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**What to Do with What Is Now?
At School and in the Theatre**

www.polishtheatrejournal.com

Publisher

Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw

Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw

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The text of *The Actresses, or Sorry for Touching You*, written by Michał Telega, a third-year student of the Faculty of Drama Directing at the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Kraków, was presented at the academy as part of the exam in the Drama Writing Workshop taught by Iga Gańczarczyk in June 2019. The exam had an open format, and any student or teacher, as well as people invited from outside the academy, could attend. Invitations were sent to all professors via email several days earlier. Few of them appeared—only two or three people.

Michał's text and our letter¹ were submitted to Rector Dorota Segda. This resulted in raising the problem of discrimination, harassment, and mobbing during a meeting of the statutory commission, which was at that time drafting new statutes for the academy. As a member of the committee, I had the opportunity to personally present Michał's text and his conversations with female students, as well as possible solutions to prevent situations like those described in the text. I mainly referred to measures taken by the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. The debate resulted in a decision to include in the statutes an additional obligation of the rector to take anti-mobbing and anti-discrimination measures.

After the mid-July Committee meeting, I requested distribution to all committee members of the Ombudsman's Report² and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights Report³ on harassment at Polish public universities. In September, Rector Segda established the Equal Treatment

1 Letter from Iwona Kempa and Iga Gańczarczyk, AST academic teachers, addressed to AST Rector Dorota Segda, calling for the issue of discrimination, mobbing, and harassment at the school to be addressed. The letter concludes with the text of the original version of the drama by Michał Telega.

2 Ombudsman, 'Doświadczenie molestowania wśród studentek i studentów. Analiza i zalecenia RPO' [Experience of harassment among students. Analysis and recommendations of the Ombudsman], 11 February 2019, <https://www.rpo.gov.pl/pl/content/molestowanie-wsrod-studentek-i-studentow-analiza-i-zalecenia-rpo>, [accessed 20 November 2019].

3 Julia Gerlich, *Molestowanie na polskich uczelniach publicznych* [Harassment at Polish public universities], Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights Report, Warsaw 2019, <http://www.hfhr.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/%E2%80%9EMolestowanie-na-polskich-uczelniach-publicznych%E2%80%9D-%E2%80%93raport-HFPC.pdf>, [accessed 20 November 2019].

Working Group to develop a code of ethics and rules of conduct to follow if the code of ethics were breached.

The turbulent debate at the Statutory Committee meeting revealed various attitudes of professors towards the problem as well as some previously unknown situations. We learned that in the past there were instances of teachers' inappropriate behaviour in the Faculty of Acting, and complaints from male and female students had led to the dismissal of at least two people. One of them was the author of the expression 'Sorry for touching you', well known in academy circles.

The discussion at the meeting of the Statutory Committee on introducing possible regulations to prevent discrimination and mobbing focused on several issues. The vast majority of teachers expressed their concerns about possible interference in the form of teaching acting. The potential involvement of someone from outside the academy, for example an appropriate specialist, as an equal treatment ombudsman or a member of the ethics committee, met with protests, claiming that such persons would lack knowledge of the peculiarities of teaching acting. Elements of the teaching process, such as working with the body, working with emotions, revealing difficult emotions, or provoking their release, could raise doubts among people without a knowledge or understanding of actors' physical and mental processes. The reaction of a psychologist employed in the academy, who was not sure during a class whether a student crying was performing an acting task and crying as a character, or was crying 'personally' as a student who could not cope with the task, was given as an example of such potential misunderstandings. From the outside, this situation was confusing and unclear.

In my opinion, the teachers' concerns confirm the importance of the problem. While an actor crying or experiencing other difficult emotions or states onstage during a performance can be recognized as a character or actor in a role (although in this case the border between the personal and the professional is not clear), a male or female student performing a task or an exercise, responding to the teacher's instruction or sometimes even a request during a class, is in a much more ambiguous situation. Therefore, questions about the way of working with young, inexperienced people on difficult, painful, and severe experiences become relevant. How to work on sexuality themes without being accused of attempted harassment? How to protect yourself and students from the danger of using any form of verbal and emotional abuse while not giving up intense work with emotions, imagination, and memory? How to teach students not only to show emotions, to get to the sources of emotions, but also to safely get out of difficult emotional states? How to teach them to protect their own psychological well-being and emotions while maintaining openness and sensitivity? How attentive, alert, or sensitive should a teacher be? And how free from any personal, professional, or bad experiences and habits can teachers be, so that they will not even unconsciously impose them on their work with students?

