taboos. Mark Ravenhill offered us a picture of young Brits warped by consumption and living to the beat of techno music. Sarah Kane delved into the territory of extreme love that lies well past the border of what we consider homosexual identity. It is an identity that is poorly grasped by a society of which 95% claim to be members of the Catholic Church. Even more outrageous is the writing of Marius von Mayenburg, who, as if focusing on dysfunctional families weren't enough, has a brother and sister entering into an incestuous criminal partnership. And how do you stage the plays of Werner Schwab and Elfriede Jelinek, who parody the language of capitalist advertising to poke fun at Austrians (equally ardent Catholics)?

As the subject matter alone becomes harder to swallow by a consumption-hungry palate, the change in the artistic language becomes an even greater barrier (especially to the older segment of the theatre world). Harsh curse words? Video clip aesthetics? Nudity on stage? That is not right, they say. Yet, all of the difficulties of staying true to creative decisions paid off. Theatres began to attract a new, young audience for whom the theatre was a place for discourse on the issues affecting the modern world.

Inevitably, the question arose as to why we still looked to plays written outside of Poland. Roman Pawłowski, a theatre critic for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's leading newspaper, appealed for more drama writing in Poland. Like the ancient senator Marcus Porcius Cato calling for the destruction of Carthage in each of his addresses, Roman Pawłowski beseeched playwrights to write about their reality. The result was a new wave of Polish theatre beginning around 2002.

New competitions sprung up—Brave Radom, the Wrocław Contemporary Drama Competition, the Gdynia Dramaturgy Award—and brought recognition to outstanding theatres and playwrights. There were also new workshops for playwrights and directors organized near Lake Wigry in the summer months of every year. Stary Teatr in Krakow and the National Theatre in Warsaw—the two oldest stages in the country—opened up their repertoires to new plays.

The directors of theatres in small and large cities alike began to commission new dramas from young authors. Also encouraging new productions was the Competition for the Staging of a Contemporary Polish Play (which is up to its nineteenth edition this year). Theatre companies (institutions, fringe theatres, associations) can nominate premieres to the competition, which are then viewed by the judging committee for a spot in the finals. In addition to awards for theatre artists (writers, directors, set designers, actors), the competition offers theatres a chance to receive reimbursements for a portion of the costs associated with the production (costs of sets and costumes, promotion, artist fees, etc.).

And what is the level of interest in the competition among theatres? In the 2012-2013 season, more than 100 pre-premiere productions were nominated. That accounts for a majority of the 142 total pre-premieres that took place in Poland in 2012. Let's add that in Poland at that time there were 629 theatre companies and 1274 premieres, with a total of 5 million spectators attending 31,000 performances in all (statistics from the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw for the year 2012). One out of every seven

theatre premieres was also the world premiere of a new text and nearly one tenth of all productions were based on Polish texts. Statistically, it all looks quite promising.

However, to those who don't entirely believe in statistics but favor quality and the merits of the writing as a measuring stick, I recommend reading a few of the dramas recently written in Poland. They constitute some of the best evidence for what is on the minds of inhabitants of the Land on the Vistula. Our government likes to boast about economic numbers (Poland was the only country in the European Union to avoid falling into recession; our GDP has increased every year since the political transformation) and ministers eagerly cut ribbons on stadiums and highways which we build with EU money. Yet, in the shadow of this impressive progress there is a society divided. On one side are those who profited from the political transformation and are pleased with the changes that took place in our country. The other side consists of those who maintain that the transformation was a great detriment and that we need to change the course of events. This is, of course, a vast simplification that, all the while, serves to portray the two extremes of the discussion on the state of Poland.

The kind of drama that can arise in such a fractured world is best exemplified by Dorota Masłowska's play *No Matter How Hard We Tried*. The piece's Polish title, which literally translates as "Things Are Good Between Us," sounds like a naïve expression of bliss, but its subject matter raises eyebrows from the very outset and urges us to examine the characters more closely. Masłowska wrote the play specifically for the Tr Warszawa theatre, with the resulting production, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna, taking home the main awards at the leading theatre festivals in Poland. A flat in the Warsaw district of Prague is occupied by three women belonging to three different generations: an aging grandmother, an overworked mother, and a young girl. The eldest woman recalls the war and Warsaw of the 1930s with vivid emotion while her granddaughter refuses to believe in such a romanticized picture. To her, Poland means poverty, deficiency, and unfulfilled dreams. Once she even declares that she is not Polish and that she learned the language from records and tapes left behind by a Polish cleaning lady.

This is a bitter truth about our dreams of joining the West—since Poland's accession into the EU, roughly 2.5 million Poles have gone abroad to work in bars, on construction sites, and as cleaning staff in the West. While the audience often reacts in laughter thanks to Masłowska's strong comedic sensibility, it is a bitter laughter holding back tears. Seeing the mother and her friend reading a magazine titled "Not For You" and lamenting that this year they won't be going to Egypt and that next year they won't be going to Tunisia, it is easy to imagine many Polish families being in the same predicament. Our heads are full of dreams from glossy magazines but the reality in Poland severely limits our ability to fulfill them. All we can do is to live in the sweet dream—the quasi-reality—that the mass media and the smug politicians concoct for us.

The play ends with a discussion between the girl and her grandmother, who reveals in one of her last monologues that she in fact died during the bombing of Warsaw in 1939. So, is the whole play really just a dream? Are the grandmother's descendants just the projections of the dead woman? Or perhaps of the audience, who watches the action unfold from a safe distance?

