

**Wojtek Ziemilski**  
in Conversation with Katarzyna Lemańska and Karolina Wycisk

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## [To] See What We Can Do Together

**KATARZYNA LEMAŃSKA, KAROLINA WYCISK:** We'd like to recall our interview from four years ago [for the journal *Didaskalia*, 2013]. Then, we noted how difficult it was to assign you to any one field of art, in that in your projects you make use of interactive installations and environments, video and mapping. You told us: 'When I did *Aktorzy* [*Actors*, TR Warszawa, 2009] – a video installation – I saw myself described somewhere as a video artist. After *Mała narracja* [*Small Narration*, Studio Theatre in Warsaw, 2010], I got called a multimedia artist, and after *Mapa* [*Map*, Komuna// Warszawa, 2010], an artist specialising in multimedia experiences. I get called by a completely different name after each project, but I'm not that fazed. I work with objects, not names'.<sup>1</sup>

**Do you still think, as you did then, that there may be a stigma to being classified in this way – as an independent artist working in different areas, outside the typical institutional arrangements?**

**WOJTEK ZIEMILSKI:** I feel the impact of institutions on my work is greater than it was back then. In Poland, the label of a theatre director gives you greater opportunities than that of a visual or multimedia artist. For one thing, theatre directors have a spot on the map where they belong, they have a clearly defined artistic and social role; second, theatre – particularly the institutional kind – is high up the art hierarchy in Poland. The name determines whether you're part of a caste – and a venerable one at that. This makes work easier; you have a certain standing, which then translates into the circumstances of production – to resort to trendy-speak.

**As a director working in publicly funded theatres, you call into question and redefine the strategies in place there. One of the ways in which you do that is by applying work methods that stage actors may find unorthodox. Your work includes a lot of workshop-style activities, based on collaboration with the ensemble and the inclusion of non-actors. As you mentioned, you 'work with objects'.**

I've never been interested in the kind of work where the scenario and course of action are determined – a formula that would dictate top-down

<sup>1</sup> 'Nie tworzę w życiu kolekcji metod', z Wojtkiem Ziemilskim rozmawiają Katarzyna Lemańska i Karolina Wycisk, *Didaskalia* 117, 2013, p. 32. All notes provided by the interviewers.

what a given project would be like. I hardly ever come to work with a ready-made, precise idea of what we'll be working on. I take issue with this hard and fast approach for two fundamental reasons. First, directors don't always like to admit they have a specific idea for a production, in which case rehearsals turn into a laborious search for this idea. This creates a very strong sense of hierarchy from the word go, driving the entire ensemble away from the director and from the work they do together. And second, when things are that way, I'm much less likely to be surprised by the result: if I come in with my own ideas, or bring a text along, and the others are supposed to act this out, however creatively, they're confined straight away to my imagination and its constraints. If, however, I can benefit from the imaginations of others, put their creativity to use, it turns out they've got ideas I would never have come up with; they bring along worlds whose existence I wouldn't have been able to predict.

To a degree, theatre has always provided space for this model of collaboration – for example, in improvisation or actors' assignments [given to drama-school students], when actors are told to construct a scene based on the director's suggestion, when they improvise a monologue or bring their own text along. But what I have in mind is a more radical kind of creative collaboration. The tasks I assign are so open that at times they can be taken in almost any direction – this entails a huge responsibility resting on the actors or performers. The material that comes up during the first stage of rehearsals, and, to a large extent, dependent on the actors, delineates the landscape where we choose the spot we're going to inhabit in the end.

**But this mode of working isn't accepted by everyone – we're alluding to events at the National Stary Theatre in Kraków [for the cancelled production *6 sposobów na wyjście z teatru* (*Six Ways of Exiting the Theatre*) in 2016].<sup>2</sup>**

This radical approach isn't always greeted with an open mind. I came to feel this very acutely at the Stary Theatre. Jan Klata [then the Stary's managing director] invited me to stage a production there. I often look for a particular strength or power of a given group or venue, and take that as my starting point; in Kraków, I found that the Stary drew its strength from its actors, particularly those of the older generation: the 'old' Stary Theatre [*stary* is Polish for 'old']. They made the theatre work, and that was what I wanted to look at. I thought the method I wanted to

2 In March 2016, rehearsals began at the National Stary Theatre in Kraków for *6 sposobów na wyjście z teatru*, directed by Wojtek Ziemilski, who planned a production based on memories among older company members. The premiere, scheduled for May 2016, was to feature such acclaimed company members as Anna Dymna, Zygmunt Józefczak, Ewa Kolasieńska and Jacek Romanowski, and guest actors Elżbieta Karkoszka and Edmund Wnuk. After rehearsals were cancelled, critic Witold Mrozek observed: 'Contrary to the arrogant diatribes of his conservative critics, [Stary director] Jan Klata wasn't given to "experiments". For him, theatre was about constructing parts and staging texts in keeping with the director's vision – not about working with "the process" or actors' privacy'. 'Epoka Klaty w Starym teatrze. Jak go zapamiętamy?', *Wyborcza.pl*, 19 May 2017, <http://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,21832038,epoka-klaty-w-starym-teatrze-jak-go-zapamietamy.html>, [accessed on 9 March 2018].

put forward, a method that's worked so many times, persuading so many different people and bringing them closer to me – that it'll work this time, too. But it didn't.

