

How Far Can You Go in an Institution?  
On the Feminist Turn that Wasn't

**Agata Adamecka-Sitek Talks with Milena Gauer  
and Weronika Szczawińska**

<http://mbmh.pl/development/ptjournal/index.php/ptj/article/view/34/49>



## How Far Can You Go in an Institution? On the Feminist Turn that Wasn't

**Agata Adameicka-Sitek Talks with Milena Gauer  
and Weronika Szczawińska**

**Agata Adameicka-Sitek:** We're talking after a reading of Aleksander Fredro's *Ciotunia* [*Auntie*],<sup>1</sup> in which both of you appeared on stage, taking the liberty of presenting an extremely loose treatment of a theatre work the Poland's so-called Grandfather of the Nation. To put it plainly, you took this opportunity to repeat a story, one which everyone knows to the point of boredom, about the oppression that women experience in the theatre – the most misogynistic institution of western culture. At the end, you apologized to the audience, retreating with uncertain step. As I understand it, you were ashamed of this tasteless outburst.

**Weronika Szczawińska:** Ashamed?! Of course it was shame. This is humiliating. As long as seven years ago, when we performed *Jackie* based on Elfriede Jelinek's text, the situation was embarrassing, because what kind of a show is this, what kind of a subject? And now, when we return to that experience – and after several years where, in Poland, everything on the subject of women on stage and in general everywhere has already been said – this is a real embarrassment. Regardless of the occasion, the project, the assigned subject, we come out with this same old song of ours....

But what's deeply humiliating is what's happening in Polish theatre and the discourse that accompanies it. An era of suspect triumphalism has begun. For some ten years, we have known that 'Polish theatre is women', that we have ever more female directors who work on all stages including the important, fashionable and prestigious ones, even those called 'national'. So we have conducted an efficient and superficially feminist shift in the theatre – and it's all done.

But Milena and I are convinced that in fact nothing like that has been accomplished. That in the end feminism in Polish theatre is useful primarily as a promotional PR strategy, switched on when clear identification situating a cultural product in the right context is needed.

That means that the situation is truly bad. The shift has happened, and nothing has changed. All of its momentum was absorbed by the media logic of attractive identity brands.

<sup>1</sup> The staged reading was part of the project *Fredro. Nikt mnie nie zna*, which took place in the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute through the 2014/2015 season. Younger and mid-generation directors prepared readings of rarely staged texts by the playwright Aleksander Fredro (1793–1876), whose most popular comedies are staples in the repertoires of Polish theatres.

**AA-S:** Let's try to describe exactly what happened, as part of what you describe as this pseudo-feminist shift. How and when was it neutralized? Has all of its energy really been captured by neoliberal logic? After all, it can't be denied that female directors have entered Polish theatre, that they have been noticed. It started with Anna Augustynowicz, counted as one of the 'younger, more talented'...

**WS:** ...and later there was a flood: Maja Kleczewska, Monika Pęcikiewicz, Monika Strzępka, Agnieszka Olsten, Aldona Figura. They came into the theatre at about the same time, and right away this phenomenon started to be bruted about. We have women who direct! A distinct, strong phenomenon, that can be given such a nice name! All the more so as female directors kept arriving: Barbara Wysocka, Natalia Korczakowska, Ewelina Marciniak...

**AA-S:** Weronika Szczawińska, Marta Górnicka. It's undeniable: There appeared a group of female directors, whose work in theatre was noticed by critics. What's more, Monika Strzępka is a woman who at the moment constitutes the dominant model of critical theatre in Poland. She holds the title of the top director of Polish political theatre.

**WS:** Exactly, this woman holds the title of top director! I understand it's no coincidence you used the masculine form of the noun [in Polish]. Let's note that Monika Strzępka is never talked about in the context of the feminist shift in the Polish theatre. Her name consistently fails to appear in critical texts analysing Polish theatre in the gender or feminist framework, or dedicated to female directing. I wonder why, considering that her productions usually take these questions into account; sometimes they work very strongly, as in *Niech żyje wojna* [*Long Live War*], sometimes they're the main theme, as in *Położnice Szpitala św. Zofii* [*The Birthing Mothers of St. Sophia's Hospital*] or in *Courtney Love*. I think it's because of the position of Monika Strzępka, which is too strong for her to fit anymore in the feminist context. That's reserved for debutantes, outsiders, new revelations: figures who even if they draw attention are still more or less marginal. A woman who has such a high position in the hierarchy, in the general consciousness, automatically drops out of the feminist category.

**AA-S:** I think it's not insignificant that Strzępka can't be mentioned without also mentioning playwright Paweł Demirski. They're a particular kind of hybrid, not even a creative team, more like a single creative organism. It's very hard to say where and how the division of labour runs between them. Strzępka states that she's first of all the implementer of Demirski's texts and the meanings written into them; that she works with actors so that it will be about poetic texts, where rhythm and phrase cannot be disturbed because meaning will be lost. But that is a shockingly traditional arrangement – with the author-man as the creator of meaning. Still, returning to our reconstruction of the feminist shift in the theatre: the rest of the female directors we named have also entered the mainstream, and in a different way from how it happens in the case of theatre that's programmatically feminist, which usually has a counter-cultural character and functions on the edges: on the margins, as bell hooks puts it, proving the political potential of this positioning.

Some of them consistently take up gender themes. It's not a transparent question for any of them. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that against the backdrop of European theatre – at least German theatre – Poland's stands out in this regard.

