

**Zuzanna Berendt**

**A Bit of a Queer Production: What Happens and  
What Cannot Happen When a Queer Biography  
Meets Publicly Funded Theatre**

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## A Bit of a Queer Production: What Happens and What Cannot Happen When a Queer Biography Meets Publicly Funded Theatre

In his review of *O mężnym Pietrku i sierotce Marysi* [*Valiant Pete and Little Orphan Mary: A Fairy Tale for Grownups*],<sup>1</sup> written by Jolanta Janiczak and directed by Wiktor Rubin, writer Krzysztof Tomasiak focused on expounding the historical niceties Janiczak and Rubin referred to, and on setting the record straight when it came to facts. Unlike most reviewers, Tomasiak chose not to emphasize how much this production stood out compared to earlier works by the writer-director duo. Instead, he unequivocally granted it a place in the most recent history of theatre in Poland, calling it ‘the first lesbian production in Poland’s institutional theatre’.<sup>2</sup> Tomasiak did not elaborate his criteria for describing the production in a way that may seem rash even to people with a less than thorough knowledge of contemporary theatre in Poland. *Valiant Pete* is certainly not the first Polish piece of theatre featuring lesbian characters. One earlier example of such a production is *Cokolwiek się zdarzy, kocham cię* [*Whatever Happens, I Love You*], written and directed by Przemysław Wojcieszek. Wojcieszek’s work opened in 2005 at TR Warszawa, an institutional, publicly funded theatre. The Polski Theatre in Poznań, where *Valiant Pete* opened in 2018, is also a publicly funded institution. If ‘lesbian theatre’ stands for productions staged by lesbians, with a lesbian audience in mind,<sup>3</sup> then the Poznań effort falls outside the scope of this definition. However, Rubin and Janiczak’s work could be described as ‘lesbian theatre’ on account of its subject matter: it tells the story of the relationship between writer Maria Konopnicka, an icon of Poland’s struggle for freedom and independence, and artist Maria Dulebianka, a social and political activist and distinguished campaigner for women’s rights in Poland. What makes *Valiant Pete* a pioneering work – and this is indeed where the description offered by Tomasiak should be accepted without reservation

1 The title of the production alludes to Konopnicka’s best-known book for children, *O krasnoludkach i sierotce Marysi* [*The Gnomes and Little Orphan Mary*] (1896), published in English as *The Brownie Scouts*, trans. by Katherine Żuk-Skarszewska (Warsaw, 1929).

2 Krzysztof Tomasiak, ‘I wieszczka, i lesbijka’ [‘Both Bard and Lesbian’], *Krytyka Polityczna*, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/teatr/i-wieszczka-i-lesbijka/>, [accessed 22 March 2019].

3 Using the term ‘lesbian theatre’ is not without its complications, as discussed by Wencong Wang in her article ‘Lesbianism and Lesbian Theatre’, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2014.12015466>, [accessed 22 March 2019].

– is that it takes as its focal point the sexual identity of its characters and the situation of non-heterosexual women, both in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (when Konopnicka and Dulębianka lived) and today.

