

Joanna Krakowska

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Commentators on public life have yet to find a convincing explanation for political phenomena storming Europe and the world, but at least they have coined a term for them. Here it is: we live in the era of post-truth. This formula is extremely popular in Western media, since it describes politics most effectively influencing the fate of states and nations. The politics of post-truth does not refer to verified facts but to imagined ones; it does not use arguments but manipulates emotions. Thus public opinion is shaped by unverifiable or openly deceitful information repeated so many times that it becomes truth-like by prescription. The most emblematic, frequently quoted examples are the blatant yet effective stretches of truth in the vast majority of statements made by President Trump in the US and announcements by Brexit proponents that leaving the EU would add a weekly £350 million to the British health-care system. Anyway, we don't have to look far: many people in Poland also believe that post-truth will set us free.

Feeling that the world is collapsing around us, a loss of any stable, shared platform which once provided a kind of factual consensus and an imperative to verify public statements, leads to a break in social communication and, further, to a crisis with serious consequences. Not to mention the fact that living the world of post-truth is a source of real torment, which is clear to anyone who had any contact with the former Communist regime in Poland, the Polish People's Republic (PRL), and its reality shaped by deception and pretence.

On one hand, there is a real need for detoxification of society, poisoned by post-truth; on the other, for establishing communication with other people under new principles and in a context of trust, even if it can appear naive. The politics of post-truth can only be contrasted with the utopia of non-pretence. Where? In theatre.

1.

In the final scene of the Krzysztof Kieślowski film *Amator* [*Camera Buff*, 1979], the protagonist, an amateur filmmaker, turns his camera on himself. This is not caused by his narcissism – he is guided by pain. He bought that camera to film his newborn daughter, but soon discovered that a camera can be of use not just for documenting private joy and emotion, but also to tell a story about the reality we live in, as means of critique, reviling wrongdoings and things remaining shamefully hidden, and stirring conflict and influencing people's lives. So he keeps recording

while acknowledging the weight of his own responsibility and the limits of creative freedom. When he learns about real consequences of his films for real people, when he pays his own personal price for engagement and honesty, when he discovers his own entanglement in the system and feels real powerlessness, he points the camera at himself to tell his own story, to explore his position and the medium he uses. This scene has been interpreted many times as the moment in which an amateur turns into an artist. Today, however, it is worth looking at it as a testimony to recognising one's powerlessness in the face of a deep crisis caused by hypocrisy, a corrupt environment, injustice, a degeneration in government and a dramatic conflict of values.

That moment – the moment of despair, to be frank – also perfectly renders the situation Polish theatre faces today. The 'Amateur Moment', as a reaction to being suspended between responsibility and powerlessness in the face of a politics of post-truth and the gravity of social crisis, is being implemented in auto-theatre, among the possible responses to this crisis yet at the same time the most personal one.

Auto-theatre is the kind of theatre in which artists speak from the stage on their own behalf and under their own names, not the names of characters. They speak in their own words and about themselves. They refer to their own experiences, explore their personal limitations, reveal their weaknesses, problematize the situation in which they speak, define and question their identities, disclose the backstage of theatrical process, relations inside the team, institutional restrictions, economic conditions, ideological uneasiness. Auto-theatre is not necessarily a theatrical convention, but rather a formula for initiating communication with the audience under new principles: honesty, revelation, disclosure, speaking on one's own behalf, responsibility for one's words, testing democratic procedures. Auto-theatre is a somewhat desperate attempt to establish a frame of reference within theatre, a team or between stage and audience, that is, in places where something is still there to be done, instead of as it has been done in the external world, social life and historical discourse, on which we have apparently irreversibly lost any possible influence. It is, therefore, also an attempt to re-establish communication, which in theatre has been broken by overly hermetic artistic explorations, and in public life as a result of radical political divides and polarisation of worldviews, which render any discussion impossible.

Writing about these issues, I have to acknowledge in small print that I am not neutral here, due to engagements in making this text not an impartial commentary but rather a kind of participant observation.

2.

