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or Post-Theatre à la polonais

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The Anatomy of a Lesson

In *Mapa* [*Map*, 2010], one of Wojtek Ziemilski's early works, participants walk about the completely blacked-out auditorium of Komuna// Warszawa, each holding a small video projector in their hands. Before we set out, a voice instructed us to try to match the displayed image as closely as possible to the things and places we come across on the way. Those objects turned out to be scattered teaspoons, notices stuck on the ground, a disco ball by the ceiling, a teapot, some beads strewn about. The film was slightly hazy: someone had recorded it beforehand, moving about the same space. As I followed in that person's footsteps, I had a sense of being led by the hand. Voices coming from loudspeakers in our projectors asked enigmatic questions, only to answer them after a while (and unorthodox answers those were, too): 'What do we have in common? What we have in common is a party of which none of you remember anything at all', or 'What we share is the desire to be inimitable, special, one of a kind'.

The voices seemed to suggest that the things that bring people closer together also prevent them from forming a community. And so it was a peculiar map: it let us find our way and avoid obstacles – but it also dictated our pace and kept participants (each of whom had a different route to follow) at a distance from each other. It was a game whose rules hadn't been negotiated. I recall how, taking part in *Mapa*, I nonetheless began to probe the boundaries of the convention.

As I participated in the performance, scenes from Michael Haneke's 2006 film *Caché* [*Hidden*] came to my mind: the protagonist, the Frenchman Georges Laurent, receives anonymous threats in the form of video tapes. One is a recording of the camera operator's route to a flat. To find out who is tormenting him, driven by an inkling that the threats are related to harm he had done in the past, Georges, like the players in Ziemilski's *Mapa*, has to physically retrace the route his blackmailer had taken before him, and perform his gestures in the same order: stop his car in the same spot, walk the same streets, and finally turn the same door-knob (almost like a handshake!). This is how he ends up in Majid's flat: Majid is the son of an Algerian couple who once worked as servants in the estate owned by Georges' parents. Majid's parents were killed in the 1961 demonstration by Algerian National Liberation Front supporters that was brutally suppressed by the Paris police. The videos containing anonymous threats is a recording of a peculiar choreography: Georges 'dancing'

to Majid's 'tune'. The power relation between the coloniser and the colonised is reversed – up until the finale, when the Algerian man commits suicide in front of Georges. When I took part in *Map*, was I, too, expected to perform a 'dance' that was alien to me – all in order to end up learning of my guilt and its horrible consequences?

As I walked, I stopped at the beads scattered on the ground and began to rearrange them so that the image of reality would no longer comply with the one recorded on film. My interference brought about a difference, which let me regain some control – or so it seemed at the time. As I shifted the beads, I was approached by a man – I later learned it was the director, Wojtek Ziemilski – who must have secretly watched what participants were doing, and saw my disobedience. He asked me not to touch the props: my interventions, he explained, would bring about a change of rules for the other players: their maps would no longer correspond to reality, causing them to lose their bearings in the space around them, perhaps even go off course.

Somewhat put off, I agreed 'not to touch anything'. I was unaware that the drama of the walk would develop as I desired. The routes of all players ultimately led to one place, previously hidden from us in the dark. The actors awaited us there. When we got there, a disparity between real and projected images appeared for the first time: real people remained silent, with their eyes closed – but in the films we projected onto their faces, they were beginning to look at us and address us in histrionic whispers: 'Do you expect something more?', 'Why do you expect something more?', 'Do you expect this character here?', 'I'm taking your seat. This is your seat', 'This is your theatre. It's my theatre. It's our theatre'. The visible and the hidden overlaid one another, coexisted and supplemented each other. The guilty and the innocent, the humiliated and the triumphant, the colonised and the colonisers, were absent. We were together in this performance, game, production, whatever you chose to call it.

Map has many features of relational aesthetics, in the understanding of the term proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud. As the French curator and art theoretician argued in his renowned 1990s manifesto: [quote TK].¹ In *Map*, Ziemilski first makes us adjust our point of view to the focus of the camera, luring us with the prospect of the perfect reproduction of life – while narrowing our perspective and restricting our contact with other participants. Step by step, he then prompts us to become ever more sceptical of technology, implying in the finale that only the uncomfortable experience of the difference between expectation / model / instruction and what actually happens may become the starting point of

a relation – including in theatre, which Ziemilski invariably links with 'live-ness'. The same audio – and video-guide mechanism was used to similar ends by Rimini Protokoll, in works such as *Call Cutta* (2005). Canadian artist Janet Cardiff, whose works include *Ghost Machine* (2005), is a pioneer in this field.

