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On the Choral Theatre of Marta Górnicka

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How to Make a Baba?: 'Choral Theatre' vs. Feminist Theatre

'How to make a *baba*?' asks the Chorus of Women, directed by Marta Górnicka, using the double meaning of the word *baba*¹ to juxtapose the baking of a cake with the cultural 'modelling' of the women which will be imploded over the course of the performance. The opening of *Tu mówi chór* [*This Is the Chorus Speaking*, 2010]² augurs its themes of feminism, protest and intervention clearly. Challenging the language, the chorus of twenty-five non-professional performers confronts the cultural clichés of femininity – in the opening minutes, it moves smoothly from the traditional Polish housewife to Lara Croft, the sexy adventurer and pop culture icon – using an original form of musical theatre.

The Chorus of Women launched the work of Górnicka, a representative of a new generation of theatre directors, in the genre of 'contemporary Greek chorus', a distinctive format of what the artist calls a 'choral theatre' (*teatr chórowy*). 'The chorus is meant to be inherently revolutionary',³ explains the director, convinced of the political power of the chorus and its ability to induce catharsis and restore the 'totality of the theatrical experience'.⁴ The premiere of *Tu mówi chór* took place at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute (ZRTI) in Warsaw, an experimental stage outside of the theatrical mainstream. Górnicka's subsequent choral-theatre works, *Magnificat* (2011) and *Requiemaszyna* [*Requiemachine*] (2013), were also staged at ZRTI. Although *Tu mówi chór* was not created for a mainstream theatre, it has achieved unprecedented success in Poland and has gained international recognition, receiving awards at many festivals including Lyon, Tokyo, Monaco and New Delhi. It is a rare example of overtly pro-feminist, shamelessly political

1 In Poland, *baba* is a sweet yeast-based cake baked for Easter. The word-play here is dependent on the use of word *baba* to denote a tiresome or stupid woman, which is now considered a pejorative term that reflects misogyny and patriarchal hierarchy in Polish society which remains entrenched in the Polish language, especially in popular sayings such as *Baba z wozu koniom lżej* [*Get a woman off the wagon and horses will have it easier*] which roughly corresponds to 'good riddance'.

2 The full title, less often used, reads *Tu mówi chór, tylko 6 do 8 godzin, tylko 6 do 8 godzin*.

3 Krystyna Duniec, *Każdy słyszy swoim uchem*, interview with Marta Górnicka. In Krystyna Duniec, *Ciało w teatrze. Perspektywa antropologiczna* (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 2012), p. 310.

4 Justyna Stasiowska, 'I Sing the Body Electric', interview with Marta Górnicka, *Didaskalia* 2013, 115/116 (pp. 124-127), p. 125.

theatre (making its protest heard through music) which functions as a form of art with universal impact and simultaneously as a humanistic reflection on the state of humanity and society. Perhaps this multidimensional aspect of Górnicka's productions explains why an undertaking so radical in form and content, drawing at the same time on the thought of the second and third waves of feminism, manages to avoid ghettoization and has been greeted with enthusiasm by the sort of critics and professional circles who normally react with restraint to projects of this type.

Given the potential for universality of Górnicka's work and the significant context of the trend for musicalizing theatre practice in order to bolster its political impact – particularly notable in German theatre, which has seen a 'musical turn'⁵ over the past two decades – I would like to examine choral theatre mainly as a courageous example of feminist/pro-feminist theatre in Poland, a country which never experienced the second wave of feminism. In the 1960s and 1970s, while feminist theatre influenced the artistic and political form of theatre in Great Britain, the United States and France, Polish theatre was involved in radically different political and ideological conflicts to the 'woman question' which was of great interest in Poland between the world wars but which, during the communist era of the People's Republic of Poland, became completely marginalized.

Polish theatre in the inter-war period had been a rich source of examples of feminist work, including the director-dramatist partnership of Zofia Modrzewska and Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska, but post-war theatre and counter-cultural work, like the rest of public discourse, remained outside of influence of feminism; traces could be found only in the work of visual artists such as Natalia LL, Maria Pinińska-Bereś and Ewa Partum.⁶ The 1960s and 1970s in Poland did not give rise to any equivalent of It's Alright to Be Woman Theatre (IARtBWT) in the U.S. or the Women's Theatre Group in Great Britain. The shape of Polish theatre was largely influenced by the artistic explorations of Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor, each of whom makes a ghostly appearance in the practice of Marta Górnicka, as will be addressed below. Teraz Polić, the first Polish women's theatre collective to tackle overtly feminist issues, was not established until 2008 and remains the only initiative of its type on the domestic theatre landscape. It is worth noting that feminist thought has had more impact on Polish theatre in recent years thanks to the considerable success of the work of female directors including Weronika Szczawińska and Iga Gańczarczyk, who openly acknowledge their sympathy for and inspiration from feminism. However, Górnicka's work is not solely concerned with the infusion of feminist elements: she seeks a radical reform of theatre as a cultural institution from a feminist position, much like in the theatre of the second wave of feminism.

Hand in hand with the development of feminist thought in the mid-20th century, the European-American theatrical tradition was coming under increased scrutiny for its deep entanglement in patriarchal

5 David Roesner, 'The Politics of the Polyphony of Performance: Musicalization in Contemporary German Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18:1, 2008, pp. 44–55.

