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The Academy of Movement: A Future Already Past

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Akademia Ruchu – the Academy of Movement – is a paradox of an institution: at once recognised and obscure, influential yet exerting that influence in a decisively covert and ambiguous way, cosmopolitan while being determined by its Polish social, political and historical contexts. Last but not least, it is a theatre company more encompassing than any definition of theatre and the theatrical, a theatre that defies classification due not only to its aesthetics but primarily to the scope of its praxis.

Established in 1973, Akademia Ruchu was founded during a decade informed by the rise in activity of socially committed student movements (from which the group originated) and by the heightened political consciousness of Polish repertory-theatre companies. The new company, however, transgressed frontiers demarcated by those phenomena: the politicality it espoused constituted a performative praxis and was no mere universal topic for intellectual consideration. Correspondingly, its signature offhanded artistic poetics, evocative of ‘experimental’ student companies, jarred with Akademia Ruchu members’ conceptual precision and impressive technical expertise.

Over the course of its long-standing career, the company staged variegated artistic events. The Academy’s creative output encompasses performances, happenings, various performative activities, frequently interactive ones. These took place both indoors and in the streets, ingeniously redefining the notion of public space and artistic communication. However, the Academy did not limit itself to the creation of finite works – activities that can be described as curatorial and organisational were an equally essential feature. Various creators affiliated with the Academy organised workshops, seminars and film screenings, facilitated performances by international companies and arranged and curated visual-arts events. As a significant component of its core activities, the Academy repeatedly attempted to establish – thanks to its innovative participatory praxis – a radical urban-culture institution aimed at the grassroots galvanisation of local residents.

Activities orchestrated by Akademia Ruchu have been of great importance to Polish culture – first to spring to mind are the independent company Komuna// Warszawa, with its artistic praxis derived directly from the company’s output, and the Centre for Contemporary Art – Zamek Ujazdowski in Warsaw, one of the most influential culture institutions in Poland, whose founding director, Wojciech Krukowski, was the former Academy leader. Yet its impact remains uncharted. Polish theatre,

which has driven away any recollection of Akademia Ruchu almost completely, seems a special case: in doing this, it has in effect supplanted the memory of a particular fusion of Polish performing arts with world art as embodied by this soundly established, strongly present company that has received critical acclaim internationally. This essay is dedicated to Akademia Ruchu's performances, and constitutes an attempt to locate the company in the context of contemporary Polish theatre.

Viewing Akademia Ruchu performances (or, rather, videos of those performances or preserved excerpts of them) from the perspective of the 2010s is a strange adventure. An adventure placing the viewer within an eccentric temporal and cognitive framework, perching one precariously between the known and the unknown, the alien and the domesticated (the familiar). The singularity of this perspective comes into focus even more when one looks at the archival footage through the prism of contemporary Polish theatre praxis.

What strikes one at first is a specific strangeness: these productions show no correspondence whatsoever with the wider cartography of domestic theatre; that is, they neither contribute to its heroic chronology nor do they mark any successive stages of its development. Unfamiliar shows, alienated from the official 'grand' narrative of the Polish theatre scene. Isolated, if only due to their belonging to the 'student' current, which eventually, over the course of time, came to be known as 'open' or 'alternative'. Located if anywhere 'in the space between visual arts and theatre',¹ not infrequently sidelined – treated as an addition to street activities, actions and happenings created by Akademia Ruchu, activities that in a sense are more easily identifiable as they were moved off the theatre premises and, as a consequence, did not present any typological conundrum. Recollections of those performances are hard to come by in the course of official education, whether at university level or one that is artistic (informal).

Obviously, this strangeness of the output of Akademia Ruchu manifests itself at a prominently deeper level linked with key artistic decisions made by the creators. This was an estrangement from the dominant trait of Polish theatre typical in essence of both repertory companies and alternative theatres, which presupposed a highly hierarchical model of operation (even when external declarations suggested otherwise) and decreed a set of dualistic choices, thus assuming the necessity of ceaseless conflict (*agon*) between supposed contradictions. This strangeness, manifesting itself not only in signature aesthetics and self-imposed formal rigour, but predominantly in the structure of the company's creative work and in the treatment of such basic categories as the body, history and community, will – along with my ensuing confrontation with the productions – constitute the core of the analytical interest that follows.

