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A New Landscape with a Rainbow:
Queerness and Hope

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Our work on this issue coincided with an extremely dynamic period socially and politically, which, from week to week, altered the context of our subject of interest. With queer aesthetics becoming increasingly evident in the field of Polish theatre and performing arts, we decided to take a closer look at its qualities and to examine at least a portion of those artistic practices which, while connected with desire and physicality, go beyond the issue of sexual identification and explore the vast expanse of all that does not fit into the norms of patriarchal late-capitalist society. We were interested in works that drive queer processes leading to what José Esteban Muñoz calls the great refusal of the ‘performance principle’¹, not only in the subject matter they address – but that too, of course – but mainly in the sphere of aesthetics, stage language, and proposed models of communication.

Thus, what we were interested in was a subtle shift which, we believe, allowed artists and creators to distance themselves from a certain trend that had dominated Polish theatre over the last two decades, a trend prioritizing stories built around the experiences of a ‘wounded identity’ dwelling in non-normative sexuality. Instead of exposing the structures of oppression and talking about experiences, humiliations and inadequacies, we wished to explore queer potential. What caught our attention were projects that nonchalantly and pertly celebrate queerness and embrace contemplation on the diversity of ways to establish relations with the world, with others and with oneself, but at the same time projects residing in the realm of the reparative practices described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who sees in them a parallel with Foucault’s ideas on self-care and with any gentle attempt to afford oneself some pleasure and tenderness, which, in turn, engenders an empathetic perspective towards others.² We were also captivated by queer ownership of failure, which challenges neoliberal models of success.

These tendencies make themselves most evident in the field of choreography and dance, as demonstrated by Anka Herbut in her article ‘A Few Queer Choreographies and a Horizon Imbued with Potentiality’, which proposes that this type of work with the body and movement be

1 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

treated as a kind of queer activism and a territory for creating social change. The queer shift mentioned above has also trickled into repertory theatre, immediately provoking questions on how 'other' strategies can exist in institutional mainstream theatre without clashing with its work regimen, communication models and stature in public discourse. From this angle, the much-talked-about show of Jolanta Janiczak and Wiktor Rubin titled *O mężnym Pietrku i sierotce Marysi. Bajka dla dorosłych* [*Valiant Pietrek and Mary, the Little Orphan: A Fairy Tale for Adults*] – lauded as 'the first Polish lesbian play in institutional theatre' – is analysed by Zuzanna Berendt, who casts doubt on the effectiveness of artists' political strategies in the field of theatre as well as in actual politics. By putting on a lesbian herstory on a high-profile public stage, its creators contribute to a specific kind of normalization by accommodating the dominant models and hierarchies. The author argues that the lesbian state utopia in the play's finale reflects existing institutions and structures of exclusion, changing only their direction, and allows the artists to avoid real confrontation with the situation faced by non-heteronormative individuals in Poland – a situation that is drastically deteriorating in front of our eyes. Also taking a look at the work of Rubin and Janiczak, this time from the point of view of a collaborator, is Grzegorz Stepniak, a co-writer of *Dead Girls Wanted*. He places their joint explorations within the general context of the subversive power of failure, which alongside its extremely difficult affectations carries in itself the potential to free us from the sometimes literally deadly tyranny of success. Citing Judith (Jack) Halberstam, the author expands on what it is to be queer, linking queerness with alternative life practices embodying different temporalities and logics.

A conversation with Marta Malikowska, a performer, actor and co-creator of the play *Malina*, concerns mainly female experience, though feminism is understood here as a broad front in defiance of patriarchal violence in the name of all those who have been victim to it. Meanwhile, the dynamics of collective theatre work described by Malikowska may be tied in to queer strategies that tolerate alienating life models and separate us from the pleasures and joys stemming from – as Muñoz states – relationships with others as well as work that rejects the excessive imposition of the principle of productivity.

In this issue, we also publish two articles examining the presence of queer undertones in Polish theatre of the past – an extremely important task seeing as Polish theatre studies still have a long way to go in this department. Both articles concern a period prior to what may be called the first queer wave, which occurred at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when just the visibility of non-heteronormative individuals was still a challenge to the general public. Katarzyna Waligóra takes a look at the subtle processes of discovery in the life of a non-normative child or queer youth as told by Paweł Miśkiewicz in his adaptation of Wedekind's *Przebudzenie wiosny* [*Spring Awakening*]. In doing so, she also examines how the play succumbed to institutional normative pressure and how its subversive and critical potential was neutralized by critics. Grzegorz Niziołek, meanwhile, analyses the reception of two plays by Konrad Swinarski, showing how the directorial approach to portraying homosexual characters changed and how the public discourse responded.

