POLISH THEATRE ARCHIVE

ALTERNATIVE THEATRE 1954 – 1989 IN POLAND

KATHLEEN M. CIOFFI

Alternative Theatre in Poland

1954–1989

Polish Theatre Archive

A series of books edited by Daniel Gerould, Graduate School, City University of New York, USA

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Alternative Theatre in Poland

1954–1989

by

Kathleen M. Cioffi

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For Frank

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The *Polish Theatre Archive* makes available in English translation major works of Poland's dramatic literature as well as monographs and critical studies on Polish playwrights, theatre artists and stage history. Although emphasis is placed on the contemporary period, the *Polish Theatre Archive* also encompasses the nineteenth-century roots of modern theatre practice in Romanticism and Symbolism. The individual plays will contain authoritative introductions that place the works in their historical and theatrical contexts.

DANIEL GEROULD

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INTRODUCTION

This book concerns a particular type of alternative theatre that flourished in Poland during the period from the 1950s Thaw to the fall of Communism in 1989. While the movement had some striking similarities to American, British, and other alternative theatres of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, it also developed in a way unique to the Communist bloc. Specifically, many theatres believed it was their right, and even their duty, to deal with, in the words of one director, "the simple facts of political and social reality" (Cioffi and Ceynowa 82). In dealing with these facts, the theatre often reflected a nationwide discontent with the Communist system. At the same time, it existed as a genuine avant-garde artistic movement influenced by trends in the international theatre world. While several of these theatres continued to exist after the fall of Communism, the nature of this phenomenon has now irrevocably changed, as indeed the entire Polish *Zeitgeist* has been transformed.

The study traces this type of theatre from its inception as an amateur student theatre movement in the Stalinist era, through its period of formal experimentation in the 1960s, its greatest maturity and engagement in the 1970s, to finally, its post-Martial Law decline. This involves three intertwined strands of inquiry. First, I attempt to identify the political and social conditions which led to the genesis of the Polish alternative theatre movement and continued to influence it over the years. Secondly, I describe the evolution of working methods, subject matter, and performance styles in Polish alternative theatres. And finally, I try to place the Polish alternative theatre movement in the context of alternative theatre elsewhere and of theatre history in general.

I lived in Poland for three years (1984–1987) in the waning days of Communist rule, and then again for a year (1990–91) after Communism had fallen. I was able to observe the phenomenon of Polish alternative theatre first-hand: I attended single performances as well as theatre festivals and became personally acquainted with the creators of most of the theatres described in Chapters 4 and 5. Most foreigners who went to Poland to study theatre went for only a week or two to participate in a theatre festival or, at most, a few months to work with a particular group. The reaction of non-Poles to Polish theatre is usually, at best, similar to British critic John Elsom's:

> *Polish theatre was proud of its allusiveness. With each attempt at repression, the layers of irony went one step deeper, so that the surface meaning was contradicted by a secondary one and then at a tertiary level. It constituted a kind of meta-language, which only Poles could understand. (81)*

Since I lived in the country for such a long time and under virtually the same conditions that Poles lived, I had to learn not only the Polish language, but also the meta-language that Elsom refers to as well. I found myself reacting to various performances in much the same way that my Polish friends did, and my reactions changed after the great political transformation of 1989 in the same or similar ways that theirs did. Yet simultaneously, as a foreigner and a theatre historian, I always stood slightly apart and could, I think, more objectively analyze the artistic value of a given production than my friends. The following reflections on Polish alternative theatre are therefore highly colored by my own experience as a kind of half-outsider/half-insider in the Polish alternative theatre scene.