Underlying Rubin and Janiczak's production is the onstage presentation of Maria Konopnicka's queer biography, and it must be stressed that this version of the writer's life is by no means universally accepted in public discourse. The playwright and director were less interested in putting together a story based on facts than on examining the implications of accepting and disseminating a queer biographical narrative of a writer who happens to be a member of the national pantheon. For that reason, memories of incidents from Konopnicka and Dulębianka's lives are introduced as a pretext and with little regard for chronology. *Homobiografie* [*Homobiographies*], a book by Krzysztof Tomasik (the author of the review discussed above), provided Rubin and Janiczak with a readymade version of Konopnicka's queer biography. First published in 2009, *Homobiographies* was a groundbreaking attempt to relate the lives of Poland's prominent nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists and literati through the prism of their non-heterosexuality. The book's opening chapter focuses on Konopnicka, and consequently also on Dulębianka. For the first time, the homosexual nature of the relationship between the two women is not called into question. Other publications<sup>4</sup> were mostly in denial about this aspect of Konopnicka and Dulębianka's biographies, dismissing it as not borne out by archival evidence, or seeking to present it as a close friendship modelled on a mother-daughter bond (there was a nineteen-year age gap between the women). In *Valiant Pete*, Rubin and Janiczak fall back on a readymade model of Konopnicka's queered biography, a model created by Tomasik, and use it as a basis for their production, which thematizes the act of telling the story of non-heterosexual women onstage in a publicly funded theatre. Rubin and Janiczak's work is 'aware' of its pioneering nature, and the complex artistic, social and political project, devised as part of the production, stems from that awareness. The project's artistic facet entails recognizing repertory theatre as a place where patriarchal power and heterosexual norms are reproduced, and expressing a willingness to transform this kind of theatre. The social aspect has to do with the emancipation of non-heterosexual women and extending their scope of visibility in public space, while the political dimension can be understood as an intervention in Poland's existing legal and institutional systems. In the present article, I will look at Rubin and Janiczak's strategy and, more broadly, examine the terms under which the narrative of non-heterosexual women emerged in publicly funded theatre. I will also investigate the relations between publicly funded and queer theatre.

Critics who wrote about Rubin and Janiczak's production explored its other, 'underlying' subject matter, beyond Konopnicka's life story. In his review of *Valiant Pete and Little Orphan Mary*, Piotr Morawski pointed

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<sup>4</sup> One example is Konopnicka's biography by Iwona Kienzler, *Maria Konopnicka. Rozwydrzona bezbożnica* [*Maria Konopnicka: Unruly and Godless*] (Warsaw: Bellona, 2014).

out Rubin and Janiczak's metatheatrical gestures which demonstrated that the limitations of using the theatrical medium, and the opportunities this presents, had to become part of the production's subject matter, as much as the story that provided the pretext for it.<sup>5</sup> Morawski draws his readers' attention to such subtleties as technical staff appearing on stage, and thus becoming 'visible', much like the characters in the production. But, according to the critic, issues pertaining to theatre as a medium can be found in Janiczak's text itself. Claims that repertory theatre as a medium belongs to men, and enables them to reproduce their power and management system, are recurrent in her piece. Theatre is listed among the institutions the lesbian characters seek to claim for themselves, using them as a means of communication with society.

In the play, Mabel Batten is one half of an emancipated lesbian couple attempting to persuade Konopnicka and Dulębianka to openly express their desires, views, and political demands. Batten suggests that cabaret may be a suitable means of expression, in that it is a medium unburdened by male signature. She turns to this form of art in order to endorse freedom of expression. Unlike the sole male character in the play, Maksymilian Gumpłowicz, Batten accentuates the positive about her choice. Gumpłowicz was Konopnicka's young admirer and her lover; his long (and unsuccessful) efforts to win Konopnicka's favour led him to suicide. Throughout the performance, Gumpłowicz, portrayed by Michał Kaleta, attempts to exercise some sort of power over Konopnicka, be it the power of a husband or financial benefactor or, failing all else, the power of passing judgment on the attitudes presented by Konopnicka and her partner. It is while giving his *ex cathedra* opinion that art made by lesbians could only inspire very limited interest that Gumpłowicz argues Batten and her partner, Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall, are only fit for a cabaret 'with their affectations and radical notions'. The form Batten has recognized as emancipatory is denigrated by Gumpłowicz as niche and wanting.

If the Poznań production is to be interpreted as an attempt to establish a platform for expressing the characters' non-heterosexual identity, it could be argued Rubin and Janiczak sought to create a shortcut for their characters, leading them from lesbians being unrepresented in institutional theatre in Poland, straight to putting them on stage in a publicly funded theatre. By using Batten's performance to hint that queer theatre does exist outside the mainstream, Rubin and Janiczak appear to lend verisimilitude to an evolutionary model of forms of spectacle related to expressions of sexual identity, established as part of their production. For those operating outside the mainstream, the goal is always to arrive at the level of visibility granted by appearing onstage at a publicly

