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I won't explain or disguise the title's ingenuous paraphrasing of the essay 'The Emancipated Spectator'<sup>1</sup> by the philosopher Jacques Rancière – a text that has been volubly commented on in the theatre world. An artist who undertakes the effort of emancipation? It sounds at least naive, if not pretentious. However, I'd like to intentionally and baldly employ this ingenuousness in my search for the eponymous emancipation, at the same time provoking questions pertaining to the situation of artists dealing with the performative arts as broadly understood in Poland today, and to the system within which institutionalized theatre companies operate in this country, and the state of Polish higher education in the arts.

Emancipation as a process of equalizing opportunities is inextricably linked to liberation from previously employed modes of operation, thereby to constructing reality, as well as to an equality of rights. From what should theatre artists strive to liberate themselves today, therefore, and what tasks are they facing on their path to emancipation? What inequalities (systemic, organizational and, finally, artistic) are encountered by artists working in Polish theatre companies? How is the discourse of power constructed in those companies, and what are its consequences for contemporary theatre? In other words, what are the consequences of contemporary cultural politics in Polish theatre companies, and wherein do direct links to the art world lie? While searching for answers to these questions, I'd like to compare working conditions of an artist involved in the performing-arts field in Poland, and the Polish system of arts education, with conditions prevailing in Western Europe, especially in Germany. I'm convinced that this juxtaposition, coming from my experience, will allow for a more precise observation of systemic conditions of power, thus also of conditions for artistic emancipation in institutions of both countries.

Let's begin, however, with Rancière's text. It was delivered in the form of a lecture at the fifth International Summer Academy of Arts in Frankfurt, in 2004. In it, the philosopher examines relations of inequality often occurring between the position of the spectator and that of the artist in a classically understood spectacle situation, which he calls 'the paradox of the spectator'. The presence of the spectator, without which there can be no spectacle, is most frequently associated with the position of passive viewing, or simply gazing while deprived of 'the power to act'.<sup>2</sup>

1 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), p. 1.

2 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 2.

Therefore 'to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act'.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Rancière compares spectator/artist relations with relations known in classical pedagogy: those of student and master (ignoramus/schoolmaster). As the schoolmaster attempts to break through the ignorance of the ignoramus in a complex process of teaching (that is, the transferring of knowledge), the artist attempts to break through the spectator's passivity (to stimulate action in any sphere) by a creative act. 'Even if the playwright or director does not know what he wants the spectator to do, she at least knows one thing: she knows that she must do one thing – overcome the gulf separating activity from passivity'.<sup>4</sup>

Both of these relations described by Rancière are based on the same premise: the principle of inequality between participants, characterized by a distinct lack (passivity) on one of the sides. In the pedagogical situation, the lack takes on the form of the 'ignorance' of the ignoramus; in the theatre world, it's the passivity of the spectator. Rancière considers both situations to be based on a misplaced assumption about the initial inequality of intelligence – a premise that it will be necessary to undermine in the process of emancipation declared in the title. 'Emancipation is the verification of the inequality of intelligence. This does not signify the equal value of all manifestations of intelligence, but the self-equality of intelligence in all its manifestations'.<sup>5</sup> What follows is that emancipation isn't to be achieved by the elimination of inequality through proper development on the part of the impaired side, but rather by a redefinition of underlying assumptions of the relations. The schoolmaster is to find ignorance that equates with that of the student, while the spectator is to find activity equal to that displayed by the artist. In this way, the lack (passivity) will in each situation be replaced by the said equality of intelligence.

