

Katarzyna Waligóra

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Growing Sideways and Subverting Theatrical Hierarchies: Paweł Miśkiewicz's *Spring Awakening*

Frank Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* [*Spring Awakening*], directed by Paweł Miśkiewicz,¹ was to open at the National Stary Theatre in Kraków on 22 January 1999. However, changes had to be made to posters already printed for the occasion: a new date, three weeks ahead, was pasted onto the original one. After more than eighty rehearsals, held across four months, the production finally opened on 5 February 1999, but it ran for just thirteen performances, closing on 9 April of that year. With hindsight, it seems astonishing that Miśkiewicz's work was taken off so hastily: judging by a (rather poor-quality) recording, it seems very interesting indeed. In my essay, I would like to reconstruct the circumstances in which *Spring Awakening* lived its brief stage life in the late 1990s, with a view to examining the possible reasons for its theatrical failure. Subsequently, I would like to consider the queer potential of the production. For purposes of reconstruction, I will draw, first and foremost, on the reminiscences of those who worked on the production.² Warmest thanks go to all my interviewees: Joanna Biernacka, Agata Kuliś, Paweł Miśkiewicz, Hanna Nowak, Matylda Paszchenko, Mateusz Przyłęcki, Karina Seweryn and Marlena Suder.

1 Paweł Miśkiewicz started out in theatre as an actor. He spent eleven years as a member of Stary's ensemble, making his most memorable appearances in Krystian Lupa's productions. Miśkiewicz began his work as a director in 1994, when he made *Waiting for Godot* at the State School for Dramatic Art (Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna or PWST) in Kraków, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* at the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in the same city. Drama school degree performances aside, *Spring Awakening* was his fifth directing effort. When interviewed for the present article, Miśkiewicz recognized his work on Wedekind's play as a breakthrough. The unfavourable reception of *Spring Awakening* brought it home to him that until he made a name for himself at a different theatre, he would be seen at Stary as an actor trying his hand at directing. And so, shortly after work on that production was completed, Miśkiewicz was offered the post of managing director of the Polski Theatre in Wrocław, which he accepted, staying in the role from 2000 to 2004. In Wrocław, he directed a number of enthusiastically received, award-winning productions. In 2004, he returned to Stary to direct *Innocence* by Dea Loher and, by his own account, it was a different kind of return than in 1999. In subsequent years, he worked regularly at Kraków's national theatre, with his latest production, *Gulliver's Travels*, opening on 25 May 2019. More information about Paweł Miśkiewicz can be found in a variety of English-language sources, including the Culture.pl website: <https://culture.pl/en/artist/pawel-miskiewicz> [accessed 28 May 2019].

2 All reminiscences of work on the production quoted here are from my unpublished interviews conducted in March 2019 for the purpose of this essay.

1.

In terms of narrative, the Stary Theatre production of *Spring Awakening* follows the dramatic original quite closely, though Miśkiewicz shifts emphasis at times, bringing out new motifs from the text of the play. These focus mostly on discovering one's own (homo) sexuality, and being subjected to different forms of violence (sexual violence included). Wedekind's characters have just entered puberty. In one early scene, Moritz (Radosław Kaim) clumsily interrogates his friend Melchior (Bogdan Brzyski) about the latter's first wet and erotic dreams. By accident, it emerges that Moritz doesn't know 'by what means [he was] brought into this world',³ yet embarrassment prevents him from listening to the elucidation offered by his friend who is more familiar with the subject. Moritz asks Melchior to put it all in writing. In any case, he has other, more serious problems to tackle: as a very poor student, he is in danger of being expelled from school. (He knows one person will be expelled at the end of the year because the classroom they are about to take has one seat fewer than the one they study in now.) Moritz plans to commit suicide if he is indeed expelled: he cannot imagine disappointing his parents. In the meantime, however, he is engrossed in his friendship with Melchior: their get-togethers, confidences and shared reading (above all, of Goethe's *Faust*). The strong bond between the two boys is marked by an erotic fascination. In the production, their friendship's romantic potential manifests itself in mutual intimacy: frequent lying side by side; seemingly innocent, mutual touching; verbal allusions made by the more daring Melchior ('Only think, you must appear entirely clothed before your best friend. You wouldn't do so if he didn't do the same thing', 'one might think that the whole world turned on sex')⁴ and Melchior's irritation when Moritz starts talking about girls. There is nothing explicit about the bond between the boys: on the face of it, they are classmates and nothing more, yet the tension between them is palpable.

The other, parallel strand of the production focuses on Wendla (Karina Seweryn). Like Moritz, the girl knows nothing about procreation and sexuality. She tries to elicit some information from her mother (Agnieszka Mandat). However, the mother is herself deeply embarrassed, and only able to respond to her daughter's queries by saying that, to have a baby, you need to get married and 'love [your husband] as you at your age are still unable to love.' Similarly, sexuality doesn't feature in the conversations Wendla has with her school friends; they are too engrossed in envisaging the families they would have in the future. However, the girls are open with each other about the violence inflicted on them by their parents. Martha (Barbara Kurzaj/Zofia Szulakowska)

3 Frank Wedekind, *The Awakening of Spring: A Tragedy of Childhood*, trans. by Francis J. Ziegler, Project Gutenberg, gutenberg.org/files/35242/35242-h/35242-h.htm [accessed 8 August 2019].

