

Nothing Else Matters

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DARIUSZ KOSIŃSKI: Over ten years ago, when you were starting out as a director, you were seen as one of the key figures on the 'new theatre' scene, engaged in social issues. Now, a decade or more later, having been the director since 2013 of one of the most important Polish theatre companies – the National Stary Theatre in Kraków – how do you see the political aspects of your practice? I have the impression that it is a lot less distinct these days, continuing to address modern-day problems, yet in more generalized contexts...

JAN KLATA: Sure, but this was already happening with my Hamlet [H.], as set in the Gdańsk Shipyard in 2004, when I was asking: What have we done with our freedoms? I was perhaps less concerned with this question in terms of the personal dimension, but the point at which I try to think about the collective context and the potency of a possible answer, I'm not creating a show which is, say, specifically against a business plan to move Polish shipbuilding to an even cheaper part of the world, but more about deeper mechanisms, and about whether that which makes us Poles is at the same time irrevocably connected with anarchy, with leading lighthearted lives, and the lighthearted lives of others, about waiting until the last moment to have the chance to act, and so on and so forth. Whether this is what is beautiful about us, or whether... These are the themes contained in Hamlet, and in the recently staged *Termopile polskie* (2014) [*The Polish Thermopylae*] inspired by [Tadeusz] Miciński, and paradoxically in *Sprawa Dantona* (2008) [The Danton Case] by [Stanisława] Przybyszewska, which has managed to travel a little around the world, from Vilnius to Buenos Aires, and has been received as both very Polish and very universal at the same time.

But what you are now talking about is a very good argument against those who consider political theatre to be an attempt to replace journalism, the press and so on. Because, in fact, even if we touch upon something which is a theme of discussion within the public sphere, then in theatre it is instantly transported onto a very different level.

If it is a sensible show, of course.

Of course. But I am not talking about whether we are dealing

here with the kind of understanding of politicality in which theatre not only expresses some opinions on a theme, projects some kind of a programme or ideology, but instead engages mental processes which help things which appear in the public debate to sound different – broader, fuller, with a greater awareness of complexity, of ambiguity...

Yes, yes, yes. I totally agree, if we manage to create sensible forms of artistic expression. But I can't quite see the sort of worthwhile theatrical performance which would solely be a kind of political manifesto. I'm not sure, I've not seen that sort of thing yet and don't expect to see this as something which could be... separated.

The politicality of *The Polish Thermopylae, H. and The Danton Case* is relatively easy to gauge (which is clear from the way in which they were received and commented upon), whereas in the case of *Król Ubu* (2014) [*Ubu Roi*], which you directed recently in Kraków, what may seem surprising is that this is a lot more difficult. On the surface, it is very easy to see it as a satire of Polishness, a very Polish sort of 'up and at them' spirit and obscure flights of fancy, while I have the impression that it is a performance which, on the political level, happens to work in a very different way.

How?

This show speaks to all those pitiful, laughable, grotesquely pompous Poles through the lyrics of a song hijacked from Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush: 'Don't Give Up'. There is something in it which you already talked about in an interview you gave in 2004: a kind of gesture of support for the weak. I had the impression that *Ubu Roi* is that sort of play in which, in spite of everything, of all the crappiness and grotesqueness, the weak – along with Ubu, and especially Ubu – are not left to their own devices in order to be laughed at.

Yes, of course. That is true. This is for me a moving play, especially at two specific points. For me it is extremely sad and so, actually, a totally unfunny and parody-free scene, when Ubu goes to war. And she [Mama Ubu] says: 'Ubu, you get that tsar good'. This is like all those Polish conversations of the 'you'll come back/you won't come back' sort. And Ubu rides out on that one chintzy horse, the only one that's left, with Metallica's 'Nothing Else Matters' playing in the background, remixed terrifyingly by James Leyland Kirby, that it's already there, in that music, there are the flies which will circle our armies, which are already lying out there somewhere, already decomposing. And in this there is something from Polish mythologies of uprisings and insurgencies, from [the painter Maksymilian] Gierymski: an army patrol, where it's clear the young lord leading it has no idea where they are and has to ask a serf, has to ask the way, because he has no idea where he's got to in his own country, a land he always traversed in horse-drawn carriages and only knows the way to his hunting grounds, but he now has to be shown the way, and no one knows if the farmer will tell him the truth because it's

not like he feels any sort of affinity with the lord, does he? And sending this sort of dandy imbecile out into the wilds, where it's not clear where we should attack them, where they will attack us and what will happen – this to me is a terrible scene... I wanted *Ubu* to be as embarrassing as *The Office* by Ricky Gervais.

