

# System Under Pressure

**Piotr Dobrowolski in conversation with Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Agnieszka Jakimiak and Marta Keil**

**Piotr Dobrowolski:** In recent years, we've heard more and more often about abuse taking place in Polish cultural institutions. Most of the cases of bullying, violence and harassment disclosed by the media occurred in theatres. Why is this the case? Is the theatre a place that provides a special opportunity to use power, a power which is grounded in the hierarchical structure of theatre work? Are the internal relations and dependencies established by tradition, or perhaps gender, the roots of this problem? Is this space unique, or maybe, is its perceived uniqueness related to a greater awareness of theatre employees, who have taken advantage of the opportunities to go public with claims of abuse?

**Agnieszka Jakimiak:** The answer to the question about the specific conditions of theatre is not straightforward. In the context of abuse, theatre can be treated as both

a specific and non-specific space. The uniqueness of the theatre, in terms of revealing violent practices, results partly from the fact that the people working there are often public figures. In theatre, as in any other workplace in the field of culture and art, there is also a commonly accepted, and often justified, belief that there are no strict rules for employment. Therefore, employees are required to intuitively adapt to unclear, changing conditions. In this way, the theatre as an employer evades the mechanisms that would prevent possible abuse. In theatrical works, intimacy and corporeality are often used, which, together with the disturbance of gender balance, creates situations conducive to the transgression of boundaries. Women's voices in the theatre are now being heard more and more often, and minority voices are appreciated, but the structural conditions mean that it is still mainly men in positions of power in theatres; both as managers and directors. I'm not saying the problem is gender specific. It is rather an element of a non-transparent, patriarchal organisational structure. The theatre is a special space of idolatry in which strong individuals are promoted. All this may point to the uniqueness of this art form. At the same time, however, in theatres, and indeed in any other work environment governed by capitalism, the pursuit of efficiency and success is evident. In the system of production, which is dominant in Poland, this perspective is common – working in the theatre does not differ in this respect from working in other places. The fact that the problem can be seen more clearly in the theatre than it can elsewhere does not mean that it is a unique or isolated issue.

I find it very positive that cases of injustice, abuse and harassment in theatres are being uncovered more and more often and that information about them is made public to a wide audience, and not only in this field. It is about time that people saw what has always been before our eyes. It is time to stop separating works from their creators. A clear example is the situation concerning Jan Fabre, whose abusive behaviour was described in an open letter published in 2010 by male and female employees of the Troubleyn theatre, which Fabre ran in Belgium. Marta Keil researched this topic, and I – along with Jaśmina Polak, Jan Sobolewski, Mateusz Atman and Kuba Ziółtek – made *Nosexnosolo*, a performance inspired by it. The title of the work is an informal byword defining the principle of working in Fabre's team. Looking today at his productions, we know that they always revealed the structure of power, along with the specific ways in which the director treated actors and actresses whose corporeality he exploited. Even looking just at the effects of working in his team, just as in other theatres managed by strong individuals, it can be seen that the structural organisation of artistic activities is not egalitarian, nor free from the transgression of boundaries. We need to rethink our unawareness, which we often use as an excuse for our own passivity. Working in the theatre, we often participate in systemic power structures and observe them only as bystanders. The challenge that we should accept now requires reflection not only on how often we have perpetrated violence, but also how often we have witnessed it. And what we can do as witnesses.

The situation in recent months has made me, like many other people, think. How do I behave when I see abuse taking place? Do you react? How? How visible does the violence have to become in order to break the silence around it? Individual gestures, as well as observations that the system is complicated, do not help much. So, it seems to me that the actions of the witnesses who decide to speak out is hugely important. Since describing the events at the Lodz Film School, Anna Paliga has repeatedly faced the criticism that she was not only referring to her own experiences. And yet it is precisely speaking about someone else's experiences that often makes it possible to break the silence in a given institution. Becoming aware that speaking out loud makes sense is revolutionary for the arts community. It differs from other environments, such as corporate ones, in that the witness's voice can resonate here and become amplified in the public sphere. We can now speak out loud about what we have seen and heard. From there, the rumour acquires a unique status; if it is confirmed by witnesses, it ceases to function only on the sidelines as a localised anecdote.