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5 Piotr Morawski, 'Odzyskać Konopnicką, odzyskać Dulębiankę' ['Getting Back Konopnicka, Getting Back Dulębianka'], *Dwutygodnik*, 250 (2018), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/8080-odzyskac-konopnicka-odzyskac-dulebianke.html>, [accessed 22 March 2019].

funded theatre.<sup>6</sup> A queer biography is therefore presented in publicly funded theatre not with the intention of queering that theatre, but with a view to incorporating into the institutional system a discourse that has previously remained outside it. It is good to remain attentive to the tension between queerness and public discourse in *Valiant Pete*, because this tension is constitutive of the three aspects of Rubin and Janiczak's production I have discussed in my opening remarks. Artistically, the pair are interested in the relation between the quality of expression and its agency – and the medium of that expression. Questions of, on the one hand, the impact of separating the characters' non-heterosexual identity from their public activism, and on the other, the limits of manipulating the process of queering someone else's biography in the belief one is working for a good cause, keep recurring within the production's emancipatory strand. Finally, the political project devised by the two main characters is founded on the demand to grant non-heterosexual individuals public rights equal to those enjoyed by heterosexuals, including the opportunity to get married.

Although Rubin and Janiczak have never explicitly expressed an interest in making queer theatre, it is worth examining the relation between 'the first lesbian production in Poland's institutional theatre', made by them and their co-workers, and queer theatre as a genre that triggered the process of expressing non-heteronormative identities within performative arts. The relationship between cabaret and queer as a category was established long before Jolanta Janiczak wrote her play. Laurence Senelick, the author of the essay 'The Queer Root of Theater', draws a link between cabaret as a form of art and entertainment – and queer theatre. In his opening remarks, Senelick attempts a working definition of queer theatre. In his view: To speak in general terms, queer theater is grounded in and expressive of unorthodox sexuality or gender identity, antiestablishment and confrontational in tone, experimental and unconventional in format, with stronger links to performance art and what Germans call *Kleinkunst*, that is, revue, cabaret, and variety, than to traditional forms of drama.<sup>7</sup> If Senelick's definition were regarded as normative, and Rubin and Janiczak's production were considered from that angle, *Valiant Pete and Little Orphan Mary* would have to be described as 'a bit of a queer production'. After all, non-heteronormative sexuality is at its core, and its non-heteronormative characters see themselves as members of a sidelined group whose demands are made against the hegemonic position of the discourse of masculinity

6 The popular identification of visibility with being onstage at a publicly funded theatre was reflected in a review by Kamila Łapicka, who described the final scene of *Valiant Pete* as follows: 'Although the two lead characters display their mutual affection as shadows against the background of a [video] projection, they do not stay in the background. They are onstage at the Polski Theatre in central Poznań, and that amounts to total visibility.' Kamila Łapicka, 'O człowieczeństwo' ['For Humanity'], <http://zteatru.pl/2018/11/04/o-czlowieczestwo/>, [accessed 22 March 2019].

7 Laurence Senelick, 'The Queer Root of Theater', in *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, ed. by Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 21.

and heterosexuality. However, the characters' confrontational tone is at odds with the conventional form of the production. As critics Stanisław Godlewski and Piotr Dobrowolski have pointed out,<sup>8</sup> on this occasion Rubin and Janiczak chose not to resort to their usual theatrical practice of involving the audience directly in the performance by overstepping the boundary between stage and auditorium, and violating the bodily integrity of audience members. *Valiant Pete* is traditional in form, rhetoric-heavy when it comes to text, and conservative in the means used by the director.

While in the passage quoted above Senelick lists specific characteristics of queer theatre, and any play can easily be examined for their presence, further into his article he points out determinants of queer theatre that are harder to define, but no less important. According to Senelick, queer theatre cannot take its subject matter 'too seriously', and there should be a connection between the ironic distance that is peculiar to it and the state of performers who 'have to take their own experiences as the inspiration for and endorsement of their work; their lives provide the validity and credibility for their art'.<sup>9</sup> These 'soft' determinants have the power to render queer theatre normative as a genre capable of representing stable identities, and a locus of 'telling the truth' about oneself. Measured up against this norm, the Poznań production must be criticized as an attempt by two straight artists to take on queer biographies of women, to speak out for a group they have little in common with, taking advantage of the position of power granted them by publicly funded theatre as an institution.