6 Izabela Kowalczyk, 'Od feministycznych interwencji do postfeminizmu', in Izabela Kowalczyk, *Matki-Polki, chłopcy i cyborgi... Sztuka i feminizm w Polsce* (Poznań: Galeria Miejska 'Arsenał', 2010), pp. 11–20.

structures. Theatre was ultimately created as an institution that was founded, both literally and figuratively, upon the exclusion of women's experience.⁷ Hélène Cixous asked:

How, as women, can we go to the theatre without lending our complicity to the sadism directed against women, or being asked to assume in the patriarchal family structure that the theatre reproduces, ad infinitum, the position of victim?⁸

It is therefore not unexpected that feminist theatre sought to reorganize the very institution of theatre, creating new techniques and tactics for theatrical practice. As in the area of women's performance art, which was enjoying a period of turbulent growth, particularly in the field of body art, the aim was to deconstruct the Western system of representation based on the woman as object and to disrupt the established order by confronting the audience with a woman acting as subject.⁹ Since the very notion of feminism is difficult to define given the diversity of feminist thought and action, and ultimately proves to be a utopian mirage which only functioned during the initial stages of the second wave of the movement, the question arises of how to delineate the boundaries of feminist theatre.

I side with Lizbeth Goodman's assertion that feminist theatre 'aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women's roles and/or to effect social change, and which is informed in this project by broadly feminist ideas',¹⁰ where 'social change' can take place at a collective and an individual level. Goodman emphasizes the urgency of provoking viewers to reflect on society and to ask questions about social and cultural aspects of gender. She adds that while feminist theatre favours the presentation of female experience it also has a place for those feminists who reject this type of thinking about gender as reductionist or essentialist (feminist theatre is therefore shaped by ideas of radical feminism and material feminism). In summary, by the concept of feminist theatre I understand theatre practice that incorporates critical reflection about the established order of gender relations and an incentive to actively participate in this reflection, potentially leading to practical action aimed at achieving social change. I believe that the first two productions of Górnicka's choral theatre, *This Is the Chorus Speaking* and *Magnificat*, fulfil and at the same time exceed all the criteria of this definition of feminist theatre. On the other hand, her later work *Requiemachine* is an attempt to trigger interventional mechanisms of protest established by the previous productions, but outside the context of gender. In my analysis of choral theatre, I will therefore predominantly refer to *This Is the Chorus Speaking* and *Magnificat*, moving on to focus on the following aspects of Górnicka's

7 See Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1988).

8 Hélène Cixous, 'Aller à La Mer', trans. by Barbara Kerslake, *Modern Drama* 27, 4 (1984), (pp. 546-548), p. 546.

9 Jeanie Forte, 'Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism' in *Performing Feminisms*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

10 Lizbeth Goodman, 'British Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own', in Lizbeth Goodman, Jane de Gay (eds), *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1998), (pp. 195-201), p. 199.

work and problems that define it: language/body, the choral form, community, political intervention and power.

Rustling of Meaning: Language, Body/Voice

In one of her interviews, Górnicka explains how language functions in the Chorus of Women to release its anti-systemic potential: 'Musicality is a gateway for transgression. I like [Roland] Barthes' saying that "language rustles at the edge of meaning"¹¹ Górnicka's chorus smashes the clichés of language, counterpointing words, mashing up heterogeneous quotes: the libretto for *This Is the Chorus Speaking* combines, among other items, a traditional 19th-century recipe, advertising slogans, excerpts from Sophocles' *Antigone* and the work of above-mentioned Barthes, while *Magnificat* brings together the texts *The Bacchae* and *The Song of Solomon*, cooking tips from Nigella Lawson and phrases drawn from Catholic liturgy. But I must emphasize that this play on language does not take place so much at the level of the text (like in the plays of Elfriede Jelinek, another of Górnicka's sources) as at the meeting point of language, voice and body where the musicality and materiality of language are played out. It is therefore not only what the Chorus says that is of importance but, more crucially, how it says it: the Chorus hisses, screams, gasps, whispers, sighs, sings operatic arias and pop standards, it repeats and loops phrases, delivers them quietly or cuts them off unexpectedly. According to Górnicka: 'The Chorus demonstrates the power of language. Portatos, staccatos and glissandi wring the necks of words or smash established idiomatic collocations. The choir always sticks its tongue out at our native tongue!¹² The Chorus therefore uses the body/voice to disrupt meanings and estrange words, not only revealing the built-in ideology of language but also influencing reception, which has a powerful effect on viewers at the sensory level.

Górnicka explores a specific condition of her choreutai: when the female bodies on the stage produce a sound that is simultaneously music and language. This is why it seems justified to once again summon Barthes, a philosopher so close to the director, and his concept of the 'grain of the voice' which according to the philosopher involves 'the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly *significance*'.¹³ All the more so as the voice in question, not being a personal or original voice, nevertheless remains an individual voice; in other words, we are dealing with a body/voice stripped of its social identity that is at the same time clearly distinct. This is precisely how the voices/bodies of the choreutai function in Górnicka's performances, because in choral theatre we lose the personal aspect of its component individuals, creating a type of community, but what is preserved is the individual materiality and sensuality of their bodies/voices. To clarify the opaque concept of the 'grain of the voice' Barthes, with reference to the work of Julia Kristeva, distinguishes the pheno-song and the geno-song. While the former refers to those aspects of performance which are to serve communication, representation and expression, geno-song is:

¹¹ Duniec, *Każdy słyszy swoim uchem*, p. 310.

¹² Duniec, *Ciało w teatrze*, p. 302.

