

**Katarzyna Waligóra**

Growing Sideways and Subverting Theatrical  
Hierarchies: Paweł Miśkiewicz's *Spring Awakening*

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**Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Agata Koszulińska, Marta Miłoszewska,  
Beata Szczucińska, Weronika Szczawińska, Małgorzata Wdowik**

## Allies: How We Broke the Silence and Drafted the Documents

We would like to use this piece to tell people how change came about. Or, to be more precise, what set in motion the chain of events, decisions, and actions which brought us to where we are now at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. The academy has recognized that violence (in the broad understanding of the term) against students is an issue; it has recognized, too, that it needs to take genuine and specific steps to ensure that the educational process carried out there is secure and based on mutual respect, treating all parties as individuals. Systemic solutions and profound, long-term work on transforming relations, communication practices, and the way people think are needed to remedy the problem and complete the task in hand. Knowledge of this has been suppressed consistently and for a very long time. And so one change has already occurred – and yet this is only the start of our work.

We have reached this point because, when the time was right, a number of people decided they would not shy away from their efforts. But the key thing was the formation of an alliance, comprising students, graduates, faculty, and those at the helm of the academy. We represent different parties of this alliance. We are here to tell you about a process that was different for each of us, but had one common goal. We are going to try to distil a formula for change from the stories we tell, and describe the essential ingredients of that change.

### **Weronika Szczawińska:**

For me, the process started sixteen years ago, with an experience of violence I could describe as bullying and harassment. From 2003, I was a student in the academy's Directing Department. Before that, I attended the University of Warsaw and played no active role in the theatre world, so all the rules of a drama school community were new to me. I quickly realized it was actually a single principle. Like the other people in my year, I was subject to rules set by individual members of the faculty with virtually no limits. Despite ostensible respect, and an almost courtly etiquette towards our teaching staff, who without exception were addressed as 'professors', the lack of transparency we had to deal with was extreme: unclear assessment criteria and, above all, a lack of clarity as to what was, and what was not, allowed in the faculty's relations with us. The claim that 'temperaments run high' in both drama school and in theatre itself seems to have provided a motto

for a whole range of behaviours we found inappropriate. This was particularly true of one of the professors. The examples I will use are not just about me, but also about a whole group of my peers, male and female. Female students found themselves in a particularly challenging situation. Infringing on their physical boundaries was common practice: putting a hand on a student's shoulder, stroking her neck, touching her exposed stomach. The appearance of female students was constantly discussed: we did not enjoy the compliments we were paid in what ought to be a professional relationship. And so we were fed remarks about our big blue eyes or a low-cut black blouse against a white body, a detail so enthusiastically received by the academy's admissions panel that it actually became a factor in the candidate being accepted to study there. All of this might seem insignificant if it were not embedded in the context of a particular power-based dependency between student and professor – if it is not put in a cultural context that tells women they should constantly put up with situations they find uncomfortable.

Furious outbursts, and the establishment of a scapegoat mechanism, were another issue we had to face, regardless of our gender. There was a blatant (and embarrassing) bias in favour of some of the students in our year (I was one of them), while for others a measured polemical remark in class was all it took to trigger a burst of shouting, offensive remarks, and bullying from the professor in question.

I have to stress that this is really difficult to put into words. Staying long-term in a relationship you regard as unwanted sparks guilt and the feeling of being complicit. Of consent, being drawn into a dependency with fuzzy outlines and vague rules: you did, after all, say 'thank you' each time you were complimented, never spoke out in protest, and threw his hand off your shoulder only once, in response to which you were asked (in public): 'Are you afraid of me?' Once, after a whole day of classes, the teacher in question texted me about the extraordinary moon that happened to be hanging in the sky, witches, and Venus looking over it all. I found this extremely upsetting. I could not understand why I had to put up with such dubious messages, why I kept getting them; why, for instance, a few days before, at six in the morning, I received a text reading: 'I gave you the top mark, try hard.' I began to be afraid of classes. I wanted to start skipping them, and thus escape from the dodgy, uncomfortable situation that built up there. But I also had a rebellious impulse, which dated back to university, where I became convinced higher education institutions are exceptional places, enclaves of free thought, existing primarily for the benefit of the students. With the support of everyone in my year, I talked to the then-dean of the department. This put an end to some of the unacceptable practices. Others, relating to the purely violent aspect of such behaviours and targeting everyone indiscriminately, continued until the end of our work with this faculty member. During my conversation with the dean, I was told, alarmingly: 'So it has happened again.' Which means that people in the department had known what was going on for years and, effectively, did nothing about it.