That was genius television, by which I mean the kind I can watch, because I have a sort of liking for embarrassing scenarios. My wife, Justyna, can't stand it, for her it's too awful, unbearably cringeworthy. And so I thought about achieving the same sort of effect. There is nothing dismissive about it... after all, pataphysical traditions commit us to something... When I look at the main character from *The Office*, I have no disdain for him, not for his character or any of those working with him. These are people who are trying to do what we're all trying to do: go to work and survive. And they just happen to have run out of luck and ended up with jobs they don't like. I don't know what percent – well, we are the lucky few who value what we do, but some 90 percent of people don't. Is it their fault? Maybe a bit, but then again mostly not.

And it's the same with the characters in *Ubu Roi*. They are given a challenge which is beyond them (based on the traditional forms of Greek tragedy). Ubu is given a task which is way beyond him and now he, with his ragged, ridiculous universal models of how to behave, how is he to step up to the role of statesman? This is an almost Shakespearean problem, and is very much of antiquity: I have to now go and manage, and pronounce this or that. Instantly, certain mechanisms begin to sneak into our heads, quite theatrical, because that is what theatre is about, is it not? That I have to come in and do something, somehow, though I don't really know how to. In public, always in public, having to show your ass in the market square... And how am I, Ubu the luckless, to know how to manage, when I've never had to go through it before? So how will we do it? There are templates, templates which are proto-Polish ways of dying well, yes? We get this from somewhere, from grandfather to grandson because the father never came home from the wars. I don't know how these myths of dying in a decent way – he fell, he was carried on a shield like a stone for the ramparts, for the sacrificial pyre – how much they mean to young viewers, I've no idea. I know they watch *The Office*, but how much they can actually understand of it, of the old legends of unnamed heroes who fell, it must all be alien to them, or else... I don't know...

It seems to me that the aggressive, shocking, political aspect of theatre, along with strategies which were effective a few years ago such as quotes from pop culture, has for the past several years become part of the mainstream, audiences have become used to it and now know how to treat it as a familiar and even popular convention: 'We're off to the theatre – they will insult us a little in there, but overall it's quite cool'...

Yeah, yeah, yeah [*laughter*]. Perhaps not in Kraków... in German theatre, that is how it works.

In that case, the key question is: in what ways could theatre

function in this regard, can it function on this political level where we are mostly dealing with a changed mode of thinking, or diversions from stereotyped orientations which politics is trying to foist on us? How can it function in situations where the strategy of an aggressive attack on the viewer seems to no longer work because the viewer has simply become used to things?

Well then, let us set some traps for the viewer...

And this is what I want to ask about, because I have the impression that these traps are set in your new plays.

Then what, that they don't get caught in them...?

No, let's leave 'them' alone for a while, because we're not altogether sure how it works, these are still new productions. I am asking more about this strategy, if it is conscious, this setting of traps. And if it can be a new strategy of politicality.

I think that it adapts to changes in the viewers' mentality. Audiences do become used to certain things. And of course they do become used to the idea of being attacked, I don't know, by the politicality of theatre, let's say. Great, let's invite them to see *Ubu*, where the politicality of theatre is taken to such an extreme of bad taste, banality, cliché even, that we will see if we don't then cross over to the other extreme. In the same way, you can go to an exclusive, unique perfumery and spend a fortune on perfume which stinks so badly you want to run to the nearest toilet and rub it off your own skin. Or the way you go to another perfumery and spray yourself with – wait for it! – the smell of human sweat. These clearly are, I would say, aesthetic actions, because in this way I am showing that I can afford all this 'next level shit', or I'll spray myself with something equally rare so I can stink like a car mechanic after a shift in a filthy garage. The mechanic smells that way whether he likes it or not, but I'm going to spend hundreds on doing it out of choice.

