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Post-Theatre: Escaping from Theatre,  
Escaping to Theatre

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## Post-Theatre: Escaping from Theatre, Escaping to Theatre

1.

Let's begin from the beginning. Five beginnings, in fact.

First: after a short overture performed outside the theatre and in the foyer, the audience enters the auditorium, where they see a long line of several dozen people, standing shoulder to shoulder, facing them. These are 'men and women, children, adults, older people, heterosexuals and homosexuals, foreigners, refugees, disabled people. There's also a soldier in uniform and [a] drag queen'.<sup>1</sup> An actor reads out the text of the preamble to the Polish Constitution and the chorus repeats after him, 'freezing' at times on isolated words: 'We, the people of Poland – all citizens of the Republic / all / all / all...'

Second: two people come on stage and stand facing the audience. They introduce themselves: 'I'm Rozalia Mierzicka and I have worked on this as an actress', 'I'm Wojtek Ziemilski and I've worked on this as a director'. Together, the two announce that the performance which is about to begin will be an unusual one, in that it'll require the co-operation of one spectator. 'What this is, is that we need one person – one of you – to make this work at all. We need one person to come up here and join me in a bit of action', Mierzicka explains. 'Which one of you wouldn't mind coming up here? Who wouldn't mind a bit of action?', asks Ziemilski. Those interested raise their hands, the artists look at the audience, debating the issue among themselves – and finally choose one person, who gets invited onto the stage. The rest of the production is in very large part Mierzicka working alongside that chosen spectator.

Third: as they wait in the foyer, the audience realises the performance has already begun. Some spectators are approached by performers, already the roles they'll continue to play throughout the evening. Dressed as extravagantly as if they were in an avant-garde fashion show, they arch their bodies and murmur mantra-like catchphrases. After a while, they enter the auditorium, followed by the audience. They move about the stage – at the centre of which another character is seated, with a mask covering her face. In an electronically distorted voice, she encourages those present to: 'Relax your body. Relax your body. Move your body. Move your body. Come on! Come on!' In subsequent sequences, the

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<sup>1</sup> See Stanisław Godlewski, 'We? The People? On Marta Górnicka's *Constitution for the Chorus of Poles*', in the present issue of *Polish Theatre Journal* 1:5, 2018 [www.polishtheatrejournal.com](http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com) [accessed on 27 April 2018].

characters – Angel Dust, Coco, Beauty, High Speed, Lordi and Glow – introduce themselves to the audience, with the entire production transforming into a series of self-presentations.

Fourth: Three female performers walk onto the empty stage.

‘Dear Lover’ – they say and then each of them takes a piece of paper from their pocket. They begin to read together – in one voice, in English – the content of the letter: ‘I have been reduced to the object that desires you. I am writing this beautiful letter to you during sleepless and nightmarish hours of the night. And everything has passed. I just miss you in a desperate, human way. [...] Forever Yours’. The stage is completely empty and darkened, which creates a contrasting background for the performers. The audience’s attention is thereby focused only on them and their words. The second letter begins with the same wording – ‘Dear Lover’ – but the way of reading it has been shifted. Each of the performers reads the same text, but at their own pace. As a result, if we want to hear the whole text, we have to listen to the voice of only one person or give up and allow it to reach us in a piecemeal way. With the next letter, the performers go around the various parts of the room and stand close enough to choose a particular person from the audience who becomes the recipient of the letter.<sup>2</sup>

Fifth: lights in the auditorium go off. A recording is played through the speakers:

Hello. My name is Anna Karasińska. So far, I’ve completed two pieces for theatre. For my first show, besides hiring actors, I used a chair and four cross-shaped pieces of adhesive tape. My second production features a carpet, a desk lamp, an empty Coca-Cola can and a curtain, which made me worry the show might be a bit overloaded. Komuna// Warszawa’s Micro Theatre project seemed perfectly suited to my tastes.

