

‘I Don’t Want to Do Theatre Anymore,
I’ve Got Bored’

Paweł Demirski in conversation with Maciej Nowak

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MACIEJ NOWAK: Why do you do theatre? Why not let go, when one can get the impression that the current system, the power, the media are not interested in theatre?

PAWEŁ DEMIRSKI: It seems to me that, as a relatively young person, you are deep into your own imagination, you don't know what it looks like, what's really going on. But you have a dream, you see people who are doing it. As for myself, after ten years, I don't want to work so much in the theatre.

But is this a hangover? A habit?

It's hard for me to reject a model, which in my case is somehow successful. And if you ask me, now, why I do theatre, I don't know. I am at a specific moment, after reaching success. They have said that we have broken the bank. But what's next? I have absolutely no desire to do it anymore.

This is a pessimistic confession. However, in theatre, you and Monica Strzępka¹ are driving to a change in the social and the aesthetic approach.

I have a feeling that only in the aesthetic. One of the two most important experience related to the profession was the opportunity to work with the aesthetics, and this was in the show *Niech żyje wojna!!!* [*Long Live the War!!!*]²; this way of writing, consisting in the fact that the whole dramaturgy is built on the identity of the character. And when you come with this kind of show, those who have to write about it are confused, they don't know what's going on, and only in a process get accustomed to the language and begin to understand it. But the audience was always behind us. It was worse for those who had to write about us. A second important moment was *Tęczowa Trybuna 2012* [*Rainbow Stand 2012*]. It

1 Monika Strzępka – theatre director with whom Paweł Demirski has worked almost exclusively since 2008.

2 A production of the Jerzy Szaniawski Dramatyczny Theatre in Wałbrzych, inspired from the TV series *Four Tankers and A Dog*, showing the adventures of the tank commander Rudy and his dog Szarika during the Second World War.

was a performance made before Euro 2012 [football championships], which our government saw as great step forward, where we created a false situation of a gay fun representation in Polish football. And it actually went into the main TV news programmes.

Theatre went beyond the stage.

Yes, and this was great. I think if you're in the theatre, it's worth doing it, in order to make the theatre more poignant, to open a breach. For me, the most important thing was that *Przegląd Sportowy* [*Sports Review*] wrote about the show. A sports magazine suddenly giving a theatre review!

It is important that this dream of Euro has been deconstructed by various Polish dreams of modernization. You ask the question: what would happen if they followed the trend of modernization, would the language of modernization create a gay fun club? What about this phantasm of football? And this phantasm was consistent, because some people believed that this fun club actually existed.

You know, it seems to me that in this example, this is about the show itself has no causal power. The driving force is what you are able to create around it. The show itself was well received, it got a lot of awards, etc., but in itself it didn't changed anything.

Its context actually generated a change – creating a website of something false, which attracted true fans. And instantly, on the online forum, there was theatre happening. And it was more important to me than what happens between the stage and the audience during a performance.

And what about the shows that started outside the theatre space? I believe that *W imię Jakuba S. [In the Name of Jakub S.]*³ was a breakthrough show and who knows, even a more important one than *Rainbow Stand 2012*. It was a show which opened a great discussion on the legacy of Polish peasant culture.

Well, yes, but in my opinion it was a once in a lifetime shot. It actually happened, and then there was a series of articles, already not necessarily related to the performance. The performance was mixing three lines. The first was about the Galician Uprising – the bloody peasant uprising in the mid-nineteenth century against the nobility. An uprising that became a taboo and was forced out of the Polish historical narrative. The second topic was our comparison of serfdom to modern living on credit and commitment to working just to pay off loans. And the third is the structure of Arthur Miller and *The Death of a Salesman*, the story of a man who lives just to pay off his loan. Media picked up this peasant thread primarily, although in my opinion the most important topic was that there cannot be a revolution without bloodshed.

³ A co-production of the Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw and Łaźnia Nowa Theatre in Kraków.

This show was a great success in activating a discussion that hadn't existed in Poland. Because we deny our peasant roots. Warsaw is largely inhabited by people who came from the provinces to make a career here, and who quickly denied their roots. And you and Monika Strzępka reminded us that these people don't need to be ashamed, and even that their origins can be a subversive force.

Well, yes, but apart from the fact that it was a kind of reminder, nothing else came out of it. Although a few people said that suddenly understood that in Warsaw they build a false identity, besides the stories of peasant nothing more could be done. The rebellious aspect of the show, which was important, was pacified.

