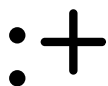


**Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska**

Winged Elephants: The Jezyce Story Project

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## Winged Elephants: The Jezyce Story Project

In times past, Poznań's Nowy Theatre – one of the city's two municipal drama theatres – was a critically and politically orientated institution ranked among the most interesting theatres in Poland. After the transformations of 1989, that reputation became a distant memory as the Nowy gradually turned into something of an elite institution – not due to the quality and value of its productions, but rather to the external glitz and 'crystalline' refinement of its renovated foyer and an audience more interested in 'being seen' (dressed to the nines at premieres) than in actually 'going to see' plays. With Janusz Wiśniewski at the helm, the theatre became something of a personal, auteur project, albeit one with a monotonous aesthetic and predictable seasons.

So in 2011, the news that Nowy Theatre's new director would be Piotr Kruszczyński was greeted with both surprise and hope. The surprise came from the utter incompatibility of the image of the two entities – the theatre and Kruszczyński – and the hope from the sense shared by many theatre lovers, per usual, that it was high time for change. A legend had formed around Kruszczyński as something of a miracle worker who had revived the fortunes of theatre in Wałbrzych, a former mining town in Silesia, turning a provincial company in a state of collapse, threatened with closure by local authorities unwilling to keep it going, into Polish theatre's hottest property, making unknown playwrights and directors into stars of the new drama by giving them the opportunity to debut in Wałbrzych. People had flocked from afar to that theatre to see its bracingly proud, formally innovative productions, with their passionate commentaries on reality that were often 'dirty', iconoclastic and 'incorrect'. Local theatregoers slowly warmed to the new face of theatre as it spoke to them about their own issues – one telling example was Michał Walczak's *Kopalnia* [*The Mine*], written on location and dealing with the problems of ex-miners.

In returning to Poznań, Kruszczyński's home town (a fact many commentators either forgot about or did not know, as they associated him almost solely with his accomplishments in Wałbrzych), and to a company he knew well from his early theatrical forays, the director was making a very tough decision. The critic Wojciech Majcherek used a football metaphor to describe the situation: 'in Wałbrzych he was coach of a third-division club that he took to the Premier League', whereas at Nowy Theatre it was as if he was becoming 'coach of Lech Poznań, a club with its own traditions, legends and successes, players who have been here for

years, and of course its faithful fans<sup>1</sup> – and one that for years had been riding high, in the top flight. Striking as Majcherek's comparison is, it contains a misleading paradox: Nowy Theatre boasted a stable 'squad' of actors, renovated stages and technical infrastructure and a foyer adorned in marble and mirrors, but was as far from the Premier League as the Wałbrzych company had been. For years, the Nowy had been perceived as a 'middle-ground city theatre', its audience comprising members of the well-to-do middle class who did not expect experiments or changes, valuing continuity and predictability. Concepts of civic mission had been abandoned long since. Dropping the football rhetoric, I would compare the previous two decades at Nowy Theatre to a luxury liner moored in port: guests welcome for receptions and captain's balls, but if it is a voyage they are looking for, they will need to go elsewhere.

Having used the phrase 'middle-ground city theatre', I need to step back for a moment to a debate sparked by Tadeusz Nyczek's column on bourgeois theatre. Following Nyczek's column, the journal *Dialog* asked theatremakers to give their opinions on several terms (such as bourgeois, middle-ground, artistic, critical and commercial theatre). According to the editors, these terms occur in debates in the community without being precisely defined, thus proving to be misleading and resulting in misunderstandings – and are certainly not neutral, but used with attached connotations, as insults or praise. 'We have the sense that by merely making it clear what we understand by the fundamental notions concerning the functioning of theatre in the public realm we will do away with the lion's share of misunderstandings and doubts,'<sup>2</sup> wrote the editors, although I am almost certain that they did not, and could not, really have such hopes. What they were in fact doing with this feigned earnestness was setting the cat among the pigeons to show how we squander categories that commonly function without a historic background, attempting on an ad hoc basis to identify and classify theatres for our own use (aided by the actions of the institution as it seeks to forge its own image), generally in a rather biased fashion.