This monologue goes on for several minutes, with the director speaking of her qualms about the rules of the project she’s taking part in, of her desire to mount a large-scale production with huge logistical backing – finally, she confesses: ‘Of all the things I can imagine, appearing on stage is the one I’d fear most’. At this point, lights comes up again and we see a nervous young woman in a beanie cap and an oversized shirt, standing at centre stage. It’s Karasińska, the director of the piece. Her monologue goes on: ‘I feel my breathing is somehow different’, the recorded Karasińska complains a bit neurotically. After a while, she makes a suggestion to her audience:

This outmoded thinking, that theatre is when someone experiences something on someone else’s behalf, appeals to me. I’m so afraid and embarrassed right now that I think we may just be able not to squander this. If anyone here hasn’t experienced these things – be my guest.

These are the opening sequences of five productions mounted during recent seasons by young artists working on the outskirts of institutional theatre in Poland. The preceding descriptions refer (in order)

<sup>2</sup> Agnieszka Sosnowska ‘Androgynous and Soft: Ania Nowak’s Non-normative Languages’, trans. by Monika Bokiniec, in the present issue of *Polish Theatre Journal* 1:5, 2018 [www.polishtheatrejournal.com](http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com) [accessed on 27 April 2018].

to *Konstytucja na Chór Polaków* [*Constitution for the Chorus of Poles*, Nowy Theatre in Warsaw, premiered on 1 May 2016], directed by Marta Górnicka; *Pygmalion*, directed by Wojtek Ziemilski [Komuna// Warszawa, premiered in Poznań on 25 October 2014]; *Zrób siebie* [*Make Yourself*, Komuna// Warszawa, 20 May 2016], directed by Marta Ziółek; *Offering What We Don't Have to Those Who Don't Want It*, directed by Ania Nowak [Sophiensaele, Berlin, 10 January 2016]; and *Urodziny* [*Birthday*, Komuna// Warszawa, 12 November 2016], directed by Anna Karasińska. There are substantial differences between these works, and it's not necessarily intuitive to place them alongside each other. Yet it wouldn't be amiss to notice similarities among them, to see what they have in common.

Above all, these productions share a certain attitude towards the spectator in theatre. In each instance cited above, the spectator is a (and, on occasion, the) focus of the creative team's attention. As on-stage action unfolds, the presence of the audience is ostentatiously revealed, commented on and established as a subject. The methods used to achieve this by the productions vary, but the main theme recurs. These are productions where performers stand on stage facing the audience, staring at it or addressing it directly, undermining theatre's traditional arrangement, in fact, or at least complicating it. Here, it's not only spectators observing performers, but also performers looking at spectators.

## 2.

Attempting to describe this new formation in Polish theatre, the critic Joanna Krakowska has suggested the term 'auto-theatre'. What is auto-theatre? It is:

auto-theatre is the kind of theatre in which artists speak from the stage on their own behalf and under their own names, not the names of characters. They speak in their own words and about themselves. They refer to their own experiences, explore their personal limitations, reveal their weaknesses, problematize the situation in which they speak, define and question their identities, disclose the backstage of theatrical process, relations inside the team, institutional restrictions, economic conditions, ideological uneasiness. Auto-theatre is not necessarily a theatrical convention, but rather a formula for initiating communication with the audience under new principles: honesty, revelation, disclosure, speaking on one's own behalf, responsibility for one's words, testing democratic procedures.<sup>3</sup>

Directors and dramaturges identified by Krakowska as representatives of auto-theatre include Karasińska, Ziemilski, Michał Buszewicz, Anna Smolar and Justyna Sobczyk with her Teatr 21, a company of performers with disabilities. Without a doubt, Krakowska has grasped an important feature of Polish theatre's most recent experience, recording a salient motivation shared by emerging artists. At the same time, though, she seems to have missed something. By focusing so intently upon on-stage events, Krakowska has paid only scant attention to what goes on in the audience at

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Krakowska 'Auto-theatre in the Era of Post-Truth', trans. by Monika Bokinić, in the present issue of *Polish Theatre Journal* 1:5, 2018, [www.polishtheatrejournal.com](http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com) [accessed on 27 April 2018].

the same time. She chose the '*Camera Buff* moment' as the leitmotif of her piece – a reference to the closing scene of Krzysztof Kieślowski's acclaimed 1979 film, when the protagonist, an amateur filmmaker played by Jerzy Stuhr, turns the camera on himself 'to tell his own story, to explore his position and the medium he uses',<sup>4</sup> in the wake of earlier disappointments. Krakowska makes a telling choice, and one that carries specific implications: she loses sight of the spectator, focusing entirely on the performer who in turn watches herself. True, Krakowska does cite the rules arrived at by company members from Teatr 21, which include the contention that 'the actor sees the spectator and the spectator sees the actor' – the critic goes as far as to call this last insight the key principle of auto-theatre – but this insight is not followed by a more in-depth analysis.