This sort of amplified aesthetic game might be representative of a certain civilization of excess and glut, etc., etc. Distinctions, blah, blah, blah... But... I was trying to test a certain limit with *Ubu*. I mean, so that audiences would really come and think: Wow, I mean, wow, I haven't seen anything that cringeworthy on stage before. All those fine actors in our Stary Theatre and look at what they're doing to themselves, right? Well... Zarathustra. Zarathustra was a great man, insanely deep, par excellence, how to say it, and look at what are they doing to him here, right? *[laughter]* No, no, no, this is rubbish, those disposable costumes, you know what I mean, right? And her? Christ... horrible... Besides, the lighting is horrible, that Justyna, she can make it look good, right, light it nicely, in the best tradition... That Felice Ross, let's say, and here, just take a look, lame, it stinks, and that, well, no. I mean, we had a sort of competition with our co-workers, how to make it even more embarrassing. Disco Polo in Chinese. And from that same intensity of cringe-worthiness, and those part-truths, to build a show.

And that is why I find it funny when, for example, reviewers take

that amplified tone of embarrassment as our true take on the world of politics, right? *[laughter]* And at the same time, people are delighted by shows like *House of Cards*, where the level of para-Hollywood Machiavellian exposure is in places so basic, that it is only they who can present it in this way: Oh, look, see how they are cheating you. How your vote is worthless, because just one guy can come along and make it... will manipulate everything, I mean.

But then Ubu's entrapment would be about the audience being drawn into this disgrace, and us waiting for the moment when it occurs to them that, if it is so clearly built up, if it is all acted by professionals, with experience, with authority, then...

... then there must be something in it! *[laughter]*

Then maybe they know what is going on.

And this is often, of course, a sort of most basic form of referencing of authority. Hey, since Picasso went and slapped some paint around and did that pigeon, well, hell, there must be something in there, right? Wow, and there's Rothko, looks like just a square or two... This becomes then a sort of game with signs, with labels, with brands. The National Stary Theatre – damn, that actor... And when we recently changed the closing-curtain bows for a desperate, panicked, enthusiastic, bent-in-ecstatic-half sort of bowing... craziness ensued, something snapped in both actors and audiences, and now the ovations last fifteen minutes, a pataphysical communion of souls, until the electricians turn the lights off out of despair because they finally want to go home, but on stage it's 'Author! Author!'

But I keep going back to the risk that the audience will go back into their regular grooves, the grooves of someone watching *House of Cards* and will get from *Ubu* little more than – yeah, Poland is crap, Poland is crappy...

But this is not a play about how Poland is crap.

I know it's not. I am talking about a situation in which audiences won't let themselves be pulled into a trap and no sort of connection will be made...

Theatre has the advantage that it can be turned off, you can go have a cup of tea, or... well, just forget it... It is also a kind of effort, a trial... People can say: First of all, it took me an hour of driving to that theatre, and it was a snowstorm, and I took a friend on a date, and then... What if she doesn't like it? Then what, I'll walk out by myself? Or with her? Am I supposed to negotiate? But it's not right, is it? *[laughter]* It's still not the right thing to do... And maybe that's a good thing, that it's not right, and maybe that convention happens to be good for what is about to happen? And if one person leaves, then that's good too, something ends up happening... Because we have them, the audience, they're ours, right? In theatre, it's so vital that we have them. And this is incredible, of incredible value. On the one hand that we, theatre people, have them, and on

the other that we are here for them! And we could have a *House of Cards* for everyone, but only when we have them by remote. He won't be here and now for us. That is something which is exploited by all the private theatres, that – hah! – a living person right off the TV is here, acting for us. This is an improbable, primal sort of experience. Christ, he's here, a real actor, standing there, physically present, here! No, they didn't tape it beforehand, these aren't jokes of any kind, right? And this is... a miracle.

I want to go back to those traps and that basic theatrical state of being with the self, which is something different from the act of communication which has been elevated to such importance in recent decades, the act of talking about theatre. Because of course there is this stereotypical conviction that when we are together then the challenge is for us to communicate. That theatre then is an act of communication, and the act of communication is all about messages being sent out from the stage, messages which have to be received by the audience, and the audience sends their own messages, and this loop of feedback goes on and on, and the theatre thus becomes an arena of dialogue...