4 Frank Wedekind, *Spring Awakening*, directed by Paweł Miśkiewicz, production recording, 6 min. 30 sec., courtesy of the Art Documentation Archive, National Stary Theatre in Kraków. In his 2010 translation of the play, Jonathan Franzen renders this last sentence as 'You'd think the whole world revolves around penis and vagina!' (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 31. Joanna Diduszko's translation used in Miśkiewicz's production has 'phallus' instead of 'penis' (as discussed below).

tells how she is beaten with 'anything that is handy', intimidated and forced to sleep in a sack, folded so she is unable to move all night long. She sometimes thinks her parents enjoy treating her this way. Wendla finds Martha's stories fascinating. She goes so far as to claim she would like to spend one night in the sack. Ilse (Ewa Kaim) describes the sexual violence she is subjected to: drunk, she runs into Moritz and confides in him.

In this extremely oppressive environment, the characters' lives come to a tragic end. Moritz is not promoted to the next school year and commits suicide. Walking in the woods, Wendla runs into Melchior and embarks on a perverse game with him, which leads the boy to beat her with a wooden stick. When they meet again, Wendla attempts to start another, more romantic kind of relationship with Melchior, who responds by raping her and getting her pregnant. Meanwhile, Moritz's father finds Melchior's rigmarole on sexuality among his late son's effects. Informed of the matter, teachers are quick to spot an opportunity to lay the blame for Moritz's death on the author of the essay. Melchior is expelled from school following a grotesque investigation, in the course of which the boy accused of corrupting his classmate is never allowed to speak, and none of the teachers tasked with reaching a verdict on his guilt or innocence as much as glances at what he had written. Wendla has no idea what is happening with her body: she is convinced she is suffering from dropsy and will die soon (she has often thought and spoken of death before). The news that she is pregnant comes as a shock to her. Her mother arranges an abortion, but the abortifacient administered by a folk healer prove deadly for the girl. Learning of their son's rigmarole and his rape of Wendla, Melchior's parents decide to send their son to a reformatory emphasizing strict Catholic upbringing. In the final scene of the production, Melchior, walking in a cemetery, meets an apparition of Moritz. The ghost tries to persuade him to commit suicide, but the boys are interrupted by the mysterious Masked Man. He drives the ghost away, and Melchior decides to leave with him into the unknown. They walk off stage together.

2.

Spring Awakening was being made at a very difficult time for the Stary Theatre. Miśkiewicz's production had been commissioned by managing director Krystyna Meissner, who was removed from office shortly afterwards as a result of her conflict with the ensemble. Her successor, Jerzy Bińczycki, died suddenly of a heart attack almost immediately after taking office. Bińczycki's deputy, Jerzy Koenig, became acting director. Thus, in the space of a few months, three different people were at the helm of the Stary Theatre. This meant uncertainty around the artistic course the institution would take, and had an impact on how comfortable the ensemble, technical crew, administrative staff and freelance collaborators felt working there.

Paweł Miśkiewicz cites being guilty of a major breach of theatrical hierarchies as the reason for his production closing so quickly. As he puts it: 'What had happened was that the school council, bullying the main character for his misdemeanours, echoed Stary's Art Council, ill-treating our show for its unruliness, for stepping outside the framework of what was acceptable within the institution.'

The actors Miśkiewicz had asked to work on his production were very emerging indeed. The cast included six PWST students,⁵ and students of a secondary school of drama acted as understudies for two of the parts. Three further roles were played by very recent drama school graduates: Bogdan Brzyski, Ewa Kaim, and Radosław Kaim, who was not a member of the Stary ensemble. Paweł Miśkiewicz recalls:

When we were at work on the production, tensions were running very high. People at the theatre didn't trust us. They didn't believe a group like ours would be capable of putting together a production worthy of the Stary Theatre. I was criticized for choosing young people who didn't know how to act, didn't know how to put a part together and were too personal on stage. But this was precisely what I found most interesting: coming up not with complete parts, but a kind of sketch, where we would look at Wedekind's characters and their state of mind.

In *Spring Awakening*, experienced, long-term members of the Stary ensemble were cast in supporting roles and cameo parts. In the director's view, this disrupted the customary order of things at Stary:

I think *Spring Awakening* was a threat to the image of Stary that had formed in the audiences' minds. Our production was inconvenient, in that it brought traditional acting into disrepute and subverted hierarchies: regular ensemble members, who owned the place, waited around in the cafeteria or in their dressing rooms for students to finish their scenes, and then they came on for just a few minutes. This, by the way, fuelled the youngsters' enthusiasm and added to their sense of freedom. Usually, if they were admitted to play at Stary at all, they were cast in cameo parts.

