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Testimonies and Declarations

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1.

Interviews with female students of the Faculty of Acting at the AST Academy of Theatre Arts in Kraków conducted by Michał Telega and the text based on these interviews were not the first signals of violence in teaching acting at AST. A year earlier, the premiere of the diploma production *#Gwałt na Lukrecji* [*#The Rape of Lucrece*; based on Shakespeare – ed.], directed by Marcin Liber, a production addressing the topic of sexual violence against women and widespread failure to recognize its sources, took place on 17 March 2018. An extensive commentary by the playwright, Martyna Wawrzyniak, regarding the process of creating the production, was published in the theatre journal *Didaskalia*. I will address only two issues directly relating to the topic of our meeting.

The first concerns one of the scenes, entitled in the script ‘And there will be no more’. The producers designed it to express the resistance of actresses and actors to the staging of the rape scene and their final refusal:

You probably think now that we are making this stuff up, that these are some [...] whims, that we can do more, why would not show it again, [...] that this is a diploma production, so it requires this initiation, [...] it's not the same as some exam at school, where we are also pretty well prepared, and we already know this and that, that this scene would have to be played from your twat or prick, and the rules are primary: you will take off your blouse, it's not school anymore, here you have to go full Kalina Jędrusik, here orgasm, here Kalina again, and here give him a mental blow job...¹

Although the text/manifesto was written by Wawrzyniak on the basis of students' statements, in which they cited acting tasks from classes at AST, the group quickly distanced themselves from the content of the manifesto, fearing a ‘negative reception from the teachers, a potentially offensive tone, that this text could provoke misunderstanding and thus ostracism on the part of the academy’.² A compromise version of the scene was finally developed, using a humorous convention. This way, the potentially

1 Martyna Wawrzyniak, ‘Opis doświadczenia pracy przy #Gwałcie na Lukrecji’ [‘Description of the Experience of Working on #The Rape of Lucrece’], *Didaskalia*, 151/152 (2019), p. 19.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

sensitive issues were detonated and the scene, although sharp in the script, didn't cause any teacher's discomfort or reflection on the subject of verbal violence in relations with students or crossing the lines of intimacy in working on scenes staging violence. There was no open discussion on this topic.

The second issue concerns the mattress which with the permission of the academy authorities appeared in the school corridor during rehearsals for the diploma production, with the slogan #MeToo inscribed in the middle. It was the initiative of a female student taking part in the diploma production, who was sceptical of the #MeToo campaign and decided to conduct an experiment at school. She found inspiration for her action in the YouTube account of a girl named Kate, who had slept for several months on the mattress on which she had been raped. On the wave of the #MeToo action, she decided to carry the mattress outside and encouraged others to write on it their own experiences of harassment. The actress working on the diploma production published an announcement in the student union Facebook group:

Hello. Here is the thing. As you all probably know, we are doing a diploma production of *The Rape of Lucrece*. Therefore, I am initiating an action. From today, for the next two weeks, there will be a mattress next to the library on which any of you will be able to write about your experiences, thoughts, and whatever comes to your mind about #MeToo. I must admit that I would like you to get involved in any way you can because it will help me a lot with my work.³

As a result, the mattress was filled with comments from AST students. Also, an important declaration appeared by the rector herself: 'Please come to me if something bad happens. I will always help you – Dorota Segda.' The mattress, previously a theatrical prop, became a kind of testimony or document and was included in a scene in the production with the commentary: 'What's done is done.' In June 2019, in the context of the performative reading of Telega's text, I tried to get a photo of Segda's comment on the mattress, but it turned out that nobody had documented it. We found only one not very clear picture, and finally the mattress itself, which came back to us as a theatrical prop, standing somewhere in a corner in the school corridor. I mention these two cases to pose a question about the effectiveness of our actions. How to avoid illusory, fictitious, or short-term gestures and actions?

On the day of the public reading of Telega's text, we met with AST Rector Dorota Segda to demonstrate the problem and deliver a letter in which we appealed for the appointment at AST of a working group to draft the academy's code of ethics and regulations regarding the appointment of an equal treatment ombudsman. Through the text *The Actresses, or Sorry for Touching You*, we wanted to reveal the scale of the problem and show the mechanism of replication of violence in theatre as a deeply systemic matter, demanding the implementation of an anti-violence and anti-discrimination policy at the place where this system also forms, i.e. the academy. We wanted to protect people who decided to talk

³ Ibid., p. 19.

about the abuses and humiliation experienced at AST and in theatre. However, we were not clear (and probably still aren't) on how to proceed when we are entrusted with information on harassment, but do not want to expose the victims of violence to confrontation. What procedures to initiate? What to hide and what to disclose to ensure the safety of people who have reported inappropriate behaviour but are afraid of opening an investigation, because the disciplinary commission includes people employed by the faculty? How to report abuse if the questionnaires do not fulfil their function in this respect? And how important are the testimonies expressed in the production, written on the mattress, processed in the dramatic text?

