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‘There Is No Democracy in Theatre’—Seriously?

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‘There Is No Democracy in Theatre’—Seriously?¹

We so often hear the cliché ‘There is no democracy in theatre.’ It opens the door to abuse, violence, and humiliation, to exploiting power, assaulting dignity. And not only against actors: another group widely mistreated in Polish theatres is technicians. This system persists because such is our society and such are our social norms legitimizing these actions. We don’t respect each other, we don’t react, because we don’t know how. We have no other patterns of behaviour available. We continue to be afraid. We fear losing our jobs, being expelled from the academy, worse grades, losing our social network, or being labelled a ‘difficult actor’. At the same time, our norms proscribe talking about bad things happening, revealing that someone, especially in a position of authority or power, does bad things, such as committing indecent behaviour. Our colleagues, fellow students, who believe that this is what acting is like, also reinforce this impediment to discussing abuse.

It is often claimed that these are the methods in theatre school which will supposedly help you, male and female students, find yourself in the profession, because the theatre world is not going to be easy for you. But we are the ones creating this world. You, male and female professors, contribute to creating this world. So you create a world of abuse and disrespect, and you train your students how to survive in it? That’s absurd. It’s like beating children because they may get kicked in the ass in their future life. ‘Let’s beat them for their own good, so they get used to it!’ To make them tougher? These abusive methods are also justified by the need to ‘open up’ the actor. So I would like to ask the professors: Have you verified the effectiveness of these methods? How many people have you hurt? How many have you traumatized? In how many people did you kill their love for theatre?

Boundaries. It is very easy to cross them and allow them to be crossed when we don’t see them or know them. It is not my intention to stigmatize theatre schools only. Such is the system in general; we experience it in schools, in preschools, in the street. Our rights are often violated, and our dignity is often destroyed from preschool on up. But I keep reminding myself that we are the ones who create the system, and we are jointly responsible at any given moment for changing it.

¹ The text is a revised version of an article published for the first time in Polish on Alina Czyżewska’s blog 24 October 2019: <http://nicdoukrycia.mystrikingly.com/blog/o-czym-milczeliscie-w-szkolach-teatralnych> [accessed 20 December 2019].

In this system, we are not prepared to react to crossing our boundaries. We don't have an appropriate standard of reaction. We are speechless. When we witness violence, we are often paralysed with fear. We know it's inappropriate, but we don't know how to react. Because we were never told or trained how to behave appropriately and decently when someone is crossing our boundaries. So perhaps I should remind you of these boundaries. Because they exist. They are not subjective. They are defined by the law. I will get off to a good start.

After the painful experiences of the Second World War, when 'disregard and contempt for human rights [...] resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind',² countries associated with Western civilization agreed on the necessity to establish certain minimum common standards which they promised to follow in order to build a better world founded on cooperation and respect and not violence. These were human rights. The Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, then the European Convention on Human Rights, which is based on the belief that every human being has inalienable human dignity and states have a duty to protect it and respect human rights derived from it, regardless of age or gender, who they hold hands with, who they go to bed with, what god they believe or don't believe in, and – to return to the area of teaching acting – regardless of whether they are shy or open, skilled or not, talented or not.

This is a horizon to be seen and respected everywhere, also in theatre schools. In this country, we have included these values and references to human dignity in our Constitution. We stated in the preamble (by the way, read it, it's a very good piece of writing): 'We call upon all those who will apply this Constitution for the good of the Third Republic to do so paying respect to the inherent dignity of the person, his or her right to freedom, [and] the obligation of solidarity with others'. Professors, rectors, authorities, teachers: they are all, as are we, as am I, obliged to observe this Constitution, to respect the inherent dignity of all people.

By means of an online survey posted on my blog (the questions may be found at www.nicdoukrycia.mystrikingly.com), I asked students and graduates of Polish theatre schools about their experience relating to violence, abuse, and infringing on their dignity. Thirty-nine people filled out the survey: twenty-six men (two stated that they had no such experience) and thirteen women. I shall now give voice to them.

Verbal abuse

Personal insults directed at individual students:

'slut', 'dick', 'idiot', 'you're a waste of time'

'You can't think, you are not cut out to be a director, you are not worth the money this school is wasting on you.'

'For a woman, you're not that stupid.'

