

**Paweł Mościcki**

The Village Is on Fire!  
The Village Is Burning Down!  
Notes on the Oliver Frljić Production  
of *Klątwa* in Warsaw

[www.polishtheatrejournal.com](http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com)



**Paweł Mościcki**

The Village Is on Fire!  
The Village Is Burning Down!  
Notes on the Oliver Frljić Production  
of *Klątwa* in Warsaw

MAID

And what did you dream?

YOUNG WOMAN

*(silent)*

*(then speaks)*

Nothing – just that I am to beware

Other people's curses,

As what I learnt while dreaming

Would then come to pass.

MAID

What did you learn while dreaming?!

YOUNG WOMAN

What he would not say.

What he forbids to be asked about.

Stanisław Wyspiański, *Klątwa* [*The Curse*]<sup>1</sup>

It's quite easy to see theatre as an example of a heterotopia: a place in which, as Michel Foucault put it, various kinds of spaces mix together

---

<sup>1</sup> Stanisław Wyspiański, *Klątwa*, in Wyspiański, *Dramaty wybrane*,  
1 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), p. 51.

along with their symbolic decorations and modes of functioning.<sup>2</sup> In theatre – a very real place constantly playing with its reality, thereby questioning the said reality and at the same time confirming it – we always encounter some other space: a less tangible, more expandable one. It's a natural process of projecting a fictitious narrative on stage along with its set of metaphors, network of relations and the emotional power inherent in its individual elements.

It seems, however, that theatre today retains a certain extent of uniqueness thanks to the fact that the relationship between spaces mixing within it doesn't have to be equivocal, that these can be hybrids or outlines of barely recognizable situations. This allows a far richer combination of meanings and tensions to appear on stage than in cinema, for instance, where heterotopia often succumbs to pressure from the tacit requirements of realistic credibility. The artificiality of theatre, built on real contact with the audience in a particular space, paradoxically leaves great freedom for building ambiguous, chimeric or even internally contradictory sequences.

In Oliver Frljić's production *Klątwa* [*The Curse*, Powszechny Theatre, Warsaw, 18 February 2017], movement between these spaces is almost literal – or at least it seems that we're dealing time and again with points of contact between what is painfully real and what is entirely fictional, or even abstract. From the very beginning, the production draws the audience back to the streets outdoors, as it were, breaking the framework of theatrical autonomy and pushing itself into the very centre of the sphere of everyday social fears, taboos, restrictions, self-censorship and the hierarchy of taste. It doesn't operate within any well-defined framework but continually attacks precisely the established framework of what's appropriate to show or what seems reasonable. Instead of offering a journey into an unspecified space of fiction, it confronts us painfully with rules governing the sphere outside theatre that model our symbolic Polish world.

We learn in the opening scene that we're in Poland, the 'arse of the world', that is (the 'nowhere' designation Poland receives in *Ubu Roi* would sound like too much of a compromise here), where a terrified group of actors attempt to obtain guidance from Bertolt Brecht on the subject of adapting Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Curse*, over the phone. Unfortunately, no political-art tradition will allow them to escape the society in, for and against which their production at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw was staged. Thus Brecht, the creator of epic theatre, sends the desperate cast to the only authority figure along the Vistula River: John Paul II. At that point – that is, from the moment we stay in Poland – the performance truly begins. And it won't end with the performance's climax either, because we'll always remain on the streets into which it returns us, with all the power art can muster today.

The audience watching *The Curse* become hostages, in a sense, not only of the production's individual, acute and memorable scenes but also of the entire discussion, or struggle, rather, for the continuation of this production's existence. They can't remain mere bystanders – even if they attempt it, they still end up taking a side. In that sense, they do remain on the streets, because newspapers maligning or defending the

<sup>2</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'Inne przestrzenie', trans. Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska, *Teksty Drugie*, 5, 2005, pp. 117–125.

production's creators, groups protesting outside the theatre and politicians passing categorical judgement on the production will not allow them to forget it easily. Since an inquiry was immediately launched by the state prosecutor's office to decide if it constitutes a case of blasphemy, and since the theatre company and the production's creators have been intimidated, denigrated and disparaged, while public opinion has been swamped with simplistic and false information on the subject of *The Curse*, there is no returning to any safe consumption of the work's artistic merits. One is now condemned to follow those public vicissitudes and assume co-responsibility for their outcome.