In fact, it failed in two ways. On one hand, the actors had no confidence in the method or in me – they remained very sceptical all along, from the start of rehearsals to their interruption by the Stary's managing director less than three weeks later. On the other hand, Jan Klata showed no confidence in me, either – or rather, he took no interest whatsoever in what we were doing, he never attended a rehearsal, never had a conversation with me about the ongoing process. He decided to cancel the premiere without making the least effort to really look at what was coming into being, let alone to mediate. At the Stary, I found no space to put all our heads together or to share the creative process with the actors: in their view, this was my job – I was to bring ideas and solutions to the table, for them to carry out. As for me, I need such creative collaboration to make the production believable not just to the audience, but also to the artists themselves – the work needs to be something they actually experience and discover.

This is another feature of theatre I'm interested in: the person on stage is key, they're much more than just conjurors, however skilled. When an audience member finds herself uncomfortably close to reality, the production becomes an important experience, it has substance. I don't mean any sort of confession. Intimacy doesn't come about at the level of confidences or psychodrama, but at the level of individual relations with what she brings along with her. It's either yours, or you're pretending. That's quite a challenge to actors, and to managing directors: they're accustomed to producing things that are only ostensibly personal, and in fact keep reproducing the same little dramas over and over again, never neglecting to gush in the process about their own role as a medium. I could have taken a different strategy and taken on the Stary's youngest actors: maybe they would've been great at this, they would've taken to it, and all would then end well.

But the experience I've had made me see the place in great specificity and detail, taking away some of my optimism as to whether institutional theatre is capable of change, purification, development and breakthrough. It does show these skills wherever it's convenient: where it's less convenient, it won't even budge to see how to do things differently. A managing director showing no confidence in the artist he invited, neglecting to have a conversation with that artist when, as he sees it, things go wrong – that speaks for itself. It's a state institution, old and venerable, more interested in its status than in what it produces. And when the status begins to crumble, swift action is needed: an unambiguous, top-down, play-it-safe decision, rather than communication and integration.

After working at the Stary Theatre, I had two fantastic experiences at institutional theatres: the Nowy and the Studio Theatres in Warsaw. At Nowy, I didn't work with actors who were part of the permanent ensemble, but I produced a full-length work [*Jeden Gest*, or *One Gesture*, premiered on 24 September 2016] with huge support from the institution. So much so that, when things came to a head – no one said my approach was easy! – and I wanted to give it up, the Nowy people persuaded me that would've been a mistake. And, let me add, they were

right: a good thing came out of it. At the Studio Theatre, I worked with members of the ensemble, and also received the company's full support [*Come Together*, premiered on 24 February 2017]. I think it mostly depends on who is part of a given institution and how they envisage it; what theatre means to them.

**When it comes to *One Gesture*, did you arrive at Nowy Theatre with the idea to work with deaf people? Did you want to complete a project from scratch?**

I wanted to produce a show where sign language would be used. It's an incredible language choreographically, and I always find that interesting. Not only that: it's a language where issues of identity, social dynamics and the role minorities have to play in Poland and around the world become interwoven in any number of ways. As I saw it, many themes came together in this idea with beautiful simplicity. I had wanted it to be an international co-production, but, the more I went into it, the more I realised that would've been an absolute nightmare. If I had deaf people from four countries, each of them signing in a different language, they would each need their own translator. The project would've been prohibitively expensive, and terribly complicated to organise.

I was looking for a place to stage this, and finally came to Nowy, asking them to be co-producers, and they offered to produce the show themselves. That was a tremendous relief: I'm useless as my own producer. Very soon, as it turned out, so many issues were relevant to deaf people in Poland that the international project could wait.

**At what point do you have the feeling that an institution supports your work?**

When a good production comes out at the end [*laughs*]. A good institution provides me with the opportunity to use the project's potential – be it a production, a workshop, lab or installation. That is, the institution is willing to learn how the dynamics of a given creative process operate, and not only adjusts to that, but develops and reinforces it as well.