Though still unknown to wider audiences, productions by Akademia Ruchu, in particular ones created in the 1980s, for example *English Lesson* (1982) and *Inne Tańce* [*Other Dances*, 1982] evoke an aura of the uncanny and a sense of temporal disturbance: in numerous instances, they look not like images from a by-gone era but from some potential future of Polish

1 Dariusz Kosiński, *Teatra polskie. Historie* (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2010), p. 480.

theatre. Or a future that is partially emerging on the horizon. A future that exists in a paradoxical fashion: about to happen and already past. Unknown (introduced yet neglected by an indifferent reception), it makes its presence known as something that has in fact been witnessed recently – in a form not fully developed. As something that, of late, has begun to be a more official adventure for Polish theatre, partially inspired by international artworks (according to the accepted grand narrative, in any case). This sense of peculiar *anachronia* is augmented by the fact that certain archival excerpts of Academy productions (a case in point being gesticulatory actions in the second part of *English Lesson*, along with manoeuvres involving pocket mirrors held in the mouth as signal transmitters) conjure up sudden and unexpected associations that transgress cultural and political borders. At times, one thinks this is not theatre but a video clip, a music video in the style of Talking Heads or Tuxedomoon, perhaps even produced by those bands: a vintage documentary, but definitely created abroad.

If we assume, to evoke artist Alain Bublex and philosopher Elie During in *Le Futur n'existe pas* [*The Future Does Not Exist*, 2014], that the future does not wait for us but is already active, beyond (and out of reach of) its own representations,² then Academy productions reveal their paradoxical place in the archival memory bank as a past that has slipped into obscurity – yet as one that continues to affect the tissue of Polish culture subcutaneously, not anticipating processes taking place in contemporary performing arts but simply building them unwaveringly. Mapping out one among the potential paths of development. This 'futurist' aspect of the Academy's output is linked with numerous artistic practices that I will discuss succinctly. Still, the fundamental reason I would like to classify the works in question as one of the 'lost futures'³ of Polish culture boils down to the fact that they seem to stem from an outlook suffused with belief in change. A change that occurs on the cognitive plane; theatre, construed not as an aesthetic sensation, a solution to immediate concerns or a commentary on topical issues, but as a deep dialogue with the present composed on the aesthetic plane and a concerted effort to enable society to narrate itself anew, constitutes the tool of that change.

My first encounter with Akademia Ruchu archives triggered a sudden, surprising affinity for and kinship with the company (or an intention thereof). A feeling of rapport and continuity that arose when, among documentary materials, I stumbled upon notes, frequently taken hurriedly and now only partially legible, which immortalised the process of performance creation. These notes resemble a film treatment; they are records of fluid structures, potential set-ups and modules to choose from. As such, they are evidence of an intricate creative build-up to every full-fledged production, each of which, despite impressive formal simplicity, was also testimony to advanced imaginative work on meanings. The work, as the company's name aptly suggests, was essentially carried out on the physical (motor) plane. Work construed, it seems, as the embodiment

2 Alain Bublex, Elie During, *The Future Does Not Exist: Retrotypes* (Parc Saint-Léger: Éditions B42, 2014), p. 45.

3 See Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester-Washington: Zero Books, 2014).

and performance of ideas across a very broad, variant-driven spectrum – a physical working-out of social phenomena. This fusion appears unique. It is certainly so against the backdrop of Polish theatre praxis, where sophisticated intellectual work is hardly ever mediated by forms of movement belonging to the contemporary, to the topical and to the communal, as cannot be overemphasised.