However, Miśkiewicz goes on to observe that the regular ensemble members cast in *Spring Awakening* had little chance of defending the production. This is because some of them were known predominantly from Krystian Lupa's productions, and were sidelined at Stary at the time; others were retired or nearing retirement and no longer had agency within the institution. Whatever either group had to say carried little weight against the decisions taken by Jerzy Koenig or Stary's Art Council.

The older actors weren't thrilled to be part of the production. Matylda Paszczenko, who portrayed Thea, remembers them as follows:

I have a very vivid memory of the first read-through of *Spring Awakening*. With the other drama school students, I came into a big room where we were met by a large group of older Stary actors, who were cast as teachers in our production. They had read the script and started to show their discontent, but without putting a name to their fears or prejudices. Paweł [Miśkiewicz] was a bit baffled: they treated him like a beginner who doesn't have a clue what he really wants to show on stage. I found their behaviour shocking. I was surprised that actors who didn't have much work, who at the time weren't cast that often, weren't pleased at all when given the chance to play interesting, full-bodied parts. For a very long time, they remained critical of the way Paweł worked.

⁵ Since 1 October 2017, the former PWST has been known as Akademia Sztuk Teatralnych (the Academy of Theatre Arts, or AST).

Mateusz Przyłęcki, who played Hans Rilow in *Spring Awakening*, tells a similar story:

As far as I can remember, the oldest actors weren't so sure about Paweł. I think they weren't pleased that so many young actors, drama school students, were cast in the production. As a student, I was out of my depth there. I felt like an intruder who has barely any skills yet, but already wants to be on stage at Stary.

Karina Seweryn's memories could not have been more different. According to her, 'Older colleagues, members of the Stary ensemble, were wonderful: they were helpful, treated us as partners, and did nothing to hinder our work.' However, Seweryn may well have been quite alone in her views. By her own admission, given that playing Wendla was a major challenge, Miśkiewicz shielded Seweryn from any emotional aspects of the atmosphere surrounding the production. Joanna Biernacka, who in 1999 was pursuing a degree in theatre studies and worked as Miśkiewicz's assistant on *Spring Awakening*, remembered Seweryn as a highly sensitive and emotional person, for whom playing a girl who is raped and dies as a result of a botched abortion was quite a challenge. Biernacka also recalls that Miśkiewicz had been intent on making Seweryn as comfortable as possible at work and preventing her from suffering any emotional damage. He must have succeeded, given that Seweryn has stressed she felt secure and never had a sense of doing anything in spite of herself.

Nonetheless, work on the production did not go well. Jerzy Koenig and Stary's Art Council attended the dress rehearsals. They demanded changes to the show, which were only very reluctantly introduced by Miśkiewicz. This had an impact on the emerging actors, although Matylda Paszczenko recalls that an effort was made to keep the students away from any institutional problems. They were regarded as outsiders and were asked to leave when actors set about discussing 'matters to do with the theatre'. Paszczenko herself does not remember being aware that anything was amiss with *Spring Awakening*. However, in Mateusz Przyłęcki's view,

some people at Stary disapproved of the production. I can't remember the details, but this must have had an impact on the atmosphere we worked in. You could feel a struggle for the production was going on, and what we were doing wasn't unreservedly accepted.

Meanwhile, Joanna Biernacka remembers a rehearsal with the managing director in attendance:

I remember a ghastly rehearsal during which Jerzy Koenig and several other members of the theatre staff were to decide whether or not to give permission for the premiere to go ahead. I've preserved a very vivid memory of this because Jerzy Koenig and the people he brought with him – presumably members of the Stary Art Council – broke theatre rules, or rather what I imagined to be theatre rules at the time. For example, they would comment out loud on what was happening onstage. This must have been when it was decided the premiere would be postponed. There was no appetite for pulling the production – for the sake of the young actors, but also, I think, because this was Paweł

Miśkiewicz's debut as a director at Stary. Krystian Lupa may have spoken up for the production, too.

Mateusz Przyłęcki remembers that, apart from the management interfering, the nascent production was fraught with difficulties:

The fact that as a second-year student I had been asked to play in a Stary production was a great honour, but it was very stressful, too. As an actor, I felt slightly out of my depth in *Spring Awakening*. A lot of the time I didn't know what I was playing. At that stage, with my acting skills not yet developed properly, I couldn't cope with that and felt very insecure.

The intervals between subsequent dress rehearsals were long, and at last the opening was postponed. Joanna Biernacka recalls what happened once that decision was taken:

The final three weeks of rehearsals were marked by the desire to fight till the end, but there was also the feeling we were being defeated. It's one thing to put a production together when things are going smoothly, and quite another to work when you're aware it's perfectly possible the show won't be allowed to open. There came a point when the only thing that mattered was to perform in front of the audience, not to give up on the production by default.

3.