The situation of theatre marked by an imperative of public engagement is especially complex in Poland today. On one hand, it has been trying for several years, for better or worse, to find itself a new formula in light of the fact that critical theatre – which over the past decade has thoroughly looked through Polish symbolic and identity registers, remodelling historical narrations and enhancing emancipatory discourse – has been trivialised and exhausted. On the other hand, it is precisely the achievements of critical theatre that are the source today of various discomforts or at least questions: about efficiency and stability in the changes it has

brought about, assessments of conflict used as a method, co-responsibility for social divisions, if it did not succeed in winning some people over and had not convinced others to take its diagnoses seriously and address appropriate consequences. Awareness that the enormous work done by historical and identity theatre is now squandered by the political counter-offensive is depressing. It imposes an awareness that after some time this work must be done again, from the beginning. But that is a matter for the future, as today the most important issue appears to be the real, drastic social polarisation, with both sides entrenched deeply in their positions in a gigantic conflict of values which nobody wants to abandon.

The question is: how to rescue ourselves from this deadly clutch, from this collapse down a precipice of mutual hate and contempt, from the conflict which may escalate to real violence? Today, nothing is more important in Poland than to prevent that. Prevent it by creating conditions for dialogue by seeking opportunities in elementary communication, through alternative points of view, through creating local communities based on empathy and dialogue. With its imperative for engagement, theatre has much to offer here. Auto-theatre is one way, but not the only one.

Over the past two seasons, at least two clear programmes of acting through theatre in public space have been proposed.

Maciej Nowak derived his idea of a new public theatre – offering a way out from powerlessness and communicative deadlock – from his reflections on critical theatre, which he promoted vigorously [as director of the Wyrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk]. Nowak admits (though not entirely legitimately) that even given all the achievements and contributions of critical theatre it could not achieve one goal: establishing a new audience. ‘We stumbled, focusing primarily on the Regietheater model, partly even on formalistic theatre, which ignores any alliance with the audience’.¹ Nowak wants to build that agreement by means of the powers and instruments of popular theatre, which is ‘friendly for its audience and which fights all forms of exclusion: generational, moral, physical, based on worldview or class [...], that searches in its alliance with the audience and with its manifestations of local social activism for a new community shape realized in diversity. The theatre of socialized individualism’. And that is, importantly, a ‘theatre that will care about clarity of message and an accurate diagnosis of reality’. Whatever this means in practice, his declaration of approachability and caring for the varied community of subjects is a political declaration par excellence.

An alternative proposal has been developed and implemented over three seasons by Paweł Wodziński and Bartek Frąckowiak at the Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz. Declaring that they think about theatre as a ‘democratic institution: open to all and open for all’, providing audiences with the opportunity to participate in debate and ‘to exchange ideas as equal partners’,² while they offered a kind of escape forward.

1 Maciej Nowak, ‘We, the New Public Theatre’, *Polish Theatre Journal* 1, 2017, <http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/133/618>, [accessed on 30 January 2018].

2 Paweł Wodziński, Bartosz Frąckowiak, ‘A letter from the directors of TPB’, <http://www.teatrpolski.pl/list-dyrekcyj-tpb-do-widz%C3%B3w.html?lang=en>, [accessed on 30 January 2018].

This is supposed to consist of freeing ourselves from all the identity debates spinning in place and turning to global issues, which to date have proved rather unpopular in Polish theatre; in abandoning emancipatory discourses favoured by the cultural Left while turning towards a broadened debate about democracy; and in ending conflicts around symbolic language by turning to reflection on the possibility of utopian solutions for society, the economy and politics. The programme of Wodziński and Frąckowiak, which is openly political: it has global and universal aspirations, which can become a communicative challenge for the audiences but which liberates them at the same time from the ideological impasse in which all arguments have been used, abused and rebutted. Shifting the debate out of those old trenches onto new ground, as-yet untouched, is another potential perspective for communicating over the heads of those threatening us with fratricidal conflict.

A third, quite clearly outlined proposition – along with the popular theatre proposed by Nowak and the idea of political theatre offered by Wodziński and Frąckowiak – positing a new language for theatre as well as a signpost for overcoming communicative and social crises, is auto-theatre. It has yet to develop its programmatic interpretation, which should come as no surprise: as it is ‘auto’, each performance within the movement and each of its creators speak on their own behalf. Importantly, auto-theatre is a formula which can find its place in almost every theatre model and programmatic framework. And this is happening. Auto-theatrical performances or those containing auto-theatrical elements have been created in the State Jewish Theater in Warsaw, the Polski Teatres in Bydgoszcz and in Poznań, at Komuna// Warszawa and at TR Warszawa in Warsaw, at the Stary Theatre in Kraków and at Theatre 21 in Warsaw.