An interview with Jolanta Janiczak by Damski Tandem Twórczy (the Female Creative Tandem) offers interesting evidence of the LGBTQ community's less than favourable disposition towards Rubin and Janiczak's attempt to take over the discourse of non-heterosexual women.<sup>10</sup> The Tandem comprises Agnieszka Małgowska and Monika Rak, a couple who not only work in theatre together, but also keep abreast of Poland's broadly understood lesbian culture (film, theatre etc.) and document it. The dynamic of the interview is interesting in itself: Janiczak is not cast as someone who remains in control of the meanings of the production she has co-authored, nor is she presented as a writer sharing the secrets of her work and research. Instead, she is confronted with information

8 Piotr Dobrowolski, 'Szafiarki' ['Closeted Women'], <http://teatralny.pl/recenzje/szafiarki,2537.html>, [accessed 22 March 2019]; Stanisław Godlewski, 'Ta historia to punkt wyjścia do rozważań na temat emancypacji kobiet i nieobecności lesbijek w polskim dyskursie' ['This Story Is a Starting Point for Considering the Emancipation of Women and the Absence of Gay Women from Public Discourse in Poland'], *Wyborcza.pl Poznań*, <http://poznan.wyborcza.pl/poznan/7,36000,24106597,ta-historia-to-punkt-wyjscia-do-rozwazan-na-temat-emancypacji.html>, [accessed 22 March 2019].

9 Senelick, p. 26.

10 Jolanta Janiczak, 'O teatrze lesbijskim w Polsce XXIV. Mam dość oglądania bohatera maczo, który kolonizuje świat' ['On Lesbian Theatre in Poland no. 24: I'm Sick and Tired of Watching a Macho Protagonist Colonize the World'], interview by Agnieszka Małgowska and Monika Rak, [http://akulturalgbtq.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/aaakulturalnik\\_sistrum\\_TLP\\_Jolanta-Janiczak.pdf.pdf?fbclid=IwAR-0SA1kzrtvQMYMs5eR7BAWzFhDSAj2D8Ati4zSvLgQRZZBoJgIH9W67zY4](http://akulturalgbtq.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/aaakulturalnik_sistrum_TLP_Jolanta-Janiczak.pdf.pdf?fbclid=IwAR-0SA1kzrtvQMYMs5eR7BAWzFhDSAj2D8Ati4zSvLgQRZZBoJgIH9W67zY4), [accessed 22 March 2019].

on lesbian off theatre, a subject she is largely ignorant of. What is more, Małgowska and Rak are suspicious of the strategies employed by Rubin and Janiczak, and openly criticize aspects of the production which, in their view, lack credibility. Reading the interview, one has the impression Janiczak has been caught entering (with Rubin) what was only seemingly an undeveloped and unclaimed area. Rubin and Janiczak's turn towards female homobiographies thus seems like a usurpation. Małgowska and Rak reveal that the LGBTQ community looked askance, in particular, at the fact that the production was directed by a man. The interviewers themselves disapproved of the performances in *Valiant Pete*. Rak found Monika Roszko's portrayal of Dulębianka listless and her relationship with Konopnicka unconvincing:

The relationship between the two Marias lacked credibility. I'm not talking about a veristic portrayal of a relationship – I mean chemistry. In a non-heterosexual relationship, the chemistry needs to be deliberately set in motion, whereas in a heterosexual equivalent it's triggered automatically; this is what culture drills us to do. Lesbianism is nothing but a declaration if it's not embodied. It is a construct without flesh, and the characters were cut off from their flesh.<sup>11</sup>

