

**Maryla Zielińska**

Factory 3

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### Factory 3

In 2008, at the Scena Kameralna [Chamber Stage] of the Stary Theatre in Kraków, Krystian Lupa<sup>1</sup> recreated Andy Warhol's silver Factory space. The recreation was meant to provide the cast involved in the Stary production *Factory 2* that Lupa was directing with their own private space; it was a kind of enclave assuring safety for those who were taking part in rehearsals and performances. Eight years later, the stage set was transferred to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków (MOCAK), where an interactive installation, *Live Factory 2: Warhol by Lupa*<sup>2</sup> was mounted by the theatre director, based on the original set. Visitors were able to enter the maze of decor, rummage through every nook and cranny, touch things, read what artists had written on the walls, and look at their drawings and photos they had taken – and they could also make themselves comfortable on a chair or sofa and watch recorded excerpts from the production and workshops that preceded it. The installation had the power to 'suck things in', as its museum context disappeared within it. Even more important, sitting on Andy's sofa and watching an excerpt of the performance in which Andy sits on the same piece of furniture and watches us as he wait for his guests to arrive (Piotr Skiba, who is playing Warhol in this scene, awaits his fellow actors and the audience), one could hardly escape the fundamental questions: where exactly are we – and what is theatre, the palpable fiction sweeping us up, touching us with images, sounds, lights and colours? Who in here is watching whom? As we are told in one of the recordings: 'The purpose of art is to make us stop knowing'.

As I sat on the sofa, I thought that sentence would spur a good commentary to the work of director Anna Karasińska. In the five productions Karasińska has made since her debut work in 2015, the director consistently breaks the art of theatre down and asks 'What is this?'

1.

Karasińska came to theatre as a so-called mature individual, at age 37, with a wealth of experience which, though diverse, had scarcely anything to do with theatre. Originally from Łódź, she pursued her entire tertiary

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1 *Factory 2*, dir. by Krystian Lupa, National Stary Theatre in Kraków, premiere 16 February 2008.

2 *Live Factory 2: Warhol by Lupa*, MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków, private view: 14 March 2016.

education there: at the Academy of Fine Arts, she studied in the Faculty of Textile Art and Fashion Design (carpet weaving and video-art studios); at the University of Łódź, she majored in philosophy, abandoning her studies before completing her degree. Her literary work, though praised by a prospective publisher, was also set aside. She received her degree in film and television directing from another institution, the Lodz Film School. There, she completed short films,<sup>3</sup> several of which have won best film or best screenplay awards at festivals in Poland and abroad. She has collaborated with six directors on as many feature films, working as assistant director,<sup>4</sup> casting assistant,<sup>5</sup> associate director<sup>6</sup> and casting director.<sup>7</sup> One could say Karasińska came to theatre straight from the film set.

What drove her to express herself through theatre? What were her objectives and expectations? Karasińska speaks in interviews of being out of line with the film-production system which does not take kindly to lab-style work. She also mentions her quest for a place where she would be able to bring her various creative experiences together and formulate a statement on her own terms. She is certainly not looking to tell stories, create characters and emotions between them, to charm audiences with the illusion of theatre or to engage in a critique of reality. Karasińska is not interested in extant, completed literary works (though she did make use of a play<sup>8</sup> while working in film; and perhaps when she mentioned she would like to stage *Hamlet*, it wasn't meant as a joke): she writes her own pieces for the stage, and relies on actor improvisation. She clearly has a need to physically exist within the structure she herself created: she appears on stage, or else she's present in voiceover. It seems that stage and costume design are in Karasińska's work to represent and illustrate nothing, not to construct a narrative of any sort; they are there to render meanings indistinct. By offering theatre in its unadorned form, Karasińska reflects on what theatre as an event means to people taking part in it, whether as collaborating artists or audience members – and what such an event means to her. She poses a number of ontological questions. All without pomp, but with a great deal of humour, quite irreverent and very absurd.

3 Karasińska was writer and director of *Fochy*, a short documentary (2005); the montage specialist and director of *Udany dzień* for TV (2006); director of *Szuler*, a workshop performance (2006); director of *No Speak Poland*, a short documentary (2006); writer and director of both *Universal Spring*, a short film (2008), and of *Obowiązki*, a short film for which she received her degree (2014). Karasińska was also montage assistant on *350 km*, a short film dir. by Jakub Piątek (2009).