To be honest, at the time I didn't do much either. I was twenty-two and had no instruments I could use to come up with a comprehensive analysis of the situation. My feminist views gave me some (limited) insight, but were less helpful when it came to solutions. I have never really given

thought to why I – we – had not taken the matter further. Why a guarantee of my personal safety put an end to the matter, why I failed to think of others who could be bullied like I was. Within our year, we looked out for each other. But in a wider perspective, we felt helpless.

In the time that has passed since I was a student at the academy, I was constantly kept aware that the situation outlined above has not changed. I remember running by chance into directing students I knew; I remember their stories, in which familiar tropes recurred: humiliation, teaching a class while drunk, personal remarks, subjecting students to chronic stress. This was compounded by the dismissive attitude of the academy's highest authorities, who spoke of the violence in terms of 'coming into contact with a real character' or preparation for work in theatre. Still, that people were talking to each other about what was going on was a positive development. It dawned on me that everything I have described above was more than the sum of individual instances: it was a systemic issue. This is why I became so engrossed in the efforts of directing students who, in 2017, embarked on a dialogue with the school's authorities. I saw them as an opportunity for systemic change and felt I had to get involved.

#### **Agata Koszulińska:**

I am going to focus on one specific faculty member, but I would like to stress this is not about an individual. It is about the entire system of theatre education, with its ingrained tradition of violence. Two years ago, when I was in my second year, I had classes with a professor of whom my fellow academy students said: 'You'll have to get through this. After that, things will start to look up.' The year before, a student lodged a complaint against the professor, but the matter came to a standstill. So as we started the seminar, all students in our (exclusively female) year had the internalized sense that 'we needed to get through this'. There were lots of stories around. Some students (and graduates) said it was a worthwhile experience.

I can echo what Weronika has said: this is difficult to put into words. At the time, I was in a very peculiar state of mind. I gradually allowed the boundaries of my comfort zones to be infringed, one after another – although subconsciously I did realize this had nothing to do with my development as an artist. I will go further: with hindsight, I think these encounters, which were the opposite of partnership and dialogue, soon caused me to become withdrawn; they curbed the freedom I had as an artist. I was constantly told things like: 'Watch out, or you'll make a mistake', 'You want to load too much onto this boat', 'That's not the way to do it.' And, like Weronika, I started at the academy as a graduate; in fact, I had more than one degree (I was twenty-five!).

The hardest thing for me was that the professor was emotionally volatile, capable of changing his tone at the flick of a switch: aggressive and reproachful one moment, and friendly, even intimate, the next. The carrot and the stick. The switches were powerful and so unexpected that, on one occasion, there was a sudden lurch in my stomach. I understood a primeval, animal-like fear was working within me. Although my face remained expressionless, and my body upright – after all, you had to 'get through this' – inside I felt a fear I could not

contain. But I only decided to make an official complaint after the professor described the acting of an emerging actor (in fact a student) I was working with as 'disgusting'. Let me add that he did it during a rehearsal, with the student in question in the room. When I explained to the professor why we were rehearsing the way we did, he replied jovially: 'That's all right then. No problem at all.' For me, though, there was a problem. I couldn't even shield the people I had invited to work with me from aggression. That was too much.

The second year is very intense. No time for anything, not even looking after yourself, let alone activism. So, when we did file our complaint – we did this together, as a group of five – the final exam with this professor, which took the form of a student performance, was already in sight. Things were becoming even more hectic. After much agonizing about whether, in the circumstances, it would not be better to let it go, we eventually came together and reported the abuse. Later that day, we each received a message from the professor, who expected us to attend a meeting with him. Colleagues who replied that they would not be able to come received a late-night call, and had some very unpleasant conversations. Those who did attend the meeting the next day were treated to a lecture lasting several hours, during which they were described as 'little tattletales'. By this point any sort of comfort and security at work was not even an issue, so we had another meeting with the authorities, even though the only thing our first meeting had achieved was that the professor had learned of our reservations about his teaching methods.

There was a stark contrast between the dean's and the deputy dean's reaction to what we had to say. The dean found the phrase 'little tattletales' amusing, while his deputy at the time was visibly moved. The contrast deepened as the deputy dean stressed that they would only be able to take any action if we filed an official written complaint. The dean meanwhile countered her, saying our accusations would look ludicrous on paper.