The acting qualities mentioned by Rak are characteristic of Rubin and Janiczak's productions. They are closely linked to the playwright's style and her habit of creating her characters as vehicles for discourse, rather than individuals with a particular psychological makeup. The text on which the Poznań production was based was indeed structured as a polyphonic piece, giving a platform to a variety of voices concerned with the presence of lesbians in the public sphere and articulating different modes of taking on a queer identity. It is therefore no surprise that the acting style of the Poznań cast owed hardly anything to psychology, nor did the ensemble embed their parts in their corporeality (that is, they did not use their bodies to perform desire). A strong relationship with performers' bodies is one of the characteristics of queer theatre: in this type of theatre, 'cutting one's body off' would entail forgoing a large share of the production's affective potential. (In queer theatre, productions are granted verisimilitude through the performers' bodily identity and sexuality.) These aspects of *Valiant Pete* (which Małgowska and Rak have expressed reservations about) make the production appear as a cool statement, harmonious in discourse and based on academic research but lacking the authenticity of queer productions, where performers speak in their own name, instead of demanding that rights be granted to a group they themselves are not part of. The interviewers could be criticized for regarding queer as another norm, within which some statements are recognized as true and others as false, and for shaping their views of the Poznań production accordingly. However, one especially noteworthy aspect of Małgowska and Rak's interview is what they have to say about off theatre productions and their very slim chance of becoming a part of public discourse. By contrast, the interviewers go on to suggest, mainstream productions staged in subsidized theatres make it into the mainstream almost by

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

default. My feeling is that the duo behind *Damski Tandem Twórczy* speak out in favour of a strong, essentialist concept of representation within queer theatre because they regard this concept as the sole effective instrument in the circumstances faced by off queer theatre in Poland. It is worth noting that the go-ahead for *Valiant Pete* to be produced at the Polski Theatre in Poznań was given by its managing director, Maciej Nowak, whose longstanding experience includes serving at the helm of the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre and the Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk, and the Theatre Institute in Warsaw. Nowak, who is openly gay, enjoys a very strong position within institutional theatre in Poland. The question of why in publicly funded theatre there is such a shortage of productions concerning the identity of non-heterosexual women and their rights is inevitably bound up with the issue of who can take the liberty of including such a production in their repertoire.

If Rubin and Janiczak did indeed seize the strategies of queer theatre, they did so to a limited extent, and theirs was not a queer production. Productions in publicly funded theatre usually enjoy regular runs; they are promoted by the theatre's designated department, given press coverage, and reviewed. They reach a far wider audience than any independent theatre would ever manage to attract. In the interview quoted above, Janiczak implies that staging a production about Konopnicka and Dulebianka was not really motivated by the wish to open up publicly funded theatre to queer narrative; rather, it was part of Rubin and Janiczak's longstanding project of staging women's biographies.<sup>12</sup> Positioning Maria Konopnicka's queer biography at the centre of the production becomes the catalyst for emancipatory processes which Janiczak and Rubin simulate onstage, with a view to showing various aspects of her queer life and various opportunities to functionalize it. Konopnicka is shown first and foremost as Dulebianka's partner, but also as the mother to Zofia and Helena, lover of Maksymilian Gumpłowicz, and a lesbian who represents a different model of 'wearing queerness'<sup>13</sup> than her Western European contemporaries Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall and Mabel Batten. Although Konopnicka's relationship with Dulebianka is discussed openly in *Valiant Pete*, and the assumption is that the bond between the two women was both emotional and sexual, the aim of their joint portrait is to show two different attitudes towards lesbian identity. The title of the production is an early hint at these differences. Dulebianka, or 'valiant Pete', as Konopnicka nicknamed her, resents living in the closet, pretending 'we are not there, there is no history, no lot...'. She is only able to accept this out of love for Konopnicka, to whom she maintains a submissive attitude. Janiczak took advantage

12 Other productions by Rubin and Janiczak which focused on women's biographies include *Joanna Szalona; Królowa* [*Joanna the Mad; Queen*] (2011, Stefan Żeromski Theatre in Kielce), *Caryca Katarzyna* [*Empress Catherine*] (2013, Stefan Żeromski Theatre in Kielce), *Sprawa Gorgonowej* [*The Gorgonowa Case*] (2015, National Stary Theatre in Kraków), *Hrabina Batory* [*Countess Bathory*] (2015, Stefan Żeromski Theatre in Kielce), and *Żony stanu, dziwki rewolucji, a może i uczone białogłowy* [*Stateswomen, Sluts of the Revolution, or the Learned Ladies*] (2016, Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz).