If I described in such detail the dramaturgy of experience at work in *Map*, I did so for a reason. My conclusions will serve as a map guiding us through Ziemilski's entire body of work. *Map* includes all the major

1 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2002), p.

formal features peculiar to this director – but also the recurring theme and mechanism of his productions: disciplining / restricting / training the audience member (some reviewers have gone as far as to say ‘humiliating’), whose subjectivity is restored in the finale, once again enabling her to form social bonds. The purpose of the training is to acquire the cognitive instruments needed in the reality we inhabit beyond theatre. Thus it’s not a lesson we’re being taught the hard way (as in Haneke’s film), but one we are willing to learn from. As Ziemilski told me in an interview for the journal *Teatr*, ‘Many of those who took part in *Map* didn’t really take much notice of the fact that this game had certain rules, or they interpreted these rules in their own way, so in subsequent versions I emphasised, in this world of ours, certain things must be done if the “mission” is to succeed’.² The structure of the mission is clear and the audience know the rules of the game from the outset, but we only learn at the end what game we’re playing or, rather, what’s at stake.

Ziemilski, a teacher with years of experience of convening theatre and new-media workshops, has recently joined the faculty of the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. In his productions, he gives us simple assignments suitable for all levels of ability, taking as he does so the task-oriented approach, widely practiced in behavioural therapy and education.³ This invites two kinds of associations. First, a reference can be made to post-modern dance, with its fondness for task-oriented dance, used by Yvonne Rainer in *Trio A* in 1966 (to name but one example), where Rainer extracted simple, goal-oriented activities from everyday life. Second, Ziemilski has links with Brecht and his learning-plays (*Lehrstücke*): both directors share not only an interest in the participatory aspect of art, but also the belief that the experience of theatre can be translated into social reality. Ziemilski said in an interview that ‘a production is the prologue to action, an ongoing introduction to reality’⁴ – and one of his productions was indeed titled *Prolog* [*Prologue*, premiered on 6 October 2011 at the Reminiscences Festival in Kraków]. As the virtual actors tell us in *Map*’s finale, ‘Now you’ll leave, and say something to someone, and they will respond’. Ziemilski and Brecht agree that ‘all evil begins with Aristotle and catharsis, because, due to the release of feeling, the matter is settled in theatre, and then we go out into a different world’.⁵ Where Brecht and Ziemilski diverge is in their aim: the Polish director is less interested in ‘stuffing’ us with knowledge of the relations of power and production currently in force – he provides us, rather, with instruments for recognising those relations.

2 Jacek Cieślak, Zofia Smolarska, ‘Na kogo liczymy?’ – an extended version of interviews with Agata-Duda Gracz, Grzegorz Wiśniewski and Wojtek Ziemilski; excerpts published in *Teatr* 2, 2017, pp. 36-40. Extended version: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/miesi%C4%99cznik-teatr/na-kogo-liczymy/1381833518517445/> [accessed on 12 April 2018].

3 In foreign-language learning, the method consists of redirecting a student’s attention from linguistic correctness to performing a specific everyday activity – say, having a job interview or buying a bus ticket.

4 Sandra Szaja, ‘Odpowiedz, Człowieku! (*Prolog*)’, <http://www.e-splot.pl/?pid=articles&id=1586>, post dated 15 October 2011 [accessed on 13 March 2018].

5 Wojtek Ziemilski, on 9 October 2017, during his lecture ‘Naprawdę serio w realu autentycznie, czyli o przekonywaniu w teatrze’ in the *Teatralne Pomysły Na Real* series, at the Nowy Theatre in Warsaw.

Director Heiner Goebbels, in a lecture he delivered as part of a seminar on new paradigms of educating theatre artists, observed that it was a close collaborator of Brecht's, the composer Hanns Eisler (to whom Goebbels acknowledges a heavy debt for inspiration), who introduced the formula of progress and regression (*Fortschritt-Zurücknahme*), which proposes that certain things cannot be developed without taking a step back in others. This gesture of withdrawal, made in order to go / think / see further, is another of Ziemilski's characteristics. For example, it is at work when he claims he prefers to describe himself as 'someone who arranges things' rather than a 'director'. In Ziemilski's view, in Poland a director 'is a messenger of a metaphysical order suffused with religious belief'.⁶ By contrast, the associations invited by 'arranger' are much more pragmatic. Ziemilski's works are made by a collective approach (he often writes collective scripts using Google Docs or by employing the methods of devised theatre); what is more, the person who arranges things 'makes decisions in a moment, when there's a lot going on: ideas being thrown in from all sides, the team is united in a joint effort. [...] The director should be an inquisitive listener'.⁷

Ziemilski takes another step back when it comes to bringing about a revolution through art: after all, an audience member may well go on to use the skills she acquired in a theatre to unpredictable or undesirable ends. For example, the knowledge of the mechanisms of perception mediated through a 'personal player' which can be drawn from *Map*, can be used both for the deliberate formation of social bonds through technology and for fostering 'the society of spectacle'. In sum, Ziemilski filters Brecht through Rainer, working in micro-scale, and taking a more humble approach to theatre as the driving force behind changes in society. Stepping down from his role as an ideological instructor, he nonetheless takes a major step forward when it comes to democratising his relationship with the audience. Each time, he examines closely only a fragment of reality, and perhaps it's no accident he's most at home with small forms.