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) p. 182.

the space where significations germinate 'from within language and in its very materiality' [...] it is that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language [...] explores how the language works and identifies with that work. It is, in a very simple word but which must be taken seriously, the diction of the language.¹⁴

It is perhaps in the sphere of the geno-song that we should place the artistic explorations of Górnicka, which are located at the intersection of body/voice and language; in that place where meanings rustle.

This affinity with Barthes does not rule out links between Górnicka's approach to language and the metaphor of woman as the thieving magpie, introduced by Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They [*illes*] go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down.¹⁵

Exploiting the double meaning of the French verb *voler*, which means simultaneously to steal and to fly, Cixous imagines the female writer as a thieving magpie, who shamelessly steals from a language foreign to her, then soars away into the boundless expanses of her own creation. In this way, language becomes a cache of resources, methods, principles, which she must utilize while keeping her distance and remaining vigilant and defiant. It is in this spirit that Górnicka samples words, terms and phrases from high culture and popular culture, artistic life and daily life, which she mixes and transforms in her original creative process, sticking out her tongue at the language that alienates women.

Cixous's metaphor not only neatly captures the nature of the link between feminism and language but also the crux of feminist theatre practice: the women involved have, from the very beginning, treated Western theatre tradition with suspicion, but at the same time consciously 'stole' from it according to their needs and inclinations. Feminist theatre practice, writes Elaine Aston using British examples, is 'a practice that "steals" or draws on whatever is necessary, from wherever it is needed'.¹⁶ Peta Tait, on the other hand, in writing about Australian feminist theatre, compares female practitioners to haughty pirates in a 'landlocked, male-defined theatrical world' who 'had to undertake raid and plunder

14 Barthes, pp. 182–183.

15 Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, trans. by Keith Cohen, Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1, 4 (1976) (pp. 875–893), p. 887, University of Chicago Press, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>, [accessed: 14 September 2009].

16 Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.18.

missions to obtain possessions from the theatre form'.¹⁷ It is therefore clear that female creativity has its origins in transgression, beginning with the act of violence aimed at existing language and form. Choral theatre is an excellent example of this principle: it is not enough that Górnicka steals and explodes language, she also undertakes its deconstruction, impertinently plundering the world of Western theatre from which she snatches and reappropriates the Greek chorus, transforming it into a women's 'modern tragic chorus'.

Contemporary Tragic Chorus

Our knowledge of the ancient Greek chorus is of course deeply unsatisfactory and fragmented; questions about the exact nature and function of the chorus in Greek drama and its staging, and its general role in ancient cultures, continue to arouse polemics in academic circles. It will suffice to mention the dispute between John Gould¹⁸ and Simon Goldhill,¹⁹ although both scholars agree to reject models of the Greek chorus as the idealized audience, the mouthpiece of the author or a means of expressing the emotions of the audience, their conclusions about the role and importance of the chorus in the context of community, authority and *polis* are ultimately antithetical. The source of this divergence in opinion is their acceptance of different scholarly perspectives: the literary and the historical-cultural, where the former establishes the chorus as a marginal entity, the latter emphasizes its central position.²⁰

Melinda Powers identifies numerous 'traps' awaiting scholars of the Greek chorus which determine and differentiate research results, for example overestimating the representativeness of individual sources, constructing uncertain causal relations and referencing only established types of source material.²¹ Hence it is difficult to achieve consensus on the issue of the Greek chorus. Over thirty years ago, Albert Weiner said that we definitely know that at the start of the 5th century BCE, the Greek chorus comprised fifty performers and it was Aeschylus who, in all probability, reduced this number to twelve, while Sophocles increased it to fifteen. We also know that the chorus was restricted to a space known as the orchestra or 'a space for dancing' and thus its role was most probably to dance as well as sing. We must also assume that poets accorded it a good deal of importance, if only because it appears in all extant Greek tragedies.²² The rest is a web of conjecture. Even Weiner, taking as the starting point Aristotle's *Poetics*, which devoted only a paragraph to the chorus, suggests that we see the chorus as a practical/

17 Peta Tait, 'Feminism in Australian Theatre' in *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, ed. by Lizbeth Goodman, Jane de Gay (London, New York: Routledge, 2002) (pp. 223–230), p. 223.

18 John Gould, 'Tragedy and Collective Experience', in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, ed. by M.S. Silk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 217–243.

19 Simon Goldhill, 'Collectivity and Otherness – The Authority of the Tragic Chorus: Response to Gould', in Silk, *Tragedy and the Tragic*, pp. 244–256.

20 Melinda Powers, *Athenian Tragedy in Performance: A Guide to Contemporary Studies and Historical Debates* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), pp. 54–56.

21 Powers, *Athenian Tragedy in Performance*, p. 48.

22 Albert Weiner, 'The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus', *Theatre Journal*, 32:2, 1980 (pp. 205–212), p. 205.

theatrical element rather than a dramatic one.²³ In other words, the chorus, as opposed to the characters in a play, does not exist on paper and its words gain meaning only once they are sung and danced within the confines of a communal performative space. If we accept Weiner's concept, today's choral theatre is very close to its 'stolen' original form: in Górnicka's work, meaning is created not in the libretto but only in performance, at the intersection of the logos and body/voice, when the chorus of performance faces the chorus of the audience.