13 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).



of the fact that Dulębianka's surviving archive is very modest indeed, and, in the production, attributed radical views to her. Matters are different with Konopnicka: she constantly hovers between being in the closet and coming out, between remaining on the pedestal as the bard of the nation and becoming an icon of Poland's LGBTQ movement. According to Dulębianka, men are always having intercourse with men – it is just that sometimes they use women as intermediaries. Dulębianka demands the proclamation of the third sex and, in a dramatic gesture, she strips naked and addresses all those women – 'cleaners, aunts, secretaries, lady friends' – who did not leave their mark in history, but could have joined an alliance cutting across the history of male dominance which wiped out female narratives. The production does not provide an explicit answer to whether Dulębianka refers to non-heterosexual women of different professions, classes, and cultural backgrounds. The moment when Roszko, naked, faces the audience, is the most radical part of the production. At the same time, because the group she addresses is left undetermined, the previously upheld discipline of speaking out about the situation of non-heterosexual women is now relaxed. Their stories become more universal. What they have in common is the experience of having been erased from history, something heterosexual women are also familiar with. I would be inclined to argue that this scene reveals Janiczak's approach to her characters: she regards them as female characters first and foremost, while their non-heterosexual identity is an interesting aspect of their biography. The way Dulębianka is structured as a character would indicate that, for Janiczak, her political activity, campaigning for suffrage for Polish women and her (unsuccessful) bid to become an MP were a pretext, a way of enabling the playwright to attribute to her character emancipatory demands for non-heterosexual women which, historically speaking, were not part of Dulębianka's political agenda. Dulębianka acts the 'valiant Pete' primarily towards the 'Little Orphan Mary' who is unable to decide which version of her biography she would like to preserve for posterity. Portrayed in this manner, Konopnicka becomes virtually a model of the queer figure as described by Heather Love in her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*.<sup>14</sup> In her analysis, Love focuses on the negative passions and emotions driving the foundation of queer history. As she writes about identities built on the boundary between social stigma and a sense of extraordinariness, Love argues that every project of 'a better queer future' is based either on a negative past experience, whether dormant or given prominence, or on an absence which is the result of either the archive having been destroyed or traces of queer history having been deliberately effaced. The theme of the destroyed archive which could potentially hold evidence of a romantic relationship between Konopnicka and Dulębianka recurs throughout the play: in the opening scene, when the audience are shown a recording of the two lead actors (Agnieszka Kwietniewska and Monika Roszko) visiting a Lviv archive, where all they manage to find are laconic notes about Konopnicka and Dulębianka's funerals; later, in the scene where Dulębianka accuses Konopnicka's daughter

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14 Ibid., pp. 31–52.

Zofia of destroying her mother's letters and thus making the myth of Konopnicka as one of Poland's jingoistic writers easier to uphold. Janiczak approached this absence of an archive in a positive spirit. A shortage of evidence may indicate that the women were close friends rather than romantic partners; this is how their bond is interpreted by those in charge of the Maria Konopnicka Museum in Suwałki, north-east Poland.<sup>15</sup> Equally, however, this shortage may indicate there was evidence (letters, notes, and other documents) of a romantic relationship between Konopnicka and Dulebianka, but it was destroyed. This is Janiczak's interpretation, and presumably it would be Love's, too. Thus, contrary to her official biography and the narrative favoured by her family and the institutions whose task is to protect her legacy and preserve her memory, Konopnicka is established as an advocate of lesbian emancipation in Poland. According to Heather Love, the difficulty presented by the discourse of queer history taking over the likes of Konopnicka is equivalent to the impossibility of satisfying homosexual desire in a public space ruled by heteronormativity. Love's suggested solution is to accept the negative nature of the relation between a character recalled from the past and the person who recalls her. Rather than transform the normative model of shaping history as a progressive process, based on forward movement and positive emotions, one should adopt a 'backward' model, closely linked to feelings of regret, nostalgia, bitterness, and pain, which enables queer subjects to record their negative experiences. Putting this model into practice can be a struggle. Often it is only practised up to a point, beyond which it transforms into an affirmative song in praise of a (potentially) better future – a future where political agency is won and the chain of negative identifications broken.