This isn't that simple at all. I don't believe in theatre made by a director who knows everything best and decides everything by herself. Obviously, this does happen, but exceptions have inspired the rule – which, in my view, is a detrimental one. The upshot is that this translates into the director's institutional conceitedness and her overall demiurge-like manner which would make people in any other walk of life laugh. To give you an example, this is where the dramaturge developed from: it turns out – lo and behold! – the director is incapable of building the best of worlds on her own. That she's better off not being the demiurge. Kind people who are cleverer than the director when it comes to different aspects of creating a piece are priceless. They will have better ideas – but they might also be better at planning, organising, adjusting the circumstances to what the project needs.

You don't always see everything you need, particularly when you're in the process. When I'm in the process, I forget I need things. It's hardest with sudden ideas. You never know when an idea is serious, and when it's just an absurd joke. Artists often don't know this either, and a lot depends on that. There are some accommodating institutions who

would immediately order eighty fans, if they came up in a conversation about the prospective stage set. But it's more often the case that even the most essential wireless projection is regarded as a passing fad right till the end. With most institutions, it's a bit of both, but the dominant approach in Poland is to see each need as a whim. Which is awful, because it requires you to fight the system all the time. And the institution doesn't need to be an obstructive system. It may be a project's exoskeleton, a tremendous support.

In Poland, I have a very strong sense of an institution being made up of, and by, people. It's not the structure itself that has certain properties – perhaps except for the Stary, but there, too, one would have to see how the theatre works with different managing director who'd be more than a random name pulled out of a hat. To take a positive example, at the Nowy Theatre I met specific people who let *One Gesture* flourish: not just the managers, but also the incredibly committed stage manager, Marta Śmierchalska, and producer Marysia Wilska, who spent hours with me every day thinking how to find people and support. We were really tight as a team.

We first did a project with secondary-school students, *Fabryka pięknych gestów* [*The Factory of Beautiful Gestures*, 2016]. It was difficult and exhausting, but it worked. After that, the production itself was pure bliss. Well, maybe with a few crises thrown into the mix. Let me add – I think it's important – that, as far as the theatre was concerned, our production wasn't regarded as a 'community' project. If it were, it would have had much a more limited scope and, crucially, different overtones. There are currently lots of artistic initiatives which focus on the social or community aspect, whereas I wanted to emphasise the theatricality of my subject. The production became part of Nowy Theatre's repertoire, and we're getting lots of invitations to theatre festivals.

This, too, says a lot about the institution: whether it's capable of presenting a project in such a way that it isn't left 'to its own devices'. When you work on a production where professional actors portray characters written by the dramaturge, the audience is given ample opportunity to furnish it with a theatrical context. But when we go beyond this convention, a lot depends on how a production is presented – in other words, on whether the institution is capable of thinking of, say, a production featuring a group of deaf 'amateurs' as a serious, professional project. This takes a lot of sensibility, but also requires the institutions to make certain decisions with regard to repertoire, PR, finances and time.

**When working on *Come Together*, how did the performers and members of the Studio Theatre ensemble get along?**

Theirs had been an exciting meeting. I put a lot of time and effort into choosing the people for my project. I felt a bit like an alchemist who picks out his ingredients so that the whole thing works – after my experience at the Stary, I'm even less interested in antagonism as the driving force in theatre. So I came up with the proportions straight away: two 'institutional' actors and three close collaborators of mine, who were there in safeguarding roles. It wasn't about the dichotomy between them and us – it was about a sense of safety, and it was mostly about the actors. The aim was to ensure they're surrounded by people for whom my

working methods were absolutely natural, and who simply got to work and helped construct the production at the point when I came into rehearsals and as yet had no solutions to hand. And that's what happened. For Marysia Stokłosa, Sean Palmer and Wojtek Pustola, the moments when we're at a loss about what to do next are inherent in the dynamics of this sort of process.

The first thing I did at Studio was to hold workshops open to the company's entire ensemble. I sent them a special invitation, where I explained the methods I used, what they could and couldn't expect – and added that if they were interested and would like to take part, I'll be choosing the cast for my production from among those who take part in the workshops. I was incredibly lucky: Lena Frankiewicz turned out to be a chameleon with a fantastic ability to adjust to the needs of the moment, giving her all and having faith in a project which at first may have seemed shapeless. Krzysiek Strużycki, an actor of the older generation, proved time and time again he was the best man on earth to play his part. But all of this emerged later. It had been a very intense process. For two weeks, we had no idea whatever what the production might be. Two weeks is a long time. With my three people present, it became easier to make a relatively painless transfer from chaos to an arch-specific, definite proposal.