In spite of all the horror of the censorship mechanisms launched immediately after the premiere, *The Curse* has been an undeniable success, changing theatrical heterotopia into something like a utopia. Doesn't it seem a utopian dream when information on a theatre production makes headlines and appears on the most watched TV shows, with expert discussions turning into worldview battles and crowds of people going to the theatre? Can a hint of fulfilled utopia be gleaned in this case, despite the vile campaign organized against the artists involved? Here, art stands once again at the centre of public affairs. Frlić and his associates firmly, even brazenly demand absolute respect for their exploration at precisely the moment when art is barely glimpsed on a horizon dominated by commerce, propaganda and 'cultural politics'. In an era when any artistic choice must be filtered through market, frequentative and advertising effectiveness, a production has been created in which one goes all the way, winning all the three of those competitions at the same time.

\*\*\*

On the surface, Wyspiański's text could seem but a pretext within the production, adding fuel to the fire in a culture war. Actors perform soliloquies based on the monologues they wrote, while ensemble scenes are devoted to the deconstruction of various sacred religious, national and artistic symbols. Yet at closer reflection, it's hard to doubt that Frlić and the dramaturges Agnieszka Jakimiak, Joanna Wichowska and Goran Injac have accomplished a masterly adaptation of the play because they decided to stage not the literal text but mechanisms of stigmatization and exclusion inherent in it, or rather several of those mechanisms. Along with stigmatization itself, the production deals with an earlier and in a sense preconditioning mechanism, that of transferring guilt from perpetrator to victim while using figures of transcendence. One must bear in mind that in Wyspiański's text, religion is divided into two parallel, even contradictory aspects. On one hand, there is faith, embodied by the Hermit; on the other, the worldly institution whose purpose is to govern mortal life and control society. That aspect of religion is embodied by the Priest. The Hermit most ruthlessly and openly exposes the hypocrisy of the latter's position – a priest living with his illegitimate children while chastising others for the sin of adultery. A similar rupture becomes the main theme of Frlić's production, which sees the present-day curse destroying Polish society in the hypocrisy of the church: hiding paedophiles in its ranks while masking that act with the moral blackmail inherent in invoking respect for the sacred.

The second mechanism borrowed from Wyspiański is the mechanism of retaliation on the part of the victim. The Young Woman is not simply a scapegoat – she does not sacrifice herself to save the community. She

attempts instead to disclose boundless mendacity in the community and, subsequently, to literally destroy it. The play ends with a truly apocalyptic turn of events, in which the woman they'll stone to death initiates a judgement on the entire village. Her return to the neighbours is like an act of divine violence which not only punishes certain people but also questions the entire system of rules on which the logic of curse and atonement is built, in which everyone seemed to believe. But the Young Woman can only accomplish this by dying directly at the hands of the villagers. Only then does the storm break out and strike those who are really to blame.

The virtuosity of the creative team's text adaptation from *The Curse* is based on a combination of a nonchalance in 'not staging' the text with very precise use of its elements. Specific phrases, recollections of situations and short dialogue sequences occasionally haunt the staging. In this production, the play's text seems to be a foreign body, interrupting the actors' provocative tirades time and again. From a traditional burden which must be translated somehow into present-day conditions and language, it becomes an intruder, a tool of its denunciation. In the era of postdramatic theatre, there's probably no better or more distinct way of doing justice to a play's text.

Their staging, however, adds yet another meaning here. In *The Curse*, we're dealing with something akin to a performative adaptation which not only refers to social mechanisms inherent in the play but attempts to unleash them in an entirely new situation, to test their continued validity in contemporary society. Does an attack on the sacred and placing the production's creators at the centre of controversy not constitute the exact equivalent of what happens in Wyspiański's text? Does the scandal this production caused in provincial Polish mentality not rather resemble the storm provoked by the Young Woman over Gręboszów, the village east of Kraków?

\*\*\*

Frljić cultivates something that could be called theatre in an extended field – a kind of theatre in which the main tensions and dramatic turns don't happen on stage but in the audience's minds, putting habits and comfort continually to the test. The entire production is a big multi-level play on discourse, emotions and images censored long before the prosecutor's office ever could. *The Curse* consists of subsequent acts of transgression aimed at the most sacred thus unreflected-upon symbols of Polish society. The term 'transgression' is most clichéd not so much in twentieth-century art but rather in the discourse around it – the creative team actually mocks it in the play's soliloquies. They're right, as it's become a term overused by those far removed from art, who either invoke its revolutionary nature just as an alibi for its total negation or its total (often equally feeble) defence.