Mobbing, aggression, humiliation, and ridicule as teaching methods:

² Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948.

'Are you fucking retarded? You are fucked up. I will kick your ass out of here.'

The intention to 'activate' the student was usually right, but the form was not appropriate at all and went way beyond the limits of respect.

People in my class (including me) heard from their teacher that they were not even at the zero level, and their work was compared to shit.

For the whole semester, I haven't heard any constructive criticism which would help me correct my shortcomings so eagerly pointed out by my professor.

Art. 30 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland: 'The inherent and inalienable dignity of the person shall constitute a source of freedoms and rights of persons and citizens. It shall be inviolable. The respect and protection thereof shall be the obligation of public authorities.'

Physical violence

I have been regularly kicked, humiliated, cursed, and once I was even spat at.

Her teaching method came down to mental abuse, humiliating students ('You are worthless', 'God didn't give you talent, it's not your fault', 'You are not cut out for this profession'), physical violence; she would kick a student or shake him by his clothes to 'wake him up'.

The professor ran towards me and started hitting my arm. She would not hold back. She was beating the hell out of me. What did I do? I turned it into a joke. At some point, I adopted a technique of responding with some rude joke, but that was just an act because inside I felt terrorized.

Of course, nobody reacted to these acts of physical and verbal abuse. Everyone was paralysed. This was the worst humiliation during class.

These are not methods. These are provisions of the Penal Code (art. 217 §1): 'Whoever strikes a human being or in another manner breaches his personal inviolability shall be subject to a fine, the penalty of restriction of liberty, or the penalty of deprivation of liberty for up to one year.'

Gender

He crossed the boundaries of good taste many times. I'm sure that this person believes his behaviour was OK and within the so-called norm. What kind of situations? Like when he would turn to look at me, gaze at me suggestively with a creepy smile, saying things like 'Your legs are fucking fine!', 'You are so beautiful', 'Your lips are alluring.' All these situations happened in a public place, in school, in the corridor, the hall, the cafeteria. If I saw him coming towards me, I would change direction, turn back, use a different stairwell. I'm certain this person believes he didn't cross any line. For me, however, the line was crossed, because a school employee should not refer to a student

as if she were some girl picked up in a bar. I felt awful in these situations, like a naked body on a market, and I think the behaviour of this person was creepy.

A very talented guy, but he treats female students as if they were a piece of meat. He doesn't respect boundaries, he touches them, paws them with his gaze, suggestively comments on the way they are dressed, he explicitly hits on them. If someone points that out or clearly establishes boundaries, he responds with psychological abuse. He gets offended, gives the silent treatment, or makes scenes. Theoretically, you can ignore it, but not in a situation when you have to work with him intensely and see him every day. Of course, I was not the only victim.

In hindsight, I can see that this was emotional abuse of young girls while favouring and hitting on 'pretty boys'. Of course, she got away with it, because she was a woman and an 'old actress.'

Individual singing lessons during office hours. He commented on my looks (breasts, buttocks), which was very uncomfortable and embarrassing for me.

Monologues. He reminded us for the whole semester that 'there should be some transgression in the body'. Eventually, he explicitly told me that I should masturbate during the scene. 'The Professor' thought he should be the object of this monologue. In the end, he gave up, he was satisfied with me expressing any kind of desire. This was disgusting, and I looked for help among other students, asking them to come to me to the class, but they advised me not to treat him seriously because it was just funny and he was just a 'funny old man.'

Comments about sex, which are so funny to everyone, and by which I feel ridiculed as a woman every day. Comments suggesting I should be more feminine, comments affecting my well-being. Not to mention a lack of reference women's cultural heritage; for all these years of learning, we've never used any text written by a woman in practical class. But what did I expect?

There is a general consent to this kind of atmosphere in our milieu, especially in terms of women. As a result, people become actors or artists who were not taught to respect other people and allow bullying in everyday life, who don't know how to say stop.

Sexist comments, a professor, a famous and acclaimed actor, kisses a student on the cheek saying, 'Fuck, I couldn't help myself.'

The professor asked me to turn my 'ass' towards him and walk seductively while he commented on my movements. In his numerous anecdotes, he claimed that we would be authentic and flexible on stage only after we lost our virginity.

I once had a situation during puppet classes when the professor approached me from behind, very close to me, and started showing me how to animate puppets. I sensed something sexual in it, but

I didn't react because I was afraid I would be kicked out. I was embarrassed to talk about it.