**The category of 'the economy of closeness' proposed by Bojana Kunst seems suitable for describing your methods. As Kunst sees it, it's not only artists, but also friends working together in the arts sector, with another strong bond established between performers and the audience – the latter taking part in the production process. You, too, work with a close-knit group and invite the audience to rehearsals.**

That's true. For quite some time, I thought it was a good idea to choose your collaborators as if in an audition: specific people for a specific project. But these days, it's not enough for me to choose 'the best person for the part'. The creative process itself is too essential a part of my life for me to spend time on it with people I can't see eye to eye with. Even if they do their job perfectly. I'm fortunate to know people who are outstanding performers, artists, and my friends to boot. With *Come Together*, we made a radical move towards, as you called it, the economy of closeness. I accepted the fact that my friends are also my co-workers. Before that, I tended to avoid such arrangements: I had a family history of being involved in theatre, and thought we were sticking together, a bit like candied apples, and there was something insufferable about this.

My life is project-based: I move from city to city, from one country to another, and I don't have the luxury of working with a fixed group of people. In this project-based world, choosing a group I felt close to wasn't all that obvious. When I fell ill recently, I needed to feel I was being supported. Having said that, this group has never worked together in this arrangement, it wasn't as if they immediately saw eye to eye. But they are flexible, and do a lot of work outside theatre. As the process progressed, they turned out to be great: both on stage and as a team.

**Tell us about the process then. Was *Come Together* another project where you constructed your scenario based on communal stories?**

I came in with the buzzword 'Come Together'; I knew this would be the title, I knew it would be a production about the community and we would be listening to the Beatles' song of that title. I had plenty of material about remote tribes, islands that were supposed to be paradise but turned out to be hell, utopian-dystopian stories of the reality around us. We never even touched upon it, having started out with various games related to community and communality. From there, we began to assemble our material; two weeks later, the key feature emerged: immediate contact with the audience, or negotiating with them what it means to be together.

And then I put a stop to everything else, put it aside 'for a second'. The change was radical: the switch from quite a loose set of different scenes to a very precise production which is almost just this one thing, almost nothing but this one idea. It had been a transfer from devising – creating together and pitching ideas, building up material – to Real Time Composition, a cleanup of sorts: once we've found something, let's stick to it.

**Did you employ the Devising Theatre and Real Time Composition methods already when working on *One Gesture*? During a post-show Q&A, an audience member asked whether it had been a collective creation...**

These are dangerous terms: collective creation, creative theatre. They seem intelligible, but they are the product of a different time. Today, ostensibly similar situations have a different dynamics. Collective creation was focused on the collective, on the communal subject. Here, the collective is a derivative of the production, which is administered by me, in an authoritarian manner. This doesn't preclude communality, just organizes it around different things.

I think it's important – particularly when there are non-professionals on stage – that the audience have it brought home to them that the performers are speaking in their own name. But the language of the production [*One Gesture*] isn't an innocent reflection of 'what they have to say' because my presence isn't innocent. In this sense, the director defines this kind of theatre. I'm the one who imposes the perspective. The responsibility for what the production will eventually look like rests on me. In my case, devising is not a way of coming together, but rather of extracting new material – I made ample use of that in *One Gesture*. Questions, tasks and rules. Looking for rhythms, repetition and play. We had all this, and it could all have resembled collective creation – except that I'm the one proposing, looking, and deciding what we're going to develop, and what will be left aside.

I also think it's a matter of competence recognition. My competence is directing, and getting people involved in the production, and they in turn take responsibility for their own skills. In the case of *One Gesture*: for sign language, for the story about signing, for how they construct their language, how they represent or depict themselves through these stories. The actors in *One Gesture* are outstanding at this. However, it's my

responsibility to determine how this will be constructed as a performance. This is my creative work, not their community project, with me acting as a mentor or animator. Obviously, the boundaries are fluid, and the performers are often highly knowledgeable about matters of theatre. I try to make use of that knowledge, but this is subject to the needs of a given production, not competences.

Some are quick to find themselves in the world I propose, while others continue to find it a bit enigmatic. Wojtek Pustoła, the stage designer I work with on almost all my productions, has found himself so well that he works with me on the concept, staging – we work together at practically every stage. He butts in on everything and, shockingly, he's often right. In fact, we share responsibility for the production.

**How do you work on the text itself? In *Small Narration*, you started out with a completed text, and then formed it even when already on stage. Tell us about your way of working on a scenario with actors / performers.**

We spend a lot of time talking: I ask questions and wait for responses. With *One Gesture*, there were lots of individual conversations and questions: 'What do you do, what's it like being deaf, what's it like to sign, can you show us a different way of signing this?' I listen to the answers and make them into a coherent statement. When I think there's something someone hasn't told me – they either hadn't thought of this, or wanted to say it but stopped short for some reason – I make my own suggestion.

So the level of manipulation within the text is quite high. With Marta Abramczyk's text about how she doesn't represent deaf people, the audience are unable to tell her words from mine – I can say now I suggested the text to her. But it's never the case that I tell someone: you're going to say this! I tend to suggest a text to a performer and ask if she agrees with this, if these could be her words. There were times when I'd suggest a text, and the performer replied: 'No, I won't say this', because she didn't believe in what it said, or was embarrassed.