These are the most important points with which Rancière recasts modes of understanding and practicing the discussed relations. I'd like to broaden the scope of this analysis and the postulated transformations by also taking a look at the work process and the artist's position in the context of institutional and systemic implications. Speaking of the emancipation of the spectator, which is to say the change of perception and meaning of the position held in a spectacle situation (which, according to Rancière, is in principle active), let's also examine the position occupied within it – and, going further, in theatre in general – by the artist. The emancipation of the spectator without the emancipation of the artist simply seems dubious to me. If the task of theatre, according to Rancière, just like the task of teaching, lies in the practice of egalitarianism – spectator and artist are equally passive and active participants in a spectacle, as well as the entire theatre discourse – then let's draw conclusions from it while examining the artist's situation and relations of inequality occurring in the relations with the institutional system in which the artist operates. Let's also take a look at possible ways of repairing them.

The first problem encountered by an artist stepping into a Polish theatre institution is the necessity of professional specification that results from traditional divisions of functions in theatre. Polish theatre artists

3 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 2.

4 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 12.

5 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 10.

still very rarely change or expand their artistic aptitudes and functions, or operate at the intersection of these. Therefore it's usually the director who's responsible for the concept (typically consisting of yet another mode of staging a dramatic text) and the main premise of the staging. This places their work in the broadly understood sphere of significance. Actors, in turn, deal with the text – its expression and performative processing, which places their work in the broadly understood sphere of emotions. Between those two positions, the dramaturge, set designer, composer, costume designer, and sometimes choreographer are situated, whose 'small' works the director strives to combine into a coherent structure of staging.

The divisions are fairly clear; lines of demarcation are defined, as are functions and associated responsibilities. Each attempt at stepping beyond this specification and hierarchy is very problematic. What happens if a set designer becomes an actor performing on stage or, better yet, the set design is treated as an actor? What if a composer creates the concept of the production, thus taking over the director's function? What if the actors cease to present traditional theatre-craft qualities long ascribed to their profession and instead begin to consciously place their stage activity within the context of the situation of the production's creation, the context of the institution in which they happen to work, or the broader socio-political situation? What if the choreographer takes up a choreography of sound and not of the actors' bodies on stage? And finally: what happens if the concept of the entire production is the result of collective decisions? Shifts and intersections in traditional theatrical functions, after all, often invigorate the artistic process and can certainly generate new creative situations.

However, the theatre system in Poland seems not to take such possibilities into account, though they occur on a broad scale in contemporary performative arts, insisting instead on forcing us to function in the received, ossified production procedures. Theatre events in Poland are usually initiated by directors, sometimes by dramaturges or artistic directors of theatres and only very rarely by artists in other roles, while staging concepts are usually the work of one person. Power and responsibility are invariably concentrated into a single hand. For many years, theatre life in Poland has been organized around the name of a given director. What counts is their original language or innovative form of staging, and it's rare for the theatrical idea with which a given group of artists co-creating the show identifies themselves and which they strive to defend in their work plays the same role.

Interestingly, this happens within an organizational structure that should promote collective work, since almost every publicly financed, theatre institution in Poland is based on the presence of a fixed ensemble of artists who've often been working with one another for years. It's this ensemble – a term that usually only denotes the group of actors, excluding tech department, administration department and freelance directors and set designers – which constitutes the fundamental merit of public theatre in Poland. Meanwhile, the vast majority of these 'ensemble' theatre companies present no recognizable, consistent repertoire or ideological policy. It remains the common idea to build a season around 'big director names', which is meant simply to translate itself into an 'important work': a production which will gather good reviews and festival accolades. This results in a widespread eclectic nature in theatres'

programmes.

What's more, repertoire decisions taken by artistic and production directors are frequently dictated by the grant a given institution is currently applying for. One can't blame them – after all, this is one of few available ways of stimulating cultural life financed by public money. However, when one takes a closer look at which theatre productions are supported by national grants – for instance, within the framework of ministry competitions – things don't appear too innovative. Stagings of classic texts are usually funded, as is contemporary Polish drama, and perhaps minor works in the field of documentary theatre. And that's all. It would seem that theatre, both classic and contemporary, is primarily text-based. Meanwhile, the entire output of the postdramatic that's current in theatre, with great contribution by Polish artists and theorists from Tadeusz Kantor to Andrzej Wirth, remains outside the attention of public theatre and is rarely included in theatre discourse. And I don't mean new forms for reception of Kantor's work, or spending millions on a biopic as part of celebrations in 2015, the year officially declared for honouring him. It's more about understanding the cultural heritage of that artist, and about drawing particular conclusions from such a lesson. Clearly public theatre, the 250th anniversary of which was so sumptuously celebrated in 2015, isn't geared towards seeking new ways of development but remains set rather on consolidating traditional modes of staging.