Six reviews were published after the premiere, and critics were divided in their views. *Spring Awakening* did not find favour with Paweł Głowacki, Janusz R. Kowalczyk or Marek Mikos, whereas Agnieszka Fryz-Więcek, Paweł Łopatka and Grzegorz Niziołek all gave positive reviews. Ironically, however, the last two critics published their pieces in the April 1999 issue of the journal *Didaskalia*, more or less concurrently with *Spring Awakening*'s final performances. All the critical reviews stressed that at a time of huge progress in sex education, issues such as puberty and exploring one's own sexuality appeared dated. This, for instance, was Janusz Kowalczyk:

In this day and age, when your average nursery school pupil is more likely to believe in Santa bringing gifts than in storks bringing babies, anyone wishing to stage Wedekind's play needs to come up with – forgive me for stating the obvious – a good artistic reason to do so.⁶

Marek Mikos added:

From the point of view of people who grew up in the latter half of the twentieth century, we marvel at the difficulties once presented by explaining the facts of life to young people. Is there anything else left in the text of the play?⁷

That in 1999 the issues highlighted in *Spring Awakening* could be regarded as resolved must seem astonishing, especially today, when we

6 Janusz R. Kowalczyk, 'Samobój' ['Suicide'], *Rzeczpospolita*, 1999, no. 33, <http://www.e-teatr.pl/artykuly/144592.html> [accessed 10 April 2019].

7 Marek Mikos, 'Z głową pomiędzy nogami' ['With Head between Legs'], *Gazeta w Krakowie*, 1999, no. 32, <http://e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/144589.html> [accessed 10 April 2019].

are faced with yet another media debate⁸ about sex education, more commonly (and more prescriptively) known in Poland as ‘education for family life’. Grzegorz Niziołek seemed similarly astonished after the opening of Miśkiewicz’s production:

In the press and behind the scenes, after the premiere *Spring Awakening* was pilloried along strikingly similar lines. Wedekind’s play is dated, the concerns raised by the author are no longer an issue because enormous progress has been made in sex education. [...] These arguments alone seem questionable. First: is *Spring Awakening* actually a play about the disastrous consequences of ignorance in matters to do with sex? Second: are we devoid of even a modicum of historical imagination, enabling us to relate to the distress of people living at a different time and place? Third (and finally): are we really as open, liberal and liberated as we would seem? And aren’t many of the issues raised by Wedekind still taboo?⁹

I find Niziołek’s last question particularly interesting. As Agnieszka Kościańska has explained in her book *Zobaczyć łosia. Historia polskiej edukacji seksualnej od pierwszych lekcji do internetu* [*To See an Elk: The History of Polish Sexual Education from the First Lessons to the Internet*], the post-1989 political transformation in Poland has seen a conspicuous conservative turn in school teaching on sex and procreation. In Kościańska’s view, *Przysposobienie do życia w rodzinie* [*Preparing for Family Life*] by Wiesław Sokoluk, Dagmara Andziak and Maria Trawińska (1987) was Poland’s most progressive sex education textbook. However, its detractors promptly denounced it as a ‘masturbation and defloration handbook’ which corrupted young people. Protest from students notwithstanding, the textbook was withdrawn after less than one semester and the unsold copies were pulped. According to Kościańska, ‘The school system in Poland would never again use a teaching aid this progressive’;¹⁰ meanwhile, post-1989 sex education was shaped by the fiercest critics of the controversial textbook. The alternatives, largely written by conservative Catholics, used scaremongering tactics to discuss masturbation, avoided the issue of contraception, resorted to survivor-shaming when dealing with rape, and only approved of sex if it was heteronormative and within marriage.

Thus, when Miśkiewicz’s production opened, schools offered little by way of reliable information on sexuality. Nor could the young of 1999 rely on the web to provide them with the guidance they needed. At the time, internet access was both limited and very expensive, and it was still early days for internet cafés, both in terms of numbers and popularity (needless to say, they could be found only in major cities). Even online search was difficult, as Google and other such services had yet to take their present form. The Ponton Sex Educators Group, whose members give talks

8 The debate erupted after the mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski, signed the Warsaw Urban Policy for the LGBT+ Community declaration, which included a clause on introducing sex education classes compliant with WHO standards in every school.

9 Grzegorz Niziołek, ‘Po premierze’ [‘After the Premiere’], *Didaskalia* 30 (1999), p. 33.

10 Agnieszka Kościańska, *Zobaczyć łosia. Historia polskiej edukacji seksualnej od pierwszych lekcji do internetu* [*To See an Elk: The History of Polish Sexual Education from the First Lessons to the Internet*] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017), p. 46.

and offer young people advice over the phone, was established in 2002. Thus, in the late 1990s, pornography could have been a major source of information about sex. Leaving aside the question of the nature of such productions, while pornography was made legal in the wake of the post-1989 transformation, young people's access to it has always been limited by law. Given all of the above, does the scene so eagerly seized upon by the detractors of Miśkiewicz's production – Wendla's conversation with her mother, during which the girl tries to debunk the claim that babies are brought by storks – really seem that dated? Was there reason to believe that, when schools let young people in Poland down, most parents would be ready to step in as responsible sex educators? Was the ludicrous, irreverent portrayal of teachers, frightened and scandalized by an essay on procreation written by a student, or the death of a girl in the wake of an illegal abortion, actually out of touch with reality? Matylda Paszczenko recalls:

Wedekind's play did seem a little dated, and our production was quite subdued in visual terms. 'But it was still a play about puberty. We became very involved, and the emotional cost was high. I focused on remembering how much shame had been involved in puberty and discovering one's own sexuality. When I was growing up, sexuality was frightening: everything was shrouded in mystery. It's like a leap into the abyss, isn't it? So, when we were working on the production, I set in motion the feelings that appear when you are faced with a taboo.