Thanks to Górnicka, the Greek chorus becomes a tool for reclaiming the female voice which has been silenced in classical theatre. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek believes that the Chorus of Women 'makes a show of the absence of women on the historical stage and as it sings its powerful song in spectators' faces it mocks a system that condemned women to silence'.²⁴ Although the true function of the Greek chorus remains an object of academic controversy, it was doubtless linked to the aesthetic-political experience of the male gender, which alone had access to the theatre, and it is highly probable (especially in the case of 'female' choruses) that it was directly linked to ephebes and the development of their masculinity at the cost of rejecting all elements classified as feminine.²⁵ *This Is the Chorus Speaking* and *Magnificat*, through their form alone, pose the question of how a female voice can arise in a patriarchal system, especially within the matrix of Western theatre.

The theatrical form that Górnicka 'seizes' for her own purposes is essentially a paradoxical form par excellence. The Greek tragic chorus, as demonstrated in the above-mentioned historical research, is characterized by an inherent instability and internal contradiction within the discourse of theatre history, and the dichotomous approach seems unjustified in this case. This is because the chorus can function at the same time as a signifier of tradition and experimentation. Suspended between the stage and the audience, it is interpreted as the voice of the community, a liminal figure or a mouthpiece for the author's opinions, and while it may be associated with lofty lyricism, it remains constituted in physical bodies/voices.²⁶ Górnicka exploits the ambivalence of the chorus and aims to create a no-less paradoxical subject on stage: a polyphonic community of women who, while creating themselves within a stolen language, at the same time operate primarily through their sensuality and materiality.

A Polyphonic Community of Women

Both *This Is the Chorus Speaking* and *Magnificat* (unlike *Requiemachine*) star women representing a variety of professions, body types and age categories who were selected through an open casting call. Krystyna

²³ Weiner, 'The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus', pp. 211–212.

²⁴ Agata Adamiecka-Sitek et al, 'Siła Chóru. Niesterowane głosy', *Dialog* 2012, 1, p. 29.

²⁵ See Mary deForest, 'Female Choruses in Greek Tragedy', *Didaskalia – The Journal for Ancient Performance*, 4.1, 1997, available online: <http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol4no1/deforest.html>, [accessed: 25 March 2015]; John J. Winkler, 'The Ephebes' Song: Tragoidia and Polis', in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, ed. by J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 20–62.

²⁶ See, for example, Ewa Partyga, *Chór dramatyczny. W poszukiwaniu tożsamości teatralnej* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2004).

Duniec and Joanna Krakowska write:

Just the fact that someone speaks out can be obscene. Particularly if it is someone unauthorised, that is anonymous people who have never been heard from or heard of before. Speaking out for the first time is obscene especially when it means bridging timidity, tearing away from invisibility, breaking the covenant of silence. [...] It is obscene to be in the presence of twenty-five different women who say 'I' but we hear 'we'.²⁷

In *This Is the Chorus Speaking*, we see the materialization of the obscene phantasm of the polyphonic (rather than utopian monolithic) community of women, culturally deprived of their voice, which impacts the public with immense corporeal power. Górnicka signals the subordinate status of women in Euro-American culture and on its theatrical tribune, a status which the Chorus opposes, by summoning, in the quiet closing scene of the libretto, the Greek category of the metic, the foreigner resident in Athens, deprived of the full rights of a citizen. The Chorus of Women thus leaves the public with an incredibly powerful image: women as foreigners living in a culture that is foreign to them and performing on a foreign stage from which they have been excluded for millennia. The difference is that, early on, Górnicka manages to set up a clearly political and active community of 'metics' that speaks with a collective female voice, but without claiming the right to absolutism and skilfully avoiding the aporia of the logic of the second wave of feminism. The Chorus of Women, constituted at the intersection of such categories as voice and logos, individuality and collectivity, medium and message, authority and emancipation, with a paradoxical theatrical form, becomes not so much a self-affirming subject as a 'subject in crisis'.²⁸ This self-constituting community of women is therefore intrinsically ambivalent – in searching for a 'we', it treats the very notion of a 'we' with suspicion – and aware of its ambivalence, because it constantly struggles with the problems of what to say and how to say it. Interpreting Górnicka's Chorus as a 'subject in crisis' or a 'paradoxical subject' seems to meet the intentions of the director, who in one interview spoke of the tension between the individual and collective that accompanies her work, describing the Chorus as a 'political community' that nevertheless 'remains suspicious of unifying mechanisms'.²⁹

The political nature of Górnicka's productions – which is planned and undisguised – has a chance to effectively materialise thanks to their choral form. Perhaps the Greek chorus has from the very beginning been a tool of political action and Górnicka, in reviving this ancient medium, reminds us of its 'fundamental kinship' with politics.³⁰ In the 20th century the recognition of the political potential of musicality, in the broadest sense, including the choral form, brought about the 'musical turn' to the German stage, where directors such as Einar Schleaf and Christoph Marthaler sought new forms of representation and communication

27 Krystyna Duniec, Joanna Krakowska, *Soc, sex i historia* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014), p. 305.

28 Adamiecka-Sitek, p. 29.

29 Duniec, 'Každy slyszy swoim uchem', p. 305.

30 Dobrochna Ratajczakowa, 'Kilka uwag o chórze', *Dialog* 2012, 4 (pp. 186-189), p. 189.

which would facilitate political intervention. They began to explore polyphony and heterogeneous voices, transforming the theatrical space into a soundscape and the actor into a 'musical body'.³¹

David Roesner wrote that 'Musicalization can reassess and re-contextualize the text, enhance our understanding of it, affirm and contradict it, simplify or obstruct our understanding and – one of many possibilities – replace it'.³² Roesner claims that the musicalization of German theatre in the past two decades should be discussed on three levels of analysis: the process of devising the production, with reference to organizational principle of performance and in the context of the perception process.³³ Although Górnicka's work is an excellent example of musicalized theatre (at every afore-mentioned level of analysis) based on an appreciation of the anti-systemic properties of musicality and giving equal rights to the voice, body and text, it would be difficult to compare her work to any of the German directors of this trend, even to Einar Schleeef. Górnicka's main theme is that of the excluded, while Schleeef's³⁴ *idée fixe* was history; what's more, compared to Górnicka's Chorus, Schleeef's choruses appear hieratic and formally monolithic.

