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Theatre Studies: Working with Theatre

www.polishtheatrejournal.com

Publisher:
Theatre Institute in Warsaw
Theatre Academy in Warsaw

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I should probably begin by giving some basic information about the location of our conference. It also wouldn't be amiss to say a few words about the forty-year history of the Department of Theatre Studies (or WoT in Polish), about our experiences of teaching theatre – to present what we call the WoT tradition. I'm also going to take this opportunity to explain how the idea came about to reflect, here at the Department of Theatre Studies of the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, on the achievements of the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen and similar departments and institutions which, fortunately, are starting to appear on the map of Europe in ever greater numbers. We'll come to that. But before we do, I'd like to ask some more general questions, relevant if not to all then at least to a significant number of conference participants. I mean that most basic thing: whom are we to teach these days, and how do we do it? What are the things we should prepare our students for? To whom can we be of use, and how? By 'we', I mean academics and artists working in theatre and faced with the task of educating their successors. You may think it's naive to even ask these questions. Still, let's try.

In keeping with the title of our conference, 'Giessen and Others', I'll begin by answering those questions (or by making suggestions which hint at answers). I came across these answers and suggestions in a piece of writing fundamental to defining (approximately at least) the attitude of Giessen's Institute of Applied Theatre Studies circles. Heiner Goebbels is bound to object: he'll no doubt imply there's no such thing as the Giessen school or Giessen circles and, to take the matter further, that these circles have no solid, coherent theoretical foundation. Still, we know that's not how things stand. Theatre professionals across Europe are likely to give a reasonably well-defined response to the catchphrase 'Giessen', and their response will probably still be dominated by such themes as the achievements of the so-called new documentary theatre, an interest in Bertolt Brecht's heritage and his *Lehrstücke* theory, and implications first drawn from it by the Institute's founder, Andrzej Wirth, then by his famous students who established Rimini Protokoll and Gob Squad. In recent years, new strands have been added to this set of associations. As we've been hearing [in other presentations], reflections on the relationship between contemporary performative arts and global capitalism are emerging as Giessen's main field of interest. *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism*, Bojana Kunst's widely read, commented on and translated

book, provides a salient summary of these reflections. Since 2012, Kunst has been working at Giessen, where she is head of the 'Choreography and Performance' master's programme. The impact of her thinking is difficult to overestimate: her influence is evident in the work presented by Institute graduates, and by swelling numbers of practitioners and theoreticians of Choreography and Performance across the continent. I'll attempt a commentary on the main arguments of Kunst's text. As announced in the title of our conference, I'll be talking about Giessen, casting myself as the Other.

Kunst's basic intuition is implied in the very subtitle of her book: 'proximity of art and capitalism'. In the author's view, there is little doubt that artistic practices (even, perhaps especially, the most provocative and transgressive ones) have been definitively appropriated by the late capitalism of the present day. There was a time when we could live under the illusion that the art field is an area of defiance where the rules of capital accumulation don't apply, and that taking a stand against the market is possible, perhaps even desirable. Today, there's nothing left of those utopian dreams. We see cognitive capitalism manipulate us, making us drive it with our creativity. As a result, the more creative we are, the better capitalism fares – a rule known to every user of social media of any description. We may believe that Facebook is a democratic tool we have been given to boost our creativity. But by now, we're already aware someone is making a handsome profit on our creativity. As she recognises that complication, Kunst follows in the footsteps of left-wing critics of previous generations, from Theodore Adorno through Herbert Marcuse to Frederic Jameson. Notwithstanding the massive differences between these thinkers, all of them portrayed modern culture as a disciplining structure. Kunst writes the next chapter of that story, as she remarks that capitalism – having made provisions for a considerable portion of the Left's one-time demands, having in brief learned the lessons of '68 (in other words, having moved away from the so-called Fordist work model in favour of much subtler strategies, dependent on affective encouragement rather than duress) – has by no means abandoned its demonic inclinations and continues to alienate us, seemingly by different means than those once applied to the assembly line worker, but then perhaps not that different at all.

