

Whose National Theatre Is It?

**Oliver Frljić in Conversation with Marta Keil  
and Agata Adamiecka-Sitek**

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**Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego**

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**Marta Keil:** When I think of your work, the figure of the trickster often comes to mind: you come to the institution and problematize its way of working, you reveal its structure, name its power relations, say things out loud that usually nobody dares to mention.

**Oliver Frlić:** And then I'm banned for a certain period of time...!

**MK:** But then you pop up all of a sudden somewhere nearby. Your strategy makes me also think about the notion of undercommons, proposed by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney.<sup>1</sup> They describe two means of a critical approach towards the institution – the first involves a full-on frontal assault on emanations of the neoliberal system, the second focuses on an intellectual critique of the system from inside, through widely available and accepted means: articles, discussions, interviews, etc. And then chose a third option: constant, radical changes within the institution, entailing permanent problematization and interrogation of existing power structures. They propose taking all the tools we have within an institution, which in our case would be all the tools and ways of work that theatre offers: the space, the performers, the set, then to enter the institution in a mode of constant interrogation of one's own position, of the way the tools are used, of the entire work structure. One doesn't take anything for granted, instead problematizing it and becoming a problem herself within the institution. Sounds like your practice in the framework of institutional theatre, doesn't it? And I think this is what you achieved in Kraków [at the National Stary Theatre, in 2013],<sup>2</sup> too.

**OF:** Yes, what we actually try to do is to perform the institution, we don't try to create a good or bad show but to see how can we use that theatre and all its resources as a performative tool. I think in the context of the Stary Theatre in Kraków – though I try not to refer to this situation all the time, which isn't easy, especially in Poland – this was, in

1 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Autonomedia 2013).

2 Oliver Frlić and his dramaturgs Goran Injac, Agnieszka Jakimiak and Joanna Wichowska were rehearsing at the Stary Theatre in Kraków in autumn 2013 for their production *Nie-Boska komedia. Szczątki*. The production was cancelled by the Stary's director, Jan Klata, on 27 November 2013, two weeks before the scheduled premiere. See 'Polish Theatre Journal', 1 (2016): 'Poles, Jews and Aesthetic Experience: On the Cancelled Theatre Production by Olivier Frlić' and 'Nothing Else Matters: Jan Klata in Conversation with Dariusz Kosiński'.

my humble opinion, a positive misunderstanding. Some actors and the theatre management couldn't understand that it was not about a good or bad show, it was about the question of how can we extend the tools of performativity of the medium itself. And there are battles around it every time, wherever I go. For instance here, in the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, we tried to send invitations to all the members of the Polish Parliament as a kind of introduction to the performance. With this action, we aim to start the show before the actual opening. I would like to provide visibility to the project even before we go in front of the audience. I think theatre is not just we see on stage but also the perception created before and after the show.

**Agata Adamiecka-Sitek:** And then you make the institution really visible in the community. Here in Poland around 17 per cent of the members of society go to the theatre once a year.

**OF:** Which isn't bad in comparison with some other countries!

**AA-S:** Yes, but these calculations have been based on the number of tickets sold the previous theatre season. However, if we take a closer look, the fairly good result is to a large extent due to those who go to the theatre several or several dozen times a year. This can't be calculated properly, but it can be estimated that in fact around 10 per cent or less of the population goes to the theatre at least once a year. And this is only in big cities, which in recent years experienced the explosion of the 'cultural supernova', as urban-culture researchers term this phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> There is a group of people participating intensively in various forms of the cultural life who are 'omnivorous' and this constant participation in culture is their functioning mode, but this is a relatively small group. This situation is deepening, as is the process of desertification in the provinces. The circle of people within reach of culture and theatre is getting narrower, while for others theatre is invisible. This is a problem for those who believe in the social efficiency of art, and who perceive change as one of its goals.

**OF:** I think theatre today is a very elitist art and most of the time we don't have any connection with the audience we'd really like to address. So I think we shall find new ways to use other media tactically. A few times, I've been in a situation where I wasn't really interested in presenting the show as I thought everything I wanted to do had already been done through this so-called media performance. I'd produced a performance in the broader social context using theatre as an instrument, and in the end it wasn't really necessary to play the performance itself. And if you look at the Philip Auslander book *Liveness*, where he describes this ontological status of the theatrical performance, I think that a live co-presence of performers and audience is not a prerequisite for theatre to happen. I think different interfaces can be inserted between those two entities and it's still theatre.