**WS:** Yes, I agree. This is a visible phenomenon.

**AA-S:** It's also visible in relation to contemporary European theatre, and to the history of Polish theatre. In the research project HyPaTia, carried out in the Theatre Institute under the direction of Joanna Krakowska, we examine this question carefully and we see how few women have directed on – let's call it by name – on stages that count in Polish post-war theatre. And how few women's texts were published and staged. Here the change is striking, evidenced by the special volume published by the journal *Dialog*, with a selection of plays written by women and published in this journal in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

**WS:** That's right, it can't be denied that something is stirring; the things you're talking about are a sign of some kind of real change. But looking from the perspective of the entirety of Polish theatre, it's still a terribly narrow phenomenon. Visible and amplified, a PR event, as I said – but still very exclusive.

**Milena Gauer:** Let's think about what's happening in Polish theatre aside from several progressive companies. The reigning figure is that of the woman who throws her head back, grabs her breasts and gives a drawn-out groan, or throws off cascades of laughter. We tried to show that this evening – *Auntie* in a theatre in a city with up to 200,000 residents. These stereotypes work strongly: actresses know what's expected of them, the audience is happy. This is particularly visible in popular farces. And on the other hand, there is almost no herstory. We have row after row of *Hamlets*, *Kordians*, *Konrads*, *Kartotekas*, *Śluby* [*The Weddings*]. Stories of the hero, his buddy, his father and of course his lover, maybe his mother. Plays [written by women] get printed in *Dialog*, but this doesn't particularly change the realities of such theatre.

Weronika and I tried several times to get to an affirmative, subjective female character. With varying effects. In *Noże w kurach* [*Knives in Hens*] we searched for a female voice, for our own language separate from the male narrative. We ended up with a little girl tapping her foot, who tries to speak on her own behalf, despite being constantly ridiculed by male heroes of the production. Interestingly, the mocking of the heroine/actress started out completely spontaneously in rehearsals. We analysed this situation, and it ended up making it into the show. In *Moja pierwsza zjawka* [*My First Phantom*], the girl becomes truly impolite and ornery she wants to take the masculine narrative by storm, and to some degree she manages to do so. The problem began when we tried to transition from a little girl to a woman. In *Kama Sutra. Studium Przyjemności* [*Kama Sutra: A Study of Pleasure*] Klaudyna appears, inspired by the stories of Colette. Self-aware and affirmative. I remember how hard that was; it would have been much easier to build on opposition, struggle with something, break

<sup>2</sup> 'Najlepsze z najlepszych. Dramatopisarki dekady', *Dialog* (Kraków-Warsaw: Instytut Książki, 2012).

the shackles, hinder and hamper. A woman proud of her body, sensibly looking at the world and at people, without trauma, envy, hysteria, turned out to be a real challenge, and still today I have a feeling that I'm not fully satisfied with that production.

**WS:** Let's think about today's Polish theatre from the perspective of actresses; about a theatre whose hard core still remains a theatre of male directors and its immovable ironclad hierarchy.

**MG:** There's probably no more oppressive relationship than the director-actress relationship in the institution that is repertory theatre, with its roots in the 19th-century tradition. And this remains the most universal and stable model of theatre in Poland, in which every sexist and misogynistic practice flourishes.

**WS:** I agree. And as a result, it seems important to me to ask two questions. First of all, has the emergence of this group of female directors changed anything for actresses? Or more broadly – has it reshaped Polish theatre at all in its everyday practice? Second, was this feminist shift not so visible precisely because it was achieved in the most publicly displayed and simultaneously most obvious field of discursive authority, directly related to the position of the director, and not in the field of institutional practices where unrelenting, widely distributed and invisible violence is carried out?

**AA-S:** That would mean that female directors, even if they take up feminist subjects, haven't transformed the institution at all. They have only taken the place that earlier was reserved – with few exceptions – for the male director, still defined in the modernist paradigm, as the 'artist of the theatre', who calls into being a separate world and who, as a result of his almost divine prerogatives, has at his complete disposal the team of workers that are subject to him, who in theatre schools are trained after all to be perfectly submissive instruments. The only thing that counts is the supreme authority of the company director, almost certainly a man. In the distribution of power within the institution of the theatre, nothing has changed. This group of women has simply managed to jump into the old arrangement – they're the ones who have managed to pull it off – but their appearance there hasn't changed anything in the institutional practice of the theatre, or in its ideological framework.

**WS:** That's how I see it. We have managed to change very little. For example, tech crews have gotten used to the idea that a director can be a metre and a half tall and wear a skirt. Maybe sexist jokes are told less often. But it doesn't seem to me that any decisive change has taken place – either within the institution or in the symbolic field. I think this is the situation we're dealing with: If some kind of women's subject is staged in the theatre, it happens most often through a particular discourse of the body, and independent of whether the director is male or female, it turns out that this female body is something that is very much out of order. It even seems to me that female directors themselves have raised this subject. For example, what happens with the female body in Maja Kleczewska's productions could just as easily take place in the traditional theatre of the male perspective, because these bodies – seemingly

transgressive, ripped out of patriarchal control – are bodies that are constantly mistreated and pushed into the spectacle of hysteria. Ever since Kleczewska's *Phaedra* I have had the unshakeable conviction that they work for only one purpose: for the image of the woman as victim.