In May of 1985, I entered the Economic Transport Building (affectionately called by students "E. T.") at the University of Gdańsk in order to see a performance by the Theatre of the 8th Day from Poznań. The performance was by invitation only, and Dorota, one of my students in the English Institute, had gotten me an invitation through some kind of campus "theatrology" circle. Though I knew the 8th Day was well-known and controversial, I expected that the invited audience would be small. When I walked down the corridor to the auditorium where the performance was to take place, however, I found hundreds of other audience members, including several other faculty members and students from the English Institute, milling around. I found Dorota and asked her why we weren't being permitted to go into the auditorium. She replied that the 8th Day actors hadn't arrived yet, and everyone was afraid that either they'd been stopped by the police or the university authorities had gotten cold feet and cancelled the performance at the last minute.

Finally the actors arrived and Dorota, after consulting with some friends of hers, whispered that they had been stopped by the police but had then been allowed to come to the performance after all. The actors themselves ushered us into the auditorium and showed us where to sit in a kind of long U-shaped formation around a stage area. I started to worry about whether I was going to be able to see everything. And then the performance, called *Piołun* (*Wormwood*), started, and my worries evaporated. I was caught up in a series of striking visual images which possessed no obvious narrative link. Each actor played several roles with an impressively physical energy. The acting was completely nonrealistic, yet utterly

believable. I was captivated by the performers' skill, commitment, and talent, and by the audience's enthusiastic response to the performance.

The tone of *Wormwood* blended a dreamlike quality and quasi-religious imagery with a corrosive, bitterly ironic humor. Its imagery evoked yet exaggerated the Solidarity and martial law experiences. For example, in one scene people fought while waiting on line for meat and finally ate a man. In another, Christmas carollers, one of whom carried a knife ready to stab any attacker, had to find their way in the pitch dark (after curfew? during a power cut? because all the light bulbs in the halls had been stolen?) through an apartment building. A third scene depicted a dreamlike dance on a pier where lantern-carrying dancers joyously stepped out on the water only to discover where they were and fearfully retreat. In images which simultaneously mocked and paid homage to religious traditions a man hung from a ladder as if crucified on the cross and actors slapped (scourged?) themselves frantically with wet towels.

After the performance was over, Andrzej, another friend from the English Institute, asked me if I would like to interview Lech Raczak, the director of the 8th Day. He set up an appointment for us to meet Raczak the next day and ask him some questions. Raczak spoke to us for three and a half hours, and told me many things about the 8th Day, their history, and the Polish alternative theatre in general. However, it was not until after I had spent two more years in Poland, reading everything I could get my hands on about Polish literature and history, as well as theatre, and had seen many other alternative and mainstream theatre performances, that I understood what I had seen in the E. T. auditorium. This book is, in a sense, my attempt to explain to myself that first, exciting, puzzling performance which, despite only lasting approximately an hour, embodied within itself numerous elements from Polish theatre history as well as paradoxes about the then-current political situation.

Background in Polish Theatre History

The theatre has long been an especially cherished art form in Poland, one for which Poles feel a particular affinity. As poet Czesław Miłosz states: "Polish literature has always been oriented more toward poetry and the theatre than toward fiction" (History xv). In the popular imagination, also, the theatre has a great deal of prestige. Writing in the 1950s about Poland, Clifford Barnett comments:

> *For Poles, who tend to see their own life and history as filled with drama and romance, the spell of the stage possesses a special potency.... Theatergoing is one of the most important*

> *social activities of the urban population, particularly the intelligentsia who consider it a serious and edifying experience, not entertainment. (383)*

The repertory of a theatre which is regarded as "serious and edifying" has very little in common with that of Broadway or London's West End. Martin Esslin points out that in both Eastern and Western Europe the theatre is usually "regarded as an important *cultural* institution, on a level with universities, public libraries, symphony orchestras, opera houses or art museums, and thus deserving of, and entitled to, public funding" (26). Such a theatre is generally regarded as playing an important role in preserving the national heritage. In Poland, where that heritage includes more than two hundred years of opposition to the powers that be, the theatre has often found itself at the center of many political controversies.