3.

The actors from Theatre 21 best express the essence of auto-theatre, with shameless simplicity: ‘In this theatre, actors speak about themselves’, and on the idea of auto-theatre: ‘Why do people need theatre? To open up to other people’, and the principle of auto-theatre: ‘The actor sees the viewer, the viewer sees the actor’.³ These three points guarantee that issues related to political, economic and social context are taken up not as a part of an ideological debate but as actual experience; that democracy or a lack of democracy is not abstract but practical; that theatre can become a space for empowerment rather than for embodiment and looking.

In their productions from 2013 to 2015 – *Statek miłości* [*Love Boat*], *Upadki* [*Falls*], *Klauni* [*Clowns*] – Theatre 21 actors have staged, deeply and critically of the system, their hard-won conditions regarding the context of social programmes, economic rules, the family institution. In a similarly vein, actors from the Jewish Theater, in the production *Aktorzy żydowscy* [*Jewish Actors*, 2015] problematize their professional situation, the meandering ways that led them to this company, revealing their failures and related stigmas. Actors with the Ochota Theatre in Warsaw,

3 *21 myśli o teatrze*, eds. Justyna Lipko-Konieczna, Justyna Sobczyk (Głogowo: Fundacja Win-Win, 2016). See also: Justyna Godlewska-Byliniak, Justyna Lipko-Konieczna, ‘Public to Private: A Theatrical Game with Disability’, *Polish Theatre Journal*, 2, 2016, <http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/85/373>, [accessed on 30 January 2018].

in three short studies that make up the production *Triathlon* [*Triathlon*, 2016], sit the audience backstage and in the foyer to reveal the human, personal dimension of theatre and stitch together its emotional linings. In the production *Kwestia techniki* [*A Technical Question*, 2015] at the Sary Theatre in Kraków, tech hands come on stage, revealing their identities and behind-the-scenes views of their work, which are typically invisible to audiences. Performances played by the tech hands allow the audience to notice how, within the institution of theatre, under-recognized groups function, and to take a look at the hierarchical order within theatre, related also to visibility. This issue gets further complicated by the production with TR Warszawa, *Ewelina płacze* [*Ewelina's Crying*, 2015], in which hierarchies dictated by the media constitute the starting point and actors cast doubt on their own identities, which may seem obvious while in fact those are being constructed by audience fantasies and aspirations.

In all these productions, the essential task is to establish communication at the basic level of sincerity, requiring the engagement of a personal 'I', obviously constructed but clearly pointing to the subjectivity of the performer. All of the productions require, not so much reception strategies exercised in theatre, but those belonging to human relations: sympathy, empathy, respect, curiosity. The human reflexes, simply put. As it has been put before: 'to open up to other people', democratically and without patronising.

Auto-theatre also deals with power relations in theatre, its economy and rules of teamwork. As with the production *Take It or Make It* (2016) from the Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz, in which the creative process, democratised from beginning to end, long before the premiere, is shown and analysed. Here, each actor received the opportunity from the start to define their character and follow through with their own individual script, but when teamwork began, it turned out that actions by some people prevent other people's actions. Thus the performance became an attempt at negotiating shared rules for being on stage, an attempt doomed to failure. This is not a particularly good sign for attempts at solving social problems by theatre but, at the same time, it is a splendid example of making reasons for democracy's failure visible. It is also worth noting that auto-theatre usually operates with the discourse of weakness and failure. We can only hope that there will be theories which would argue that, today, this discourse has power.

This is related to what may be the most important feature of auto-theatre: its capacity for taking a self-critical attitude. The production *Drugi spektakl* [*Second Performance*, 2016], by the Polski Theatre in Poznań, literally implements the rule that 'The actor sees the audience, the audience sees the actor' – copying all behaviours, even the most typical, of the audience, while fulfilling various tasks actors on stage might be given by an audience. And in this action it also fails, as it reveals its own powerlessness, embarrassing itself, displaying that imitation – mimicry, yes, but emotional experience, unfortunately, no. *Second Performance* asks itself the question: why theatre at all?

