

**Maciej Nowak**

We, The New Public Theatre

[www.polishtheatrejournal.com](http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com)



Maciej Nowak

## We, The New Public Theatre

Nineteen-year-olds are arrogant and not too wise. I know this well, because I was thus myself when, directly after graduating high school, I began my career in theatre. In my very first review, published in 1983 in the national paper *Sztandar Młodych* [*The Banner of Youth*], I knocked director Kazimierz Dejmek<sup>1</sup> down a peg after the premiere of his *Zemsta* [*Revenge*] at the Polski Theatre in Warsaw. Fifteen years on from the premiere of Dejmek's historic *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*] at the National Theatre, a mere whelp accused the legend of Polish theatre of having directed a 'grim museum of Polish petty nobility' instead of a lively production. If I got my hands on the author of those words today, he'd look more or less like the playwright Paweł Demirski after he got in a fight recently with Polish Cup football fans for defending a Pakistani student.

Another kid, this time celebrating his nineteenth birthday in 2016, sent me a text message with his opinion on a fashionable Warsaw theatre: 'that place is hopeless, because all they do there is drink coffee, eat up tax money, and they've got way too settled in their avant-garde position'. What a nonchalant youngster! Show more respect, you whippersnapper, for the institution that started all we value today in Polish theatre! The symbolic January breakthrough, that is: the coinciding Warsaw premieres of Witkacy's *Bzik tropikalny* [*Tropical Madness*] directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna at TR Warszawa and of Sophocles' *Electra* directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski at the Dramatyczny Theatre took place on 18 January 1997 – the year you were born! How dare you question the achievements of artists who've been working longer than you've lived!

Nineteen can be rude, but it also draws attention and brings back a sober perspective. Probably that's the reason Prof. Dariusz Kosiński chose the nineteenth anniversary of that January breakthrough for the mini-conference 'Nowy teatr. Nie(po)rozumienia' ['The New Theatre: (Mis)understandings', April 2016] held at the Kontrapunkt Festival in Szczecin. I arrived at that summit straight from Moscow, where Jan Klata had directed *Macbeth* at the Moscow Art Theatre. That perspective makes it clear that talking today about the new theatre the way we've understood it for the past two decades has begun to be somewhat pointless – or at least it's changing its context. When one of that current's

1 Kazimierz Dejmek (1924–2002) was a very important Polish theatre director, highly renowned especially through the 1960s, when he directed the National Theatre from 1962 until he was fired by the Communist government in 1967. For a biographical article, see: <http://culture.pl/en/artist/kazimierz-dejmek>. [Footnotes added for *Polish Theatre Journal* publication.]

leading artists runs the most important Polish theatre company<sup>2</sup>, when he's the first Pole ever to direct at the theatre company founded by Stanislavsky, it's difficult to still count him among a gang of impertinent hooligans. The same's true for Jarzyna, who from a young boy has transformed into an experienced man, at the helm of TR Warszawa for the twentieth season running. He's not yet beaten the record of Maciej Englert – director of the Współczesny Theatre in Warsaw – but he's on that track. 'They've got way too settled in their avant-garde position', writes the nineteen-year-old and, with the nonchalance of youth, touches a sore spot.

Artists associated with the new theatre's currents will certainly surprise us yet – their stage skills and talent haven't run dry and will bring us great satisfaction in days to come. But their peach fuzz is already worn off, and 'few can retain their charm once they've lost their freshness', as Virginie Despentes writes with ruthless sincerity. There've been many attempts to define what the new theatre at the change from the twentieth to twenty-first century is and has been. It's been described, with its characteristics, by Agata Adamiecka, Anna Róża Burzyńska, Krystyna Duniec, Joanna Krakowska, Piotr Gruszczyński, Paweł Mościcki, Roman Pawłowski – and I've also written this and that. In a series of display-case texts, we've pinned down the most typical specimens of the new style – we've created a taxonomy, grouped families and affinities, isolated the genre we're interested in from the theatre practices of earlier generations. We also postulated a great deal. Today, looking back over the past twenty years, it's clear how much the new theatre has changed received stage aesthetics.

We've certainly managed to generate a distinct type of actor, no longer a coat hanger for roles but rather an artist aware of his or her creative function in the production process. His or her taste, personality, worldview, honest physicality are fundamental materials for theatrical expression. The new theatre has introduced contemporary protagonists onto the stage along with their language, their rhythm of speech and vocabulary. It dared question the dominant aesthetic, social and economic order – it has also annexed documentary narrative methods and ventured into authentic, non-theatrical spaces. It faced the achievements and power of popular culture and knew how to feed on that life-giving energy. It appreciated the function of the dramaturge as the director's collaborator.

