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Change – Now!
Calling for an Unavoidable

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In this issue of *Polish Theatre Journal*, we publish selected papers from the conference Change – Now! What Have We Been Silent About at Drama Schools, organized by the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw in October 2019. The conference took place exactly two years after Alyssa Milano went public with her experiences of working with Harvey Weinstein, using the hashtag #MeToo. Her testimony, which appeared in the public space at the same time as a well-documented investigative article in the *New York Times*, launched a huge social movement that shook the English-speaking media and film world in particular, but also had a wider impact on Western culture as a whole. In planning the conference, we had this anniversary in mind, and the accompanying frustrating sense that #MeToo had yet to exert any concrete influence on the situation in Poland. But we also had a very pragmatic objective. At the beginning of the 2019/20 academic year, new institutional protocols were put into place at the National Academy of Dramatic Art to prevent discrimination and violence in the academy community: a Code of Ethics was adopted, and for the first time at a Polish drama school the function of Student Rights Advocate was created. We wanted to talk about these changes, a further impetus for which was the crisis and media scandal regarding violence towards female and male students which the academy had faced the previous year¹.

This crisis not only exposed the specific issue of abuse of power, but in particular shed light on the systemic determinants of violence in drama schools, which, although known about for a long time, generally remain invisible and therefore untouchable – protected like a dirty little secret. This time, however – and we can probably discern here the influence of the changed mentality and social climate brought about by #MeToo – the academy's authorities decided that the reaction should be changes at the systemic level, thereby admitting that the wide-ranging problem of violence towards students is the school's problem, and it is up to the school to ensure genuine and concrete work towards subjective relations, respect, and safety in the education process. We were therefore keen to work together as a group of Polish and European

¹ Piotr Jagielski, “Wykładowca nadużywa władzy” – absolwenci piszą do rektora Akademii Teatralnej [“Lecturer abuses power”: Graduates write to the rector of the Theatre Academy], *Onet Kultura*, 11 July 2018 <https://kultura.onet.pl/wiadomosci/wykladowca-naduzywa-wladzy-absolwenci-pisza-do-rektora-akademii-teatralnej/q4y64vv> [accessed 20 December 2019].

institutions to examine the situation at drama schools and to discuss possible solutions, ask about the experiences of others, share what worked in practice, and plan further steps.

We were not disappointed. The conference taught us about a range of concrete methods and procedures, including intimacy coordinators, an increasingly popular role in the English-speaking world, who identify the risks associated with work encroaching on intimacy, negotiate solutions with director and actors, and ensure the safety of all those taking part in the process. Then there were the ‘safe space’ working rules adopted recently at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and the initiatives to prevent ethnic and social discrimination and marginalization implemented in the last few years at the Conservatoire National Supérieur d’Art Dramatique in Paris, including the idea of colour-blind casting. The meeting in Warsaw showed how important for the authorities and communities of European drama schools anti-violence and anti-discrimination actions are, and how the alliance of people committed to change is steadily growing.

In Poland, we are at the beginning of this process. Real implementation of similar situations will only be possible if there are profound and widespread changes to people’s thinking, not only among teachers at drama schools, but in the entire theatre community. For the time being, the insight into the reality of Polish schools that the conference provided demonstrates the scale of the problem. In a paper based on a survey completed online by drama school students and graduates, Alina Czyżewska cited shocking examples of violence and humiliation experienced by students, showing that Polish drama schools are guilty of infringements to human rights, the Constitution, and the law. ‘These are not methods,’ she concluded. ‘These are provisions of the Penal Code.’