At one point, I became desperate. One of the actors made a very strident remark about deaf people – it was fascinating, and I wanted him to repeat what he said on stage. He tentatively agreed, but the following day, having talked to his wife, he decided he wouldn't do it. I tried to persuade him: it's important not to turn the production into a bit of puff – and I finally came up with a way to include his words in the show. In this particular scene, two voices contradict one another. One person says deaf people should wear implants and try not to be deaf, while the other claims they shouldn't, because it's not a given that implants would help them. In this form, it came across as quite light and funny; also, the two extremes were drawn very sharply, which stripped the story of its personal aspect.

I was forced to rack my brains a little, while also getting what I needed: access to a more complex sort of reality. When you work with texts provided by other people, they quite naturally mollify their statements, and the outcome is a bit of a lump. This needs to be factored in. It's the curse of documentary and community projects: everything has to be nice and uncontroversial. And the story tries so hard to side with the people on stage that it loses credibility.

**You frequently convene educational workshops: Muranów 2014, for example, at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. What methods do you employ in those projects to ‘protect’ the credibility of the story you mentioned?**

With workshops, there’s a slightly different dynamic. Theatre-wise, you can’t expect as much from participants; at the same time, they bring enthusiasm and specificity that are hard to find in institutional theatre. I have to draw them out on these specifics, stories, situations and actions, while also providing them with a form which will work in favour of the artistic situation as such – or find that form with them. Artists like the British-German choreographer Tino Sehgal, but also the Polish artists and performers Paweł Althamer and Elżbieta Jabłońska, practice different ways of building aesthetic structures which enable ‘non-professionals’ to become the most exquisite performers, characters and theatres. This kind of work entails exceptional formal discipline: limiting the scope with a view to bringing out the most powerful aspect of a tiny fragment of reality. That’s still very inspiring. In terms of the approach to the people themselves – participants, performers – there’s little change. There’s less time, but there’s normally no pressure on the ‘product’, either. Some people use their workshops to work on the production. This is something I cannot do – perhaps because so much always depends on the participants.

**With *Central Intelligence Agency* (CIA, 2013)<sup>3</sup> – from the initial project completed with actor Sean Palmer through a third variant staged in the US – why did you opt for a step-by-step exclusion of actors, eventually turning the text into the instrument of agency, the performer?**

I found the atomisation of the stage interesting. The repression of the human being as subject – which, come to think of it, is anyway just a matter of appearances on stage. The mechanism at play in the final version of *CIA* is operated in a top-down fashion – it’s an unspecified System, producing the text and operating the cameras. The person who walks on stage – in this case, an audience member – becomes part of the System, which muddles his subjectivity and makes it unclear. The stage becomes a big – and slightly frightening – subject, and the individual is humbled.

The *CIA* project in general began from a sense of humiliation. I could never believe there were CIA prisons in Poland. I found that stupid. Years later, it turned out I had been manipulated. I believed in the assurances given by politicians, and thus lent support to the whole practice; my subjectivity had been manipulated. It was a game, played beyond me and within me at the same time. That makes for an excruciating experience. My beliefs turned out to be a hilarious patchwork of things suggested to me – a grown man – by other people.

<sup>3</sup> *Central Intelligence Agency* was a performance, installation and interactive environment, shown in 2013 in Troy, New York as part of a residency at EMPAC (the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute). See more: <http://empac.rpi.edu/events/2013/fall/central-intelligence-agency> [accessed on 9 March 2018].

What's one to do with this on stage? How to use this mechanism, how to embody it and let the audience feel it, rather than just talk about it? *CIA* was shown in three versions – each time as a work in progress – and, from one version to the next, the actors, in their capacity as individuals with agency, were gradually withdrawn. The version called <https://maps.google.com/?ll=53.4811,20.935822&t=k&z=14> came first – with the title a reference to a Google Maps page showing the location of a CIA prison. It had been a short production, made in collaboration with Sean Palmer. We drove along the twenty-kilometer stretch between the airport in Masuria [a region in north-eastern Poland] and the prison where prisoners were tortured. We filmed the image of the sky. On stage, visual documentation was supplemented with our commentary – from the point of view of guides looking after tourists who came to Masuria to do some sightseeing. So there was quite a strong element of human presence about this. Then came the second show, as part of Warsaw's *Ciało / Umysł* [C/U] festival in September 2013, with Wojtek Pustola and Marysia Stokłosa working with movement-sensitive cameras. In this case, humans and cameras were interdependent. The third instance was the show in the US, when it was just machines and the text, inviting the audience to interact with cameras or to subordinate themselves to them.