It's easy to notice the lack of any comprehensive proposition of support for projects oriented at artistic experiment in Poland's system of public financing for theatre projects. One must note several initiatives attempting a makeshift change in this situation, of course. These certainly include the Placówka [Outposts] project launched in 2015 by the Theatre Institute in Warsaw as a funding competition, the opening of the Nowy Theatre International Cultural Centre in Warsaw, focused on the latest phenomena in Polish contemporary theatre, choreography and performance art, and occasional curatorial programmes in public theatre companies, such as Teren TR at TR Warszawa, the Scena Tańca Studio in the Studio Theatre in Warsaw and the numerous curatorial cycles at Komuna// Warszawa – the latter of which still operates as an NGO. However, I'd not place them in the category of systemic solutions, but would rather term them as ad-hoc support, especially as they're concentrated more on final products of their own activity rather than on artistic process.

There's no ministry program, no permanent residency program and, perhaps most importantly, no arts institution entirely publicly funded and not operating within the NGO sector, that's being aimed solely at initiating, producing, supporting and presenting a wide range of experiment-oriented projects in performative arts. By that are meant projects – we mustn't forget – which have a chance of and the potential to develop and change the field in question. This is also related to the predominant systemic attitude on the part of theatre companies in Poland, which has been mentioned above and remains set on producing seasonal hits that would subsequently tour the festivals, eliminating projects that are process-oriented and attuned to artistic pursuit – and, consequently, to trial and error. I'd point to such circumstances as the reason for a somewhat stuffy atmosphere in the Polish arts community that's centred around theatre, and for the rigid, predictable, simply boring framework

of artistic activity, lacking in creative ferment and readiness for change.

The situation seems even more complicated in the world of choreography and contemporary dance. Choreographers – though it's hard to believe at times – still find it difficult to shake off the label of 'movement person', denoting someone to run warm-ups before rehearsals and teach actors how to move nicely on stage. Any attempt to negotiate a degree of autonomy in artistic decisions automatically generates structural and organizational problems. Of course, no one prevents dance artists from creating their own productions based on their original ideas, thus taking responsibility for the entire concept. At the level of the system, however, they remain practically unsupported: the lack of any residency program is evident, as is shown by the lack of grants or other forms of public support aimed at the production of new contemporary choreography. The long-term activities at the Sary Browar Nowy Taniec programme in Poznań is but a drop in an ocean of needs. It's interesting that while ministry funds are very eagerly assigned for the education of young choreographers and dancers at education centres abroad – most frequently in the form of artistic scholarships, as is in the case of the Młoda Polska scholarship program – their later work at home in Poland are supported rather reluctantly. We therefore pay for the education of young artists from public funds but, paradoxically, we're not interested in seeing the effects of that education on national stages here, nor do we encourage them to return to Poland.