Yet many of its plans and goals remain in the realm of dreams. Some paths turned out to be dead ends: the once-widespread use of film footage and projection has become tedious; the postdramatic conviction that storytelling was reactionary and encroaching in its nature hasn't worked out well. Nudity as a means of expression, still fashionable a few years ago, has ceased to be interesting for the youngest generation of theatre creators. A hip student preparing his master's thesis on that subject recently observed this with astonishment: 'I don't see the need to undress my actors', he heard from a young director who'd debuted not long before, while directors a few years older couldn't imagine any limits in that regard.

However, where the new theatre is least fulfilled or even where it fails is with the question of the new audience. We had great ambition in this

---

2 Jan Klata was artistic director of the Stary Theatre from 2013 to 2017.

regard. In the manifesto *My, czyli nowy teatr* ['We, the New Theatre'] from 2004, I wrote bombastically:

The new theatre has ceased to be a refuge for a group of know-it-alls and culture mavens convinced of their own uniqueness. We don't want to see them in our theatre, because the past decade has shown that these supposed guardians of Polish conscience and good taste did not in fact meet the challenge of the age. They're just here on holiday. The so-called Polish intelligentsia no longer treats visits to the theatre, reading books, taking part in concerts as essential things. It has taken up paying off loans, furnishing flats, travelling to Greece and Spain. And constantly complaining, which justifies their intellectual passivity and consumer appetites. The new theatre has no subjects in common with this audience. It is much more interested in the people who meet in clubs, cinemas; the girls and guys from motorcycle clubs; young intellectuals, craftsmen, concertgoers; the unemployed, and those trying to find their place in the world. This audience is not interested in theatre that is a conventional, cultural gesture. To interest them, it's essential to have distinct opinions, orientation in the world, the courage to diagnosis problems. The new theatre is not a refuge. The new theatre is an agora.<sup>3</sup>

I still maintain my criticism of the new bourgeoisie, but we didn't manage to perform the task of establishing a new audience. We stumbled, focusing primarily on the Regietheater model, partly even on formalistic theatre, which ignores any alliance with the audience. The model of the theatre of the betrayed covenant created by critic and director Małgorzata Dziewulska forty years ago still holds. Actually, the same mechanism remains in force by which theatre, in an attempt to improve its ranking on the artistic stock market, leaves its audience sitting in a stupor, glassy-eyed. Dziewulska wrote brutally about how our theatre looks to forge a covenant with festivalgoers, with the international theatre elite, sparing not a thought for its everyday recipient. Why is this the case?

Attempting at the Szczecin conference to answer that question, I digressed onto the subject of dairy cooperatives and rural water companies, which left most of my listeners gaping like koi fish. But it was grist to my mill, because purely theatrical arguments won't advance this discussion any further. This is because the inability on the part of Polish theatre to enter into an alliance with its audience results from class divisions. Community is an important value for the rural class, while among the upper classes, which by definition involve artists and theatre specialists, individualism is what really counts, as well as lifestyle, freedom and the pursuit of personal aspirations. They speak about dairy cooperatives, we speak about café lattes. They speak about community, we about style, manners, rules and the pompous national accord. We look on them from above, while they skip sideways, backwards, into a corner – wherever they won't have to put up with performances of superiority on the part of the intelligentsia.

This crucial misunderstanding was also expressed in Szczecin over the course of the discussions by those associating cooperativeness only with social co-ops, therefore with the area of economic exclusion. Meanwhile,

<sup>3</sup> Maciej Nowak, *My, czyli nowy teatr* ['We, the New Theatre'], *Polish Theatre Journal*, 1 (2015). See [polishtheatrejournal.com](http://polishtheatrejournal.com).

the cooperative community model, as described by the philosopher Edward Abramowski, serves common interests rather than a totalizing unity of views. And the upper classes have a propensity for the latter. True community is born of diversity rather than homogeneity. While looking for non-theatre analogies, it's worth noting the achievements of Polish urbanism – public-space studies, that is. One of the preeminent architects and the general designer of Ursynów [a residential district in Warsaw], Prof. Marek Budzyński, created the concept of 'group parceling', which expressed the idea of 'socialized individualism'. This squaring-the-circle solution makes it possible to maintain uniqueness within a more general community mechanism.

