

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Marta Malikowska

Nakedly and Tenderly.
Agata Adamiecka-Sitek in conversation
with Marta Malikowska

www.polishtheatrejournal.com

Publisher

Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw

Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Marta Malikowska

Nakedly and Tenderly.
 Agata Adamiecka-Sitek in conversation
 with Marta Malikowska

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek: *Malina* is a women's manifesto play. It is strong, resolute, yet filled with tenderness and an infinitely affirmative declaration: the female body should return to mainstream culture and start functioning in it according to new rules of engagement. We (and our bodies) have been deprived of so many modes of being: the body is subjected to ruthless taming, unending acts of aggression, multiple constraints, and appropriation; as such, it must find both a fitting language that is conducive to self-expression and a space to accommodate its corporeal experience. It is the female body that is perhaps the most exploited asset, with its colonisation initiating the process of "subduing the earth" [*Genesis* 1:28 – translator's note] that has led us to where we are today. The Anthropocene is the direct consequence of capitalist patriarchy. We should put an end to this self-replicating madness and focus on life instead. Doing so through practices of caring for the body, practices of sustaining life, and providing care. In *Malina*, you tackle fundamental matters, discussing their very essence, yet you do so in a light and humorous fashion. Tenderly.

Marta Malikowska: Indeed, this is an apt word. We went to great lengths to make the entire creative process "tender." We aimed for a particular register, for a certain energy that I wouldn't like to define as "female", as this would condemn us to fruitless gender binarism. I struggle to get my bearings in this debate because "male" and "female" are, after all, formidable cultural categories that continue to palpably order the world, thus it is difficult to simply dismiss them. Still, they shouldn't be essentialised.

The second phase involved travelling to the countryside in the company of Agata Siniarska, Maja Skrzypek and Anka Herbut (with her baby son at her breast). Together, we headed for my childhood home. This was more like a meeting of women rather than theatre rehearsals. We came without concrete expectations regarding the work; there was no fully orchestrated plan. We just chatted, practiced yoga and meditation, and wandered through the nearby woods. I showed them my village and we became very close in the process. Afterwards, already back in Warsaw, we were joined by other artists involved in the project – Maniucha Bikont, Nastia Vorobiova, and Aleksander Prowaliński. Agata Skrzypek was also present throughout the entire process, conducting participant observation.

I commenced my work on Malina by searching for any available information on Malina Michalska, a dancer, the first Polish yogi, and author of *Hatha-joga dla wszystkich* [Hatha Yoga for All] (1972). Early on, I was greatly assisted by Lucyna Marzec, who wrote her dissertation on Malina's sister, the writer Jadwiga Żylińska. She provided me with vital clues as to where and how to look for library sources on Malina. Finding someone who knew Malina personally and would be able to talk about her verged on the impossible. But thanks to Lucyna Marzec, I managed to get in touch with Wanda Wąsowska, who was friends with Jadwiga, and who remains the only person to tend to the graves of Jadwiga and Malina.

But, to be honest, it was in the countryside already that we got on the right track and established the basic objectives of our work. We knew that it would take the form of an encounter with audience members at the Church of the Invisible Pink Unicorn dedicated to the Yogi Mother of God...

AA-S: ... who has nothing in common with the Mother of God, as you stated at the beginning of the performance.

MM: Yes, because this encounter could only take place outside of the Christian context. Far away from blame, far away from conceptions of sin that place the body – in particular the female body – at their centre, far away from penance and forgiveness in an extraterritorial space, a safe space where we could work on creating a system of asanas that could help us – both men and women – survive patriarchy. On the surface, this obviously all appears a tad ironic, it seems like a joke, whereas it in fact stems from a deeply-held belief that yoga as a physical practice may indeed help shift the status quo.

AA-S: In what way?

MM: Working with the body means working with trauma, with the very core of trauma, which is always anchored in the body. By focusing on the body, we can reach the deepest wounds and that which is most deeply suppressed. Bringing the body to the fore and allowing it to exist outside the remit of cultural clichés while tending to it – particularly in situations requiring mutual care, we might change things that are most resistant or seemingly impossible to change. The body must be loved but this is unbelievably difficult in cases where we are dealing with bodies that are in some sense damaged. The strength of the body needs to be restored. This is a lengthy process, one that for me is directly linked with many years of practicing yoga; after all, every woman working on *Malina* does yoga.