**Marta Keil:** The rumour, indeed, has acquired a unique status recently. However, it is still an ambiguous and potentially dangerous tool; at least until it's veracity is firmly established. However, the position of the observers seems to me to be extremely important – their attitudes, actions and decisions can affect how we work in the theatre. The importance of bystanders' actions will

be clearly visible when we start looking more broadly at the networks of interdependence that connect people participating in theatrical life. After all, the responsibility for the shape of the theatrical ecosystem is not limited to people directly involved in the production of a given performance. Curators and researchers must understand that their choices and decisions also have meaning, and influence the canon; deciding which artistic practices are worthwhile (and worth researching, presenting, promoting, etc.) and which are not. These are, after all, political gestures. Jan Fabre's position would probably be different if prestigious festivals in Europe and around the world had not invited him and stopped ignoring the rumours about him. We all heard them, so the organisers of the events where he appeared as a star must also have heard them. We have to go beyond the horizon of a single project and look at the networks in which we participate and which we create. Individual curatorial and research choices have a real impact on how this ecosystem works and how the audience perceives certain artistic practices. What do we see as a particularly interesting artistic practice? Which of them do we support and which do we reject? A very specific example: which performances do we highlight as the most important in a showcase of Polish theatre? Who decides on this and according to what criteria? These are the same questions asked by Ilse Ghekiere, the founder of the Belgian Engagement movement, which works to fight sexism in dance. After several years of activity in this area, she stated that reflection on sexual, structural and economic violence in the field of

performing arts always leads to a reflection on how the canon is created and whom it serves in a given shape.

**Agata Adamięcka-Sitek:** I'd like to return to Piotr's question about the unique nature of the world of theatre in the context of power relations and mechanisms fostering violence. In my opinion, in this discussion it is necessary to take into account the role that theatre schools play in shaping relations throughout the entire system. For me personally, this is a particularly important topic due to my role as the Student Rights Ombudsperson at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, which I have been doing for 2 years. The theatre and school is an interconnected system which for many years has operated in such a way as to not just replicate, but strengthen violent mechanisms. According to an unwritten, but commonly accepted, assumption, the school was meant to prepare students for theatrical violence, i.e. teach graduates to be able to function in conditions of abuse, transgression, manipulation and appropriation, without even seeing that they are subject to such mechanisms. It was part of the preparation for the profession, training for this "hard job" in which "you are not mollycoddled". First year actors and actresses were initiated into this world, for example, through participating in a semi-official ritual called *fuksówka* lasting several weeks, organised by older cohorts. Its aim was integration, creating readiness for artistic experiments, and breaking down barriers, but according

to many, it led first of all to the deprivation of personal boundaries, to imprinting young people with an auto-aggressive and submissive attitude, which opened the way to consent for abuse “in the name of art”. Today we’ve read and heard many testimonies from people who have paid a huge physical and mental price for it. For example, I talked to a student who had been getting treatment for her voice for years, after it had become damaged during one of these “games”. The intensive use of the voice in a situation of extreme bodily tension, in a state of stress bordering on trauma, can lead to serious, sometimes irreversible consequences. This story of a voice almost taken away at the start of school, and then a long struggle to preserve and strengthen it, is somewhat symbolic for me.

Selection was another oppressive mechanism. “Welcome to the final stage of the exams” – first-year students have heard for years – “some of you will certainly not graduate from this school”. And it really happened. Often, without prior notice and a chance to improve, without proper communication and discussions pointing in advance to difficulties or possible threats, students were removed from school. It is not difficult to imagine how this gave power to lecturers, how it set the dynamics of subordination and submission, and how it effectively blocked student gestures of solidarity, establishing the primacy of competition and selfishness. At any time, it was possible to be branded as someone who was not cut out for the profession or lacked talent. This mechanism refers to the question about the canon men-

tioned by Marta; what is considered valuable – and as such is universalised – and what is removed from the mainstream. After all, “talent” is always embedded in a specific aesthetic context, and therefore has an ideological and historical character. This is by no means a transparent, objective category. However, it is extremely easy to make it a tool of systemic control. Especially if you add to this the assumption of the full autonomy, or even sovereignty, of the lecturer in their classes. Requirements, methods, and to some extent also the programme – everything was a matter of individual decisions and practically not subject to discussion or control.

In a similar way, one could speak of violence in the process of educating directors, when you take into account the way in which future leaders are formed – those who are to have a higher position in the theatrical hierarchy and control employees. Many voices have been heard recently on this subject, including those of Hubert Sulima and Jędrzej Piaskowski, which are important to me. We can speak openly today because – thanks to the discussion on violence that has been going on now for several years – these mechanisms are no longer invisible and ignored. It is important to remember that the conversation about violence in theatre, which is so intense today, started in theatre schools as a bottom-up process that met with a hard institutional response. This process is very dynamic. It is supported by other bottom-up actions, such as the resistance of the students of the Bytom branch of the Academy of Theatre Arts to the abuse of Paweł Passini, or the testimony of