This was displayed explicitly by the critic and editor Jacek Kopciński, whose survey responses came with the proposal for a simple test: he listed plays in the current repertoire of the National Theatre in Warsaw and invited readers to classify them according to the categories provided – of course, this would be impossible, as the set of productions was exceptionally eclectic, and the plays that the National puts on deliberately 'belong to various theatrical currents, invoke various languages, and operate with varied aesthetics'.<sup>3</sup> Answers sent to the editors included others that made no attempt to define the given concepts, even going so far as to emphatically dissociate themselves from such efforts: 'I find these categories idiotic'; 'it's hard for me to take part in the survey, as I don't "define for my own use" any of the categories listed'; 'any attempt at categorization only serves [people] feeding on the theatre; no practitioner or artist has or deals with any such need', '[bourgeois] theatre does not exist and the notion, which once referred to a specific social

1 See Wojciech Majcherek, 'Kruszczyński', <http://wojciech-majcherek.blog.onet.pl/2011/09/08/kruszczyński/Kruszczyński> [accessed 2 April 2014].

2 *Dialog* 2013, 12.

3 *Ibid.*

reality, now only vegetates in the language of artists and critics who proclaim a revolution once in a while and need a whipping boy'.<sup>4</sup>

Mindful of this debate, I should reject the term 'middle-ground theatre' right away (the one respondents attacked most fiercely: what are the extremes between which lies this is the 'middle ground?'). I could do this with no regrets, replacing it, for example, with 'auteur theatre', as the previous Nowy director Janusz Wiśniewski certainly left the imprint of the unique form of his productions on the image of Nowy Theatre. Yet by adopting such a term, I would be coming at the issue from a different perspective, and I would prefer to retain that of the audience.

I also want to refer to another response to the *Dialog* survey, as fortunately Piotr Kruszczyński also participated. He was looking from the audience perspective when he wrote:

Bourgeois theatre is how theatre satisfying the undemanding tastes of a not particularly sophisticated audience has popularly come to be known. Personally, I don't associate this term with the quality of the production, nor do I perceive a pejorative undertone to it. Rather, it defines the kind of consumer we are dealing with, and as a result what actions we must take for the so-called 'bourgeois viewer' to be able, flushed with emotion, to experience a series of theatrical initiations, for example on the path from farce to... critical theatre, paying attention to current social and political problems. I prefer to call this 'engaged' theatre, as I don't treat it as a separate category, assuming that everything said on stage should result from this 'engagement', passion, and 'anger with the world'. [...] I associate so-called 'middle-ground theatre' with specific names of directors whose theatre community is automatically linked to this concept. It has become common to say 'X is a middle-ground director' (I mention no names so as not to offend anyone, as I have great respect for these circles). Company directors frequently invite makers of 'middle-ground theatre' in order to ensure respectable ticket sales while preserving the enterprise's artistic values. But I would not look at this as a painful compromise. Perhaps 'middle-ground theatre' is simply artistry combined with trade – an ideal symbiosis of 'spirit and reason'?

Although I disagree with most of what Kruszczyński writes here (it turns out that we have a different understanding of the categories in question), I must give him one thing: he knows very well where he is talking from, and his strategy is clear. In short, it is 'Thou shalt not kill'. Or, less harshly: 'Thou shalt not be a revolutionary in Poznań'. Or perhaps even: 'Thou shalt not be a revolutionary in theatre'.

After all, in Wałbrzych in fact there had also been no revolution, except perhaps that from the remote perspective of Poznań things were seen otherwise. What happened in Wałbrzych was above all terribly painstaking and hard work on building an audience, no doubt for the first time in that city. Yet Nowy Theatre, as Majcherek pointed out, already had 'its faithful fans'. What was needed, then, was to direct a theatre that would attract new punters, without scaring off the 'old' ones, as well as gradually offering this mixed, newly formed audience further 'theatrical initiations'. In one of his first interviews after becoming director, Kruszczyński said that at first he just wanted to listen intently to comments and opinions from the audience, that for now he was 'sniffing'

4 Ibid.

at the reality of the theatre. 'And what have you sniffed out?' asked a journalist.