To take a different perspective, not just on *CIA*: withdrawing performers from stage is a bit of a recurrent motif in my work. Actors are usually over-present in theatre: too intense, too symbolic, too domineering. To an extent, this is the result of actors being trained as super-humans, but it's also, to a degree, due to the understanding of theatre as a humanity extract. I'm allergic to this kind of concentration of presence. Once you neutralise the pressure to present yourself and to symbolise a bit from the depths of your innermost self, beautiful things emerge: relationships between bodies, form and space. There's space to breathe.

**You've always been interested in this spatial quality – as is much in evidence in *Map* and *Prologue*. Has working with Marysia Stokłosa and Centrum w Ruchu [the Centre of Movement in Warsaw] choreographers changed your concept of choreography and space?**

I can't say where my fascination with space came from. It certainly started long before I became interested in theatre. I remember as a child I had a passion for rearranging my room. With each new arrangement, everything became different! It was building a world from scratch from seemingly recognisable fragments. But it was also creating space. The tension between space and place is important to me. I understand space as openness, opportunity, the absence of an unambiguous identification and resolution. And place is determination, signification, association. But also a personal, specific way of looking, enabling us to come closer and form an intimate relationship. The Centre of Movement has an affinity with this approach.

While I was still in Portugal [studying directing at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, graduating in 2004], I hung out with dancers who drew on the tradition of performance and, more broadly, the visual arts. It was tremendously inspiring. Vera Mantero, Cláudia Dias, the circles of the now defunct Re.Al. centre. When I came to Poland [in 2008],

for a long time I looked for artists with a similar set of references. Someone put me in touch with Marysia Stokłosa. There was very good flow between us, ever since our first meeting. Marysia was just setting up the Centre of Movement and I became involved straight away. At the time, we used to refer to our group as 'eleven choreographers and Wojtek'.

Naturally, spending time with people from the Centre, watching them at work and taking part in what they do, had an impact on me. When you experience movement, your perception of the production, of theatre, changes fundamentally. Quite simply, a production amounts to the presence of the body. And dance makes it easier to view this body as a subject. In this sense, to grant subjectivity to the body is to recognise we're not just an interpretation of a text. Once you accept that, the very idea of a performance as the interpretation of a text, however loose, starts to look a bit hilarious. Why would words – understood as a text – provide the basis for us, rather than anything else? I say this both as a philosopher, who's heard a lot about the significance of logos and language as the basis of the universe, and as someone for whom language is a recurrent production theme. With all this baggage, language is still just one constituent part. And yet, a stream of words keeps flowing through Polish theatre. Learn from dance! The talking kind included. The subject comes first, the speaking subject follows.

**Wouldn't you like to go in the direction of contemporary choreography? You had an unusual education, and your training includes Forum Dança, the Portuguese centre with links to contemporary dance. Are you thinking of developing that path?**

I occasionally venture there. *Pygmalion* and *Przedstawienie* [*The Performance*, 2016] – a sixteen-minute production made as part of the Microtheatre series at Komuna// Warszawa – are very choreographic. So, to a degree, is *One Gesture*. But, in the end, choreography in the strict sense of the term is a separate field, one I'm only superficially familiar with. Which doesn't mean it's not tempting. Just for the heck of spending time with dancers and benefitting from their skills and knowledge. To see what we can do together. I'm starting preparations for a new production with Marysia Stokłosa, where there'll be a lot of dancing. I don't yet know how much I'll interfere with the choreography as such, but as for the process, I can't wait.

**The theatre you create is minimalist and spare: why did you opt for this form of theatre and how would you describe it? Could you point out your inspirations, whether local or foreign?**

Visual artists are a major inspiration. Sophie Calle, Paweł Althamer, Janet Cardiff, Jeremy Deller.... There's quite a lot of it. Some, like Rabih Mroué and Walid Raad, work in galleries as well as in theatre. As for theatre in the strict sense of the term, I'm inspired by artists who are trying, or have tried, new flavours. Very diverse artists: Forced Entertainment, Gob Squad, Halory Goerger and Antoine Defoort, artists with links to the UK's Forest Fringe. A fair number of choreographers, too: obviously Xavier Le Roy, Jérôme Bel, João Fiadeiro and, from the younger generation, Mette Ingvartsen.

My Polish inspirations are often subconscious or mediated. Certainly Akademia Ruchu [the Academy of Movement] has been a major influence, even though I never saw them live. Ideas, description, language, or rather the approach to the language of art are transferred through other artists, and by other paths, unknown to me. I was shocked when I first saw recordings of Academy of Movement productions and actions. How could this have passed me by! Impossible.