This tortured body in the theatre brings us great pleasure. Polish theatre and Polish theatrical criticism have great love for these trembling anorexics in over-high heels; they adore convulsions and vomiting, shoving food into lips and spitting it out, shattering on sheets of plexiglass; the uncontrolled, spastic scream. In short: it very much likes to look at the female body as a dynamic object. And that is why I don't feel any particular connection to female directors in Polish theatre, and I don't believe in the effectiveness of the feminist shift caused by their presence. Instead, I feel a strong connection with women I've worked with: dramaturge Agnieszka Jakimiak; female set designers; graphic designer Izabela Wądołowska, designer Natalia Mleczak, Dagny Szwed; with actresses. I have the feeling that in repertory theatre, I have managed over time to create a type of women's collective. Of course, I could say the same about the male collaborators with whom I share key convictions. But here we happen to be talking about women.

**AA-S:** It's a sort of diversionary tactic, a sabotage operation within the bounds of a patriarchal institution. This dimension of work on a production that Agnieszka Jakimiak called the creation of a micro-institution.

**WS:** Yes. Sometimes it works. Though I've had the experience of hearing from the company director that more than two women on the crew of a production is too many. That it's a kind of disrespect. 'A female director and dramaturge, okay, if you must, but do we also need a female choreographer and set designer? This is starting to look like some kind of a demonstration. It's somehow not serious, unprofessional. I won't have this kind of cheap ideology in my theatre.'

**AA-S:** But is it possible to want more, not just a small act of sabotage, which additionally is so easy to block? Can such a takeover apply to mainstream institutional theatre? For several dozen years, feminist artists have been wondering about this, finding various formulas, yet all of them ad hoc and powerless against the backlash. Luce Irigaray advised giving up on theatre, which in Western civilization arose as an institution of a single gender – the male, because that's how ancient Greek theatre can be described – and which has always fanatically served the patriarchy.

**WS:** I'm now testing my attachment to the institution from another side, not only the artistic one, as an employee of the Bogusławski Theatre in Kalisz. So maybe I shouldn't complain, because somebody could say that I'm now in some kind of position of authority. That's true – but you also have to remember that the institution in its current form has taken shape over decades, and it can't be changed so quickly. In Kalisz we're definitely trying to take this aspect of institutional violence into consideration.

Maybe we should also talk about what is bringing an exciting change in this area in Poland today. I'm thinking of, for example, dance. This

whole gang of new female dancers, choreographers, performers, curators has something to offer that actually contains subversive power. Something that seems to me to be not just critical work, but also a positive proposition, which we're so lacking in theatre. They often achieve this by being completely audacious.

Here I would mention two solo dance pieces. The first is Agata Maszkiewicz's *Polska*. Maybe this isn't an offering aimed at recovering the subjectivity of the female body on stage, but through her audacity and deliberate use of abject images, Maszkiewicz really does transgress something. A beautiful and innocent-looking girl, in a skimpy athletics outfit in the national colours throughout the entire show – if we can call it that – contorts herself on stage, taking up strange, misshapen positions. She becomes a sort of incomprehensible body, with ill-defined limbs, deprived of her head. At a certain moment she's positioned so that her buttocks, which she's moving strangely, look like her breasts. All of this is unbearable, impossible to take. You have the desire to interrupt this obscene performance, to demand that the body immediately receive back its 'natural' shape and movement. A nationalist-sexist bombshell in the most paradoxical version of a sports show is revealed and disarmed, but in such a way that all the pleasure that we have ever felt looking at the supple bodies of female athletes running for a medal for Poland comes back to us in the form of unbearable embarrassment.

And then Maszkiewicz takes the microphone and starts to make the most inappropriate, repulsive jokes. Then, in extreme abandon and at the same time automatism, she on all fours 'dance' perform to 'Sympathy for the Devil' somehow made up entirely of friction moves. 'Somehow' – because Agata's solo is first and foremost a game with the viewer's vision. You see what you're accustomed to. It seems that here the body is forced to the edge of endurance. And it all ends with a Polish folk dance, which she dances for us lightly and joyfully, with a sweet smile on her face. You look at this and you're in shock. The whole time you're wondering whether it's some kind of innocent gymnastic exercises, or something extremely obscene. For me it was radical and liberating. And simultaneously light and – as I said – audacious. Nothing of victimisation, none of these spasms.

The other solo is Agata Siniarska's *Śmierć 24 klatki na sekundę, czyli zrób mi tak, jak w prawdziwym filmie* [*Death at 24 Frames per Second, or, Do It to Me Like in a Real Film*]. This is a sort of anti-choreography, a series of prepared, static images inspired mainly by Godard films. Siniarska looks exactly like a woman taken out of the frames of these films: her hairstyle, heels, tight dress, all the accessories of a woman of glamour – 'beauty as beauty'. Freezing in successive poses, the dancer prepares iconic gestures that 'make the woman'. This is strongly associated with Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, and at the same time it refers to Brechtian gesture – interruptions and pauses of the action, which open up the space of critical analysis. Unlike in the case of the photographs, though, here we're dealing with a live body, which introduces an aspect of obscene strangeness.

At a certain moment we realize that she has her lips open the whole time, and there begin to emerge and grow inarticulate sounds. It's not a voice, more like some kind of sighing, groans or murmurs created thanks to the work of the diaphragm – pulsating, persistent, accompanying every breath. Simultaneously somatic and mechanical. An extreme

tension is created between the image of the body frozen in an attractive pose and the phonic sphere, which indicates the body pulsing with life. Life, obscene and imprecise, pulsating within the body, under its smooth and beautiful surface, arising from the space of strangeness, radically other. At a certain moment, from the open, constantly unmoving lips of the dancer, saliva begins to drip.