Gradually, the archival materials began to reveal something that almost seemed the archaeology of the future of Polish theatre. The Academy's artistic output appears to constitute a single strand around which a genuine alternative to the repertory-theatre model could come into being – or a signature strand which could, as a result of creative osmosis, transform the entire theatre mainstream. Academy productions reveal traits typical of a phenomenon capable of making the dominant theatre discourse in the present day less airtight and more porous (less insulated and less insular) – a phenomenon presently visible in the new Polish dance. The traits under consideration are not exclusively formal, although this aspect is very important – in large part, these traits can justifiably be classified as a progressive dominance of the performative over the theatrical.

Tampering with the hermetic seal that has gripped Polish theatre is a form of politicality that translates directly onto performative structures. A kind of politicality that is expressed through the construction of non-narrative, analytical situations. A kind of politicality that shies away from the immediacy of ideological codes and their provisional coverage, but one that absorbs social mechanisms on the structural level. As critic Paweł Mościcki observes:

the fragility of the theatre matter, the transitoriness of everything that comes to life on stage shows us that the theatre as such is not destined to impart messages, but to construct situations and provoke a chain of events [...]. What is at stake is the fleeting and temporal order of a disparate set of elements – sounds, images, words, space, movement, which are assembled together to give rise to an unrepeatable effect of some evanescent single entity.⁴

Mościcki goes on to say that the notion of assemblage, which demands continued maintenance, corresponds to the very structure of social order. Seen in this light, theatre that creates situations is not involved in their representation, but creates a socially committed metonymy of the lived-in reality instead.

Academy productions seem an excellent example of such a 'situational' theatre praxis. Fished from social reality, structures of gesture, behaviour and action undergo the process of montage within a framework of rhythmic sequences, which in turn become an autonomous on-stage order as well as meta-commentary. The diversity of techniques the Academy employed – all connected with variants of movement – resulted in the same idiom, honed painstakingly by the artists, being adapted to the demands of a specific topic and production. Performances brimming with quotidian actions – walking, standing, sitting on a bench, greeting,

4 Paweł Mościcki, *Polityka teatru. Eseje o sztuce angażującej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2008), pp. 37–38.

leaping, etc. – play a variety of roles in comparison with source material. Sometimes, as in *Other Dances*, they lead to forceful physical transitions that shatter normative codes of conduct to reach the level of more affective impact. At other times, as in *Kolacja. Dobranoc* [*Supper: Goodnight*, 1985], the everyday basis of comportment becomes warped to such an extent that viewers lose confidence – the situation is no longer easy to decode and acquires an additional spectrum of meanings.

Situations created by Academy members impress audiences with the precision of their ‘technique’. In Polish theatre, ‘technique’ is commonly equated with a particular skillset meant to lead to the construction of ‘well-made’ works. Perhaps ‘technique’ is the first of several select, crucial notions that could be re-worked upon re-examination of Akademia Ruchu’s signature strategy. Movement counterpointed with motionlessness, the static countered with musical rhythm, differing repetition of movements, variants of movement and variants of image, tension between the organic and strictly formalised treatment of the body, repetitions of sequences and paraphrased shifts – these are only some tactics Academy members utilised during their work on productions. These activities seem to have one goal in common: an obsessive analysis of behaviour, the conscientious probing of the habitus. Perhaps ‘technique’ ought to be understood as flexibility, as cognitive elasticity, as an ability to modify the simplest on-stage qualities with a view to attaining the most intensive level of work on the opening of behavioural variation, which would mean a very specific activity and its simultaneous problematisation. Such a reading of Academy strategies would guide domestic performing arts towards an alternative future expressed differently: abandoning the terror of the sign and symbol (the situation of this semiotic disease has been convincingly delineated by critic Grzegorz Niziołek in *Polski Teatr Zagłady* [*Polish Theatre of the Holocaust*], in which he points to the problem of the transmission of collective experiences into such a performative framework).⁵ The ‘poster-like’ manner and the distillation of senses the Academy employed are a far cry from on-stage (or physical) mechanicalness, even when those actions are highly formalised. Correspondingly, the social reality here is not transformed into a mechanical procession of concrete senses and communication codes. The typicality of actors, actresses and actions – subjected with some frequency to film-like treatment – aims unceasingly to remove the hermetic seal and to fathom the present that is being anthropologically critiqued.