The School of Agents

Mała narracja [*Small Narration*, Studio Theatre in Warsaw, 2010] takes the form of a lecture performance. Ziemilski, seated behind a lectern, delivers a lecture on the ways of constructing individual identity. Born in the United States, raised in Canada, a student in France who learned the ropes of directing theatre in Portugal, Ziemilski recounts how, within the postmodern paradigm, he shaped his view of the world, free of the burdens of history and nation-related obligations. Contemporary choreographers – Jérôme Bel, Claudia Dias, Xavier Le Roy and João Fiadeiro – have played a crucial role in this process, as their works were founded on the belief that the body was the sole axiom.

This nomadic artist's freedom was then traumatically disrupted in 2006 when the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Poland – a public office with the full name 'IPN Commission for the Prosecution of

6 Arek Gruszczyński, 'There Is No Single Mainstream. Talk With Wojtek Ziemilski', trans. Jan Szelażewicz *Biweekly.pl* 37, July 2012, <http://www.biweekly.pl/article/3798-there-is-no-single-mainstream.html> [accessed on 16 April 2018].

7 Gruszczyński, 'There Is No Single Mainstream'.

Crimes against the Polish Nation' – exposed Ziemilski's grandfather, the well-known singer and reviewer Wojciech Dieduszycki, as a collaborator with the nation's Communist-era Security Service. This was compounded by a media furore surrounding the case, and by the fact that, as Ziemilski demonstrates in *Small Narration*, the IPN investigation, conducted by historians taking the roles of vetting officers, had been unreliable from the point of view of historical scholarship.

Nonetheless, there comes a point when the author-performer takes the step back that was mentioned above, fleeing the personal, score-settling tone of secondary victimization that pervades many productions of documentary theatre, many of which are very much alike. As Ziemilski sets about illustrating his lecture with slogan-questions displayed on the screen as if on a school blackboard, in a font reminiscent of rounded letters in a student primer, his narrative turns cooler and becomes completely objective. The questions come from Wittgenstein's philosophy treatise *On Certainty*; occasionally, they contradict one another:

But might it not be possible for something to happen that threw me entirely off the rails? Evidence that made the most certain thing unacceptable to me? Or at any rate made me throw over my most fundamental judgments? (My) doubts form a system.
For how do I know that someone is in doubt? How do I know that he uses the words 'I doubt it' as I do?⁸

All these questions are left unanswered. They are homework.

Thus the performance's entire narrative fabric (one that holds the potential of being emotionally charged) becomes nothing but source material for a lesson on the production of knowledge – that is, how we produce facts and how this relates to the way our individual and collective memories are woven together. In *Small Narration*, Ziemilski paints a poignant picture of the crisis of faith in identity founded on difference through coming into contact with foreign languages (including languages of art). This kind of identity fails in its role as a shield protecting individuals from symbolic violence from the institutions of their homeland, which determine what does and what does not count as the single approved version of history. But the theme of moral ambiguity of heritage is the most poignant of all. Ziemilski, who holds a degree in philosophy, plays on the ambiguity of words and explores relations between being active as a security-service agent and creating one's agency (he will later continue this theme in his *CIA* project, developed internationally in 2013). Learning to write is a significant step in the acquisition of agency: once we've learned to write, we are able to create and receive cultural matter. But what are we to do with this skill, or to think of our access to culture, if – as was the case with young Wojtek – we have been taught to write by a grandfather who had used the same language to write his denunciations?

Questions abound after we've left the theatre. If we use something that has been passed on to us by a secret agent, do we, too, automatically

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit* / *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (New York et al: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 67e–68e and 19e, respectively.

begin to work for an intelligence service? Is this a condition peculiar to a citizen of a post-communist country – or is it that, as she acquires agency, each individual will at the same time become an agent of the institutions that furnished her with it?

By contrast, *Pygmalion* (Centrum Kultury Zamek in Poznań and Komuna// Warszawa, 2014), based loosely on George Bernard Shaw's play of the same title, does not so much recount the process of language learning as it recreates it in front of the audience. One audience member is invited on stage (anyone can volunteer) and, under the guidance of actor Rozalia Mierzicka, she first completes a short practical course in contemporary art. A large cardboard box (stage design by Wojciech Pustola) serves as a teaching aid: audience member and actor repeatedly shift its position, dividing the stage into sectors and surfaces. They explore the capabilities of the material, they enter the box, animating it from the inside.