A professor now teaches here who likes to talk to girls, and sometimes his hand wanders to their laps. I saw such a situation once, and it was awkward.

The professor doesn't even bother to hide his misogyny. He constantly makes sexist comments, but one that's burned in my memory was calling my friend, as part of a very funny joke (according to him), a 'slut.'

Humiliation and mental abuse

'Can I poison you? I don't feel like working with you. We'll all go home and be happy.'

During my first year, the professor ordered me to take off my trousers, probably because she wanted to see if I could overcome this block and open up. I felt embarrassed and began to do it, but I remember I didn't take them off entirely, I was just standing there in a stupor, and my friends were staring at me in silence.

He had no restraints in using mental violence. Some classes were wonderful and funny, but during other classes, he would hurl insults, had emotional outbursts without any reason (it is worth noting that he was using drugs, even though perhaps it was not common knowledge...). He often just didn't show up to class or was late thirty, forty, or sixty minutes. He used to comment on our intellectual abilities. During exams, he would explain to the examination committee that the performance was bad because students had not been attending rehearsals. He didn't show up at all to one exam, but he still graded it.

Her method included 'bullying' every student because in her opinion it was the only way to learn this profession.

The professor would throw chairs and leave the classroom. He used to throw things at students, mentally abuse them and play emotional games ('I really appreciate that you are no competition', 'Who makes you stay in this school?').

'You have no talent', 'Get the fuck out of here, you'll never be an actor': these were his words every day. Including many 'funny' remarks, such as 'The difference between you and a piece of shit is a piece.'

Art. 40 of the Polish Constitution: 'No one may be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. The application of corporal punishment shall be prohibited.' Art. 207 §1 of the Polish Penal Code: 'Whoever mentally or physically mistreats a person close to him, or another person in a permanent or temporary state of dependence on the perpetrator, a minor, or a person who is vulnerable because of his mental or physical condition, shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for a term of between three months and five years.'

Respect

Another issue worth mentioning is tolerance among students of acting towards people of different sexual orientation. I was deeply shocked when I was confronted with comments or allusions to my sexual orientation among students. I was convinced that artists would be particularly open and tolerant in this respect, but I was wrong.

The professor would repeatedly intimidate or insult them ('I don't like people like you'), she couldn't provide an explanation, she spoke contemptuously of minorities (ethnic, racial, sexual, etc), she invaded personal space (touching students without their consent) and tried to interfere in evaluation questionnaires.

Unfortunately, sexist, racist, and homophobic comments are common. As I said before, not all of them. I've met many great professors and wonderful, respectful people. I don't think that jokes about women's breasts are funny. I don't laugh at comments directed towards my colleagues: 'Do you behave this way because you don't like women?' I feel helpless.

Fuksówka.³ A separate and huge issue for discussion.

Art. 31 of the Constitution: 'Everyone shall respect the freedoms and rights of others.'

Did you react? What did you do about that?

I did nothing because the relationship between a professor and a student is so shocking and consuming that you don't realize certain things.

There is wide assent to violence. Nobody reacts.

The problem lies in insecurity, because you can be expelled even during your third year. So it is difficult to resist, especially if everyone (the authorities) has known about it for years.

Everyone knew about it. Some were angry, others ignored it and laughed.... But students have different sensibilities. There were people who were diagnosed with depression caused by what happened in school.'

'We were helpless in the face of what was happening to us.

I felt guilty. I knew I shouldn't have been treated this way, but I thought that perhaps the work I was doing was that bad. Today I know that even if it was, it was guided by my teachers and represents not only me but also them.

Other professors responded with such comments as 'Well, everyone has to go through this', 'Nothing can be done about it', 'You are over-reacting, he is just a demanding teacher.'

³ A traditional hazing/initiation ritual of first-year students at artistic schools.

Filling out evaluation questionnaires, private conversations with trusted teachers, official meetings with the student counsellor and the dean. Nothing worked.

Questionnaires. Nothing changed. When a student would talk to another teacher about this problem, the situation was treated as a joke or as the student's unrealistic invention.

I was supporting the case of the *Weak Year*.⁴ We were facing regular emotional manipulation, deceit, lies, bringing us students down to the lowest level in some kind of pseudo-hierarchy. I am proud that we kept fighting, but it was also exhausting.

