

Speaking Out



The most recent premiere of the Theatre of the Eighth Day from Poznań, Poland, *Paragraph 196 (Exercises in Terror)* is strongly involved in a specific political context: in 2015, the right-wing party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) won the parliamentary elections in Poland. Its candidate also won the presidential election. Gradually, the L&J appropriated important spheres of public life, breaking the constitution of 1997 and ignoring the rule of a tripartite division of power. Having a majority in the parliament and a president, the ruling party amended the laws in order to make the Constitutional Tribunal (common courts and the state media, whose message reminds our generation of the content of the media from the era of communist dictatorship) subordinate to it. Among the few still operating resistance points are: the Supreme Court, independent media, and the institutions of culture subordinated to the local public self-governments ruled by the representatives of the opposition or local activists.

The politicians of the ruling party are generally obedient to the orders and prohibitions imposed on them and on the whole society by the Catholic Church. Most priests do not hide their political sympathies, which sometimes go beyond the support given to Law and Justice towards the far right. Far right organizations in turn grow in strength, supported by L&J, who sees them as allies and a counterweight for liberals. Churches and the most frequently visited public places are becoming the gathering places of neo-Nazi groups, whose hate speech is becoming more and more radical. In contrast, protesters against these assemblies, such as activists of the left, feminists, environmentalists, and representatives of LGBT groups, are persecuted by the police and courts.

Theatre in Poland, usually still independent of central state power, often refers to practices known to older generations from the communist epoch. Dramas basically forgotten after 1989 like *Enemy of the People* by Ibsen, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Brecht or *Acting 'Hamlet' in the Village of Mrduša Donja* by the Croatian author Ivo Brešan (where the dictatorial actions of a village cacique from the former Yugoslavia are exposed) have returned to favor.

We will focus here on one of the most radical, the most expressive and the most intelligent acts of theatrical resistance against the massive aggression of hate speech. Its authors are veterans of theatrical resistance against the communist authorities from before 1989: the company of The Theatre of the Eighth Day from Pozna?.

Almost fifty years ago, in the communist era, critics who did not want to do any harm to The Theatre of the Eighth Day wrote their reviews for the play *Introduction to...* omitting some parts of the performance in the descriptions. For, although the show was based on the texts by Vladimir Lenin, which were very "safe" at that time, its message was extremely revolutionary, although not necessarily in the spirit of Bolshevism. The excerpts from Lenin's works, officially published, widely available, collided with each other and with the stage action and thus all their idiocy was made evident.

Although no one from the cast of *Introduction to...* is present in the current ensemble of the Theatre on the Eighth Day, the last premiere of this company entitled *Paragraph 196 (Exercises in Terror)* can be placed somewhere between that performance and the experience that the group has gathered in recent years, creating documentary theatre. The paragraph mentioned in the title of the performance is most often used during the rule of Law and Justice in relation to artistic works. The content of this article sometimes results in protests against theatrical performances, initiated by the Catholic Church and carried out by the extreme right. The clause states, "Who offends other people's religious feelings, publicly insulting an object of religious worship or a place intended for the public performance of religious rites, is a subject to a fine, restriction of liberty or imprisonment for up to 2 years." The greatest protests in the country, for which the Pozna? diocesan curia gave the signal, took place even before L&J came to power – in 2014 by an attempt to show the play *Golgota Picnic* by Rodrigo Garcia as the part of the Malta Festival in Pozna?. The President of the Polish Episcopate, who had no opportunity to see this performance, wrote that "it is commonly perceived as blasphemous and ridiculizing in a vulgar way material of the greatest sanctity for Christians. The nude actors mock the Lord's Passion, and the whole performance is saturated with pornographic references to the Holy Bible." In the Polish parliament, the Law and Justice deputy from Pozna?, Tadeusz Dziuba, called for the closing of the performance. The organizers of the Malta festival were intimidated. The performance was criticized in the homily at 2014 Corpus Christi celebrations in Pozna?, during which Stanis?aw G?decki, the local Archbishop, said: "What will be our response to this kind of sad spectacle? Some are driven to blows, convinced that evil must be overcome by evil, convinced that blasphemers should be eliminated, as do certain radical chapters of Islam, according to Old Testament law...Christians are opposed to such a solution because we do not live in the Old Times but in the New Testament times...If we were silent, we would be silent and useless dogs of the Church. Therefore, we will never accept the saying: 'freedom of expression, even vulgar, is sacred to us' – as a rational slogan. We want to fight all attacks on God, faith, morality, society and the state with legal means."

Eventually, the organizers of the Malta festival gave up the presentation of *Golgota Picnic* for fear of the riots caused by radical activists of the extreme right. Other right-wing fervent protests took place before and after the speech by Archbishop G?decki both during the performances (*To Damascus* by Strindberg directed by Jan Klata in Stary Teatr in Cracow, 2013) and in front of the theatre buildings (*The Curse* according to Stanis?aw Wyspia?ski directed by Olivier Firli? in Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, 2017).