Anna Paliga, which – I want to believe – have a transformative force in relation to the entire system. The more so, as the response from the institution is clear, and unprecedented in the history of Polish theatre. Systemic changes have been taking place in schools since 2018: comprehensive procedures for counteracting violence are now being developed, and the ongoing, intense internal debate is beginning to change the mentality. Codes of Ethics have been written, Student Ombudspersons or Plenipotentiaries for Combatting Discrimination have been appointed. After the last discussion, caused by Anna Paliga's speech, anti-bullying commissions have been established in Łódź and Warsaw theatre schools. Initiation rituals have been banned. In the Warsaw school, we gave up on selection and, together with the students, we have developed a feedback system that provides much greater transparency, security and agency over the education process.

These are very fresh, but fundamental changes at the same time. We do not yet know what subsequent changes they will bring and whether they will be sustainable. In any case, schools, which I believe were a key element of the theatrical system of violence, are now becoming a progressive force. I am far from celebrating success and very aware of the resistance and tension faced by universities today. But – I repeat – something unprecedented is happening.

If you'll allow me, I would also like to come back to the topic of rumours that you raised. For a long time in

schools, we had only dealt with rumours of violence. With ‘water-cooler’ knowledge – widespread yet unofficial. It was impossible for official use, because no one complained or confirmed the information with their name, so in fact it strongly facilitated the normalisation of violent practices. I fully agree with what you say about changing the position of a witness to violence – from someone who is a source of informal, behind-the-scenes knowledge to one who is responsive and open-minded. When a bystander becomes a whistleblower, a transformation takes place. However, I wonder how we can take into account in practice something that still functions only as a rumour. You say, Mara, if Fabre – based on unverified information – was not invited to festivals, everything might be different. Such an approach would be dangerous. There is a tendency to abuse in the theatre – it can be a space for intrigue, manipulation and provocation. I myself would be careful of making decisions influenced by gossip. I don’t know whether it’s possible to create efficient procedures, but I think that building soft tools with the participation of experts – appointing anti-bullying committees, examining cases within institutions and leading to a situation in which a request for assistance or arbitration will not be treated as “embarrassing”, a scandal or a last resort – this is a much better direction. It is worth attempting to create and launch efficiently operating tools that allow for the translation of internal, affective flows of information – gossip and ‘water cooler’ info – into procedures, so that not only the victims, but also people accused as perpetrators of violence, could say “Okay, I’ve checked

it". There are ways to rationally and democratically create such committees, which will initiate procedures to verify this information and resolve conflicts in the presence of psychologists and lawyers. I would not like rumours to become an element of official institutional policy.

**P.D.:** I agree that rumour should not be taken as primary source of knowledge. Therefore, it seems very important to me to try to work out systemic mechanisms of confrontation, allowing for the verification of all kinds of doubts within the institution. Before returning to the question of how you think the system can be improved, however, I would like to refer to the aforementioned reproduction of violence. The information and interpretations that Agata Adamięcka drew attention to when talking about the practical side of acting education in theatre schools are shocking. Being introduced to violence, getting used to it and taking it for granted, and then using it in hierarchically managed theatres raises questions about how violence manifests itself in institutions. Are its internalised forms visible in the practices of their functioning? How does it look from the perspective of a women director? Agnieszka, do you see everyday violence and systemic domination when you enter the theatre and start rehearsals?

**A.J.:** Before I answer, I would like to refer to Agata's statement. I agree that the work environment in the theatre is unique in many ways. As a graduate of the Directing Department of the AST National Academy of Theatre

Arts in Krakow, I can also confirm what Hubert Sulima – with whom I studied – and Jędrzej Piaskowski observed. What I witnessed in the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts, which I graduated from almost a decade ago, was shocking for me, especially as a person who also has experience of studying at the College of Interdisciplinary Individual Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences. And especially when I observed the ways in which the Acting Department operated. Education at the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw taught me that dialogue between lecturers and students is possible. It turned out that acting studies function on different principles. Anyone can be thrown out at any moment, for example because they have a crooked smile – in their second or third year! I believe that this is the essence of the Polish version of the corporate capitalist system. Of course, publicly funded theatres in Poland are subject to different rules than companies. But the present internalised hierarchy, and the belief that some people working in them are better than others, who are treated as means of production, and to whom someone has rights, is a degenerate form of capitalist attitude to work. This system is rooted in the minds of those who work in theatre schools. The AST National Academy of Theatre Arts was unique to me for one more reason – but I guess it must be similar in Warsaw – it was mostly the actors that taught actors and conveyed what they had been taught over the years about working in the system, and cultivating the vision of bohemian Krakow: crossing borders and not conforming to any standards, which is also

a source of pathology. Actors, who usually teach without any pedagogical training, transfer their habits to students. They tell them how to barge their way in and how to stay in a position of power. When we started working on the Undivine Comedy at The Helena Modrzejewska Old National Theatre, Oliver Frłjić said that in Poland, just as in Croatia, actors in theatre schools are taught how to avoid directorial manipulation, and directors are taught how to manipulate people. I agree with him.

