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If you asked someone who does theatre - pundit or player - to give you a name they connect with theatre, they'll probably name someone from three categories: actor, director or writer. [...] I'd go with writers every time. This is because although I know the limitations of theatrical space and I am under no illusion about theatre changing the world, I am also convinced that changes in theatre have been almost exclusively the province of writers. This is a result of a natural equation: writers think and actors act. It is a crucial, powerful combination and one that demands the writer's ideas take centre stage.¹

Aleks Sierz

Polish theatre is a theatre of producers. Even if for several years we have been observing a wave of interest in the so-called New Polish dramaturgy, and recently the position of dramaturge has appeared in Polish theatre, the director still remains in the centre of theatrical events. The director is most often judged, the director is treated seriously and demands are made on the director. Theatrical circles, particularly the conservative part, wait to see when a director will at last take on some classic, canonical work, for it is only tackling [Stanisław Wyspiański's] *The Wedding* or *Hamlet* that, according to these circles, is the great test. Staging contemporary dramas is also a test. But a small one. The theatre world is waiting for masters, shamans, magi of theatre. And if it's not capable of applying these – embarrassing? – nicknames to its favourite directors, it will at least call them good craftsmen, professionals who carry out their duties well, and it will try to knock the ones it doesn't like into professional oblivion.

It is expected first and foremost that a director have ideas – for selecting plays, working with actors, for the language of theatre that she uses, and so on. In Poland (perhaps it is similar in other theatrical traditions, but I'm talking about our own garden) the majority in the theatre world and, it follows, the majority of the audience would answer Sierz's question unequivocally.

I would like to look at the answer that suggests itself, examining it in the context of thinking about engaged theatre; in the context of a theatre that attempts to walk alongside society, to fight for a new political language; in the context of a theatre attempting to escape absorption by the obligatory liberal discourse.

Reinterpretation and Engaged Theatre

Theatre in Poland has all the attributes of a museum. A large part of the theatre world, led by conservative critics and directors, wants nothing more than to fill the honoured role of curators. They look after tradition and take care that the canon is kept free of dust. Through such actions, theatre becomes one of the areas of art that's most absorbed

¹ <http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2003-02/sierz.htm>

with tradition and the past. And thus it detaches from contemporary discourses, it ceases to dialogue with other spaces of social life, in the end – it breaks away from the public.

One strategy that supports the maintenance of the museum consensus is the maintenance of the cult of directorial theatre, theatre of producers. It has become a universal practice that the producer-director, reading the texts she intends to produce, is primarily checking their capacity from the contemporary point of view – looking for references, correlations, answers to the question: what exactly could this be about today? How can we update the text to prove that through Shakespeare we are able to say something about the contemporary human? Of course, the spectrum of these practices is exceptionally broad: from a curious fidelity to the author (tradition), through ambitious attempts to cut the texts, reworkings, samplings, connections with other texts and so on (the avant-garde).

What results from this intellectual work? What exactly will a director come up with in interpreting, adapting, updating a classic, i.e. moving back and forth really just between Shakespeare and Chekhov – the classics, the founding fathers, the ideal creators – whom no living person, tapping on a computer keyboard, would be able to match?

To judge, possibly unfairly: the result of this is the 338th production of *The Seagull*, the 500th production of *Othello*, a similar number of *Threepenny Operass*. Maybe we should fund a state prize for the millionth production of *Antigone*?

Productions dressed up in contemporary costumes, switching of roles, ‘revolutionary’ interpretational developments as a rule, lead in the end to an aesthetic change.

The director, limited at the very least by the basic requirements of the text, such as construction of characters, relations between them, plot, etc. must wrestle not only with the material of an archaic text but first and foremost with the problem of how to bring new ideas into the existing structure of the play. A large part of the director’s work is thus concentrated on demystifying the text, and not on the quality of the message.