The Political Nature of the Chorus of Women

The political dimension of *This Is the Chorus Speaking* and *Magnificat* is primarily of a feminist nature, although Górnicka emphasizes different elements in each production. The effectiveness of the political intervention designed by the director (aimed at the patriarchal social system, especially in Poland, and the androcentric matrix of Western theatre, but also more broadly at all mechanisms that discipline and alienate) is guaranteed by the impact and energy that her Chorus attains on stage. The voice of the Chorus physically touches the public, one cannot hide from it or ignore it when it impacts with the bodies of the audience. Górnicka admits that she finds it hard to put this phenomenon into words: 'It is a form of very powerful presence, kind of massively enlarged, energetic, I don't have the words...'³⁵ One particularly emotionally powerful scene begins with a phrase spoken by a solo performer standing before the chorus: 'We women are monstrously different. We are differently monstrous.' The other women gradually join in with their voices and bodies, forming an angry and terrifying mob that advances towards the audience. The many-headed female 'monster' speaks with different voices which repeat the word 'speak' in individual tempos, culminating in an angry scream that reclaims woman's right to speak. Scenes like this lead to the unification of women's bodies and voices, bodies that expand so much that their presence becomes physically and sensually overwhelming. But Górnicka emphasizes that this genuinely revolutionary power of the Chorus is born from contact with the public, it is created in the social situation, in the conditions of the corporeal co-presence of the performers and audience. 'The Chorus always confronts a chorus', the

31 Patrick Primavesi, 'A Theatre of Multiple Voices', *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts*, 8:1, 2003, pp. 61-73.

32 Roesner, 'The Politics of the Polyphony of Performance', p. 46.

33 Roesner, p. 45.

34 Matthias Dreyer, 'Prospective Genealogies: Einar Schleeef's Choric Theatre', *Theatre Research International*, 34.2, 2009, pp. 138-145.

35 Duniec, 'Każdy słyszy swoim uchem', p. 209.

director says.³⁶

In Górnicka's productions, we are confronted therefore with an original combination of two tactics of feminist political action developed by consecutive waves of feminism which conceptualize female identity differently. On the one hand, at the level of the body, the Chorus is reminiscent of *écriture féminine*³⁷ and the second wave of feminist performance, confronting the public with embodied female subjects who create through their bodies, endowed with the status of a source and tool of a specific female language that exceeds the masculine logos. On the other hand, at the linguistic level the Chorus juggles clichés and stereotypes, practicing a cultural bricolage whose aim is to unmask the performative character of femininity rather than to discover the 'real' femininity under the shell of social imperatives.³⁸ Górnicka exposes the alienation of women from the language which is reduced for them to an endless series of orders and instructions describing the cultural conditions of being a woman and its acceptable variations. The oppressive character of language and culture does not imply the existence of any authentic but suppressed form of femininity. The Chorus can therefore say, with a measure of irony: 'Order yourself a woman. Size 36. Choose from Halka³⁹ or Lara', but it will not try to argue that a woman creating herself according to one of the models available on the market must first renounce some form of 'real' femininity. It is important that she should create her gender identity according to a design which is alien to her.

One of the restrictive clichés of femininity that makes several appearances in *This Is the Chorus Speaking* is the figure of the princess. Górnicka incorporates in her libretto excerpts from Elfriede Jelinek's cycle *Death and the Maiden I-V: Princess Plays*, and specifically *Sleeping Beauty*, so that the stage rings out with the words: 'as if without him I was nothing but an empty vessel and only he was to fulfill me, and only with love',⁴⁰ pointing to the dependence of female identity on the masculine, self-determining subject which forms part of the script of the fairy tale. It is harder to imagine a more inert and passive model of femininity than a sleeping princess whose only chance to be brought back to life is a kiss from a de facto unknown man. Another paraphrasing of Jelinek appears in *Magnificat*, where the words of Jackie Kennedy, a modern-day princess: 'It's a miracle that a picture like me can speak at all',⁴¹ are repeated by Mary, Mother of Jesus, who inserts a significant interjection: 'It's a miracle that a holy picture like me can speak at all'. In each case, Górnicka emphasizes the imperative of silence imposed on the female gender which is a part of the prevailing culture and the structural assumption of the impossibility of the self-determining emergence of the female subject. The spectre of the princess returns in *This Is the Chorus*

36 Duniec, 'Każdy słyszy swoim uchem', p. 313.

37 *Écriture féminine* was first used in Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa*.

38 Feona Attwood, 'Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16.3, 2007, pp. 233-247.

39 Halka is the titular female character in the most renowned Polish Romantic opera (1848) by Stanisław Moniuszko.

40 Elfriede Jelinek, *Death and the Maiden I-V: Princess Plays*, trans. by Gitta Honegger, *Theater*, 36, 2, 2006, doi: 10.1215/01610775-36-2-46, [accessed: 20 March 2015] (pp. 46-51), p. 48.

41 Elfriede Jelinek, *Jackie*, trans. by Gitta Honegger, available online <http://www.a-e-m-gmbh.com/ej/fjackie-en.htm>, [accessed: 20 March 2015].