This purely formal game then transforms seamlessly into a narrative of grappling with linguistic matter. Seated inside her cardboard prison, Mierzicka asks the audience member to repeat words she dictates syllable after syllable, as if she was teaching him to speak. The significance of this scene becomes apparent during another attempt at 'teaching', when the actor uses the same technique to reveal that her young son has been diagnosed with delayed speech development. Repeating after the actor as a child repeats after her mother, the audience member becomes an extension of Mierzicka.

Associations with the 'human microphone' come to mind – the means of communication adopted by Occupy-movement protesters who had been deprived of a PA system. For Mierzicka, the chosen audience member is this kind of microphone – yet she performs the same role for her mute son, a mother telling his story in the theatre.

A film which in due course appears on screen also works as a microphone of sorts: a recording of a mother playing with her son inside a cardboard house, with little Kazio making stamps with his paint-dipped hands, banging the walls until he gets out of the house. In the film, art seems to be effective as an instrument of communication and self-expression. But, as the production's finale implies, the film has very different overtones indeed: the performance ends with Mierzicka's somewhat ironic litany of thanksgiving to her stage-delivery teachers at drama school, and to the speech therapist who attempted to 'do well for Kazio' by putting him through numerous exercises. The actor's relationship with the chosen audience member, previously seen as a metaphor for political resistance, can now be understood as a micro-scale replication of the educational model based on transmitting skills and knowledge, which has been in place since the eighteenth century. In that model, educational goals are externally imposed by experts, then implemented by teachers who 'put portions of knowledge' into children's heads and then check on their progress. And, given that those goals are uniform for all pupils, the process is reminiscent of work at an assembly line: Ken Robinson rightly

observes how that transmission model was created with the needs of the industrial era in mind.⁹

Pygmalion was made as part of the project *We, the Bourgeoisie*; the curator, Tomasz Plata, sought to think back on the bourgeois category of *Bildung*. But Ziemilski is no advocate of the Enlightenment idea of education as a means of gaining agency. Instead, he depicts the social and individual effort and the emotional and cultural cost involved in this education towards humanity. Kazio's peculiar language of images and inarticulate sounds remains inaccessible to us, being formatted as we are to use speech in one way only; and Kazio is perceived as faulty goods, rather than the author of a differing, equally comprehensive speech culture.

This transmission mechanism, contributing to the alienation of a human being as the object rather than subject of teaching, has been touched upon in one of Ziemilski's earliest works, completed while he was still living in Portugal. In that action, whose title has now been forgotten,¹⁰ an immigrant from Moldova – specifically sought out by Ziemilski with the performance in mind – told his story to the Portuguese audience in their language, mechanically repeating the words playing in his headphones. What he listened to was the recorded translation of his own life story. He had previously told it to Ziemilski, but, with Portuguese as his medium, he had no understanding of it during the performance. As the director recalled, there was something humiliating about the man's numerous mistakes and misspoken words, which blurred the meaning of his self-presentation.

A similar game of cultural Chinese whispers [the kids' game also known as 'telephone'] was the basis of *Poor Theatre*, a 2010 production completed by Ziemilski as part of the RE//MIX project at Komuna// Warszawa. This time, however, awareness of the violent nature of the game had grown far greater.¹¹ A 2003 production by the Wooster Group titled *Poor Theater* served Ziemilski as a reference point: in that earlier production, the cast attempted to settle their accounts with Jerzy Grotowski's *Akropolis* (1962) by recreating, as precisely as possible, the intonation and movements of actors from the Laboratory Theatre. As theatre historian and critic Joanna Walaszek has noted, the Wooster Group performers 'engaged their whole selves' in the process of reanimating the characters and the notions related to them.¹²

9 *RSA ANIMATE: Changing Education Paradigms*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcdGpL4U>, accessed on 23 March 2018.

10 Wojtek Ziemilski in conversation with the author, 12 March 2018.

11 In the documentation for the RE//MIX series, Ziemilski wrote: 'In *Poor Theatre*, where children used headphones to listen to instructions, I withdrew, keeping my intervention to an absolute minimum. I still find the violence inherent in that system frightening, and have to remind myself that it's in no way different from the entire structure of 'education-towards-obeying' – except that it's on display. The element of obedience is evident in it'. Wojtek Ziemilski, 'Autodokumentacja. Słuchamy się', in *RE//MIX: Performans i dokumentacja*, eds. Tomasz Plata, Dorota Sajewska (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Komuna// Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014), p. 138.

12 Joanna Walaszek, 'Spotkanie z The Wooster Group. *Poor Theatre w Warszawie*', in *RE//MIX: Performans i dokumentacja*, p. 145. Reprinted from Joanna Walaszek *Ślady przedstawień* (Warsaw: Errata 2008), pp. 148–150.