I must admit we became a bit paranoid. The deputy dean was so insistent that we file the complaint, and the dean worked so vigorously to undermine her, that we began to wonder if there wasn't some other, personal game unfolding here. I realize today it was a battle between two different modes of thinking about education and working in theatre. I sincerely hope the mode that allows you to make a complaint when you feel your boundaries are being violated, and ensures you are treated seriously, will prevail. And yet, at the time, we did not file our complaint. We were not sure what impact it would have on the rest of our studies, what the procedure would be like, and how long it would take, what the exam before a board would look like, and if, despite an ongoing inquiry, the professor in question would still teach us a class in a different subject. And, as a matter of fact, we were not sure if our complaints carried enough weight. We felt they did, but this feeling was constantly undermined. There was no reference point. Boundaries were so fluid they barely existed. We made it through to the final exam, and our drama classes with this professor continued, until one day we once again found ourselves in the rector's office, for a completely different reason and, as if in passing, mentioned the subject which seemed off limits to us at the

time. As soon as he heard the accusations against the faculty member I mentioned earlier, the rector asked whether he could see us about this issue again. It would be best, he added, if as many affected students and former students as possible attended the meeting. We were surprised by the extent of the response from students and graduates: at the next meeting, there were not five of us, but about forty. After that meeting, the professor was suspended from teaching immediately. We had broken through the first wall. But that was not the end.

**Marta Miłoszewska:**

I was the deputy dean Agata was referring to. It would seem that, from the students' perspective as well as my own, I was the right person in the right place. A deputy dean who is a feminist and anti-discrimination activist, the first woman to hold this post in the Directing Department's eighty-year history, herself a graduate of the department, a director of plays about systemic violence against women. Still closer in age to the students than the average faculty member. On paper, everything looked great. I was the students' first point of contact: they came to see me. I wanted to help them: for me, this was obvious, and I thought it would be simple. And yet it took a scandal in the media to get things moving. Before that, the matter had remained unresolved for months.

Why was that? What went wrong? First, I had to act as an official, within the academy's legal framework – in this case, the general Rules and the Code of Ethics, both of which turned out to be vague and inadequate. Second, according to the procedures in place at the time, to take any sort of action, I needed a written, signed complaint, an official notice. The affected students did not want to put themselves in the spotlight; all they wanted was for the matter to be resolved swiftly and effectively. They were afraid of the consequences – which they knew nothing of, and the academy's Rules made them hard to predict. And, above all, they were concerned that nothing would change. They decided not to file an official complaint. Although as a private individual I understand that survivors of violence feel powerless, are frightened and reluctant to expose themselves, if only potentially, to further bullying, as a holder of an administrative post I was unable to help the students without an official written complaint. I wasn't sure how to do it. The affected students bounced off me.

From an emotional point of view, I understand what a tremendous disappointment it must have been: to see the person who was on their side act as if she defended the system they felt wronged by. The matter went up a notch, to the dean, where more or less the same thing happened. And then it went up further still, to the rector, where, at that early stage, the same thing happened again.

I would like to offer some turning points of this story, but at this point there are none. We all wanted to help, and with a view to doing so we called lawyers in. They repeated the same thing: in light of the existing legal solutions (and non-existent procedures), nothing could be done. In other words, the students' rights were not, in fact, protected. Students and graduates spoke of their frustration; they will say more later. My disappointment and frustration at not being able to help them were huge – so huge I handed in my resignation from the post of deputy dean.

I am sure there are many reasons why this inflammatory situation escalated. But they would all have become secondary if we had discussed violence and discrimination at artistic universities openly as a genuine and abiding problem. And if the Rules and Code of Ethics in force at the time had put a finger on this problem, provided us with instruments and offered solutions; if there had been any other anti-violence and anti-discrimination documents, drafted with the students in mind and designed to protect their rights; if clear anti-discrimination procedures had been in place: if A then B, and if C then D. And so, for instance, if a member of teaching staff is suspected of violent or unethical behaviour, an investigation is launched regardless of whether the behaviour is reported orally, or in the form of a written, signed complaint including the complainant's personal identification number. That is because ensuring the academy is in every respect a safe place is up to the school itself, and not the students. It needs to be stressed that, in a place like a school – an artistic school in particular – every issue is relevant not just to the specific offender and affected person. It is an inflammation spreading across the system. For years, 'lack of procedures' has been a convenient excuse for not taking any action to improve the situation. People's decency, and the belief that 'decent people act decently', are not enough. Behaviour models need to change, so does mentality, and so does the belief in 'hallowed tradition', thinking along the lines of 'this is how things always were', 'this is how I was treated and I was fine', 'no one ever objected', 'an artist needs to be thick-skinned (or even hard-arsed)'; and 'someone here is a snowflake of a tattletale', 'it's all for your own good', 'someday you'll remember it fondly'. All that needs to change. And the change will become easier if decency is safeguarded not by decency alone, but also by stringent procedures. When the opportunity to change the status quo emerged, I felt I had to get involved. I owed it to my students, but above all to myself.