Yet it's worth earnestly recalling, in the context of Frljić's production, something from the definition of transgression created by Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, transgression is always linked to the law and the boundary one is crossing. It's never a one-off act but is a continual re-negotiation, a dialectical movement of simultaneous overstepping and confirming a boundary established by law (understood

literally, institutionally or metaphorically).<sup>3</sup> Frljić operates in a similar way, drawing audience and non-audience into the game, who by their reactions (objections, polemics, protests, and court cases) confirm the boundaries recognized by the production, at the same time making these the front lines in a political conflict. The creators, with the help of this transgression game and along with the entire society, shape the image of our mutual society and trace its outline as set out by restrictions, protestor blockades and prohibitions.

The production at the Powszechny Theatre therefore takes place all over the country and all the time, and each subsequent event around it adds something to the self-portrait made by the community. The disturbance in relations between interior and exterior – that radical trait of theatrical heterotopia – finds its reflection in the freedom with which the actors balance seriousness and joking, authenticity and artificiality, often inviting the audience to ruthlessly vivisect the intentions and attitudes of the director, his work method and individual proposals included in the performance. This way, there's a chance of an unusual kind of solidarity forming between stage and audience in which both the director's plan and external pressure become invalidated, and it becomes possible to negotiate together as to 'what we want' and 'what we allow' both in social life and in theatre.

\*\*\*

Frljić in some respects resembles a seasoned boxer. He has mastered changes of pace and the alternating rhythm of attack and defence. In *The Curse*, the director alternately hits jabs right between the eyes with a straight left only to hide behind a double shield of quote marks and *mise en abyme*, theoretical reflection and multi-level mediation. His artistry, however, lies in the fact that – like a seasoned boxer – he treats defence as a form of attack. When actress Julia Wszyńska speaks of a scene deleted from the production depicting a collection to fund the assassination of the president of Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, Jarosław Kaczyński, she provides sufficient detail for that missing scene to, in a sense, happen. At the same time, because of the obvious absurdity – a few minutes earlier, Wszyńska had made everyone repeat that 'everything we say and do in theatre is fiction' several times – this excuse turns into yet another accusation. What sort of society is it in which the course of a theatre performance is defined by the penal code?

Frljić has done something that hadn't ever been achieved in Polish theatre with such clarity: he has managed to create a ribald farce that's an ideal example of postdramatic or even post-critical theatre. On one hand, it is a very direct show which immediately resonates in the sensitivities of every audience member. It often refers to quite puerile humour and vulgar taste. At the same time, however, it's a production complex in its detail and ambiguous, packed with hidden references and constructed with great precision.

The viewer, dazed from blows delivered by the blasphemous form, always has a chance to recover and see that the creators are playing a sophisticated game at the same time, with viewer sensitivity and with self-imposing readings and symbols. What exactly is the meaning of the

<sup>3</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'Przedmowa do transgresji', in Foucault, *Powiedziane, napisane. Szaleństwo i literatura*, trans. Bogdan Banasiak, (Warsaw: Aletheia, 1999), p. 52.

scene depicting fellatio performed on a statue of the pope? Is it an act of blasphemy, or an act of devotion? An expression of hate or love? After all, 'erection' denotes both sexual arousal of the male sex and the act of establishing a monument... Is it blasphemy against John Paul II, or rather an attack on the mindless cult of the individual that for years has been performed by Polish society and utilized by politicians to veil their machinations? Isn't destroying false idols a strictly religious act, even the duty of every Christian believer? Or perhaps that sexual act simply helps illustrate the attitude of Polish society to its authorities? Hanging on a placard saying 'defender of paedophiles' and placing a noose around the neck of the same statue doesn't, after all, leave any doubt as to how the creators judge social effects brought about by that authority's actions. But how to combine those acts with the ostentatious exposure of the director and of critical theatre in general which appears in almost every scene? No one in the production gets attacked as much as Frljić does. But does that self-referential and self-critical attitude dull the blade of criticism fashioned by the creative team or, on the contrary, sharpen its expression? Yet another difficult question born out of gameplay that's both full-frontal and rife with feints.