**Critics call you the political philosopher of theatre. Would you agree with this description? What use do you make of your political and philosophical background in your work? Research is a crucial stage of your working process.**

It varies. It depends on a given project. When you venture into some area or other, of course you need to be prepared, do the background research. This was the case with sign language. By contrast, with *Come Together*, I didn't want to prepare at all. This production had this whole background I mentioned earlier, but I was aware it was an anecdotal background rather than a fundamental one.

When I studied philosophy, I thought it was the weirdest imaginable course, and I'd grab any opportunity to escape it. As it turned out, I'd return to it quite often in later years. Today, I tend to think of philosophy as a part of a way of thinking; it sometimes involves splitting hairs, stopping at details, choosing one's words precisely. When it comes to theatre, for some years now the humanities have been completely dominant in shaping the language of the stage. I can at least make sense of what's being said on stage – not every time, obviously, but one of the advantages of having studied philosophy is that, if there's something I don't understand, I'm not afraid to say it. Asking a very clever person to explain what they were talking about, because I wasn't able to grasp it – that's not a problem for me.

**Are projects completed at alternative centres a way of obstructing the mainstream of power, a tactics of countering the strategy adapted by the cultural-production sector? This is how Komuna// Warszawa operates: they're capable of producing the projects Macro Theatre and Micro Theatre: self-referential, critical projects with relatively small budgets, if still publicly funded.**

The people at Komuna// Warszawa are very much to the point. They want a different kind of theatre, and are prepared to put a huge effort into making that ambition come true, and not necessarily as artists, either – predominantly as producers. And when they get involved, they do things to the hilt. On one hand, this seems very healthy, but on the other, it's a huge sacrifice that not everyone's capable of: devoting a large chunk of your life to something which, on a day-to-day basis, offers no returns, whether financial or political. Obviously, what we're all hoping is that, even if, according to immediate statistics, our artistic activities don't seem to work, they do work over the long term, or have an impact on the right people.

But Komuna's actions are not calculated, they stem from some deep-seated inner need. Perhaps this is why it's difficult to describe their work as an effective way of obstructing the mainstream. Then again, people are

capable of recognising and appreciating the fairness of that approach and the completely different quality of theatre experience that stems from it. Is this enough to change 'the strategy adapted by the cultural-production sector', as you called it? It certainly helps to diversify that sector, to break away from certain tired patterns.

**Why do you work with Komuna// Warszawa so frequently? Is one of the reasons having to face up to the tasks assigned by the curator: remixing, minimising, maximising?**

Why do I work with them? Because they want me. It's very rare for me to go somewhere and persuade people to take my idea on. Usually, I have the luxury of being invited. Occasionally I suggest a specific production to a theatre, but I limit myself to the reliable venues. This may be a mistake on my part. Another reason for doing this is that not every 'production house' reacts well to a fundamental change of the production concept a fortnight into the rehearsals. Then there are institutions – I count Komuna among them – that have backed me on no uncertain terms: they like what I do. I wouldn't say there are political reasons for this, unless you express it like this: our sensibilities are alike. This entails similar reading, being socially involved – but surely that's not enough!

Usually there are some tacit, informal assumptions underlying formal rules. To enter a certain form, you need to meet on a different level. I met Komuna through [critic and curator] Tomasz Plata, who had just started working with them on the RE//MIX series. To this day, Tomasz experiments with curatorial activity as a way of providing a work with a profile. This had been a good coincidence, because I'm stimulated by limitations – all the more so by those that enable me to construct a new language – rearranging things, as I once rearranged furniture in my room. To build something completely new.

Mutual trust is another reason why Komuna and I keep working together. I'm slow to come round to new people and places. I can be capricious, I get irritated by a lack of collaboration and structural flexibility in the places where I work. And, before anything else, Komuna still manages to remain a group of lovely, generous people. I'm not enthusiastic about all their curatorial ideas: for example, I think it was a mistake to schedule the Macro Theatre series during the Warsaw Gallery Weekend – the two represent completely different orders, conventions and entail different audience behaviour – but trust is also about relying on structure rather than one's own opinion when necessary.

**You have completed several residencies abroad [including the Arttrakt Visual Arts Residency in Tuscany and the performing-arts residency in St. Erme, France, both in 2010]. In Poland, they're not that popular as an alternative working method for directors. Is this a model you prefer?**

I can't see a model I'd find satisfying. Directors' residencies are always enigmatic, regardless of where they're held – you never know what exactly the director is doing there. When directors are able to go places with their companies, it's different: the situation is clear, they're working on a production, they're provided with a good working environment, they've got space and people who help them. Sometimes you need this kind

of space: just to yourself, to be able to prepare for rehearsals in peace. But the question about the model is broader in scope – it's a question about how to redefine the institutions of theatre, and my feeling is there already are some institutions in Poland trying to put this into practice.