In this context, it's worthwhile to return to the French debate on *théâtre populaire* that took place in mid-twentieth century. It's not easy, as the most competent Polish expert on the subject, Piotr Olkusz, defended his PhD on director Roger Planchon ten years ago but has never published his dissertation.<sup>4</sup> As Olkusz claims, he's felt over the past decade that the ideas of popular theatre have been associated with embarrassment and ossification. And it's hard to be surprised by such an impression in an era when hipsters, Plac Zbawiciela [a Warsaw social hub] and marinated octopus came to rule cultural trends. The actor and director Jean Vilar used to say '1,200 seats sold for 100 francs each are more important to us than 300 seats for 400 each', which in post-transformation Poland sounded rather populist. And as is generally known, everything the elites find problematic can be termed populism. Today, we have just behind us celebrations of the 250th anniversary of public theatre in Poland, as well as political changes arriving through 2016. And we know a little more about Polish society. Which is why only now does the characteristic of *théâtre populaire* from Olkusz's dissertation reveal its contemporary meaning:

Vilar decided to revive the idea of accessible theatre addressed at the general public. At the same time he emphasised that the new venture must be guided by ambitious artistic goals. Probably most famous metaphor by Vilar, which by now has made history, likens theatre to the state services, suggesting that access to culture is the inalienable right of every citizen, just like the right to healthcare or education.

Let's also add Planchon's postulate to 'leave behind the mask of a bored burgher'. In the present Polish situation, these ideas can serve as weapons both against escapist theatre, which disrespects the audience, and against vulgar theatres that try to suck up to the audience.

What could our direction for the third millennium be, then? Perhaps a new public theatre, which will fill the gap between laboratory-type theatre and commercial companies? How to recognize it? It's a type of theatre that will combine the achievements of the new theatre with a sense of social responsibility. A theatre based on a permanent ensemble of actors, good literature, performing systematically – one that carries out and continues stylistic and organizational challenges of the theatre of the second half of the twentieth century, that is. It should be the theatre of the new spectacle, which doesn't exhaust itself on current concepts

<sup>4</sup> See Piotr Olkusz's, 'The Pope's New Robes: Jean Vilar's Lay Religion and Popular Theatre' in this issue.

of coherent staging but opens up to a wealth of performative effects, gestures and genres. Produces shows that are at the same time concert, dance show, TV show and performance-art show – whatever one comes up with. And not necessarily the kind of production that lasts four to six hours. What directorial hubris lies behind such disregard for time!

The purpose of the new public theatre should be to restore to theatre its dignity as a public-service institution. It will be a theatre that's friendly for its audience and which fights all forms of exclusion: generational, moral, physical, based on worldview or class. A theatre that will provide important moments of togetherness. A theatre that searches in its alliance with the audience and with its manifestations of local social activism for a new community shape realized in diversity. The theatre of socialized individualism. Integrating and supporting the community. Building the community, which today is in pressing need of support because it doubts itself. Theatre that will care about clarity of message and an accurate diagnosis of reality. Theatre that will give proper profile to children's productions and stop treating them as mere gigs of dubious freshness. Theatre not ashamed of its pedagogical mission, which develops and inspires various forms of creative activity in audiences encompassing all generations.

The repertory basis of the new public theatre should be classics of Polish and world drama staged with contemporary aesthetics, on one hand, renewing still-current messages and establishing a sense of belonging to the European cultural narrative. It will be necessary to open the canon to currents practically absent from the repertoire to date – such as the Enlightenment period, that neglected source of Polish modernity almost entirely displaced in our day by the Romantic tradition. Małgorzata Dziewulska wrote about that as well in her *Teatr zdradzonego przymierza* [*Theatre of the Betrayed Covenant*, 1985]: 'In [early National Theatre director Wojciech] Bogusławski's times everyone was most engrossed in the issues of civil society, whereas in the Romantic times these were superseded by the question of the nation's survival'. On the other hand, the new public theatre must also take on the task of identifying new talent and new masterworks. If we don't, no one will.

I finish this text with a sense of anxiety. Suddenly I realized that the idea of the new public theatre veers dangerously toward catchphrases of middlebrow theatre. I'm allergic to the latter, and honestly despise it. Theatre can't be in the middle. It can't be average and typical, like middle-class tastes and Scandinavian furniture. Theatre must be fiery, violent, insolent, irritating and remain unsettling to any convention. In this regard, I want to believe that middlebrow theatre is only deceptively similar to the new public theatre. It's like a middle-aged gentleman confronted with a nineteen-year-old. Remember Hanoach Levin's song? 'When you're young, you've got your balls full and your pockets empty. Later on it's exactly the opposite'.

Translated by Karolina Sofulak

This text was originally published in the journal *Dialog*, 6/2016, as 'My, czyli nowy teatr publiczny'. This translation is published in *Polish Theatre Journal* with some editorial alterations and clarifications.

## WORK CITED

Nowak, Maciej, *My, czyli nowy teatr* ['We, the New Theatre'], *Polish Theatre Journal*, 1 (2015).

Olkusz, Piotr, 'The Pope's New Robes: Jean Vilar's Lay Religion and Popular Theatre', *Polish Theatre Journal*, 1-2(2017).