Speaking with another reference to pop culture in the guise of the Disney Studios theme, a charming and joyful melody that gradually transforms into the loud, penetrating screams of women, for whom fairy-tale narratives represent a frustrating mirage or a gilded cage restricting their every move.

An analogous diagnosis of the influence of the princess model on the experience of women can be found in the visual arts in a photography series by the Israeli-born Canadian artist Dina Goldstein, *Fallen Princesses*,⁴² and in the photo cycle *Disney Princesses* by British artist Sarah Maple.⁴³ Goldstein's photos compare the idealized world of the fairy tale with a ruthless and painful reality and at the same time show a possible future for each princess. The Disney princesses, easily recognizable by their characteristic dresses and hairstyles, are thrown into some exceptionally difficult situations, which to varying degrees correspond with the original fairy tale. For example, Rapunzel is pictured sitting on a hospital bed holding a drip stand and her extraordinary long plait of golden hair, which she lost undergoing chemotherapy. Maple's photo series attempts to subvert the biographies of Disney princesses, who are typically denied the right to self-fulfilment in favour of passively awaiting a prince. *Disney Princesses* comes in two parts, *Graduation* and *Job*, in which the artist poses in the costume of Disney fairy-tale heroines. In the *Graduation* series, the princesses hold diplomas in their hands and look confidently at the camera, but without pouting – these are proud, aspiring young women squeezed into grotesque outfits that do not complement their mortar boards, not sweet temptresses with languorous gazes. *Job* captures the same characters at work: Ariel chairs a business meeting; Bella manages a football team with lively gestures from the bench; Jasmine carries out her duties as judge with utmost focus; Cinderella has just won a parliamentary seat; Snow White conducts research in a laboratory, while Aurora performs surgery. By placing the princesses in the context of jobs that are both prestigious and culturally dominated by men, Maple exposes the ridiculous nature of the costume attributed to each princess. The fairy-tale dresses do not stand up to the demands of a professional career, clash with the aesthetics of public space, and render questionable the princesses' abilities, since appearance influences how professional qualifications are perceived. Maple juxtaposes the model of femininity suggested to girls by fairy tales with a social and cultural reality in which power, influence and resolve are conditioned to a significant degree by education and public roles. This is why the Disney theme climaxes with screams during Górnicka's play.

While in *This Is the Chorus Speaking* Górnicka summons a whole procession of cultural clichés of femininity, in *Magnificat* the central character of the performance is Mary, Mother of Jesus, who is of fundamental importance for defining femininity in Poland – a culture saturated with Catholic ritual – and who functions as a tool of ideological control over women in Poland. *Magnificat* might therefore be seen as a production

42 The photographs are online at <http://www.fallenprincesses.com>, [accessed: 9 February 2015].

43 The photographs are online at <http://www.sarahmaple.com/disneyprincesses.htm> [accessed 9 February 2015]. The photographs of Maple and Goldstein were shown in Poland at the exhibition *Księżniczki: międzynarodowa wystawa fotografii i wideo* (Nowe Miejsce, Warsaw, 4 – 27 October 2013, curated by Katarzyna Majak).

which has a stronger connection to its local context, and is more direct in critiquing current public discourse in Poland, with its national components of messianism and martyrology which assume a complete instrumentalization of women and a radical idealization (understood as a disembodiment and desexualization) of them. The libretto contains references to the Smoleńsk crash of the presidential jetliner on 10 April 2010 (when over 90 members of Poland's political and social elite died during a failed landing, including President Lech Kaczyński and his wife), to the monumental statue *Christ the King* in the small town of Świebodzin, for a time the tallest statue of Christ in the world, and to the specific character of Catholicism in Poland, where almost everyone is Catholic and 28 per cent of the population believes in reincarnation, and where even declared unbelievers are churchgoers. Certainly, the themes of the libretto imprint themselves on the musical content of the production, which comprises sounds, words and melodies sourced largely from Catholic liturgy. In *Magnificat*, the Chorus makes a targeted strike on the Polish Catholic Church, replacing scattered centres of power Górnicka's earlier work aimed for with a clearly identified antagonist.

Consequently, in the opening part of the performance, the Chorus is also temporarily unified and mobilized, which is reflected in the sound and choreography: the musical motif is stripped of individual accents, the Chorus uniformly and insistently repeats a set of phrases, or sways from side to side like an obedient army unit. But this unification of the Chorus does not last long: the documentary dimension of the performance is not intended to dominate but merely to supplement, which is why the Chorus quickly returns to the polyphonic union established in *This Is the Chorus Speaking*. *Magnificat* is essentially an attempt to answer the question of the corporeality of Mary, in whose shadow Polish women have to live – or, to quote Górnicka, 'to see what's hidden beneath her azure dress'.⁴⁴

In *Magnificat*, Górnicka confronts the concept of motherhood which is inscribed in Polish culture, its outlines established by the figure of Mary. Being a mother primarily denotes the loss of one's own corporeality; motherhood seems to render the female body transparent. Worse still, loss of corporeality is accompanied by a stripping of individualism: a woman ceases to be a distinct and independent individual (in so far as she ever was one). She must be silent and invisible, humble and obedient to authority, and always ready for self-sacrifice. The tensions and conflicts that result from motherhood defined thus – paradoxically signifying the simultaneous exaltation and marginalization and exclusion from the universal category of people – explode in the culminating sections of *Magnificat*. The Chorus chants a cookbook recipe, much like in the *This Is the Chorus Speaking*, but this time, instead of a traditional recipe for a *baba*, Górnicka adapts Nigella Lawson's tips on how to prepare meat. It is a scene in which the Chorus appears to swell, becomes threatening and dangerous, expanding with a rebellious and indignant energy that pushes the audience back in their seats. The language of cooking combines with the ever-growing voices/bodies of the performers and becomes a weapon of revolution.