No, it was considered a part of the school's special nature and Polish custom.

Talking to the dean was to no avail. The situation described above was dismissed with 'This is her method, she is an actress at XYZ theatre, she knows people, so it's better not to mess with her, you have to suck it up....'

The teacher was fired. After so many years.

We had this conversation with the dean, who openly encouraged us to fill out teacher evaluation questionnaires honestly. After this conversation, some students definitely paid more attention to the questionnaires and filled them out openly. Perhaps this yielded the desired result, because I was one of the last students to have the doubtful pleasure of being trained by Prof. X.

Every year students write a complaint against Prof. Y, they fill out negative evaluation questionnaires. This year, there was a mediation, which resulted solely in changing the placements of groups taught by this professor.

Sometimes the rector or the dean were the abusers, so it was difficult to find support anywhere.

Questionnaires filled out after each semester bring no effect. These teachers continue to teach us, and worse, after reading our opinions, they will keep teaching and probably take revenge on us.

The problem is, I'm afraid. It's my fault. I am afraid to fight the big names, people who are friends with the school authorities. I'm afraid I won't have any job in the future. It's my fault and I regret this. Once, my friends who were bullied reacted, I supported them, but I wish I had done more. I could have done more. This summer, I promised myself that I wouldn't stay silent anymore.

4 The diploma of Department of Puppetry AST Wrocław directed by Martyna Majewska. See: Alina Czyżewska, 'Nie wierzę Dorocie Segdzie' ['I don't believe Dorota Segda'], *Nic do ukrycia*, 30 April 2019, <http://nicdoukrycia.mystrikingly.com/blog/nie-wierze-dorocie-segdzie> [accessed 20 December 2019].

Reflection

It was very easy for them to forget that we are on the same team. At school, I felt many times that I had to fight with professors (there are of course exceptions who helped me survive) or fight for their instructions.

I think that there should be meetings with a psychologist to make sure that everything is OK. Because these studies and this profession interfere with mental states.

I think this school should teach tolerance. Respect. This should not be done by professors who have been working here for 150 years, but qualified people.

It's the aftermath of the old mentality, according to which students must be criticized, bullied, and intimidated, so they will work and be tough. This approach comes from a lack of education among teachers and their confinement to a hermetic environment. We can't trust our professors; they manipulate our feelings, and we no longer know which comment is an honest one to follow.

I don't understand this lack of respect for students. Telling someone that they can't make mistakes is inappropriate – we're at school! School is not about surviving, but learning as much as possible. I witnessed a situation in the cafeteria where a teacher gave a dirty plate to a student eating nearby and told him to return it. What was that about? This is not so much about classes, but about an attitude.

I believe theatre can be created in a less oppressive way, by respecting each other as people, supporting each other, and striving for a common goal. A good teacher guides students, reveals their strengths, and points out weaknesses. We feel completely abandoned and lost in the teaching process.

I wish that the argument 'It has always been that way and nobody complained' would vanish. Just because something has always existed doesn't mean it's alright.

There are, of course, many great teachers at this school, such as A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, who make learning here meaningful, stimulate development, bring joy, and simply create good memories.

I graduated and buried all this inside. I'd forgotten about it, although as I write about it now I am shaking with emotions, which means something was wrong. It was thirteen years ago.

Maybe what I'm writing will not be very helpful to you, but I feel this is helping me.

I am glad that I can write about it anonymously, because it has a significant impact on my current life, including my professional life.

These are just a few voices. Many people contacted me privately, to write about it, to tell their story, but they didn't want to complete the survey.

I am not speaking up to incite a witch hunt. I wanted to reveal this common backstage knowledge to the public. I have the names, but I won't reveal them. I hope that school authorities will do some soul-searching, take a look at the bravely accumulated dirt swept under the carpet and make changes. That is what I want: change. It is possible, as the events at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw demonstrated. I believe that there is space and potential for this at other schools as well. Here is a private message from a friend, who is a teacher:

Is there any chance you will publish the conclusions of this study?
As a teacher, but also an actor, an emotional human being, maybe, unknowingly, I cross the boundary, I make mistakes. I try to avoid it, but ... I may have missed something. Your research could serve as a source for reflection, a compass showing how to behave properly. I would be grateful, but I will understand if it is not published.