Of course, here we have the whole package of feminist theory, with Laura Mulvey front and centre. We have revealed the situation of a woman brought into existence, seen through the objectified male eye. A woman existing through being looked at. In this anti-choreography, we have made clearly visible the principle that women don't act, but appear – always in the appropriate pose, always in a perfectly carnal stylization. But – and this is very important for me – for all this strong, openly feminist statement, the production is light and amusing, just like Maszkiewicz's *Polska*. Every so often the audience bursts out laughing, as Siniarska takes on successive poses of a woman being lusted after. In this there is a girlish and – I'll say it again – audacious strength; there's fun.

**AA-S:** Isn't this critical success partly because the two of them are doing it to themselves, eliminating the theatrical situation of using somebody else's body, which applies to actors regardless of their gender? The structure of theatre and the hierarchy of power peculiar to it reflect the fundamental cultural principle of appropriation and use of the female body, and depriving women of their position as subjects. In the case of women, because of their specific exhibition on the cultural scene, the exchange into the object of relentless ogling, constant desire/possession by the male gaze, this structural homology between theatre and culture operates particularly drastically. This must be why it's so difficult to take over the medium of theatre for feminist-emancipatory purposes. Both these artists at least partly make it out of this trap.

**WS:** Yes! That is definitely fundamental; that's where the strength of this offer flows from. That's why I have the feeling that female choreographer-dancers are a step farther than we in the theatre are.

**AA-S:** It recalls the situation of radical feminist performance of the 1970s. Only then it was about recovering the body, which was to be a freeing of the residue of femininity from the cultural trap. The creators of the performances you're talking about don't have any essentialist temptation. It's all based on deep consciousness of the mechanisms of culture, and readiness for the critical game. Also a game in the sense of fun and pleasure, thanks to which the trap of victim-ism is avoided. In a word: these are post-feminist productions, or maybe third-wave productions, which don't just successfully depict the system, but also bring a constructive proposal. They show that women can feel good in this reality, can spread themselves out in it thanks to their courage and sense of humour, and thanks to knowledge used in creative action.

**WS:** I have the feeling that we're approaching the heart of the problem. Maybe the oppressive mechanism can't be defeated at the level of representation, because it's encoded in the very principle of work in the theatre. Framing it this way allows me to understand why I very quickly felt that I must depart from simply taking up these subjects, that looking

for another representation of the female body on stage doesn't lead to anything, that I simply don't have any idea how to do it. That none of us does. And we're in a situation where we've read all the texts you need to know, where a few important things have been written on this subject in Poland then certain productions have emerged – we've finished the lesson, and so what? What's the next step? Well, exactly: we don't know. Milena and I could still be playing that phantom *Jackie* today – I say phantom not only because it's a production that has dropped off the marquee, but also because our *Jackie* from the beginning was such a particular undead object, which constantly haunts us – because it's still current. The deadlock we're in with this 'feminist shift' is precisely the grave where Jackie is embedded – and to which she invites us.

The situation now is that people who are interested in changing theatre and recovering it on behalf of true emancipatory work have begun to intensively analyse the area of relations of institutional work and practices. We have the feeling that this is the path to return to feminism, though of course here it's not only about feminism, because it's about connecting feminist discourse with other fields of emancipation. This is literally an institutional obsession; we're possessed by this subject: how to dismantle the hierarchy in the theatre; how to reveal and change the relationships of power, the distribution of prestige and finances; how within the framework of institutional theatre to decolonize the collaborators who are subject to the director, how to build a creative collective? First and foremost: how, within the framework of repertory theatre, to engage actors in the emancipatory process? This seems to be the most difficult task.

**AA-S:** That's why I believe director Oliver Frlić's proposal is so important, which has at its heart the creation of a true collective of political entities, of which each takes a position in its own name, having the right to question the authority and power of the director. This collective is not directed in this by the principle of consensus, because this is always based on exclusion and on hidden violence, but it acts in the field of revealed conflict. Repertory theatre is here a perfect space for critical operations, because in such theatre there exist teams that have worked together for years, treated as ensembles, meaning literally a team that is as attuned to each other as an orchestra, which is to be subject to the principles of discipline, subjection and full availability.

And in reality, here there are worldview and ideological conflicts similar to those in society. A repertory theatre's company is a metonym for society, and Frlić makes political use of this. He also enters into a strong confrontation with the aesthetics of that theatre, showing that it is part of a certain regime of institutions, serving a certain class system and national ideology.<sup>3</sup> The institution couldn't withstand such a well-aimed attack, and responded with preventative censorship. Nevertheless, I believe that this time too censorship will turn out to be counterproductive – as Judith Butler puts it – and in the end it will cause a broader and more intensive presence of the forbidden act, in this case the forbidden model of work and institutional criticism par excellence. In November,

3 For more see Agata Adamiecka-Sitek 'Poles, Jews and Aesthetic Experience: On the Cancelled Theatre Production by Oliver Frlić' in this issue of *Polish Theatre Journal*.

Frljić staged a performance as part of the Kraków project POP-UP. In 2017, he will be the curator of the Balkan idiom at the Malta Festival in Poznań. Other offers of work in Poland are being prepared.

