

The Polish Nation in a Never-Landing Aircraft

By Katarzyna Biela

In Poland, 13 December is commonly associated with the implementation of martial law, announced in 1981 by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, which introduced repressive restrictions valid until 1983. In 2021 the day was chosen for the premiere of *Odlot* (High), written by Zenon Fajfer and directed by Anna Augustynowicz. The title invites associations both with flying and the enthusiasm that often accompanies intoxication—both explored in this play. For Fajfer, it was the first time his work was staged by a team of institutional theatre practitioners. For Augustynowicz, it was the production that concluded her 30-year tenure as the art director of the Contemporary Theatre in Szczecin. The play is a confrontation with the repercussions of the Smolensk air disaster of 2010, which caused the death of 96 Polish officials in a plane crash while they were flying to commemorate the anniversary of the Katyń massacre. The staging has been welcomed positively by spectators who related to this representation of the current social situation in Poland. Moreover, the latest global events, including the pandemic and, importantly, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, seem to make the piece even more relevant, and its commentary on bonds and communication within a collective even more acute. The enthusiasm expressed by critics seems in harmony with a universal cry for a better tomorrow.

As if to confirm the positive response, *Odlot* received an award for the best performance at the International Festival of Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant in Łódź as well as the Grand Prix for a contemporary play from the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute. The former was given by the audience and the latter by the jury, which, as Tomasz Młocki observes, demonstrates a rather unique agreement between two different types of spectators—the public and the committee chosen by the Institute. Furthermore, *Odlot* was staged at the Warsaw Theatre Meetings, among six other productions, and received the Swinarski Award, organised by the “Teatr” [“Theatre”] journal. Jacek Kopciński, the editor-in-chief, noted that Fajfer’s text requires special competence and disposition from the reader and from the practitioners—the ability to find a new theatrical language.

Across Poland: a writer from Krzeszowice and a director from Szczecin

Fajfer, a Polish poet based in Krzeszowice, near Kraków, coined the term *liberature* to define a literary genre encompassing works whose authors intentionally design the form so that it matches the content and helps the message resonate. Fajfer introduced the poetics of *liberature* in the essay-manifesto “*Liberature. An Appendix to a Dictionary of Literary Terms*,” published in 1999 in the *Dekada literacka* [Literary decade] magazine. Concerned about the future of literature, he argues that the shape and materiality of the book (Latin: *liber*) communicate meanings. Therefore, writers should not leave matters, such as layout, font, size, and color of the text for the sole consideration of the publisher and printer, but collaborate with them in the publication process to let the book take the shape that corresponds to their vision. After all, it is the material volume that the reader becomes familiar with at the very start before they even begin reading. Referencing Polish theatre practitioners, Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski, Fajfer compares the space of the book to the space where a theatre production is

staged. If contemporary theatre directors are at liberty to design the space with a particular performance in mind, so too writers should treat the book as a nontransparent space that hosts their unique literary message. In 2003, Fajfer, accompanied by his wife, Katarzyna Bazarnik, established a liberatic series in the Korporacja Ha!art publishing house. Both were willing to make avant-garde, liberatic books, whether classics or debuts, broadly available for the public. Currently, the series encompasses 24 works, including those written by Fajfer and Bazarnik themselves, like their triple codex book *Oka-leczenie [Mute-I-Late]* (2009), but also translations of well-known world literature examples, such as *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard* (*Rzut kości mi nigdy nie zniesie przypadek* 2005) by Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* (*Sto tysięcy miliardów wierszy* 2008) by Raymond Queneau, *Life A User's Manual* (*Życie instrukcja obsługi* 2009) by Georges Perec and *Finnegans Wake* (*Finneganów tren*, 2012) by James Joyce. More recently, and internationally, liberature has been included in *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (2019) edited by Richard Kostelanetz and discussed in *Refresh the Book: On the Hybrid Nature of the Book in the Age of Electronic Publishing* (2021), which Bazarnik co-edited with Viola Hildebrand-Schat and Christoph Benjamin Schulz.