The evolution of the Nowy Theatre in Warsaw is a perfect example. An institution that used to be focused on a single director, the entire scope of activity of which hung on almost that one person, has been capable of substantial transformation. Now it's a place where different shows are produced – including works by [founding director] Krzysztof Warlikowski – and different actors are cast in those productions, both members of the Nowy ensemble and people from elsewhere.

If the economy of closeness is absent from theatre, if a producer and a technician don't believe they play a key role in the production and in the institution-building process – things are very bad indeed. Theatre should be a place where people want to meet and do things together. It's not a place where you come, do your job and make yourself scarce, then someone else comes along, and so it goes on and on. That's the issue with institutional theatres in Poland. Most of them are still looking for directors capable of sustaining a certain tedious, flat drama involved in the production process. Change is essential to prevent it all from rotting to the core.

Though, of course, change can be difficult. Places where things began to happen – Wrocław, Bydgoszcz, Kalisz, Kraków – are now being reformulated, mostly for political reasons: powerful reactionary forces have been set in motion. But this is also about a lack of support from the community – this often includes the employee community. This is also a matter of work culture. Persuading people who for decades didn't give a toss about their institution – and nor did it about them! – to organize, to show solidarity, is not an easy thing to do. In their view, identification with the institution is an abstract notion.

As for myself, I'm thinking about change that's even more radical: flexible theatres, capable of being in step with daring projects, changing the very tissue of the theatrical event. That's difficult. The risk is that this sort of 'liberalisation' will soon become identical with transforming theatre into an empty shell. An institution which is project-based rather than repertoire-based, has few staff members and a small budget, may start to do less and less.

### **Where do you see yourself on Poland's artistic-institutional map?**

I see myself in several informal groups: 'directors presenting non-traditional work in traditional institutions' – in particular, I identify with a group of artists who came to theatre some time after I did: Ania Karasińska, Gosia Wdowik, Michał Buszewicz, Justyna Sobczyk – as well as with 'non-dancing artists with links to dance', and 'directors who had rehearsals broken off by Jan Klata'. I feel an affinity with artists representing the 'performative turn' in visual arts. I turn out to be an ambassador for different groups, different trends, depending on the project. Community theatre, object choreography, post-humanist post-drama – you name it.

I suppose I'm seen by some as a knight-errant, wandering all over the map. Fortunately, institutional theatre turns out to be quite absorbent. And the audience seem quite happy with my wanderings at the moment. In terms of attendance, my productions at the Nowy and Studio Theatres are a success. The audience don't see the reception of my art as a problem: for them, it's not some weird thing bordering on the visual arts; it's an intuitive, accessible proposal. And they like it, no matter how reviewers, who are used to a different language of theatre, choose to classify it. For example, there's a tendency among reviewers to qualify the kind of theatre that features, say, deaf people on stage, as community theatre – there's disdain for the community and for society lurking there – or as amateur theatre.

From the audience's point of view, things are different. The Studio Theatre audience are very diverse. *Come Together* isn't popular with everyone, particularly not with members of the older generation, but we almost always play to a full house. The audience don't come to see a production by Wojtek Ziemilski, an artist representing some trend, they don't come to see 'a challenge thrown at the audience' – they come to see a production which is, quite simply, very watchable. 'Unorthodox, frustrating. But it's also funny, and has important things to say about the reality around us' – that's what audience members had to say about my work.

Of course, this can be criticised as a bourgeois pastime, but I would think having a good time at a performance is no longer a sin. As for the purists who are so bothered by this lightweight quality, they seem to be okay with watching an HBO series after a production. I like it when theatre is a part of life, when it doesn't run away from life. This is quite far removed from the vision of theatre as the place for antagonisms and adversities, aporias and dissonances. There's a plethora of alienating words, words that help verbalise distance, a lack of understanding, a hermetic quality – everything that separates. The challenge is to overcome this and build a relationship, a communal space.

*Translated by Joanna Błachnio*

## ABSTRACT

**[To] See What We Can Do Together:**

Wojtek Ziemilski in Conversation with Katarzyna Lemańska and Karolina Wycisk

Ways of working at different institutions – from state-owned theatres to independent ventures such as Komuna// Warszawa – are the main theme of Karolina Wycisk and Katarzyna Lemańska's interview with director Wojtek Ziemilski. As he elaborates on this issue, Ziemilski references the examples of his (uncompleted) project at the National Stary Theatre in Kraków, and *One Gesture* and *Come Together*, his recent Warsaw productions at the Nowy and Studio Theatres, respectively. The interview takes as its starting point the question concerning the future of the art of theatre in Poland, following a change of government in the country. Ziemilski specifies what 'the economy of closeness' means to him and comments on the current state of affairs in theatre from the point of view of a freelance artist.