The procedure carried out by *The Curse*'s creative team can be described as desecration, as understood by Giorgio Agamben: a restoration of elements excluded from common use thus considered untouchable.<sup>4</sup> In the production this concerns religious symbols (the cross) and state symbols (the flag), as well as artistic instances including the director, not to mention the playwright and the actors. All these figures lose the unequivocal function ascribed to them and the oppressive force they contain is deactivated. The accumulation of acts of desecration, however, their redundancy and ridiculousness, causes the gesture of desecration to become desecrated, so to speak. It loses its dark and scandalous dimension by changing – at best, that is in the best moments of the performance – into a kind of exotic scenery or a toy.

That's why for all its insolence and uncompromising nature *The Curse* seems innocent in some fundamental way. Like a good bout of boxing, it's both a great strategic endeavour and an honest, simple confrontation. Frljić's theatre is without a doubt a theatre of political struggle, yet at the same time it's a theatre of sincerity. Proposing an unhypocritical conversation – which most often is then rejected by precisely those who profess to value it most, as in life – along with the production's reception document, to a large extent, what evasive moves we as a society have at our disposal and what defence mechanisms seem to be protecting us from the painful truth about what's going on around us. The sincerity of the production's creators falls into modes of performative distortion, and thus stages mechanisms of social exchange. Reading subsequent attacks on the creative team and various ways of taking offence at their production's obscenity, it's hard not to get the impression that the main aim of these attacks and offences is to prevent – God forbid – any discussion of what *The Curse* speaks about from beginning to end without beating around the bush: harm done to victims. Direct harm in the form of children molested by clergy, as well as intermediary harms such as the entire society subordinated to authorities of such dubious quality.

<sup>4</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, 'Pochwała profanacji', in Agamben, *Profanacje*, trans. Mateusz Kwaterko, (Warsaw: PIW, 2006), p. 93.

\*\*\*

The outline of Polish society drawn by the production's creators and audience become a source of specific knowledge on the subject of political determinants of art today and of the community's moral condition. As is usual in the case of strong tension, symptoms of unconscious emotions reveal themselves along with superstitions that the subject expresses unknowingly. The more the subject is unaware of these messages, the more clear and obscene they are to the one who can read them. Hence the knowledge coming from the symptoms is a more ruthless and cruel kind of knowledge.

After Frljić's *Nie-boska komedia. Szczątki* [*The Un-divine Comedy: Remains*] at the Stary Theatre in Kraków was cancelled in 2013, the director published a rage-filled letter about Poland, in which he accused it of intolerance, stupidity and conformism. At the time, to many people, the content of his letter seemed too simplistic and generalized. It must be admitted, however, that some present reactions to *The Curse* betray such an unbearable level of mendacity that it might not be indicated by even the most brutal criticism. On 13 April 2017 in Poznań Cathedral, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki during a homily (sic) expressed his support for the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, who promised to break the law and block funding for that city's annual Malta Festival if Frljić was kept as curator of one of the festival programmes. Gądecki expressed concern for the future of Christian values and morality, threatened by obscene and blasphemous tendencies of contemporary culture. The mass was then celebrated by Archbishop Juliusz Paetz, who stands accused of having for many years molested seminar students subordinate to him.

The ruthless nature of these symptoms stems not only from the fact that, as in the case just mentioned, they completely deny what the subject wants to consciously say, but also from the fact that they successfully displace the problem being repressed. This type of displacement is illustrated, for instance, by Catholics concerned about morality who beset a theatre company's venue but not parishes in which children are molested or raped or the seats of bishops compromised by others' public defamations. It really isn't far from the Powszechny Theatre to the seat of the capital's Praga-district bishopric, where Henryk Hoser resides, who has never even at the very least explained his activities in Rwanda during one of the worst acts of genocide in recent history. And Hoser probably doesn't receive threatening phone calls or anonymous threats on Facebook, as have the creators of *The Curse* and employees of the Powszechny Theatre. What's more, tradition was also defended on sidewalks at the entrance to the Powszechny Theatre by members of ONR [the National Radical Camp], an organization that before the Second World War had organized anti-Semitic discrimination termed 'ghetto benches' at universities, spread racial hatred with its press and launched attacks on Jewish shops.

Such selective attention even concerns specific scenes in *The Curse*. For example, one of the few scenes devoid of a double frame (generally theatrical, based on the distancing effect) is the moment in which the actor Jacek Beler walks into the audience looking for Muslims, whom, as he had admitted in a hate-filled soliloquy, he wants to expel from

his country. Beler even brings a specially trained dog to help him track down foreigners. Interestingly, this scene's not the subject of any public controversy, remaining unmentioned in critical comments demanding the production be censored due to its offensive character. It seems not to offend those who are disturbed by the free use of religious symbol on stage. Within the ranks of Polish patriots, it looks like an almost official approval of racism is functioning, and that it's become an imperceptible, seemingly natural, acceptable language.