There was a moment, a very tough moment when rehearsing *Ubu*, when I did what I could to convince the actors that when they set out against those Ruskiés and sang their 'Boža Gira' song the second time in an exalted way and go down the side aisles, to go and unleash...

... into the audience...

And they didn't want to do it! And something happened, another miracle up on stage, by which I mean at one of the shows, the fourth or fifth performance, they were lashing out, those National actors, but so as not to really lash out, so as not to make the director feel bad, and so they sort of hit out willy-nilly. Until one actor lost his inflatable club. Then an audience member grabbed it and smacked the actor. Then we had a real battle, because the other actors felt that one of their own is being attacked. So they lashed out too. The audience started to pile in, in a half-serious way, yet something happened for real, something took place. But no, let's not go into that sort of convention... Because the convention of contemporary theatre is terribly irritating, so engaging, but only in a cultural context, right?

Because when we create democratic theatre, democratically here, together, we'll be seen to be making decisions together. But we know anyway that in the end someone must take responsibility, especially when things go wrong, someone must show their face... and, unfortunately, that someone is liable, has to make decisions. But we tend to conceal this in various ways, and so on and so forth. Hence the tales of strange happenings, that, oh, an audience member can become involved but if they become too involved then it's not so good because we can't go on with our show if they are, right? With video games, there is this clause that a gamer can have choice, but only this or that sort of choice, right? And we still know how the game will end, because it's scripted, it has to lead us to some end, right? And then they invented sandbox games, in which reality is open enough to allow you to become a baker and play for

ten years or more as a baker, when the game's all about being a gangster, correct? Of course this is a trap for the theatre, because we can't do it that way.

If we're talking about theatrical democracy, I would like to talk about Oliver Frljić and his *Nie-Boska komedia* [*The Un-Divine Comedy*], which was never premiered. Because he, as I understand it, didn't want to work with actors in order to activate the empathetic process which is not present in hierarchic theatre...

No, Frljić wanted to manipulate the actors. He wanted to make them pawns in his own game, but he was playing for himself. He wasn't interested in the *The Un-Divine Comedy*, not interested in [Konrad Swinarski]. His intention – I'm not sure if from the very start, but probably from the point at which he realized he wasn't going to achieve anything strictly for himself here – was purely to shock. In the most primitive way possible, causing conflict. As if piling on things which could insult the greatest number of people, from actress Anna Polona to philosopher Professor Hartman. A wide spectrum. And so actors came to the Stary Theatre, all sorts, from doyens to youngsters, and said: 'It's not for me, this is no challenge, nothing worthwhile, in the sense of testing any limits, I don't want to take part in it, so please, release me from the play. Besides, you'll go to one of the rehearsals and see for yourself soon enough'. And it was true, I did. Oliver Frljić and his team's time here came to an end when I saw what he was ordering, or at least asking, actors to say from the stage. That a young actor is meant to go up on stage and say: 'This is a play about traitors and heroes. The traitors are: Anna Dymna, Mieczysław Grąbka...' and all the actors, from the oldest to the youngest, who had declined to work with him for a range of reasons, from weeks of pointless arguments during rehearsals with Oliver Frljić. And so: 'They are the traitors, and your heroes are here – on stage before you'. That was the level of insight in the play.

Then I said to Frljić: Goodbye. I never said outright what was wrong, in public, to give all those involved the chance to save face. They didn't and that's too bad. Unfortunately, the play he was trying to stage would have ridiculed the idea of creating a contemporary, insightful, biting, reality-driven theatre. And my problem depends only on the fact that I couldn't say anything outright honest back then. A mess was created, partly by Frljić and partly by an investigative editor called [Marek] Kęskrawiec, from a local newspaper, who kept on beating the pseudo-patriotic drum with transcripts from the rehearsals. It is very easy to build up opposition: a censor scared for his job and his conservative, clerical-fascistic team versus wonderful playwrights and a painfully unpromising director. But who was going to end up feeling all that pain?

In Frljić's case, if we really do believe what the director says about his method, we are dealing with a sort of attempt to enter into theatre as a hierarchical structure, based at least in part on partially hidden violence... And this too is something which keeps on cropping up in discussions about the politicality of theatre: theatre wants to be a tool for emancipation, fight for freedom of expression, open up the space for freedom and convince people to

speak in their own name, speak for themselves. But the mechanism which produces this, which is meant to open free spaces, is often dictatorial.