3 Wojciech J. Burszta, Mirosław Duchowski, et al, *Kultura miejska w Polsce z perspektywy interdyscyplinarnych badań jakościowych* (Warsaw: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2011).

**AA-S:** That was also your strategy at the National Theatre in Rijeka [Croatia], right? You made that institution incredibly visible.

**OF:** We ate all the other theatrical institutions, they became completely invisible. And mediatizing theatrical performance was my conscious strategy, it wasn't something that happened by chance. Most people, theatre specialists as well, couldn't understand what it means to use theatre as a performative tool. Their thinking, although maybe very progressive in terms of recognizing and analyzing new theatrical forms, was completely unable to understand this desire of theatre to perform/oppose the broader social context and diverse social forces trying to utilize it for the reproduction of a certain ideology – most of the time, a neoliberal one – and its related class interests. I also think theatre shouldn't be an aim in itself. Theatre is an instrument, we want to communicate something or we want to produce a certain performativity, that's why we use theatre instead of writing books, for example.

**AA-S:** From this point of view, incidents of censorship turn out to be especially productive, because they make artists and their messages visible. Censorship gives artists opportunities to explain the meaning of their works, because they become the focus of public debate. Censorship reveals the boundaries of freedom, and power relations.

**OF:** Though I've had so much experience with censorship that I'm glad when sometimes the censor doesn't interfere with my work! But on the other hand, I think that theatre shall produce dialogue with centres of political power. Of course, I use word 'dialogue' as a euphemism, it's never a real dialogue, but you can provoke a reaction from the other side, most of the time from the one who wants to put sanctions on you and your work. But I think this ability also proves that theatre still has some relevance in our society.

**MK:** But do you really need censorship to make the institution visible? To reveal its modes of production, its working structure? I don't think so, and your work seems a perfect example. From my point of view, your strategy is an interesting way of performing institutional critique. For instance, you interrogate, question and challenge the usual hierarchic structure, the position of the director and her power.

**OF:** I'm working on this all the time, but it's not easy at all. Sometimes when you're in this structure of power, you can give it up, but the system itself still keeps you in your position, it gives you symbolic power that you can't get rid of easily.

**AA-S:** Even this gesture, by which you give up your position, is only possible because you've had it. Because you're a director, you can use your symbolic power to establish a level playing field.

**OF:** Yes; usually the actors can't do it.

**MK:** And at the end of the day, it's always you who sign the work.

**OF:** Yes, working as a collective is not highly esteemed within the

institution. Most of the time, people want one name, one person.

**MK:** I think this is especially difficult within the framework of repertory theatre: when you try to change the usual way of attributing roles and positions and say there's no director in this production, it often becomes highly problematic. Even on a basic level: how to introduce the production and its creators, who'll be named on a poster or in a booklet, to whom will authorship be attributed. But what I was referring to wasn't only a collective way of working; introducing that might be a critical approach in repertory theatre, but it's definitely not the only one. What seems equally crucial is to problematize working methods and structures.

**OF:** Although I've never heard of a director who'd resign from his fee...

**MK:** Well, it's definitely not a common case. But what seems important to me is to question existing positions, to problematize them. For instance, in artistic research, you often give the actors back their subjectivity and responsibility. How do they react? Is it easy for them to alter their usual position, to take that responsibility, to become subject of the entire artistic process and its result?

**OF:** I have different experiences in this respect. Some actors see institutional-theatre hierarchies as a variation on existing non-theatrical economic and politic reality and corresponding social injustices. Others don't have a problem, since this very structure is the one that releases them from responsibility – in the same way, for example, that democracy does. I see the rehearsal process as a time and space for confrontation with internalized systems of values where the actor or actress is taken as a talking head, a means of representation and for the reproduction of existing reality. The first task of theatre is to question what seems obvious. And what seems more obvious than for an actress or actor to be obedient to a director and his or her ideas?

**MK:** Questioning the institution and its mode of operation was definitely one result of your work in Kraków: though we were deprived of the chance to see its final phase on stage, you managed to initiate one of the biggest and most vivid discussions about the theatre institution, about its role, duties, responsibilities.

**OF:** My strategy at the Stary Theatre was to create a conflict on different levels and to see what could come out of them. So on one level I'm very conservative, I still think conflict is the concept that is functional in the theatre context, but I don't believe in a conflict as a fiction.