Conducting research for this project, I learned that yoga is by no means a female practice; rather it is considered essentially male, or at least the yoga that we have access to is – and this is something that generally applies to all the schools of yoga present in our culture. However, my knowledge on the subject is not too extensive, I did not conduct in-depth research. Instead I rely on intuition and practice – I follow my gut instinct. I sustained a spine injury related to my continued yoga practice, which has led to excessive anterior curvature (lordosis). As a result, I was forced to stop doing yoga for a while and introduce corrections to my routine and posture. After all, perhaps it is true that the yoga we are familiar with does not entirely suit women...

While researching the subject, I stumbled upon a fascinating trope – Slavic gymnastics, a female-oriented system whose origins can be found in our region. Diana Poteralska-Łyżnik, who practices the system and teaches it in Warsaw, started out with yoga, working with Michalska's book, but it failed to satisfy all her needs; she felt that it was not quite suitable and then came across Gennadiy Adamovich's *Słowiańska gimnastyka czarownic* [Witches' Slavic gymnastics], getting in touch with teachers of the method based in Belarus.

AA-S: Witches are a huge subject in culture, one that is making a notable return. In *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Silvia Federici analyses 300 years' worth of persecution of women and concerted genocide in the context of the mechanisms of early accumulation of capital, showing that the colonisation of female bodies through the terror of witch hunt, destruction of female solidarity, appropriation and paralysis of procreative expertise and reproductive rights, and in effect rendering women the most exploited "producers" of labour – all these phenomena constituted key early-capitalist processes. It was then that class solidarity was shattered, radical gender antagonism was introduced, while society, subject to ever increasing exploitation, was granted an ever handy scapegoat – women. Conveniently, they were likely to be charged with witchcraft and all the fear of and anger at escalating social injustice could be smoothly projected onto them. All relations cultivated by women seemed suspicious, as witches were accused of feasting and consorting with the devil. They were accused of engaging in group sex with the prince of darkness during witches' sabbaths and devouring the bodies of abducted infants. It is difficult to imagine how degrading the entire process was for women, as the state and the Church were actively involved in it. And how long-lasting it would be! And yet, against the grain, women have cultivated relations, returning of late in the form of ideas of sisterhood.

MM: These are all fascinating subjects that I would like to pursue further, they are topics that I have been orbiting around. My dream is to make a film about a present-day witch who creates a women's circle in Warsaw, practices Slavic gymnastics and shares her power with other women [*laughter*]. Slavic gymnastics was a female, corporeal, and communal practice. It is very important to me that this was something that our grandmothers did, here on this land – I am from the countryside, a woman of the land, I am descended from these women. I totally feel this. However, not every one in our collective took to Slavic gymnastics. Agata was really quite sceptical towards it. Indeed, we all maintained healthy scepticism, genuinely toying and playing with what we were doing – there was no element of "obsession" or "initiation"; but we took the idea of play seriously, treating it as a means of communal being and working together, something that is underappreciated in our culture, particularly in theatre. Playing together produces serious results. This is both an affirmative and critical strategy.

AA-S: Agamben wrote that play is one of the most effective strategies of profanation, i.e. of returning to the common use everything that has been demarcated and relocated to "the museum space", frozen in its forms and put on display.