Another pressing problem for the emerging contemporary-choreography scene is the lack of an institution in Warsaw to focus on such projects. Artists still operate on a guest-project basis, most frequently carrying out their ventures in Komuna// Warszawa, the Sala Laboratorium of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art or, more recently, at Nowy Theatre and Studio Theatre in Warsaw. It's impossible not to get the impression that these are all the while 'occasional' projects: carried out because a space happened to be free, a remnant was left in a budget, or because the project could be accomplished at cost. The comforting fact is that we can notice the Polish audience's growing interest in dance projects, thanks to the huge determination and commitment of young artists who, having graduated from education centres abroad, decided to pursue their artistic path in Warsaw and have set the introduction of contemporary choreography into the Polish theatre and performative context as their goal. The ideal, most logical next stage would be to establish a permanent space in Warsaw presenting contemporary choreography. All it would need is a touch of goodwill on the part of Biuro Kultury [the culture department of the capital's municipal government], which could decide to assign one stage venue, from the many they finance, as an autonomously curated space for contemporary choreography, with a modest budget and an administrative office. All other conditions seem to be met: we have the artists, the willingness, the audience interest, the demand in the artistic community and the human organizational potential. The one thing missing, as usual, is the political will.

The problems we're touching on here are also well known to international performance-makers. There's no point in deluding oneself about an idyll for artistic life beyond Poland's western border. Those artists have also struggled and still are struggling with systemic constraints determining their work, and with an institutional organization that



fails to adapt itself to changing standards of art. A noticeable reaction to rigid professional specifications narrowing the possibilities of artistic work is the ever-increasing number of collectives. Groups of artists, often from different fields, decide to focus their collective work in the field broadly understood as theatre. They create together, come up with shared concepts, rehearse together, think and quarrel and read and drink together. They're connected by ideas rather than by institutions and organizational structures. It's for the sake of common ideas that they find new institutional solutions: more long-term or less, more complex or less. Not only flagship collectives including Needcompany in Belgium, Forced Entertainment in the UK and Gob Squad and She She Pop, known mostly for their stage work in Germany, can serve here as examples; so could many lesser-known collectives, informal groups that are extremely artistically active. These collectives usually don't have a permanent place to work, and their pieces are co-produced by European festivals, contemporary-art centres, museums and theatre companies. What's interesting is that this system of work in which individual theatre companies having no permanent ensemble, instead inviting particular groups of artists as part of curated programmes, has for years contributed to the cultural life in Western Europe. Along with traditional repertory-theatre companies, we can find places such as the cult-status H.A.U. Hebbel am Ufer and Sophiensaele in Berlin, Mousonturm in Frankfurt, the Veem House for Performance in Amsterdam, and smaller centres such as the Berlin Theterdiscounter, Zeitraumexit in Mannheim, Studio Naxos in Frankfurt and other smaller or larger theatre and performative-art centres.

However, the most characteristic feature of more or less formalized collectives isn't an original production system – which is the result of their artistic activity – but the specificity of work and group dynamics. Usually these are formed by creators coming from various artistic fields: from visual artists, musicians and choreographers to traditionally trained actors, dramaturges and directors. Most often, the collective doesn't divide its functions while working according to the classic specialization system, but rather it strives to work together in each artistic field, from dramaturgy through acting to working out their own aesthetics, theoretical background and research. This frequently allows for new ways of looking at the theatre medium in order to reveal themselves, and at the same time allows artists to draw on the output of other artistic fields. After all, such a work approach enables maximum focus on the theatrical idea, on the common artistic goal, not on professionalization often pushed to absurd limits within the framework of a narrowly defined profession.

Collective work also has its drawbacks, however, as the democratization of art has its displacement and the creative process has time constraints and technical limits. Decisions taken together by consensus rather than a compromise basis frequently lengthen the process of work on the main concept, then subsequently draw out the rehearsal period in the direction of infinity. In spite of tremendous effort and a large amount of patience, it doesn't always produce the desired effect. In addition, this mode of work requires all participants in the collective to be equally prepared, both in terms of theory and practice. These assumptions sound idealistic, and often fail over the course of their implementation. One can't deny that the project of an artistic collective is by definition

long-term, and perhaps it should even be treated in terms of a choice determining one's entire artistic life. Working out a common language and aesthetic, agreeing on theoretical assumptions, then finally getting the entire team of creators in sync often takes years. Nevertheless, considering the evidence, it doesn't discourage artists from taking such an artistic risk, thereby expanding and changing the institutional framework in which they happen to work.