Konopnicka undergoes a similar transformation in the Poznań production. For the vast majority of the performance, she remains in constant flux between wanting to join the emancipation front (represented by Dulebianka) and the convenient option of upholding the image of a writer devoted to the cause of Polish independence. Although this state of flux prompts us to regard Konopnicka as a conformist, it also protects her from being hijacked by any one, definitive narrative. Konopnicka implies she promoted patriotic values in her writing to be able to afford her life with Dulebianka. In this reading, Konopnicka's work, viewed today as conservative and dull, would acquire an emancipatory aspect. On the other hand, Konopnicka is reluctant to publicly declare her love for Dulebianka. In the final scene of the production, Konopnicka, quite out of the blue, accepts the challenge of spearheading the movement for the rights of non-heterosexual women. She is encouraged to do so not only by Dulebianka, but also by Batten and Radclyffe-Hall. It is this transformation, for which there is little substance in the production,

<sup>15</sup> In 2012, Grzegorz Gauden, who at the time headed the Polish Book Institute, faced a backlash from conservative circles when he suggested Konopnicka and Dulebianka should become patrons of the draft Civil Partnership Act. Gauden's opponents objected to classifying Konopnicka as gay. Magdalena Rusińska, director of the Konopnicka Museum in Suwałki, spoke out in a similar vein, [https://youtube/o\\_2urjuhuIk?t=89](https://youtube/o_2urjuhuIk?t=89), [accessed 22 March 2019].

that marks the beginning of the political project (proclaimed as part of the production) of changing the situation of Poland's non-heterosexual women.

There are several stages to the construction of this project. The first has to do with confronting Batten and Radclyffe-Hall. This inspires the plan for lesbians to take over one institution after another (these are referred to in broad rather than specific terms: 'cinemas, theatres...') and claim for themselves various aspects of public life (the opportunity to name streets and introduce books of their choice into the school curriculum). A demand to establish an independent lesbian state emerges from this sweeping vision of reconstructing the public sphere. The project concludes with Konopnicka and Dulębianka's final appearance, which they use to 'establish' an archive named after them and a foreign scholarship for non-heterosexual female artists. They also agree to take the draft Civil Partnership Act under their wing and become its patrons (a word consistently used by Janiczak, after Grzegorz Gauden, although the word 'matron' would seem more suitable). At a basic level, the ideas put forward by Batten and Radclyffe-Hall are founded on the belief that non-heterosexual women must become more visible in the public sphere. Because these ideas do not amount to proposals of specific solutions, it is easy to accept their manifesto-like nature, without giving too much thought to the fact that they disregard the dynamics of public life and institutional procedures. What is striking about Batten's proposal of calling a lesbian state into being – particularly if we include the relation between the queer and the public in our scope – is that her project of founding a state of non-heterosexual women is based on reproducing normative models taken from existing political systems which carry a strong patriarchal signature. Rather than the opportunity to live a different, queer life,<sup>16</sup> subversive in its undermining of the norm and rendering it negotiable, non-heterosexual people are being offered another, newly established norm. That this norm is potentially repressive is borne out by the very fact that the only women allowed to settle in a lesbian state would be those who came out and whose way of life Radclyffe-Hall approved of. What is more, the project envisages the new lesbian state as an isolated entity, where those who were previously subject to social exclusion could now, for a change, become part of excluding structures.