But thanks to the show, it appears from time to time in publications the idea that maybe it's not worth celebrating national holidays associated with the successive disastrous uprisings. It seems to me that *Był sobie Andrzej Andrzej Andrzej i Andrzej* [*There Was Andrzej Andrzej Andrzej and Andrzej*]⁴ is another breakthrough performance. A show in which you invited the audience to the funeral of Andrzej Wajda – the Oscar-winning icon of the Polish cinema. The man who built the post-war Polish identity.

He's a personification of the Polish elite after 1989, but also, in some sense, before 1989.

It was a somehow excessive and outrageous show, you were exposing these post-war elites that constantly have an impact on what kind of art we think today to support. Did Andrzej Wajda come to a performance?

No, but apparently he was really affected, it was a very unpleasant experience for him. I am not surprised, it was a rowdy gesture to kill someone who's not dead. Yes, I have a feeling that once again we hit something. People loved this show, as if they had a feeling that someone was speaking in their voice, that this going on with the dissidents of the communist period – those who gave Poland its new shape – is already worn up. It is interesting how the show went. Because before *There Was Andrzej Andrzej Andrzej and Andrzej* there was *Był sobie Polak, Polak, Polak i diabeł* [*There Was Pole, Pole, Pole and Devil*]⁵, the representation of the lower classes. And then we thought that it was too easy and decided to do the same mocking representation of the upper classes. And indeed it was the right moment, surely the Poles were tired of this generation, and the ideas that this generation had produced. As I think about it, I don't know if I would be so brave now. Then it was indeed an anarchist, hooligan attack on people that were actually, most of them, called by their own name.

4 Jerzy Szaniawski Dramatyczny Theatre in Wałbrzych.

5 Jerzy Szaniawski Dramatyczny Theatre in Wałbrzych (2010).

And if you want to identify disaster in your theatre projects?

There are two natural sources. First – if you think that the subject is in the air, and it still fails. And in my opinion that's the case with *Firma* [*The Company*]⁶, a show about corruption and the collapse of the railway system in Poland. A second source is also natural – when you are not able to carry out the theme as you wanted to. This is again the case with *The Company* and with *Bierzcie i jedzcie* [*Take and Eat*]⁷ – a musical about diets and nutrition. Where the subject was hanging in the air and died away by bad narrative framing.

For eight years you have been working in a creative pair with the theatre director Monika Strzępka. Polish media calls you 'a furious duo', the 'hooligans of the Polish theatre'. Have you developed a specific method of cooperation?

No, there's no method of collaboration.

But in the classical model, first there's the text and then a director stages it...

At the beginning, there are always the first ten pages. Enough to give the actors a sense of what they are about to participate in. All of these productions rely on a range of crises. That is, when I don't write finished scenes, I don't bring them, I'm not completely happy with them. The whole struggle is that we invent the show during production and we don't know how it will all end up. And the first general rehearsals always end up badly, these rehearsals are awful, hideous, so we do another montage of scenes. After each theatre project I have the feeling of a great disaster. You know, now a Polish director is doing a documentary about us. And she came to me and said, 'Paweł, fuck it, and what if you won't be able to write the scene on stage the next day?'. I don't know. This kind of crisis management is constant. You advised me, 'Take a dramaturge'. I could take a dramaturge, but just at that moment when I already know what I will write.

Is the writing is form of exploration?

When my assistant comes to me and asks for a scene for the next week, I say 'here there will be this scene, it has this title, it will be on such and such a person'. And it come this rehearsal day with the people who were cast, so I cannot write them a scene of half a page for five actors. Because the rehearsal is scheduled for seven people, it will take two hours and I have to write so that they have at least something to read. What is total nonsense, because sometimes you do not need that scene, you just need it in rehearsals.

6 Tadeusz Łomnicki Nowy Theatre in Poznań (2012).

7 Rozrywki Theatre in Chorzów (2013).

And the result is...

... that it's all boring, wordy and too long. And to answer your question, writing is absolutely not an exploration. In my case, writing is matching the production process of the show.

And are you enjoying the result of the controversy, the nonchalance, the effectiveness of their ideas? Is this what you're looking for?

No. And I'm saying this in total frankness.

But Wajda's funeral, the exaltation of Jakub Szela, the leader of the bloody uprising, they are all strong public gestures.