In Ziemilski's work, three seven-year-olds (their age was crucial) repeated such a pattern, carrying out instructions on stage that were being passed to them by three adults through microphones and wireless headphones, and repeating quotations from *Akropolis*, the 1904 play by Stanisław Wyspiański [on which the Laboratory Theatre production had been based]. What we were watching was an experiment in a culture lab, the objective of which was to observe the socialisation process and the gradually narrowing scope of individual expression. Initially, the young actors operated in an 'in-between' zone: messages conveyed by culture were constantly coming unstuck off their somewhat desultory presences. This was evident in their involuntary movements, restless glances, spelling mistakes they made when writing down words being dictated to them. 'I am the revolution-n' – one child wrote on a piece of paper, incorrectly dividing a word between lines. We have seen how the possibility of revolutionary change is encoded within us and thus, paradoxically, restricted.

Ziemilski returned to the issue of intercultural translation and the question of how to express one's own identity in a foreign language in *Jeden gest* [*One Gesture*, Nowy Theatre in Warsaw, 2016], completed in close cooperation with stage designer Wojciech Pustola. The production was participatory in that it entailed the participation (and indeed co-authorship) of deaf-mute people expressing themselves in sign language. The difficulty the deaf face when trying to get through to the 'hearing' world is depicted quite literally in a scene in Ziemilski's production which brings to mind Samuel Beckett's *Not I* (1972), as I've argued elsewhere.¹³ Holes were drilled in cardboard partition walls; into those holes, the deaf performers put their arms up to the elbows, using sign language to signal their needs to us from this makeshift hiding place. 'I need to be seen to be understood', one pair of hands signed. 'I need you to know the basic gestures of sign language', 'said' another. A interpreter, seated in the front row for the duration of the production, simultaneously translated their gestures into spoken Polish.

But the lesson that was especially difficult to overestimate came in another scene: actor Adam Stoyanov signed to the audience first about being the class scapegoat, and about anime films, which had given him some respite from the violence at school; then – now without the interpreter's intervention – Stoyanov went on to illustrate, with highly expressive gestures, scenes from a cartoon which played on a screen with the sound off. What he created was visual poetry in sign language. The result of his gestural dubbing was that we provided the images with sound in our imaginations: beginning to hear the lava eruptions, screaming characters, the sounds of their footsteps. On-stage lights were slowly dimming, while Stoyanov's shadow expanded on the wall, not unlike a conductor presiding over a huge symphony orchestra. As in the case of child-like mistakes and involuntary movements in *Poor Theatre*, something about this beautiful scene, permeated with a sense of freedom, felt like a clearance in the principles of the cultural order, a momentary escape from our logocentric glance. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, the limits of our language no longer meant the limits of our world.

13 Zofia Smolarska, 'Ucieśnienie języka', *Teatr 3*, 2017, pp. 60–64.

Teachers' Strategies

And so the didactic forms used to date by Ziemilski include a lecture illustrated with source materials (*Small Narration*), tours using a multimedia guide (*Map*), exercises involving a volunteer (*Pygmalion*), the lab (*Poor Theatre*) and the translation seminar (*One Gesture*). This diversity of forms has had one constant: the multiplicity of questions.

A question is a basic didactic instrument and the mechanism most frequently used for the testing and acquisition of knowledge every one of needs to survive, as Gerald Edelman has observed,¹⁴ and the world won't provide us with answers to questions we haven't asked ourselves before – theatre scholar Tomasz Kubikowski has call this the Rule of the Nibelung. Ziemilski has been very consistent in his use of this instrument. In some productions – for instance, the remix-lecture *Laurie Anderson Stany Zjednoczone* [*Laurie Anderson the United States*, Komuna// Warszawa, 2012], the moment when questions addressed directly to the audience pile up was the key point of action, a climax of sorts. Those questions were direct, not least in that they were put to us by the director himself, emphasising their personal, intersubjective nature, as in the finale: 'What are your words doing to me? How do they keep on at me, and where? [...] Words, being works, are supposed to work and pull the rabbit out of the hat. But where did the rabbit in a hat come from?'

Marriott / Koniec świata [*Marriott / The End of the World*, BWA Warszawa Gallery, 2012] one of Ziemilski's non-theatrical works, displayed on the facade of the eponymous hotel in Warsaw on the day that had been predicted by the Maya for the end of the world, consisted of two questions: 'Is the snake gold-skinned? Should it always be?' These were excerpts from 'A Song on the End of the World' by Czesław Miłosz, originally expressed in the affirmative:

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.¹⁵

All the artist did in this case was add question marks. So little – and yet so much.