4.

With hindsight, Joanna Biernacka acknowledges that *Spring Awakening* was not a great success in artistic terms, and, above all, it missed its moment. She stresses that, in the late 1990s, the debate about sex education was absent from the media, and theatre in Poland had little interest in the subject. Had the production been a success, a debate might have been sparked. Sadly, no such thing happened.

The formal aspect of the production may have been a disadvantage. Paweł Miśkiewicz had chosen not to rewrite the play or make it more contemporary. As far as we can tell from the recording and the few extant photographs, the set design was realistic and very austere indeed. A tree trunk was placed at the centre, branching out into two separate parts with a shared base. This seemingly innocuous detail had critics fantasizing. Janusz Kowalczyk compared the trunk to 'the human groin, with the legs stretching out straight into the sky',¹¹ while Paweł Głowacki observed that *Spring Awakening* was set 'in the shadow of the "Dream of an Impotent Adolescent" in flower.'¹² Similarly, the costumes did little to make the production more accessible. In no way did they resemble the clothes worn by sixteen-year-olds in the late 1990s. In Miśkiewicz's staging, women and girls wore long dresses, and boys wore ugly school uniforms. This plain aesthetics was of a piece with the language of the staging. All the young characters speak

¹¹ Kowalczyk.

¹² Paweł Głowacki, 'Wiosenne przebudzenie żab' ['Springtime Waking of the Frogs'], *Dziennik Polski*, 2004, no. 34, http://e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/144597.html?josso_assertion_id=D7AFF7197E46A2A3 [accessed 10 April 2019].

proper, literary Polish; even the word ‘penis’ is replaced with ‘phallus’. They do not go into detail or speak openly about their apprehensions. Moritz’s only experience of a naked woman had been in an anatomical museum. Although, regardless of their gender, the characters want to learn something about human sexuality, in the case of the girls this interest is clearly linked to family life and procreation. According to Joanna Biernacka:

Spring Awakening had lost sight of its audience. Aesthetically, young people couldn’t relate to the show at all; for them, it must have felt like a trip to a museum. And adults were neither shocked nor felt guilty watching a play about puberty; for them, it didn’t even have a whiff of nostalgia of returning to their school days.

5.

Nonetheless, the aesthetics of the production was the result of a deliberate decision on Miśkiewicz’s part; initially, he had a very different show in mind. On 22 December 1997, an audition for *Spring Awakening* was held at the Stary Theatre, organized by Hanna Nowak at Miśkiewicz’s request. Boys and girls aged thirteen to fifteen were invited, and, between 19 January and 16 May 1998, the twenty-four selected teenagers participated in rehearsal workshops. According to the reports from the Stary archive, there were some nineteen such events, each between three and six hours long. As we can infer from the notes opposite their names, five characters were to be portrayed by workshop participants: Moritz, Wendla, Jaś,¹³ Thea and Martha. Initially, two or three teenagers were assigned the same character; it seems, then, that the workshops were a further stage of the audition. Marlena Suder and Agata Kuliś, who as teenagers were part of the process, remember the workshops as quite an experience. Suder had dreamed of becoming an actor, while Kuliś had auditioned for fun, along with a few girlfriends. As they recollect, study groups at the theatre entailed not just acting classes, but also rehearsing selected scenes from Wedekind’s play in smaller groups. Suder remembers that Urszula Kiebzak¹⁴ came along to the workshops and offered participants assistance with their assignments. Kuliś adds that their classes also had another purpose: they were to help participants understand what *Spring Awakening* was about. Both women recall that their parents had to consent for their daughters to take part; a meeting with the parents was held before the workshops started. A fee was to be paid to those who were cast in the production. Although after all those years Kuliś cannot remember the workshops in any detail, her overall memory is that they were conducted with great care and attention; above all, the organizers were mindful that the issues addressed in the play – violence, rape, tragic death – could be harrowing for very young people. –

¹³ A character by that name does not appear in *Spring Awakening*; presumably, Hans Rilow (in Polish, Janek Rilow) was meant. In the end, Mateusz Przyłęcki was cast in the role.

¹⁴ Urszula Kiebzak went on to become Paweł Miśkiewicz’s second assistant (alongside Joanna Biernacka). She also appeared in *Spring Awakening* as Melchior’s mother. Katarzyna Paciorek, a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, also worked on the production as assistant photographer.

Paweł Miśkiewicz offers a somewhat different account of the workshops:

The workshops were mostly me talking to the participants, though we did rehearse a few scenes. I remember we read the play and thought about what today's teenagers would have done faced with the situations described by Wedekind, to what extent they could open up to their parents and peers. But they weren't proper rehearsals, with a stage manager, lighting etc. I was keen to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible, and let them work without any inessential people looking on.