### **Małgorzata Wdowik:**

In December 2017, the academy's rector and the dean of the Directing Department held a meeting with the students there at the time. Agata Koszulińska mentioned this earlier. I graduated from the academy several years before, but the students invited people from my year along to the meeting, which we all attended. The issue in hand was important: students being subjected to abuse of power by a faculty member. I had a similar experience a few years earlier. As I sat in a room packed with graduates and students, I realized I didn't know most people there because I completed my training before they came to the academy. And yet what they had to say was appallingly similar to what my peers and I had shared with the dean a few years before. I was dismayed to learn nothing had changed in this matter.

And yet, these students were different: they were brave, they supported each other and showed solidarity. We were the only 'insubordinate' year at the academy, and, in our case, the selection procedure [expelling the least promising students at the end of the first year] was stretched to two years rather than one – an attempt to 'discipline' us, as the intimidation campaign launched against us was called.

The solidarity shown by students from different years once again made me feel this was about me, too. And I felt that this time what we had to say mattered! That the people on the other side of the debate listened to us with good intentions. And yet, six months later, the professor who received the bulk of students' criticism was elected to the academy's Senate. It was as if we had been mocked, and the meeting in December had been just a sham. There were only a handful of people left from across all years, and their enthusiasm, too, was waning. A few years before, I, too, was tempted by the prospect of graduating and putting it all out of my mind – to give up on speaking out and fighting the system. I felt this time I could not let go, and nor did I want to: I sensed we were closer than we had ever been before. I felt I did not want to attend another meeting with another rector in a few years' time and hear new students say exactly the same things.

In a case as complicated and a process as protracted as this, different people are obviously involved to varying degrees at different stages. We all knew the case had to go on, but there was no need for the same people to be at the helm as it progressed. This is why I think of the moment of becoming actively involved in the academy's affairs as being passed the baton in a relay race. I took this symbolic baton with two academy graduates, Weronika Szczawińska and Aleksandra Jakubczak, and Katarzyna Łęcka, who was still a student at the time.

In terms of how the institution operated, the situation looked hopeless. A lawyer we consulted at the time brought it home to us that with this set of Rules and Code of Ethics, our testimony would barely achieve anything. The legal documents in place at the academy were clearly ill-suited to a situation like ours. This is why it was so important to rouse ourselves from thinking that the academy's problems are the internal problems of a community. And to remind ourselves, and others, that the academy is a state-funded institution and, if necessary, its flawed system should be subject to a public debate. After all, no way of protecting perpetrators is more effective than misconceived loyalty towards an institution or a professional circle, and being complicit in keeping their 'house secrets'. Transparency and the pressure of public opinion can work to the massive advantage of the survivors of violence and discrimination. Especially when large numbers of people speak out for them in one emphatic voice. This is how the idea came about that graduates (who were independent of the school, and often had considerable stature in theatre circles) should issue an open letter to the rector, Wojciech Malajkat, expressing their support for the students.<sup>1</sup> The number of signatories, and the fact that they had completed their degrees over a number of years, immediately laid bare the scope of the problem. In the letter, we stressed that the situation had been going on for years, and that successive heads of the academy had done nothing to remedy it, despite being aware of what went on. And not only that: attempts to campaign for good practices were stymied, and

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1 Karolina Stankiewicz, 'Nękanie, przemoc, zastraszanie - list absolwentów Akademii Teatralnej do rektora' ['Harassment, Violence, Intimidation: Letter from Graduates of the Theatre Academy to the Rector'], *Wirtualna Polska*, 11 July 2018, <https://film.wp.pl/nekanie-przemoc-zastraszanie-list-absolwentow-akademii-teatralnej-do-rektora-6272201363601025a> [accessed 20 November 2019].

students who spoke out about unacceptable behaviour found themselves silenced and intimidated.

We knew we not only needed to go public with our case, but also take meaningful action within the institution. This is how the document calling on the authorities to take disciplinary action against one of the professors came about. It was signed by every student who ever attended his classes. We decided both documents should be made public and delivered to the rector's office on the same day. The media uproar caused by the publication of the letter produced a dynamite effect, blowing up obstacles that for years had seemed immovable. The space for action was open, and it became clear action had to be taken before the gap closed up again. Interest from the media would no doubt end in a few days' time, and the whole matter would be nothing more than a scandal. Our aim was to use the scandal to trigger a debate.

We agreed on a range of issues we would and would not discuss: for example, we did not want to turn the professor mentioned in the letter into a scapegoat, and we were not interested in looking for anyone else to blame. But we were keen to draw the public's attention to a flawed system that enabled such behaviour and needed a radical overhaul if similar things were never to happen again. We tried not to give our campaign a face and spoke to the media in groups made up of students and graduates, so as to highlight our solidarity. We did our best not to level any accusations at the current rector, stressing instead that we viewed him as our ally and were willing to engage with him. But, above all, we looked forward to the rector responding to our letter: this would enable us to work towards change in concert with the institution. When the reply came, we suggested a meeting. Fourteen graduates attended – all of them had signed the earlier letter of support. We all declared our solidarity with, and support of, the students; we also stressed that we wanted to witness changes being implemented. We presented the rector with a list of demands we drew up earlier. The most important and most urgent of these was appointing a Student Rights Advocate. After the meeting, we decided to focus our efforts on this single issue. This was the first time such a position had been established at the academy.