4 *Jestem twój*, dir. by Mariusz Grzegorzek (2009).

5 *Małe sztuczki*, dir. by Aleksandra Gowin and Ireneusz Grzyb (2014).

6 *Papusza*, dir. by Joanna Kos-Krauze and Krzysztof Krauze (2013); *Sąsiady*, dir. by Grzegorz Królikiewicz (2014).

7 *Papusza* (see footnote 6); *Stwór*, a short film dir. by Aleksandra Gowin and Ireneusz Grzyb (2015).

8 The screenplay for the short film *Udany dzień* was modelled on *Parasiten*, a play by Marius von Mayenburg. For *Jestem twój*, Karasińska and the team worked from a screenplay by director Mariusz Grzegorzek based on the play *I Am Yours* by Judith Thompson (from which the film took its title).

2.

In the context of theatre, Karasińska's name first came up in a competition held in the 2014/2015 season by TR Warszawa, one of Warsaw's leading theatres. 'Teren TR', the name of the competition, referenced previous editions of a similar undertaking (2004, 2005) when the objective had been to attract interesting artists who weren't necessarily drama-school graduates to theatre. In doing so, the company, led by Grzegorz Jarzyna, its long-time artistic director, was seeking to tap in to new sources of energy. Karasińska made it to the final stage with a project in which she sought to 'look into the effect of strangeness, which I've been coming to grips with for a long time now'.<sup>9</sup> While at work on the project with aspiring actors, she overheard one girl in her cast exclaim: 'Wow! This is actually the bathroom these actors piss in as well. Dig that!'<sup>10</sup> Karasińska drew on amateur actors' idea of TR Warszawa stars for the script of *Ewelina płacze* [*Ewelina's Crying*]<sup>11</sup> – and went on to cast those very stars in the production.

Audience members take their seats in an auditorium where lights remain switched on throughout, with the working lights joining spaces occupied by those watching and those performing. Four actors stand next to each other on the proscenium, dressed comfortably, as if ready for a workshop. Three are easily recognized, and not just by regular theatregoers: Adam Woronowicz, Rafał Maćkowiak and Maria Maj, popular actors who are as well known for their film and television work as their theatre performances. The girl on the far edge of the stage is an enigma, and so is her name: Ewelina Pankowska. But there is a fifth person, as well: a young woman (Karasińska) who, over the course of relaxation exercises (or what amounts to the stereotypical of such exercises), awakens Ewelina from her stupor, helps her warm up then runs off the stage. The mechanism has been set in motion by the director's touch.

The well-known actors play amateurs from across Poland, here to fill in for TR Warszawa stars – Woronowicz, Maćkowiak – who have more important things to do than take part in an 'experimental project'. The actors present their ideas of the stars. Ewelina Pankowska appears under her own name and is supposed to fill in for another well-known actor, Magdalena Cielecka. What follows is a multi-layered, extremely funny play on the identity of the theatre character, the actor – and the role, which may entail playing oneself. But what does 'oneself' really mean when applied to an actor? Is it her image in the media or her actual self? Can the two be separated? This play on identity featuring TR stars provokes waves of laughter, but jams up when it comes to Ewelina. She is neither Cielecka nor able to play her (does it follow that she is a bad actor?); she stumbles over herself, on her own naturalness, seems uninteresting to herself per se. Is it because she is unknown? She culminates the drama in a fit of tears. But this is wrong, too: that's no way to cry in

9 Mike Urbaniak, 'Nie umiem zauczestniczyć', *Pan od kultury. Teatralny blog Mike'a Urbaniaka*, <https://mikeurbaniak.wordpress.com/2016/11/28/nie-umiem-zauczestniczyc/>, [accessed on 29 November 2016].

10 Urbaniak, 'Nie umiem zauczestniczyć'.

11 *Ewelina płacze*, written and directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy assistant Magdalena Rydzewska, TR Warszawa, premiere 7 June 2015.

the theatre. Her colleagues show her how it's done. But do they do it as characters (after all, they play small-town amateurs) or as older, more experienced actors? All four collapse on stage, exhausted, the lights go down, the actors appear for a curtain call. Only Ewelina keeps lying where she was. She needs to be dragged off the stage. But dragged off as whom? Has she experienced a personal drama while on stage? But surely she cannot experience it like this night after night! Is she an actor or an amateur? She has just graduated from drama school in Wrocław.