Although Fajfer is frequently associated with his poetry and the poetics of liberature, it should be noted that his interest in theatre goes as far back as his high school years. In 1988, again accompanied by Bazarnik, he directed *The Trial I* and *The Trial II*, based on Witold Gombrowicz and Franz Kafka as well as Kafka and T.S. Eliot, respectively. He then went on to direct three other plays of his own: *Madam Eva*, *Ave Madam* was a commentary on the biblical Creation prepared with actors with disabilities (premiere: 1992 in Kraków), *Finnegans Make* presented an oneiric collage of Joyce's life and work (premiere: 1996 in Dublin), while *Pietà* fused scenes presenting an exhausted playwright who reflects on Pontius Pilate with an account of a drunken witness of the Way of the Cross and an insight into Mary's despair after the death of her Son (premiere of one act: 2006, the version with two acts: 2007, the whole work with three acts: 2012). In writing and publishing *Odlot*, Fajfer again returned to his engagement with the theatre.

For Augustynowicz, in turn, the staging of *Odlot* marks the end of her 30-year tenure as the director of the Contemporary Theatre in Szczecin. Although she resides in the rather distant northeast region of Poland, she has become a crucial figure for the country and its theatre. Taught by Józef Tischler and Krystian Lupa, among others, she has developed her own theatrical voice and established her own ways of working with the modest black space, in the manner reminiscent perhaps of Peter Brook, Grotowski, and Kantor. Interested in encounters and human interactions, in what happens between one person and another, she treats the stage as a metaphor for the world, or the universe, and believes that in the theatre one should not be afraid of speaking their mind. She likes to engage with texts that await a performance and pose a challenge for those who confront them individually through reading. She looks at how such texts resonate with the outside world. Given that in Poland the role of a director is at times viewed as the vocation to speak on behalf of the nation or provide people with a social diagnosis, the perspective of her retirement signalled an important change. Augustynowicz's *Odlot* is thus yet another production of hers that remains in dialogue with the society and Polish post-romantic tradition, but at the same time, it is her last grand work and a farewell. She is the first director to answer Fajfer's challenging prompt, given to theatre practitioners in the shape of the printed literary work, which at the time of its publication seemed

both impatient to be staged and very difficult, if not impossible, to be transferred into the theatre.

Odlot in print

Fajfer wrote *Odlot* between December 2015 and June 2016. In April and May 2019, he added a few minor revisions. The work was published in the same year in the form of a liberatic book—a codex with a unique layout, corresponding to the imagined stage design. The stage is to be divided into two parts, with the left side reserved for tragic—presumably grotesque—executions, and the right to be occupied by two actors who kiss for the entire duration of the spectacle. This is represented on the pages of the book—the left ones provide stage directions describing the executions as well as dialogues between characters while the right ones comfort the reader with blank space and gentle stage directions "całuj się" [they are kissing]. Moreover, the spectators are supposed to be divided according to gender, with men seated on the left and women on the right. The omnipresent divisions bear witness to Fajfer's sober reflections on the condition of Poland after the 2010 Smolensk air disaster. To his mind, Polish society has lost the ability to communicate, cooperate, and integrate successfully. The catastrophe, in his view, was not a matter of a single plane crash, but is still ongoing and influencing all Poles.

Undoubtedly, the Smolensk air disaster was one of the most tragic events Poland has recently witnessed. Ninety-six Polish officials, including the president, Lech Kaczyński, and his wife, Maria Kaczyńska, died in one moment as the plane heading for the 70th anniversary of the Katyń massacre crashed around the Smolensk North Airport on 10 April 2010. News about the tragedy instantly spread across mass media, interrupting the previously scheduled programme. The government announced national mourning, signs of which could be seen everywhere, from newspapers to shop displays with photographs of the presidential couple and the black ribbon. The crash was extensively investigated, but no problems with the aircraft were reported. In effect, some view the disaster as a tragic accident; others as a planned conspiracy. Notably, looking at the nation's response to the tragedy, theatre and performance studies scholar Dariusz Kosiński observed many reactions reminiscent of performance or theatre (*Teatra polskie. Rok katastrofy* 2013).

Concerned about the socio-political repercussions of the tragedy and the subsequent election won by the Law and Justice party, which Lech Kaczyński represented, Fajfer examines the condition of his motherland and Polish society. Situating his characters aboard an in-flight aircraft, heading toward an unknown destination and seemingly never ready for landing, he captures an all-encompassing anxiety about the future and the disturbing feeling that something is probably going to go wrong. The characters are described as voices engaged in dialogues full of worries and ambivalent recollections, some of which touch upon traumas, e.g. intergenerational war trauma and domestic abuse. Many of the passengers do not have names, but represent certain personality types, e.g. the Slim One, the Obese One, the Old Lady on a Swing, the Old Man with the Order of Merit, the Suspected One, and the Eavesdropped One. Others turn out to be simultaneously fictional and real characters, letting *Odlot* oscillate between a playfully intertextual collage and a critical commentary on attitudes presented in contemporary political discourse. The conversations quickly become problematic since the characters have a feeling that they are not allowed to express themselves as they would like. There is more and

more tension inside the cabin, intertwined with exhaustion in the face of drastic political changes, resentment and disappointment in regard to the Catholic faith, alluded to by means of unconvincing representatives of the Church, such as the Priest and the Voice in a Collar.