**AA-S:** You mean the representation of the conflict?

**OF:** Yes, exactly. I believe in creating real conflict at rehearsals, in the working process, it depends of course on what I'm interested in having as an outcome, as a result of the work, but I tried at the Stary Theatre to create a conflict on as many levels as possible, and also to see how far we could push the institution's boundaries. At a certain moment, I even

said to the dramaturges Goran Injac, Agnieszka Jakimiak and Joanna Wichowska that I wasn't sure we'd be allowed to continue the work and complete it. But at the same time, it wasn't that important to me to have some final product.

And this is another point of conflict: this inability of some theatre-makers to understand that theatre can perform in a much broader context, it's not just a matter of bringing the audience to the building. While preparing for the production *The Ristić Complex* [Mladinsko Theatre, Ljubljana, 2015] we read lots of materials and I don't know how many of [the production's subject, actor Ljubisa] Ristić's interviews, and in one he said that theatre is actually a community of people who already share the same system of values and they go to theatre to confirm it. And I strongly disagree. When I want to create a conflict with the audience, my dream is to have antagonism between every audience member. The goal is to divide them as much as possible and thus to reaffirm their uniqueness. The task is not to unite them, not to find a common denominator or a common system of values that we share.

**MK:** So the aim would be not to reenact or reaffirm the audience as a consensual community, it would rather be an idea that we may become a real community, that we may construct one, only if we open space for potential antagonisms.

**OF:** Yes, definitely.

**MK:** This is interesting because Oliver Marchart, for instance, says that opening theatre space to conflict might be the only single moment when the institutional framework of that institution reveals its contingency; it's at this moment that we become aware that these are far from being universal. On the contrary, they were constructed in a certain context, by certain social groups having their own aims. Therefore the consciousness that given frameworks shall not be taken for granted seems crucial.

**AA-S:** In my opinion, the events in Kraków in 2013 were of enormous importance. Though the 'final product' was not eventually created, the process of creating it produced something which might be regarded as a real theatrical idea, in the sense that this process could have come into being only through the theatre medium or, even more to the point, only in that particular theatre, with its historical, ideological and aesthetic conditions. The conflict you instigated, or revealed, rather, among the team which has been working together for years, even decades, under institutional restrictions, was in fact a reflection of suppressed social conflicts grown up around the most difficult experiences, attitudes and affects related to anti-Semitism as a dark mechanism in establishing our community.

What's more, this was rather obscenely connected to the Romantic-modernist matrix of our theatre, and with Konrad Swinarski, the most prominent of Polish directors, long ago canonized and placed in the national pantheon! You attacked both the foundations of an institution grounding its activities and symbolic capital on the unquestionable authority of great directors and the artistic quality of their works, as well as the foundations of a social contract which empowers us to see ourselves



as invincible, ever-innocent heirs of Romantic-era heroes. In fact, you attacked the national theatre in both meanings of this term!

But I think it's impossible to follow that track any farther. You put that institution in a position from which it could either cancel the production, thereby exposing its inherent violence and constraints, or erupt with this spectacle and begin an extremely painful transformation process. The director of the theatre, Jan Klata, chose the first option, institutional censorship. After opening night was cancelled, there was a discussion among the team here at the Theatre Institute, many important texts were written interpreting the situation, the same team of dramatists prepared another production the following year related to the cancelled Kraków performance.<sup>4</sup> All these activities are great examples of productive censorship. However, it doesn't alter the fact that this strategy has been exhausted in this process, or the fact that eventually this entire event concerned only the narrow circle of people interested in culture.

**OF:** I think I went further, but it was when I became director of another institution, the National Theatre in Rijeka. Of course, I had to be very wise while taking this position about not revealing my strategy completely, not revealing everything I'd do when I got there. Everyone expects you would shit in your pants when you enter that building, but for me it was very clear from the beginning that I want to use that institution as a performative tool and to expand my stage, to perform that institution in every conceivable media that was available. It was really great, 'cause I think we managed. I tried to antagonize the entire society, and the good thing was that everybody knew about our theatre. Even people who'd never been there had their opinions, they had their discussions, though over 90 per cent of that community was opposed to what we did.