Yet it doesn't take much effort to recognise that emerging artists in Polish theatre take an occasional interest in themselves, but that their interest in their audience is far greater and more intense. This is the case not just in the five productions referenced above. A similar concern about emphasising the audience's presence in the structure of a theatrical event is evident in other works by Górnicka, Ziemilski, Ziółek, Nowak and Karasińska, as well as selected productions by theatre artists who have an affinity with these directors. Weronika Szczawińska, Romuald Krężel, Agnieszka Jakimiak, Grzegorz Laszuk, along with Buszewicz, Smolar and Sobczyk, who are mentioned by Krakowska, are similarly concerned about emphasising the audience's presence in the structure of a theatre work. That list also includes Maria Stokłosa, Agata Maszkiewicz, Karol Tymiański and Paweł Sakowicz – dancers and choreographers who make increasingly daring ventures outside their own territory.

All these stage artists comprise a new milieu of Polish theatre, a sort of expanding constellation or network: they regularly work together in different personal and institutional arrangements, support each other and invite each other to take part in subsequent projects, having a sense of shared interests and beliefs. Significantly, hardly anyone in this group graduated from the directing department of a Polish theatre school. This may be why their works don't reproduce the canons most ubiquitous in the art of theatre in Poland, at least in part. One might say, somewhat provocatively, this is the first emerging generation of Polish theatre artists in years who have managed to be successful without being shaped by the influential Polish director Krystian Lupa.

When searching for the context informing their work, one must move away from the local setup and closer to achievements among Europe's major dance and experimental-theatre artists. Neither is the main reference point among them the work of classic post-dramatic theatre artists such as Heiner Müller and Frank Castorf, or great contemporary masters of staging such as Romeo Castellucci. Instead, these emerging Polish artists allude in their work to colleagues from outside the theatre mainstream, younger by a generation or two than the doyens mentioned above. These 'outsiders' include Tim Etchells and his company Forced Entertainment, groups from documentary-theatre circles (Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad), artists working in so-called conceptual dance (Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Ivana Müller), unorthodox choreographers

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4 Krakowska, 'Auto-theatre'.

(Cecilia Bengolea, João Fiadeiro), visual artists with an interest in performative activities (the so-called relational aesthetics circles, Janet Cardiff). As far as the history of Polish theatre is concerned, perhaps only the achievements of Akademia Ruchu [the Academy of Movement] could fit into this catalogue of associations.<sup>5</sup>

This list of reference names may in itself suggest origins for the interest young Polish stage artists are taking in the issue of spectators in theatre. Practically everyone mentioned here has implied their unease in a traditional theatrical situation, and have attempted to set up their relationship with the audience from scratch, along less predictable lines. Some, including Rimini Protokoll and Janet Cardiff, have turned audiences into performers, while others – Xavier Le Roy, Ivana Müller – have experimented with widespread habits of perception, with a view to imply that the purpose of theatrical action emerges more in the eye of the spectator than on stage – or in her consciousness.

There's little doubt that the new wave of Polish theatre-makers have followed such suggestions. They have also followed intuitions formulated in salient theoretical writing in recent years and exploring the same issue. It is significant that, in large part, the Polish theatre artists of the young generation under consideration have mastered two sets of abilities: those related to their art form, and general skills in the humanities. Thus if they have wished to rethink their relationship with their audience, they know full well they were within a field already marked heavily with previous efforts by artists and theoreticians alike. They became even more aware of this in the wake of the relatively recent publication of 'The Emancipated Spectator' by Jacques Rancière.