The characters' concerns are woven into a composition featuring an impressive number of cultural references. Employing Polish alexandrine, used in the 19th century by Polish bard Adam Mickiewicz, Fajfer alludes to patriotic Polish Romanticism, when poets preserved the language and tradition, hoping for the end of the Partitions of Poland. Further, the dialogues include references to Stanisław Wyspiański's drama *The Wedding*, released in 1901. Inspired by an actual wedding that gathered representatives of different social spheres, the drama also offers a sincere social diagnosis. Further, Fajfer's work draws on more contemporary culture, especially music and social media. The accumulation of references and puns is overwhelming, which, added to the difficult content, makes *Odlot* a very challenging piece to stage. In the book's afterword, Kosiński recalls the words of Heiner Müller that the best text for theatre is that for which no theatre yet exists.

Odlot on stage



ODLOT, by Zenon Fajfer, directed by Anna Augustynowicz at the Contemporary Theatre in Szczecin. Photo: Piotr Nykowski.

The stage design of Augustynowicz ' s performance is rather modest, yet telling, and accurate. A few rows of seats are located center stage and the white headrests make it clear that the characters are seated in a plane. Such an arrangement strongly influences the position of the spectators. No idle watching is possible: the auditorium is reflected on stage and everyone is looking one another in the eye. All representatives of Polish society gathered in the room become passengers of the mysterious flight and scrutinize others. Given that all lights are on throughout the performance, there is no way to hide. Watching the play feels like looking into a mirror.

The play seems to start even before the spectators are allowed into the room. The characters are already present on the stage when the doors open and the figure played by Grzegorz Falkowski, the coryphaeus of the flying choir, is walking in front of the main row and whispering phrases about hatred. Thus, the difficulty, or perhaps even the impossibility, of communication is immediately established as one of the crucial themes. This is yet another strategy to let the audience into the grim world of *Odlot*. Though Augustynowicz does not divide the audience members on the basis of their gender, one may feel watched as one searches for their seat, and hesitate whether they actually want to stay. But the uneasiness is undoubtedly a sign of a prompt engagement in the performance, which mesmerizes before it properly begins, and the temptation to stay wins over any doubts. Still, the performance is not easy to digest, and the challenge is both Fajfer ' s and Augustynowicz ' s powerful tool.

Other elements of the stage design complement the idea of voyeurism while adding supplementary contexts, such as technology and consumerism, among others. There are two huge screens, one behind the actors and the other behind the audience, presenting operating escalators, at times occupied by performers and/or mannequins we know from shopping malls (these can be seen also on stage, covered in plastic foil). At other times, the actress, Irena Jun, or other performers who are not present in the room appear on the screen behind the actors. Furthermore, Augustynowicz makes use of a smaller TV screen, allowing for a Zoom call with additional cast members. The arrangement of two big screens, accompanied by the parallel between the performers ' seats and the auditorium, makes the stage design interestingly regular, but also extends the dimensions of the black box into the realm of the digital. Augustynowicz is intriguingly flexible with the liveness characteristic of the theatre medium and seems to ask what presence is, or what kinds of presence are possible in the contemporary world. This corresponds with Fajfer ' s references to television and social media, provided in the stage directions. Or perhaps the stairs allude to the Bible and suggest an ongoing, so far unsuccessful, search for a passage to heaven.