Watching footage of Academy productions poses experiential difficulties. Due to historical circumstances, it amounts to going through snippets, blurred and incomplete versions. Viewing full-length documentary recordings is burdened with a melancholy of a different sort: the loss of any opportunity to be involved in the transfer between the on-stage artists and their audience. Yet no mere transfer of energy is at stake here, but rather a form of communal participation in the momentous occasion undergoing kinetic analysis and examination. What is lacking – sensed only through the medium of the screen – is the opportunity to partake as the community makes a collective effort to think through action in which

5 See Grzegorz Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady* (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013).

social forms are inseparable from aesthetic ones. For that reason alone, in *Other Dances*, I seem unable to comprehend the audience's roaring laughter accompanying dainty movements of the actors' hands (a warm-up to the on-stage impersonation of a diverse set of human types?). Remaining equally unfathomable to me are some territories of exploration that serve as points of departure in etudes that are constitutive of this unusual performance (for example, the motif of changing clothes). However, confrontation with the archival footage has inspired me to rethink three categories whose present importance in the performing arts cannot be overestimated. These are the body, the community and history – as well as binary oppositions related to them.

The video scrapbook that preserves the first Academy performances shows moving images of the corporeal – as if at once befitting the time of its creation and alienated from it. Excerpts from *Collage* and *Ruch* [*Movement*, both 1973] point to very intriguing work strategies. The result is a series of images that seem unprecedented. We see artists endowed with tremendous physical agility. Their activities appear reminiscent of the most recognisable image of 1970s physical acts: exercises and drills associated with the work of Jerzy Grotowski in this period. We are privy to a similar type of malleability, vividness, modes of improvisation, and movement in space. Dissimilarities are quickly noticed, though. Here, fitness is not a means of unblocking the body and depriving it of civilisational accretions, but a way of testing and probing a miscellany of common relations. *Collage* brings to the table an image of a complex organism composed of numerous bodies – or, rather, a gargantuan collective body that moves thanks to coordination and a covenant and, as such, is subjected to formal rigour. The quasi-organic actions seen in *Movement* seem deceptive in their simplicity: sometimes they resemble basic physical-education routines, at other times they are tinged with palpable posturing, a kind of thespian intention, or even yield to heavy-handed formatting, a motor cliché. An excerpt of yet another vintage video clip appears to show the behaviour of a highly diversified group that gingerly starts to interact within – and this diversity, evident among others in the fickle heterogeneity of their motor strategies, seems exceptionally inspiring. Operating in an arbitrary and leisurely fashion, the Academy draws on a variety of physical techniques, enabling the existence of a multiplicity of corporealities, beyond the binary system of the organic and the formal.

Later Academy performances do not expose the actors' physical agility so much, allowing room for understatement instead – agility is hinted at by the perfection of their movement, by the precision of their actions, and predominantly by the finesse of their collective orchestrations. Arguably, the artists' bodies abandon the organic for the sake of accepting the social form; such a conclusion, however, would be a fallacy. The artists perform typical, standard, everyday actions, while maintaining the stance of specific on-stage repose. At no point does their precision become mechanical; their training does not provide them any pretext for experiencing transgressive torment – individual conduct is informed concurrently by a collective character and by actors' personalities. Making use of advanced physical training as a platform for further work on disciplined structures within which the social habitus is vivisected seems an unusually imaginative transformation. It is worth emphasising that a number

of physical forms created over the course of Academy productions are pioneering attainments – precursors of contemporary dance forms, alluding inventively to the avant-garde by exploring popular forms.

More importantly, Academy productions become collage-like narratives about social choreography, and about the network of communal relations expressed only and exclusively through performers' concrete actions, accompanied by word and sound. Emerging from the Academy's output, a community appears to exist that follows codes different from those typical of Polish theatre. First, it is a radically social and political community. It functions only in the present, in historic time – it is striking how few elements that refer to mythical matrices or signs of the past are present within the Academy's catalogue. The society evoked by the performances communicates in a direct manner with its viewers – most frequently beyond the sphere of the phantasm. This is a community of equals: equal in the dissemination of historic and social experience. At the institutional level, the situation is mirrored in the collective nature of the actors' work, in their movement within the horizontal structure of on-stage presence.

