
Maciej Nowak

We, the New Theatre

<http://mbmh.pl/development/ptjournal/index.php/ptj/article/view/34/49>



Maciej Nowak

We, the New Theatre

As long as I sat on the other side of the fourth wall, in the comfortable seat of a critic, I knew everything. What's good and what isn't; which director knows how to work with actors and which can't pull it off; who has talent and who isn't cutting it. Now, since coming over to the other side of the barricades, I feel at ease mostly in restaurants, where for every chateaubriand or bouillabaisse I can find the right formula. When it comes to performances, I have suffered an unexpected loss of self-assurance. I can no longer sum up an entire show in two malicious bon mots, or use a single tight phrase to dismiss months' of work by an actor, a director, a designer. Have I lost my clarity of vision? Has my theatrical sensitivity been dulled, replaced only by gastronomic refinement? Who knows, who knows... In any case, I know one thing: Insofar as I don't have a recipe for a good show, I have a fairly certain sense of where good theatre may be lurking. Theatre where performances include both good shows and bad; theatre where fate may be extraordinarily complicated; theatre that arouses the extremes of the viewers' and critics' emotions; living theatre. Theatre which, for simplicity and in order to anger a few readers of this text, I shall call new theatre.

Agora

During the last decade, a time of great transformation and challenges for Poland and the Poles, our theatre somehow didn't feel any kind of an obligation to speak out on social issues. Zygmunt Hübner once taught us that in every political system, no matter whether it's a communist or a free-market country, artistic and intellectual circles must remain in opposition to the governing powers. But for 15 years the power has been in our hands, the power that we dreamed of during years of Soviet domination. And we initially wanted to be its footstool. Remember the slogan from the beginning of the 1990s: 'Artists for the Republic'? Under this banner, theatre people competed to declare their sympathy and support for the new reality, for the new authorities. In effect, we brought about a situation in which theatre completely lost the moral and social authority it had built up over two centuries. A theatre with a tradition of outraging God and the Tsar took up issues of upholstery. The country finds itself in a state of war, soldiers with white eagles on their caps are fighting in the sands of some desert somewhere, and Polish theatre, Polish literature, Polish cinema has nothing to say on this subject. Every day, we hear about ourselves as a society of terrible things; our faces burning with shame, we read Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbours* and at the same

time the majority of theatres have a repertoire consisting of street-performer burlesque. The new theatre does not consent to this, as it deeply believes that theatre remains a medium that allows us to fix society and to hold up its own image to it as an example.

Today's theatre is no longer a phenomenon of the intelligentsia, at least not in the same way that it had been an aspiration of that social group in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The new theatre has ceased to be a refuge for a group of know-it-alls and culture mavens convinced of their own uniqueness. We don't want to see them in our theatre, because the past decade has shown that these supposed guardians of Polish conscience and good taste did not in fact meet the challenge of the age. They're just here on holiday. The so-called Polish intelligentsia no longer treats visits to the theatre, reading books, taking part in concerts as essential things. It has taken up paying off loans, furnishing flats, travelling to Greece and Spain. And constantly complaining, which justifies their intellectual passivity and consumer appetites. The new theatre has no subjects in common with this audience. It is much more interested in the people who meet in clubs, cinemas; the girls and guys from motorcycle clubs; young intellectuals, craftsmen, concertgoers; the unemployed, and those trying to find their place in the world. This audience is not interested in theatre that is a conventional, cultural gesture. To interest them, it's essential to have distinct opinions, orientation in the world, the courage to diagnosis problems. The new theatre is not a refuge. The new theatre is an agora.

New Stories

In stereotypical thinking about the process of development in theatre, there exists a conviction that contemporary directors don't respect dramaturgy. In fact, the earlier theatre held new literary production in greater disdain. Instead, it treasured the old texts, with the conviction that reinterpretation is the highest form of directing. The new theatre is not afraid to confront the classics, but it also has a great appetite for new stories, stories that are close to its audience and its actors. It searches for actors, for world-premiere texts and pretexts. Even at the risk of them being less than perfect. In this searching, the function of the literary director becomes essential, a position which, after years of being marginalized or actually disappearing, is slowly returning to our theatres. Of course, its traditional activity, once restricted to serving as a reader for the artistic director, has been supplemented with new responsibilities. The literary director still reads, but she also takes part in rehearsals, discusses things with directors and actors; sometimes even writes or adapts herself, enlivening dramaturgical workshops, maintaining contact with writers and translators. The holder of this position is a genuine co-creator of the shape of artistic theatre. The weight that the new theatre places on inspiration from literature means that on the team of artists responsible for each performance, there will soon be a position responsible for the literary shape of the show. Scoffers see this as yet more evidence of the new theatre being enthralled with the German model; people who know their own traditions remember that this structure was already formulated by Leon Schiller.

The Actor

The principle distinctive of the new theatre is its unique concept of the actor and the actor's art. This is a change so fundamental that we can speak of a phenomenon analogous to great reforms in the theatre a hundred years ago. At that time, the director was promoted from the position of toiling behind the scenes to that of a theatre artist. Today, this same process is taking place with the actor. The new theatre does not treat him or her, to use the terminology of a century ago, as an über-marionette. It does not need a mannequin, a coat stand, a trained animal, a helpless executor of the creator-director's desires. Or – as a great 20th-century director put it so eloquently – machines made for acting, like an arse is made for shitting. In the new theatre, the actor becomes a co-creator of the production, responsible for its shape in equal measure with the director, the set designer and the composer. The personality of the actor, his or her views and sensitivities, are possibly even more important than the so-called stage conditions. The new theatre seeks thinking actors, critical ones, those who are interested in the world. And thanks to the world, which they bring with them to rehearsals, they build their performance.