### **Beata Szczucińska:**

We are a small school. We like to describe ourselves as a family, call the academy our home, and nourish the 'blood ties' formed in our student days. I have worked at the academy since 2003. Prior to that, I was a student here, completing a degree in Theatre Studies. The practical courses – acting and directing – were always a little wary of Theatre Studies. The students there had no part in the creative unrest experienced by actors and directors. They were, and perhaps still are, both within the academy and outside it. As someone who had a degree in a theoretical subject, I began to work on organizing the academy's day-to-day affairs, at first mostly administrative and then, increasingly, legal issues. This included drafting regulations and, later, statutes. I learned the language used by acting and directing students, and their teachers, occasionally finding it incomprehensible: I had no practical experience of creative work. I participated in the process of shaping the academy's organizational and legal framework, maintaining a dual perspective: internal, as the head

of the academy's administrative staff and a former student; and external, as someone who had no experience of training to become an actor or director. Obviously, I was very interested in this practical side of things, both as a student and during my first years as a member of staff. What went on behind the dropped curtain, during class. What the creative process is really about, what brings results, what determines the mark awarded to a student, and what the assessment process really entails. In my case, it was obvious: you either knew the answer to an exam question or you didn't. How do you decide whether or not an actor is capable?

During my time as a member of the academy staff, the legal framework within which it operates changed fundamentally on three occasions: in 2005, 2011 (amended in 2015), and 2018. I was actively involved in writing the statutes and all the other legal acts shaping the academy. Public law put us under ever greater pressure to standardize our education model and come up with clear, transparent, and precise rules for the entire process: from admissions, through completing the syllabus, up to the procedures for awarding degrees. Once again I had to balance two points of view: external (the Higher Education Law) and internal: our habits, set ways, and the people we trusted. Little by little, time-hallowed bastions fell along the way: students being banned from appearing in ads, banned from doing any acting work without the academy's consent; the age limit for admission to the Acting Department; the concept of a 'selection year' (after which the least promising students were expelled). As regards the last two, they have disappeared from the official narrative, but a change of law does not entail a shift in mentality.

At the same time, I became increasingly critical of the academy's received doctrines. Take for example the belief only young people could be admitted to the Acting Department: that was because we wanted to take on people who were not yet fully formed, who had not yet developed 'habits or baggage' – precisely with a view to shaping them. As time went by, I began to find this alarming. Meanwhile, the message conveyed by the legal acts in force at the time was becoming increasingly clear: the task of a higher education institution is to provide students with knowledge and skills. No more nor less. I was becoming ever more wary of claims that a work of art and the creative act eluded description; that the creative sphere was an entirely subjective process that could not become objective in any way. I was also concerned that it was customary for teachers at the academy to address students by their first names, but the students had to call them 'professor', regardless of their actual academic status. 'Child', 'my son', 'darling': these and similar forms of address were ubiquitous, and often they were uttered kindly and in a warm tone. But to me there was always a hidden agenda behind them: an attempt to establish a strong dependency, modelled on the dependency of a child on a parent. This ran parallel to the relation between master and disciple.

In 2011, a Code of Ethics was introduced at the academy, in keeping with the standards of internal control. I found the code wanting: too general, more suited to a corporation than to the academy's realities. Students were completely disregarded in this new document. The principles it set out were as follows: rule of law, non-discrimination, proportionality, impartiality, independence, fairness, objectivity, and

shared responsibility. Abuse of power was proscribed. All the same, the code was suspended shortly after it was introduced. According to some faculty members, the document could potentially become a 'denunciation system'. 2016 and 2018 saw events without precedent in the academy's history: students filed official complaints against faculty members, triggering inquiries into their conduct. One of these was dismissed by the Disciplinary Advocate on grounds of insufficient evidence. In another case, a faculty member was penalized but brought an appeal. A third inquiry is still in progress. It is 2019. The students who felt wronged in their first year here are now nearing the end of their training. Their case has not been resolved. When it does, eventually, reach a conclusion (if all goes well, this will take another two years), today's students will be at a different stage of their lives.