Neither I nor Monika has such an overview of our expression as seen from the outside. And this is our strength. They criticized us strongly for using obscene language. Yet for me it is the most natural means of expression. That's how people speak. These curses were not introduced by force, just like the kind of gestures you're talking about. I never set up on the controversy, I never thought 'how should I now approach the controversial chic'.

And how was the meeting with Monika?

I've always had your kind of humour, fairly coarse, but I had the feeling that I couldn't afford it in the theatre and the theatre couldn't allow it. And when Monika came, she said 'that's the whole point!'. She freed in me some form of expression, which I always had inside but I repressed because I wanted to be so cultural. And I always thought that I was more lyrical. In contrast, Monika gave me the opportunity, the right, she dared me to take out thick, coarse and great jokes.

I was very impressed that you learned Italian.

Si.

Why?

One of the greatest things that can happen in the theatre is the opportunity to meet people. When I was a member of the jury at the Polish contemporary arts festival in Gdynia, a lady came to me and said: 'Sir, I will teach you Italian for free, but after that you will have to translate Dario Fo'. She believes that Dario Fo's dramas are poorly translated into Polish, which my intuition says true. These translations are so clumsy it hurts. And that is why I'm learning Italian, in order to translate Dario Fo's texts into Polish.

Dario Fo was openly rejected in Poland, the Polish elite was offended when he got the Nobel Prize. Your creativity is often related to Brecht, but it seems to me that they are misguided comparisons.

Nonsense. They say the same thing about Castorf, and about Pollesch. I've seen one show made by Pollesch. I haven't seen any of the things that supposedly inspired him.

In general, it is said that in the last several years, Polish theatre is strongly influenced by German theatre. While you, if ever searching for some inspiration, looked for it in Dario Fo's intellectual playfulness. Eight years ago, when in a cabin on the lake you were establishing your alliance with Monika Strzępka, you were reading together, Monika Gurgul's *Teatr Dario Fo* [*Theatre of Dario Fo*].

What I think is important in his case is the fact that he really is a clown, a comedian. People love him for his sense of humour. He can thus make contact with the audience. Something that in Poland, with the cult of the Polish Romantics, is bad manners. Because when something is funny, it means that it is weak, inconsistent and so on.

You're exaggerating.

But there were wars in the reception of our performances. We did the *Rainbow Stand 2012* and a left-wing critic said 'Could it be that being so funny, it might somehow accidentally miss the gravity of the subject?'

But I think we're more vigilant, because we realized ten years ago, when I was working at Wybrzeże Theatre, that there is the element of humour, playfulness, through which you can now communicate best with the audience. We came to the performance, backstage. And the first question to the stage manager was 'are they laughing or aren't they?'

Now we did the show, the first episode of a theatrical series. The people there incredibly responsive, they laughed, they applauded during the performances.

A series that you are doing in co-production with a public theatre in Kraków and a private theatre in Warsaw. The show, which is a kind of political fiction, in which in the first scene, it appears that the entire Polish parliament was killed. Parliamentary democracy in Poland is in question. And at that exact moment Jesus Christ enters.

An unknown person.

The element of humour is fundamental in the show.

It was contrived so that the first episode was very funny. The second has to be sad. This is all just from Dario Fo, who always wrote funny political stuff, because he understood what we had understood in Wybrzeże⁸ – that the pact with the audience lies in the fact that it must

⁸ Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdansk is where Demirski made his debut and worked (2003–2006) while Maciej Nowak was the director.

react. Cry or laugh. Although it is not that simple.

Exactly. Tears are now rarely seen in the theatre...

It does happen. Didn't you cry at *Courtney Love*⁹?

Well, yes, I did.

People also cried at *In the Name of Jakub S.*, at *Położnice Szpitala św. Zofii* [*Saint Sophia Maternity Hospital*]¹⁰.

Well, and this is the story that you introduced me to a year ago, on May 1st, when we were listening to revolutionary songs and you asked me to write such things. I'm not ready yet, but little by little.

What will happen with you ten years from now?

I don't want to do theatre anymore, I got bored.

But we will do it, because that's what we know.

Then possibly I'll do some work in television.

Translated by Julia Popovici

Originally published in *New Performing Arts Practices in Eastern Europe*, in the Sibiu International Theatre Festival Book Collection (Bucharest: Cartier, 2014).

9 Polski Theatre in Wrocław. The show combines the story of Nirvana with Polish realities of the capitalist economy and hits by Nirvana and Hole performed live (2012).

10 Rozrywkowy Theatre in Chorzów (2011. A musical, whose action happens in the maternity ward of a hospital preparing for privatization).