Intriguingly, this same process has taken place in the world of dance, thanks to which one of the most exciting fields of 20th-century art arose: contemporary dance. It values physical ability and technical perfection in its dancers, yet first of all it profits from their personalities. Dance, the older sibling of theatre, allowed itself a revolutionary departure from principles of classical technique almost a hundred years before we did. Today the time has come for us, at last.

The actor of the new theatre subordinates himself, of course, to the vision of the staging, yet within boundaries defined by the director, she moves independently, in accordance with her convictions and thanks to her sensitivity. There is no place for iron rules, those questions of the old theatre: from where do I enter, and what am I doing here? The actor as an artist of the theatre understands the absurdity of viewing the matter this way, and with his or her capabilities and doubts is able to enrich the process of creating the production. Significantly, being an actor of the new theatre is unrelated to age. There are experienced, older artists capable of working according to the new principles, as there are fresh graduates of theatre schools who put it plainly: please direct me, I'm only an actor.

The Company

The new theatre can't exist without the company. That many-headed organism, bonded by common artistic consciousness, communicating with similar means of expression, a creature that amplifies the energy of the individual through the strength of the entire group. The group nature of theatre is an old song, but today, when the old theatre has allowed itself to become banal, this has once again become exceptionally timely. With a shiver running down our spines, we discover the power of intentional collectivity. Individuality intrigues us, but what captivates us is the vision of a multi-generational band of artists.

Today it is not possible to carry out new theatre in opposition to this collectivity. And it's not just in theatre: This problem applies more broadly, to all structures that employ workers. Methods of the superintendent and the overseer – perhaps effective against peasants in the age of serfs

– don't work in contemporary social structures. Especially not in the theatre. Which of course doesn't mean an artistic institution must be run on popular votes. What's needed is a strong vision the entire company can unite around, a vision that suggests so much that potentially dramatic shifts in personnel or organisational structure will be justified within its context.

Directors attempting to imitate the new theatre mechanically often invite its creators to collaborate. But on more than a couple of occasions it's turned out that new theatre can't be achieved just by picking one fashionable director or another. Achieving the proper effect is possible only after many months of working together, possibly years; various artistic experiences, during which the common language of an actors' collective is shaped.

Not Gathering Dust

The new theatre is a child of its age, and expresses its distinctness thanks to sharp, clear visualization. It doesn't like dusty backstage spaces, it doesn't feel well in halls where zones of audience and actors are conventionally divided by the high apron of the stage and a strong proscenium arch. It prefers interiors with compact, readable space, flexible and easy to adapt. In accordance with ancient tradition, the new theatre likes to invite the audience into a space in the shape of an amphitheatre, assuring exceptionally comfortable viewing possibilities. New theatre doesn't treat mass culture as an enemy. It's rather a sphere of inspiration, a laboratory of contemporary language and contemporary visual codes. To use them properly, the new theatre turns to new technologies, searching for new materials, technical solutions, lighting sources. It may be just a whim, but the new theatre has fallen in love with HMI projectors, which cast a cold, objective light.

The set designer is not a decorator, but co-creator of the space between actors and audience. Her creative position means she takes part in the entire process of preparing the staging, participating in rehearsals, consulting ideas with director and actors. It's a different matter, which we'll leave to the next reformers of Polish theatre, to call for development of an ability to organize a mock-up set and prepare precise plans – perhaps after another hundred years.

The January Revolution

This time, theatre history's given us the opportunity to date the start of the new theatre in Poland precisely. It appeared at 7 p.m., Saturday, 18 January 1997. In Warsaw that day there were two premieres: in the Teatr Rozmaitości, Witkacy's *Bzik tropikalny* [*Tropical Madness*] as directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna, and in the Teatr Dramatyczny, Sophocles' *Electra*, directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski. The two most expressive creators of the new theatre made their debuts before Warsaw audiences on the same evening. In one night, everything changed: by means of Witkacy, somewhat forgotten at that time, Polish theatre entered communication with the tradition of its own avant-garde searchings from a few decades earlier; through Warlikowski's *Electra*, we made contact with what was happening on the stages of Western Europe. And that, in the broadest terms, is how Polish new theatre wants to be: artistic, knowing its traditions, and simultaneously open to inspirations flowing in from the rest of the world. If you believe that this isn't a very revolutionary plan,

you're mistaken. In the mad, vulgar, politically liberal Polish reality, a declaration of creative freedom is as proud a cry as *¡No pasarán!* No less threatening is the sound of the attempt to enter discourse with European theatre. Already in the first reviews of *Electra*, this demand was ridiculed as the vulgar enchantment of the show's creators with the pictures in *Theater heute*.

The Revolution of 18 January had to happen, sooner or later. Most areas of our public life and our art liberated themselves from the bonds of the old thinking in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Only theatre remained unchanged, posed atop its terrazzo tombstone. Nothing in Poland has remained for longer in this position, except farming. The 18th of January brought the long-awaited spark that kindled, perhaps not a great flame, but at least a solid fire which today draws to itself not a few artists and companies. Convinced that they can create a theatre different from the one taught in schools; a theatre which doesn't have to be governed by hackneyed banalities; a theatre that doesn't have to be this or that, one or the other. The new theatre can be anything, because the stage opens the unlimited space of freedom before us. In a world subjected to ruthless pressures, the benefits of the new theatre's freedom are the most precious treasure.

Translated by Nathaniel Espino

* Originally published in the journal *Notatnik Teatralny* 2004, 35, pp. 116–119.