Prolog [*Prologue*, co-produced by Ochota Theatre in Warsaw and the Reminiscencje Festival in Kraków, 2011] was composed almost entirely of questions. In the first part of the production, these took the form of sociometric instruction. The technique is widely used today by artists working in the so-called social choreography, including Christine de Smedt and the Walking Theory collective. Yet few people know that sociometric instruction was devised in the 1920s by Jacob Moreno (better known as

14 Gerald M. Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Tomasz Kubikowski, *Reguła Nibelunga. Teatr w świetle nowych badań świadości* (Warsaw: Akademia Teatralna im. Al. Zelwerowicza, 2004).

15 Czesław Miłosz, 'A Song on the End of the World', trans. by Anthony Miłosz, in Miłosz, *Selected Poems* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1981), p. 57.

the founding father of psychodrama), originally for recognising group roles and power relations within small social groups, such as classrooms – as it was used by the famous Polish-Jewish educator Janusz Korczak, among others. Students are asked a number of questions, such as: 'Who in the classroom do you value most / least in a given area?' This provides the teacher with information about who is the best-liked person in the class, who is the *éminence grise*, and who is the scapegoat.

Today the technique is used predominantly in the form of written tests (keeping choices confidential increases the truthfulness of the responses), but Moreno, a fervent proponent of spontaneity and action, had recommended that the test be conducted 'live' in space: he proposed, for instance, that group members position themselves in relation to the chosen individual to indicate how close or distant she is to that individual. In *Spatial Confessions (On the question of instituting the public)*, completed in 2014 as part of the Performance Room at London's Tate Modern, Christine de Smedt together with Bojana Cvejić, Marta Popivoda and Ana Vujanović used the form of the sociometric test to ask participants to, for example, answer simple questions about their status and their views on social issues by making uncomplicated movements. 'If you came to London to look for work – jump twice. If you followed your partner here – jump three times', 'If you think more money should be invested in London's social housing – stand next to someone and put a hand on their shoulder'. This embodied sociology played an educational role: as they took up space, participants were given the opportunity to reflect on social distinctions, and were provided with material to do so as they went along. They were at once researchers and research participants. In their format *100% City*, Rimini Protokoll have staged living graphs in a similar way.

In *Prologue*, Ziemilski put the same instrument to slightly different use, choosing criteria which mapped out the corporeal, extremely personal experience of theatre. In order to elicit truthful responses despite the social nature of the encounter, he created an atmosphere of intimacy by providing each participant with headphones through which instructions were broadcast. 'Are you usually late to the theatre? If so, take a step back'. 'Do you sometimes read text messages in theatre? If so, take a step back'. 'Have you ever cried in theatre, laughed at bad acting or a foreign actor's accent?', 'Have you ever found that a production changed your opinion on an important issue or prompted you to act?', 'Have you ever stank during a performance?', 'Have you ever masturbated in theatre?', 'Have you imagined everyone in the theatre were naked?' The audience then went on to recline on cushions, while a projection showing the image of audience members linked in a network by lines drawn in real time was displayed on a screen hung from the ceiling. A male voice summarised the results of the study, giving the number of people who responded to each question in the affirmative. As soon as the summary was finished, a female voice told audience members to picture themselves in erotic or embarrassing situations and asked whether this was enough to make them feel something significant had taken place here, in the theatre. Finally, the voice prepared the audience for going out into the real world, where 'we've got something to lose'.

Inclusion of the second degree

In Anna Róża Burzyńska's review of *Prologue*, the critic wrote:

The stakes are high in the game called *Prologue*: if we accept its rules and decide to enter the discomfort zone of absolute candour, we will indeed learn something important about ourselves, and leave the theatre deeply moved by the pertinence of intimate questions and pitiless insights. [...] Paradoxically, Ziemilski's peculiar anti-theatre is based on the deep confidence in the power of theatre, capable of exerting a profound influence on how the audience think.¹⁶

Although the participatory aspect of his work was frequently discussed and analysed,¹⁷ in my view the far more significant characteristic of Ziemilski's theatre is the internal inclusion taking place within the sphere of concepts and values – the 'high stakes' mentioned by Burzyńska. As Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska has observed in her review of *Pygmalion*, thought of great complexity is concealed behind the modest staging and formal clarity of that production. 'This installation – or is it a game? – for two people, one cardboard box and a very short film – is seemingly very simple, minimalist, austere and yet quite complicated'.¹⁸ Ziemilski takes small portions of reality and places them under a microscope, where they reveal their baroque complexity.