The gradual brutalization of the official language of state power and those who support it, among whom the Catholic Church and its priests play a very important role, became the starting point for The Theatre

of the Eighth Day's performance of *Paragraph 196 (Exercises in Terror)*. The text of the show consists of the official (more or less) statements of Polish Catholic priests, including bishops, and politicians and activists of the Polish extreme right. These statements have already appeared in the public sphere; they are known, often widely commented on and—more importantly—none of the authors have been held accountable for their statements, even though they violate the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and the regulations of the penal code. In the performance, they function as quotes spoken by stage characters. In this sense, the last premiere of The Theatre of the Eighth Day is a show that falls within the scope of documentary theatre, documenting the mental state of people who currently have great influence on the environment called by Jürgen Habermas the "official public sphere." The creators of the performance—an actress and actors appearing here as the Senior Collective, make these statements circulate, transferring them from the official and monological sphere into what once—from antiquity to the Enlightenment—constituted the public sphere: into the space of dialogue between equal citizens. Their stage actions, the context in which they put these drastic acts of hate speech, are in effect a discussion about what these acts can mean and what they will mean when translated directly into action.



Theatre of the Eighth Day's *Paragraph 196 (Exercises in Terror)*. Photo: Max Malecki.

The characters greeting spectators in the theatre hall lead them to and seat them in four sectors located in the corners of the room and cut off from each other by two landings intersecting at right angles. Such a space integrates viewers (they can see each other) and at the same time physically separates them. The proper terrain of the action are these landings. However, before the show begins, we meet its fragments,

flashes, splashes already from the entrance of the building where the Theatre of the Eighth Day is located. In the lobby there is a man in a cassock with an "entry chaplain" badge attached to it (Dominik Z?otkowski), who directs the arriving people to the elevator. There is another man, also dressed up as a Catholic priest with the badge "elevator chaplain" (Pawe? Hajncel) who serves the elevator and at the same time grants moral support to those who go with him. In the foyer there are still two more chaplains (Adam Borowski and Tadeusz Janiszewski) who greet and sprinkle the audience with holy water from a bucket. They provide spiritual supervision over the evacuation exit, tickets and invitations, alternative theatre, and stage facilities. They are also, as indicated by another badge, guardians of the first contact, art department, or disappointed spectators.

Those spectators who go up the stairs encounter another chaplain dressed in the uniform of a forester with gorgeous deer horns (Marcin K?szycki). He, in turn, is responsible for the state forests, including the primeval Bia?owie?a Forest, which is a strictly protected area, and which was, until recently, mercilessly cut down on the orders of the minister of the environment, against the protests of environmentalists and the European Union.

In the theatre hall, the spectators are welcomed by a female figure dressed in a nun's apparel from the Sisters of Charity order (Ewa W?jciak). There's a cornet made of newspapers on her head. She has supervision over the end of the long platform to the left of the entrance where the desktop is located. A priest looks over each of the four sectors of the audience. They seat the spectators and tell them "in privacy" that they should not expect anything special, "because it's just a kind of journalism."

The other end of the long platform, to the right, is the space from which three men come out at the beginning of the performance. Two of them carry a small riser with a great effort, on which the third enters. He has on his head an Indian plume in white and red colors—the colors of the Polish national flag. He greets the audience with the abuse: "Welcome, traitorous mugs" and then develops a catalog of insults. They are insulting epithets that are daily directed toward oppositionists and people protesting against the Law and Justice rule by the leading activists of the party, headed by its president, Jaros?aw Kaczy?ski, who exercises informal, one-man power in the Polish state, issuing orders to the prime minister, the ministers, and the president. It was Kaczy?ski himself who directed the insult of "traitorous mugs" towards the MPs of the opposition in Sejm, the lower chamber of Polish parliament, on July 18, 2017.

The figure calling the spectators every name in the book is the theatrical recycling of another character played by the same actor, Tadeusz Janiszewski in the play *Oh, Have We Lived in Dignity* (1979). There, Janiszewski in the scene entitled *Political Bureau*, dressed in a similar plume, became a caricature ominously similar to the leader of the USSR, Leonid Brezhnev. Today's message of the whole scene is very similar to the 1979 *Political Bureau's* message, as if history had mischievously spun around.

There will be a few more self-references in this performance: they bring to the older members of the audience memories not only from *Oh, Have We Lived in Dignity*, but also from *Sale for Everyone* (1977), and from *Wormwood* (1985). However, they are not the reuse of old scenes that once worked. These citations evoke the message and the original context in which they were used—Poland's part in the Warsaw Pact and the dictatorial rule by party caciques controlled by the USSR. Actors of the Senior Collective refer not only to that political context, but also to themselves—to what they were years ago and what role they played in that reality. Among other things, thanks to this, they are very credible in their

performance—they show that *Paragraph 196* is not made in order to adhere to today's "fashion for being in opposition" or opportunism "to be rebellious," but reflects the attitude they have been faithful to throughout their entire creative life.