### 3.

As readers may remember, Rancière's essay began with a surprising, provocative, but I think justified diagnosis of the state of self-awareness in contemporary theatre: the theatre of today in fact distrusts itself. More than that: it dislikes itself. After reading Rancière, one can go as far as to conclude neurotic insecurity is at the core of contemporary theatre. Where does this belief come from? Simple observation. Major artists of twentieth and twenty-first century theatre agree on this basic contention: theatre's relationship with the spectator – which is the relationship theatre cannot do without – is, by definition, a relationship of power and political dominance. As Rancière observes:

there is no theatre without a spectator. [...] But, according to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Weronika Szczawińska, 'The Academy of Movement: A Future Already Passed', trans. by Bartosz Wójcik, in the present issue of *Polish Theatre Journal* 1:5, 2018, [www.polishtheatrejournal.com](http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com) [accessed on 27 April 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', in Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009), p. 2.

Where such conclusions are reached, theatre can only do one thing: call itself into question and formulate a utopian fantasy of a theatre without an audience. A theatre, in other words, where 'the passive optical relationship implied by the very term [theatre] is subjected to a different relationship – that implied by another word, one which refers to what is produced on stage: *drama*'.<sup>7</sup> In a theatre of this kind, spectators would be able to (and should) become the actors' active partners, no less noteworthy and no less responsible for the entire event. As a result, the audience for such theatre could and should render the performers' traditional dominant position over them null and void.

Rancière identifies two ways of achieving this. The first is to provide the audience with cognitive opportunities, the second is to give them opportunities to act. In the first way, an audience member must be persuaded to 'exchange the position of passive spectator for that of scientific investigator or experimenter who observes phenomena and searches for their causes'. In the second way, she must be 'dispossessed of this illusory mastery, drawn into the magic circle of theatrical action, where she will exchange the privilege of rational observer for that of being in possession of all her vital energies'.<sup>8</sup> Rancière associates the first of these strategies with Brecht's epic theatre, and the other with Artaud and his Theatre of Cruelty.

There are two strategies – seemingly quite different, even disparate – are, in Rancière's view, very much alike at a deeper level. Both might be regarded as an unorthodox method of working through Plato's classic critique of theatre. As we know, Plato renounced theatre as a threat to the democratic collective, a system of representation that distracts a citizen from his duty to work for the community. Brecht, Artaud and their heirs acknowledged Plato's critique as valid – but, instead of abandoning theatre, they made an effort to reform it, with a view to arriving at a formula wherein Plato's criticism would no longer apply.

Rancière reports on all this in an unbiased manner – until he at last reveals his reservations. He describes attempts to include Plato's critique into contemporary theatrical practice as paradoxical and ineffective. This is because each such attempt starts (as it must) with theatre's paternalistic gesture towards its audience. The entire model can be described as follows:

Theatre accuses itself of rendering spectators passive and thereby betraying its essence as community action. It consequently assigns itself the mission of reversing its effects and expiating its sins by restoring to spectators ownership of their consciousness and their activity. The theatrical stage and performance [...] intend to teach their spectators ways of ceasing to be spectators and becoming agents of a collective practice.<sup>9</sup>

In Rancière's view, such an arrangement may be likened to a relationship between an enlightened schoolmaster and a student receiving instruction from him, where the former is regarded as the custodian of knowledge, and the latter as an ignoramus. Even if the schoolmaster

7 Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', p. 3.

8 Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', p. 4.

9 Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', pp. 7–8.

makes an effort to achieve greater partnership with her student, she finds herself unable to avoid the symbolic violence inherent in the situation.

What, then, is to be done? Should one simply accept theatre's troublesome nature, the inevitability of its condescending feature? Rancière has another idea. To present it, he references his earlier book, *Le maître ignorant* [*The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1987], a discussion of the forgotten educational theory (and practice) proposed by Joseph Jacotot, a French professor from the early nineteenth century. According to Rancière, Jacotot successfully worked through the traditional schoolmaster-student arrangement by questioning the belief that the former must be intellectually superior to the latter. One of the things Jacotot was renowned for were his attempts to 'teach' his charges languages he himself didn't speak. He encouraged his students to make an independent effort, enhancing their sense of self-esteem. In the process of knowledge acquisition, Jacotot was a companion rather than someone who passed on their skills and expertise. In that respect, his strategy made a lot of sense when it came to emancipation and equality. And yet Jacotot didn't succumb to naivety; he didn't advance an image of a student as an ignorant genius capable of acquiring skills and achieving self-awareness entirely outside the institutional system of knowledge. He argued that a student can ward off the schoolmaster's violence if he is able to reference another, external source of knowledge – above all, a book. That's because a book is 'a third thing [...] – alien to both [schoolmaster and student] and to which they can refer to in verifying what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it'.<sup>10</sup>