It seems to me that for feminist thinking about theatre and more broadly, for the project of change in the model of institutional theatre in Poland, Frljić's proposition is uncommonly inspiring.

**WS:** Yes, this is very inspiring – it's important that in the Polish context somebody has finally dragged this topic to the surface. But it must be recalled that this proposal is also connected with the need to question one's own positions. That doesn't always work out, but you have to try. I think that only now am I starting to understand more broadly these hierarchical complexities that we're discussing. Earlier the matter seemed to me to be simple, more tied to the rules of representation.

**AA-S:** Let's note that both in the case of the dance productions you referred to and in the case of Frljić's work, what's fundamental are the shifts that are achieved in these works with respect to the classical rules of the theatre medium. The real work goes on not so much at the level of representation as at the level of the model of communication and the structure of the medium. At the meta-level, though of course with a strong connection with the discursive layer of presentation.

So they would be examples confirming the thesis put forth by Paweł Mościcki in *Polityka teatru. Eseje o sztuce angażującej* (2008)<sup>4</sup> – a very important book, which, I have the impression, was ahead of its time. In writing about his understanding of engaged theatre, Mościcki didn't have interesting examples in Polish theatre that he could use. Today, the analytical part of the book could be presented completely differently, but the categories proposed are based precisely on the recognition of structural homology between art and societal reality, which would mean that in making a revolution in art, we make a change in the social space. So it would be about work on new models of communications, reconfiguring the existing rules in such a way that the current dividing lines disappear, along with the hierarchy and power relationships that are implied by them, so that the possibility opens up of taking new positions, which earlier for such entities weren't accessible or even imaginable. Thus what's in the foreground is a particular sensitivity to one's own medium, meaning not only to the language of the theatre, but also with regard to the entire theatrical 'equipment', which is produced by the discourse of this art.

This is precisely what we need today in Polish theatre. Only when we transform institutional theatre itself and the work methods accessible within it and its aesthetics – because these are closely interlocking fields – can we, with the help of this theatre, change reality. And this in turn leads us to very concrete proposals for the democratization of the system of financing public theatre and the opening of opportunities for other organizational models: production houses, impresario theatres, umbrella institutions that would give institutional security to various groups and collectives working according to their own principles. And here it's not about grant-based pathways of financing that destine people to extremely

<sup>4</sup> The first chapter of Paweł Mościcki's book is published in translation in this issue of *Polish Theatre Journal*.

precarious employment relationships.

Why should repertory theatre – a 19th-century bourgeois monument, completely anachronistic today – be the only institutional model to be identified with public theatre? Why should more than 90 per cent of public funds support the functioning of this model exclusively, which today artificially divides theatre from the field of visual and performative arts, closing it in a silo of an organizational form that is no longer adequate, not only retarding its artistic development but also limiting its potential interactions with society and its institutional surroundings? Why must the only method of serious, long-term functioning in the space of Polish theatre be breaking into the system of repertory theatre, which is a theatre of the director and company director – with all the attendant consequences? Why should public theatre be defined as such with regard to who is the organizer and what is its institutional form, and not with regard to its significance for society and the type of work it undertakes?

**WS:** I would be very eager to experiment with other models of employment, production and collaboration. I have the impression that this would create a solution that's beneficial for all. It would question the accursed dilemma of farce or avant-garde. It would call into question the compromises related to the mission of an institution that must be for everyone. It would allow a place to be found for everyone, without restricting the audience's access to the very phenomena that it desires. And I say this as an employee of an institution who realizes its demands, benefits and limitations.

**AA-S:** Let's return to the 'feminist shift' in Polish theatre. We still haven't talked about what may be the most distinct phenomenon: Marta Górnicka's Chorus of Women. This is a project that emerged outside repertory theatre, in a completely separate organizational form and a different model of work. What is your opinion of the Chorus?

**MG:** I'm ambivalent – I guess that's how you could put it. The Chorus creates a certain problem for us, probably of the extremely serious type that appears here. It's not even about the message itself, because here of course there is a great deal of humour – laughter is one of the strategies Górnicka uses – but about the fundamental relationship between the director and the singers. Here there is a kind of violence, extreme control. I also have the feeling that in our *Jackie* we said earlier certain things that were heard and adopted by critics only on the occasion of the Chorus of Women – when they appeared in an exhibited place, when they were packaged appropriately in PR terms. This is more a remark addressed to the critics, but it's related to the functioning of the Chorus of Women, to its brand of breakthrough feminist enterprise in the history of Polish theatre.

**WS:** Here we return to the question of PR as a tool for harnessing revolutionary energy and channelling it in market-based mechanisms. I think that to a large degree that's how it happened with the Chorus: it didn't operate on the level of inspiring any change in Polish theatre, but it became a brand – even an export brand. If Warsaw wants to be snobby about its feminism, it goes to see the Chorus, which has just got back from a festival abroad.

**AA-S:** Yes, this is a certain problem. The Chorus and its message were needed here, in Poland, in the Polish provinces. Not only in Polish theatre, but in Polish society, because it brought up the problems of women who live in this culture. I'm thinking in particular of the *Magnificat*, in which they analyse the power relationship that the Catholic Church spreads out over women's bodies, over their lives, in Poland. The show premiered two years before the church announced that 'the ideology of gender' is another totalitarian ideology threatening the survival of the Polish nation, in the hope, as I understand it, that it will provide a substitute for communism and the church will once again be able to unite the community of Poles in the name of a battle with systemic evil. And later came the Chazan affair<sup>5</sup> – a symbolic example of that universal violence that the church and its fanatical adherents use against women. That makes it all the more visible how important productions such as *Magnificat* are.