These questions inevitably refer to the situation in theatres, where the vast majority of drama teachers also work. I believe that in Poland there still exists (although it is slowly beginning to wobble) a hierarchical, almost feudal theatre system fostering abuse

of power. Many theatres still maintain the indisputable, superior, and imperious role of the managing director and director over actors. Starting with economic issues, it is clear that in the managing director–director–actor hierarchy, the actor is at the bottom of the food chain. In Polish theatres, economic training often takes place. The system gives the managing director the opportunity to deprive actors of roles and performances, thereby depriving them of their source of income, while awarding very high pay to directors and their collaborators. This economic inequality becomes the basis for other forms of violence. Actors know that they may lose their roles or full-time jobs, be removed from subsequent casts or overlooked by the director in planning performances, so they are afraid, remain silent, accept humiliation, and don't speak up when they are harmed or other team members are violated, insulted, or humiliated. This constantly happens in small provincial theatres and in so-called progressive theatres in large cities, headed by managing directors who have openly declared their belief in freedom, equality, and the struggle for democracy. In the comfort of studios and backstage, these ideas, so often propagated from the stage, cease to matter. In theatre, the managing director has power over the actors, which for the time of creating a production is assumed by the director. In Polish theatre, critics and reviewers sustain the cult of the director even if the director's name overshadows a crowd of collaborators and the main burden of creating the production rests on the shoulders, or rather on the minds and emotions, of actors. An actor, a subordinate of the managing director and director in the theatre, eventually gains power over his or her students at school. Actors learn the model of work and creative relationships, and accumulate great experiences, but also injuries, professional trauma in the theatre. We know from psychology that, unfortunately, those who were beaten will usually beat others, so it is not difficult to imagine that the humiliated will humiliate, the trained will train, the abused will abuse. This is a human mechanism supported by a system that can be very difficult to defy. Only the individual experience, maturity, and wisdom of a teacher/actor can become a foundation for the relationship model they can build with their students.

Can an actor, and especially an actress, say 'no'? Without fear of consequences, of being deprived of roles, excluded from performances, losing a full-time job? Can a male or female student say 'no'? Without any worries about their position at school?

I am deeply convinced that a new model of work and relationships should be created in theatre, one that is not based on an indisputable hierarchy, but on equality and partnership, mutual respect regardless of the position and role played in the process. Being at the forefront, being a leader, a teacher, means first and foremost caring and taking responsibility for another person, for the team, and not following your own needs and visions at the expense of others. For years I have been trying very hard to be faithful to my own version of the Hippocratic Oath: 'First do no harm.' Unfortunately, in the past, when I was the artistic director of a theatre, I didn't always succeed. I couldn't resist the pressure and rules of the system when economic considerations forced me to cut several actors' positions. It was a bitter and painful lesson. I know how

difficult it is not to succumb to systemic pressures, the theatrical 'eternal truths', which are supposedly obvious but sometimes seem invisible.

That is why the ethics of care and reciprocity seem so important to me. Being a managing director, a director, a teacher, is not about power, position, advantage; it means carrying a burden of responsibility, the power of inspiration, the ability to listen, the ability to build a sense of community and security, creating the best conditions for individual creativity and development of each team member.

I deeply believe that changes in theatre schools will slowly start a change in the theatre system, but I realize that it will be a long process.

Translated by Monika Bokinić

Works cited

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ABSTRACT

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What to Do with What Is Now? At School and in the Theatre

The text *The Actresses, or Sorry for Touching You* by Michał Telega was presented during an exam performative reading along with an appendix, which was an appeal to the Krakow AST Rector – Dorota Segda, to appoint spokesman for equal treatment, together with a team representing the academic community, who, together with a chosen law office and professionals in equality, will draft a college Code of Ethics. These are the first steps towards implementation of an anti-violence and anti-discrimination policy at the AST.

Keywords: ethics, theatre school.