⁴⁴ Anna Rączkowska, *Matka Boska rzezi*, interview with Marta Górnicka, *Wprost*, 6 June 2011, 23, available online <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/247621/Matka-Boska-rzezi?I=1478>, [accessed: 8 February 2015].

Next the Chorus, smoldering like a lit fuse, begins to chant excerpts from *The Bacchae* by Euripides. Energy accumulated during the recitation of the meat recipe is dissipated through the transgressive gesture of Agave, who tears apart her beloved son Pentheus, but this is a transgression made under external control: her feminine energy is captured and usurped in order to implement the plan of the gods. Though seemingly very different from Mary, Agave sacrifices her son, like the Mother of Christ, to satisfy the will of the gods, which she has no right to question. The production climaxes with a wonderful rendition of the canticle *Magnificat* (*My soul doth magnify the Lord*), performed in classical style by the Chorus without any of its characteristic sound treatments or 'physiological' interjections, gasps or sighs. *Magnificat* is Mary's song of thanks for the Annunciation, presaging the exaltation of the meek and poor at the expense of the proud and wealthy. Górnicka gives the audience no clues on how to interpret the song, by allowing its inherent ambiguity to sound out: is *Magnificat* just one more analogue of the figure of Mary in the form of music and words, a hypnotic and effective tool of manipulation that serves to keep women in their assigned place? Or is it a promise of the religious and social revolution the inevitable onset of which the church hierarchy tries to forget?

The Visibility of Authority

My analysis of Górnicka's productions has concentrated thus far on her work with the Chorus of Women. Taking into account the feminist context of choral theatre, we should also turn our attention to the relationship between the Chorus and the person who founded it and revives it during every performance, that is, on Górnicka. Feminist theatre practitioners have identified the autocracy of theatre with oppressive patriarchal power and have consequently laboured to organize their creative practice according to different principles, such as collectiveness or consensus.⁴⁵ It is with good reason that the history of feminist theatre comprises accounts of groups of artists rather than individual directors. IARtBWT⁴⁶, for example, functioned as a women's art collective with no leadership, with all decisions made collectively and every member functioning as playwright, director and actor. Many feminist theatre initiatives utilised the techniques of devised theatre, rejecting the classical staging of texts in favour of creating a script through joint exploration, discussion and rehearsals, inspired by current socio-political issues determining female experience.

Górnicka's choral theatre, meanwhile, is not created through collective collaboration or within a non-hierarchical structure. Górnicka's authority over the Chorus is undeniable and real – at the outset, she created a Document of Rules which she has consistently followed; she also created the original training course for choreutai based on work with the 'body/voice'; she is the author of the librettos to all productions and she conducts the Chorus during performances. The Chorus – under Górnicka's direction, it implements her artistic vision and has its foundations in

⁴⁵ See Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Voices: A Collective Oral History. Six Feminist Theatre Groups in Interview* (Loughborough: LTT, 1997).

⁴⁶ <http://www.itsallrighttobewomantheatre.com/>.

intensive physical training transforming amateurs into professionals⁴⁷ – represents a fascinating example of artistic practice that leads to the liberation of the female subject and the female community through discipline, including rigorous physical discipline. This type of work with actors, in which formalized physical exertion is used to create a new type of performer, refers in the context of Polish theatre back to the work of Jerzy Grotowski and therefore to a masculine and homosocial tradition. Górnicka manages to reappropriate this tradition, reform it and utilize it in exploring the polyphonic female voice.

Górnicka's authority over the Chorus – as an artist who is herself a performer, conducting the Chorus expressively, always from a place where she can be seen by the audience – is a visible form of power, which gives the Chorus a subversive and reforming character. Adamiecka-Sitek argues that choral theatre reveals 'at the material level the power which in theatre traditionally belonged to men and which was usually concealed'⁴⁸ The performance also contains scenes which involves the flagrant disruption of Górnicka's authority, for example when the choreutai sit with their backs to the audience and to Górnicka, who for a short time is able to observe the Chorus but does not control it.

I can think of only one other artist in Polish theatre whose ostentatious presence on stage during his own productions so powerfully influenced their reception: Tadeusz Kantor. As with Górnicka, who always dresses in black and conducts her Chorus in full view of her captivated spectators, which emerges as a paradoxical subject, so had Kantor, always in black, conducted his actors, who became *doppelgängers* of the dead. As Jan Kott writes:

Kantor is present/absent on the stage from start to finish during a performance, hunched over, always garbed in the same black suit and dark scarf, urging his actors on with a light, sometimes almost imperceptible flick of the fingers, as if impatient that everything is taking so long, he might resemble Charon, guiding the dead to the other side. But Kantor is not only ferrying the dead, he is also summoning them. In this theatre of evanescent and blurry impressions Kantor's presence on stage stands for a memory of places and people.⁴⁹

I have never seen a live performance by Kantor; I can therefore only compare my own perception and interpretation of Górnicka's presence during performances of the Chorus to the historical record documenting the influence of Kantor on the performance and reception of his productions, for example, the essays of Jan Kott, which are dominated by the

⁴⁷ Although Górnicka recruits her choristers through open castings, the length, intensity, weight and effect of their training means that they cannot be called amateur performers. It would therefore be impossible to compare choral theatre to the recent resurgence of amateur choirs (The17, Feral Choir, Complaints Choir). These two types of work differ not only in the form of performance (choral theatre combines theatre and the medium of chorus, while amateur choirs are limited to musical practice) but also in its preparation. They are linked by their mobilization of the critical potential of the medium of choir. Misha Myers, 'Now Everybody Sing: The Voicing of Dissensus in New Choral Performance', *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts*, 16.3, 2011, pp. 62–66.

