

Arkadiusz Gruszczyński (ed.)

How Komuna Otwock
became Komuna// Warszawa:
A Conversation among Alina Gałązka,
Grzegorz Laszuk and Tomasz Plata

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Re// mixes

Remix is an approach from music and refers to a new piece created by transforming an existing piece. More than just an 'interpretation', a remix presents the original piece by means of new means of expression or a new arrangement. It may include original parts (so-called sampling), but these are only quotations. A remix is a new piece referring in form or content to its original, debating with it, nostalgically recalling or re-reading it.

In the **RE// MIX** cycle created at Komuna// Warszawa from 2010 to 2014, the remixes are new interpretations of classic works, mostly from theatre, along with dance and literature. These works include originals already somewhat forgotten that changed the awareness of people who practice 'strange' theatre today: interdisciplinary, questing, situated on the borders between visual theatre, performing arts, visual arts and social action. They constitute a particular cultural canon, defining taste, becoming a self-definition as sources and inspiration – they have come to constitute reference points.

Alina Gałązka: The Komuna Otwock collective [predecessor of Komuna// Warszawa] disintegrated because the formula of the 'magic circle' depleted and because of internal quarrels. We wanted to keep the name and a certain history with our colleagues who didn't agree with the direction we wanted to take. There were many personal problems also.

Grzegorz Laszuk: We'd been residing in Praga [the district across the river from central Warsaw], we were thirty minutes in to a performance and suddenly someone calls from Otwock, that they can't find Lubelska Street [the performance venue]. We had to do something about it. We were also a bit tired with the 'ethos', so dissolving Komuna Otwock was a formal closure to a certain history. We needed to detach ourselves from ambitious goals set in 1989 and start doing something new. We were tired with the label of engaged anarchists and by the end of the 2000s we were done being them. We didn't believe that a performance shown in a dark room to sixty people could change anything. Because it can't – that's obvious, isn't it? It doesn't mean that today we don't have a critical rather than ideological attitude towards reality. We

tend to focus on analysis of social relations or reflection on the 'essence of humanity' or 'social relations'.

The mid-2000s was a period of a political turn for theatre and visual arts. In fact, we could've floated in that 'political engagement', but preferred to manifest our belief that political art leads nowhere. We wanted to share our own failed experience of engaged and political art. That's why we created productions such as *Dlaczego nie będzie rewolucji?* [*Why's There Not Going to Be a Revolution?*].

By 2009, we had a cycle titled *Co-2-tygodnie-show* [*Every-Other-Week-Show*]. And every other week we'd produce a new small performance, which commented on current events: there was a reconstruction of events from March 1968 [anti-Semitic government actions in Poland and suppressed student March 1968...], the action *Kościół+Państwo=Draństwo* [*Church + State = Vileness*], *Naród chuj* [*The Nation Is a Dick*] for Independence Day, *Sierkowski, kto Ty jesteś* [*Sierakowski, Who Are You*], after meetings between Sławomir Sierakowski, a leader of the new Left, with Wojciech Olejniczak, chairman of SLD [the Democratic Left Alliance] and leader of post-Communist Left, were made public. The idea behind the cycle was great, but the pace and discipline, requiring constant invention of new action and organisation of meetings, were exhausting and it was increasingly difficult to create something interesting. Then, after a meeting with Tomasz, we decided to change the strategy and develop a community around Komuna.

Tomasz Plata: We'd known each other for years, but not closely. Grzegorz designed the cover of my first book and later we saw each other occasionally out in the city. Eventually they invited me to go with them to Kraków for *Reminiscencje* [Kraków Theatrical Reminiscences], to moderate some discussion. I went; it was fun. Several months later, Laszuk called again, this time with the idea to write a book about them. That they'd changed their name, wanted to go in different directions and would like to re-examine their activities so far. We wrote this book with Agnieszka Berlińska and it was published by Krytyka Polityczna [Political Critique].

Various visual-art curators created their small projects at Komuna at that time: Kaja Pawełek, Adam Mazur. The idea that I could be next came rather naturally. I proposed a project, but the problem was that it was elaborate, just too big for Komuna's possibilities at that moment. The initial idea was simple: to convince Komuna to gather a new community of performing artists around its space on Lubelska Street. The idea was to transform this alternative-theatre company preparing a production from time to time into an alternative institution which formed a community. This was the idea behind the 'Perform' cycle, with the 'RE//MIX' project as a part.

The beginnings weren't easy. First, Komuna had to be convinced. The project was ambitious and demanded a lot of time. That wasn't easy to tell the Komuna people: now work even more, so someone can produce a performance in your space. Fortunately, Alina Gałązka, Grzegorz Laszuk and other members of the group soon recognised the value of these actions. The other problem was more serious: we had to find the money. We produced the first RE// MIX season for pennies which we managed to get out of Studio Theatre [in Warsaw] by some miracle.