We mustn't forget that the system within which theatre institutions operate and problems resulting from it are also – perhaps above all – a consequence of the arts-education system predominant in Poland. This system is not only incompatible with the reality of contemporary theatre, it's not only wracked by the disease of professional specialization, but most of all it has ossified long since due to a lack of changes in teaching staff.

Let's take a look at the contemporary form of arts education outside Poland. There exist institutions and art schools that for years have educated theatre artists with no distinct specialization. Theory is equal to practice, which means that students spend as much time attending seminars on the latest topics in philosophy, sociology, the broader humanities and social sciences, as they spend on rehearsing, writing texts and attending workshops teaching video techniques and sound work. Apprenticeships in the academic centre one is attending are as important as travelling abroad, completing internships at important festivals, pursuing work as assistants, obtaining residencies. Education isn't formatted to a prescribed calendar of classes that a student must pass in order to receive a diploma. Students find their own path – often entirely original – to earning their credits, and can choose from a full range of courses offered by their home institution and by neighbouring faculties. From the very beginning, such a system shapes artistic responsibility, teaches one to make choices in accordance with one's individual field of interest, and develops creativity. In addition, it often allows established organizational market-governed regulations that particular academies must obey to be bypassed, and indicates potential new paths of their artistic development.

Along with lectures by professors permanently assigned to specific degree courses, the number of which is usually much smaller than in Poland, others are given by guest professors. Each year, academies invite two or three artists who are unable to lecture regularly due to their calendars, to run two- and three-week workshops in which students prepare practical assignments. As a result, academies employ three or four permanent professors, and give their students a chance each year to encounter important artists from the European festival circuit and key art theorists. With such an organization of work, Prof. Heiner Goebbels can be included with the classics at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen and continues to lecture there, while the generational exchange among the teaching staff isn't blocked.

Of course, problems on our own backyard appear much earlier, forming already at the construction level of the entire national higher-education system, which doesn't facilitate the introduction of innovative solutions even in the field of arts education. Let's not forget, however, that universities outside Poland had to organize their courses within limits imposed from above, as well. It requires a great deal of flexibility on the part of those in charge of given departments, as well as a partnering treatment of students – to return to Rancière once more. As we know



too well, Polish art schools are still organized in accordance with a rigid system of power and hierarchy expressed in non-transparent, non-democratic practices.

Student participation in elections of university authorities, and their actual influence on decisions concerning the activity and direction of studies, is incomparably smaller in Poland than it is in Germany. The statutory 20 per cent of the vote granted to students while electing authorities at Polish higher-education centres is usually only observed at the level of electing the head university authority. When it comes to electing department deans, it all depends on circumstances, as I experienced while studying at the Łódź Film School. The question of selecting student representation is a wide field of abuse, and traditionally non-democratic practices of teaching staff finds no resistance from art students, who aren't highly aware of their rights. The possibility of enforcing those in practice proves fictitious – while, for instance, students in acting courses are still subject to an unspecified trial period in their first year, compounded by bizarre episodes of certain students being expelled. Also, the presence of students at faculty-council meetings during which key decisions are made, directly relevant to students, though that presence is guaranteed by school statutes, remains a rather unpleasant, frequently abandoned duty, and is still met with a certain reluctance on the part of the teaching staff. It's hardly surprising that young artists brought up and educated in such a reality, when faced later with incidents of censorship on the part of organizers of artistic life (which are generally accepted in the artistic world) or with strong interference in the integrity of work and in the independence of individual artists, give up more easily.