⁴⁸ Adamiecka-Sitek, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Jan Kott, *Kadysz. Strony o Tadeuszu Kantorze*, second edition (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2005), p. 17. Quote translation by Aleksandra Sakowska.

figure of Kantor-Charon. I think that the fundamental difference between Kantor and Górnicka is not their different ages and genders. The distinction is more subtle: Kantor directed the Theatre of Death while Górnicka conducts a chorus of life.

In Kantor's theatre, his actors, constantly 'urged on', became the director's mechanical marionettes and passive doppelgängers of dead people in faded photographs, who would take part in melancholy and often nightmarish séances: 'The figures would appear and disappear like in the Renaissance and Baroque clocks of churches or town halls [...]. Or like in elaborate music boxes where tiny figurines spin and prance to the sound of a recurring merry melody'.⁵⁰ While Kantor's theatre turned to the past, Górnicka's Chorus looks to the future. Choral theatre is after all about subversion, awakening, intervention, change. Finally, it is about the body – the breathing, powerful, vital, emancipated female body. Despite superficial similarities between the performances of Górnicka and Kantor, there is no doubt that the role of the conductor summoning an active, political and corporeal community of female performers to life, and Charon ferrying the 'living/dead', 'dead/living', 'doppelgängers/mannequins', cannot be the same.

Conclusion

This analysis of *This Is the Chorus Speaking* and *Magnificat* by Górnicka shows that both productions can be read within the milieu of feminist theatrical activity that simultaneously undertakes a profound critique of the prevailing paradigm of femininity and a creative revision and vindication of theatre as cultural institution – both the tradition of the broadly conceived Western theatre (Greek chorus) and local Polish practices (Grotowski and Kantor). Górnicka's choral theatre exists solely on the stage; it is a theatre that takes place between the performers and the spectators, at the juncture of the body/voice and language, synthesizing form and content, which lends it a truly revolutionary force of impact. Górnicka's other work – particularly *Requiemachine*, based on the writings of socialist poet Władysław Broniewski – proves that we are dealing with an author whose output has potentially universal impact and who does not limit herself to gender issues.⁵¹

In each of the above-mentioned choral-theatre productions, the key emphasis is the highlighting of culturally suppressed voices; in each, Górnicka highlights the motif of the impossibility of speaking. In *This Is the Chorus Speaking* and *Magnificat*, the problem of the marginalization of women's experience and the inherently sanctioned silence of women is demonstrated directly. In the former production, the choreutai shout out cultural imperatives of femininity (for example, 'be beautiful', 'be sexy' and 'be quiet') of which the hardest is 'be a woman'; they then stage a noisy and oppressive discourse on the medicalisation and commodification of the female body, before moving on to an emotional scene in which individual women hoarsely intone or whisper in mute voices 'I'm calling out to you'. Is this phrase – barely audible, barely intoned, erupting from the diaphragm through a throat and squeezed by cultural

⁵⁰ Kott, p. 23.

⁵¹ In December 2014, Górnicka premiered her latest production: *Matka Courage nie będzie milczeć. Chór na czas wojny*. She collaborated on the work with Arab and Israeli mothers, Israeli soldiers and Arab children.

restrictions – the female voice attempting to constitute itself? *Magnificat*, on the other hand, emphasizes that, in Catholic discourse, silence is seen as a woman's greatest virtue, as an 'expression' of humility, meekness and the complete acceptance of the authority of the Church. In *Requiemachine*, Górnicka summons the sickness of the poet Broniewski – throat cancer – to enable the Chorus, which wheezes and suffocates while repeating Broniewski's 'I am mute', to find the language of victims and outcasts of capitalism.

Perhaps Górnicka's choral theatre exists in order to finally give a voice to those to whom a voice has been culturally denied: as a theatre that is intentionally anti-systemic and subversive, in which the excluded become present in stolen forms and words.

Translated by Aleksandra Sakowska

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Productions:

1.

Requiemaszyna [Requiemachine]

Concept, libretto and directing: Marta Górnicka

Choreography: Anna Godowska

Dramaturgy: Agata Adamiccka-Sitek

Premiere: 24 March 2013 at Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute (ZRTI) in Warsaw

2.

Chór kobiet. Projekt II: Magnificat [Chorus of Women, Project Part II: Magnificat]

Concept, libretto and directing: Marta Górnicka

Choreography: Anna Godowska

Dramaturgy: Agata Adamiccka-Sitek

Premiere: 27 June 2011 at Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute (ZRTI) in Warsaw

3. *Chór kobiet. Tu mówi chór, tylko 6 do 8 godzin, tylko 6 do 8 godzin...* [*This Is the Chorus Speaking, from 6 to 8 Hours Only, from 6 to 8 Hours Only...*]

Concept, libretto and directing: Marta Górnicka

Choreography: Anna Godowska

Dramaturgy: Agata Adamiccka-Sitek

Premiere: 13 June 2010 at Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute (ZRTI) in Warsaw