In her first production, Karasińska sought to identify the kind of instrument the actor becomes in the hands of the director; and the relationship she has with her character and with reality. How much oppression do such relationships entail? As she posed such questions, Karasińska also managed to offer an irreverent commentary on the project-based employment system and to let some steam out of TR Warszawa's haughty media image.

Karasińska worked on her next production in an aura of expectation among theatre circles: would she pull it off again, or would her luck run dry, letting the cat out of the bag – the 'cat' in this case being that the director really had nothing to say? Karasińska took this atmosphere surrounding the production as her theme, calling it *Drugi spektakl* [*The Second Performance*]<sup>12</sup> and... focusing on her audience. On stage, actors seated in a row of chairs face the audience, performing short acting exercises on the theme of behaviour among typical theatregoers. Their subject matter is given by the director, who features in the performance in voice-over. From the actors' point of view, there is... a second performance taking place in the audience. The situation has the flavour of cabaret or drama-school exercises. But the production has a further part: the voice introduces it as 'the advanced option: how to express your needs' – then falls silent. One after the next, the cast take a seat among the audience and talk about what they would like to see on stage. It's a festival of actor requests, from 'I'd like to see something on the theme of mother' to 'play the here and now'. An actor / audience member who wants to 'feel something' causes problems and wrecks the performance. She doesn't feel anything; she doesn't even know what she is supposed to feel.

What is the purpose of theatre? Karasińska seems to ask. Why do people continue to be drawn to it, though they often find it boring and tiresome? Is theatre really supposed to trigger feelings and sensations in the audience mediated by a third party, the actor? And what would those sensations be entertainment, or catharsis?

As I mentioned above, Karasińska practices theatre in its unadorned form, which meant she didn't need to restrain herself in any particular way when accepting the invitation to participate in the *Mikroteatr* [Micro-theatre] project devised by members of *Komuna // Warszawa*, a leading Warsaw independent theatre. Tomasz Plata, one member of the collective, envisaged the project as a directors' exercise in self-limitation. A production had to be no longer than sixteen minutes, the cast no larger than four. Directors were provided two microphones, four stage lights, a video projector and any prop that would fit into an airline-cabin

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12 *Drugi spektakl*, written and directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy assistant Ewelina Pankowska, Polski Theatre in Poznań, premiere 13 May 2016.

bag. The budget of up to 1,200 zlotys [300 euro] was a further limitation. Only the choice of subject matter was unrestricted.

Karasińska presented *Urodziny* [*Birthday*],<sup>13</sup> a seemingly self-referential miniature. 'For me, working in theatre is a bit like having a party, when I have guests over. For now, I'm very excited to be able to present something, to have people come and experience something, to be able to script someone else's experience. This helps me grow'.<sup>14</sup> Karasińska stands still in the middle of the stage (blacked-out at first, then lit by the spot lamps), while her monologue is heard in voiceover. She introduces herself, tells the audience why she's here and how it makes her feel. Because she isn't comfortable, she comes up with the idea of her own birthday, where only well-wishing family members (the audience, that is) would be invited. This does not help, and terror mounts, culminating in darkness and thunder. A girl appears on the empty stage, incessantly combing her long black hair with a silver-tinted brush. A boy in a white T-shirt comes on, too: he is dripping wet, having just fallen into a waterfall (the one Karasińska imagines in the first part of the performance?). The pair make themselves comfortable in imaginary armchairs and embark on a rather absurd dialogue – the situation is far from clear. Is the actor on stage by her own volition, or is she there because this is what the director wished and imagined, having fled the stage herself in a panic?

Karasińska's involvement with micro-theatre and self-theatre (one characteristic of the latter, according to critic Joanna Krakowska, is that it's 'capable of embarking on a critique of itself'<sup>15</sup>) has put her in great demand: since her first production, *Ewelina's Crying*, she has been receiving invitations to mainstream theatres and to festivals in Poland and abroad. Her subsequent productions in 2017 premiered again at TR Warszawa and at the Sary Theatre in Kraków. The former, *Fantazja* [*The Fantasia*]<sup>16</sup> is a boldly devised exercise of the imagination – or rather, the imaginations of all those who are there in the auditorium – but is also, in a way, a piece of music. Six actors enter an empty stage, surrounded on three sides by a curtain, stand side by side in a straight line, wearing comfortable 'work' clothes. A voiceover says:

The performance you are about to see will now come into being, live. Except for several fragments to which we've grown attached during rehearsals, the actors haven't been assigned their parts. I respond to events on stage and read aloud the course the performance will take. For that reason, there's no such thing as a single, perfect course of events. I'm the director of this production and I think it's important

13 *Urodziny*, devised and staged by Anna Karasińska, Komuna// Warszawa, premiered 12 November 2016.