The situation at German universities is similar from the legal perspective, and guaranteed student participation in taking key decisions also oscillates around 20 per cent. Differences, however, can be gleaned at the level of good practices that have yet to develop in Poland. In Giessen at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies, it's the norm for professors to have an open dialogue with the entire student body, manifested in the form of meetings held each term. In addition, there are two student representatives at each meeting of the faculty council, one of whom has a right to vote. No one even imagines any major decision could be taken without the students' participation – ultimately, these all affect them. The decision of who to invite as guest professors is made together, as is the decision regarding which practical classes should take place in each term. Students vote for specific names of artists to be invited, and for class topics that are currently missing. This puts young creators in a subjective position from the very beginning, with the right to real dialogue, and gives them a feeling that they can decide on their own artistic development and assume responsibility for it.

What's more, a strong sense of responsibility for the future of this institute can be felt. Elections for the position of Goebbels' successor as a professor were preceded by over six months of consultations, discussions and candidate presentations. Each and every one of the candidates, from Xavier Le Roy to Kate McIntosh, had to run a 'demo' class with students, present a specific program and answer all questions posed to them. The decision to choose a new professor is of course the result of many factors, but student favour remains one of the most important.

Higher arts-education facilities in Western Europe still function in a traditional way, obviously, and are designed to release profiled art adepts into the market armed with the necessary tools to perform their artistic craft. These are heavily balanced, however, by contemporarily oriented academic centres granting future artists a completely different legitimacy in their artistic endeavours. In Poland, artists dealing with contemporary and experimental currents in the arts still aren't taken seriously and can't count on systemic support. I think the situation could in large part be changed by establishing a kind of Polish performing-arts institute as part of a large academic centre. The lack of an academy oriented to contemporary currents, that would train adepts in choreography, performance and new trends in theatre is felt increasingly. Even more so because a growing group of theatre makers who construct works with means different from classic stagecraft are increasingly visible in Poland – take, for example, the recent international showcase *Generation After* organized by Nowy Theatre in Warsaw.

'Who can ignore the fact that, depending on which public one is playing to, the theatrical act does or does not deliver the theatre-idea, does or does not complement it?'<sup>6</sup> With this quote from Alain Badiou's 'Theses on Theatre', I'd like to return to the question of the emancipation of the spectator and changes through which their position is viewed within a spectacle, and the question of the emancipation of the artist and attempts to define the possibility of change across the footlights. In his renowned lecture 'Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art', Badiou voices demands on art that are fairly high, yet simple: in the era of capitalist reality and free-market promises of infinite possibilities in every sphere of life while systemic change remains impossible to imagine or conceive, it's the task of art to reveal the unreality of those ubiquitous opportunities and discover the possibility of that which until now has been considered unrealistic. In other words, art is to disclose the illusory nature of free-market promises and at the same time try to outline directions for systemic change that can seem impossible in today's reality. It must thus face barriers erected by our capitalistic, neoliberal reality.

It's the principal contradiction between two kinds of universalities. On one side the abstract universality of money and power, and on the other the concrete universality of truth and creation. My position is that artistic creation today should suggest a new universality, not to express only the self or the community, but that it's a necessity for the artistic creation to propose to us, to humanity in general, a new sort of universality.<sup>7</sup>

Taking it further, we can assume that such a task means the emancipation of society:

today, artistic creation is a part of human emancipation, it's not an ornament, a decoration and so on. No, the question of art is a central question, and it's central because we have to create a new sensible relation to the world. In fact, without art, without artistic creation, the triumph of the forced universality of

6 Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 74.

7 Alain Badiou, *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art*, <http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm>.

money and power is a real possibility.<sup>8</sup>

The emancipation in the title, therefore, which at first could seem quite pretentious, may after all have a broader significance and doesn't by any means seem a hermetic, inner problem for artistic circles. I'm convinced that artists should begin the emancipation processes from their own theatrical practice. We'll probably easily agree about the need to change the way the spectator is viewed in contemporary theatre. Can we agree with equal ease on the postulate of the necessary change in perceiving the artist within the system of theatre production, arts education and the public financing of culture? Should we artists not emancipate ourselves in order to perform emancipatory functions within society, and to attempt to transplant the ideas of egalitarianism, broadly understood?

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8 Badiou, *Fifteen Theses*.