However, the workshops came to an abrupt end, and the production featuring young people never made it onto the stage. As Miśkiewicz explains,

It turned out that contemporary teenagers were much better informed (which is hardly surprising, given that Wedekind's play was a century old), but the information they had was vulgarized because they were exposed to porn and shared things on the sly. That was when I thought there was no point doing this. I didn't want to make a journalistic show about how sexually aware contemporary teenagers were. I'd rather introduce an aspect of art to our work, have faith in the text of the play, and look at a more intimate, clumsy way of dealing with one's own sexuality. I did use what I'd heard during the workshops when I was writing my script, but in the end decided to work with emerging actors [rather than teenage amateurs].

However, Marlena Suder has quite a different memory of the reasons for curtailing the workshops. She recalls Krystyna Meissner, Stary's managing director at the time, attending the post-workshop roundup performance. After the summer holidays, the teenagers were told their rehearsals would be discontinued. For Suder, who at the time was ready to sacrifice a great deal to make her dream of acting come true, the unfulfilled promise of performing onstage was a major disappointment. Today, she takes the view that 'it would have been too much of a scandal: fifteen-year-olds performing in a show about matters like these.' However, Agata Kuliś suspects curtailing the workshops may have had to do with the quality of the participants' performance. Karina Seweryn agrees:

I attended one of the final rehearsals with the teenagers, after the decision to cut the show featuring them had already been taken. I knew I would be playing in *Spring Awakening* too, so I was watching the rehearsal as someone about to take on the task. I remember asking Paweł why he'd abandoned his original casting idea. He said that after a few rehearsals, the teenagers he had chosen were trying to pretend they were professional actors: instead of simply being on stage, they were starting to 'act acting'. Paweł found that unacceptable, so he decided he was going to work with people who had a better understanding of acting and the skills it involved.

6.

Miśkiewicz may have found the confrontation with the teenagers' real (or vulgarized, as he prefers to call them) experiences unnerving. It is also possible that Krystyna Meissner, whose position at the helm of

Stary was already precarious at the time, pressured him into curtailing the workshops. In any case, it is doubtful whether a performance featuring teenagers could have been produced in an institution as hierarchical as Stary was in the late 1990s, given that even a performance featuring drama school students proved controversial. But Miśkiewicz's argument is also worthy of consideration: keen to stage Wedekind's play, he had to find a group of professionals capable of bringing out what was of interest to him in the play, and, at the same time, of lending credibility to the text, while keeping their acting fresh and somewhat naive. What opportunities did staging a century-old play present in 1999?

In his book *Sztuka życia inaczej: ustanawianie queerowego czasu i przestrzeni* [*The Art of Living Differently: Establishing Queer Time and Space*], scholar and arts festival curator Grzegorz Stępniaś examines the cultural images of childhood and their queer potential. He introduces Kathryn Bond Stockton's term 'growing sideways', a form of life development in which vitality and pleasure are experienced in a network of versatile, non-reproductive relations. Stępniaś argues, moreover, that children are much more open and flexible when it comes to alternative forms of living and experiencing pleasure, which is why the adult world attempts to subject them to normalization processes.¹⁵ American scholar Judith (Jack) Halberstam, whom Stępniaś frequently cites, likewise cites Stockton's writings. According to Halberstam, 'If we were all already normative and heterosexual to begin with in our desires, orientations, and modes of being, then presumably we would not need such strict parental guidance to deliver us all to our common destinies of marriage, child rearing and hetero-reproduction.'¹⁶

In *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Stockton discusses different forms of queering the figure of the child (she understands 'queer' as both 'gay' and in the broader sense of 'strange', 'different'). One of the forms of queering discussed by Stockton is the child queered by innocence:

From the standpoint of adults, innocence is alien, since it is 'lost' to the very adults who assign it to children [...]. What do children queered by innocence share? They all share estrangement from what they approach: the adulthood against which they must be defined. This is why 'innocent' children are strange. They are seen as normative, but also not like us, at the same time.¹⁷

Adults in *Spring Awakening* are convinced of the children's innocence. Despite compelling evidence to the contrary, they refuse to admit their sons and daughters could be sexual beings. However, innocence proves deceptive, in that it allows for desires that cannot be named to be not only revealed, but also realized. Miśkiewicz's production certainly paints a grim picture of the teenage years: there is no support from

15 Grzegorz Stępniaś, *Sztuka życia inaczej: ustanawianie queerowego czasu i przestrzeni* [*The Art of Living Differently: Establishing Queer Time and Space*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2017).

16 Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 27.

17 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 30–31.

either school or parents, and death always remains an alternative to consider. Non-normative desires – Melchior’s fascination with Moritz or Wendla’s fantasy of a masochistic experience, which underlies her provocative attitude towards Melchior during their first encounter – are acted upon with tragic consequences. As Sara Ahmed has pointed out, stories of ‘unhappy queers’ are one of the key elements of the queer archive.¹⁸ One of the reasons for this is that these stories do not need to be taken literally as moral fables about how non-normative desires lead to violence or death, as was the case in *Spring Awakening*. In this particular production, the very fact that queer characters make it onto the stage at all might be more important.