The establishment of fictional institutions in Konopnicka and Dulębianka's concluding monologues is equally dubious. I saw *Valiant Pete* in Poznań twice, and while on the first occasion I was very enthusiastic about the production's finale, which proposed to establish specific institutions and offer financial assistance to non-heterosexual

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16 *Sztuka życia inaczej. Ustanawianie queerowego czasu i przestrzeni [The Art of Living Differently: Establishing Queer Time and Space]*, by Grzegorz Stępnik (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2017), is a very interesting study of queering the three stages of human life: childhood, adulthood, and old age. Stępnik examines this phenomenon by looking at queer theatre productions, performances, and films in the United States. Stępnik scrutinizes his material, focusing in particular on the establishment, in cultural representations, of 'homonormativity', based on transplanting into gay and lesbian culture models that originated in a society shaped by heteronormativity.

women, I realized on second viewing that Agnieszka Kwietniewska and Monika Roszko were repeating formulas that in no way translated into action. On the night of each performance, audiences are informed over and over again that the Maria Konopnicka and Maria Dulębianka Archive is being established in Poznań 'at this very moment', but repeating this announcement onstage at a publicly funded theatre will not result in establishment of the archive (or a scholarship fund, for that matter). Simulating the proclamation of specific institutions establishes a semblance of the political in Rubin and Janiczak's production. Their work acknowledges the legal situation of Poland's non-heterosexual population, while completely disregarding the relevant facts for the sake of a happy ending. But who is to benefit from such an ending? For the audience, whose legal position will remain unaffected by the Civil Partnership Act, this ending is simply an optimistic conclusion that fits in well with the economics of publicly funded theatre as entertainment for the bourgeoisie. For those whom the Civil Partnership Act could grant the opportunity to have their relationship acknowledged by the state, this finale remains a useless (if not harmful) fiction.

The preamble to the Civil Partnership Act, read by Monika Roszko in the production's final scene, was written in 2012 by Grzegorz Gauden, newspaper and radio journalist and managing director at the time of the Polish Book Institute. The lower chamber of the Polish Parliament, the Sejm, was not working on a Civil Partnership Act at the time. In 2018, a draft Civil Partnership Act was released by the Nowoczesna (Modern) party. The National Council of the Judiciary issued its opinion of the bill as being unconstitutional and a threat to Christian values. While Rubin and Janiczak opted to leave the realities of contemporary politics outside the scope of their production, they did attempt, as part of a production staged at a publicly funded theatre, to establish Konopnicka and Dulębianka as icons of the campaign for the rights of Poland's non-heterosexual women. But this iconic status was to be granted not by the force of queer history being established, against official procedures and even in spite of the characters themselves, but as a result of creating structures based on solutions already familiar from public and political life. The discursive operation performed as part of the production has resulted in a paradox. Rubin and Janiczak have led their characters out of the realm of unstructured, subversive queer history, only to include them in public discourse. However, this inclusion is a simulation, and thus remains ineffective.

*Translated by Joanna Błachnio*

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**ABSTRACT**

Zuzanna Berendt

**A Bit of a Queer Production: What Happens and What Cannot Happen When a Queer Biography Meets Publicly Funded Theatre**

The article is a critical analysis of *O mężnym Pietrku i sierotce Marysi. Bajka dla dorosłych* [*Valiant Pete and Little Orphan Mary: A Fairy Tale for Grownups*] (Polski Theatre in Poznań, 2018), a production by the writer-director duo Jolanta Janiczak and Wiktor Rubin. The author examines the strategies employed to present onstage at a publicly funded theatre the queer biographies of Maria Konopnicka, a Polish writer who lived and worked at the turn of the twentieth century and was an avid proponent of her nation's patriotic discourse, and her partner Maria Dulębianka, artist, social activist and campaigner for the rights of Polish women. Zuzanna Berendt explores the artistic, social, and political project embedded in the production and related to the representation of non-heteronormative women in Poland's public sphere. Analysing the strategies of queer theatre used in the Poznań production, Berendt considers the conditions a female queer biography has to meet to appear onstage at an institutional, publicly funded theatre. She also reflects on the relation between Rubin and Janiczak's artistic project and the situation of non-heteronormative people in Poland.

**Keywords:** publicly funded theatre, institutional theatre, queer, queer biography, Polski Theatre in Poznań, Wiktor Rubin, Jolanta Janiczak.