How do we cope with this? How do we defy this sort of capitalism? Kunst comes up with a paradoxical answer: the best thing to do is to do nothing. As she explains in *Artist at Work*, the solution isn't to increase one's creativity, or to be active in one way or another, as activity of any sort is immediately seized by the market. What, then, is one to do? Kunst expresses herself in no uncertain terms as she recommends inactivity, or severe restraint of activity. To illustrate her argument, she references the achievements of several major contemporary choreographers (including Eszter Salamon and Xavier Le Roy) who have used the stage to present their bold experimentation with instances of entropy, energy loss, emphasizing the static over the dynamic. Kunst argues this was their way of making a stand against one of the characteristics of late capitalism: the compulsion to remain incessantly active. Mladen Stilinovic, one of classic conceptual artists of both the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav eras, famous for works such as *The Praise of Laziness*, becomes the patron saint of Kunst's

argument. By way of illustrating just how influential this rhetoric is, let me add that it's becoming more and more common for theatre, dance and performance theoreticians to describe – and call for – something they refer to as non-performance: that is, activity that leads, surprisingly, to a manifested refusal to act. This theme is easy enough to trace in major texts by cultural historian Fred Morton and by performance-studies scholar André Lepecki.

And so, duration instead of action. According to Kunst:

culturally, duration can be deeply subversive. [...] Duration irritates us because it can reveal how deeply our most intimate perception of time (i.e. the feeling that we are active beings and constantly on the move) is socially constructed and economically conditioned. For this reason, duration demolishes social and organisation protocols. [...] [It also] directly sabotages the organization [sic] of the social protocols of flexibility and mobility.¹

I must admit that, reading Kunst, I kept asking myself how such views might influence her teaching practice. Obviously, it's not my intention to make light of the matter, or to imply Kunst might be deliberately disrespecting her students and, by questioning the social protocol of academic work, might be choosing not to teach them. But, to formulate my argument in earnest: Kunst takes as her starting point the general assumption that her Choreography and Performance students will encounter an essentially hostile cultural environment. This hostility is due to (not in spite of) the fact that these surroundings take as their guiding principle strategies appropriated from the field of Choreography and Performance. How is one to teach Choreography and Performance in these circumstances? How to maintain a sense of purpose in one's efforts? How to answer all the questions I have posed at the start of my address?

I can only see one way out of the trap set by Kunst. I think there's only one way not to become depressed as a theatre (Choreography and Performance) teacher; and that's to conclude that Kunst's general insight is wrong. I mean her contention that the cultural reality we live in is of a uniformly oppressive nature. This is no place to polemically confront certain pre-assumptions shaping Kunst's argument, derived directly from the tradition of Marxist thought. What I would like to do, however, is to persuade you that by disposing of at least a part of the contentions peculiar to the so-called New Left and new humanities (Kunst being yet another embodiment of those contentions), we may be better able to prepare our students to confront contemporary culture, not least its more bloodthirsty neoliberal manifestations. A slight shift in perspective may be all we need.

As my guide in this attempt, I would like to appoint an author referenced very rarely indeed by either theoreticians or practitioners of performative arts. An author, I may add, who is quite openly disregarded today even by those working in his native field of philosophy. The author in question is Richard Rorty: usually known in Poland as a postmodernist, Rorty is in fact an heir to and continuator of the long American

¹ Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2015), pp. 130–131.

tradition of pragmatism. Let me add as an aside that the lack of interest on the part of theatre theory and the field of performance studies in Rorty and his intellectual predecessors never ceases to amaze me. After all, it's almost impossible to write a history of performance art disregarding the influence on John Cage and Allan Kaprow of the writings of the classic pragmatist John Dewey. And this isn't the only reason why more attention should be given to the relationship between performance and pragmatism.

I won't make a secret of the fact I find Rorty's political attitude as inspiring as his philosophical proposal. In his slim book *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, he enters a debate with representatives of a formation he calls the New or academic-cultural Left.

In my view, at least part of his polemical reasoning is relevant to argument made by Kunst. Seeking to unveil differences between the old Left (of which he considers himself a representative) and its 'new' counterpart, Rorty observes:

The difference between this residual Left and the academic Left is the difference between people who read books like Thomas Geoghegan's *Which Side Are You On?* – a brilliant explanation of how unions got busted – and people who read Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. The latter is an equally brilliant book, but it operates on a level of abstraction too high to encourage any particular political initiative. After reading Geoghegan, you have views on some of the things which need to be done. After reading Jameson you have views on practically everything except what needs to be done.²

One could add with a touch of irony that, having read Bojana Kunst's book, we already know what to do. As I have mentioned, the thing to do is to do nothing.

Needless to say, Rorty doesn't disregard theory. He does realise the political achievements of the New Left – and is quite open about them in the book: after all, the significant transformation of the shape of public debate taking place since the 1960s is due to that movement. However, admitting as much doesn't stop Rorty from drawing decisive conclusions. One of them – perhaps the crux of the entire text – is that 'disengagement from practice produces theoretical hallucinations'.³ As befits a pragmatist, Rorty believes in practice and action. We could say he believes in performance. He would most likely have regarded nonperformance as a theoretical hallucination.