Additionally, successive stagings of even the most revolutionary plays rob them of their force. It’s enough to look at what has happened to Bertolt Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, which, through successive stagings and the introduction of its themes into pop culture, has changed from a harshly critical voice into a pleasant little musical.

At the level of introducing ideas into public discourse, sparring with reigning ideas, at the level of theatre opposing dominant languages and thus the languages of power, or ultimately at the level of theatre that wants to take part in a larger social project, is where the serious problems begin. If the statement of theatre is to be a truly radical gesture, it’s difficult to make that while remaining on ground defined by Chekhov. Or else the most radical gesture will be that of the director waving her arms during rehearsals.

In re-interpreting a classic, a director who really wants to say something radically new and important for society won’t bring forth anything new under the sun. In general, he is able to act only on what the audience is accustomed to regarding the world presented in a universally known text. The more a play is a ‘reading’ the better, because the public has powerful habits and thus can devote greater attention to following

directorial operations on a known text. The text is known, the reading is fascinating, the viewer leaves the theatre with a feeling of someone who's solved a crossword, from whom cultural erudition has been demanded. Then theatre is cool, because it's understandable, though supposedly it wasn't understandable.

Re-interpretation doesn't lead to a change in thinking; it doesn't pose important, current questions; it demonstrates, rather, that works written years ago are still obligatory, that people don't change, thus the world doesn't either.

This is also – to a large degree – what conservative critics are talking about when in protecting theatrical traditions they can write after yet another performance of a classical text that Chekhov is still current, meaning eternal; the viewer, on the other hand, knows that in an unchanged world, tea is drunk unchangingly, the soul hurts unchangingly and it's immeasurably difficult to leave for Moscow, or for anywhere; in a modernized version, maybe to Egypt? Or to Greenland. It would be just us and the seals.

This type of directorial operation and thinking about the theatre, within the realm of known truths, plot structures, the rules of the presented world, known and accepted ideas, is nothing other than support for the status quo. Such thinking perhaps does not eliminate, but in a very serious way hinders, the making of a gesture of transgression in the theatre.

Booby-Traps, or: The Playwright on the Proving Ground

The theatre of producers, which places the person of the director at the centre, is forced even against its best intentions into reproducing the existing social and economic world and space of values, through the necessity of reaching for canonical texts which this world produced 100, 200 and 500 years ago.

The way out of this trap is to consider a change in perspective from director-centric theatre towards a model of a playwright's theatre. New texts being born in ever new conditions are a chance for a more accurate articulation of barely perceptible problems, needs and expectations of an ever more dynamically transforming society. A theatre of the playwright also gives the director the possibility of a fuller and more significant theatrical message.

Someone may ask: But where is this new dramaturgy? Where is there any kind of important contemporary Polish dramaturgy? The answer is simple – I'll cite my own play only once – 'In the shit. You know? In shit!'

The obligatory thinking about dramaturgy, about new plays and in general about writing plays, recalls a minefield on which playwrights often move about without a metal detector, often with fake ones. There are many mines; I'll deal with the ones that I believe are most detectable:

1. 'The new dramaturgy'. Grumbling about the lack of contemporary dramaturgy is a constant element on the landscape of Polish theatre. More or less at the time Ingmar Villquist's work appeared in theatres, there arose the phenomenon of 'the new Polish dramaturgy'. The grumbling ceased for a bit. New Polish works were presented in theatres, competitions were set up, followed by the organisation of workshops, discussions, public readings, workshop performances and publications; a buzz was created. People in Poland started writing plays. The grumblers,

observing this phenomenon, then started to grumble that there were too many plays, they were of low quality and they didn't measure up to you-know-which authors. So the majority of theatres made a quick gesture to disarm the phenomenon. Polish plays started to be pushed onto various 'stages of new playwriting'; new Polish texts were called 'the new brutalism' or something similar; no theoretical discussion was conducted on the role of this phenomenon and its potential. After a few years, the wave of playwriting subsided. Most likely, on the map of theatrical Poland there will soon remain just a few names of playwrights. The new playwriting was not treated seriously.