Iwona Kempa, dean of the Faculty of Drama Directing at AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Kraków, described the entire system of Polish public theatres and drama schools, in which the same artists work, as a violence-filled system of connecting vessels. According to Kempa, Polish public theatres, based on permanent companies of actors and boasting an ethos of teamwork, also remain a space of brutal, ‘almost feudal’ relationships of subordination and dependency. In the theatre hierarchy, actors occupy the lowest places. They are dependent on managerial decisions on who to cast in new productions, subjected to ‘economic training’, and subordinated to the extremely strong position of the director, who is surrounded by an artist-genius cult, which translates into a high economic and symbolic position. ‘An actor, a subordinate of the managing director and director in the theatre, eventually gains power over his or her students at school,’ Kempa writes, pointing to the pathological mechanism of transmission of violence.

This system has a particularly strong vector associated with gender, for it is usually men who are in power, and sexuality is a brutal mechanism for executing this power. The experiences of female students of drama schools are related by Michał Telega’s drama *The Actresses, Or Sorry for Touching You*, written on the basis of interviews which the author carried out with women studying at AST in Kraków and read out at the conference. It was from this drama, which we are publishing in a block of texts on the Kraków school, that the process of

changes began at AST, with work commencing on introducing systemic solutions. This is an example of how theatre makes use of its own artistic tools to initiate and strengthen emancipatory processes, facing up to its own hierarchical structure with increased openness in its economic, gender, class, and ethnic dimensions. Pace is gathering in the discussion on changing the model of work and production, related to emancipation of actors, empowering the theatre company, and reviewing power relations. This is also happening in Poland, and it is up to us together to make sure that this process is not confined to a short-term fad, and above all that it goes beyond the level of debate, becoming everyday practice for theatres and drama schools.

‘The system is beginning to wobble,’ Iwona Kempa said at the Warsaw conference. ‘The time of cowards is coming to an end,’ director Jagoda Szelc declared in concluding the presentation of her own practice of subjective work on the film set. The conference was a deliberate step on this path. When we were planning it, though, we had no idea that it would also become the first in a series of important events to strike Poland this autumn, perhaps triggering a delayed, but concrete reaction to the #MeToo movement. The most serious scandal to hit Polish theatre to date concerning sexual harassment and abuse of power erupted on 6 November 2019. Sixteen women, actresses and staff of Bagatela Theatre in Kraków, accused director Henryk Jacek Schoen of years of abuse, and approached the city authorities for help in the matter. The women did not intend the affair to become public news, but hoped for help from the city government, under whose auspices the theatre is run, and for the director to be removed from his position. The authorities did not respect the victims’ request for discretion, as their names were revealed to the accused director immediately and he began intimidatory tactics. The women opted to go public with their stories, to an unprecedented reaction from the artistic community. Public letters of support were signed by thousands of people working in theatre and art, a succession of theatres also declared their solidarity, meetings and press conferences were held, and support campaigns were organized on social media. The affair became front-page news and was the first item on news programmes. Following public and media pressure, the director, who denied everything and sought to downplay the allegations, was finally separated from his victims and forced to take leave for the duration of the investigation. This was the first time in the history of Polish theatre that a sexual harassment case achieved such status, recognized as a fundamental social and systemic problem of theatre in Poland. This broke through the unfortunately still strong narrative in Poland used to discredit people experiencing violence, playing down the significance of the #MeToo narrative. We can expect that the women of Bagatela Theatre will not be the last example of such an affair. In Polish theatre this is more an everyday occurrence than an exception, something that was emphasized during the solidarity initiatives.

This was followed in late November 2019 by a petition by a group of Łódź Film School students to the school’s authorities, demanding that they cancel a planned meeting with Roman Polański as a result of the past – and continually recurring – accusations of sex crimes

by the renowned film director. Polański is an eminent alumnus of the Łódź Film School, a symbol of global success and artistic mastery. The school authorities decided that this status fully legitimized the artist's presence on its campus, regardless of all the controversies. Rector Mariusz Grzegorzek responded to the petition by saying, 'Human life is a complicated, pulsating phenomenon, which requires mindfulness and respect. We, as artists, should understand that particularly well. It is not up to us to issue judgments in cases so complex and ambiguous as the accusations against Roman Polański.'² In the end, Polański himself decided to cancel the meeting.