Coming back to the question: theatre life in Poland is drenched in violence. It is easy to find examples of how unprotective and predatory this system is. However, today – as a participant in the discussion about abuse, molestation and the #MeToo movement in culture – I am more interested in looking for positive patterns and examples than in analysing negative ones. An attempt to create a code of ethics and a collection of good practices is one of the ideas implemented on the initiative of Iga Gańczarczyk, Beata Kempa and Michał Telega at AST. Yet even in a crisis triggered by a pandemic, it was clear how many institutions treated their employees responsibly and with care. I have seen this in the case of the Wrocław Contemporary Theatre, where the work was done by both parties. During the renovation, which was completed a year before the first lockdown, trade unions, actresses and actors managed to work out ways to ensure that during the crisis, when there were no performances, no one would lose their jobs. Shortly thereafter, these mechanisms proved to be very success-

ful in the pandemic. The management paid attention to every employee and showed great management skills. It has led to a situation where contracts are negotiated in advance, knowledge about repertoire plans is widely available, and employees gain a sense of institutional security in the event of crisis situations. The experience of working in such a theatre allows me to believe that a violent bubble can be pierced not just in schools, but also in spaces of later professional practice. Although education has established bad habits and there seems to be no easily accessible way out, some things can be unlearned. There is a pool of positive examples that we should draw from. Of course, it is worth starting from the very beginning, but not everyone has the opportunity to reform the school. I myself am beyond its reach now, and I can only publicise what I saw and experienced a decade ago, when I was still studying. Internal discourse always feeds on examples of bad practices that obscure efforts to change. However, I believe that it is also worth talking about the good things. Otherwise, we will remain blind to the positive patterns.

**P.D.:** The idea of transparently setting the cast of performances and transparent management of the institution, as in the case of the Wrocław Contemporary Theatre is linked to the idea of confronting rumours by means of an internal dialogue. Can the disclosure of rumours, and an open discussion about them be a condition for cooperation within the institution? Does the change of work rules require a reform in the approach

to actors and the entire team of co-writers of theatre performances, who should be treated as independent, subjective artists, and not passive performers subjugated to the directors' wills? Are members of theatre troupes ready to enter this level of cooperation? Or maybe they are waiting for the directors' initiatives, for their vision of what to do and how? How about the willingness to cooperate, which replaces the attitude that serves the passive implementation of the will of a director?

**A.J.:** I would like to look at these questions from a slightly different angle. So far, I have been very lucky in the conscious creation of teams of employees who were ready to function on an egalitarian basis. I have not experienced a person standing in my way or turning out to be very difficult to cooperate with. However, I know that such situations do happen. When devising a performance, I have to responsibly select people who are able to get along with each other. I avoid work based on conflict, although I am not against this style of work. I even think that working with conflict can bring interesting results. Oliver Frlić works using ideological conflict. Similar to Chantal Mouffe, he assumes that there are lines of conflict in society that must be exposed, because without them it is impossible to purify the relationship. Ideological confrontation allows us to continue functioning – only thanks to it are we aware of the differences between us and are we able to work out common solutions. When Oliver starts rehearsals, he looks for the ways in which social conflicts are represent-

ed within the team. It is not about personal differences – although these may appear in the course of work – but about confrontations of political attitudes. Frlić makes things clear. He asks what we think about the strike at work, about abortion, anti-Semitism or Polish nationalism. I work differently: I do not look for dividing lines between people, but for points of contact. I know that I am not able to resolve every tension. I do not treat theatre as a space for therapy and I never require people to cross psychological boundaries that they do not want to cross. I don't have the formal qualifications to do so.

I also do not believe that work in an institutional repertory theatre in Poland can be collective in the full sense of the word, because contracts and remuneration are structured differently here. It is normally only the director who is required to prepare the idea, concept and script in time for the first rehearsal. In Polish theatres, there is no practice of paying for research and preparation time, so there is no chance that we will sit for six months as a group of colleagues and look for solutions together. The second difference is what Agata Adamiecka noticed while working on the project entitled *Porozumienie* (Trans. *Agreement*) in the Powszechny Theatre, namely that the structures of institutions are differently organised and the people who work in them are different. Paweł Łysak, the manager of the theatre, noticed that not all people working in the theatre wanted to make decisions. The discussions sparked at that time led to the conclusion that even if people do not want to make decisions, it does

not mean that they do not want to know about them. It made a lasting impression on me then – we do not have to hold everyone responsible for making decisions, but we should inform everyone when they are made.