**AA-S:** What happened there, what did you actually do?

**OF:** I used the symbolic capital of that institution. I was expected to arrive there and conserve national culture as is usually done at that kind of institution. But with various actions, I really tried to use experiences from conceptual art, from performance art, etc. One of the first things we did was to hang the LGBTQ flag from the theatre during the biggest national holiday in Croatia. It was a very simple action, not expensive at all. And it was clear from the beginning that a certain friction would happen. On one hand, you had a national day which represents certain values and a certain image of society, from which some social groups are excluded; on the other hand, we had the flag of one of the minorities, the one that's constantly being denied by that extremely homophobic society. We got immediate responses. There were accusations we were mocking the national holiday; it gave us even more space to reflect on this.

**AA-S:** How did you respond to all these accusations?

<sup>4</sup> *Nie-boska. wyznanie* by Agnieszka Jakimiak, Goran Injac, Joanna Wichowska and Oliver Frlić, produced as part of the POP-UP Theatre programme curated by Agata Siwiak and Grzegorz Niziołek, premiered on 14 November 2015 in Kraków. See 'The Actor in the Deadlock of Contemporary *Folkwark* Relations' by Monika Kwaśniewska in this issue.

**OF:** I was present in all conceivable media in Croatia, giving further explanations. Going further meant to make a kind of discursion on what we did, trying to explain how I imagined the national theatre should operate in the twenty-first century. I was also trying to abolish the structural division of the National Theatre in Rijeka into three separate branches: theatre, opera, ballet. I think such a structure is extremely narrow-minded. What I was trying to do was the performative deconstruction of that institution and its structure; all norms, all fundamentals were being questioned. I was trying to bring to the center things at the periphery of the institution – and being at its periphery also meant being at the margins of society.

The National Theatre was established in Croatia in the nineteenth century and its task was to support national emancipation from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. And that was probably a legitimate task at that time, but the institution needs to change, to evolve in new circumstances. And with such a high level of xenophobia and homophobia that we observe at present in Croatia, I made the statement that our theatre will be a kind of shelter, providing asylum for all minorities in the country. That was another big problem for official cultural politics, because the national theatre is perceived as cold storage for the national culture. You put national culture there so it doesn't rot. Our action was thus perceived as a complete upending of the logic of the institution.

Then another thing I did was a performance/event on the day of commemoration of the anniversary of the so-called Operation Storm [in 1995], in which part of Croatia was liberated but at the same time the Croatian army committed a lot of crimes and forced over a hundred thousand people from their homes. And on this very specific day, with all the major preparations for this commemoration, nobody mentioned the victims of this operation. So I invited five women of different nationalities to tell their stories. The first problem was that their stories didn't confirm official national narratives about the war; the other problem was that they were women.

**MK:** Who therefore brought another point of view to this history, one having nothing to do with heroism.

**OF:** Yes. They were supposed to help heal wounded soldiers and give birth to new ones.

**AA-S:** And to clean up the mess.

**OF:** Exactly. And to be widows. On that day, we had a big fracas in front of the theatre, there were lots of protestors blocking the entrance, two people including one journalist were bitten. We had to be evacuated, but after the evacuation was done one woman didn't want to leave the theatre as she was afraid of being recorded for TV. That was another form of violence we were exposed to in the situation: media violence. This entire national hysteria started when one newspaper published an article claiming that Frljić is creating an 'anti-Operation Storm'. In such a situation, when you're described in such words on the front page, you become an easy target.

**MK:** Thus you were labelled as 'an enemy'. It seems useful for some



social groups to create enemies they can consolidate against.

**OF:** The president of Croatia said several times there were people who really hated the country – and I was mentioned among them, or I may even have been named as the top one, the one who really hated Croatia.

**AA-S:** Well, no, you hate Poland more [*laughter*]. You've stated explicitly in the opening monologue of your POP-UP performance in Kraków: 'I hate you more than the country I come from'.

**OF:** In a way, it's my answer to this obligation that you have to love your nation, your country, and you have to express it all the time. I really don't get this concept. In the countries created after Yugoslavia collapsed, it got even more awkward: you were supposed to publicly express your love towards your country. I was too old by then to play that game.

**MK:** Actually, you got different social groups to occupy the National Theatre in Rijeka, even those who might've had no idea before where was it located. The question is what's the whole concept of national theatre about, which concept of the nation does it concern, and whose is this theatre, actually?