Rancière recalls all of this in the belief that contemporary theatre ought to treat its audience as Jacotot had treated his students, as there are deep-seated similarities between a model student and a model spectator. After all,

the spectator also acts, like a pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way. [...] They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them.<sup>11</sup>

In Rancière's view, only after assimilating these considerations can theatre provide a suitable environment for spectator emancipation. In other words, only eroding the age-old myth suggesting that, as a matter of principle, some participants in the theatrical situation are active and others passive, can offer hope for discovering theatre's potential for liberation.

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', pp. 14–15.

<sup>11</sup> Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', p. 13.

## 4.

Surely the bulk of the new wave of Polish theatre-makers have read 'The Emancipated Spectator'. What did they find for themselves in the piece; what was it about it that persuaded them? Certainly its opening sections, with remarks about contemporary theatre operating in the awkward state of self-dislike because it persists in the belief that the theatrical situation is, by definition, an arrangement based on inequality and injustice. The fact that today's younger Polish theatre-makers recognise this problem isn't due to Rancière alone, yet the Frenchman's essay played a crucial role in this process, in that it presented the matter clearly and synthetically.

At the same time, let's be fair: in Poland, Rancière's essay was read with interest, but emphasis was only given to its selected aspects. As he developed his argument, Rancière singled out for criticism the neurosis afflicting contemporary theatre, which he described in the piece's opening paragraphs. More than that: this neurosis became a negative reference point, in contrast to which Rancière formulated his own proposal. In Poland, however, the reception of Rancière's piece was dominated by uncomplicated concurrence with the diagnosis he put forward. Yes, Polish theatre-makers seemed to nod in assent, watching in the theatre is a bad thing. Yes, theatre arises from a separation of two roles: performer and spectator – but this separation is also dangerous to theatre, in that it irrevocably transforms it into a machine for symbolic violence. Yes, theatre should do all it can to work through this tragic condition, to somehow render it null and void.

This set of views has been deeply internalized, leading to the acceptance of two further narratives referenced by Rancière: Plato's critique of theatre and Guy Debord's critique of the spectacle. The two were summarized in the catchphrase appropriated from the choreographer Yvonne Rainer: 'NO to spectacle'. Spectacle, in this context, was understood both in the narrow sense of the term, in keeping with the categories relevant to theatre studies, and more broadly, in line with insights offered by Debord and other French Situationists. Rainer's renowned 'NO Manifesto' (1965) was only translated into Polish much later, in 2013<sup>12</sup> – but no translation was needed for this short text to have a vital influence on Poland's theatre and choreographic practice. It wasn't just Rainer's demands – 'No to spectacle. / No to virtuosity. / No to transformations and magic and make-believe. / No to the glamour and transcendence of the star image'<sup>13</sup> – but also the reminiscence of the achievements of an entire formation of American choreographers and dancers from the post-modern dance movement that have become a recurrent presence in contemporary Polish theatre and dance. The discovery of this heritage by Polish theatre – and dance-makers has been due in part to being inspired by those who revived post-modern dance at the turn of the millennium: conceptual choreographers including Jérôme Bel and Xavier Le Roy.

12 Yvonne Rainer, 'NO Manifesto', trans. by Jadwiga Majewska, in *Świadomość ruchu. Teksty o tańcu współczesnym*, ed. by Jadwiga Majewska (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!Art, 2013), p. 195.

13 Rainer, 'NO Manifesto', <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/yvonne-rainer-no-manifesto/1454>, accessed on 25 March 2018.

The works of Sally Banes,<sup>14</sup> the driving force behind documenting post-modern dance, began to be published in Poland; Polish choreographers and dance artists completed a number of projects in which they referenced the heritage of this strand of dance. Performers including Weronika Pelczyńska, Ziółek, Przemek Kamiński and Agata Siniarska staged their own commentaries to Rainer's work, and Ziemilski frequently commented publicly on the statements regarding her 'NO Manifesto'.