14 'Jak na polskie kino jestem za bardzo pojechana', Anna Karasińska in conversation with Przemysław Gdula, *Gazeta Wyborcza Trójmiasto* (online edition), 28 June 2016, <http://trojmiasto.wyborcza.pl/trojmiasto/1,35611,20314873,anna-karasińska-jak-na-polskie-kino-jestem-za-bardzo-pojechana.html> [accessed on 29 January 2018].

15 Joanna Krakowska, 'Auto-teatr w czasach post-prawdy', *Dwutygodnik* 195, [www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/6756-auto-teatr-w-czasach-post-prawdy.html](http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/6756-auto-teatr-w-czasach-post-prawdy.html) [accessed on 29 January 2018].

16 *Fantazja*, written and directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy by Magdalena Rydzewska and Jacek Telenga, TR Warszawa, premiered 9 April 2017.

to say I'm not running a tape here: I'm physically present in this room, and I'm currently sitting in the balcony. This is something you cannot see, but you can imagine it: I'm very small in this large room and my desk lamp is small, too. Because I'm live as well, it's possible I'll laugh, or make a mistake, or I'll be at a loss about what to do next. I'd also like to say – in my own name, and in the name of the actors and all the other people who appeared here on stage – that we are very happy to be with you today.

The first task for an actor follows: 'Dobromir will play a white bear now.' Actors appear under their own names, so Dobromir Dymecki takes a step forward and begins to play his role – which, in this production, means he does not imitate anything: he stands, makes slight movements or keeps still, changes his facial expression so that embarrassment is more pronounced in his face than the effort of acting. The director has taken his lines away. And so it continues until the end: the actors reconfigure on stage, the voiceover assigns tasks in a throwaway manner, the tasks repeat themselves and, as previously announced by the director, the rhythm is 'disturbed' (actors speak, they 'play something'). The tasks assigned by Karasińska are a tour de force of abstract thinking, and demonstrate how keenly she observes reality. As the performance comes to an end, Karasińska leaves the actors free to 'play what they want'. They stand motionless, silent, their arms dropped – after a moment, they walk off the stage.

Does the work of the imagination have to be seen? Should it not be transferred to the audience? The latter group are left with the question: what is theatre? Would the actors' imaginations (and those of the audience) be set in motion without the voice – that is, without words? The director still needs the actor on stage, but are her voice and movement needed, as well? Karasińska plays on imagination, but also on being live: theatre is what happens here and now. We are well aware of this, but Karasińska's theatre approaches these obvious contentions in a manner so peculiar that we are left empty-handed and knowledge-free.

Karasińska's first production with the Sary Theatre in Kraków happened to coincide with the end of the tenure of artistic director Jan Klata (one of Poland's most sought-after directors). Karasińska's production was staged in a climate set by the deplorable way in which the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage set about choosing Klata's successor. Not only did Klata lose the competition organised by the Ministry – humiliatingly to him and his ensemble, he lost it to the least known and least experienced person on the candidate list. As interviews for the position were being held, and the results announced (sparking vehement protest from the Sary ensemble), Klata was in rehearsals for his production of *Wesele* [*The Wedding*] the great Polish drama by Stanisław Wyspiański from 1901. That was the atmosphere Karasińska worked in: her own production acquired a new context, and new expectations arose around it as critics and audiences began to hope she would speak out about what was happening at the theatre – and in Poland, whose nationalist, rightist government had been in power by then for eighteen months. Given that Karasińska's is an acritical theatre, she did an about-turn and avoided 'taking a stand' by changing both the title and the rationale of

her undertaking. In place of the previously announced *Poradnik na czas nieporządku* [*Self-help for a Time of Disorder*],<sup>17</sup> she came up with *Wszystko zmyślane* [*All Imaginary*].<sup>18</sup> ‘This production’ (as it’s incessantly referred to in the script) is a stream of actor fantasies triggered by the director’s voice; a record of staring – at the world and within oneself; a flow of impressions heading towards the one and only certainty: death. The eschatological tone drowns the laughter of audience members who recognise the stream of absurd words and actions as a familiar thing. The audience joins the cast in an effort to construct ‘this production’ within themselves – after all, nothing much happens on stage. Karasińska examines the strength of theatre as a community, but does so without an ounce of pomp. She prefers simplicity and laughter to pathos and emotional excess. She is a practicing Buddhist, and perhaps something of that permeates her theatre practice.