That's right. That's right. Absolutely dictatorial. Go, climb up on stage and say that your friends are traitors.

But I'm talking about a widespread mechanism. A widespread mechanism of theatrical violence based generally on the idea that an actress who goes up on stage, with her body, her voice, name, everything, endorses something she may not want to endorse at all. She tells the audience about their freedoms, about their own voice, but she herself speaks with someone else's voice, that of the director. I am talking about that conviction, expressed in the infamous two-line verse by director Kazimierz Dejmek: 'The arse craps, the actor acts'. And even if we instantly protest as humans and proclaim that it's not true, when it comes down to it, the actor still has to do what the dictator demands.

The question is: who takes responsibility for what happens on stage? Who takes responsibility for what happens in theatre? Is it some kind of abstract collective which takes responsibility for all that? So much power, so much responsibility. And the other way around. We can't simply pretend that, yeah, we did all that together, right, and if it's a success then we're all behind it, but if it's not, well then it sort of just happened, right? In the case of protests against Klata's *Do Damaszku* (2013) [*To Damascus*], where actors were attacked though the target was the director, both of the play and of the theatre, then we really stood together. To react this way collectively against what was coming – because we knew what was brewing – was the idea of [actor] Krzysztof Globisz, one he borrowed from American counterculture, from the Living Theatre, I think: at any point when they were performing something which proved very unpopular with audiences and they were heckled, or the audience threw various things at them during the play, then all the actors would stand before the audience in solidarity, not leaving any single player at the mercy of the mob, and allow themselves to be insulted as one. A very counterculture model, you could say, to use in a state institution like ours. And all of us went out there: the theatre director, the vice director, actors, the prompter... well, we didn't drag the stage technicians into it, but they were saved as back-ups, because they're strong lads.

Was it never the case that someone in your company had a problem with this strategy, that they are sticking their own neck out, their own face, for something they don't believe in?

No, because in actual fact, let's be honest, the risk involved in that very Christian play (even with a certain didactic stench) is minimal. In the case of Ubu things would be harder, right? And so, no. It was more of a manifestation of, as they say, workplace democracy. A different puzzle is connected with a troubled conscience. When we decided that it was necessary to somehow react against the paranoia surrounding *Golgota Picnic* [Rodrigo Garcia's production cancelled in Poznań at Malta Festival 2014], we did it voluntarily. Even people who worked behind the

scenes on that show put their hands up. It was never that someone who was not in agreement, internally, had to pronounce or show something they didn't want to. I don't even know if there were any people at all who had a dilemma, although we were very much ready for it. Very. In order to stop the institutional machinery from forcing anyone to take part in something they did not agree with; a question of conscience came into play here. The whole paradox and paranoia of the situation was based on them being expected to show a much lower level of civil courage, while we – the ones who were performing, protected by a police cordon from the audience, who had to pass by there!

It really was an overwhelmingly oppressive experience. It is, of course, lovely to see Poles praying, but there was a lot of aggression in it all. And it is rather paradoxical that, at the point when we went up on stage, then, what do you say? We'll have a read-through, we'll manage somehow. In Kraków, actually, we didn't meet with the kind of aggression aimed at Warlikowski [another read-through, held at Nowy Theatre in Warsaw in response to the Malta cancellation], where they fought, threw things. And there is also something false about this sense of aggression and oppression. Because what can happen to us? The best they can do is insult me while I'm out walking in the park, scratch out my eyes from a poster and send it to the theatre offices. Some kind of horse-drawn carriage driver will write an anonymous letter or say something, or I don't know, I'll get text messages for six months with threats that someone somewhere wants to kill me. Life. Okay, that's tough, and so what – that's part of the game, right? But the audience? Let them go into the theatre without being hassled, and make up their own minds.

Does the same not apply, on a smaller scale of course, to the normal operations of a theatre? Which is trying to enter into the kind of relationship with the audience which allows them to change their perception of reality? Is it not that, in spite of everything, we are responsible for creating an environment in which the audience finds itself, in which they live and in which we do not, because we remain in a safe artistic space?