**OF:** Yes, my biggest problem is what's the nation this theatre belongs to? Who is this nation?

**AA-S:** If you put the question that way, you have to remember that the idea of national theatre serves not only to fortify a certain national identity but also a certain class distinction. The institution of national theatre has always been operating in those two registers at the same time. In Poland, the national theatre is entirely devoted to the model of 'the urban cultural theatre', which fortifies the identity of the middle class and its distinction from lower classes which don't go to this theatre.

**OF:** I agree. What we represent as national values are values of a certain social class and I strongly believe that these institutions are instruments for the reproduction of that system of values and of that social division. When I was younger, I was sometimes moved when someone said what I was doing was artistically worthless. Nowadays, I feel I can't get a better critique, a better compliment, because aesthetics aren't created in a social or political vacuum. Upholding certain aesthetics means upholding certain social structures and divisions. There's no such thing as 'beauty in itself' or something artistically worthy in itself; there's just the ongoing struggle about what is the Western canon, why those paintings, why these plays, etc. I really don't believe in this essentialist concept. It's the same with emotions; there's no love as such, no sadness as such, they're all conditioned socially.

**MK:** But bearing in mind everything we've just been discussing, I have to ask why you chose to work in repertory theatre? For a long time you were part of the independent performing-arts field, working with choreographers outside of institutional structures. Why did you decide to change the institutional frame of your work completely?

**OF:** I was very skeptical towards theatre – for me, theatre was fake as a medium. I felt embarrassed most of the time watching people on stage. And when I started to think about the arts, of what and of how could do things, performance art was my first choice because of at least two things. First, it was available, you didn't need anything: it was like conceptual art, you need your idea, you have yourself as performer, you can perform whenever you want, etc. On the other hand, I really liked the original politics of performance art: no repetition, no rehearsing and no recording. So the only trace of each performance is an experience shared between you as a performer and the audience.

But we see also that all those original politics of performance have been betrayed a few times already by the pioneers of performance art. Marina Abramović is good example here – she really capitalizes each drop of blood and sweat she ever shed in her work. Then I saw works by artists of the Flemish 'new wave' and realized that antagonisms between theatre and performance art might be overcome in a way. That was when I started to work more in theatre. Then I decided to study at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Zagreb, which was a very embarrassing experience. The school was a very conservative institution; teachers were either making duplicates of themselves or teaching you how to be mediocre.

**AA-S:** But if theatre institutions were and are so conservative, why stick to them?

**OF:** First of all, you can utilize their symbolic capital and it may provide much broader visibility for your work. With all the codes within institutions, with the expectations, with the hierarchy, there is a lot of performative potential. I think these institutions are a public good, so why should we give up on them, why should we stop taking care of them? For a long period of time, I was also part of the independent scene in Zagreb and most of that time I actually was working harder at all levels: on the conceptual one but also when it came to producing a performance, preparing the tech equipment, etc. And our work there had almost no impact, it was completely invisible to any broader audience.

Once we had a residency in Potsdam, I was working as dramaturge with a group of choreographers. For a month, we were working extremely intensely and at the end we performed the piece only twice. Even though the work was really good, I think, we couldn't get greater visibility. And then I realized you could do the same in the institutional context, you just have to break rules, not to follow them. Of course, you have to have your Trojan Horse to climb inside of. When I began to work in an institution, I knew that I first had to establish myself within it, then I could start to deconstruct them and their artistic practices.

**AA-S:** In many cases such cooperation and real institutional support are, in fact, possible. Christoph Schlingensiefel may serve as a good example, since he created his radical projects precisely because of the power and authority of such theatre institutions as the Volksbühne in Berlin, which loyally supported his attempts at going beyond class, national, racial and all other social distinctions. I am especially interested in class issues, because I am under the impression that it has not been given enough attention in the Polish theatre, and it is a fundamental

issue for our construction of public theatre. Have you discovered any efficient strategy in this area? How to reach people who don't belong to this stable, class-divided theatre audience? Moreover, people, who were excluded from it by means of the very definition of public theater as the theatre of a cultural city.

**OF:** For me, it was much easier when I held the position of director in Rijeka. When you're invited to do one or two productions with institutions, you've no influence for instance on ticket prices.

**AA-S:** But this begins earlier than at the level of financial barriers. Let's take a look at the architecture of theatre buildings and symbolism encoded in them. Not many people will have the courage to enter such theatre and feel that this is their space.