For the protesting students, however, more important was another point of view, which focuses not on the complicated experience of a great artist – according to the words of the rector, beyond the moral judgment of mere mortals – but on the feelings of victims of violence. And this refers not only to the alleged victims of a 'maestro', but to all the members of the school community who have suffered sexual violence, and so often from those protected by the special status of power and prestige.

It is not for us to judge whether these accusations are true or not. At the same time, we believe that the gravity and number of these accusations mean that a meeting with Polański on the school's premises would be disrespectful to all those who have experienced violent sexual behaviour. Such people are also among us, part of the community of our school.³

This is a telling change in perspective and change in language, which allows us to believe that major transformations are taking place in our society. Has the time come for a Polish 'Day of Action' – a campaign in response to the one initiated by Vicky Featherstone, artistic director at the Royal Court Theatre in London? On 17 October 2017, Featherstone published an appeal on the theatre's website:

Following last week's revelations concerning Harvey Weinstein it is time to confront the abuses of power that have been occurring in our own industry for years. [...]

The Royal Court exists to tell the stories that are otherwise unheard. We have therefore created an online forum where you can safely, and (if you choose), anonymously tell us your stories. Whether you consider it a big or small thing, if someone in a position of power over you has made you feel sexually compromised, or at all uncomfortable, then be brave, tell us what happened. We will take care of your story.⁴

² Mariusz Grzegorzek, 'Oświadczenie Rektora ws. wizyty Romana Polańskiego' ['Rector's statement on the visit by Roman Polański'], Łódź Film School, 27 November 2019 <https://www.filmschool.lodz.pl/news/1585,oswiadczenie-rektora-ws-wizyty-romana-polanskiego.html> [accessed 20 December 2019].

³ 'Apel o odwołanie organizowanego w Szkole spotkania z Romanem Polańskim' ['Appeal to cancel the meeting at the school with Roman Polański'], *petycjeonline.com*, 26 November 2019 https://www.petycjeonline.com/apel_o_odwoanie_organizowanego_w_szkole_spotkania_z_romanem_polaskim [accessed 20 December 2019].

⁴ Royal Court Theatre, 'Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone Programs a Day of Action in Response to the Weinstein Revelations', 17 October 2017 <https://royalcourttheatre.com/artistic-director-vicky-featherstone-programs-day-action-response-weinstein-revelations/> [accessed 20 December 2019].

This campaign, which Hilary Jones from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland discussed at length at the conference, revealed 150 testimonies of sexual assaults, leading to the spectacular downfall of two of the most important figures in the British theatre world, Max Stafford-Clark and Kevin Spacey, as well as to profound changes in the way theatres operate.⁵ In Poland, the ‘Day of Action’ is still to come. Before we can declare it, we must feel the strength and solidarity that will give us the courage to act. We need alliances and determination. We need teams of people open to long-term commitment. We already know this is possible. Unavoidable, in fact.

Translated by Ben Koschalka

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⁵ See the procedures implemented at the Royal Court Theatre itself: ‘Code of Behaviour: Preventing Sexual Harassment and Abuses of Power’ <https://royalcourttheatre.com/code-of-behaviour/> [accessed 20 December 2019].

ABSTRACT

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Change – Now! Calling for an Unavoidable

The text presents an outline of this issue of *PTJ*, which focuses on issues of theatre training in Poland and Europe in the context of the debate on changes in the model of work and production associated with emancipation of actors, empowerment of the theatre company, and revision of power relations. Theatre is grappling with its own hierarchical structure, taking into account its economic, gender, class, and ethnic dimension. Theatre's own version of the #MeToo movement has provided a particular context for this process, asking questions about sexual violence, including those of the model of the maestro – the genius artist whose unlimited freedom has been treated as the highest value of the creative process. The widely discussed examples of violent behaviour from the last weeks of 2019 have been instrumental in highlighting the pressing need for wide-ranging changes and universal education in prevention of sexual harassment, bullying, aggression, and exclusion.