Dislike of the spectacle – in the narrow as well as broad understanding of the term – have borne two kinds of fruit in works by contemporary Polish theatre-makers. First, it has resulted in a predilection for minimal, extremely spare stage forms, deliberately disposing of everything which, in Rainer's terminology, could be accused of an excess of splendour or displaying a glamour factor. When staging their works, Ziemilski, Karasińska, Górnicka and Nowak have done away with everything superfluous and excessive. If a modest prop does appear on stage, it is less a part of traditional stage design and more of a useful object transposed directly from vernacular reality. In Ziemilski's *Pygmalion*, with stage design by Wojciech Pustoła, a piece of cardboard was a piece of cardboard, not a stage partition pretending to be a wall. In Maria Stokłosa's *Wylinka* [*Ecdysis*, premiered on 29 November 2014 at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw] a huge dump of plastic garbage, also designed by Pustoła, may have generated some metaphorical meaning, but above all was an instrument, there to be used by performers.

Maximising rather than minimising the spectacle aspect of theatre is another strategy, seemingly different but in fact complementary. This option has been tested by Marta Ziółek in particular: the choreographer has consistently transformed her productions – especially *Make Yourself, IT* [premiered on 26 October 2016 at Nowy Theatre in Warsaw] and *Pixo* [premiered on 27 October 2017 at Komuna// Warszawa] – into extravaganzas of attractions, featuring numerous quotes from popular culture, references to the aesthetics of the Internet, along with intense dance work put ostentatiously on display, and the clear relish of exposing the body on stage as a sexual object. In other words, Ziółek has shown a predilection for the things Rainer disparaged in 'NO Manifesto': eccentricity, camp and the spectator being tantalized by the performer.<sup>15</sup> Having completed *Make Yourself*, which had post-modern dance as its main theme, Ziółek was ostensibly breaking away from the heritage of this dance movement, transgressing and abandoning it. In fact, however, she remained within the scope of its influence, as the phenomenon of the spectacle itself became the focus of her attention. She exposed the performance, revealed its mechanisms with no less daring than Ziemilski and Karasińska have done in their productions, the structures of which they have reduced to the bare minimum.

Thus young Polish theatre-makers' distrust of what might be described as the spectacular in theatre did not result in their attempting

14 Sally Banes, *Terpsychora w tenisówkach. Taniec post-modern*, trans. by Artur Grabowski and Jadwiga Majewska (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 2013).

15 Joanna Szymajda, 'I'm Your Private Dancer: Popular Culture in Choreographic Practice', trans. by Joanna Błachnio, in the present issue of *Polish Theatre Journal* 1:5, 2018, www.polishtheatrejournal.com [accessed on 27 April 2018].

to transgress the theatrical framework, to reject theatre as a medium. Rather, it encouraged them to work hard within theatre's boundaries and expose its structure. Hence their frequent returns to the rudimentary theatrical situation: confronting performer with spectator. The present text began by describing the opening sequences of five of their productions. In each case, performers placed themselves as close to the audience as possible, implying that theatre got underway at that very moment. All of the productions to date by Marta Górnicka's Chorus of Women and by the director Anna Karasińska have been structured with this same intention: each piece indicates clearly that not only does 'the spectator see the actor' but so does 'the actor sees the spectator'. Productions by Teatr 21 along with many works staged as part of the Micro Theatre programme (Ania Nowak's *Ohne Titel*, as one example, and *La Dolce Vita* by Romuald Krężel and Monika Duncan) tell a similar story. Ziemilski's experiences may be most interesting of all: he began by completing several projects (*Mapa* [*Map*, premiered on 18 December 2010 at Komuna// Warszawa], *Prolog* [*Prologue*, premiered on 6 October 2011 at the Reminiscences Festival in Kraków], heavy on participation and encouraging spectator activity, or at least attempted to persuade them that their personal decisions held potential agency; meanwhile, performers per se more or less vanished. However, after several years, Ziemilski changed course and, in *Come Together* [premiered on 24 February 2017 at the Studio Theatre in Warsaw], took the radical step of separating performers from spectators – while bringing about a situation in which their mutual co-dependency became even more evident.