How could the students feel in the circumstances? 'Unsatisfied' is putting it mildly. But this is how the academy's disciplinary procedure works. It is based on Poland's Higher Education Law and Criminal Procedure Code. A protracted and exhausting affair, it must be overseen by a legal professional. Specialized practical and legal knowledge is needed to embark on it – the kind of knowledge students and faculty members would have only if they had completed legal training. In addition, both sides have the right to appeal: first, to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education disciplinary panel, and then to the general court of appeal. These are the reasons why disciplinary procedures take very long indeed.

When during their meeting with the rector in December 2017 students and graduates decided to address the issue of longstanding irregularities, neglect, and abuse of power, I once again saw things from two points of view at once. The internal perspective of the academy offered clear evidence of how complicated and petrifying disciplinary procedures launched against faculty members were, and how indiscernible they could be, particularly to students. A perspective external to the Directing Department and its practices alerted me to the fact that the vague assessment criteria – or a lack of them altogether – were bound up with a whole range of behaviours falling within the spectrum of psychological violence, manipulation, insults, and humiliation. Obviously, each of these accusations must be proved. It was clear to me that students lacked the knowledge and instruments needed to make their complaint effective. And from the legal point of view, the academy had no way of providing immediate protection to students, ensuring they are safe when coming into conflict with a faculty member. This is because, to be suspended from teaching, a member of staff first must be charged, and before they are charged, they must face an inquiry chaired by the Disciplinary Advocate.

In July 2018, students filed another complaint. They also decided to go public with their story, and informed the media. *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalist Agata Diduszko-Zyglewska sent Rector Malajkat a list of questions.<sup>2</sup> I drafted the answers (obviously, the rector later cleared them

<sup>2</sup> Agata Diduszko-Zyglewska, "Debil", "obrzydliwa", "skarżypytka". Wykładowca Akademii Teatralnej poniżał i zastraszał studentów? ["Idiot", "Disgusting", "Tattletale": Did a Theatre Academy Lecturer Humiliate and Intimidate Students?], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 11 July 2018, <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,23658527,debil-obrzydliwa-skarżypytka-wykladowca-akademii-teatralnej.html> [accessed 20 November 2019];

for publication). As I was working on this, struggling with every word, I thought – and I said this out loud to my deputy – that I was in fact pleased to be pressed by this Zyglewska woman. I no longer had a choice, I added; I really had to get to grips with this; here was a serious problem which I had never ignored, but could no longer put off. And I was the person to do this, in that I was both outside this situation and within it. In the car, I listened carefully to Małgorzata Wdowik, Karolina Skrzypek, and Aleksandra Jakubczak being interviewed on the Tok FM news radio station.<sup>3</sup> Although the interview was an indirect attack on me as a member of the academy's senior management, to a large extent I agreed with their diagnosis and the demands they made.

When Agata Adamiecka-Sitek met Rector Malajkat to set out her plan for improving the situation – setting up a working group made up of the academy's students, graduates, and faculty members – and was given the task of coming up with suitable anti-discriminatory and anti-violence procedures, I volunteered to join it. It was obvious to me that if the effort was to succeed, the group had to include someone from inside the administrative machine. As for me, I badly needed allies. I wanted perspectives to complement one another. Of course, none of this could have happened – certainly not on this scale – without support from Rector Malajkat. And so I got into this vehicle for change. The new Code of Ethics we drafted introduces concepts enabling us to protect our students and enabling them to protect themselves, but the definitions included in the code are relevant to everyone at the academy. In the end, words are the basis for everything. Striving for justice is no exception.

### **Agata Adamiecka-Sitek:**

On 1 October 2019 I officially assumed the newly established post of Student Rights Advocate at the Academy of Dramatic Art. I started in this role a year after attending an informal meeting with the academy's students and graduates, during which I was asked to get involved in work of this kind.

After the meeting, two things became clear to me. The first, on a personal level: regardless of how much this project seemed beyond my capabilities, I felt I could not, and did not want to, shy away from involvement. My other consideration was systemic: if this new role was to provide genuine support to students, it had to be embedded in the academy's system, and the person in the role had to be provided with suitable instruments. At that point, no documents evidencing anti-discriminatory or anti-violence policies were in place at the academy. Therefore, I suggested that a working group be established made up of students, graduates, teachers, and representatives of the academy's

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Agata Diduszko-Zyglewska, 'Wykładowca AT znęcał się nad studentami? Rektor Wojciech Malajkat wysłucha ich argumentów' ['Did a Theatre Academy Lecturer Harass Students? Rector Wojciech Malajkat Hears Their Arguments'], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 16 July 2018, <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,23678147,wykladowca-at-zne-cal-sie-nad-studentami-rektor-wojciech-malajkat.html> [accessed 20 November 2019].