The political nature of Polish theatre is, however, not the only quality that has given it what critic Witold Filler terms "a special place in Polish culture"; he contends that "the theatre has collected a maximum of typically Polish traits and is thus capable of best representing the spiritual features of the country and its people" (7). The specific traits which critic Stanisław Marczak-Oborski believes make Polish drama unique are an ability to combine crucial issues in Polish history with universal philosophical problems and a further ability to pass freely from the poetic to the humorous:

> *[T]he two main currents of Polish theatre — the poetic theatre and the theatre of grotesque and satire — draw from one another. On the one hand, works of tragic impact, undertaking the most difficult conflicts, do not lack grotesque or humorous elements that help show some other, different picture of the world as if in a looking-glass fixed at a different angle. On the other hand, pieces considered grotesque offer more than just the satirical or playful dimensions of their subject: they draw on the traditions and experiences of the poetic theatre with its vast horizons, intellectual restlessness, and irrationality. (10)*

In other words, the qualities which I had noticed in *Wormwood* — the strange combination of the poetic and the grotesque — are characteristic of all the great works of Polish theatre. Furthermore, the work of the Theatre of the 8th Day was also typical of Polish theatre in that it tried to use national issues to illuminate philosophical problems that go far beyond those issues.

These characteristics appeared, at least in embryonic form, almost from the beginnings of Polish theatre history. As in many other European countries, Polish medieval drama had evolved from religious rites in Latin performed in churches to full-fledged mystery plays in Polish performed outdoors. This evolution was complete by about the fifteenth century. The tradition of medieval religious drama was particularly robust in Poland, and has survived up to the present day in the *szopka*, a Christmas Nativity puppet

play performed by carollers, and in the mystery plays still performed every year in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska near Kraków. As do other European mystery plays, Polish mystery plays combine comic, often bawdy, interludes with scenes from the Bible. They thus already included the mixture of the poetic with the satiric mentioned by Marczak-Oborski.

It was not until the sixteenth century, however, with the advent of humanistic drama in Poland, that Polish theatre acquired its characteristic preoccupation with national issues. The most famous Polish Renaissance drama is Jan Kochanowski's *Odprawa posłów greckich* (*Dismissal of the Greek Envoys*), staged in 1578. The plot of this play, the story of Greek messengers who arrive in Troy just prior to the outbreak of the Trojan War and try to negotiate a peace settlement, contains many allusions to conditions then current in Poland, especially to the disorder which disrupted sessions of the Polish parliament and to abuses that the young gentry was guilty of. There are also calls to war which would have been understood at the time as referring to King Stefan Batory's intention of declaring war on Muscovy. However, the most unusual aspect of the play is the fact that there is no individual hero; according to cultural historian Adam Zamoyski:

> *The characters in the play are not really people, but in effect the voices of collective interests, and the play is not about their feelings, but about the fate of Troy, which is a sort of corporate character. The curious use of dramatis personae to represent the collective is seminal because it foreshadows nineteenth- and twentieth-century Polish drama, the mainstream of which is neither lyrical nor psychological, but ethical and political. (120)*

Having a collective hero is by no means unique to Kochanowski's play or to Polish literature of the period; Lope de Vega's Spanish drama *Fuente Ovejuna*, written in approximately 1614, has a town as its protagonist. What is more significant is that the pattern established by Kochanowski continued to be followed by Polish playwrights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Miłosz points out:

> *The naturalistic, photographic theatre has never experienced great success in Poland, while the poetic transformation of reality, akin to mystery and morality plays, has attracted many writers.... [N]ot the drama of the individual as such will attract the poets, but that of the individual as redeemer of the collectivity. (History 73)*

Polish playwright/poets, particularly those of the Romantic and later eras, have striven to follow in the tradition both of Kochanowski and of the earlier, anonymous writers of mystery plays. As in the performance I saw of *Wormwood*, the theme of the individual as redeemer of the nation has been a common one in Polish drama, often expressed in a poetic, non-naturalistic style of performance.