But of course...! That is why we parted ways with our friend Frlić, because I had the impression that I'm dealing with someone who is completely irresponsible. Someone who is interested in winding things up, and winding them up to the max... And happiest only when blood is flowing. Because then a certain totally cretinous thesis will be proven, right? That an anti-Semitic play by that racist Swinarski, living and reproduced in memory as a masterpiece, has now been revealed for what it is. And so, in the end, we're all in Srebrenica. The global village of Srebrenica. And that was the thesis. And I have to say I disagree with it. After all, this is Kraków, not Srebrenica, and Swinarski isn't much of a Ratko Mladić...

And now, straight away, we have the argument, difficult to refute, that by cancelling the play, the theatre director is acting as a censor. He won't let me see something I would otherwise be able to judge for myself.

Sorry: the only notion, the only reason I might not have taken that play down would have been my own potential fear that to do so would be read as an act of censorship. Well, that I can debate, but on the other hand I am simply trying not to ruin all that which I have achieved as a stage director for over a decade, and as a theatre director since January 2013. Now, seen from a certain distance, my decision can be judged. We are asking people to come see *The Un-Divine Comedy* as staged by Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski instead, and then we'll see if it was worth waiting for this *The Un-Divine Comedy*. I have been saying all year: wait, my dears, don't hurry with your opinions. Now of course it has hurt Monika and Paweł, because a large number of leading reviewers have not written anything sensible on the subject. Why? Because Frljić's version of the show was declared a masterpiece simply because it didn't happen, and so Demirski and Strzępka's version has to be some kind of regime-sanctioned production, and therefore can't be interesting or engaging. Because with critics it's either/or.

Is it not the case that Frljić pushed the limits of something which is almost normal practice in certain theatrical socio-techniques, that which allows this one dictator to make his plan happen? Is it not the case with him – as in the way you have just told his story – is it not that he is activating this sort of socio-technical process, allowing it to happen, withdrawing himself and risking nothing, then sending actors out there which in such a radical format creates opposition, but in this process also shows how theatre works, that it is a purely force-driven mechanism? Is it not the case that because of this figure of the solitary, immovable ruler, theatre will always, irrefutably, remain a politically problematic institution?

Okay, but the question of the overall effect remains. Because this is not separate from the effect of the show itself: either the show is good, or it's crap.

But this means that we can do anything we like with people, as long as the end product is good.

No, no, no, we can't do anything we like with people. I once read [Andrei] Tarkovsky's memoirs, how in shooting *Solaris* he told an actor he was letting him go, that it is all for nothing, that they've shot half the film and he's useless, and then he pointed the camera at the actor and shot a scene which shows the main character breaking down. And great. We have it, the moment captured. This is, to me – ignoring for a moment the inner conflict of a deeply enlightened person, etc., etc. – this is something which I could never stoop to. And maybe this is the difference in how we respond to Frljić. I wouldn't have done it like that.

And so we're not dealing with a dictatorship, but an enlightened monarchy.

Rather: the question is whether we destroy 'for the good of the show'. Are we destroying people? But this is also a question for Grotowski, for [director Krystian] Lupa, who when writing about Grotowski once upon a time happened to write about himself also. And of course there is the question of what sort of person was [actor Ryszard] Cieślak, if he hadn't had the guts? Well, yeah, wasted potential, died early... but how was it, actually? A provincial actor... Maybe he would have had a nice, pleasant personal life, would have ended up acting somewhere...

And lived long and happily ever after.

Precisely. And now the question: the one who wants it, do they come to harm or not? And how much do they want, and how much do they know, and what does it lead to?

Fine, let's go back again to politicality and the systems of theatre. Because there is this utopian idea that theatre, which is effectively political, should base its organizational formula, or its method of working, on rules analogous to the society it would like to create.

What sort of rules do you mean? A workplace democracy?

For example...

As a great Christiania. Now we vote. Every hour, on the hour.

Or the Living Theatre or Odin Teatret, as a certain attempt to discover and build a different collective organization...