Miśkiewicz’s staging leaves open the possibility of this alternative, non-literal reading. In one scene, more or less halfway through the production, and virtually unrelated to the rest of the play, Hans Rilow (Mateusz Przyłęcki) and Ernest (Jakub Snochowski) meet by a tree. They spend a moment discussing their visions of a happy future, and speak condescendingly about their parents’ hypocrisy, after which the following dialogue ensues:

Hans Rilow: Imagine the future as a milkshake with sugar and cinnamon. One fellow upsets it and howls, another stirs it all together and sweats. Why not skim off the cream? [...]

Ernest: Let us skim!

Hans: What remains the hens will eat. [...]

Ernest: And how everything springs from self!

Hans: Why not? [...] Don’t let us be sad!

After that Rilow kisses Ernest on the mouth.

The kiss is short and relatively innocuous, but its meaning is unequivocal. For a moment, the boys are embarrassed about what has just happened between them, but it soon turns out both were looking forward to spending time together. ‘I love you, Hans, as I have never loved a soul,’ Ernest cries, elated, to which Hans replies: ‘If we recall this in thirty years, perhaps we shall make fun of it. And yet everything is so beautiful.’ They run backstage together.

Thus an exuberant scene of young gay love erupts in the midst of a pessimistic production, whose characters, almost without exception, suffer, die or wander off into the unknown. Although *Spring Awakening* does include several other comical sequences, these are invariably ludicrous, at once laughable and frightening. This makes the scene of Ernest and Hans Rilow’s kiss the sole optimistic and joyful moment in the entire performance. Funnily enough, the most pertinent – and indeed the only – commentary on that scene can be found in Marek Mikos’s unfavourable review of the production (although this probably wasn’t what the critic intended). According to Mikos, ‘The two boys, Ernest and Hans, are actually the only lucky ones in the lot: though they love each other and kiss on the mouth, no children will come of it.’¹⁹ Mikos most likely intended the sentence to be spiteful, but he is right: Miśkiewicz’s production depicts love between the two

¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Mikos.

boys – non-normative, spontaneous and not leading to reproduction – as a possible source of pleasure and happiness.

7.

Opinion is divided on the reception of *Spring Awakening*. According to Karina Seweryn, the ensemble had the sense of having put together a fine production, and there was a mood of intense concentration in the audience. Mateusz Przyłęcki can only recall positive feedback from his friends. Joanna Biernacka recalls, 'The response after the premiere was quite subdued. There was no euphoria, no enthusiasm, only slight helplessness.' But Marlena Suder, who, having failed to perform in *Spring Awakening*, went to the theatre to see it, remembers being slightly envious but nonetheless impressed. Her opinion matters, in that when the production opened she was a teenager, so perhaps one of those for whom the show was meant. At the time, Stary's repertoire did not include any other productions about young people and their problems. After a run of just thirteen performances, it is difficult to say whether or not the production actually found favour with audiences. However, I do think it makes sense to ask whether *Spring Awakening* should be brought back to our attention and included in the queer archive.

In her book *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* [*Norms of Visibility: Identity in Times of Transformation*], where she examines representations of gay men in the 1990s, Magda Szcześniak argues:

For the normative majority in 1990s Poland, homosexuality [...] didn't exist: it was neither a significant topic for debate nor a social issue waiting to be resolved. [...] Paradoxically, in the 1990s, Polish audiences may have found representations of male homosexuality even more exotic than the images of capitalist affluence enjoyed by the American upper classes. [...] Images of male non-normativity never made it into the mainstream; there was no lively debate around them, they were not reproduced in adverts, they did not become examples to follow.²⁰

In the 1990s, gay magazines, and organizations campaigning for LGBTQ+ rights, did exist, but their scope was limited. Only very occasionally did the issue of sexual non-normativity make it into the mainstream press. For instance, Szcześniak mentions a series of articles written in 1998 and 1999 to mark the passing of a bill institutionalizing civil partnerships in France.²¹ It wasn't until 2013 that the same issue was debated in the Polish parliament, and on that lone occasion the draft bill was rejected on first reading.

If we regard *Spring Awakening* as made also (or predominantly?) with young people in mind, we should stress that teenage audiences growing up in the 1990s had limited opportunities to learn about gender or sexual non-normativity at school. Although homosexuality was removed from the World Health Organization's list of diseases

²⁰ Magda Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* [*Norms of Visibility: Identity in Times of Transformation*] (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Instytut Kultury Polskiej UW, 2016), pp. 167–68.