The Sister of Charity looks among the audience for specific characters: a doctor, a judge, or a feminist. For each of these characters, the same man appears on stage: Paweł Hajncel, who is a guest star here. He is the famous Man-Butterfly from *?ód?*, who in 2011 joined the procession of Corpus Christi in the city dressed as a butterfly. Three years later, after the feast of Corpus Christi, he tried to clear the streets of the religious objects left by the procession, appearing in the protective suit of a chemist with a "Caution: irritating substances" sign and holding decontamination equipment in his hands. In 2016, when attempts were made to introduce a complete ban on abortion, he stood during a procession on the street dressed as a woman with a banner: "Women do not have any rights in the church." In other years he was also a white bear, a sexy nurse, and a priest demanding sacraments for free, as well as Jesus. For these actions, several attempts were made to bring charges against him from paragraph 196 of the penal code.

The doctor, judge, and feminist are disciplined by the Sister of Charity: they have to bow their heads, bend their knees, in short: humble themselves. And then they wander along the long landing under the watchful escort of guards, most likely headed to the prison, where the representatives of today's state power in Poland would like to see them all, or at least the most unruly among them.

When the doctor and judge—members of professional groups most criticized by the propaganda of Law and Justice for alleged nepotism and corruption—are punished and imprisoned to make an example of them, it is time for the scene of the feminist's humiliation. A man dressed as a woman can have amusing associations—transvestite, Drag Queen, musicians from *Some Like It Hot*, or desperate actor Michael Dorsey from *Tootsie*. This stage "feminist," however, looks completely different: she is wearing a stilron apron, which in Poland is still worn by women involved in cleaning or cooking. She does not look grotesque or funny but rather sad and helpless, while he/she listens to comments about how she looks and how badly she meets the requirements of her husband. These fragments come from the recordings made public by a battered wife whose husband was a city councilman representing the ruling party.



All these activities can look amusing, so the spectators laugh sometimes—it is a form of release and defence. However, subsequent scenes, although still grotesque, are no longer part of the comedy. When four figures dressed in cloaks, field uniforms, and helmets adorned with a white-and-red rim burst onto the stage and start to "separate the sectors of the audience," it gets quite grim. They attach a wire net to the edges of the landings, cutting off the performers from spectators and spectators from each other. From now on we see the stage action and other viewers through a transparent, yet clear fence evoking those that can still be seen in museums and memorial sites in Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Majdanek. This impression is reinforced by the penultimate scene, in which we see the outline of a man showing his back to the audience, dressed in black trousers and a shirt (again Tadeusz Janiszewski), who makes a fiery speech derived from a compilation of speeches delivered by Jacek Mi?dlar, the radical priest suspended in his priesthood duties. He announces straightforwardly and without hesitation the "disinfection of the country," during which those to whom he speaks will have to "get their hands dirty."

The Senior Collective of The Theatre of the Eight Day has proven that when it deals with the matter that really engages it, it can still perform spectacles that accurately reveal reality, full of strong and suggestive metaphors. The performance ends with a poem that is both a memento and a confession of the author's guilt, which is often forgotten. Its author, pastor Martin Niemöller, supported the NSDAP in the early 1930s. With the development of Nazism, he changed his attitude, as a result of which he became a prisoner of concentration camps in Sachsenhausen and Dachau. His character is an example that no one is forever determined by the first choice they make in life. It is in Dachau, where he wrote the poem, that this performance by The Theatre of the Eighth Day ends:

When they came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.

When they came for the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,
I remained silent;
I wasn't a Jew.

When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.

Prof. Juliusz Tyszkaj, tyszkaj@amu.edu.pl, since 2008 head of Dept. of Performance Studies at the Institute of Cultural Studies, Adam Mickiewicz Univ. in Poznań (lecturer there since 1978). Veteran of Polish student theatre (1974-82), author of seven books on theatre and performance including *Theatre of the Eight Day from Poznań: first ten years, 1964-1973*, editor of five collections, including *Theatre in Non-theatrical Places* (1998) and *Performance Studies: Sources and Perspectives* (2014), author of more than 350 articles, essays, reviews, pamphlets published in thirteen countries. Coordinator and co-coordinator of sixteen international conferences in Poland and France, participant in seventy-four, in twelve countries. Fulbright Visiting Scholar (Dept. of Performance Studies, New York Univ., 1992/93, Faculty Associate: Richard Schechner), visiting prof. at Univ. d'Artois, Arras, France (2003) and Univ. Rennes 2 – Haute Bretagne, France (2010), lecturer-collaborator at European University Viadrina at Frankfurt/Oder, Germany (since 2006 till now). From 1999 till now contributing editor of "New Theatre Quarterly" (Cambridge Univ. Press, UK); 2001-04 secretary general of Polish Fulbright Alumni Assoc., 2003-2014 co-organizer Winner of many awards, incl. The Yearly Award of Polish Prime Minister for Artistic Achievements in the Domain of Art for Children and Youth (1989, as a member of Wierzbak Theatre Company) and The Yearly Award for Cultural Achievements of the Marshall (prime minister) of Wielkopolska (Greater Poland) Region (2015).

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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 Tyszka
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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