**P.D.:** Do you meet supervision in theatres that limits your artistic autonomy? Are there any visible effects of the artistic director on directing autonomy, or the organisers' attempts at influencing the directors?

**A.J.:** This is a difficult question, different institutions work in different ways. Recently, in my work, both in the Contemporary Theatre in Szczecin and in the Contemporary Theatre in Wrocław, I experienced very productive feedback and organisational care, in which open dialogue was encouraged. Of course, I have also encountered conceptual supervision many times. Let me put it simply – while working in Polish theatres, I have seen a lot of violent situations and a lot of bad practices. Recollection of the support that Marek Fiedor gave me when I was preparing *Kongres futurologiczny* (Trans. *Futurological Congress*) is much more important to me than re-examining the oppressive behaviour of the people I used to work for. I feel that we are able to recognise violence better and better, but we lack the tools to push the discussion about it further. I am not saying that accountability for violent gestures and harmful practices is not important, on the contrary – I believe that it is a key step that will allow us to create new spaces for dialogue. At the same time, I am convinced that many people have been work-

ing for a long time to make things better, more equitable and fair – and I would not like this effort to be ignored.

**A.A.-S.:** I agree with Agnieszka. Constructive examples are needed, and it is worth focusing on strategies that consciously go beyond the violent paradigm. If you allow me to come back to the process of changes in the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw I would like to say that it is with great joy that I have recently discovered lots of great counter-practices undertaken by educators who recognise the problem of systemic violence and resist it. They do not always have the courage, or simply the opportunity to talk more about the different pedagogical practices they use. But right now comes the point where they are beginning to communicate with each other. I can see it during the obligatory anti-violence workshops for lecturers at the Academy. It is amazing when I speak to someone and they say that they had been waiting for years for the institution they work for to take up this topic. And when other participants respond to them, and share their experiences, diagnoses and novel methods of dealing with identified problems. In this way, important alliances are built, although, of course, antagonisms and conflicts emerge too, which – I agree with the already mentioned Frljic – is generally a constructive process that conditions the development of the organisation. I think this is a project for me – as well as describing, analysing and trying to understand the system – I want to collect examples of positive counter-bullying and empowering strategies, which are really quite numerous.

Referring to the theme of collective work – I agree that there is no point in making it a utopian endeavour, because this practice is almost impossible in the repertory system. However, I would not like to devalue the concept itself or adopt superficial mechanisms to replace it. In the context of repertory theatre though, I would replace the striving for collectivity with transparency and subjective communication. Concluding the so-called contract, the postulate of which was included in the documentary resulting from the *Granice w teatrze*<sup>1</sup> (Trans. *Borders in theatre*) conference organised this year, should be the basic practice. The point is for the people who participate in the artistic process to meet at the very beginning of their work and establish the rules according to which the process they undertake will be carried out. They can agree on both a certain range of mutual relations and the way they work; establish substantive issues, as well as psychological and ethical ones. It is important to talk about how they would like to work; what they will need, what they agree to and what they are sure to reject. These things should be negotiable, the results of which should be written down. A team of creators who propose an artistic concept can initiate solutions, but must be open to conversation.

This fundamental procedure, very simple in assumptions, but not always easy to apply, weakens the basis of the entire manipulation system. As Agnieszka mentioned, it is based on a specific game, in which you look for ways to approach your colleague. Directors learn to

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1 <http://www.ast.wroc.pl/projekt-granice-w-teatrze-15-16-maja-2021-r>

manipulate actors, and actors learn to function in the face of manipulation. Of course, the dynamics of power are complicated. The team may have its own strategies and resources to defend itself against over-domination. However, knowledge about organisation of the institution and about the assumptions of the creative process is always needed. Many directors still feel that actors do better when they don't know what they're doing; that they then are able to fully activate their unconscious potential. This was revealed, for example, thanks to the discussion around the practices of Paweł Passini, who claimed that he had the right to propose principles that only he understood, without even trying to communicate them. As it turned out, his contribution to very young people's diplomas was based on the concealment of intentions and manipulation. Only the director knew how he wanted to work and what methods he would use. Everything was in his hands, he could freely suggest individual, naked rehearsals to actresses, convinced – as he claimed – that they had therapeutic power and offered the chance for them to get rid of shame and limitations. He believed that knowledge and consent were not needed. This situation is very conducive to violence.