And, to conclude, the essential issue: money. Economic conditions for theatre productions were the subject of our own production in Bydgoszcz, *Kantor Downtown* (2015), in which an actress reveals her monthly earnings and encourages the audience to do the same. In *Mikrodziady* [*Micro*

Forefathers' Eve, 2016] prepared as part of the Komuna// Warszawa Micro-theatre project, there are multiple questions about the possibility of creating theatre with no money, no grants, no funding. However, it turns out that questions related economy are in fact questions about theatre engagement and the kind of social order in which it operates. Therefore, other forms are soon taken up: 'Am I ready to have political views?', 'Am I ready to kill?', 'Am I ready to be unpleasant to the society?', 'Am I ready to shut down?', 'Do I have to start adjusting?'. That uncontrollable series of questions, which actors unleash in the 16-minute *Mikrodziady*, is the 'Amateur Moment', during which we have to turn the camera on ourselves.

4.

Auto-theatre can, of course, have many variations, from autobiographical solo performance to elaborate ensemble performances, but always focuses on at least one of two issues: deconstructing the theatre medium into its component parts, and/or empowering participants in the performance. The former means coming back to workshop practice and basic actor statements questioning all conventions and transcending traditional limits of theatre. The latter means personal responsibility, exposing one's privacy, risking being shamed or perhaps even ridiculed.

By no accident were many of the productions mentioned above developed with the utmost effort, often accompanied by conflicts and sometimes incidents within company ensembles. The production developed by Wojtek Ziemilski, *6 sposobów na wyjście z teatru*, [6 Ways Out of Theatre], who studied memories and workshop awareness among Stary Theatre actors and attempted to translate that into a social efficacy, ultimately was not staged. The goal of empowerment is not appealing to everyone: a lack of a role deprives some of their sense of security, while some regard questioning their own opinions as a form of oppression. Auto-theatre created within the repertory-theatre system often means a dramatic confrontation between two theatre languages: the director, who expects sincerity, and team members who want roles. Meanwhile, it is a specific social test: if, and how, is agreement possible between these two different languages and developments of common quality? Do all participants in this process want to assume that responsibility, speaking for themselves and on their own behalf?

What would they receive in return? It turns out that most of the productions mentioned above are popular, receiving prizes, great reviews and audience applause. Sources of that applause are worth reflecting on, since perhaps it is precisely the harbinger and evidence of a great impassioned demand for the semblance of truth, for a personal voice expressing actual experiences and failings and weaknesses, which would enable compassion, inspire confidence and develop relations between people. As a consequence, this would authenticate the systemic, political and social critique while at the same time leading the way towards overcoming this crisis.

5.

In the era of post-truth, in which facts are deemed unpatriotic thus denied, and in which obvious lies are not stigmatized but assessed in

terms of their efficacy, standing before an audience and offering simple sincerity without pretence, or just a reflection on the essence of pretending, can wield therapeutic value. In the face of post-truth, in which 'talking a load of rubbish' is by no means a study from the production *Ewelina's Crying* but an immanent quality of doing politics, delivering verifiable results from Brexit to the Trump presidential campaign, auto-theatre can offer veredical catharsis.

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ABSTRACT

Joanna Krakowska

Auto-theatre in the era of post-truth

Detoxification of society polluted with the post-truth and establishing communication with other people under new principles, in the context of fundamental trust, is today the most urgent social need. The politics of post-truth can only be confronted with a utopia of authenticity, nowadays practiced and tested in the most comprehensive way by auto-theatre. Auto-theatre is the kind of theatre in which artists speak from the stage on their own behalf and under their own names, not the names of characters. They refer to their own experiences, explore their personal limitations, reveal their weaknesses, problematize the situation in which they speak, define and question their identities, disclose the backstage of theatrical process, relations inside the team, institutional restrictions, economic conditions, ideological uneasiness. Auto-theatre is not necessarily a theatrical convention, but rather a formula for initiating communication with the audience under new principles.

Auto-theatre can, of course, have many variations, from autobiographical solo performance to elaborate ensemble performances, but always focuses on at least one of two issues: deconstructing the theatre medium into its component parts, and/or empowering participants in the performance.