Meanwhile, the Chorus has played decidedly more abroad than here, winning prestigious awards at successive festivals, and if it plays here, it's most often in Warsaw, in the headquarters of the Theatre Institute. Again, to a certain degree, things fell apart over institutional-financial questions, because it's uncommonly hard to take a show with twenty-five people around Poland. It's a lot easier to get money to create a project than to run it. But I also think that we were lacking in determination – I say 'we', because I was involved in this project from the start – and also to a certain degree in consciousness or even will.

**WS:** For me, the fundamental problem is the presence of Marta Górnicka on stage, which turns the Chorus's appearances into a public display of training. And here this lack of distance that Milena was talking about is really revealed. On stage, you see fantastic female personalities, but all of them are subject to this training, they're restricted. I also have the feeling that at the layer of message, the Chorus stops at the level already known to us of a story of trauma, that it doesn't take the next step and as a result doesn't act as an emancipatory experience. I also have a problem with the formula of an exclusively female work. With the assumption that here in a group of just us girls, we'll sing about how bad it is for us, how the patriarchy squeezes us so terribly, and in this way we'll affirm each other. I believe that if we don't make feminism into a common cause, if we don't make it cohesive with other emancipatory discourses, we're destined to lose. Of course, I can allow myself the kind of audacity like in this evening's performance of *Auntie*, that we act on our own, and we don't need the boys, but I wouldn't want to do further productions that way.

**AA-S:** I'm not in an entirely comfortable situation to defend the Chorus, because it's nevertheless to a certain degree a voice from inside [AA-S was a dramaturge at the project]. But I'll try to present briefly the most important arguments. The Chorus's appearance had that

5 The Chazan affair – a case, notorious in the middle of 2014, of a gynaecology and obstetrics professor, director of one of the biggest hospitals in Warsaw, who by invoking the conscience clause refused to perform an abortion on his patient, thereby forcing her as it were to deliver though her foetus was heavily genetically damaged (the baby lived for ten days). The doctor was dismissed.

audacious and provocative character that we were talking about earlier – and with regard to the entire Western theatre tradition. It was an obvious reference to the ancient chorus – also in the textual layer, because in the first production *Antigone* was important [*This Is the Chorus Speaking*, 2010], in the second *The Bacchae* [*Magnificat*, 2011] – as that single-gender male institution. Instead of a male protagonist, the stage has been ostentatiously taken over by women, mostly amateurs, with their radically feminine, commenting message. With one blow this has struck at tradition and the contemporary state of professional, artistic theatre. All the more so as these women, under the leadership of a director-coryphaeus, had the perfect form and technique, developed in an original training programme. What's most important, acted here precisely on the level of form, of theatrical language, which arose between the body, the voice and all its registers, and language as a reservoir of stereotypes and the most effective tool of power.

When it comes to Marta's position, toward the members she is undoubtedly violent, though this authority is here readable and strongly presented. That which in the traditional director's theatre is hidden behind representation here becomes one of the subjects. From the start, it was clear that this isn't a formula that can be repeated in further productions. That's why *Requiemachine* [2013], based on Władysław Broniewski's texts and taking up questions including neoliberal employment relationships, the final alienation of the subject from the means of production and the lack of a plan for systemic change – is executed with a mixed, majority-male cast. Marta's next projects, although they take advantage of the form developed with the Chorus, open up to other spaces. Her Israeli social project is very interesting; she did it with male and female Israeli army soldiers, with Arab and Israeli mothers and children.

But I have to admit to one thing: The Chorus of Women as a whole worked on – and is working on – Marta Górnicka. None of the women singing in the Chorus, even if she were the biggest individuality on the stage, will be remembered individually; any of them can be replaced at any moment. Marta's other collaborators are similarly invisible. In this dimension, this is a project that really hasn't changed the relationships in the director's theatre.

**WS:** To the question of what comes next, I think you have to answer it's combining contradictory strategies: work at the foundations, and terrorist operations. Work at the foundations must go on, meaning within the framework of institutions. I'm not convinced that institutions are in the end reformable, but are certainly so to some degree. It's just that in Poland, it's about blowing up the monopoly of the institution – which you mentioned.

**AA-S:** And not only in Poland, it seems. In 2007, Josette Féral's book *Voix de femmes* came out, with more than thirty interviews with women working in theatre in the West. These are creators who come from various backgrounds, various generations and various countries: from Franca Rame, born in 1929, through Helgard Hang, a member of Rimini Protokoll. There's one thing in common in all these interviews: disappointment with the institution of the theatre, the experience of discrimination and, for the majority, a decision to work on the margins of the system or completely outside it.

**WS:** Exactly!

**AA-S:** Of course, we must be very careful here. It's not about a simple reduction of the share of institutional theatre, because on the other hand institutions guarantee relative security for culture. In today's system, it's very hard to liquidate an institution; there are full-time employees ready to fight for their jobs, and so on. A simple transition to a grant system – as happened at a certain moment in Holland, and which is described by Dragan Klaić in his book *Resetting the Stage: Public Theatre Between the Market and Democracy*, threatens that at the moment of a crisis in public finances, a single effective decision-making process will liquidate half of culture, because the amount to be distributed in competitions will simply be reduced.