##### 5.

All this has had little to do with the strategies for spectator emancipation suggested by Rancière. Rather, it has been attempts to work through (or leave aside) what seemed most problematic about Rancière's argument. What exactly are these 'most problematic' bits?

Inconsistencies of thought are not hard to find in 'The Emancipated Spectator'. Let's mention but a few major ones. First, if Rancière is so clearly opposed to a notion of the realm of knowledge and experience of the arts where some may pass for experts while others must be deemed ignorant, then the position the author assigns himself within the structure of his own text merits consideration. By presenting his views in such a decisive manner, does he not take up the role of the omniscient sage: the very role he purports to criticise? Doesn't he reduce us, his readers, to the role of unemancipated student-ignorami? Second, can a valid comparison actually be drawn between the theatrical situation and the educational process? Is it really the case – as the pairing proposed by Rancière would seem to suggest – that passing on (or even providing inspiration to garner) any sort of knowledge is what's at stake in theatre? Is it not the case that, by comparing theatre with a classroom, we boost fantasmatic notions of theatre's position in the life of society, rather than working through them? Third and finally, can the pivotal argument of 'The Emancipated Spectator' – that we can and should regard a theatre performance as we'd regard a book – really be allowed to stand? Rancière writes in no uncertain terms: it's necessary 'to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to

restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story [or] the reading of a book'.<sup>16</sup> The author's intention seems clear. The logic of his thought forces him to identify in theatre something he could describe as an external source of knowledge, 'a third thing, alien to both'<sup>17</sup> – something which would play the same role in a performer-spectator relation that the book plays in relations between schoolmaster and student. And so, Rancière indicates, what is in question is the performance itself – but a performance shaped in a very specific manner, a performance from which a spectator can draw as much as she or he can from independent reading. No great expertise in theatre studies is required to see how risky such proposals are, for a number of reasons that include the fundamental one: it's extremely difficult to imagine theatre in which the phenomenon of the living co-presence of event participants (even with this presence mediated in a number of ways) could be completely eradicated. A performance is hardly comparable with a book: a piece of theatre is not an external instance, independent of the specific situation in which it's used. A performance doesn't exist outside this situation, outside the actor-spectator relationship. More than that: it's only established, called into being by this very situation.

This view is best illustrated by a considerable part of contemporary theatre practice, including the practice of the young generation of Polish theatre that's being focused upon here. As has already been demonstrated, Ziemilski, Karasińska and Górnicka don't fantasise about a production which could be an independent external element in the arrangement between performer and spectator. Instead, they abide by the common-sense contention that a performance is the product of this arrangement, that it doesn't exist outside it. In their works, these directors make renewed attempts to expose this arrangement, to enable – or indeed force – a spectator to become aware of its existence. There's an element of warning about this: spectator, be careful what you're consenting to, be aware of the traps set for you in the theatrical situation.

One could, referring to Rancière's categories, say that, in this respect, Polish theatre among certain of its younger directors is returning to Brechtian inspirations. In other words: giving the spectator the opportunity to get to know and understand co-ordinates in which she has found herself. But there's something more to the productions introduced above, something closer to what was implied by Artaud: a clear effort to not only expose the structure of theatre, but also to use it to achieve something it ostensibly hasn't been made for. The point is not just to give prominence and emphasis to the distance generated by theatre – but also to reduce and somehow cancel it. There are at least two ways of achieving this. First, by getting the spectator involved in experiences with a high concentration of empathy. Second, by plunging the spectator in immersive experiences.

Ziemilski's *Pygmalion* is a good example of a production aiming to enhance feelings of empathy. The entire structure of the piece is very simple. Once the opening scene (described in the opening pages) has come to an end, the actor and the spectator who has been selected embark

16 Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', p. 22.