Knowledge resulting from transgression as practiced in *The Curse* is a practical form of knowledge, a way of recognizing critical points of social communication and provoking conflict around them. This impasse performativity allows one to see how very obvious and predictable are both the locations of those points and strategies of compromising anyone daring to infringe on their stability. The impasse of society is reproduced around the production. This is where the success of *The Curse* lies, and also its failure. By diagnosing that impasse, the production inevitably becomes its element. It becomes testimony of what's impossible to break or overcome.

Perhaps after *The Curse* it will be even easier to attack artists than it was before – perhaps such a bold production can trigger dormant repression mechanisms that can now solidify uninhibited? Wouldn't it be truly utopian to function in a society where such productions no longer need to be created because critical thinking has replaced mindless faith in authority figures' inviolability and their 'morality'? This is not necessarily an objection to the production. The curse on Polish society won't be broken by any single victim, only by an entire paradigm change. And that – which Frljić presents in many of his productions – is simply unfeasible (even for him) in the present capitalist system, which increasingly erodes the authority of art and of any other realm of unfettered thinking.

\*\*\*

Some of the impetus with which *The Curse* broke into the public sphere certainly results from the sharpness of perspective it proposes: from the desire to see things for what they are, without false nuance, without precaution or evasion. Such an outlook seems invigorating and provides courage in a world increasingly devoid of it. As Walter Benjamin wrote, 'all true insight forms an eddy'.<sup>5</sup>

The stage in this production is indeed reminiscent of an eddy, focusing in itself all the ideological components of our daily life, mixed as if in the funnel of a tornado. Thanks to the fact that these components have been set in motion, they begin to intermingle: violence and subservience, calmness and aggression, piety and hostility, become dimensions of the same gestures, just as the act of fellatio on the papal figure is fundamentally ambivalent.

The storm surrounding the production, however, hides somewhere at its centre an absolute silence, a kind of unspeakable though also consciously unexpressed injury. At that centre, in the eye of this storm, remain victims of real and unpunished thus still on-going sexual violence. Though the cast plays roles of molested youth, introducing themselves by name and surname, they remain least talked about in this entire

5 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 843.

conflict. Perhaps this is a kind of strategy aimed at focusing at last on the perpetrators, showing them in full light. If so, the device used by the creative team didn't work, as it couldn't have worked. Through the turmoil of public conflict, they took the position of victims, attracting the entire odium of hatred.

With that said a great merit lies in this failure. Might it have been unnecessary to unleash a storm in order just to provide some shelter for those victims in the middle of it? This way, it's impossible to forget them, as it's impossible to forget this production.

Translated by Karolina Sofulak

#### WORK CITED

Agamben, Giorgio, *Profanacje*, trans. Mateusz Kwaterko, (Warsaw: PIW, 2006)

Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999)

Foucault, Michel, 'Inne przestrzenie', trans. Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska, *Teksty Drugie*, 5, 2005

Foucault, Michel, *Powiedziane, napisane. Szaleństwo i literatura*, trans. Bogdan Banasiak, (Warsaw: Aletheia, 1999)

Wyspiański, Stanisław, *Klątwa*, in Wyspiański, *Dramaty wybrane*, 1 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972)

Paweł Mościcki

The Village Is on Fire! The Village Is Burning Down!

Notes on the Oliver Frljić production of *Klątwa* in Warsaw

The text is a critical assessment of various aesthetical and political strategies used in *The Curse* directed by Oliver Frljić. It starts with the hypothesis that what is staged in the performance is not only the problem with which it is overtly dealing (namely the dominant position of the Catholic Church in Poland) but also mechanisms and symbolical codes that surround and condition theater as such. It is only together with the excessive and often highly ideologized reactions by the press and audience that one can understand it as the theater in the extended field. It's critical load but also its gentleness, or even tenderness. The biggest scandal in the Polish theater in recent years is in fact organized around a fundamental deadlock, which points at the emptiness of society at large. Thus the real curse consists of the repetitive clash between

the utopian vision of critical art and the overwhelming production of fake symbols organizing society around the quintessential, yet undisclosed, void. The production acknowledges this deadlock and exacerbates it in order to exorcise it. And perhaps its strongest effect stems from the fact that it is impossible to distinguish between its success and its failure.