Ridiculous. The Stary Theatre is an institution which employs almost 200 people, with a specific organizational structure – one which is definitely not solely vertical – and a collective arrangement, rules, trade unions, ways of reporting to all relevant inspectorates and monitoring bodies. It's not some kind of peer-group commune. You can't compare a rowboat to an aircraft carrier. What we need is for a complex organism to work effectively. Thankfully, on board our aircraft carrier we have many fabulous employees at every level of the organization, and we keep sailing on ever more gracefully. We had to work together a while to click, to see who is heading in the same direction, who doesn't fit, and who simply wants to be elsewhere. It took a little time, but that's how it goes.

But is it not the case – I will ask in another way – that interior processes involved in dictatorial rule over a theatre are concealed, hidden by the way theatre works in cultural life, in the social workings of our part of the world...

I think that one of the most interesting, though rarely mentioned, aspects of the way Polish theatres have been functioning over the past few decades has been the lack of openness regarding management systems.

Maximum power, minimum liability. Take the example of Krystian Lupa: he took no responsibility for his leading the Sary Theatre, the same as he took no responsibility for the time he spent in charge at Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw, or Polski Theatre in Wrocław. And now... this is the most obvious example, because we are also dealing with a great theatrical figure.

According to what you have just said, the ways these hidden power structures work can be excused by the quality of the art they...

By the quality of one work of art, or the quality of the gangrene which begins to infect the whole system which we have here? Because we should ask, how does this affect actors, the technical team, chaos in the programming, etc.? Does it not create sects of sorts, tribes which have nothing to do with each other? The tribe of the Chamber Stage and the tribe of Main Stage. The tribe of director [Andrzej] Wajda and the tribe of director [Jerzy] Jarocki. The tribes of Swinarski and Wajda. And we could say: Wow, how well this theatre functioned. Because this is a new age and what counts for me is that Dorota Segda and Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik will play in a production by Monika Strzępka. That Adam Nawojczyk will play Mrs General, and Anna Radwan will play Platonov in a production by Konstantin Bogomolov. The examples are numerous, because the team in our Sary Theatre is wonderfully varied.

My question is slightly different, and deals with the system rather than individual cases. The system of work in which someone else takes responsibility for the theatre and the team as a whole, and someone else – the stage director – for a specific show delivered to order, essentially, by someone from the outside: I fly in, do something, but in fact take no responsibility for the people I'm working with, or if anything, I'm only responsible for the work of art. Meanwhile, to take responsibility for the theatre means to accept responsibility for the team, allowing it a voice and reacting to the suggestions they might make...

Right, and here is that process of democratization, the effects of conversations with the team. If actors who previously demanded a certain kind of play come afterwards and say: Yeah, it was an interesting experience, enjoyable, but I don't, wouldn't want to do it again, then I truly respect what they've said and feel a total responsibility for saying to them: Right, we created a fine show, but we're not going to repeat it, it doesn't let the actors flourish, that's all.

This means that theatrical dictatorships can be very enlightened and open to their subjects...

You are jesting, Professor, and I am opening my heart up here. There has to be a solid team, a quality collective of artists, with a million problems which come with them, but I believe it's worth it. Because otherwise we end up with an English or a Spanish model: we take a few actors, have some basic sets, get a dozen people together for, say, six

weeks of the play being on and then – we part ways. Okay, but I'm sorry: the type of theatre which is formed around a company is the type which thinks, when taking on an actor or actress, about what it will be able to offer them in a few years time, what it will do for their development and so on. In this way, I can talk to directors – a range of directors! – and say that we have these actors that we always work with, but maybe you'd like to try with some others? And this to me, being a director, makes sense. No one else gets this, of course, and I don't expect some reviewer or critic who has not once in their life been to a rehearsal to one day appreciate what we do in terms of building a team.

I still can't accept the thesis that the only thing of importance is the quality of what ends up staged on opening night.

Yes.

That's all? And not, for example, creating an audience of your own?

But that is related! The same as with building a team. Really, the energy which flows through some of our shows now is the energy of something which can really be felt... I mean that something terribly important has happened in theatre. And actors have the awareness that in a direct way they are taking an active part, that it is good for the company. And that is why I think that this is the foundation, the fuel for any theatre, night after night. We have to have something the actors can be proud of, something the people working in the office can be proud of. This is a test. A test of the technician. The stage manager. The prompter. This is the basic test of any company, for me. The longer I work in theatre, the more I listen, or try to listen, to their opinions. They have a sixth sense and they know which show will open well.

Translated by Marek Kazmierski