But we have to find a clever way to democratize and diversify the institutional forms of the theatre that we consider public. We have to allow creators to organize themselves in the institutions that they need for work, in institution-ideas. To make active and flexible institutionalization possible for collectives and creative groups. But that means that repertory theatres will have to move over, to give up a little space; some portion of them may have to be liquidated, with an iron-clad guarantee that the subsidies designated for theatre won't shrink but will grow to the degree possible. Theatre can be a space for practicing radical democracy, and at the same time, in this systemic model, there is space to care for the crisis of representative democracy in which we find ourselves. Today's repertory theatres are 'court institutions', which in the best case are governed by 'enlightened rulers', who see what is good for the people and how much they can be told about the politics the leader practices.

A shocking proof of this state of affairs was supplied recently by Jan Klata in the interview he gave Dariusz Kosiński.<sup>6</sup> He admitted that the reason he publicly explained his decision to stop work on *Nie-Boską komedię. Szczątkami* [*The Un-Divine Comedy: Remains*] directed by Frljić – that is, the safety of the cast – was only a pretext to be able to withdraw from the entire situation without losing face. I mean, Klata sort of didn't realise that security is actually the first alibi in situations of the violation of democratic freedoms in many of today's disputes over world views. Quite obviously, he also doesn't understand that in revealing his actions so ruthlessly, he reveals not only his own cynicism, but also his complete lack of understanding of the role of a public cultural institution.

Meanwhile, in a situation of a shrinking public space under the influence of its persistent neoliberal colonization and conversion into a sphere of capitalistic production and consumption, this role is inexorably growing. It's cultural institutions that should create the conditions for questioning the ideological foundations of the consumerist society and make possible practices that challenge the hegemony. This function was not performed by court theatres. The feminist revolution in the theatre has to be executed in parallel with the struggle for democratization of the theatre.

**WS:** That's why the feminist shift, which was to happen as a result of the entry into the theatre of a group of woman directors, didn't in fact

<sup>6</sup> See 'Nothing Else Matters: Jan Klata in Conversation with Dariusz Kosiński' in this issue of *Polish Theatre Journal*.

happen. In repertory theatre, the director – regardless of gender – equals authority, equals no negotiations, equals an individual delineation of the ideological message of the production, equals all-but individual authorship of a work that should be by nature collective. We're still submerged in these mechanisms of violence. We're still asking ourselves: How far can you go in an institution?

One thing is no less important in relation to the strategy of working at the foundations and terrorism. It must also be accompanied by a certain work around discourse, based on a merciless pointing out of sexist practices in all areas of life. There's no need to fear embarrassment. Women are very often laughed at; that's one of the most effective tools of misogyny. Agnieszka Graff wrote about this long ago in *Świat bez kobiet*: You have the right not to laugh at a sexist joke, only if you don't laugh, you're immediately one of those sad chicks, you're not a cool colleague. Meanwhile, the way productions on feminist subjects are treated in Poland is reprehensible. Rarely does anyone discuss them; most often they're just mocked.

**MG:** After *Jackie*, we heard from our male colleagues – 'Is it my problem that you're having your period? Do you really want to talk about that on stage? What's all this feminist gymnastics leading to?' These weren't stupid people; it was more a sort of – I swear – an avant-garde.

**WS:** That's right, we heard constant arguments that it didn't matter. That it was shameful to discuss this. It's really easy to make a person ashamed by such a trivializing attack on his or her work. It's a certain defencelessness.

**AA-S:** The subject of laughing at women allows us to return to Fredro's *Auntie*. It's written in such a way that you have to laugh, because how can you not laugh at a character who's a woman over fifty, who believes that all the men surrounding her have suddenly begun to burn with passionate love for her. If you don't laugh, you don't have any distance, and there must surely be something missing in your life.... Nothing, no operation by the director can defend [the character] Małgorzata. Unless it's a gesture as radical as yours this evening. And – what's most important – the play is so trivial that it's absolutely innocent. That means the question becomes totally depoliticized, and after all the patriarchal, conservative, misogynistic world order comes to be confirmed here yet again.

**WS:** Right, here there's a stalemate because of this triviality. After all, what's the problem? This is a comedy about nothing. And Małgorzata is a warm, charming creature, who doesn't hurt anyone and, in the end, nothing bad happens to her. Dear lady, where's the problem? Well, and we're stuck in hell! Because this is – if we listen precisely and, for a moment, halt this dance of words and the constant motion of plot twists – a story about a woman who to others appears to be a restless, repulsive old bat. And this construct, of course, harms women. Meanwhile, the triviality blocks all critical examination. On the other hand, it's interesting that it's so intensively argued that this play has a deeper level, as the indefatigable Professor Kucharski, whom Boy [the writer Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński] so rightly mocked, once pointed out. Really, in this charming

manor house there is hidden a wounded insurgent – this is how Kucharski interpreted the character Edmund-Astolf. Fredro couldn't write about him, so he wrote about the auntie – this ostentatiously trivial subject was supposedly intended to make the reader aware that the writer wanted to, but couldn't, speak about that which is most important: about Poland. And we're back in hell! Wherever you look: checkmate. Chicks versus banners.

And that's precisely what's happening in Polish politics, including cultural policy, with women and with the problems of women. Let's pose it radically: what's an unwanted pregnancy in comparison to Smolensk [the crash of the Polish presidential jetliner in 2010]? What's an unwanted pregnancy compared to, on the other hand, the propaganda of success of the last quarter-century? It seems to me that it's precisely in this way, among others, that our culture shames, denigrates and humiliates women.