²¹ Ibid., p. 217.

and disorders in 1990, Polish ‘education on family life’ textbooks published after 1989 (and approved for use by the Ministry of National Education) would often describe any sign of non-heteronormativity as a deviation. This is the case in the two most popular textbooks: *Wędrując ku dorosłości* [*Approaching Adulthood*] and *Zanim wybierzesz* [*Before You Choose*].²² In their report on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, Lambda Warszawa, one of Poland’s best-known organizations campaigning for LGBTQ+ rights, describe their unsuccessful efforts to persuade the minister of education to change this.²³ Similarly, homosexuality is considered a disorder, and at times linked to paedophilia, in *Książka dla chłopców* [*The Book for Boys*], a popular 1990s self-help book for boys.²⁴ Thus, young people who identify as non-heteronormative have little hope of receiving support at school. As already stated, in 1999 they also had a slim chance of learning how common homosexuality is. Theatre in Poland, too, showed scarcely any interest in the issue,²⁵ so Paweł Miśkiewicz’s *Spring Awakening* was unusual in that respect, too. What made it unusual was not only its earnest, respectful portrayal of homosexual characters, but also that it was willing to depict non-normative teenagers at all. Thus potential queer audience members were given the opportunity to identify with the characters or to recognize their own childhood as queer.

8.

As Mateusz Przyłęcki has explained, the scene of the encounter between Ernest and Hans Rilow came about as a result of a ‘frantic improvisation’ he and Jakub Snochowski came up with after a long period of casting around. He goes on to add:

Homosexuality wasn’t pre-assigned as a major theme of the production, one that we or Paweł were especially keen to highlight. We didn’t talk in these terms at all. Sexual initiation did come up, but homosexuality wasn’t highlighted. My feeling was that what was happening between the characters wasn’t described as homosexuality, but as a kind of intimacy that resulted from friendship and closeness.

Miśkiewicz struggles to recall the scene of the encounter between Ernest and Hans Rilow. Like Przyłęcki, he does not describe it as homosexual, and argues that what happens between the characters is due to loneliness and longing for intimacy. None of those who worked on *Spring Awakening* think matters related to sex had anything to do with the production’s being taken off so quickly. But the review excerpts I have quoted above show that the critics wasted no time trying to invalidate the subject of the production (by pointing out that it was

22 Kościańska.

23 Stowarzyszenie Lambda Warszawa, *Raport o dyskryminacji ze względu na orientację seksualną w Polsce* [*Report on Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation in Poland*] (Warsaw 2001), http://lambdawarszawa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Raport_dyskryminacja_2000_p.pdf [accessed 10 April 2019].

24 Kościańska, p. 249.

25 For more on representations of homosexuality in theatre in Poland and Polish theatre circles, see my article ‘Homolobby i społeczne nastroje’ [‘The Gay Lobby and Social Moods’], *Didaskalia* 149 (2011).

dated and long irrelevant), which could well demonstrate some moral nerve was indeed touched. However, it is likely that, although arguments related to sex did inform the prejudices against the show, they were not among the critics' official complaints because the emotional response to *Spring Awakening* focused on denouncing the alleged ineptitude of the director and emerging actors.

Miśkiewicz indeed breached theatrical hierarchies, in that he allowed 'innocent' artists onto the stage, not yet carrying the full burden of their acting skills, but therefore able to unleash the spontaneous potential of queer improvisations. Matylda Paszczenko has stressed that the opportunity to 'try something new each time' was among the most interesting aspects of working on *Spring Awakening*.

But why did all these progressive ideas have to be carried out within an ostensibly conservative aesthetic framework? Where did the strong need for a dramatic structure come from? In my view, thanks to its plain style and that it held on tightly to the play's historical costume, the production was able to take the audience back to a time when sex education was not so much pornographic or unfit for purpose, but rather when there was no sex education at all. Thus a reality was created onstage in which the absence of education was tantamount to an absence of normativization. Parents' and teachers' unwillingness to talk to young people opens up a space for developing the queer identities inscribed in the figure of the child. Taking a step back in time and depriving the characters of a language in which they could voice their feelings also entails creating a space that is out of reach of present-day school education – a space where young people are at once innocent (what they know hasn't been vulgarized) and free from heteronormative models. Thus their innocence takes on a radically queer nature.

Translated by Joanna Błachnio

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ABSTRACT

Katarzyna Waligóra

Growing Sideways and Subverting Theatrical Hierarchies:

Paweł Miśkiewicz's *Spring Awakening*

This present article offers an analysis of the archive of the production of Frank Wedekind's play *Spring Awakening* directed by Paweł Miśkiewicz, which opened at the National Stary Theatre in Kraków in 1999. The production closed after a run of thirteen performances. Based on documents and the accounts of those who worked on the production, the author investigates why the life of the 1999 staging of *Spring Awakening* was so brief. Reconstructing the production itself, and the making of it, is focused on two principal themes: casting emerging actors (some of them drama school students) in the lead roles, which constituted a serious breach of the theatre's received customs, and setting queer sexual desire in motion within the production. The author considers the relation between the queer potential of *Spring Awakening* and the traditional theatre aesthetics in keeping with which it was made.

Keywords: Institutional Critic, Aesthetics and Politics, Censorship, Misogyny, Queer, Theatre in Poland.