This inclusion 'of the second degree' is shown in the most emphatic manner in *Come Together*, one of Ziemilski's most recent works [Studio Theatre in Warsaw, 2017]. The whole plot of the production consists of the actors using all possible means to encourage us to come on stage – 'Come and join us: being together is a great exercise in being together' – while theatre staff prevents each such attempt, sending audience members back to their seats. A notice reading 'Please do not enter' is placed above the stage, further deterring the audience from participation. As they grow increasingly desperate, the actors resort to bribery, inviting the audience to join them for an orgy or even a cigarette (after all, only actors are allowed to smoke in a theatre in Poland). Finally, they use blackmail: choreographer Marysia Stokłosa begins to suffocate and pleads with the audience to help her. Actor Lena Frankiewicz becomes hysterical, trying to move us to pity. As the production draws to a close, a small group of audience members is at last admitted on stage – or rather backstage, where they are 'devoured' by actors. We can infer this act of cannibalism from the blood gushing from backstage and the actors' faces, smeared with red paint as they line up to take their curtain calls.

Come Together may be read as an ironic commentary on the way public-arts institutions operate, blocking genuine citizen participation in the production of culture, and degrading participation to the role of a festival gadget. But Ziemilski goes beyond the framework of institutional critique: although the audience can't influence the course the performance will

16 Anna R. Burzyńska, 'Foyer rzeczywistości', *Didaskalia* 106, December 2011, pp. 78–80 (p. 80).

17 Katarzyna Lemańska, 'Teatr rozszerzony Wojtka Ziemilskiego', *Performer* 5, 2012, <http://www.grotowski.net/performer/performer-5/teatr-rozszerzony-wojtka-ziemilskiego> [accessed on 11 April 2018].

18 Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska, 'My? Mieszczanie?', *Didaskalia* 125, 2015, pp. 32–38 (p. 37).

take, they are indispensable to it, regardless of the form of participation they choose. Were it not for the passivity of some audience members, the audience wouldn't have to persuade anyone to take part. By contrast, if others didn't decide to come up on stage, theatre staff would have nothing to do – and the institutional framework could well turn out to be redundant. Any form of participation is okay, Ziemilski seems to say; and institutional barriers, as well as the division into those who act and those who watch, is a challenge feeding the dream of transgressing those very barriers and that division – this is where theatre draws its strength from. The point is not to take an 'active' or 'passive' part in theatre, but to let art take part in our lives. We can get there by different roads.

Such mediations between things commonly taken to be oppositions are more numerous in Ziemilski's work. His is an intermedial theatre, avoiding facile divisions into 'evil' technology and 'good' reality. He rejects the weight of fictitiousness, emphasising the 'meaningfulness of form', while returning to narrativity, leading the audience member 'from thought to thought', often using a micro-story for the purpose. He works both in and outside publicly funded theatres. Although his own tastes are as sophisticated as it gets (as evidenced by his blog on contemporary art), he endeavours to make the language of theatre accessible to as broad an audience as possible. He rates post-modern dance, but also claims that an interest in theatre was instilled in him by the Open Theatre Festivals in Wrocław and that city's fringe Kalambur theatre, where his mother once worked.¹⁹ Ziemilski provokes us to reflect on ways of producing historical knowledge – a characteristic of post-documentary theatre. And yet, this doesn't stop him from arguing that trying to establish what things are 'really' like is worthwhile – this is where he differs from the post-documentary – and that an objective reality still exists which theatre can reference.²⁰ He takes the attitude of mediating between different worldviews and paradigms in place both in the social sphere and within himself. When I asked him about divisions within theatregoing circles in Poland, he replied:

These different audiences feel ever more strongly they belong in the group of their choice; they share codes they want to hold on to. Given this, the anti-government declarations made from stage strike me as backward, because the people who embrace them will only be confirmed in their views, and those who think differently will ignore such declarations completely. I'm not interested in this sort of tribal mentality and becoming entrenched in one's views. I'm on the lookout for situations where community comes into being in ways that are far from obvious, going beyond the manifest divisions [...]. As far as I'm concerned, this stands a better chance of being 'political' – as in, 'taking part in the world'. Which doesn't mean I find this straightforward: I've got my own views and certain aesthetic criteria which for many are hard to meet. Quite recently, as part of the Micro-theatre project, I staged a sixteen-minute production with nothing but balloons in it. I'm aware this language isn't universal at all, and, to appreciate a production, you need to be familiar with a whole set of codes, as well as with art

¹⁹ Wojtek Ziemilski in conversation with the author, 12 March 2018.

²⁰ Ziemilski spoke of this during his lecture 'Dokument na scenie', 19 February 2018, in the series *Teatralne Pomysły na Real* at the Nowy Theatre in Warsaw.

history and modernism. I still have that tension in me: I want to go outside and face something that lies beyond this 'camp' of mine – but I also want to make use of what I find appealing and worthwhile.²¹

Unlike Santiago Sierra and Artur Żmijewski, who set traps for those who participate in their projects, Ziemilski fishes for his audience with a rod and reel. For him, the participatory aspect is not there to deconstruct the myth of the all-national community – the role that aspect had played in *Oni [Them]*, a 2007 piece by Artur Żmijewski. Nor does it serve to prove the conformity of those who fell into the participatory trap, as was the case with Żmijewski's *80064*. Ziemilski is after 'an intimate sense of the collective. In other words, a thing no less utopian than the idea that theatre is the sphere of encounter and community', as he put it in the self-documentation for *Laurie Anderson*. Thus he endeavours to make the audience member experience constructive, while examining how little this structure needs for theatre to survive. What else can be called into question? What else can one end with a question mark?