[...] it smells of elegance. But I get the impression that the decor of Nowy Theatre encourages viewers unnecessarily to treat this space as a super-elite place. And that's a certain problem. I'd rather the theatrical creation referred to the space of the stage, and not the foyer and the audience. Please don't misunderstand me: I don't mean that people should come to the theatre in sportswear. My point is that going to the theatre should not automatically mean only distanced 'play-watching'. Theatre doesn't tolerate distance; it's about a close encounter with living people, which contains an element of improvisation every night. What is needed here is openness from both sides. I'd call this state 'being ready for the unexpected'.<sup>5</sup>

Before this could happen, of course, Kruszczyński knew very well that he needed to make many potential audience members ready even to pay a visit to the sophisticated theatre in which they had never set foot. Despite being in a sense a calling card of Poznań's Jeżyce district, situated at the beginning of the street that leads from the city centre into Jeżyce's heart, Nowy Theatre had never identified with the district nor shown any interest in doing so. Kruszczyński therefore drew up a plan essentially very similar to the Wałbrzych one, to establish a new type of bond between city (or, at first, district) and theatre; his assumption was that for this to work, for people to be interested in the company, first it would need to be interested in them.

Nowy Theatre forged bonds with the district audience in a number of ways (including removing the mirrors and marble), one of which was the 'first theatre-documentary serial', *Jeżyce Story. Posłuchaj miasta!* [*Jeżyce Story: Listen to the City!*]. Between February and June 2013, the premieres of the four editions – or rather episodes – took place: *Buntownicy* [*Rebels*], *Lokatorzy* [*Tenants*], *Gracze* [*Players*] and *Miasto kobiet* [*City of Women*]. The serial was prepared using the verbatim-theatre technique by a group of actors who, with director Marcin Wierchowski and writer Roman Pawłowski, opted for a different kind of work than the usual model of a theatre actor. This required them to make prior contact with potential audience members, who also became characters in the play: it was up to the actors to choose protagonists and carry out interviews with them, which the writer then used to create the script for individual episodes, with the director working on the stage presentation.

The point was not to seek out novelty, sensation or curiosity, but rather the everyday and ordinary that was at the same time interesting and in some way representative of Jeżyce; the director was looking for 'average, unheroic and unspectacular stories' that also had the power to grip. Whether they in fact had this power would become clear in practice. All episodes are played on the Third Stage, in a small space (eighty-four seats) that is sufficiently intimate to cope with ordinary stories. The construction is always the same: actors represent their protagonists, telling their tales in the third person, aiming to act in a relatively low-key but characteristic way, conveying gestures, speech patterns and temperaments they have observed. The stories are usually in rhythm

5 "Chcę robić teatr także dla wiary z fyrtała". Piotr Kruszczyński in Conversation with Marta Kaźmierska', *Gazeta Wyborcza. Poznań*, 14 February 2012.

with projections or video animations, but these are understated (e.g. in *Players*, maps of city routes the characters take every day) and juxtaposed with those of animals (an association with the district's old zoo but also with the animals free in the city next to the people: rats, cats or pigeons).

In *Rebels*, the video is made like an old silent movie based on archival photos: a story from 1912, when the Sarrasani Circus came to Poznań with demonstrations of animal training. One day, an elephant escaped from the circus; it ran through the streets and police were needed to catch and cage it – the 'urban safari' was big news in the city. In recompense for the incident, the circus manager gave the elephant to the local zoo. Little Cohen lived there for twelve years. The protagonists of this episode are Tomek (co-founder of the Rozbrat squat and singer with the band Apatia), Tomek's father (an old man who once lived in Jeżyce, struggling to come to terms with his son's choices), the famous Polish rapper Peja (still living in the district), the urban activist Kaśka (also from Rozbrat), and finally a retired musicologist and music-lover (the owner of high-end audio equipment and thousands of records). The rebellion is therefore with music in most cases, though this in fact has no bearing on the issues of the episode. Everybody tells their own story, focusing mainly on difficult family relations and those moments when they had to make some important life choice (for example, Peja tells how he gave up drinking alcohol), and tending to 'localize' their monologues, referring to streets, the playground or the market square in Jeżyce.