2. 'Theatre'. This unserious treatment derived first and foremost from the fact that the majority of theatre directors decided to have some kind of new Polish work in their repertoire, without really knowing why. They gave playwrights a chance to exist, but not to develop. Within theatres, opinions circulated along the lines of 'Well, it's not Shakespeare.' Constant comparisons with the classics doomed new plays to the role of developmentally disabled children: well, we have them, because we have them, but anybody can see what they're like.

3. 'The finely crafted play'. I myself am not convinced of the quality of many Polish texts. Graham Whybrow – the literary director of the Royal Court Theatre – explains as something obvious that 98 per cent of the texts sent to his theatre are rubbish. But then why is the new playwriting such an important force in Great Britain? Most likely, because of the knowledge that 'new works' are not works written recently (where newness is measured by the date the file was last modified), but those in which we encounter new ideas, communicated by new formal solutions. In Poland, the concept of the so-called 'finely crafted play', written within the conventions of psychological realism, continues to dominate. So theatres want plots, turning points, so-called full-blooded characters, dialogues that 'leap off the page'. They expect, first and foremost, plays that are useful, easy to act and simultaneously as wise as – no exaggeration – Chekhov. I think it's not insignificant that one playwriting competition is called 'We're looking for the next Shakespeare'. Comparing new playwriting to old, traditional forms renders its natural development impossible. Drawing attention first and foremost to tattered formal solutions, to conventions, we have lost sight of the basic sense of the new playwriting, meaning the message.

4. 'Small realism'. As a result of the expectations of 'finely crafted work', so-called realistic works are created, making use of values and principles existing within the framework of obligatory discourse. The hero confronts a known world, overcomes difficulties, in the end reaching a happy or an unhappy ending. The mechanisms of reality in which the hero moves remain unchanged. In the best case, the heroine achieves her own private victory in the name of principles, though there are some who manage to deal with the cruel world. I believe that this kind of plot construction becomes an instrument for supporting the liberal order. Characters governed by plot are not only its tools but, primarily, they are slaves of principles of the order of reality from which that plot was derived. For a plot is nothing other than a reconstruction of a cultural narration so universal as to be imperceptible, organizing all elements of the world and thus also determining the possibility of movement within it.

The mines of the critics:

5. 'Masterpiece'. The very clever – and possibly unconscious – strategy of obligatory theatrical discourse is waiting for the Masterpiece. A Masterpiece comparable with the immortal Shakespeare, a Masterpiece that will floor us, electrify us, cause a series of aesthetic shocks, moral conversions, a run of catharsis and simply such a penetrating experience that the critics will be at a loss for words. There is an obvious contradiction in this approach. The demands concerning a Masterpiece appeal to values established earlier by criticism. Thus a truly strong and contemporary statement, not only aesthetically but first of all in terms of world views, has no chance to be hailed as a Masterpiece – because it doesn't fit into the cognitive categories of theatrical criticism. The example of the career of Krzysztof Warlikowski is the best evidence of this. A few years ago, Warlikowski was mercilessly condemned, his theatrical language was attacked as were his aesthetics and in the end his way of interpreting texts he staged. With time, Warlikowski, after staging successive performances, got his recognition. Criticism from right to left hailed him as a genius, which meant – no more and no less – that it had managed to get accustomed to his theatre. I believe that the task of creators of theatre, however, is not getting critics accustomed to them, but unconcern with the experience of theatre criticism. The task of creators is to escape the language already known by critics. For this language is a strictly theatrical and aesthetic category, and not one of world view. Theatre criticism in Poland is ignorant to such a degree that it would be necessary to appeal instead to commentators, intellectuals who understand a performance not only in aesthetic categories but foremost as those of world view. Without attentive commentators, theatre dies.

