

Theatres of Politics, the Politics of Theatre

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Political commitment is one of the trademarks of Polish theatre. Due to dramatic historical events, the Polish audience and the national stage have been engaged in debate and political struggle since the very beginnings, becoming one of the most important tools for shaping public opinion. The nation's loss of independence in the early 19th century meant that the mere presence of Polish theatre on territories of the now non-existent Polish state was a political act. In the 20th century, political aspects of Polish theatre were associated not only with the question of the struggle for independence, but also with involvement in social conflicts and with criticism of the dominant ways of solving them. In spite of being financed by the government, theatre has acted at the same time as its critic, often displaying subversive or outright revolutionary attitudes. Such was certainly the case during the period of communist rule. After the fall of communism in 1989, the politicization of theatre had to be redefined.

This process began at the end of the 20th century but took its most dramatic form in the first decade of the present century, when its new tone was set by artists of the younger generation including Krzysztof Warlikowski, Grzegorz Jarzyna and later Maja Kleczewska, Jan Klata, Michał Zadara, Paweł Demirski, Monika Strzępka and others. They have disclosed and raised awareness of the significance of what had been considered 'privat': especially issues of gender and sexual orientation. They have discussed and questioned dominant forms of collective memory, identity myths and rules of symbolic politics, and have spoken out on current political and social affairs related primarily to the process of transforming the system, and its costs. One of the manifestos of the new way of understanding political theatre was a text by Maciej Nowak from 2004, 'We, the New Theatre', republished in this issue of *Polish Theatre Journal*. Nowak – at the time running the Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk – gathered a group of artists who for a certain time were associated with the unequivocally political objective declared in the manifesto of the 'new theatre': 'to fix society and as an example present it with its own reflection'. The 'new theatre' was recognized as a bastion and a vehicle of critical political thought.

Today, leading representatives of that group hold prominent places in Polish theatre. Krzysztof Warlikowski and Grzegorz Jarzyna enjoy international acclaim, at the same time running their own theatre companies in Warsaw. Jan Klata is managing director of one of Poland's two national companies, the Stary Theatre in Kraków, while Michał Zadara

has become one of the important directors of dramatic theatre. The creative writer-director team of Paweł Demirski and Monika Strzępka have established the dominant model of engaged critical theatre in recent years. Although theatrical practices vary among these artists, they are still connected by their involvement in the public debate and the need to relate in various ways to what society is going through. They still retain their attitude of opposition to the government, as asserted in Nowak's manifesto.

Strzępka and Demirski remain the most radical in their political commitment. In the course of a few years, they have developed an original formula of political theatre constantly attacking virtually every project and every ideological stance, including their own. Though they belong to the mainstream and work the major Polish stages (and those run privately), they have managed to preserve their independence. Even if they don't believe that theatre can change the world (Demirski repeats this incessantly), their most recent production, *I Will Tell God Everything!* based on Zygmunt Krasiński's *The Un-Divine Comedy*, is one of the most powerful diagnoses of Polish social life.

This production is also important because, regardless of its autonomous value and significance, it constitutes at the same time the latest link of a dramatic chain of events that took place between 2013 and 2015 in the Stry Theatre in Kraków. These incidents exposed tensions between different modes of understanding and practicing political theatre, in a particularly expressive way. The appointment of Jan Klata and Sebastian Majewski as directors of this prestigious company with its great tradition evoked protests from very early on, both in the conservative environment of Kraków as well as among theatre people. The latent conflict exploded in November 2013 when a group of conservative audience members interrupted a performance of Strindberg's *To Damascus* directed by Klata with cries of 'For shame!' and 'This is a national stage!' The director and his actors, and with support from part of the audience, got the protesters to leave the auditorium, but the latter, in a way, had achieved their goal: all Poland was talking about the conflict around the Stry Theatre. The company's management found itself under huge pressure from conservative forces, and the debate was heading towards the familiar political conflict repeatedly played out in Poland: the clash between supporters of traditional dramatic theatre (in brief) and representatives and enthusiasts of the 'new theatre', the theatre viewed as a forum for discussion.

However, a turn of events at that time revealed that this conflict was to some extent anachronistic, or perhaps even secondary. In the heat of ongoing disputes and discussions, Klata cancelled the announced premiere of another production based on Krasiński's *The Un-Divine Comedy* by Croatian director Oliver Friljić in rehearsals at the time in the Stry Theatre – a production expected to become yet another locus of battle. Klata explains the circumstances and reasons behind his decision in an interview in this issue of *PTJ*, and the topic is also critically analysed by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek. We devote considerable space to discussions of Klata's decision in the belief that it constitutes a disclosure of a point of tension and conflict that had been effectively obscured until then by Nowak's binary opposition of 'us vs. them', drawn eleven years ago in 'We, the New Theatre».

These tensions relate to various ways in which theatre can be political.

The differences between them were successfully described in 2008 by Paweł Mościcki, who proposed, in an essay also reprinted in this issue of *PTŻ*, a distinction between engaged and engaging theatre. Put succinctly, the former is political because of issues it addresses while applying an array of relatively traditional theatrical modes of expression. The latter takes up not only and not entirely political issues insofar as it recognizes and attempts to critically process the political nature of theatre itself, as a site of communication that is not free from mechanisms of violence and power. It reveals the political dimension of working methods and conditions prevailing within a company and an institution. It is precisely this dimension of politics that the events in Kraków have unveiled. Due partially to their influence, this aspect of politics has become a subject of analysis and practical, creative work on the part of the newest generation of directors: Weronika Szczawińska, Bartosz Frąckowiak, Marta Górnicka, Agnieszka Jakimiak, Wojtek Ziemilski to whom we also devote considerable space in this issue. To them, the politics of theatre is not something external that needs bridging into but, rather, it often covertly permeates the very core of the company and institution, finding expression in seemingly obvious but far from innocent relations of the management organizing the artistic work.

Weronika Szczawińska and Milena Gauer discuss this from a feminist perspective, showing an image of the theatrical institution and the position of artists in a manner entirely different from that of Jan Klata. In the tension between these two equally strong positions, the arena of diverse theatre politics extends itself. This also includes activities that go beyond the repertory theatre institution dominant in Poland to construct different relations between artists and local communities, as in Agata Siwiak's curatorial project *Wielkopolska: Revolutions*, the premises of which are discussed by its curator and are examined critically by Joanna Jopek.

In this issue, *PTŻ* attempts to identify and describe aspects of theatre politics from various viewpoints, activating a space for debate rather than determining their hierarchy or ascribing judgments. Is it possible for theatre in its institutionalized, artistic and practical shape to avoid becoming a hierarchical power structure triggering mechanisms of violence? Can a theatre company of open debate and political freedom encompassing all its members exist? Or is it true that the best possible form of theatre is that type of 'enlightened monarchy' described by Klata, based on relations of power and responsibility? What is the political and social potential of participatory theatre? These are some of the questions about political attitudes that we put forward in this issue, in the belief that the discussion around them that is happening in Poland has a dimension far exceeding local contexts and interim configurations.