This teacher was mentioned in the survey as giving strength, meaning, and inspiration.

What can be done?

First of all, let's start talking openly. This conversation, which should be a multistage process, could use a careful moderator, perhaps external. Second, let's listen. It takes courage to listen to many difficult and unpleasant things. Students really have a lot of important and necessary things to say, but for some reason they can't trust you: teachers, school authorities. ... We need to start building a culture of dialogue and respect. Let's learn. There are NGOs such as the Polish Society of Anti-Discrimination Law or the Foundation Against Rape Culture, which could develop a programme of anti-discrimination and anti-violence workshops, help understand what is wrong, train how to react, tell how to recognize the line between a teaching method and violating the Constitution and human rights. Such training and programmes are necessary for everyone: students, professors, school authorities. Let's teach human rights. Theatre schools should create a space for learning about society and human rights, so education can be based on values and not violence. To teach shared responsibility for the world we create, both onstage and in life. So that the following words from the preamble to the current Higher Education and Science Law (there are some really great words in legal acts), thanks to the joint effort of students and professors, are reflected in reality:

Recognizing that the need for learning the truth and passing knowledge from generation to generation is a particularly noble human activity, and recognizing the fundamental role of science in creating civilization, the rules for the functioning of higher education and conducting scientific activity will be guided by the following principles: [...] each scholar is responsible for the quality and integrity of research and for bringing up the young generation; universities and other research institutions carry out a mission of particular importance to the state and the nation: [...] they shape moral standards in public life.

And in art. 2 of the Law: 'The mission of the higher education and science system is to conduct education and scientific activities

of the highest quality, to shape civic attitudes, and to participate in social development [...].'

Shared responsibility

Sometimes my colleagues, artists, say: 'I don't do politics, I do art.' But politics deals with us. And the system we have, i.e. what we have learned since childhood and what values we propagate, depends on politics. Politics is not a stage for politicians, however, but a common, public stage; politics means caring for the common good. So let's take care of what we do together, and let's start from our own backyard. Much has been neglected in our society, and the effects are visible everywhere, not just in theatre schools. This is the kind of democracy we can muster. These are the conditions in which we have to practise our profession; this is our respect for human rights in schools, on the streets, in theatres, in this country. Let's listen, support, respect, react; let's show solidarity, and when necessary, let's vote. It is our shared responsibility for what is happening in our own backyard, at school, in our country.

Two voices on the matter

Finally, I will quote two more voices, but not from the survey or the present time:

Here, mutual trust turns an average actor's material into good theatre, while a lack of trust results in garbage, buffoonery, lie, and pretence. Here, the profession of an actor can become either an offence to human dignity, or human liberation. Here, you are either a gentleman or a scoundrel. [...] Theatre in Poland will remain bad as long as it is organized by people incapable of teamwork.

Do you recognize these words? They were written by theatre director Stefan Jaracz in 1936.⁵ And now a voice from abroad, Constantin Stanislavski:

'Artists can operate successfully only under certain necessary conditions. Anyone who upsets those conditions is being disloyal to his art and to the society of which he is a part.'⁶

Translated by Monika Bokinić

⁵ Stefan Jaracz, 'Organizacja pracy w teatrze. Praca aktora' ['Organization of Work in the Theatre: The Work of the Actor'], in *Scena Polska. Pamiętnik Nadzwyczajnego Walnego Zjazdu Delegatów Z.A.S.P. poświęconego sprawom i zagadnieniom artystycznym* [*Scena Polska: Record of Special Convention of ZASP Delegates Devoted to Artistic Matters and Issues*], p. 68.

⁶ Constantin Stanislavski, 'Toward an Ethics for the Theatre', in *Building a Character*, trans. by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Routledge, 1949), p. 267.

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ABSTRACT

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'There Is No Democracy in Theatre'—Seriously?

Democracy we have is the one we can afford. Democracy is not only voting. It is not voting at all. Democracy is values such as solidarity, respecting human rights, reacting when someone exceeds their power or usurps it. What effective tools are there? What can be done to practice democracy in cases of ill will, usurpation of power, incompetence and, at times, deeply-rooted tradition? How can democracy be practiced in theatre or drama school?

Keywords: democracy, mobbing, constitution, theatre school, human rights.