Therefore, in *Granice w teatrze* we propose formulating a contract that can always be returned to, can be re-negotiated and which should also be presented to the theatre management. It is they who are legally responsible for ensuring a safe working environment. Bullying or harassment cases are dealt with by employment

courts against the employer, and not against the direct perpetrator. Working with contracts, in addition to having committees working with experts and providing a safe form of discussion, could do a lot to prevent and fight violence, and lead to stronger teams.

**M.K.:** I fully agree with what you say about procedures, contracts, and most of all about talking, and sharing knowledge with the team. I only have one doubt. As a result of a study that I am currently conducting on behalf of IETM (International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, the world's largest performing arts network) together with Marie Le Sourd (a representative of On the Move, an organisation that monitors and supports mobility in the arts) as part of the SHIFT project, and which checks the reactions of institutions and artistic organisations in Europe to the latest #MeToo stories, we can see that introducing even the best-conceived procedures is not always enough. Sometimes they turn out to be a kind of fig leaf – a plan on paper that has no real effect. It can also be the case that their introduction is simply not possible. This happens mainly in teams managed by strong individuals, where employees are clearly subordinated to the dominant vision of a leader and where there is no space for a real conversation. I do not want to say that this is the reason why you should not try to implement the recommended mechanisms. On the contrary, there will be no change without them. But procedures alone are not enough. What can be done in such a situation? How can we influence the person run-

ning the institution? The context here is crucial. Here again I come back to the canon, and at the same time I agree with Agnieszka that Polish theatre is an environment embedded in a social, political and economic system in which the effects of work are more important than the way it is done. The awareness that there will always be a hundred others in the place of each employee enables almost any violation of employee rights. I also believe that this is a fundamental feature of the economic system in Poland, which is dominated by a very brutal version of late capitalism. An equally important obstacle on the path to change is, in my opinion, the dominance of repertory theatre. There are no conditions, or at least not yet, for rumours to be discussed in public. Therefore, rumours remain just that, rumours. This does not mean that it is a tool that can be used to reform the system and individual institutions. However, I am convinced that is necessary to create a space for public debate that will destigmatise the personal experience of violence, and allow you to talk about it without repressing and labelling you as a difficult person, a troublemaker. I have gone through an experience of violence in the theatre. As an unemployed person, I did not have access to legal tools, I was not protected by employment law, so I could only speak out about this experience. Only that, in fact, I had no place and no one to talk to about it then. So, instead of a public debate, there was a rumour. I am convinced that the lack of space to talk about working conditions was deeply rooted in the repertory theatre system. We were unaware that it is possible to work differently.

Criticising the existing system is often synonymous with losing the possibility to work and develop. Within this type of organisation, there are basically no alternatives. I don't think that full change will happen unless we see that various forms of organising and various ways of working at the professional level are possible, and unless we produce structures that are alternative to repertory institutions – ones that enable paid work and full-fledged professional development. It is difficult to talk about the imperfections of working methods in repertory theatre if we are not aware of other solutions. Moreover, for a long time it was the lack of alternatives that made it possible to turn a blind eye to abuse. There was nowhere else to escape to. We can learn from the natural environment: no alternative to a strong monoculture always hurts development, the soil becomes barren. It is worth considering how we can build an alternative canon and translate what has so far been an area of personal, affective experiences into concrete, legitimate social and political experiences. It probably won't be possible until we start to accept the possibility of different conditions and working practices in the theatre. And also until we start thinking about art as simply a working environment.

**P.D.:** We ask questions, but we are left with only a presumption of possible answers. In the context of maintaining dependence and disciplining actresses and actors, how do you see the possibility of making a real change at the organisational level? Can the statutory independence of institutions facilitate or hinder the

implementation of potential reform in the treatment of culture workers? Is it a fact that, given their legal independence and power to single-handedly make arbitrary decisions, every manager will defend the status quo? Of course, there are examples of theatre management practices that contradict this rule, but these are isolated cases. How possible is it to influence the shape of the entire system? How can each institution be reached? How can you influence the model of functioning and management of cultural institutions in Poland?

**A.A.-S.:** Let me be clear: I do not see any extended role here for the organiser of a cultural institution. And I would be careful to suggest anything that would weaken the autonomy of the institutions. In recent years, we have had many examples of how the incompetent, and often openly politicised actions of organisers have damaged institutions. Instead, I see the right direction of changes in strengthening the subjectivity of the team. We hear more and more about the constructive, positive role of trade unions. It is also worth promoting a new way of thinking about programme, or programme and art councils, which we tried to do at the Powszechny Theatre as part of the *Porozumienie* project. Democratically elected staff representatives from all structures of the institution, even if they are not yet empowered to influence decisions, should be entitled to be fully aware of management decisions. The manager must not fail to engage in discussions with them and answer their questions. The work of such a council should be transparent, and the minutes of its meetings should be

disseminated internally. Such mechanisms make it possible to see how the theatre is managed. At the same time, they play the role of soft tools for empowering its employees.

**M.K.:** When looking for an answer to the question of how to carry out a change, I would like to draw attention to the trap created by the lack of organisationally legitimate and independent groups with the possibility of structured financing, and thus also professional development. People who want to escape from the system to which they have been trained in schools have nowhere to go. They are left with the post-Grotowskian and Gardzienician tradition of alternative theatres, represented by, for example, Paweł Passini; or the uncertain fate of artists who have no chance of employment, who must earn elsewhere, as exemplified by the Warsaw Commune. Hope for change is brought by more and more numerous, wonderful, bottom-up choreographic initiatives, such as KEM or the Centre in Motion, but these still function on the verge of survival, in an uncertain design system and without structural support. The lack of sufficient space for choreographic practices is particularly significant here, because it means a lack of reflection and the absence of discourse, within which alternative methods of work used in various places of the world have been developed over the years.

I will refer to a personal example here. The attempt to change the model in which we operate, and to expand the canon of artistic practices were the basis of the pro-

gramme strategy that we adopted together with Grzegorz Reske as curators of Theatre Confrontations. Today I have the impression that our activity was discontinued in 2017 because it did not correspond to the deeply patriarchal and hierarchical working methods of the local “alternative” – Janusz Opryński, Paweł Passini, Łukasz Witt-Michałowski, who dominated the theatre world in Lublin at that time and where, as we know today, there was abuse of the directors’ powers. At the same time, our goal was something else. We wanted to show the artistic practices that developed thanks to the novel ways in which work was organised. The phenomena we present, seen from a broader European perspective, were not particularly subversive or radical. After all, Gob Squad or She She Pop are very well-established, now basically mainstream propositions. So our programme was not particularly provocative. However, it differed from what those associated with the Centre for Culture, the organiser of Theatre Confrontations, considered valuable at the time. I am saying this because, from today’s perspective, I understand our departure from the festival as part of a much broader, violent dispute that still continues today. Our programme was embedded in a feminist perspective and resulted from the need to broaden the ways of thinking about theatre practices and ways of working in theatre. The organisers made it clear that at that time there was no room for that in Lublin.

We know very well that such situations are not unique. Let’s look at the first few important curatorial programmes that broadened our thinking about performing arts and

introduced alternative, international perspectives to Polish institutions or festivals: I mean here the performative programme of Joanka Zielińska in the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, the programme of the Malta Festival in Poznań, implemented by Katarzyna Tórz, and Tomasz Kireńczuk's expansion of the Dialog-Wrocław International Theatre Festival's programme. None of these people work in Poland anymore – and neither do we and Grzegorz. I am not saying that the solutions proposed by this group of people were perfect. We made mistakes like everyone else. However, I am very worried that none of the discussions initiated in this way have had a chance to be continued. I would like to believe that change is possible, but reality suggests otherwise. As long as alternative models of work in theatre are not organisationally and structurally validated, a profound, long-term change will not be possible.

**P.D.:** In the repertory theatre system, as in any cultural institution, measurable effects are of key importance. This is the dominant way of thinking about culture in Poland. The need to measure effectiveness with numbers is at the core of the organisation of cultural life: media interest, measurable rehearsal effect, audience interest, ticket sales, attendance, trips to festivals and awards. These conditions influence the violence of the Polish theatre system. How does it look in Europe? How popular are the mechanisms to prevent abuse and lead to full enforcement of employees' rights in those theatres?

**M.K.:** Currently, I observe two practices that prevent abuse. The first one is associated with the use of tools that Agata has already talked about, i.e. various forms of transparent procedures for finalising contracts, which is very important in the case of institutional theatres. Transparent pay scales work very well in the Netherlands and Belgium. The salary structures are precisely defined there at the state level, thanks to which, with specific experience and education, you know where you are on the salary grade. It is known how much a freelancer's work costs per day or hour, and the organisers cannot offer them a lower salary. It is very important that the salary brackets are clearly defined, not only the minimum, but also the maximum. Thanks to this, the issue of remuneration ceases to be a grey area or a tool of manipulation. Transparency of salaries, and clear rules for announcing auditions and finalising contracts help to organise the work of the institution.

The other thing I notice is, I don't quite know what to call it, some kind of critical mass. I mean the discourse that arises as a result of a whole series of bottom-up activities, ones that are not from the state level anymore, but come from the people working in art and employed at various organisational levels. These are not only initiatives by female artists, but also of people working in administration, production, promotion or supporting the artistic process. It is about such movements as Engagement or Justice is Fairness in Belgium, codes of fair practice in the Netherlands or the German

Initiative for Solidarity at the Theatre. It is a whole stream of bottom-up initiatives that create regulatory principles regarding equal treatment, preventing racial, gender, sexual or economic discrimination, and the documents proposed by them are signed by various institutions. Such public declarations make it possible to say “Okay, I’ve checked it” (it is no coincidence that Jan Fabre Troubleyn’s team did not sign the declaration of good practice prepared by Engagement).

The proposed principles of good, equal and fair practices arise in the processes of participation and dialogue in which a large part of the community participates. The ongoing discussions are widely commented on, and often also picked up by the media, and not just specialist ones. When the topic moves to the public media, it becomes, in a way, a response to the rumour mill. Of course, this does not mean that working in these countries is always great. In many independent, non-repertory ensembles, the master-servant order still dominates. But the context and style of public debate is changing and it is moving towards fair practices. There is more and more talk about the importance of fair, equal working conditions in art and the artistic results of alternative organisational practices are more widely understood. This makes it more difficult to pretend that nothing is changing, and work the old way.

The introduction of a code of good practice and the appointment of an employee ombudsperson in an or-

ganisation employing more than a dozen people is mandatory and required by law. Artistic organisations must meet these conditions to apply for grants. Rejection of good practices, neglecting equality solutions or failing to eliminate gender inequalities make it more difficult to obtain funding. Of course, these are not perfect solutions. Even after cases of sexual abuse and violence were exposed Troubleyn continued to work and continued to receive subsidies. Why? He was very much in favour with the right-wing Flemish government at that time. So the change has not yet been fully completed. However, because it takes place on several levels, including legal, structural, and at the level of public debate, I see a very good chance that it will cover more and more areas.

**P.D.:** You emphasised that the media have a certain role to play in the process of reforming the system. Will the contemporary media reports in Poland about how bad things are in theatres be used to present them only as a space for breaches of conduct and abuse? Can scandals coming to light actually work against culture as a whole, not only against a flawed organisational system, master-servant conditions, hierarchy, patriarchy or bad management in institutions, but against the entire cultural system in Poland? Could all of this become a political argument for taking full control and implementing schemes that limit creative freedom?

**A.A.-S.:** We think about it intensively within culture, and for some time we have been asking ourselves

a similar question. So far, however, nothing of the sort has happened. Of course, there is always the possibility that our government will take advantage of some scandal. However, this should not paralyse us. I repeat this thought and I know that I agree with Marta and many others here – the fear of keeping the resources must not hold us back from our transformational work. Merely keeping the funds does not make sense. Institutions are worth our commitment and defence not when they are defined as “our” in a political perspective, and this kind of thinking is very harmful to culture, but when they truly represent the values we share. In short, I would not be concerned about it at all. We must, of course, create alliances, including political ones. We must work for a broad political change in Poland, also for a change in cultural policy, but this cannot be a factor that has a decisive influence on the strategy and practice of action. The media that expose scandals are essential in the process of change. We all know how #MeToo functioned – the development of the situation was determined not only by social channels, but also by the work of investigative journalists. Everything so far that has happened in Poland regarding the purification of the cultural environment has been possible thanks to the involvement of the media. However, there is also a threat from them. It can be the case that when the media start the process of investigating difficult matters within the institution, they paralyse these processes and block the possibility of developing what is particularly valuable, i.e. the mechanisms of restorative justice. Theatre peo-

ple are often well-known and coverage of them in the media is “click-bait”. One story is reprinted dozens of times by different publications, stations and portals that simplify it, tweak it and introduce destructive dynamics. It also happens sometimes that someone makes false claims in order to gain publicity. I think there is a no more ambivalent player in the whole process than the media. At the same time, the theatre system, as well as the entire system of cultural institutions in Poland, is under enormous pressure – stirred up, even to boiling point by the process of transformation, which may be happening too quickly at present. I have a feeling that further criticism may at this point lead towards a backlash. Therefore, I would repeat Agnieszka’s postulate: this is the moment for a story about good practices, about the possibility of the theatre without violence.

Translated from Polish by Aleksandra Skolaska-Bennett  
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