**OF:** Absolutely. And the other problem is 'cultural incompetence' – theatre has such complex codes, it's not possible or easy for everybody to read them. That's why in my work I try to find another language; I think language is a tool for communication, it's not something one ought to use for intellectual masturbation. You have to communicate with somebody: with the centres of political power, for example, or with people excluded from that context, and you look for the language that can establish this specific type of communication. I also think the most important thing is not to have these people physically present in the theatre; communication can be established on different levels and by different means, as we did it in Rijeka.

**MK:** According to you, should we take over existing institutions or create new ones?

**OF:** Existing institutions are definitely already a materialization of certain interests and you have lots of laws that protect them and their structures. Thus there is not a lot of room for maneuvering. On the other hand, to create a new institution you need stable financial support if you want to have a certain continuity and visibility.

**MK:** And to be able to digest what you have produced – and let others perceive it. If not, you'd probably present your work once or twice, then it's done. As is the case with most independent artworks.

**OF:** Sure. And I think that existing institutions should be used, though I don't actually believe in a nonviolent transition. I don't believe that if we take an institution, we can gradually and smoothly change it into something else. This is what leftists believe could be achieved through democracy: we're gonna make another political and economic system through existing political and economic institutions. It doesn't work that way. Those institutions are constructed to protect the existing status quo, not to change anything. So I don't have an answer. I think it's a matter of experimenting and trying things out. You mentioned Schliengensief; what he did with *Bitte liebt Austria* was that he really turned the very bourgeois festival Wiener Festwochen upside down, which was really great. Doing it in any other context would be meaningless, but in the context of that festival, it had a really strong impact.

**MK:** Will you take over another repertory theatre if you receive an offer?

**OF:** I would, but under other conditions than those I had in Rijeka. I'd take such a position if I'd get strong guarantees that I can really start to change something. But this isn't just a matter of a national or a city theatre, it's not a question of a ministry of culture or the city administration. You also have to change theatre law. We have very dysfunctional laws in Croatia; without changing those, you can't change a lot.

But now I think I'm fine with the experience in Rijeka. I did everything I thought I should do in that context. On one level, we established a new paradigm, we showed that a national theatre can be something completely different, that it doesn't have to be this cold storage for national culture. On the other hand, I think every new government or minister of culture will be super-attentive not to let somebody like me run such an institution. A few times in my life, I've had this illusion that things I've done would change something. You know, rules are unwritten but they're known to everybody. If you want to be successful in that context, you just have to adapt and perform the way they expect you to.

**AA-S:** And what about your production with the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, in this context of institutional strategies?<sup>5</sup>

**OF:** I am at the moment in the middle of the process, but what I can say now is that, though I am still learning about the institution, I know already it's quite different from the one in Kraków [the Stary Theatre], it's a different type of institution and it's definitely a different kind of institutional support that we have there – this is incomparable. On the other hand, I think it's not a question of getting into dialogue with the institution, but of bringing a broader social context here, right now and right here, in Poland – and this is what I am aiming for. In the production, we'll query what we're allowed to do in the framework of the theatre, when we can expect an authority to interfere, when this might take a role of aesthetic experts.

This drive of the artists to constantly expand the borders of art is fascinating. After the historic avant-garde, which wanted to establish the equivalence between life and art, I can't really understand when somebody, especially legislative or in an authority position, feels the need to say what is art and what is not. It always depends on the context, on the framework we put it in. I really don't believe in those normative aesthetics anyway.

**AA-S:** Well, in a sense, the institution is such a framework.

**OF:** Sure. I think in a broader sense this production with the Powszechny Theatre will rely on the normative pressure that we're put under by the institution, and on our ability or inability to escape it.

5 Oliver Frljic's production from *Klątwa* by Stanisław Wyspiański premiered in February 2107. See 'How to Lift the Curse' by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, 'The Village Is on Fire! The Village Is Burning Down!' by Paweł Mośicki and conversation with Paweł Łysak and Paweł Sztarbowsky, directors of the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw 'Polish Theatre after *Klątwa*' in this issue.