Modern theatre history in Poland starts at the end of the eighteenth century with the establishment of the National Theatre in Warsaw by King Stanisław August. The first full-fledged director of this theatre was Wojciech Bogusławski, who was also an actor and a playwright. During the period when Bogusławski was active, the Great Powers — Russia, Prussia, and Austria — were in the process of annexing various sections of Polish territory to their own empires. Bogusławski, who is even today honored in Poland as "the father of Polish theatre," made of the National Theatre a political forum during a time of great political ferment. One of the plays he staged in 1791 was *Powrót posła* (*The Return of the Deputy*) a romantic comedy by Julian Urszyn Niemcewicz, one of the deputies to the Polish parliament who was an ardent reformer and champion of a new constitution. The plot of *The Return of the Deputy* is the unexceptional story of the love between Walery, a progressive deputy in the parliament, and Teresa, the daughter of Mr. Gadulski (Mr. Talkative). However, Niemcewicz used this love story plot to satirize certain types of the Polish gentry, which had an exceptional effect on the political life of the day. Miłosz comments:

> *There are not many examples of spectacles having such an immediate political effect.... In Mr. Gadulski... the audience recognized those deputies to the Four-Year Diet [Parliament] who employed a filibuster tactic to oppose any changes. (One such deputy, after seeing the spectacle, delivered a speech in the Diet against subversive plays and even introduced a motion to withdraw the concession granted to the theatre — fortunately without success.) (History 171)*

Bogusławski's own most famous work is the libretto for a comic opera *Cud mniemany, czyli Krakowiacy i Górale* (*A Supposed Miracle, or Cracovians and Mountaineers*), first staged in 1794. This light opera is also a love story — this time between the daughter of Tatra mountain inhabitants and the son of villagers near Kraków. However, Bogusławski's play itself became a political event since the lyrics to the songs were interpreted by the audience as alluding to the political situation. Audience members responded emotionally to these lyrics and the play was a great success. However, Russian diplomats made a formal protest to the government and succeeded in closing the play after only three performances. The beginning of modern Polish theatre history thus coincides with the period of partition and foreign occupation, which was to have a great influence on its subsequent evolution.

In the early nineteenth century, Romanticism became a major influence on all Polish literature and on Polish thought in general. Naturally, it had a major influence on the evolution of Polish drama and theatre, and this influence is perhaps unique in theatre history. As slavicist and translator Harold Segel points out:

> *The importance of the Romantic drama for later Polish drama as well as theatre far exceeds that of Büchner in the German-speaking countries. Apart from the impact of their formal innovations, which actually anticipated those of Büchner, the Polish Romantic plays gave rise to an entire tradition of modern Polish dramatic writing. (9)*

The three great Polish Romantic poet-playwrights, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Zygmunt Krasiński, like many Romantic playwrights in other countries, wrote closet dramas with no hope of having them staged. In any case, these masterworks would have been too politically volatile to be performed in occupied Poland. However, the fact that they did not have to worry about actually producing their plays liberated the imaginations of the poets to conceive of works on a monumental scale, far beyond the capabilities of the illusionistic theatre of the time to produce. As Marczak-Oborski points out, Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*, Słowacki's *Kordian*, and Krasiński's *Undivine Comedy* have much in common with the plays of contemporaries such as Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death*, Prosper Merimée's *La Jacquerie*, and Alexander Pushkin's *Boris Godunov:*

> *Two features were however distinctive for the Polish poets: firstly, they took up current rather than historical events and secondly, presented them on a monumental scale, not only in the artistic sense, for their performances embraced vast philosophical and moral spheres. It is this multi-plane that has become their contribution to the European Romantic drama. (12)*

These vast dramas later became the basis of the modern Polish repertory. They are also the occupiers of a firm place in the modern national consciousness.

Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), long considered the greatest Polish poet, wrote few plays, but his work, together with his theoretical pronouncement on Slavic drama during his lectures at the Collège de France in Paris, has had tremendous influence on modern Polish theatre practice. Mickiewicz's greatest theatrical achievement, the play *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), was written in four parts. Parts I, II, and IV were written in 1823 when he still resided in Poland; Part III was written in 1832 in Dresden when he was already an exile. The play is based on a folk ritual still in existence during Mickiewicz's lifetime: on All Souls' Day, Lithuanian and Bielorussian peasants would gather to call on the dead and offer them food. Mickiewicz transformed this pagan folk rite into the framework for his multi-part, fragmentary, dreamlike work dealing with the political awakening of a young Pole. *Forefathers' Eve* also has a strong autobiographical element. When he wrote the earlier parts, Mickiewicz had just experienced an unhappy love, and these sections are concerned with the unhappy love of the hero, Gustaw. However, the later part was written after Mickiewicz's own imprisonment and exile from Poland, and immediately after the failed November Uprising

of 1831–32 against the Russians, an insurrection which Mickiewicz did not take part in. In this section, we see a Gustaw imprisoned in a Tsarist prison but transformed from a person preoccupied with his own personal problems into a man dedicated to the national cause. To symbolize his change in consciousness, Gustaw even changes his name to Konrad (a name earlier used by Mickiewicz in another work about a revolutionary, *Konrad Wallenrod*). The play reflects Mickiewicz's optimism that Poland could be saved by a Polish "Messiah." It also reflects Mickiewicz's conviction that the Polish nation had been sacrificed, as Christ had been martyred, for some higher, divine purpose; Poland was thus the "Christ of Nations."

Forefathers' Eve, like the plays of the other Polish Romantic playwrights, was never performed in the author's lifetime. The first production was not until 1901, when the symbolist playwright/painter Stanisław Wyspiański directed it in Kraków. Wyspiański merged all four parts and shortened the work into a seven-scene drama that could be performed in one evening. This adaptation became standard. Miłosz comments:

> *Afterward it became a kind of national sacred play, occasionally forbidden by censorship because of its emotional impact upon the audience. The most complex and rich among the products of Romanticism, combining dreams with brutal, realistic satire, it has been looked upon as the highest test of skill for theatre directors. (History 223–4)*

Since the problems of Mickiewicz's time (especially those connected with Russian occupation) reappeared after World War II, *Forefathers' Eve* has been seen by modern day audiences as anti-Communist. Polish critic Jan Kott declares in a 1967 essay: "This must be said clearly: we are still attacking the communist heaven and in this great attack Mickiewicz is on our side. *Forefathers' Eve* is for revolution and for the vehement champions of justice" ("Why Don't" 123). Less than a year after Kott's essay appeared in America, Kazimierz Dejmek mounted a production in Warsaw that so stressed the anti-Russian elements of the play that the authorities considered it inflammatory and closed it. The suppression of this production caused student riots which were in turn brutally suppressed; this Polish version of "the events of 1968" is often cited as seminal for the thinking of some of the leaders of Solidarity.

The plays of Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49) and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–59), although more pessimistic than Mickiewicz's, have also had a tremendous impact on modern Polish theatre practice and consciousness and continue to be staged today. Słowacki was far more prolific than Mickiewicz but went nearly unrecognized in his own time. His most famous play, *Kordian* (1834), was a kind of polemic against Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*;

Kordian, the main character, is a more neurotic version of Mickiewicz's Gustaw/Konrad who searches for love and cannot find it, then resolves to serve the national cause by killing the Tsar but cannot bring himself to do it. Słowacki disagreed with Mickiewicz's messianic notion that Poland could be saved by a single individual. According to literary historian Manfred Kridl:

> *What he did was to take up, to pose and interpret in a basically novel way, the question of the contemporary Polish generation, its psychology, its attitude toward national problems and its ability to act. This question was connected with that of the recent insurrection, which occupied all the minds at the time. (Kridl 270)*

Słowacki's criticism of Polish Messianism and the intelligentsia's role in Polish society is a theme that has been taken up over and over again in Polish drama and theatre. The image of a Christlike martyrdom which appeared in the production of *Wormwood* only to be satirically undermined elsewhere in the performance represents both an homage to Mickiewicz's idea of Poland as "the Christ of Nations" and a Słowacki-style critique of it.