Vibrating, propelled by rhythm, the community of Academy productions comes across as an interesting act of transgression of the ahistorical Romantic paradigm the pressure of which has gripped Polish theatre like a vice. Here instead is a critical community: radically aware of the historicisation of the present, the company has managed by dint of the actors' bodies to examine with anthropological inquisitiveness concrete everyday material rather than universal myths and archetypes. Interestingly, the Academy has succeeded in building a different type of universality; in doing so, they crossed the guarded normative divide, upheld by Polish theatre, into the local and the universal, which in turn reduces to the myth, diligently cultivated, that Polish theatre may be artistically great but due to contextual specificities it will remain globally incomprehensible. Performed over the course of the Academy's on-stage output, this communal experience is steeped in a time-specific Polish experience, yet there is little hermeticism intrinsic to it. It does not require any sophisticated cultural competence of its viewers – perhaps due to its consistent minimisation of signs, symbols and metaphors. The remarkably inventive treatment of the mundane (the quotidian), evidenced throughout the Academy's oeuvre, may hold the key to an analytical perspective such as mine.

Enviably, the Academy, as witnessed on film, had an opportunity to cultivate theatre in such close-knit alliance with its epoch. Theatre that, thanks to its inherent structural quality, was able to position itself in a crevice between immediacy and the cryptonymous strategy of cultural masking (masquerading); theatre that is not in need of a present-tense filter. In any case, this seems yet another breach of the Romantic paradigm: abandoning the mythical in exchange for the historical, giving precedence to the experiential over its sanctioned representation. Such an outlook could bring a breath of fresh air to contemporary Polish theatre, still entangled in tension between the mundane and the scorn for it, between a dual drive for creating complex ambiguities and an aestheticizing veneer, the latter often in striking contrast with purely performative qualities. Meanwhile, Academy of Movement activities appear close

to Georges Perec's manifestos from his series *L'infra-ordinaire* [*Infra-Ordinary*, begun in 1973]. Perec writes:

To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it. We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither question nor answers, as if it weren't the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it's anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space? [...] What's needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we've been pillaging from others. Not the exotic anymore, but the endotic.⁶

Academy of Movement actors seem to salvage 'life, bodies, and space' through a paradoxical motion: they create performances that often touch upon the phenomenon of historical experience, yet it becomes synonymous with mundane experience. The anthropology of the everyday turns into historiosophy. History is precipitated somewhere at the margins of the mediated daily hustle and bustle. Opposites offset each other – reconciled on the grounds of the present tense.

Inherent in every Academy production, this offset of opposites makes the company's art seem like images sent from the future. A future that is, alas, already past.

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Translated by Bartosz Wójcik

6 Georges Perec, 'Approaches to What?', trans. John Sturrock, in Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. John Sturrock (London, New York: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 209–211 (p. 210).

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ABSTRACT**Weronika Szczawińska****The Academy of Movement: A Future Already Past**

This article considers the productions of Akademia Ruchu (the Academy of Movement), a cutting-edge institution of culture established in 1973 – a decade informed by increased activity in socially-committed student circles and by a heightened political consciousness in Polish repertory theatre. The company's output has been marginalised in Polish theatre studies, labelled primarily as 'alternative' or 'student' theatre. The article attempts to inscribe Akademia Ruchu productions on the map of contemporary Polish theatre. The history of mainstream twentieth-century theatre has managed to erase most memory of the Academy – a company that had been strongly present and internationally acclaimed, linking the domestic theatre world and the world at large, which this company embodied. Here, the Academy's output is analysed as political situation(ist) theatre focused on the examination of the present. Key to issues discussed throughout the text are community, the body (the corporeal) and the mundane (the quotidian). Akademia Ruchu activities are presented as the praxis of community making a collective effort to think by dint of actions, where social forms are inextricably linked with aesthetic ones.