And in this sense, I really can't avoid referring to the Bydgoszcz case, when our production *Our Violence and Your Violence* [Mladinsko Theatre, Ljubljana, 2016] had been presented at a festival then accused of violating religious feelings and desecrating the Polish flag – mostly by people who hadn't seen it. At the moment, the prosecution is questioning witnesses – people who saw the performance. I've had a lot of experience with censorship, but this one is new for me, I must admit. For me, it's interesting and in a way awkward how the repressive state apparatus is in charge of deciding what's an artwork and what's not. I've met some people who told me they had to go to police here in Warsaw or in Bydgoszcz to give statements about my production *Our Violence and Your Violence*. So in a way it was unavoidable to mention this case.

I thought we should actually test what we're allowed to do in a theatre and what we aren't allowed to do, when a state or any state representatives are allowed to interfere and decide what's art and what's not. I also want to show that a certain set of signs, taken out of its original context, produces a different meaning and has a different value. Of course, we're counting on all possible misunderstandings, especially in relation to different centers of power. But on the other hand, I think art is the space where we're obliged to transgress in relation to existing social and artistic norms.

**AS-S:** Is the prosecution really trying to establish whether your production is art?

**OF:** It's one question that everybody's been asked.

**AA-S:** They can't ask that.

**MK:** But they think they can, and that's the problem. In the Bydgoszcz case, they've confronted every witness with that question. And the answer was always: forget it, if it's an artwork, you as the prosecution have no right to interfere.

**OF:** It's not under your jurisdiction.

**AA-S:** However, isn't the argument that this is art and therefore we are within the realm of signs and metaphors, which have no actual power because they belong to meta-language, counterproductive in this situation? If you put it that way, then it sounds like art means nothing to us, as if in art you can do whatever you want and it doesn't mean anything to society. It's not serious, since it's art. Nobody cares. And if you say we're obliged to transgress, that means to push boundaries in reality.

**OF:** And definitely to violate some laws, written or unwritten.

**AA-S:** Or even to make us aware where boundaries lie, where the system is: it's often not visible. So without this censorship reaction, we'd not have seen it.

**OF:** I remember in one of his interviews Hans-Thies Lehmann said the problem after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Eastern bloc was that the enemy wasn't so visible anymore. We lost that

centralized power, that power became dispersed and not so visible anymore. The violence was part of the economic and political system, and this time we don't have this that old repressive state apparatus. And lots of artists got lost in that situation, they didn't know how to articulate the new positioning.

The problem is that to make a play about capitalism is very difficult if not impossible, because the nature of capitalism is that it escapes articulation. It's so complex in itself that you are actually obliged to make some simplifications in order to criticize this economic system and the politics which it produces. And these reactions in Poland, in Croatia, in Sarajevo, where the production *Our Violence and Your Violence* has been attacked both from the side of the Catholic press and by some fundamentalist Islamic organizations – this tells me that we're stepping again on some new/old configuration of power.

We see it also at the global level. I expect that society will try to establish more strict control. I guess that the dream of the state is to record even the dreams of its citizens. However, it's gonna be interesting, because I think that, paradoxically, the more repressive the system becomes, the more fertile the ground for art becomes. The problem with this dictatorship of permissiveness in neoliberal capitalism, as I like to call it, is that it seems like you can do whatever you want, but of course the boundaries are clear.

That's why I'm so interested in subversive affirmation as a method of artistic work. Here, I'll borrow Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse's definition of subversive affirmation as an artistic and political tactic. They write that it allows artist-activists to engage in discourses that are social, political or economic discourses while undermining them at the same time. In their words, this is 'characterized precisely by the fact that with affirmation there simultaneously occurs a distancing from, or revelation of, what is being affirmed. In subversive affirmation there is always a surplus which destabilizes affirmation and turns it into its opposite'.<sup>6</sup>

Translated by Karolina Sofulak

### Whose National Theatre Is It?

Oliver Frljić in Conversation with Marta Keil and Agata Adamiecka-Sitek

Oliver Frljić, in conversation with Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Marta Keil, talks about his strategy of performing institutions, giving examples from the time he ran the National Theatre in Rijeka. Referring to the elitist nature of theatre, the director talks about his attempts to move the show and the discourse accompanying it outside the theatre-company building and to use theatre as tool for triggering a broad social debate. He also cites instances of

<sup>6</sup> Inke Arns, Sylvia Sasse, 'Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance', *Maska*, spring issue (2006).



censorship he has encountered in his work. By analysing political and social entanglements of art institutions, the director wonders as to whom theatre actually belongs. The conversation took place before the premiere of *Klątwa* [*The Curse*] directed by Frljić at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, and was included in the production's programme book.