The RE// MIXs worked better than I expected. When they began to appear in annual rankings of the top theatre events of the year, even I was surprised. I think that thanks to a large extent to RE//MIXs, it was possible to change the coordinate system defining the world of Polish theatre and performing arts. Suddenly it seemed that [Tadeusz] Kantor and [Jerzy] Grotowski didn't have to remain the privileged reference points – that Akademia Ruchu [Academy of Movement] and a set of the key achievements of the international avant-garde from American post-modern dance, the Wooster Group, Laurie Anderson, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Jérôme Bel, could become more inspiring. It sounds banal today, but seven years ago, when we began the RE// MIXs, it was quite a discovery. What's more, we succeeded with the most important thing: the community was created. Wojtek Ziemilski, dancers from Centrum w Ruchu [Center in Motion], Marta Ziółek, Weronika Szczawińska, some of the more aesthetically courageous mainstream theatre directors – we met while working on the RE// MIXs, and later we kept returning to each other in various configurations.

GL: At the same time, Komuna began telling stories, instead of calling for change. We became a 'normal theatre': we choose a person or event and told the story to our audience, who had the freedom of interpretation. We stopped saying people should be this or that. The entirety of art history demonstrates that such ideological premises lead us nowhere. What's real is the need to be together, creating theatre together, for example, because it gives us pleasure. That's why we continue our activities.

I think a good example of this new strategy would be *Sierakowski*, a production about the founder [Sławomir Sierakowski] of a leftist organisation, Political Critique – a journal, community centre, website and publishing house. It seemed obvious that this community would generate serious political power. Unfortunately, under the influence of Occupy Wall Street and the Indignados movement, Critique began to think about utopian social revolution instead of working on creating a political party. We wanted to tell its leader: 'Wake up! You publish books you apparently don't read yourself! It's obvious that all movements, just like the one from 1968 or other various social actions, sooner or later burn out. You have to think realistically instead of writing another manifesto'. This was the story we wanted to tell.

TP: In a way, that was a prophetic production, and it was under-appreciated at that time. It conveyed a message that politics is practice, that publishing books, even written by engaged authors, or creating political productions, is important for raising awareness, but it's really about founding a political party and winning elections. The production was organized around Richard Rorty's statement: 'Disengagement from practice produces theoretical hallucinations'. I absolutely agree with this statement and often think about it when I observe actions of the contemporary so-called academic Left. It seems to me that, with Laszuk, we also understand each other quite well in this area, in a strongly unorthodox idea about how an effective emancipatory politics should look today.

GL: I regret that for the past ten years we've not managed a decent party which would matter in today's Polish parliament. Perhaps we'd not

be going through what's happening now. When I started to engage in politics, I became a member of the Green Party. I ran in elections. For me, it was obvious. That was the only way to influence the real world and the law-making process. Theatre is for other purposes.

Which Europe?

GL: Let's get back to stories. Another person was [Kemal] Atatürk. In my mind, his biography was connected with our position in Europe. Atatürk invented Turkey under the influence of his fascination with Europe and designed it accordingly. He carried out a radical political and cultural transformation. He made people use the Latin alphabet, he had beards shaved by dictum, etc. He wanted Turkey to become European.

Today, when I look at those fascist-like hit squads protesting in front of the Powszechny Theatre [in Warsaw], I see that the idea of Europeanization failed in Poland. Note that in discussions, on the side of liberals and leftists, these European values are still present. We appeal to them when we say: don't cut down the forest, let the refugees in, respect freedom of speech.

Our production *Atatürk albo dlaczego pojechałem do Istambu* (premiere on 31 December 2012) was telling a story about this Europe which is fading somehow. At the time, [Prime Minister] Erdogan won another election and started tightening the screws and there were riots on Taksim Square. It was a moment of political unrest which indicated the conclusion we're witnessing today, namely Turkish dictatorship. In one scene, Aleks sits on the shore of the Bosphorus, looks at Europe and suddenly fog appears. Europe disappears. Poland is in the same situation. Now we'll probably sail away from Europe.

But just as Atatürk was fascinated by Europe, I was fascinated by Turkey then. [The novelist Ohan] Pamuk, Istanbul, crayfish... Eventually, a strange performance emerged out of all this: about Turkish stories, music and politics...

AG: There's an ongoing observation in our productions that a small bit of evil creates equilibrium in the world. The social meaning lies in keeping that small bit of evil small. It recalls for me the final part of the *Perechodnik/Bauman* production (2004): small lies, everyday deceptions and modest exploitation are the best things that can happen to mankind.