In Rorty's view, action is not only necessary, but also possible. As we have seen, Kunst seeks to persuade us that action is pointless because, by definition, it supports capitalist accumulation. Rorty has no such dilemma. He is quite clear: 'I think that the Left should get back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market

² Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 78.

³ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 94.

economy'.⁴ Although he is not enamoured of contemporary forms of capitalism, he never indulges in the utopian thought of an anti-capitalist revolution, so characteristic of the New Left. Rorty is interested in discussing the feasible, taking as his starting point the belief that reality is malleable and susceptible to influence. This is best evidenced by the fact (acknowledged by the old and New Leftists alike) that capitalism changes shape when criticised, adapting its strategies to fluctuating circumstances.

It's time to explain what these musings have to do with what we do at the Department of Theatre Studies. Before I go any further, I want to (re)assure you I'm not simply looking to put practice above theory. If I were to borrow a phrase from Rorty, I would say: in our department, we still read Jameson rather than Goeghegan. Further, ever since its inception in 1975, WoT has had relatively little to do with theatre practice in the narrow understanding of the term. Although it was part of structure of an arts school, it remained quite distinct from the practical departments of acting and direction. As a former student myself, I can well remember a favourite adage of one of our most distinguished professors: 'One doesn't need to be a fish to become an ichthyologist'. What he meant was that we were being educated to become ichthyologists, or fish specialists – and the artists were the fish. We were to observe them from a safe distance, from through the aquarium glass.

For a long time, the department did abide by this (understandable) premise: the aim was to preserve its integrity. WoT was born out of the belief that the new field – at the time, still unrecognised by the Polish academic system – needed to demarcate its boundaries. This new field was being called all sorts of different names. WoT's founder, the eminent theatre critic Jerzy Koenig, wrote of 'theatrical thought'⁵ in 1969, six years before the department was formally called into being. The term 'theatrology' was carefully avoided, to emphasise the new field is not a philology [the Polish equivalent of Language and Literature Studies] and, in particular, that it's not a sub-discipline or a part of Polish Language and Literature. The figure of a Polish Language and Literature scholar specialising in theatre – an individual with no knowledge of theatre's inner workings and no belief in its autonomy as an art, but with an unwavering tendency to examine a work of dramatic art solely as the stage implementation of a previously existing literary work – has been repeatedly brought up by the department's founding fathers as a negative reference point. In the end, when considering how to name the new department, its founders opted for Theatre Studies ('theatre knowledge' in Polish). The term was suggested by Prof. Bohdan Korzeniewski (interestingly, a man of double identity, working before the war primarily as a theatre critic and historian then after the war predominantly as a theatre practitioner).

There's no point in concealing that the new name was devised as a loan translation from the German *Theaterwissenschaft* – yet another proof that WoT's identity ultimately grew out of efforts to win recognition for the achievements of the Great Reform of Polish Theatre (circa 1890–1940).

4 Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 105.

5 Jerzy Koenig, 'Teatropisanie', in Koenig, *Rekolekcje teatralne* (Warsaw: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1979), p. 120.

In a nutshell, it grew out of the heritage of the Great Reform: the firm belief in the autonomy of a piece of dramatic art. German theatre historian Max Hermann was one of the lodestars in this quest; another was the great director Leon Schiller, one of the founding figures of Polish theatre between the wars. Schiller was closely involved in the Great Reform, and his 1913 piece 'Nowy kierunek badań teatrologicznych' ['Theatrical Studies: A New Direction'] is particularly relevant in this context. At the Department of Theatre Studies, the autonomy of theatre was something to be protected, the general consensus being that it was still under threat. Perhaps this was where the belief sprang forth that a strict demarcation line must be maintained between theatre and everything else (including theatre criticism, history and theory).

Over time, practical subjects came to be included in the WoT curriculum, but they never dominated it. Following changes implemented during the recent academic year, we teach a fair number of such subjects here at WoT. Our faculty includes both the greatest artists of repertory-based theatre and artists hailing from devised theatre and performance-art circles. Our students get to meet playwrights, dramaturges, stage designers and artists specialising in music for theatre. But I still wouldn't say WoT is a department equipping its graduates with the skills of theatre practitioners. Classes in theatre history, theory and criticism, as well as liberal-arts subjects including art history and the history of philosophy and ideas still occupy as much (if not more) space in the curriculum.