MM: This really does apply to theatre! Working on *Malina* – free of obsession and with play mode on – we managed to create something akin to a women’s circle. This had a direct impact on our work. Although I initiated the project and secured funding for it, I also emphasised that I did not want to have a leader, traditional hierarchies and a division of roles. Our aim was also to examine whether such a collective approach could work in theatre. It was by no means a walk in the park – especially towards the end when the pressure of the forthcoming premiere was upon us. It was at that point that familiar habits when making theatre made their presence known. “Marta, somebody has to make a decision.” “Somebody has to bring it all together.” But I tried to resist such behaviour. “What is ‘directing’ all about?” Up until a certain point, each of us took on the role of an external observer at different points because I was also on stage, acting. This worked, things fell into place. Tensions only began to appear when the awareness of the imminent public premiere kicked in. The difficulties mounted up when stage technology came into play, making it necessary to orchestrate precisely of all the elements involved, including the lighting. This was when we realised that it was necessary to manage the process, but nevertheless this was still poles apart from directing as such. Direction, and this is something that I realised in the course of working on *Malina*, involves arranging meetings, inviting artists, and perhaps suggesting topics of conversation. It boils down to setting up the initial situation and – even if only intuitively – establishing its parameters. The principles that will subsequently guide our work would emerge from our collective negotiations. What is crucial to me is the opportunity to express one’s viewpoints freely and – this is of paramount importance – security. It was crystal-clear to me right from the get-go that work on *Malina* should not lead to any form of abuse, because it is possible to work in theatre free of violence while being given due recognition as a subject, which by no means implies working superficially or without effort.

What we sought to achieve was to ensure that there was no arbitrariness or violence on stage. And it seems that we succeeded. After this experience, I realised that the collective working on a project needs to be given even more care and tranquility. As a result of my work on *Malina*, I myself am also more serene and I am more resilient in the face of the pressures posed by theatre.

In the promo materials accompanying *Malina*, we wrote “directed by Marta Malikowska”, as we lived up to the normative expectation, according to which everything ought to be duly labelled, but the official poster does feature all the names of those involved together. After much deliberation, however, we have come to the conclusion that direction was predominantly carried out by Anka Herbut and myself, and this is how we will describe the work from now on.

AA-S: Do you have a venue to perform *Malina*? The official regulations do not foresee the project being realised on the premises on the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw. You hold the copyright to the show, but the situation is quite difficult, as you need to keep the project alive.

MM: Yes, *Malina* has been included in the repertory of the Teatr Studio [Studio Theatre in Warsaw] from September [2019] onwards. We have also been invited to two festivals – Top OFF in Tychy and Herbstsalon in Berlin. This really has delighted us. We will be able to offer healing on a regular basis.

AA-S: The play is indeed healing.

MM: Yes. At least, for us – women working with their bodies on stage – it is a healing process. My own body is neither fully healthy nor fully mine. On the contrary, it is in dire need of recovery. Quite recently I read Marina Abramović's *Walk Through Walls* and I was struck by the similarity of our experiences. I mean, everything that she does in her art involves working with her body that was traumatised in childhood. I was also victimised and sexually assaulted. For years, I was literally – as I see it now – crushed. It is beyond belief how much a body can take and still remain sensitive, maintaining its ability to respond, to feel the world. And preserve strength. Now, I feel that the body is the only thing I truly own; everything else – a house, partners, career, material possessions – lasts only for a moment. Our bodies remain with us until the very end. I explore my body, I return to everything it has experienced, I feel a connection with it, and perhaps for that reason I feel its enormous strength. I follow it. I want to speak about it right now – I want to speak out from the inside of my body.

I chose acting intuitively, without really knowing much about theatre; I did so because I imagined that it would offer me a chance to work with my body. I felt that I had to do something about it – to get in touch with my body that I was separated from. It was not until my work on *Ganymed goes Europe*, a project carried out by the National Museum in Wrocław in 2013, that I fully realised my rationale. This was an installation prepared on-site by Jacqueline Kornmüller and Peter Wolf, comprising seven performances by seven actors, each taking place in front of a particular painting and in relation to it. I performed naked beside a partially-burnt seventeenth-century painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder that depicted Eve in the nude. Only fragments of the original remain: Eve's body is in pieces, the painting itself has been reframed, and it is displayed in a golden frame, hanging in a white exhibition space. What is left is merely the naked torso, the breasts, and the woman's head. This somehow symbolic and somehow monstrous. Illuminated by white light, I would stand naked in front of people who were just at my arm's length and recited Thomas Glavinic's *Naked*. I described my own body and invited them to approach me, and to take a closer look. I spoke about my own body and their own bodies. About the need to embrace the body – scars, wounds and all. It was a revolution for me. I then felt that I was ready to express myself through performance. I felt no shame whatsoever – and this is the fundamental condition for initiating change. After completing this project, I knew I would continue heading in that direction, that I was ready to talk freely about it all without any restriction by using my body. It was not about fulfilling some exhibitionist urge but rather about taking a path that was laid at that point. And the path continues to extend before me, though not at any great pace – but I am still taking it.