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandra Jakubczak and Małgorzata Wdowik, 'Akademie dyskryminacji (cz. 2)' ['Academies of Discrimination (part 2)'], radio interview by Agata Diduszko-Zyglewska, Tok FM, 27 July 2018, <https://audycje.tokfm.pl/podcast/65155,Akademie-dyskryminacji-cz-2> [accessed 20 November 2019].

authorities. The task of the group would be to draft a code of ethics setting out the fundamental values, rights, and freedoms on which the academy's social order and human relations were founded. In addition, this newly established body was to set out rules on which the work of the Student Rights Advocate would be based. The rules were to define the advocate's tasks and the instruments she could use. We found it easy to specify what these documents should include, but a proper, methodical, and comprehensive formulation of their content was beyond us.

In response to a request from us, the rector allowed us to work with a law firm of our choice, and provided us with the necessary funding. Thus, those at the helm of the academy were not only willing to talk to us, but also offered real, and not least, financial assistance as we worked to effect change. Without access to professional legal assistance, our efforts would not have succeeded, and could easily have ended up as a failed grassroots initiative. Openness on the part of the authorities, financial assistance, and the involvement of a legal team: all these must be recognized as vital ingredients of change. After several months, the documents, drafted in a series of consultations, were completed. The Code of Ethics<sup>4</sup> – the advocate's point of reference – covers the entire academy community. Its aim is to ensure that artistic licence, creative teaching, and freedom of expression are exercised responsibly and ethically, and that the basic rights and freedoms of all the academy's students and employees are respected. This is the context of the educational process. As we drafted the code, we referred to the anti-discriminatory standards arrived at in similar documents at other higher-education institutions, but we also kept in mind the uniqueness of theatre training education, ensuring that the students' specific experiences are reflected in the code, including the experiences we learned of during our consultation and during the dedicated psychological workshops on health and safety in creative work. This is why, apart from clauses banning all discrimination, harassment, and sexual abuse, the code also includes passages like this one:

The Academy is an art school of a unique character. A creative and innovative approach to the (broadly understood) education and training in the art of theatre is acceptable at the Academy. Teaching methodology may frequently involve different forms of **physical contact**. Such contact is acceptable, provided that its **sole aim is education and training in the art of theatre**, and provided **it is essential for the completion of a properly conveyed educational assignment**.

Or this one:

While emotions, and their entire range of expression, as well as **offensive and aggressive behaviour** onstage, are inextricably linked to theatre, and the teaching of theatre, they are unacceptable in interactions between members of the Academy's Community, even if they are

4 Kodeks Etyki Akademii Teatralnej im. Aleksandra Zelwerowicza [Code of Ethics of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art], adopted 25 March 2018, <http://akademia.at.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/07/kodeks-etyki-uchwalony-25.03.2019.pdf> [accessed 20 November 2019].

part of the teaching process. This applies in equal measure to verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

The other document, the Rules for Functioning of the Student Rights Advocate,<sup>5</sup> states that the advocate is impartial and independent, and not bound by instructions from any of the academy's bodies, including the body appointing her. The advocate is appointed by the rector, but only after the student governing body has endorsed her. The governing body also must approve the advocate's annual report; if the report is rejected, the advocate's term in office ends, triggering the procedure for appointing her successor. Thus, it is in effect the students who year after year decide, through their governing body, if a particular individual is to continue working for their benefit. With the advocate's consent, the student governing body can also choose to nominate her for another term. It seemed important to us to place the Student Rights Advocate between the rector and the students. If she is to be an effective representative of the student community, the advocate needs to work with the rector, and has to be able to engage in productive dialogue with the authorities. But at the same time, her nomination, and the mandate she is, as it were, given every year, depend on the people for whose benefit she works.

According to the Rules for Functioning of the Student Rights Advocate, the advocate works in two areas:

1. Intervention, where she responds to reports of violation of the Code of Ethics
2. Education, spreading knowledge on prevention of discrimination and violence, and working to raise awareness and enhance good practices.

Both areas are equally important.

In the first, intervention, the advocate can choose from a range of means and actions enabling her to look into a case and act as a mediator: from talking to the parties involved, through legal consultation, to putting forward motions to the rector and the Disciplinary Advocate. Within the law, the Student Rights Advocate can join any investigative and disciplinary procedure to support the complainant; in addition, she is entitled to sit in on any classes and exams relevant to her work.

Raising awareness may entail organizing conferences, discussions, debates, workshops, and training for the academy's students and employees. (The rules provide that, given the weight and significance of the advocate's work, the rector may make such events compulsory for students or employees.)