While I am keen on the concept of 'practice', I use it here in a different, broader sense. The practice I have in mind is the practice of 'working with theatre'. When I say 'working with theatre' rather than 'working in theatre', I do so advisedly. As we all know, there are numerous ways of working with theatre: not only as an artist, but also as producer, curator, managing director, amateur-company animator, associate critic or theoretician. The work of dramatic art may be the principal goal of such work, but is also a mechanism put to use to achieve other objectives, perhaps not strictly artistic ones. Each of these opportunities seems potentially very interesting and instructive. For that reason, we structure our curriculum with the view of preparing our students to take up such opportunities.

I don't think we should continue to worry excessively about protecting the autonomy of a piece of dramatic art. Much good has come out of this protective attitude at our department. I've mentioned this already, and I should add that it is also where major books on theatre phenomenology have come from: *Teatr w świecie widowisk* [*Theatre in a World of Spectacles*, 1991] by Zbigniew Raszewski and *Siedem bytów teatralnych* [*The Seven Beings of Theatre*, 1994] by Tomasz Kubikowski. Later, however, we became interested in performance studies. On one hand, this was a natural continuation of our phenomenological fascinations; on the other, it was a novelty. Tomasz Kubikowski came up with the term *performatyka* – a translation of 'performance studies' from English; in addition, he translated fundamental books by Richard Schechner, Marvin Carlson and Jon McKenzie. This has opened the path for performance studies to receive full recognition on the Polish academic circuit. We took up this opportunity and introduced the possibility of specialising in performance studies several years ago. This included classes in gender and intercultural performance. The result was that we saw theatre from a different

angle, and encouraged our students to do the same: rather than an autonomous art, theatre became a form of performative action, susceptible to different uses. Something to work with.

Obviously, by suggesting to our students they should work with theatre, we are accepting great responsibility. These suggestions are far from innocent. After all, work is something one gets paid for. Will our graduates be able to count on being paid in the future? Will they be able to earn a living? Will anyone be willing to pay for what they are being taught here? I'll be honest: I think it's my duty, as head of the Department of Theatre Studies, to think about these things. So far, reflections on this issue have led me introduce a course in theatre management and production. Students who take the course are preparing to carry out administrative and production-related tasks. We give them an insiders' view of theatre, but also teach them how to found their own NGO. How to write a grant application and file a tax return. I have a feeling Bojana Kunst wouldn't be best pleased with this. She would probably regard it as too great a concession to market expectations. We thought we ought to prepare our students as best we can for finding their feet in the theatre system they are going to work in. (In Poland, this system comprises around a hundred and thirty permanent, publicly funded theatres – still a very major employer.) My hope is that by doing all this, we also train students in thinking critically about the basic coordinates of that system, and pass the firm belief on to them that the system is flexible to a degree and will yield to their pressure if they're spirited enough. Either way, we are not trying to persuade our students that inactivity (even of the most sophisticated, revolutionary kind) is the sole scenario of their presence in the profession. I hope we can sustain their faith in the idea of gradual reform, as Richard Rorty would put it.

I'd like to finish on a personal note. One reason for referencing Rorty in my address was that *Achieving Our Country* came to be an important guideline for the creative group with whom I've had the pleasure of working as a curator for almost a decade. Komuna// Warszawa grew out of the anarchist movement, and today it's behind one of the major artist-run spaces in this country. Rorty's book inspired one of Komuna's productions. The piece was titled *Sierakowski* and it called for reflection on conceivable scenarios of emancipatory politics. Sławomir Sierakowski – the leader of the left-wing circle around *Krytyka Polityczna*, an influential socio-cultural journal – was chosen to be the protagonist. The sentence I referred to earlier – Rorty's belief that a lack of political involvement engenders theoretical hallucinations – became a sort of motto of the production.

I mention this because it was work with Komuna that persuaded me that 'working with theatre' made profound, multifarious sense. I hope each of my students has a similar experience. I would like to close my address by showing a short clip from Komuna's production.

Translated by Joanna Błachnio

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ABSTRACT**Tomasz Plata**

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The article examines experiences at the Department of Theatre Studies of the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw through its history and to the present day, endeavouring to place these experiences in two parallel contexts. First, the achievements of the department are considered with reference to achievements of European academic centres combining theory with the practice of theatre; particularly careful thought is given to the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen. Second, the department is situated against the backdrop of comprehensive processes currently transforming the entire field of academic education in Europe. These two themes converge in Tomasz Plata's polemical position on *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* by Bojana Kunst. Kunst, a longtime professor at the Giessen Institute, is unambiguously critical of neoliberal economy and culture; in her view, the sphere of art – particularly performative art – and education is a realm in need of special protection, in order to successfully weaken market dictates. Plata disputes this outlook, proposing an alternative programme derived from the writings of the American liberal and pragmatist Richard Rorty.