In his essay on Akademia Ruchu (Academy of Movement), one of Poland's major avant-garde theatre companies, Ziemilski elaborated on the via negative he followed while working on *Pygmalion*:

As I was working on this production, I was consistently choosing not to construct a narrative of 'engagé art', telling of one's circumstances, environment and social biography as a documentary would. The construction process had been negative – that is, predominantly probing what territory I'm able to delimit without stepping into the areas of 'the wider context' and 'usefulness'.²²

'We construct and construct,' he went on, simultaneously demonstrating his affinity to the Academy of Movement and reporting on the forms of play enjoyed by his two-month-old son: 'we go on constructing, it came out well, the rhythm has reappeared, the rhythm has reappeared. [...] Hand to hand eat your tongue'. In light of this text, comparing theatre to the teaching process acquires a much deeper significance. The point is not didactic art, but recreating in theatre a state of mind (possibly age-old) when we were able to walk the tightrope between play and non-play, connecting word and movement; when we didn't separate language from matter and the world was one great research field.

In sum, Ziemilski walks the tightrope between two models of education: the transmissional, objectifying, and the agency-granting one, based on a profound understanding of the teaching process. As demonstrated by the latest psychological studies, the latter is non-linear and highly individualized with regard to each pupil (this is the model used by, for example, the Waldorf teaching method).

Where does this ambivalent attitude come from? When I told Rimini Protokoll's Stefan Kaegi (who by then had got to know Ziemilski) of my experience as a participant in *Map* – how I felt cheated when it turned out

21 Cieślak, Smolarska, 'Na kogo liczymy', p. 39.

22 Wojtek Ziemilski, 'Nie można tego tak zostawić', in: *Akademia Ruchu. Teatr*, ed. Tomasz Plata (Warsaw: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszeńskiego, Instytut Sztuk Performatywnych, 2015), p. 294.

that, in participatory theatre, which ostensibly grants subjectivity to its audience, there is so little room for manoeuvre, for action – Kaegi referred to his own experiences with Polish audiences, replying somewhat paternally (though might there be a modicum of truth in what he said?): ‘That’s because you act like dogs let loose’. In this context, letting loose applies not only to the freedom we have been granted (some would say: the freedom we have fought for) but are unable to put to good use. Kaegi’s words also remind us of the ‘letting loose’ (or a break, as in the breaking of chains) which has occurred many times in Poland’s national identity – but also in the biographies of those who, like Ziemilski, tried to construct themselves from scratch.

As we look for post-theatre’s distinctive features, we mustn’t forget the specificity of the Polish audience and Poland’s ‘creative class’. Ziemilski is the ultimate ‘post-’ artist: he returns to Poland with a baggage of post-art, with its trans-genre, nationality-surpassing qualities, to filter this baggage through the sensibility of a resident of post-communist Poland, subjected to secondary acculturation and symbolic violence from the state. In the play for granting the post-theatrical-movement its own identity, too much emphasis sometimes falls on its international aspect, and attempts are made to fit it into Western art phenomena ‘away from the local set-up’. Ziemilski’s work suggests one should rather look at how these ‘wordly’ inspirations (and aspirations) may enter difficult yet creative relations with the Polish national character, from which – as Ziemilski has noted in *Laurie Anderson* – it is not so easy to unsubscribe. ‘I realised I wasn’t Laurie Anderson. And no one here will ever be like Laurie Anderson, not one bit. That’s because our plane came down in a different way’.

Translated by Joanna Błachnio

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ABSTRACT

Zofia Smolarska

Wojtek Ziemilski's Learning-Plays (*Lehrstücke*); or, Post-Theatre à la polonaise

The article is a recapitulation of Wojtek Ziemilski's work, from his earliest intermedial productions (*Map*) up to the most recent productions, staged at publicly funded theatres (*Come Together*, *One Gesture*). An association with Brecht's *Lehrstücke* provides a framework for bringing these formally disparate projects together. The author analyses Ziemilski's pedagogic strategies, noting that his productions create a situation of transfer of knowledge not just with their form (conference, seminar, translation seminar, lecture, etc.), but also with their theme, which is often teaching or learning. The author observes that what differentiates Ziemilski from Brecht, making him into an undogmatic teacher is, first, the pivotal place unanswered questions take in his productions; and, second, the fact that he carries out the role of director as a mediator between various world-views and paradigms.