Unlike Romanticism elsewhere, Polish Romanticism did not necessarily scorn Classicism. Zygmunt Krasiński's play *Irydion* is the story of a Greek who desires to avenge his native country for its subjugation by Rome. However, his most famous play, *Nie-Boska Komedia* (*The Undivine Comedy*), written in 1833, is a startlingly modern work: "The play deals with revolution, social upheaval, class war, political morality, and the historical process" (Segel 52). Krasiński's hero, Count Henry, goes through a personal crisis (like Gustaw/Konrad and Kordian) then becomes a politically committed man in charge of reactionary Christian forces doomed to lose against revolutionary atheistic ones. Though Krasiński's plays are less specifically "Polish" in their concerns than *Forefathers' Eve* or *Kordian*, they are still rooted in Poland's political predicament in the nineteenth century. Miłosz contends that *Forefathers' Eve*, *Kordian*, and *Undivine Comedy* exemplify "that type of Romantic drama which is most specifically Polish, dealing as it does with history in the making. Central to all three dramas is the problem of action versus poetry and the spiritual transformation of the hero" (*History* 234).

The person who was to carry on this tradition of political yet poetic theatre was the painter-playwright Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907). Besides staging Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* for the first time, Wyspiański wrote his own plays very much in the Romantic tradition. As a painter, Wyspiański was very impressed by a visit he paid to Wagner's theatre at Bayreuth, and on his return to Kraków, he devoted himself to creating a "total" theatre which combined the aural and the visual. He took up many of the same themes as the Romantics, especially in his cycle of plays devoted to national problems which included *Wesele* (*The Wedding*), *Wyzwolenie*

(Liberation), *Legion (The Legion)*, and *Akropolis (Acropolis)*, and the cycle dedicated to the Insurrection of 1830 which includes *Noc listopadowa (November Night)*, *Warszawianka (La Varsovienne)* and *Lelewel.* However, like Krasiński, he was fascinated by Classicism, and he wrote several plays set in ancient Greece. Wyspiański builds on the Kochanowski-established tradition of a communal hero while creating the kind of monumental theatre envisioned by Mickiewicz and the other Romantics.

Wyspiański has had an enormous influence on later developments in Polish theatre. His verse dramas are "the cornerstone of the modern Polish theater," according to Miłosz (*History* 358). His most influential play is probably *The Wedding*, which depicts a wedding between an intellectual and a peasant girl. In the play, which takes place in a peasant's cottage where the wedding reception is going on, characters representing real members of the Kraków intelligentsia of the time mix with peasants. As the evening progresses from relatively sober beginnings to the weirder atmosphere of predawn hours, half-mythological figures from Polish history appear, as well as wholly symbolic characters such as Mulch, a covering for rose bushes who comes to life and casts a spell on the wedding guests. He leads them in a dreamlike dance that suggests the inertia of Polish society. This symbolic dance has had a powerful effect on the imaginations of succeeding Polish generations; as Daniel Gerould states:

> *The Mulch dance, powerful theatrical image of stagnation, hopelessness, and the vicious circle of death-in-life, is taken up again and again by Polish playwrights and novelists from Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz to Mrożek; it appears in Tadeusz Konwicki's film* Salto *and in Andrzej Wajda's cinema version of the novel* Ashes and Diamonds... *(*Twentieth-Century *21)*

The dreamlike dance on the pier which appeared in *Wormwood* is yet another reference to the Mulch dance in *The Wedding*. Yet Wyspiański's influence is not limited to specific images from his plays; his whole philosophy of theatre has been adopted by many later Polish theatre practitioners:

> *Wyspiański's plays live less in their literary texts, which serve rather as scenarios, than in their theatrical potential for realization on the stage. Taking both ancient Greek theatre and Wagner as his models and making use of folk arts, village customs, popular ceremonies, processions, and Christmas puppet shows, Wyspiański created a total theatre that is all image — shapes, colors, sounds — and that succeeds in uniting many different arts. (Gerould,* Twentieth-Century *19)*

This painterly conception of a theatre of imagery where literary text is less important than its ability to be theatricalized can be instantly recognized in alternative theatre works such as *Wormwood*, as well as in the work of many

better-known, modern-day Polish directors such as Tadeusz Kantor, Józef Szajna, and Jerzy Grotowski.

The coming of Polish statehood after World War I brought freedom to the theatre as well. Now the "national" dramas, such as *Forefathers' Eve*, could be staged in theatres throughout Poland, rather than only in the more liberal Austrian-governed Kraków of pre-freedom days. The most famous theatre during the interwar years was the Bogusławski Theatre in Warsaw led by the director Leon Schiller. Schiller, together with his designer Andrzej Pronaszko, carried on the tradition of the Romantics and of Wyspiański by staging huge productions of their works; these came to be known as "Polish monumental theatre" (Marczak-Oborski 12). Schiller's monumental stagings were tremendously influential on several generations of Polish directors. All the directors who began their careers after World War II had been Schiller's pupils before the war. They in turn educated the next generation of directors.

However, also during this era, the playwright (like Wyspiański also a painter) Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939), who was extremely controversial in his own time, created what seemed to be a very different type of theatre. Witkiewicz (or "Witkacy" as he liked to call himself) wrote plays which seemed to radically break with past Polish traditions in drama because of their mocking, ironic tone:

> *Previously the Polish poet-playwright had always been committed to noble ideals, and his language had been elevated.... But Witkacy, starting with his childhood plays and parodies, showed a penchant for clowning and burlesque, and his mature art blends metaphysics with buffoonery, self-ridicule, and a flippant, offhand attitude of detachment that subverts the inflated rhetoric and aggrandizement of emotion characteristic of Polish drama until then. (Gerould,* Twentieth-Century *33)*

This flippant detachment was particularly disconcerting to critics at the time, and Witkiewicz's plays (those that were staged at all) were scathingly reviewed. It is Witkiewicz, however, who established what Marczak-Oborski refers to above as the second "main current" of Polish theatre: the theatre of grotesque and satire which nevertheless draws on the poetic theatre's vast horizons, intellectual restlessness, and irrationality. Jan Kott says of Witkiewicz:

> *The unquestionable greatness of this theater consists in its historical perspective, in the perception of the end of contemporary civilization which was fatally threatened both by the egalitarian revolution coming from the East and by Western mechanization. (Kott, Foreword xv)*

Despite Witkiewicz's buffoonery, his irreverent puncturing of the balloons of national mythology, and his grotesquerie, he too has proven to be as Polish as

Mickiewicz, if in a slightly different line. Like Witkiewicz, the Theatre of the 8th Day employed a mordant satire which still maintained its historical perspective in their production of *Wormwood.*

Another extremely important figure in Polish theatre history of the interwar years is actor-director Juliusz Osterwa. Osterwa founded an experimental theatre in 1919 called the Reduta. Polish director Kazimierz Braun writes of Reduta:

> *It was the first theatre-community in history. It was a theatre, but at the same time it was an acting workshop and a school. All events of life and artistic activity were communal, with a common kitchen and money. Specialists of varying skills were called to rehearsals as advisers and teachers. Actors and spectators met after performances to discuss the work. All this was based on Osterwa's belief that the theatre is a process, an inter-human process artistically conditioned. ("Reports" 25)*

Just as Witkiewicz anticipated the theatre of the absurd in his plays, Osterwa anticipated many of the concerns of both the Polish alternative theatre and the alternative theatre in the rest of the world. He experimented with actor training, audience participation, and what would later be termed "environmental theatre." In the last part of his life, he promoted the idea of an order of theatre artists like an order of monks or nuns who would serve society by their artistic activity. He had a marked influence on the work of Jerzy Grotowski, who in turn influenced many younger Polish alternative groups. Like Reduta, the 8th Day and other Grotowski-influenced groups have aspired to serve society with their artistic activity.