2.

Students' lack of confidence in their instructors and institutions is a huge problem and results from many years of neglect. AST in Kraków still lacks a safe platform for expressing opinions on violent behaviour at the academy;⁴ there is no one (in terms of performing the appropriate function) the students trust enough to report abuses to, believing that the procedures will be effective and lead to solving the problem instead of further persecution. Information on bad practices at AST comes to us from various sources. After the establishment of the Equal Treatment Working Group, of which we became members, we heard that the Faculty of Acting authorities had learned of several cases where violence was used in acting classes in the recent past. The contracts with educators were terminated, but the cases were not publicized. The teacher associated with the expression used by Michał Telega in the title of the work, 'Sorry for touching you', is no longer employed at the academy. In the text, the expression has a metaphorical dimension and relates to violence as a problem we dare to 'touch' on. Recently, the AST authorities began to perceive the issue of violence in artistic education as a systemic problem, rather than a few exceptions.

A handful of people interested in the subject came to the reading of Telega's text at AST in June, but a third of the participants were from outside the academy. This shows how much needs to be done to ensure that issues related to harassment and identification of violent behaviour cease to be underestimated and ignored not only by teachers but also by the students themselves. When Telega reported this topic in class, he was confronted with severe criticism by his classmates. They claimed that 'this is not a topic for a text' but just some school anecdotes and rumours and that it is not worth doing because nothing will change. Doubts were also raised by students of the Faculty of Drama Directing from other years, who asked me why Telega was 'investigating' the situation of female acting students at AST. Because nobody had dealt with it before?

So who can and who should deal with the disclosure of abuse at the academy? This question returned in the context of the last

4 At the end of October 2019, at the initiative of the Equal Treatment Working Group, after meetings with students of the Faculty of Acting and the Faculty of Drama Directing, a 'trust box' appeared in the corridor at AST, where anyone can anonymously post information about abuses and bad practices experienced at the academy (discrimination, mobbing, harassment, and all other forms of violence).

case I want to discuss: the so-called *fuksówka* (a traditional hazing/initiation ritual of first-year students at artistic schools) at Kraków's AST. On 4 October 2019, students from the Faculty of Drama Directing of different years, independently of each other, reported to me that the ritual had reached a level of unacceptable terror. We decided to act. We agreed that as a department we would write a petition to the rector of AST demanding an immediate halt to the practice. Unexpectedly, the same day, in the evening, *fuksówka* ended. We don't know what directly influenced this decision, how, or to whom it was communicated. In the course of one day, several parallel events occurred: agitated discussions on the topic on social media, as well as disclosure of traumatic experiences from *fuksówka* on closed Facebook groups by both male and female students and graduates of various artistic schools (over a hundred posts). It seems that the problem has been solved for the time being, but what does this mean for the future: the elimination of *fuksówka* from Kraków's AST, or just a one-time departure from this type of practice? The acting students suggested creating a new form of initiation ritual, while the directing students are rather against that. Students from both faculties have regrets and grievances against each other: the former for intervening, the latter for not noticing the scale of the problem. We need an open discussion on this subject followed by introduction of appropriate regulations and an escape from the cone of silence⁵ – in this case and many other cases of abuse at AST.

In addition to drafting documents allowing us to address violence at the academy, the crucial issue is education based on criticizing the system founded on hierarchy and domination. We are at the beginning of the road at AST in Kraków, but thanks to the exchange of experiences initiated during the conference, we may figure out a way to make change visible, and anti-violence and anti-discrimination policy at artistic schools more effective. However, real change cannot be made through shortcuts, following in others' footsteps, without self-reflection.

Translated by Monika Bokimiec

Works cited

Wawrzyniak, Martyna, 'Opis doświadczenia pracy przy #Gwałcie na Lukrecji' ['Description of the Experience of Working on "#The Rape of Lucrece"'], *Didaskalia*, 151/152 (2019), p. 19

⁵ After the conference, at the initiative of the Equal Treatment Working Group, two joint meetings of directing and acting students have already taken place.

ABSTRACT

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The point of departure of the presentation will be the text *The Actresses, or Sorry for Touching You* by Michał Telega (4th year student of the Drama Directing Department at the Akademia Sztuk Teatralnych (AST Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow) regarding the situation of actress students at theatre work, and more specifically – violence and discrimination on the grounds of gender at art school and theatres. The text was written as part of dramaturgical course in Working on own text led by Iga Gańczarczyk in the 2018/2019 academic year, whose subject – More than one heroine referred to seeking new language for the stage representation of women.

Keywords: drama, gender, theatre school.