**AA-S:** As we wrap up, I'd like to pull out one more subject and return to what I considerer the founding narrative, which is the image that interests us of Krzysztof Warlikowski's *The Taming of the Shrew*. The first production that was described – often with offence and dismissively, but often with recognition – as feminist. In fact, the subject of women's experiences in the patriarchy was taken up here with the greatest seriousness. From today's perspective, I see this deeper sense of that founding narrative. An open subject of the presentation is the oppression that a woman meets in a patriarchal culture – and by the way, a fantastic lecture on the subject of the performative nature of gender. But the production has a deeper level – as does *Auntie*, not to compare the two. It actually describes how in Western patriarchal culture, male-male love is stifled and displaced. About how this is a truly emancipatory need of the director, which can't be discussed directly.

This is revealed in the constant second narrative stream of this production, which takes place somehow under the rough, effective action, but every so often disturbs it, causing an unexpected and disorienting interruption. Remember those scenes of stagnation where nothing is happening, on stage the protagonists are dancing slowly to a solo on the accordion? They're not even looking at each other, but their bodies are connected by a kind of indescribable tension. Or when they start to exchange clothes in one of the many identity and class charades the plot is full of. Slowly, this time looking each other in the eye, they take off their clothes, drawing this scene out into infinity. This is precisely a story about homo-social desire in a world in which men support men and treat them as the only entities of social exchange, but they can't desire one another.

Yet in each successive production, Warlikowski developed and drew out this precise narrative, forced by circumstance to discard the open one – the feminist one – and “stealing” its emancipatory potential. Polish theatre – mainly because of Warlikowski and director Krystian Lupa – has said all there is to say about male-male love. Uncensored, unrestricted. This intermeshed tightly with world-view shifts, with real comings-out in the public sphere, and together it has worked very significantly for gay liberation. Gay, but not lesbian. They've made their own theatre. We haven't.

**WS:** And the winner takes all. Let's say it clearly: It's wonderful that in Poland people have managed to make a theatre beyond all that monstrous traditional conservatism that dominates here. But somehow it has turned out that this achievement sometimes happens at the cost of women. The emancipatory energy of Polish theatre has been completely redirected, the female kind is passé, boring. I'm filled with regret when in some productions that bravely explore non-hetero-normative male narrations, women play stereotypical roles or are tossed into a camp schematic of dolls. Similar things happen with various qualities related to the body – the male body in the theatre today can be beautiful, ugly, weak, but also desired in an affirmative way; it's liberated from clichés, it becomes truly non-normative. This seizure is a strand that's very difficult to take up. But I'm going to insist that one can cheer wholeheartedly for the gay recapture of the stage yet still say 'Give it back'.

**AA-S:** But the answer will be 'Do it yourselves'. Why have they pulled this off, while we're still just shadow-boxing?

**WS:** For institutional reasons – that's clear. As a woman you always have to leap into something, you can't wait for the system to adapt itself to you. Men here are allowed to do much more.

**AA-S:** Meaning homosexual directors have made their theatre, because as men they were at home in the institution?

**WS:** That's how it looks. Meanwhile, investing in feminism in Polish theatre is completely unprofitable. It destines you to ridicule and alienation.

*Translated by Nathaniel Espino*

**Weronika Szczawińska, PhD** (1981) – theatre director, dramaturge, cultural studies scholar and translator from English. A graduate of the Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in the humanities programme at the University of Warsaw (2007), she studied directing at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. In 2007 made her debut at the Polski Theatre in Warsaw, staging *Liberation – Rehearsals* after Stanisław Wyspiański. Among the plays she has directed are Elfriede Jelinek's *Jackie: Death and the Maiden* (Stefan Jaracz Theatre, Olsztyn, 2008), Tadeusz Różewicz's *White Marriage* (Stefan Żeromski Theatre, Kielce, 2010), *How to Be Loved*, based on Agnieszka Jakimiak's text inspired by the Kazimierz Brandys story and the Wojciech Jerzy Has film (Juliusz Słowacki Baltic Drama Theatre, Koszalin, 2011). In 2014 she directed *Genius in a Polo Neck* at the National Stary Theatre in Kraków.

**Milena Gauer** (1981) – actor at the Stefan Jaracz Theatre in Olsztyn (since 2005). Also collaborates with the Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw, Łąźnia Nowa theatre in Kraków and the Jerzy Szaniawski Theatre in Wałbrzych.

**Agata Adamecka-Sitek, PhD** (1974) – graduate in cultural studies from the University of Silesia. Author of *Teatr i tekst. Inscenizacja w teatrze postmodernistycznym* (2006) as well as several dozen essays and articles published in the journals *Dialog*, *Didaskalia*, *Teatr*, *Notatnik Teatralny* and in essay collections. Founder and editor of two publication series – *Inna Scena* and *Nowe Historie* – and editor of numerous books on theatre. Recently led the project and was on the editorial board of the first edition of Jerzy Grotowski's *Teksty zebrane*. Works at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, where she manages academic projects, including a programme of research on Polish theatre from a gender and queer perspective. Research on construction of gender and sexuality in Grotowski's theatre was also the subject of the semester-long course which she designed in 2011 for the Jerzy Grotowski Institute. Worked with Marta Górnicka on the Chorus of Women project. Teaches at the National Academy of Dramatic Art, as well as gender studies at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences.