

DERACINATION AND ROOTEDNESS.

THE DRAMA OF SHIFTING BORDERS IN POLISH CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

The phenomenon of the so-called „regained territories”, although it may inspire many a narrative, both at the time of the People’s Republic of Poland and many years since, has been mainly presented from the perspective approved by the authorities. This perspective, even if it has changed, has rarely led to a reorientation of the prevalent narrative model. In Polish theatre the situation changed around 2006, after Jan Klata’s direction of the postdramatic play *Transfer!* in Wrocław. Thanks to this performance, many people – not only theatre spectators and not only Poles – began to consider the topic of post-war displacement and re-settlement. From then on, the subject of deracination and rootedness has increasingly appeared in Polish theatre, depicted as part of a conscious policy of the state which was carried out in the past. The attention paid by writers as well as film and theatre authors to a topic removed from Polish historical discourse – of the Germans from Pomerania, Lubuskie, Prussia, and Lower Silesia – or people resettled within Operation Vistula, is just one example of the emergent postcolonial awareness of Polish artists.

The practice pursued by an increasing number of authors of Polish historical dramas is to break free of the tendencies traditionally prevailing in Polish historiography and to open the avenues it has overlooked. This phenomenon can be seen as a kind of deviation from

a kind of „historical amnesia”, in favour of „recovering” a multifaceted history (an ability to elaborate the forgotten memories, Gandhi 7–8). Some of the plays written and performed recently by playwrights such as Magda Fertacz (*Trash Story*), Sylwia Chutnik (*Murano*), Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk (*Burmistrz [Mayor]*), Paweł Demirski (*Tykocin*, written with Michał Zadara), Bożena Keff (*Utwór o matce i ojczyźnie [A Piece about Mother and Homeland]*), Julia Holewińska (*Ciała obce [Foreign Bodies]*), and Tadeusz Słobodzianek (*Nasza klasa [Our Class]*) may be seen as contributions to a partial rejection of the „just right” vision of the past – usually adopting a homogeneous state perspective, i.e. in fact a national one; they give voice to the subjugated groups. The strength of the images persistent in public consciousness stems not only from their incessant reiteration, but also from the support given to them by the authorities and institutions dominant in Poland, most notably the Institute of National Remembrance. The general desire of theatre authors to dismantle the monolith of an unambiguous narrative of the past is nothing new: there were many excellent performances produced in communist Poland, especially by authors and directors such as Jerzy Jarocki, Andrzej Wajda, Konrad Swinarski, and Jerzy Grzegorzewski (Burzyńska 54). They were at odds, even if for obvious reasons not always overtly and directly, with the existing perception of the past as promoted by the regime. Outstanding directors were in opposition to the prevailing views and visions of the past, which were simultaneously established by theatrical institutions such as Television Theatre with its *Teatr Faktu* TV series (1963–1980) and the vast majority of institutional repertory theatres, subject to censorship and ideological cultural programming.

The close connection between the disseminated vision of history and the cultural policy of the regime of the People’s Republic of Poland led to the marginalization in narratives and dramas of the Others, i.e. those who did not fit in with the vision of a homogeneous nation state. Those absent (Jews and Roma, exterminated or forced to emigrate), those vanquished during the Second World War (inhabitants of East Prussia and other citizens of the Third Reich, living within former German borders, perceived by the prism of collective responsibility as Germans and as such clearly guilty of the war crimes), and finally marginalised ethnic and national groups (Silesians, Kashubs), as well as minorities deprived of their land (Lemka, Boykos, Do-

linians, or Ukrainians, relocated to the West) were ultimately deprived of their voice, which incidentally had never been fully given to them or sufficiently respected. In the first years of the People's Republic of Poland, in the cities which had until recently been German, a physical and symbolic acquisition of local theatres and establishment of new stages took place. Theatre contributed to the promotion by the authorities of the term „Regained Territories” and of a propaganda slogan about the „return to the homeland of the northern and western lands”.

Several years had to elapse since 1989 to effect a change in how artists addressed earlier historical relations. At first, the Others mentioned above appeared as shadows of the past, deprived of their own voice, triggering a nostalgia for what had been irrevocably gone. Although in the beginning of the nineties, ideas of significant ethnic diversity in the history of these areas appeared in different parts of Poland, their significance did not exceed the local (i.e. the cooperation of the theatres of Szczecin and Zielona Góra with German stages, the Bukovina Meetings Festival organized in northern Wielkopolska, related to the culture of displaced minorities or the establishment of the Silesian Korez Theatre in Katowice). Regardless of the political breakthrough, of the regained freedom and the rejection of censorship of the press, performances and other artistic activities, the groups marginalised by the Second World War continued to be excluded; those marginalized in the narratives and dramas of the People's Republic of Poland did not gain the right to speak at all.

Maintaining such a state of affairs as a kind of unintentional „thick line”, which eliminated some of the old and still abrasive problems concerning minorities, was possible by creatively addressing the demand of portraying the new political, social and economic reality, several years after 1989. The practice of setting new realistic conventions almost silenced repertory theatres with regard to the workings of memory and the need to verify the patterns of historical thinking. The themes of dominance, subordination and their historical background, present in the texts of the day, rarely implied opening up a debate; rather, their purpose was to confirm the dominant narrative model. The setting up of *Scena Faktu* [Fact Stage] on Polish Television is a perfect example of this tendency; this series in subsequent years increased in importance in the repertoire of the Television Theatre.

However, at the beginning of the 2006/2007 season, at the time when the Fact Stage was initiated, there were more and more theatrical performances after the political breakthrough in Poland, which supplemented, and sometimes even argued with, the vision of the past as promoted by the National Remembrance Institute (Polish IPN). Today, it seems that the opening of a new chapter linking culture and historical policy of the state provoked this reaction of the artists and influenced the broadening of the perspectives they adopted. Consciously, they tried to attract the attention of audiences and encourage them to a debate, seeking to open discourse not only to demographic and historical variability, but also to the practice of historiography. One of the first examples of such activities in theatre was the much-acclaimed play *Transfer!* by Jan Klata, staged at the Teatr Współczesny in Wrocław (premiere on Nov. 18. 2006). The aforementioned polemical tendency, which some commentators saw in this performance, was described by some as „historical populism” (Sieradzki) tantamount to „falsifying history” or a theatrical „falsehood” (Hałas). Others saw it as a testimony to the maturity of the generation unencumbered by the trauma of the war (and its communist vision), which began to speak in its own name and strove to „debunk history”¹. In its various incarnations, this practice is also described using other, parallel terms, which emphasize its chosen features: in an interview with Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Weronika Szczawińska calls it a „memory, anti-amnesia turn” (Tokarska-Bakir, Szczawińska 265). The editors of the first monograph on the subject published at the end of last year speak of a „bad memory” – which is not only a form of oblivion, but also a term suggesting a dysfunction and deformation of memories. Researchers describing the trend point out in theatre plays and on theatre stages everything that had been „deliberately, consciously and mischievously distorted and masked” (Kwaśniewska, Niziołek 10), following Michel Foucault, apply the term anti-history.

¹ This was the opinion about *Transfer!* of R. Węgrzyniak (Węgrzyniak) and J. Golińska (Golińska), whereas A. Kyzioł observed that the play was „an overwhelming testimony of the time in which history went mad” (Kyzioł). At the same time, the vocabulary of right-wing publicist describing the Television Scena Faktu started to include the concept of „debunking history”. The use of this phrase also defines the assumptions of the then-current management of the TV Theatre: „When Wanda Zwinogrodzka became the artistic director of the Television Theatre in 2006, creating the Fact Stage, the priority was to debunk history” (Krasnodębska 9).

Following the gambit made in the first decade of the 21st century, Polish drama and theatre abound in examples of various examples of thematising and polemical use of historical discourse. Directors and authors combine in their artistic statements the problems of power, subordination and politics, undermining the authority of their established narratives. More and more often, there are also texts and performances that „allow the victims excluded from the history written by the winners to have their say” (Kwaśniewska, Niziołek 10), approaching the postcolonial practice of giving voice to the subordinated. The impermanence of authority and the observation of the borders moving through the changing fronts of war, of the decisions made at the top and of the alliances of those in power offer a glimpse into the grand history from the local perspective of the marginalized individuals and social groups. Shifts in such dependencies were described by Tadeusz Słobodzianek, who used the example of the relations between Poles, Russians, Jews, and Germans during the Nazi occupation in the widely discussed text *Our class. The subtitle: History in XIV lessons* stresses the didactic bend of the author, yet the diversity of the perspectives presented, without indicating the dominant view, limits the danger of intrusive didacticism, offering the only „just right” version of history.

The moving front and the introduction of new authority are also portrayed – this time from the perspective of soldiers on the move – in the play by Paweł Demirski titled *Long live the war!* Its heroes are wandering westwards with the units of the First Polish Army. By introducing the communist authority in the newly acquired territories, they realize the postulates similar to those proclaimed by the Polish Maritime and Colonial League, created in 1930:

I demand that the Polish army
move westward
and reach Berlin
and that nothing change (Demirski 345).

The author patterned himself in his text on the characters known from the Polish well-known TV series *Four Tankers and a Dog* (1966–1970), portrayed as oppressed individuals favouring the dominant political, ideological and military option. Each and every one of their movements is watched by the dog Szarik, here cast as a Russian agent, who every now and then reminds everyone of the warning and order of Red Army commanders: „No step back!” (Demirski 389–390).

Both of these plays remind us of the many hushed-down truths that we can come across in all the stories that reject a diversity of viewpoints. Paweł Demirski exposes them by presenting one of the tankers as a black person and another as a Jew. Stereotypes in the perception of ethnic groups are strongly emphasized in Olgierd's statements:

hey, you, funny Silesian blacksmith, come here for a while [...]
 did I say a stupid Georgian with a venereal disease? [...]
 and did I say: „You, black”?
 in an imitation-leather tracksuit jacket, you salesman
 of illegal cigarettes (Demirski 355-356)

The tank Rudy 102's first commanding officer, dying in the seventh episode of the series, gives Demirski an opportunity to highlight class differences, unresolved by the years of war, occupation, exile, and only apparent „brotherhood in arms”:

OLGIERD

what a scandal
 I'm rubbing shoulders with these farm-hands
 but I think that I need not explain
 who I am in this whole thing
 I really do not [...]
 just as I do not have to explain that
 my grandfather in the January Uprising

CZEREŚNIAK

my grandfather gave you a thrashing with hoes
 bleeding, you were escaping on ice (Demirski 362)

The repression of certain areas of historical memory is inextricably linked to the repression of certain classes and groups – religious, national and racial – whose status, or even generally understood identity, depends on their presence in the testimonies of the past and in memories. Theatre aiming at opening up historical discourse may contribute to the extraction of what has been hidden for years, to the resonation of what is programmatically silenced, to the utterance of what is hushed down. The postcolonial context, exposed by some theatre authors, may provoke attempts to more comprehensively describe the situation of marginalized groups and individuals. Especially interesting in the Polish perspective of these phenomena is the fate

of individuals directly affected by the shifting frontlines, changes of the authorities in power and of the borders during World War II and soon afterwards. This subject, though irregularly and infrequently, began to appear in Polish literature and film, as well as in drama and theatre. I will focus on two examples of polemical theatre practice; both break the dominant narrative of the „language of the victims” in Polish culture after 1989 about the topic of an „innocent and severely experienced community” (Kwaśniewska, Niziołek 10).

The aforementioned *Transfer!*, directed by Jan Klata in Wrocław, followed the “theatre experts formula”, used by the German Rimini Protokoll Theatre (Dreyse, Malzacher). It consists in the involvement of individuals, such as participants of events, who personally, in front of the audience, talk about themselves, their own experiences and the history they remember. *Transfer!* was a kind of verbal narrative about the war and post-war experiences of Polish repatriates from the territories of present-day Ukraine and representatives of other nationalities affected by Operation Vistula as well as Germans from Lower Silesia and East Prussia. Their multi-voiced memories informed the audience about the relations between representatives of various nations, which changed depending on the political circumstances. The characters appearing in the play often involve Jews, who in the stage presentation remain absent victims of history, devoid of their own voice. Among the memories of events and circumstances recalled, it was precisely their absence that triggered the strongest emotions, in both the audiences and in the participants of the play themselves.

A dramatic element combining all the threads appearing in *Transfer!* was a demographic change in Lower Silesia after World War II. Treated on an equal footing were the memories of people resettled from the East and reminiscences of the deportation of Germans from Wrocław and Lower Silesia. The characters who appear on the stage speak in their own name. In the eyes of the spectators they gain the authenticity which is impossible to obtain in the traditional theatre. As credible witnesses, they are also convincing as authors of the play, although its script, despite being based on their memories, was written by a team of dramaturges. The political volatility, highlighted by changes in the way children and young people learn, is best seen by one of the men in one of the initial scenes of the show:

I have six different school transcripts
in different languages

I completed three classes of grammar school before the war
 a transcript in Polish / one
 Russians enter
 certificate in Ukrainian and Polish / two
 Germans come
 transcript in German and Russian / three
 after the sixth grade, I enrolled in a clandestine high school
 certificate from an underground school / four
 Russians enter
 transcript in Ukrainian and Polish / five
 I do not go to eighth grade
 In 1946, I leave and settle in Kluczbork
 final school transcript / six (Funke, Klata, Majewski 21)

However, the stage stories are fast becoming marked by the tragedy of war and the desire to change the national relations in the territory of Ukraine. As put by another of the protagonists of *Transfer!*, in September 1939 „everything was over: plans, dreams, good neighbourly relations, and my childhood” (Funke, Klata, Majewski 22). The old woman recalls her own memories:

when the Germans came
 the Ukrainians began to murder
 I do not know why
 in a cruel way
 it was quiet during the day
 but at night
 they burned down everything
 whole villages
 only the glow was visible
 yet before the war the relations were good
 something happened to politics I guess [...]
 Ukrainians killed a priest
 they came in the night
 they massacred him
 cut off the ears, nose
 they wrote on the church wall
 in blood: marching west
 we started to fear (Funke, Klata, Majewski 27)

The established pattern of perceiving historical events is dominant. And even though the Ukrainians seem to be portrayed as unambiguously negative and – in the narratives of other nations – deprived of their voice, there is also evidence of Poles’ participation in

the plundering of Jewish property in the east. At the same time, however, the leading role of German soldiers is indicated; they carry out executions of civilians of different nationalities. The play gives their children the chance to speak; they would not see their parents as executioners, but rather as victims of the system. A woman who mentions that she could not stand the voice of Goebbels during radio broadcasts of his propaganda speeches, defends her mother and father, once dedicated to the national-socialist cause:

Blame or no-blame. Neither my father nor my mother are guilty. They are not guilty and I will not say this tonight. They lived in this system and could not do anything about it. I do not want to hear that my parents were Nazis (Funke, Kłata, Majewski 30).

Theatre literature gives the impression of an unmediated citation of the characters' words, and the open performativity of the text allows actors to show their actions. Citing words and imagining the lifestyle and behaviour of real characters is a special case of stage acts. Directly quoting on the stage the participants of past events, their witnesses and victims, i.e. all those whose voice is not always heard outside the established historical narrative, is an endeavour to give them the right to speak in their own name. The words used are a testimony of the past, regardless of the pronunciation and the degree of illusiveness of stage acts. A special case in which theatre begins to function as a tool of historical discourse occurs when the protagonists provide personal narratives about their own experiences – depicting their private, biased view of universal history. Their personal impressions, preconceptions and the consciousness of the past in their memory become a full-fledged document of the past. This is the case of *Transfer!*, a play with a tremendous impact, despite the absence of stage experience of most of the actors appearing in it.

The second example of a play I would like to recall in the context of border shifts and resettlements is *Trash Story*, based on a text by Magda Fertacz (Fertacz), presented in June last year at the Lubuski Teatr Dramatyczny. Its director, Marcin Liber, goes back to the history of Zielona Góra – the city of his birth – more precisely to the fate of the Germans from the mid-1940s; he manages to find in it a universal tragic potential. The action takes place today, in the „regained territories”, in a house inhabited by the daughter of a post-war settler and her family. The stage, apart from the characters living today: Mother,

Small One or Widow, is peopled by ghosts. There is the spirit of Alexander, who drowned a few years before in the river behind the house, when he visited his home during a break in his military service in a war-torn country in the East (Iraq or Afghanistan, symbolizing unfulfilled Polish colonial ambitions). There are also ghosts of the Germans – of women who lived in the area and committed suicide in the face of the advances of the Red Army. In the original text, only one character originated in the netherworld – Ursulka, hanged by her own mother in the mid-1940s.

In Liber's staging of *Trash Story*, spiritual beings continue their existence in the place where they previously lived and died; they are among the living, in the spaces in which the people they used to be experienced moments of both utmost happiness and greatest tragedy. Now they are participating in a show that combines levels of existence: talking with the living in their dream visions, accompanying German tourists, and when the light goes out, they help the house occupants with cigarette lighters. A chorus of nine spirits tells the story of Ursula. The women who provide her text, acting out identical emotions as a group, remain individual, separate stage entities. Breaking the girl's character into ten voices, with a separate, tragic story behind each one, is a great complement to the dramatic effect Fertacz introduces. This is in particular true in the epilogue, when Ursulka's soothed souls appear on stage in the historical costumes of Bamber women, wearing beautiful garlands of colourful flowers on their heads.