Finally, in a section dedicated to Krystian Lupa, we include two articles examining the homosexual aspects of his output. The first, by Waldemar Wasztyl, offers insight into the director's early life experiences, which seem to conform to what may be described as Foucaultian aesthetics of existence: the cultivation of a queer artistic/existential utopia and the art of 'thinking about oneself', understood both as a readiness to experience pleasure and to care for the self, and as an act of constant thought on who one is. Such concerns can also be found in the second article, in which Stanisław Godlewski studies the queer potential dwelling in Lupa's art and searches for a distinct idiom thereof, finding it precisely in the director's practice of thinking about himself and rendering himself the ostentatiously present subject of all of his statements. In this, Godlewski sees an example of the modernistic universalization of a strong male individual's perspective, and it is here that the author locates the gap between Lupa's work and queer strategies in art, even though, as Godlewski points out, in Lupa's work, eroticism and creation meld into a single act stemming 'from an urge, an erotic longing.'

Two subsequent articles concerning Lupa fill in the gaps with various aspects of politicism. Monika Kwaśniewska thoroughly analyses the creative process behind *Factory 2*, asking questions from the perspective of institutional criticism, mainly on the subjectivity of the actors in the face of the demiurge director's all-powerful position. The director himself engages in a short exchange with the author, and his two statements make up an interesting collision of various vantage points on the issues of power, hierarchy and subjectivity in theatre work processes. Piotr Gruszczyński focusses on the first-hand political involvement of Lupa, who during a staging of his adaptation of Kafka's *Proces* [*The Trial*] chastised the audience's passivity toward the authorities' violence and their dismantling of democracy, thereby breaking the covenant that enables progressive artists and audiences to celebrate their defiance and engagement without actually having to confront their own attitudes and without risk. *The Trial* is a special case. Woven into the play is the story of the authorities' ruination of one of the most important theatres in Poland, the Polski Theatre in Wrocław, which the author reconstructs. It was at the Polski Theatre that Lupa began working on *The Trial*, only to finish it in Warsaw as a coproduction between several of the capital's stages. In the play he cast actors who had been dismissed from or pressured to leave the Wrocław theatre where they had worked for years and formed one of the country's finest outfits. This literal picture of the destruction of a common asset, carried out in spite of the unprecedented protest and opposition from the theatre's community, including its audience, who had formed a society, remains a legible metonymy of the process taking place in Poland. It is important to see this in its entire complexity in order to retain a level of critical optimism towards the compounding crises impacting the political atmosphere, the public sphere, communication, a sense of community, interpersonal relations, and the ecosystem. Only this optimism can help us apprehend the potential of engagement and common effort to overcome these crises and appreciate the kind of hope described by Václav Havel when he writes:

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.³

These words by Havel, cited by Rebecca Solnit, whose *Hope in Dark Times* appeared in Polish translation this spring, could easily be the motto of this issue of *PTJ* dedicated to the latest incarnation of queerness in Polish theatre. Our work progressed in the midst of an extremely dynamic political and social process induced by a campaign launched against the LGBTQ community by the ruling right-wing party in alliance with the hierarchy of the Polish Roman Catholic Church. It is a cultural war intentionally stoked up to identify the 'abject Other' and stigmatize him as an enemy of the 'true community'. The greatest emancipatory milestones of the last two decades, like the newfound public visibility of non-heteronormative individuals and perhaps the emergence of a collective political entity, have been appropriated, flipped, and used as a weapon against the LGBTQ community. The mere presence of life models different from the traditional ones in culture is treated as a fundamental threat to conservative values. The effects, in the form of a drastic increase in all forms of aggression toward non-heteronormative people and a deterioration of the public sphere, especially when it comes to language – one of our most vital common goods – grow every day. These circumstances thrust the artistic practices covered in this issue into the fray of intense political tensions. The subtlety of queer strategies and the gentleness of reparative practices are obscured by the tumultuousness of the political process, which makes each queer statement sound like a manifesto. Our response to this must be solidarity and an unwavering practice of pleasure and joy. In the face of politics that strive to manage our fear, this is the most effective resistance strategy. The hope that Havel writes about is in front of us, on a horizon brimming with queer potential.

Translated by Szymon Włoch

Works cited

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³ Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala* (New York: Vintage, 1990), pp. 181–82.

ABSTRACT

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A New Landscape with a Rainbow: Queerness and Hope

The text presents the profile of the PTJ issue dedicated to the new quality of queer aesthetics, increasingly evident in the space of Polish theatre and performing arts. This new trend, unlike the story based on the experience of “wounded identity”, which has been dominating in Polish theatre over the last two decades, turns to affirmative and reparative practices of discovering queer potentiality. The issue also includes texts that go back to the still unexplored queer history of Polish theatre and a block of texts devoted to Krystian Lupa, among which two relate to homosexual threads in the director’s biography and work.

The introduction embeds the issues of queer practices raised by the authors in the context of the intense socio-political processes that are taking place in today’s Poland, triggered by the campaign of the ruling right-wing party acting in alliance with the hierarchies of the Polish Catholic Church against LGBTQ.