The elephant is linked to them not only in spatial terms, so to speak (because of the zoo), but also by way of comparison: the rebellion of the elephant, who ran away from the circus (because he just wanted to run, to feel the power of free animals, to 'fly'), connects to the conduct of the human rebels. A dream is related about an elephant whose ears turned into wings so it could fly away, which combines the desire to live by one's own principles, against social rules, with the problem of implementing those rules, as the next part of the story is about breaking the resistance of the rebel elephant by capturing it on the Poznań streets, reinforced by the appearance of a circus trainer accused of mistreating animals (although he fails to see a problem and believes that teaching an elephant to dance on a heated slab is like teaching young children who are also forced to do many things against their will). This history of the elephant, planted discreetly between the contemporary tales, is not merely 'archival' material (the 1912 zoo; now banned animal training methods; silent movie). Its message becomes current in the play's finale, which essentially concludes that the freedom-related actions of the Jeżyce rebels do not cause any social damage and conversely can prove useful (as in the case of the Rozbrat anarchists's work on behalf of local communities and excluded groups), and enable the building of bonds, and despite flouting bourgeois norms they certainly do not threaten anyone. It therefore makes no sense to use violence to clip elephants' wings; let them fly.

Does this not sound kind-hearted and somewhat naive? Is it not (as with theatre) a little boring? Indeed it is. The stories can be clichéd and predictable, their 'everyday' becomes banal, and actors strive to maintain semi-private contact with the audience, yet when they are playing a specific person it becomes doubly artificial and false. We might also add the *City of Women* episode's unbearable tendency to conserve stereotypes of womanhood. The only episode that tries to diagnose a current, pressing and alarming situation is *Tenants*, which tackles the topic of so-called

townhouse cleaners (gangs unlawfully removing old tenants from flats, by force and harassment at the bidding of new owners) and of informal student flat lets, reconstructing at the same time the beauty of the old – albeit mostly neglected – houses that produce the atmosphere of Jeżyce. I have the sense that I should not employ the same criteria for a serial as I do when judging a ‘theatrical work’, as that is not what it is, or at least what it wants to be, despite using tools of the theatre. This project is dedicated entirely to integrating a new audience, and that is why it is non-revolutionary and conciliatory. The type of bond with the theatre that it proposes is not so much (not only) artistic as communitarian and neighbourly.

This is because, first, the project encompasses not only plays. It also has a website, the Jeżyce Informal Initiative Group set up for the purposes of research, comprising the makers of the plays, sociologists, consultants, anarchists and Jeżyce (and other) cultural activists, lectures on documentary and verbatim theatre, and finally a (one-off) open display of the work (*Jeżyce Story: Making of*) featuring protagonists, actors, director and writer and many guests, especially district residents encountered during the ‘interview work’, forming a certain informal group of acquaintances. This meeting also saw an exchange of further stories, some of which were then adapted for the plays. In October, the actors left the theatre and for one day took over Jeżyce market stalls: where usually fruit and vegetables are sold, they ‘sold’ their characters’ stories. It was a kind of unexpected public act of exchange, a barter of stories as the listeners could only repay with their own tales. I consider all these actions equivalent; the (dis)play is not the ‘crowning’ of these various stages, but one element of the whole.

Second, the strategy for developing Nowy Theatre’s audience (keeping the ‘old’, inviting the ‘new’, stimulating everyone) clearly had space for difference: the augmented audience will no longer be easy to identify, or to stereotype as before as an intelligent middle-class crowd. On the contrary: social differences visible on the street will from now on also be visible in the theatre. The version of ‘Thou shalt not kill’ that occurs here is ‘Thou shalt not exclude’, which is an essential opening in both (or even all) ways. Neighbourhood as a strategy must take into account a diverse, sometimes random, and often not particularly desirable group. At this stage, it is clearly about getting to know then getting rid of prejudices: perhaps this is why the episodes are so cautious and indistinct, failing to show and problematize conflicts, stressing possibilities of cooperation and understanding, or sentimentally recalling neighbourly intimacy of residents of days (not so) long gone. The project’s subtitle – *Listen to the City!* – also leads in this direction: there is no order to intervene, only a request to sharpen the senses and consequently to show a more empathetic attitude to what I listen to.