And yet Augustynowicz simultaneously opts for a seemingly opposite strategy, that is seating select performers in the auditorium as if to counterbalance distance with presence. The kissing couple can be spotted in one of the rows, and though they are not kissing continuously, as Fajfer suggests in the book, but only from time to time, they inevitably introduce the tension between thanatos and eros, death and affection. The moments when other characters notice them and cannot help staring repeatedly break up the dialogues focused on the frightening flight and depressing social reflections. How the spectators approach the situation—whether they join in the staring or not—is a matter of individual preference and emotions. In the book, the kissing is clearly a relief from the horror of executions and anxious dialogues, but in the performance it

seems both to comfort and introduce contrast that highlights the conflicts and makes them even more unbearable. Another character who appears in the audience is the priest, tellingly exposing Fajfer's anticlerical attitude in the utterances alluding to paedophilia. Such a positioning of actors further illustrates Augustynowicz's creative attitude towards the theatre space. Depending on where one is seated, the couple and the priest may be right next to them, a row ahead or rather far, on the other side of the room. While booking tickets for the performance, one may be unaware that their position within the black box will influence the experience to such a great extent, bringing in either excitement or discomfort, or other unexpected reactions.

Augustynowicz envisions rather intense dynamics between the stage and the auditorium but also benefits from the abundance of cultural allusions intertwined within Fajfer's text. The actors' faces are painted white, their clothes are entirely black and their moves and utterances clearly rhythmical, so the cabin seems to resemble Kantor's *Dead Class*, a performance that premiered in 1975 in Krzysztofory Gallery, and has influenced Polish and international culture ever since. Offering a powerful reflection on transience, memory, and war, among other themes, as well as taking advantage of avant-garde gestures and rhythm, Kantor's work has been referenced by Fajfer many times, even before the publication of *Odlot*. One of his first plays, *Madam Eva, Ave Madam*, prepared in collaboration with actors with disabilities, presented students in wheelchairs, who destroyed the classroom by the end of the performance. As noted earlier, Kantor and his approach to space have found their place also in the poetics of literature. In her staging of *Odlot*, Augustynowicz is not indifferent to this tradition and Fajfer's interests. Drawing on a scene in the print version of *Odlot*, in which a teacher checks the register and learns that most of his students are dead, she lets associations with Kantor's theatre enrich the interpretation of audiences familiar with his work. Instructing the actors to sing chosen utterances to the melody characteristic of liturgical breviary is likewise a very interesting example of fusing avant-garde rhythmicality with an ambiguous attitude toward religion, sensed already in Fajfer's book. If Kantor conceptualized the Reality of the Lowest Rank and showed interest in poor objects, then Fajfer and Augustynowicz seem to be concerned with poor Poland—a country living through the consequences of the Smolensk tragedy, entangled in conflicts and misunderstandings.

Furthermore, the performance presents a dialogue between Polish history and contemporary Poland, hinted at by Fajfer in his book. Though the spectators are not made familiar with the whole list of the characters' names, which in the printed work provide space for a linguistic play on the Polish tradition, quotes from different Polish authors, including Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Wyspiański, and Gombrowicz, as well as recitations of the rhythmical alexandrine represent the intertextual confusion. Moreover, the allusions to music from different periods and to different kinds of noises are rendered by means of actual sound, and thus made easier to capture. The song of *Najbardziejziejszy Bard* [the Bardliest Bard] that Fajfer inscribed onto the pages to comment on Polish history is played and sung by Wojciech Brzeziński, and thus given the melody and tempo of singer and songwriter Jacek Kaczmarski intermingled with Tom Waits. The revision of the song *Mury* (Walls, 1981) by Kaczmarski, sung by Barbara Lewandowska, and the rap sequences, performed by Bartosz Włodarczyk, make up the more contemporary parts of the soundscape. Given Fajfer's interest and extensive knowledge of music, many readers of *Odlot* may have been waiting to hear pieces of this kind performed within the theatre

space. Another striking auditory stimulus is the painfully loud sound of air raid sirens, prompting connotations with war and subconscious anxiety, all continuously underlined by the hum of the airplane engines. The shouts reminiscent of recent strikes in Poland also stand out for their sheer volume. Meaningfully, the homosexual couple are the only passengers visible on stage who sit right next to each other, as if they struggled for contact and feeling, parallel to the kissing couple in the auditorium.

Thanks to all these strategies, the performance manages to break the fourth wall and create a dramaturgy of anxiety. Augustynowicz takes advantage of the spectators' knowledge of the Smolensk air disaster and their recollections from the time when the crash was announced in the media. Everyone in the room knows the repercussions of this 2010 flight, but no member of the audience can predict the end of the play in which they are so deeply engrossed. Even the readers of Fajfer's work cannot have a clue because his ending is too ambiguous to be taken literally. What the final scene of the performance will reveal, how the theatrical flight will change the audience's outlook on the world they will welcome upon leaving the theatre—these questions remain present throughout the performance and cast a shadow over the spectators' emotional and intellectual response.

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