

A Disturbed Ecosystem: At the Source of Violence in Polish Theatre¹

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What we remained silent about.

In March 2019, a video entitled *Anchois courage!* [*Anchois courage!*] appeared on the Internet. In it, we see two performers dressed as aliens – their faces are covered with masks made of foil, and their voices are distorted. In a makeshift TV studio lined with black foil, they talk about the director, whose play is censored by the city authorities. The aliens pay attention to the absurdity of

¹ The text is from a book entitled *To wróci. Przeszłość i przyszłość pandemii* (Trans. It will come back: The past and future of the pandemic) (eds. Przemysław Czapliński, Joanna B. Bednarek), which will be published in 2022 by Książka i Prasa.

the situation: “Well, the interesting thing is that they’ve cancelled this performance because of the bit about the priest molesting someone, and the show’s by a director who’s rumoured to have also molested someone”. We learn that when a theatre school student who collaborated with the director on her diploma confided to other students that the boundaries of her intimacy had been crossed during rehearsals, she heard: “Come on! He’s just like that! Don’t worry! You’re exaggerating. [...] He just works like that”. The conversation is then redirected to a professor of the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow and a former manager of an iconic Krakow theatre, who molested his female students and employees. There is no name or surname in the video. There was a conspiracy of silence in the theatre at that time, and we were all afraid that, as the weaker ones, and most of all weaker women, we would lose, and those in power would maintain their positions. The whispers behind the scenes, however, were still there, not only about sexual harassment, but about all kinds of violence. Knowledge of who the predator was circulated underground – we warned each other, but we were paralysed by fear of the consequences of exposing the violence. It was, in the words of Anna Majewska, “an alternative circulation of knowledge” [Majewska] – one that can always be reduced to gossip; and moreover, the rumour is ethically ambiguous, it is easy to disregard or downplay it.

I am one of the people referenced in this video – the event is taken from my Facebook page (as part of the

#MeToo movement), and describes a situation in which the manager of the Krakow theatre (where I was working at the time), the professor of the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow, Mikołaj G., pressed me against the wall and started rubbing against me with his genitals during a post-premiere party. The memory of these events is still alive in my body to this day: disgust, helplessness, shame. It did not occur to me then that such situations should be reported, because “that’s how it is in the theatre”. Similar stories circulate at parties, in office rooms, dressing rooms, and corridors. I also have experience of studying in the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow (the Wrocław branch) and the brutal hazing rituals. I clearly remember the all-night roll calls after which I passed out in class the next day. I remember when several masters – senior students – locked me in a metal clothes locker in order to pound on it with all their strength; I remember how us, girls, were told to cover their eyes and strip down to our underwear during the roll calls, and then the grandmasters (graduates) humiliated us, commenting brutally and with disgust on our bodies: breasts, legs, arms, thighs, faces... I meet people who performed those rituals on me; we hug each other as a greeting – my body always goes numb then. My body remembers. Only now, reinforced by the stories revealed during the pandemic and the support that has been given to those who have experienced violence, would I be ready not to partake in the standard hug and go back to what happened.

Why am I writing this text in connection with the pandemic? Because the topic of violence in the theatre began to resonate in the huge crisis related to it. I do not think that is a coincidence. The pandemic drove the theatre community to desperation. It found itself in a critical situation also because of the precariat system of employment, no social security, and classism that prevail here. Additionally, in recent years there has been an authoritarian rule of the Law and Justice Party which applies censorship and rewards the so-called national culture, thus creates space for nationalist and xenophobic content and practices. We have known for years that theatre can be a very unfriendly place to work and that radical right-wing governments destroy progressive culture, but it was the pandemic that left the community, already deprived of livelihoods and work opportunities, in deep trouble.

As more coming-outs related to experiencing and witnessing violence came to light, people working in theatre began to build a community, not just of victims and people employed in theatres, but also scientific and media circles, including Iga Dzieciuchowicz, Monika Kwaśniewska, Witold Mrozek and Agata Adamiecka-Sitek.

When writing this text, I rely only on the media reception of #MeToo of the Polish theatre and on the testimonies of the affected people – mainly women. I believe that what constituted the “‘underground’ archive of Polish theatre (and culture)” [Kościelniak] will become part

of the mainstream history of the theatre and will allow us to look at it from completely new perspectives, which will help it return to its original idea: community.

Theatre is not a separate space, it is anchored in the broadly understood socio-cultural environment and so, in describing its pathology, I will comment not only on theatre, but also on Poland.

Rudeness

“It is not the industrial revolution but the atrocity industry that is the prologue to the present day” – Kacper Poblócki writes in *Chamstwo* (Trans. *Rudeness*) [38]. As psychoanalysis teaches us, an experience that we have not worked through always returns. Serfdom ended 150 years ago, but its reflections are still visible in social relations, including employment relations in Poland. The landowner’s power over the peasant turned into the power of the boss over the worker, the power of the market over the citizen, and in the theatre into the power of those who have the greatest formal and symbolic empowerment here: directors over actors, managers over the ensemble, and capitalism over the creative process. It is the power over the body, over health, but also over emotional intimacy – after all, in theatre, personal stories and experiences become stage material. Theatre replicates and reproduces the history of serfdom: what is not worked out is sometimes played out as a kind of acting out. There are many analogies too, between the perception of the court and the the-

atre: theatre is still seen as an institution of high culture, which bestows it with its ethical immunity, after all “an artist is allowed more”.

The gender dimension of theatrical and feudal relations of power and abuse is crucial here. The authoritarian director was almost always a man², and the serf peasant had at his side someone who was even lower in the hierarchy: a woman.

As Pobłocki notes, it was not farming that had the lowest status, but servant work in the court, attributed mainly to women: “servitude literally became a habit for women, they became the embodiment of inferiority” [109]. Serfdom did not spread all over the territory of Poland, yet it organised social relations throughout the country. The same is true of violence in Polish theatre: it does not have to be present in every institution to structure the dynamics of relations in theatres – a relation with a sense of superiority and inferiority, insecurity and fear.

The historical narrative about the inferiority of women is intertwined with contemporary research on sexual violence. In their book entitled *Gwałt polski* (Trans. *Polish rape*) Maja Staśko and Patrycja Wieczorkiewicz cite research by the STER Foundation for Equality and Emancipation, published in 2015. They show that “88% of the respondents have experienced some form of sexual harassment (even unwanted jokes or sexual comments),

2 The last decade has brought a change - more and more female directors are fighting effectively for their position on theatrical stages.

20% – rape, and almost 38% of respondents were forced to perform some form of sexual activity (but not intercourse)” [Staśko and Wieczorkiewicz 413]. The perpetrators are mostly close people: 22% of the respondents indicated their current partner, 63% their ex, and 55% of rapes took place at home. 92% of women do not report rape for fear of experiencing “victimisation, stigmatisation, undermining their story” [413]. Research shows that sexual violence in Poland is almost always related to the family setting. It is hard not to see echoes with the special, “family” atmosphere in Polish theatres, where the relations often seem informal, and the managers are “familiar”. This lack of professional boundaries, along with the simultaneous dissolution of ethical and formal rules also leads to abuses because in our theatre culture we have a rule that “dirty laundry is washed at home” and “the family is the most important thing”. In fact, theatres are often a hybrid of a pathological family and a lord-serf relationship.

Archive of the female body, or: on farms

The Bagatela Theatre, 6th November 2019

On 6th November 2019 the media reported that the prosecutor’s office had received notification from the president of Krakow, Jacek Majchrowski, about the possibility of a crime having been committed by the manager of the Bagatela Theatre – Henryk Jacek S. A few days earlier, female theatre employees had sent a letter to the president describing the sexual violence, both physical and verbal, committed by the manager for al-

most a decade. The letter was signed by 16 women – actresses and other Bagatela Theatre employees. It was the first group from a theatre to go public in which the victims chose to identify the perpetrator by name and surname³. Some women – Patrycja Bielecka, Alina Kamińska and Karolina Więckowska – appeared in the media without hiding their image. According to the victims, Jacek S. had focused his sexual activity on employees who were in a difficult situation. Monika Kwaśniewska – a theatre researcher and humanist, dealing with the subject of violence in theatre – recalls Babicka’s testimony:

Each of us has experienced harassment when not having a partner, for example having been divorced or broken up. One of the girls broke up with her partner, the manager tried to “comfort” her until she got married – then his interest disappeared. Today I think he was looking for women who were not supported by any guy [Babicka; Kwaśniewska].

“But what that was about was the bodies” – observes Połocki in *Chamstwo* [91]. The serf body, owned by the feudal lord, who could dispose of it as he wanted, including satisfying his sexual appetite with it, belonged to him just like forests and villages. The topos of hunting

3 It is true that in 2018, as part of the performative reading of Antonina Sokolicz’s text *Pięść* at the Zbigniew *Raszewski Theatre Institute* Theatre in Warsaw, the director Katarzyna Shengiera gave an auto-ethnographic performance about abuse which she had experienced at the hands of Mikołaj G. – a professor at the AST in Krakow and former manager of the Krakow theatre. This performance, however, did not gain any media or critical publicity.

for “human game” in the Bagatela Theatre in Krakow was part of everyday life for the women working there. As can be seen from the above testimony, Jacek S. hunted for his prey based on specific characteristics. Kwaśniewska notes:

[...] in this and other statements, the term “single” is associated with the statement “without support” – implied as man’s support. [...] As a result, we come back to the rhetoric (and earlier – practice), in which the woman’s body does not belong to her, but is the subject of competition between men. According to this logic, because in the absence of a partner, the woman’s body does not belong to anyone – the manager, due to his superior position in the structure of the theatre, feels entitled to freely dispose of it [Kwaśniewska].

At this point, November 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic will arrive in Poland fewer than five months later. Cultural institutions, including theatres, will end up being forced to cancel events, some artists will be left without any income or relied on starvation wages. A discussion on the broadly understood injustice in theatres will begin: unfair distribution of goods and prestige, class character, lack of legal and administrative standards. There will be petitions addressed to the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (currently the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sports) and to local governments. As frustration begins to grow, we will hear more

and more decisive voices about the need for systemic changes, which the pandemic has only exposed. Other cases related to violence in the theatre, including sexual violence, will also come to light. It will transpire that the struggle of the courageous employees of the Bagatella Theatre was but a prelude, one that gave strength to others who no longer wanted to remain silent about the evil taking place in theatrical institutions. The wall of shame, fear, disbelief that others will believe it, will start to crack and fall apart.

Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices, 7th October 2020

The Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices is a special place on the map of Polish cultural institutions. It is a public theatre – co-organised by the Lublin Voivodeship Regional Administration and the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport – and at the same time, from the very beginning of its operation, an authorial place, focused around the works of its founder and manager, Włodzimierz Staniewski, Jerzy Grotowski's pupil and participant of his mystery internships at the Laboratory Theatre. At the beginning of his work, the manager looked for inspiration in the Orthodox traditions of the Lublin region and in the nature of Gardzienice. His first performances, attended by the local community, were famous, and the invited guests slept in farmers' houses in the vicinity of the theatre, located in a 17th-century manor house. The manor was then a ruin, but over the years it has been modernised. Contemporary promotional videos of the Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices do not

feature the local community in the audience – instead, we can see an intimidating, imposing palace with regal furnishings, and we hear the voices of delighted foreigners who came to learn about Staniewski's work methods. The director has not been interested in the local area for a long time, and he instead draws inspiration from ancient Greece. As Joanna Wichowska notes [9], Staniewski's attitude to his work environment, i.e. to the Polish countryside, bears the signs of contempt or even disgust:

Outside the window, a whitening slurry, matted with greys, dirt, fierce country faces, rheumy eyes, howling dirty dogs, mud splashes up into the heavens. [...] Drops of muddy goo drip from the rotten stalks of the bare trees, the jagged wall begs for mercy, and further, on the slope of the hill – kolkhoz, a great communist boil. It has littered this patch of once beautiful land. Cracked. It breathes a void. Festers. Stinks. In its gaping abyss, people-ants fight for the remains of scraps with people-drones [Staniewska 22-23].

I think that the air of superiority towards reality expressed by the artist who resides in a palace inaccessible to locals is significant for his relations with people, including members of his team.

On 7th October 2020 *Dwutygodnik.com* publishes a dramatic confession by Mariana Sadovska, who was associated with Gardzienice for 10 years (she left in 2001):

Every day I took sedatives to fall asleep, I used weight loss pills to avoid cynical comments, but I still cried out of my humiliation when, during rehearsals, in the presence of colleagues and sometimes invited viewers, I was told in detail how horrible my body was and how devoid of talent I was. And how I “stole” from my colleagues because there was no time left to work with them [Sadovska].

Sadovska describes her experience in terms of service: both she and other people working in the theatre – mostly women – had to “serve the master” at all levels. The scope of the service included ironing shirts (also underwear as added by another victim), shopping, cooking, massages, driving the manager. As Sadovska writes, “this” service “also included experiencing physical violence”:

On one occasion, the manager used handcuffs on me and then locked me in his room for a few days so that no one would know about it and see my bruises. [...] Another “method” the director used was isolation. Once I was locked in a room for a few days – I was strictly forbidden to go outside. It happened during an international festival celebrating the 25th anniversary of the theatre, when guests from all over the world came to Gardzienice. In this way, I was supposed to “save my energy and freshness” for the evening shows [Sadovska].

It is not the body of a serf working in the field, but the body of a female servant stripped of dignity that seems to be the most defenceless, objectified one in the history of serfdom. It is this body, as Pobłocki notices, that externalises classism most strongly and reveals that the “patriarchy is the most permanent mark of serfdom today” [361]. A body that could be beaten, humiliated, ridiculed, imprisoned; a body that was supposed to disappear, self-annihilate:

He alternately told me that I was disgusting and fat or that he would fuck me. He told me to be invisible, to disappear, not to make any sounds, he forbade contact with foreign guests [Żmigrodzka].

The above disclosure is from Alicja Żmigrodzka – one of the few women who decided to talk about their experience in Gardzienice after Sadovska went public. It thus proves that one voice can breach the silence and set others free.

While the organiser of the Bagatela Theatre – the City of Krakow – through President Jacek Majchrowski, held Jacek S. responsible, and he is no longer acting manager of the theatre, Włodzimierz Staniewski still remains in his post. The co-organiser of Gardzienice, the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport, has not addressed the subject at all. Although the Marshal’s Office of the Lubelskie Voivodeship ordered the theatre to be inspected, as of writing – on July 6, 2021 – we still do not know its effect. Also today, the Lublin issue of “Gazeta Wyborcza” reported that the District Prosecutor’s Of-

fice in Świdnik has discontinued the investigation into bullying and harassment at the Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices [Kowalewicz]. The reason given was that the statute of limitations on Staniewski's alleged acts had expired. One of the former actresses working at Gardzienice, today a left-wing politician Agata Diduszko-Zyglewska, pointed out that most of the women who made their testimonies public in the media were not interviewed [Kowalewicz]. The feudal lord still goes unpunished.

Training to violence

**AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow,
8th February 2021**

In the chapter *Niższe amory* (Trans. *Lesser romance*), Półlocki describes not only physical sexual violence against serfs, based on the quick satisfaction of urges, but also the emotional seduction of young, defenseless girls that precedes it. A similar strategy was adopted by Paweł P., the first protagonist mentioned in the video *Anchois courage!*. On 8th February 2021 “Duży Format” published a report by Iga Dzieciuchowicz describing the process of preparing a diploma with students of the Dance Department of the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts (branch in Bytom) by the director [“Nocne próby” (Trans. “Night rehearsals”)]. P. organised night rehearsals outside the school building, during which he worked alone with selected students, and each time he locked the door with a key. He asked students to strip naked during rehearsals. He persuaded Amanda to undress, arguing that

clothing was a limitation, and he wanted the young actress to seek sexuality in herself. At the same time, he added that the whole performance was based on her role and that she would make her an outstanding actress. During the night after the rehearsal, he sent Amanda her naked dancing photos, in one of them the girl touches her breast, “she doesn’t go to sleep after that” – adds the director. It turned out that in addition to taking pictures, he also recorded videos of the rehearsals. All without Amanda’s approval.

“Why are you still in your underwear?” – he asked Małgorzata. When the young woman replied that nudity caused her discomfort and asked what it was supposed to be for, P. ridiculed her – telling her not to act like a grandmother – and rebuked her for not being professional, saying that the body was an instrument of the actress. He finished with an order: “Don’t be shy, just get undressed”. In the end, Małgorzata used her period as an excuse and left her pants on. The director ordered her to open her hips wide and bend. As she danced, he would lean over her and “gasp”, saying she had the beautiful body of an Amazon woman. In the case of Agata, an independent actress from outside the theatre school, P. ordered her to undress, and at one of the individual rehearsals, also simulate masturbation. When she danced naked, he made her spread her legs wide and then do cartwheels towards him. In this instance, he also recorded rehearsals without the consent of the actress. She too, was manipulated by him: “I dreamed about this profes-

sion, it is rare for an amateur to be given such a large role. [...] When he liked my move, he shouted: ‘Yes, yes!’” [“Nocne próby”].

P. was not as crude in his behavior as Jacek S., the manager of the Bagatela Theatre; using sexual violence, he seduced – he showed admiration to the young actresses, recognition too, and promised a beautiful theatrical future. But if they did not succumb to his manipulation –he would deny their talent and suitability to the profession; he destroyed them, just like like Staniewski destroyed his theatre “servants” in Gardzienice, like the master destroyed serfs, and like the serf destroyed his wife.

**The Leon Schiller National Film School in Łódź,
17th March 2021**

On the 17th March 2021 a graduate of the Leon Schiller National Film School in Łódź, Anna Paliga, posted “a handful of facts” on social media – situations that she and other students had experienced while studying at the Lodz Film School. According to her testimony, during a rehearsal that went on until 5 am, a lecturer, Grzegorz W., hit one of the students in the face so hard that she had a nosebleed; he told a girl’s stage partner: “this is how you should play it, learn”. Professor Bronisław W. showed the student the scene of desire, biting his partner on the stage from her hands to the neck. Waldemar W., the manager of the Łódź theatre and also an academic teacher, decided to confront students with their

complexes, ordering them to face each other only in underwear and to criticise each other's bodies. During other rehearsals, the then rector of the Łódź Film School, professor Mariusz G., called Paliga a "fucking rag" and a "whore", whilst a guest lecturer, Grażyna K., ordered the student to undress, and when she resisted, she shouted to her: "Either you take off your bra or I'll throw you out of the university".

The patriarchy has no gender, March 2021

In Paliga's testimony, for the first time since the start of the #MeToo movement in Polish theatre, a woman appears as a perpetrator of violence. While statistically men are the main perpetrators of violence, I agree with bell hooks – a researcher, feminist activist, and black community activist – that patriarchy has no gender. In a book entitled *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* – an in-depth analysis of this statement – she notices that the patriarchy does not actually privilege men, but imposes standards of hegemonic masculinity on them which they often fail to meet. This causes frustration and aggression and blocks the emotions associated with powerlessness and fear, which are considered non-masculine in patriarchal culture. "We construct a culture where male pain can have no voice, where male hurt cannot be named or healed" – observes hooks [3]. Patriarchy socialises men not to express their feelings. Bell hooks points out that in conservative feminist circles, men who in fact wanted to change and started talking about emotions were considered to be attention

craving narcissists and emotional manipulators. There is only one emotion which the patriarchy allows men to express – anger. It is a positive, natural expression of patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity. Already in the process of growing up, boys learn that masculinity means getting what they want (including women), even by force. They are raised not only by fathers, but also by mothers who internalise gender roles. Identifying patriarchy and violence with only men is as sexist as denying them the right to express emotional fragility.

In this perspective, the testimonies of the male victims constitute resistance to the patriarchy and violate its order. I cannot cover every #MeToo story in this article, but I would like to mention two male voices: Konrad Cichoń (currently an actor at the Polish Theatre in Poznań) and Paweł Tomaszewski (an actor at the National Theatre). Both testimonies concern their studies at the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow. On 23th March 2021 Cichoń published a description on his Facebook profile of the “teaching practices” of one of the former lecturers at the academy, Beata F.⁴:

During the first class, I heard: “I will destroy you so much that if you survive this, no one and nothing will destroy you” . [...] To bring out the emotional state, to “feel it”, BF resorted to hitting, kicking, biting, grabbing, mocking, yelling, insulting [Cichoń].

4 Beata F. was dismissed by the rector of the AST in Krakow, Dorota Segda, after students reported her abusive practices.

Three days later, Tomaszewski's testimony appeared on the internet – it was a reaction to Anna Paliga's testimony about the lecturer, Grzegorz W., with whom the actor had worked as a debutant at the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz:

For three months I was a participant in this man's insanity. I was a participant in his manipulation, intimidation, abuse, tormenting, soliciting, exploiting and abusing at every level, including the sexual sphere. [...] It is there that I learned that after the evening rehearsal, you are not asked for consent but have to stay for the night rehearsal, without knowing when and where it will end. I learned there that contracts do not apply, that you have no right to choose, you have no right to privacy, intimacy, decisions about your body, hairstyle, etc. [...] I heard there the hallmarks of the perpetrators of violence and abuse: just don't tell anyone [Tomaszewski].

Just don't tell anyone

The testimonies of victims of theatrical (and not only theatrical) violence share many similarities, which make it possible to answer the question: why are the victims silent? Several mechanisms are at work here.

First, “no one will believe you anyway”:

“We didn't think anyone would believe us. Even now, when I've started talking about it, I'm afraid I'll hear:

Why are you lying?" (Alina Kamińska, The Bagatela Theatre [Kamińska]).

"The dean in the conversation with me and P. [the abbreviation of the initial comes from me – A.S.] openly stated that she did not believe me. It was my word against his. Then it turned out that something was wrong with the recorder and there is no recording of my testimony" (Małgorzata, AST in Krakow).

Second, fear of victimisation and self-victimisation:

"When this happens, there is shame, helplessness, you blame yourself that maybe your skirt was too short, or maybe your lips were too red, or you were too radiant" (Małgorzata Skowrońska, The Bagatela Theatre [Kwaśniewska]).

"I apologise to those who fell victim to Mr. W. [the abbreviation of the initial comes from me – A.S.] that I am writing this only now. Maybe if I had done it a few years ago, the same thing would have not happened to you. Humiliation and disgrace. I couldn't do it because I denied it. I was driven by fear. Dislike and disgust towards myself" (Paweł Tomaszewski, AST in Krakow).

Third, downplaying violence and/or regarding it as the norm:

Recently, a girl contacted me, who had also had unwanted contact with the manager. She wondered if her story was too “weak” because the manager had “only” touched her. Please note how many women think that their stories of harassment are of little importance, because it lasted for a while in a dark corridor and probably no one would believe them, because there were no witnesses” (statement by Iga Dzieciuchowicz [“#Metoo in the Polish theatre”]).

“Exaggeration, he always pawed women, we endured it, and you crack up” (anonymous person, The Bagatela Theatre [Skowrońska]).

Fourth, rationalising violence:

“We were constantly told that as actors we have to experience emotional states, so when something bad happens to us, that’s good, because (quote here): ‘we will be deeper’. The worst that you can be (sic!) is to be: ‘as empty as a bucket’ and ‘to have empty buttons instead of eyes filled with emotions’” (Konrad Cichoń, AST in Crocow [Cichoń]).

“I was told that allegedly ‘one can only create while suffering’ and that ‘only physical and mental pain is the guarantee of true and high art’” (Mariana Sadovska, Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices [Sadovska]).

I would like to discuss the last point in more detail.

“Who said the theatre – art in general – is safe fun?” Leszek Kolankiewicz asked rhetorically in defense of Włodzimierz S. in his text. And then he wrote:

Actors/actresses and dancers create their art using their own body and mind, which puts them to the test more often than ordinary mortals. [...] After all, the audience expects some daring feat from an actor and actress, that they will do their best while working on the role, maybe even – using an unfashionable phraseology – will sacrifice themselves on the altar of art [Kolankiewicz].

What emerges from this quote is a vision of a world divided into ordinary and extraordinary mortals, as well as a belief in the superiority and ethical extraterritoriality of art over other human practices. Actors and actresses should sacrifice themselves like the martyr Artaud, whom the researcher further refers to, for the sake of a higher goal – the art that becomes sacred (“the altar of art”). This means that someone has to bring out this suffering: according to Kolankiewicz, it is a director who influences them “with their magnetic power and performs some interpersonal séances in which [...] people create each other, bottom-up and down-to-earth, sometimes in a dark, wild manner” [Kolankiewicz]. Justifying violence is elevated to the level of transcendence.

Capitalism

“The power of a director is no different from capitalist exploitation” as Dorota Sajewska, a researcher and the former deputy manager of the Theatre of Drama in Warsaw, observes [Krakowska et al.]. The director “collects the desires of others, acts as a parasite on the ideas of co-workers, works primarily for themselves and their own name” [Krakowska et al.], becoming the main beneficiary of prestige as the single author of the theatrical work⁵. Moreover, the representatives of this profession are rewarded financially with extraordinary generosity in comparison to other members of the artistic process. The testimonies cited earlier reveal one more face of theatrical violence, which reflects the romantic, or even mystical, belief in the primacy of art over human life and, at the same time, the capitalist imperative of hyperproductivity:

I learned there [during the rehearsals for the production directed by Grzegorz W.] that if you do not scream till your voice is gone, it means that you did not give anything of yourself, I learned there that if your knees are not raw, it means that you played the victim in the rape scene incorrectly, I learned there that if you don't end up in hospital as a result of extreme exhaustion, you are not involved in the project enough [Tomaszewski].

⁵ This formula of work, although still highly used, is critically negotiated by a younger generation of directors.

Abuse in the name of creating a spectacle – a perfect product, giving up basic employees' rights – to rest and safety – are confused in the theatre with a work ethos and an artistic mission. While in capitalism money is the currency, in a theatre, where actors' and actresses' salaries are modest, the means of payment is primarily prestige, being among the chosen ones, for which a high price is paid:

During the presentation I was referred to as a “star”, a role model, “the face of the theatre”. One day I was proudly exhibited and applauded, the next humiliated and told that one day I would “betray” this profession. Yes, I agreed to all of this and naively believed that it was an inevitable price to pay and that this price was paid by every actor and actress for the possibility of belonging to this “chosen family” (Mariana Sadovska, Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices [Sadovska]).

The unlimited power that the professors have over us – the chosen ones who have been preparing for a long time to get into their ‘dream school’ and who can be expelled from it at any moment due to the whim of the lecturer – this power means that the violence is not reported and the perpetrators are not punished (Anna Paliga, National Film School in Łódź [Paliga]).

The director claimed that my role created the entire play, that I had great potential. That she would make me an outstanding actress (Amanda, AST in Krakow [Skomra]).

The fetishisation of the work, while omitting the entire spectrum of performative practice, has led to the supremacy of the effect of work on the process. Over the years, the quality of the work has justified the violence, depriving the creative subjectivity of people other than the director, who co-created the performance and the process leading to the production.

The relationship between the contemporary world of performing arts (and art in general) and production systems and phases of capitalism is described by Bojana Kunst in her book *Artist at work. Proximity of art and capitalism*. In it, she observes that producing and consuming has become our obsession: individualism, ideas, human energy, creativity, abilities, potential (which should be inexhaustible if you want to remain an active artist or curator), aspirations and ambitions are produced and consumed, which places art at the heart of the neoliberal system. The artist and performer becomes, as Kunst writes, an ideal “virtuoso of contemporary capitalism” [36]. They have to be like an exemplary post-Fordist employee: committed, multitasking, simultaneous, constantly creative, flexible and constantly producing. Kunst writes that unless we escape from the vicious circle of hyperproduction, and overexpose the capitalist mecha-

nisms in which we are immersed, the most progressive, left-wing cultural institutions will be tools of capitalist violence [Siwiak].

Capitalism in the Polish theatre is a unique hybrid: it remains in a suffocating embrace with patriarchy and the stigma of serfdom. The method of work of violent directors has the same foundations as those in which work was enforced on a serf: “You had to force each action. Corral them. Keep an eye on them. Push” [Pobłocki 6].

Future. Unity

The pandemic stopped, or at best radically slowed down the work of theatre creators. Of course, at the economic level, it was a tragedy for many people – especially those who worked in precarious conditions, without full-time job security. However, I am convinced that only the slowing down or radical stopping of the vicious circle of overproduction of ideas and artistic works created a space for meta-reflection on the relationship of power in theatres; for reflection on a production system based on exploitation and violence. We realised that exploitation and self-exploitation run counter to human well-being and relationships with other people. Kunst’s appeal, which calls for resistance to hyperproduction and hyperconsumption in the performing arts, is combined with the idea of post-growth/degrowth [Hickel; “Degrowth”], which in the era of the pandemic resonated particularly loudly and began to be discussed outside a narrow group of specialists. The diktat of continuous development and artistic success has

had a disastrous effect on relationships within *communitas* (also expanded by a non-anthropocentric dimension, of which we are being convinced by the eco-ethics of theatre), just as the terror of economic growth is deadly to the planet, human and non-human beings.

The pandemic has also made us feel weaker, at a point when our lives were in danger. And this is probably just a prologue – the harm we do to the planet as humans is slowly coming back to haunt us: we will experience pandemics, droughts and floods more and more often.

Confronting this fact, we have to start creating a completely different reality. We have to start with what surrounds us: our jobs, family, friends and acquaintances. As the feminist ethics of care [Gilligan] teaches us, we will not build wise states, we will not organise the good life of macro-communities, if we, as individuals, do not initiate care for our immediate surroundings (both human and non-human). The theatre is not suspended in a vacuum. In the face of a catastrophe, we do not need authoritarian demiurges-artists, but a community in which every being, human and non-human, has their rights and dignity. We need empathy, mindfulness and practice embedded in unity with the entire ecosystem, and not spiritual guides who place mystical experiences in their own creativity.

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