### 3.

The experiments Karasińska has undertaken are part of a broader phenomenon in contemporary Polish theatre which gauges how much theatre, as it were, there needs to or should be in theatre for it to still go by that name. Just as the ‘patricide’ generation that came of age in newly democratic Poland (including renowned directors Grzegorz Jarzyna and Krzysztof Warlikowski; their ‘father’ being the legendary director Krystian Lupa) ostentatiously unburdened the artist of her duty to her homeland, so Karasińska and her contemporaries repeat the same gesture with reference to critical theatre and monumental theatre (which, with time, came to include the ‘patricides’). The theatre practised by Karasińska is like a virus: let into mainstream theatres, it exposes the mechanisms of institutional theatre and its daily routine, endeavouring to operate on its own terms. Her reconnaissance forays wield a battle-like force. Karasińska seems to have stayed true to the declaration she made before her debut: ‘We are dismantling theatre as a situation in order to enter into a close relationship with our audience and with ourselves. Our work has often caused everything to go topsy-turvy, enabling us to get a taste of the freedom that entails. We hope our audiences can get a taste of this freedom too’.<sup>19</sup>

How long will it be before managing directors of theatres run out of patience? It’s often said that Karasińska keeps doing the same thing over and over again, that it must be only practice towards something more ambitious... Perhaps, however, as she breaks theatre down into its constituent parts, she only wants to say that ‘the purpose of art is to make us stop knowing’?

*Translated by Joanna Błachnio*

17 This may have been the idea of staging a cleaning self-help book or manual. Karasińska had that in mind in Poznań, but changed direction after a visit to the stage. See Urbaniak, ‘Nie umiem zuczestniczyć’.

18 *Wszystko zmyślane*, written and directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy assistant Magdalena Rydzewska, National Stary Theatre in Kraków, premiered 23 June 2017.

19 <http://trwarszawa.pl/spektakle/ewelina-placze/> [accessed on 29 January 2018].



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**PERFORMANCES**

- Ewelina płacze*, written and directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy assistant Magdalena Rydzewska, TR Warszawa, premiere 7 June 2015
- Drugi spektakl*, written and directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy assistant Ewelina Pankowska, Polski Theatre in Poznań, premiere 13 May 2016
- Urodziny*, devised and staged by Anna Karasińska, Komuna// Warszawa, premiered 12 November 2016
- Fantazja*, written and directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy by Magdalena Rydzewska and Jacek Telenga, TR Warszawa, premiere 9 April 2017
- Wszystko zmyślone*, written and directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy assistant Magdalena Rydzewska, National Stary Theatre in Kraków, premiere 23 June 2017

## ABSTRACT

**Maryla Zielińska**

## Factory 3

The article analyses Anna Karasińska's work as a director, attempting to place her theatre and filmmaking experience on the map of contemporary theatre (post-theatre). In the five productions Karasińska has made since her début work in 2015 (*Ewelina's Crying*, *The Second Performance*, *Birthday*, *the Fantasia*, *All Imaginary*), she seems to break the art of theatre down, conjure up the effect of strangeness and ask: 'What is this?'. An ontological quest, overlaid with a paradoxical sense of humour, lies behind the simplicity of the question, and the formal simplicity of Karasińska's theatre. A practitioner of micro-theatre and auto-theatre, ever since her first production Karasińska has been much in demand, receiving invitations to festivals in Poland and abroad, and being approached by mainstream theatres.

She came to theatre as a so-called mature individual, at the age of 37, with a wealth of experience which, though diverse, had scarcely anything to do with theatre. Her work in theatre is a laboratory of sorts. She clearly has a need to physically exist within the structure she herself created: she appears on stage, or else she's present in voiceover (albeit live). Stage and costume design seem to represent and illustrate nothing, not to construct a narrative of any sort in Karasińska's work – they are there to render meanings indistinct. By offering theatre in its unadorned form, Karasińska invites us to take part in an identity game on the theme of the theatrical situation: what it means for those who take part in it as co-authors and audience members. In addition, Karasińska plays with the context of great forms and critical theatre, prevalent in Poland. Her brand of theatre is distinctly her own.