The production about Terry Pratchett is also about this issue [the opera *Terry Pratchett: Social Science*, premiered 16 February 2014]. We asked a question: how to keep a little bit of evil? Each person has a personal code which they follow. The social meaning lies in keeping them from eating each other up. It's about equilibrium. We can see that now, in our country. We don't want to eliminate radical Catholics from public life. They can be who they are, but they should let us live the way we want.

GL: The fascination with Pratchett is inexplicable. There's a clan of people who like Pratchett and the rest of people don't have a clue. I went on holiday once – I didn't know who Pratchett was. I took a book from a shelf with the worst cover in the world and it turned out to be awesome literature. Pop culture read by millions of people. Pratchett describes the

world as it is. Zero social bullshit.

AG: I was also infected by it.

GL: And this is British humour at its best. Pratchett writes in a way similar to Richard Rorty, my favourite American philosopher. Both ask the same question: what can we do to keep our world from collapsing? We're standing on the edge, so how not to fall off? Rorty and Pratchett respond: you don't have to construct another building. It's about supporting the old one in the right places.

The Bourgeoisie

TP: These statements are unusual for people who still locate themselves within the left-wing community, right? Komuna quickly abandoned traditional revolutionary rhetoric. They made productions about why the revolution wouldn't happen. Laszuk was reading Rorty, a classic liberal, even if his heart's on the left side. That suited me perfectly. I had the idea to turn to the topic of the bourgeois class as the ally of modernization. And the Zamek Culture Centre in Poznań had just opened a competition for a curatorial performance project. Poznań constituted a good context for talking about the bourgeoisie. I applied and won and, thanks to the Zamek Culture Centre and Komuna, could co-produce the cycle 'My, mieszczenie' [We, the Bourgeoisie] – I invited [Wojtek] Ziemiński, [Weronika] Szczawińska, and, of course, Komuna – people who'd proved themselves in the RE// MIXs.

Quite a bit of confusion was created out of all this. Right before the end of the project, Laszuk and I gave several long, provocative interviews: that the bourgeoisie is okay, that leftists should consider the bourgeoisie their allies, that in fact we're all bourgeois so perhaps we should confront this identity and stop all this nonsense about class revolution. It corresponded quite well with the discussion around texts written by Andrzej Leder and Agata Bielik-Robson. For Warsaw leftist intellectuals, these ideas were unacceptable. Some were surprised, because they thought that the productions in the project were unambiguously and intentionally ironic. And we seriously suggested building a self-conscious bourgeois culture. In retrospect, I regret that we didn't follow up on this issue.

GL: We turned our attention to *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville, who also described the world realistically. It wasn't perfect, but it worked. *Democracy in America* describes the world in which people reach an agreement despite obvious political or philosophical differences. They agree to choose a sheriff, a judge, the president – this was Rousseau's social contract in real life. The whole America project, except the disaster of slavery, was the implementation of a pragmatic utopia: what should we do so that we'd not kill each other. It was important for us to tell a story about the essence of democracy and the way society 'works'. The production *Życie codzienne po wielkiej rewolucji* [*Everyday Life after the Great Revolution*], created out of our reading of Tocqueville, was also meant to show that everyday life – often overlooked in ideological reflections – determines the quality of democracy, fulfilling one's needs and happiness. A proper perspective on everyday life can remind us what

democracy is for. Everyday life is supposed to run on breakfast, work, dinner, lunch, dinner, sex... A mundane repeatability which builds up the system.

Then Tomasz had the idea to start talking about the bourgeoisie and the newly emerging middle class in Poland. Many aspects of the bourgeoisie annoy me, but I identify with them. That's why this project helped us look at ourselves in the mirror of a Polish bourgeoisie tradition. Talking about the bourgeoisie was supposed to become a counter-proposal to national culture, focused as it is on great and – in my opinion – harmful ideas.

AG: Then the courts banned the performance of one of the productions, the title of which we can't mention. Perhaps that trial will last for years. But it didn't affect Komuna's functioning at all; we didn't begin to censor anyone. I hope that case won't become a precedent for other courts.

Microtheatre

TP: And our last project, the Microtheatre. Every invited artist played on the same field. Grzegorz Jarzyna, Radek Rychcik, Weronika Szczawińska, Anna Smolar and Romuald Krężel got the same conditions. Their productions should last no longer than sixteen minutes; you could use only props which would fit in a suitcase the size of a cabin bag; two microphones, four spotlights and a projector. The entire cycle consisted of eighteen productions. Plus several in Lublin and Poznań, as franchise units [*laughter*].