Obviously, a shift in mentality and a change of day-to-day practice is a process designed to take years. It is early days, but at least we recognize where we are, and know which way to go. We have specific instruments, and an increasingly powerful alliance of all those who realized change is necessary, and it is possible now. So finally we thought we would

<sup>5</sup> Regulamin Funkcjonowania Rzecznika Praw Studenckich Akademii Teatralnej im. Aleksandra Zelwerowicza w Warszawie [Rules for Functioning of the Student Rights Advocate at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw], effective date 29 April 2019, <http://akademia.at.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/10/regulamin-rps.pdf> [accessed 20 November 2019].

ask ourselves: What does the change we are talking about mean to each of us? How do we understand it? What is at its core?

**Weronika Szczawińska:**

To me, change will occur if all those who take part in the educational and training process – students and faculty members – acquire a deep sense that artistic training does not need to be based on violence; that making art, and teaching it, is no excuse for infringing on another person's boundaries. They also need to understand that violence does not make us better artists, just more damaged people.

**Agata Koszulińska:**

Drama school is where younger artists meet older artists. Simple as that. It should be a realm of freedom, a meeting place of equals. A realm where both sides know they can, and are allowed to, make mistakes: in art, there is no such thing as the single right path. Mutual respect and interest: this is the basic principle of any relation between teacher and student. It is impossible to foster the artistic development of someone you do not find interesting.

**Marta Miłoszewska:**

Drama schools are special. People come to us with their hearts on their sleeves, and in the course of their training they have to expose themselves emotionally in front of strangers, in a way unheard of anywhere else. Seeing to it that this school is lab-clean of any form of violence is the single most important consideration. Our teaching skills come a very, very distant second.

**Małgorzata Wdowik:**

For me, the change is about rethinking the teaching process. This new process does not attempt to pass one, magical art-making method – the method of the master – on to emerging artists, but champions diversity instead. It support students in their own quest, enabling them to devise their own instruments of their art.

**Beata Szczucińska:**

I would like to see the formulation of clear criteria and rules for assessment. The myth that assessment of creative work cannot be objectified in any way needs to be done away with.

**Agata Adamięcka-Sitek:**

To me, partnership is key.

To my mind, what provides the motto for a partnership-based teaching process is the concept of the 'ignorant schoolmaster', which became common currency in theatre circles thanks to Jacques Rancière and his renowned essay 'The Emancipated Spectator'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See. Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', *Artforum International* 45.7 (March 2007), expanding on the concept he introduced in *Le Maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1987), published in English as *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991).

The ignorant schoolmaster knows he is not meant to seal the gap between his own skills/knowledge and his students' lack thereof. In this approach, the schoolmaster is always assumed to be ahead of his students, and the gap between them unbridgeable. The ignorant schoolmaster disregards this gap and separates his position from the status of the master.

The ignorant schoolmaster is not the one who knows, but one who wants to join his students in their quest for answers. And in that quest, he takes the view that intellectual emancipation is what matters most in the educational process.

*Translated by Joanna Błachnio*

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## ABSTRACT

Agata Adamięcka-Sitek, Agata Koszulińska, Marta Miłoszewska, Beata Szczucińska, Weronika Szczawińska, Małgorzata Wdowik  
**Allies: How We Broke the Silence and Drafted the Documents**

The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw has reached a crucial moment: we have drawn a new Code of Ethics, started to implement anti-violence and antidiscrimination policy, appointed Spokesman for Students' Rights. This text is a story about what had to happen so that we could find ourselves in this particular place –to enable the change we impatiently expect. In December 2017 the Warsaw Academy witnessed an unprecedented occurrence in its over 80-year history: almost 40 male and female students together with graduates of the Directing Department met with the Academy's Rector, and in the presence of the then department authorities talked about cases of mobbing, abuse and discrimination, which they either experienced or witnessed while studying. The scale of accusations was enormous. Their confessions triggered a discussion, but also exposed the system's weakness and insufficiency of the existing procedures. Corrective actions did not guarantee changes the students expected, and were perceived as implemented too slowly and inefficiently. Tensions arising from drawn out lack of radical solutions was growing to only reach its peak in July 2018, when the students and graduates reiterated their accusations and the news about the situation at the Academy hit the nation's media. It was time to give an effective diagnosis, start genuine dialogue and cooperation. It is high time we introduced substantial changes, whose main objective is to create a truly safe environment for students, foster their artistic development, creative freedom and subjectivity. We need to find effective tools to fight violence and discrimination within the system of artistic education.

A significant consequence of this chain of events was setting up a Working Group made up of female representatives of the Academy authorities, employees, students and graduates; female students of the Directing Department Agata Koszulińska and Karolina Szczypek, graduates Weronika Szczawińska and Małgorzata Wdowik, lecturers Agata Adamięcka and Marta Miłoszewska, the Academy Chancellor Beata Szczucińska – authors of the article.

**Keywords:** ethics, discrimination, theatre school.