AA-S: Did theatre school really point the way towards the liberation of your body? This patriarchal, conservative institution where something

that I would define as “the pedagogy of violence” is common practice? Admittedly, there are exceptions to the rule – outstanding professors, unusual, fascinating meetings... This is after all a stereotypical account of a theatre school. There are undoubtedly brilliant personalities and sensible teachers at theatre schools. But as a system, departments of acting in Poland tend to be terrifying places. Their priority lies in “familiarising” actors and actresses with violence, which allegedly awaits them in theatres. These topical issues have been raised of late by Jagoda Szela in connection with her work on *Monument*, a diploma film created by student actors and actresses from the Łódź Film School. Szela addressed these questions on behalf of the students, knowing that even after graduation they would not be at a liberty to do so, as they would then be forced to fight for work in theatres, while any criticism the relations pertaining in the schools would somehow disqualify them.

MM: I am only beginning to work through it now. I am looking back over my years there. When one is unaware, such things go unnoticed. I was accustomed to violence, and such behaviour seemed transparent and normal to me then. I accumulated all these experiences along the way – at school, in various theatres, and I worked in a great number of institutions... Today I would not accept many of the situations I found myself in, although in my capacity as an actress I have only one failsafe reaction at my disposal – quitting. It is difficult because after a few rather extreme experiences, which are not unknown in the industry, the only option left is to quit the profession. Neither at school nor at work did I fall victim to any severe abuse – direct physical violence, sexual harassment, or rape. But I agree with your analysis of the relations cultivated in theatre schools. Violence and humiliation, as well as constantly pitting people against each other and manipulation constituted the basic in-house rules.

I remember a symptomatic situation that took place very early on – during the first or second year of my studies. We were away – on a field trip somewhere at the seaside, students of acting and students of film directing working on scenes together under the tutelage of Leszek Wosiewicz. It was already very late, perhaps past 1 am, everybody was knackered. Sadly, not everybody was sober, and I do not mean the students... We were working on a scene from Dorota Masłowska’s novel *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną* [White and Red], in which Magda visits Silny (Nails) in hospital. The scene was directed by a female student, with whom I discussed and developed my acting suggestions. We presented our idea, but it clearly did not convince the course leader. To this day I can recall the only substantive piece of advice that the student director received, and which the entire film crew heard loud and clear: “If she does not bare her tits in this scene, you will get an F!” I was supposed to flash my boobs and the female student was expected to execute the order. These are the basic directorial skills – ensuring actresses are willing to perform such scenes. What we ourselves came up with was of no consequence; nor was it important whether bare boobs were relevant to what I was performing. This was altogether unnecessary, and this situation was already extremely difficult for me – I was sitting astride on a male student... Obviously, I took off my clothes, as I did not want to harm the female student, and – after all – I had to prove that I was suited for the job. This situation

epitomises the very worst aspects of both the job and the system it operates in. Violence that dehumanises and objectifies as well as almost ritualistic celebration of the entrenched hierarchy and the ensuing right to make use of objectified bodies. That female student most likely abandoned the idea of ever working as a director, while to me the event, to put it bluntly, was like having my skin branded, my body marked with a branding iron. And this is just one of the memories flickering before my eyes. They are legion. But perhaps the worst of all is permanent ambivalence imprinted on almost every relation between a woman and a director or between any of the men possessing any leverage within this system. Everything is typified by an ambiguous context, a relentless dance is being forever performed... You do not know what role you are being cast in – is this expression of interest evidence of your professional abilities or perhaps it is a way of flirting, or perhaps you will be treated like a prostitute the next moment? Anyway, you need to be constantly alert to the fact that you there to provide pleasure – not only for audiences but also for high-ranking men.