6. 'Media buzz'. Another charge levelled by conservative criticism is the charge of 'buzz' or 'media frenzy'. Critics wear out their pens writing about media bubbles that burst after the premiere; about buzz that doesn't translate into quality of 'the theatrical work', etc. In my opinion, such a strategy by critics becomes a route to closing off the unknown space that is new drama. Information in the media is an attempt to give context, to accustom the viewer to that which she will see in the theatre. It is, ultimately, an attempt to describe the directions of thought in the text and, subsequently, of the entire production. Actions in the media are ways to level new drama's chances against cultural knowledge on the subject of classical texts. By the way, I am interested what the contemporary reception of Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* would be without the entire Polish-school tradition of reading and understanding this play.

7. 'Commentary'. One of the most dangerous guns that criticism trains on new engaged plays is the charge of commentary. So it speaks of the transfer of subjects from newspapers to theatre, of simplifications, of lack of literary values. A large portion of theatre creators defend themselves passionately against what is called journalism.

It seems to me that the fear of so-called journalism rises from a failure to think through the function that theatre can fulfil. If theatre is to accompany society, to be a place that deals with contemporary humanity (everyone, even conservative critics and directors, states that their theatre deals with contemporary humanity), there is no other possibility than taking up, among other things, current subjects that are the object of the real-life interest in public opinion, i.e. the audience. Rejecting these subjects results in an alienated theatre, one that is socially useless,

pretending that it exists in a different world. It's similar with certain simplifications, for example, with the so-called 'sketching a character with too heavy of a line'. Some critics wrote this way about my play *When They Come to Torch the House, Don't Be Surprised*. If one of the protagonists – the factory director – is described in the play as a son of a bitch who causes people's deaths, critics wanted to add somewhere in the margins that maybe he's a son of a bitch but he really loves children and flowers. It's just that in the sector of social reality that's being described, he's a son of a bitch, and around him are neither children nor flowers to like, only the social function he fulfils. Constructing a character this way, a so-called 'defense of a character', is derived directly from the ruling system which demands a justification of every essentially bad attitude.

What the critics call journalism in the theatre is one of the elements allowing the existence of the phenomenon of social-political theatre.

Casting off Our Museum Manners

It seems to me that, rather than re-interpreting a classic, it's much more interesting to derail it – not looking for gaps through which you can say something about the contemporary world, but demonstrating that classical texts are no longer tools for describing actual mechanisms of individual and social life which has undergone radical transformation from the Industrial Revolution through fluid postmodernity. I get the impression that some directors aren't aware of this. Derailing a classic is an idea for one season; so what to do during the next?

In my concept of a theatre of the playwright, I don't reject the significant place of the director. But I do call for a shift in accent. The future of the work of directors who want to make bold and significant theatre is close work with playwrights, participation in the mental and ideological shaping of the text from the beginning of their work on it. Then, directors working on staging new texts wouldn't treat them in the same way as classical texts. They wouldn't fight with the texts, but would concentrate on what is the essence of their work: thinking of the most sensible form to give them on stage.

I'm not writing here about collaboration focused on the form of the play; first and foremost, I'm writing about the message, about the payload of thought the director wishes to express. Possibly this would also force them, instead of reading more plays through which they'll be able to express themselves, to point out other texts describing contemporary life which would constitute intellectual backing for their declarations. Because the theatre world needs dialogue with other disciplines of public life.

I don't say, of course, that it's necessary to stop reading classic plays; I think we can still learn a great deal from them. Still, I would treat them more as an element among common intellectual resources, not as material to be produced on stage.

Just as cinema constantly needs new scripts, so theatre needs new plays. Why should theatre maintain its museum-like habits? I believe that truly important theatre statements, entering into dialogue with public discourses, can be achieved by the theatre precisely through new plays. If we don't understand this, we'll wander like museum-goers, meandering through the galleries so long as we can gaze into them and see the same faces we see in Chekhov.

Translated by Nathaniel Espino

* Originally published in *Krytyka Polityczna* 2007, 13, pp. 298–303.