Another subject that interests writers is the relationship Poles have with the painful past. The chapter in our country's history that addresses our relationship with the Jews is full of instances of glory as well as of detestable actions driven by base instincts. Questions relating to the moral responsibility of Holocaust witnesses resurface periodically like the cry of the Erinyes while each generation grapples with the

problem. So, what do we do with stories in which the blame lies on the side of our forefathers? How would we react if the injustice were being done here and now? Such puzzles are addressed by Tadeusz S?obodzianek in his play *Our Class*.

This drama is based on events in the town of Jedwabne, where, upon the outbreak of war, the town's Polish residents corralled their Jewish neighbors into a barn and set fire to it. The author begins his story in an elementary school classroom—simple episodes in the lives of children of both sexes and both ethnicities introduce a story which eventually escalates to a dramatic conclusion. To this day, the smoke from the barn makes eyes burn and leads to tears. For the descendants of the victims, the tears are for lost loved ones. For the descendants of the perpetrators, they are tears of empathy and remorse. This tragic event, exposed by Jan Gross in a very prominent publication, examined the nuances of the violator/victim relationship and questioned the erstwhile image of Poles during the Second World War. An event as all-encompassing as the Second World War unleashes the latent instincts inside us all, and there is no sense in deluding ourselves that deep down there is a good person in each of us.

The same subject is examined from a modern perspective by the young playwright Mateusz Paku?a. His play *Ksi??e Niez?om* has already been staged several times in Poland. The Krakow-based author's grotesque work is a comedy on the simplest mechanisms of human nature. Greed, the need to channel aggression and ordinary envy are the motivational forces for a simple family keeping Jews imprisoned in their dark cellar. They use simple deception to convince their prisoners that the war is still underway and that they must continue to pay their guardians for hiding them from the Nazis. Maintaining the ruse and keeping the exiles in the dark requires increasingly difficult efforts. The grotesque comedy is a playful variation on the hit German film *Good Bye, Lenin* from a few years ago. I highly recommend reading this bitter comedy.



Tadeusz S?obodzianek's *Our Class*, Lodz 2013. Photo: Courtesy of Teatr Nowy.

Dorota Mas?owska and Mateusz Paku?a are not the only ones to address the issue of the truth and of what can be defined as reality. Similar subject matter is confronted by Ma?gorzata Sikorska Mischuk in her play *Popie?uszko*. This play was written for Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz and was lauded as the best drama written in Poland in 2012. The main character, referred to as the Anti-Pole, is a typical everyman with family problems. His life changes when his flat is visited by mysterious scientists and certain vague characters. They entangle the man in a game to reconstruct the events surrounding the murder of Father Jerzy Popie?uszko (who acted in support of the Solidarity movement as a member of the anti-communist opposition) by communist agents. As the initially detached main character goes further in the game he starts to become an active participant. The game is so involving that the play ends with the main character making a phone call to the police to give his testimony. He identifies himself as a witness to the murder which took place more than 30 years earlier. He claims to have been a fish swimming in the Vistula when the priest's body was thrown into the river and that he can identify the murderers. Sikorska Mischuk's play is a perfect example of the functioning of the so-called politics of memory, which is a common tool of the conservative side of the political spectrum. A story from the past told repeatedly—at first having no connection to present life—enters the ears of the listener and eventually gets into their blood, changing their way of seeing the world. Repeated continuously like a mantra, a story that is weakly connected with our everyday reality can take hold of our emotions and change the way we think.

Twenty-four years since the first free elections, it is surely clear to everyone that the gap between Poland's satisfied citizens and the outraged ones is only going to grow. Obviously, inequality has always existed within society. But in the past, communist propaganda was able to easily cover it up with the use of messages sent through the tightly controlled and censored media. In the age of the Internet and free speech, being free of a single sanctioned mode of thinking, theatre is likewise searching for its place in society. Still—on account of past experience—its closest function is like that of the ancient *agora*, where many people could gather to collectively find solutions to matters affecting them. When a prophet takes the podium to voice his answer to a given problem, directly behind him is a group of opponents who try to drown him out with their shouts of criticism. It is rare for one overriding voice to rule the agora. And rarer still is finding a speaker with a positive course of action or a great new idea. But is it not one of humankind's greatest challenges to assemble in a group and take political action?



Mateusz Paku'a's *Ksi??e Niez?om*, Wroclaw 2010. Photo Courtesy of Teatr Polski.

Just such a goal is laid out for the spectators in the play *On Goodness* by the duo Pawe? Demirski (playwright) and Monika Strz?pka (director). Their drama, presented at Teatr Dramatyczny in Wa?brzych, is an attempt to find a positive course of action with the aid of left-wing criticism of the capitalism system. The story is set in 2016, at a group therapy session hosted by the local Municipal Social Welfare Centre. Its aim is to find a new language to express desire, ask for something, and demand something. The group consists of individuals hurt in the banking crisis, a theatre director (an ironic self-portrait of Monika Strz?pka), a resurrected Amy Winehouse, and the investigative reporter duo of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. The workshop for learning to ask for something, to identify goals, and to find a new language does not end with a single solution that unites everyone involved. The fractured ideological material has been torn apart and all that remains are pitiful shreds. All we can do is to labor in hopes of putting them back together and finding a language: a radical language of accord. The play ends with a scene of the group singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" around a bonfire outside of the theatre building. Holding pieces of paper in their hands, the spectators join the actors around the bonfire as the place where community is first established. "Walk on with hope in your heart / And you'll never walk alone."

(Translation Simon Wloch)

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