Third, the project gave entirely new roles to the audience. Not so much to be ‘played’ in a direct act of participation, but leading to imagining oneself in a possible communication with the theatre. The first role was the untypical one of a history provider. Even here the verbatim method was infringed – or perhaps creatively transformed – as, although it is based on direct interviews and document collection, it usually aims to uncover acts and situations previously withheld from the audience, at least to an extent providing sufficient basis to form one’s own opinion on the mechanism of events. Verbatim theatre, practiced mostly in the UK

and Russia, has a strong political and critical foundation, exposes the machinations of power or capital, restoring the voice of excluded groups and victims. In *Jeżyce Story* these connotations are carefully avoided (although Roman Pawłowski's introductory lecture emphasized them strongly, by citing subjects and titles of plays from the Royal Court, Tricycle Theatre and Teatru.doc, for example, which may have been a deliberate action taken to stress how the Poznań project is different).

By sticking with 'uncovering', it shifts the search into the field of 'normality', everyday life that is utterly unremarkable but, conversely, underlines the community of experiences. The histories that residents provide are in a sense universal (they could happen in any 'normality' in which there are various profession, passions, problems and lifestyles, all existing in a certain common space), and are not even characteristic of Jeżyce, which here is more of a topographical entity than one driven by characters. What is important is that they are stories that have been presented, surrendered, brought; what is individual is that they are told by their owner, a concrete person. In this sense – and this is the next role of the viewer – the audience is entrusted with the function of verifier, who can carry out comparative operations (if this is someone's personal history, they can check what happened to it in the theatre interpretation; if it is a neighbour or friend's story, they can check what part of it they knew before, how close it is to the one spoken of; if it is a story heard for the first time, they can check the map and their own memory of the city, and finally call upon their own stories and initiate a mechanism of comparison/contrast/differentiation), and also feel a kind of trustee of someone else's narrative. After all, protagonists appear under their own names, having revealed rather intimate or at least awkward details of their biography – I suspect that participating in such a meeting has a strange way of triggering reflections on social roles and at the same time on one's own place in this community. The function of theatre here, therefore, is not only that of an archive or repository for histories confided in it but also, increasingly, as a link in social communication and of actual social agency.

Finally, as I mentioned above, among the reasons for which the project came about was activation of neighbourly relations of the theatre and district inhabitants, and changing the image of a homogeneous, elite and distanced audience, bringing more diverse viewers to the theatre. *Jeżyce Story*, meanwhile, also provides the opportunity for audience members to feel their own heterogeneity – not just the differentiation of the audience, but also multiplication of roles of the individual viewer (no longer perceiving himself or herself in the theatre solely as a viewer, but also finding within a citizen, artist, activist, reader...). Kruszczyński, remember, is thinking of peacefully leading the audience from farce to critical theatre – as I understand it, what he is interested in is allowing elephants to grow wings.

Translated by Ben Koshalka

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## ABSTRACT

Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska

**Winged Elephants: The Jeżyce Story Project**

The article uses the example of the Jeżyce Story project, a four-episode theatre serial, to examine the strategy adopted by Nowy Theatre in Poznań to construct a new audience. The idea was to change the way the previously run-of-the-mill yet rather elite theatre functioned by opening it to audiences from the neighbourhood and giving them a chance to connect with a stage that they had not previously viewed as 'their own'. The first step was to invite local residents to barter their stories and share them face-to-face with the actors. These stories then formed the basis for a series of plays portraying several Jeżyce residents as protagonists. The project allowed the new and previous audiences to meet, noticing and learning to appreciate their own diversity.