However, the beginning is dark and disturbing. When the audience enters the theatre room, projected on the screen behind which the stage is located are scenes of SA divisions marching before Adolf Hitler. The vision of joy and pride of the cheering crowds does not screen the spectre of the upcoming war from present-day spectators. When the pause freezes the *image of the Führer, his hand raised in the Roman greeting gesture*, ten women talk about their personal and professional successes. *Each of them adds the name Ursulka front of their proper name – Klarin, Anne, Marthe, and Truda. Their stories tie into the local history from Lubuskie region, enriching dramaturgically the text of Trash Story.* They do not destroy the coherence of the drama or limit its target audience. This shows the individual dimensions of the grand history. An apothecary, painter, architect, pharmacist, and educator mark the contrast between their pre-war happiness and subse-

quent tragedy. Men in brown shirts were instrumental for the disappearance of colours from the streets of Grünberg. Their demands questioned the sense of educational, artistic and educational work and brought disaster to the city:

My Grünberg was beautiful, I saw colours everywhere. [...] I do not understand why people were suddenly disinterested in paper and watercolours and all were forced to buy portraits of soldiers against the backdrop of dark, sombre and monumental office buildings. [...] Everything was the same, uniform and dirty. [...]

Ah, once I was happy, I had a loving husband and a wonderful daughter. In Grünberg we organized the Grünfest every year – a holiday of vegetables, fruits and harvest. [...]

My world is falling apart when clashed with the pride, brutality and aggression of fascist militants. [...]

After many years of working with classical music, I could not come to terms with soldier chants. [...]

They wanted me to become a city educator in charge of the fascist approach to science!².

All stories end up with a dramatic leitmotif: „There was a big barn. I said goodbye and went”. They refer to the events of the early 1945, when the crossing of the former German border by the Red Army was accompanied by a wave of mass suicides of the local population, primarily women and children.

Having finished their stories, Ursulka stand up and, their arms straightened in the fascist greeting, sing a march popular in the Third Reich: *Am Adolf Hitler Platz* (this was the name of the former Kolejarza Square in Zielona Góra). When they depart, the canvas of the screen rises and the audience moves to the stage to sit on the chairs prepared for them. The main part of the show begins; the protagonist is a place saturated with a tragic history rather than any of the characters of the play. There is a white house with a red tile roof in this place; before the war Ursulka spent here her happy childhood. The daughter of the Poles who settled here after the war recalls it totally differently. She was afraid of the house. She remembers the „sticky walls” in which „something was constantly squeaking”. The house near the river, the yard and the vegetable garden store memories. The earth is soaked

² The quotations of the added excerpts of the text come from the typewritten script of the Lubuski Theatre.

with the tragic experiences of its inhabitants. As long as Ursulka's story is not heard out, her spirit will not find peace and solace.

One of the most significant and multifaceted discussions on history, both at the national and local levels, has been taking place for several years on the stages of Polish theatres, to a greater extent than in other fields of art. Its significance lies in the observation that the aim is not merely to change the content of existing historical paradigms or to abolish existing versions of past events in favour of their alternative variants, but rather to change the general perception of the phenomenon of history, which until now – as a narrative emerging in line with the narrative conventions of fine literature (White) has also affected individual memory. In theatre, thanks to the individualization of viewpoints, the notion of collective cultural memory, derived from the work of Maurice Halbwachs (Hassman), allowing Jan Assman to lift the opposition between memory and history (Borowski 65–74), shifts to the memory of private experience. Breaking up narratives into many speaking subjects, even if each of them is dominated by the current version of history, helps preserve the specific features that distinguish and individualize the story told.

Typical forms of narration contribute to the elimination of polyphonies. In dramatic genres, however, it is an inescapable element: a precondition leading to the creation of a dramatic knot and a means of creating conflict – the driving force of narrative variability. Polyphony, dispersal and the assumed contradictory points of view affect the blur of a homogeneous perception of history, dominated by established symbolic representation. In this way, sensitive to the voice of the Other, dramas introduce a polemic element into the existing authoritarian image of the past. The exposure and visibility of the silent perspective influences the perception of the theatre spectator, laying bare previously unknown, silent or displaced dimensions of reality. Dramas of this type – discovering the hidden – shape an awareness of the present time by creating a discourse on the legacy of the past.

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