17 Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', pp. 14-15.

on a series of actions with a large piece of cardboard. After breaking the ice, they enter the inside of a cardboard carton together. Once inside, the actor sets up a confessional situation: she starts talking about her young son, who still hasn't learned to speak despite being of early-school age. The audience can hear the story, but all they can see is the cardboard object, barely discernible on the blacked-out stage. In the closing scene, Rozalia Mierzicka stands as close to the audience as possible and offers a series of thanks to all her teachers – particularly those who had taught her to speak, whether at primary or drama school. The boundary separating the stage from the audience is violated here in a subtle manner – it's just a single spectator taking part in the action on stage, and still, everyone present shares a sense of taking part in a very intimate event, breaking through the barrier of distance, one of theatre's traditional features.

Marta Ziółek chooses a different strategy with *Make Yourself*, with *IT* and with her actions from the *Pamela* series. The point of these productions is not to form as intimate a relationship as possible with the spectator, but to assault her or him with a mass of powerful stimuli, to diminish the distance between stage and audience by causing an audience member to experience immersion. Occasions when Ziółek invites spectators to take part in the action are rare indeed: she respects the boundary demarcated by the stage ramp, yet she knows how to transform her productions into highly engaging multimedia events, giving the audience a sense of being part of the show – not unlike what we sometimes feel when using interactive electronic media.

Anna Karasińska has a very interesting way of working with the experiences of empathy and immersion – the two become almost indistinguishable in her works. This is aptly demonstrated in *Ewelina's Crying*, where the director constructs a simple situation (again, actors face the audience, actors play non-professionals who act out their notions of actors appearing in the production) – but she plays so many variations on this situation, and does it so cleverly, that she succeeds in rousing the spectator from her perceptual habits. The audience member is no longer sure who she is dealing with, for the status of actor and character has been undermined. What follows is described by the director as distortion of identification: as a result, actor and spectator meet according to entirely new principles, outside previously known co-ordinates, and the mutual relation become much more immediate and spontaneous.

In each of the productions discussed, the theatre-makers remain on theatre's side. They survey it warily, perhaps even with dislike. But they don't contest it or transgress its boundaries. They probe models by which it operates, to check what it has to offer. They are aware that theatre conventions by definition produce an experience of inequality and, in that sense, it's politically suspect. At the same time, these directors return to theatre to work on strategies that would help compromise that experience, in the belief that theatre, like no other art medium, gives them access to the situation of an encounter, meaning it enables them to endlessly check what could and must be done to make our mutual relations more satisfactory, in theatre and in everyday life.

And so the term 'post-theatre' may be appropriate for describing the practice of this entire milieu. that Karasińska, Ziemilski, Górnicka,

Nowak, Ziółek and their numerous allies are post-theatrical because fatigue with the theatre establishment is their starting point – yet their final goal is always theatre itself, often reduced to its simplest forms and shown shorn of adornment. Post-theatre, in this sense of the term, is theatre struggling to cope with endemic problems it is generating – yet unwilling to stop being theatre, even for a moment.

*Translated by Joanna Błachnio*

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## ABSTRACT

**Tomasz Plata**

Post-Theatre: Escaping from Theatre, Escaping to Theatre

The present article attempts to analyse the works of the emerging generation of Polish theatre artists, with particular emphasis on productions by directors Wojtek Ziemilski, Anna Karasińska, Ania Nowak, Marta Górnicka and Mara Ziólek. The article focuses on the characteristic approach to the spectator in theatre shared by all these theatre-makers; their consistently renewed efforts to expose the spectator's presence in the course of action on stage, and to comment on this presence and to set it as a subject. The author takes 'The Emancipated Spectator', the renowned essay by Jacques Rancière, as a crucial reference point. Conceptions put forward by Rancière are juxtaposed with the work of the discussed artists, and disparities, rather than analogies, are emphasized as a result of this juxtaposition. The article's closing sections offer a synthetic approach to the specificity of this new formation in theatre – considered in a broad cultural context, and against the backdrop of various manifestations of the so-called culture of the spectacle. From that point of view, the theatre-makers who are described in the article are revealed as being particularly alert to the spectacle's ever-increasing prevalence. At the same time, emerging these Polish theatre-makers never abandon the structure of a theatre performance, abiding by the belief that theatre, like no other art medium, gives them access to the situation of an encounter, and thus offers them a chance of loosening the restrictions of the spectacle, if only for a moment.