AA-S: Yes, indeed, this is what #metoo is all about; it is no accident that the movement has been spearheaded by film actresses, and now we are witnessing its theatre incarnation, generated by the scandal involving Jan Fabre. We are yet to experience the Polish theatre version of #metoo. It would be important to successfully initiate such a process, approaching the task in a well thought-out, critical and reflexive manner that takes into account the difficulties that #metoo has faced in Poland thus far.

MM: I concur. But I also look back and ask myself self-critically: “when was I violent?” As we know, children who were routinely beaten resort to violence as adults. Being part of the system of violence, one inadvertently internalises violence, since this is the only code that has been instilled. Now is not the time for finger-pointing, but rather to leave the oppressive system behind. And to work differently. The situation I just mentioned, where I “show my tits”, is juxtaposed in my mind with a contrasting image. The extraordinary shock I experienced when watching *Yo no soy bonita* [I Am Not Pretty], a work by Spanish performer Angelika Liddell, at the Dialog Festival in Wrocław in 2013. This is in fact a performance-confession. The performer presents her childhood experience as a girl, a daughter of an extremely violent paedophile father, and subsequently her adult experience as a grown-up woman living in a patriarchal society. She lays bare all her anger, talking about her wounded body, and re-enacts on stage the gestures from her past as acts of self-mutilation. She avails herself of everything that is at her disposal: as a means of expression, her body is used most radically, and her narrative remains an extremely first-person account. She does it to herself, in her own name, in a story of her own, unmediated first-hand experience. She talks among others about the experience that crushed her in an utterly intimate dimension, but also in a social one. She was ten years old then and a soldier, while putting her on the horseback, inserted his fingers inside her. This was an act of rape that she never disclosed for fear of being treated as a whore, but at that point already she had understood that, in the eyes of the society she lived in, she was to blame for what had ensued. At one point during the performance,

she approaches a horse – a living horse that shares the stage with her – and addresses a love monologue to the animal. She confides that their intimacy is fully developed and that she knows that the horse will never hurt her. She can't – she doesn't want to love humans any longer. "You'll be my lover", she tells the animal. This came as a shock to me. I looked at it and felt that this was the road for me to take, that I wanted to make theatre. Perhaps small-scale forms and performances. And that I must talk about what my body has experienced and what it experiences at present. Such art does not have to take drastic forms – it can be presented diverse ways. For instance, tenderly.

AA-S: You have mentioned drama school. What is your experience of the repertory theatres you have worked with?

MM: It is paradoxical, but perhaps not surprising at all: to me, the most difficult experience was my work in the most progressive and left-leaning repertory theatre in Poland – the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz [Teatr Polski im. H. Konieczki w Bydgoszczy]. That is why I resigned even before the tandem of managing directors left after their short, three-year stint; and so I went to Warsaw without any prior plan, without any prospect of work, and this was really difficult for me. I thought to myself: "Soon they will be defending the theatre, then fighting for a second stint. I don't have the strength for this." To my mind, a theatre that flies the flag for left-wing politics and social justice, but at the same time simultaneously cultivates violence and exploitation in its institutional practices, is terribly damaging. And then I said: "Enough is enough!"

Translated by Bartosz Wójcik

ABSTRACT

Agata Adamięcka-Sitek, Marta Malikowska

***Nakedly and Tenderly*. Agata Adamięcka-Sitek in conversation with Marta Malikowska**

Agata Adamięcka-Sitek talks with Marta Malikowska, Polish actress and co-director of the play *Malina*. Three artists meet on stage: the actress Marta Malikowska, fascinated by yoga and traditional singing; anthropologist, singer, expert and propagator of folk music Maniucha Bikont and Karolina Kraczkowska - performer and choreographer. The artists jointly carry out an artistic and anthropological experiment, combining Far Eastern inspirations with the Eastern European tradition of folk singing, emancipation strategies and a meditation session. They create the Church of the Invisible Pink Unicorn dedicated to the Yogi Mother of God.

Keywords: interview, queer.