Microtheatre was about several things. First, to reveal production conditions in theatre. So the audience had a clear idea what it's made of, was aware of institutional conditions which determine what can appear on stage. Second, it was about making Polish theatre think in more specific ways, to formulate its diagnosis more precisely. If you only have sixteen minutes, you have to speak directly, without ornaments, define clearly what you have to say. I like such theatre very much: modest, conceptual. Theatre, so to speak, with a low concentration of theatre. And third, Microtheatre was a particular exercise for guerilla theatre, created with limited funds and, as a result, free from various political pressures. As we know, today's Polish theatre must develop a strategy of resistance to political pressure at an accelerated pace. The lesson of Microtheatre can hint at how to do this.

There were some criticisms that our project was a neoliberal dream come true: fast production, fast consumption, low cost, precarious work conditions, the system satisfied because it didn't have to invest too much money, the audience is satisfied because they saw three performances in one night. I think that Microtheatre revealed these institutional entanglements, rather than silently accepting them.

Where Is Komuna Now?

AG: We're in a difficult situation. Komuna// Warszawa turned into a big organization and we can't keep running it without some form of pay

for full-time employees. Issues related to finances are very difficult for NGOs and without institutional support it's easy to make a mistake. You have to know that the curator works for free or almost for free; administration also works for free. Some Komuna members also work for free. We usually pay some small amount of money to artists outside Komuna. Now we need some time to rethink the formula.

GL: Alina is right: we lack institution. The theatre mainstream works with us – [the directors] Grzegorz Jarzyna, Weronika Szczawińska, Markus Ohrn, Anna Smolor, Cezary Tomaszewski, Michał Borczuch and Radek Rychcik. Many other, old and young, trust us and want to work with us. If we don't find a stable source of funding, however, this formula will fail. Dignity requires that artists have good working conditions.

AG: We've been thinking about a new model for a while. A non-public cultural institution is defined by the fact of its permanence: it has a permanent repertory team of basic employees and a uniform profile. Non-public, because it doesn't receive a regular institutional subsidy, and public or local authorities aren't administering it. It applies for funding in a competition by presenting a programme concept. The city or the ministry could choose several non-government organizations which would be recognized as 'flagships', stable and with predictable repertory. In such a situation, competitions could only be profiled for such institutions. And, interestingly, this is possible in light of Polish law. There's also another alternative: management of an institution by a non-government organisation. The cultural-activities act allows it. They open a tender procedure, or undertake a direct-agreement contact. Things can work that way. With Aldona Machnowska-Góra [an NGO activist], we tried to raise interest in this issue among politicians, but without success.

In these institutions, it's possible to develop the programme as a group, a team. This is how it works now in Komuna. Decisions are usually made collectively. Grzegorz has an idea, Tomasz has another, someone else yet another, we talk everything over and finally we look for the money. It's not that we are eaten by *granotsis* and try to accommodate ourselves at any cost to subjects that're desired by funders.

GL: We have specific tastes, we're an experimental theatre, though despite this our performances are usually sold out. It's good that the number of informed audience members is growing. Our choices, which initially seemed risky, are now on an 'obligatory list' for every dance company. RE// MIX has enabled debuts of many choreographers and dances who are well known today. Today Iza Szostak and Marta Ziółek are very popular. We created the opportunity to reveal their incredible talents. In a normal country or city – see Poznań and its Scena Robocza [Working Stage –, after so many years of successful actions, we'd have already become a big institution, yet we function in poverty. Unfortunately, the authorities don't understand today's arts scene.

TP: As an institutional model, Komuna// Warszawa is a unique phenomenon in Poland. This group has been creating their own productions for the past thirty years; they maintain their space and in addition have become a production house. This is quite an achievement on the scale of

this city. What's more, Komuna has become a reference point for other institutions, especially as many directors and actors drop out of institutional circulation due to policies implemented by the Law and Justice political party. Suddenly, they have to look for new forms. The history of Komuna// Warszawa can become useful.

Abstract

Arkadiusz Gruszczyński (ed.)

How Komuna Otwock became Komuna// Warszawa:

A Conversation with Alina Gałązka, Grzegorz Laszuk and Tomasz Plata

A conversation between Alina Gałązka, Grzegorz Laszuk and Tomasz Plata, members of Komuna// Warszawa, one of the most interesting independent theatre companies in Poland, and creators of the most important interdisciplinary centre of performing arts, gathering young artists of the so-called post-theatre. The conversation focuses on their political attitude illustrated by the evolution of this group from an anarchist commune, operating in a small town in the field of political art, to a big-city alternative arts centre. The artists discuss the most significant curating projects which have enabled Komuna to enter the theatre mainstream and mark their place as an alternative production house functioning at the junction of theatre and performing arts. They also indicate difficulties related to the limitations of the theatre-funding system in Poland, which does not include such independent entities operating professionally, but without becoming a public-culture institution.