The Paradox of Censorship

When it became clear to me that the Polish audience appreciated *Wormwood* precisely because it depicted ideas and scenes which could not be depicted on, say, television, I wondered why the censors allowed such depictions at all. If the censors were able to stop programs critical of Communism and of the Soviet Union from appearing on TV, why did they seem incapable of stopping the 8th Day and other groups from performing? Those of us who did not live in Communist countries tended to think of the Communist system as a monolith which had complete control over all aspects of culture. Therefore, it seems like a paradox that something like alternative theatre, with its more or less explicit critique of politics, could exist.

However, though the system was supposed to control all aspects of culture, and in various other countries in the Eastern Bloc (for example, Czechoslovakia), it was more successful, in Poland, for various reasons, it frequently broke down. In some periods, the censors were required to be stricter, in others less strict. The level of strictness of censorship varied widely

from region to region. Moreover, the censors themselves often colluded with artists to allow various allusions or implications to be published, presented on stage, or shown on film. In an interview with Eva Hoffman, an émigré from Poland who returned after 1989, a former censor somewhat cynically declares:

> *[T]he point is... that you could always say to your boss, "There's nothing underneath this, there's no subtext. It simply says what it says." And then maybe both you and your boss could pretend there was nothing there. After all, life under socialism was supposed to be one big stretch of sunny happiness; there was not supposed to be a dark layer to anything. So it was perfectly possible, even advisable, not to notice anything under the overt surface. (Hoffman 85–86)*

Therefore, though it is in fact paradoxical that the system was not able to control artists it was usually actually subsidizing in various ways, when one considers that censors were people rather than mere cogs in an impersonal system, that as time went on, the system became more and more unpopular, and that there were fewer and fewer dedicated Communists who believed in the system, the fact that cultural criticism of the alternative theatre type was allowed to exist becomes less astonishing.

Moreover, the structure of the funding mechanisms for cultural institutions in Poland actually aided alternative groups in subverting the system's control. In other words, because alternative theatre started under the aegis of university sponsorship it was subject to less strict censorship. As sociologist Jeffrey Goldfarb points out in his book *The Persistence of Freedom*, there were different types of cultural institutions in the Communist system: primary ones manned by professionals under the direct control of cultural and educational ministries and ancillary ones not under the control of the cultural or educational ministries. Examples of primary cultural institutions are universities, literary publishing houses, scientific academies, and professional theatres. Examples of ancillary cultural institutions are newspapers and publishing houses of various professional organizations, research institutes of various industries, culture houses of specific localities, and student theatre (14–20). Most alternative theatres started life as student theatres financially supported and supervised by the officially apolitical Polish Student Organization (Zrzeszenie Studentów Polskich or ZSP), an organization created by the party in 1950 as an alternative to the very political Union of Polish Youth (ZMP), which was not strongly supported by students. Because Polish student theatre was an ancillary cultural institution, controlled only by an officially apolitical organization, it was able to develop in a more autonomous manner than primary institutions such as professional theatres would have been allowed to.

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THE BEGINNINGS OF POLISH ALTERNATIVE THEATRE

Polish alternative theatre came into being during the period directly preceding the historical event known as "the Polish October" in 1956. The "October" was a result of a complex sequence of circumstances starting with the Communist takeover at the end of World War II and ending with the installation of an anti-Stalinist, Władysław Gomułka, as head of state. It marked not only a change in government, but also a transition point in the relationship of creative intellectuals to the party-state apparatus. This changing relationship in its turn affected the intelligentsia's attitudes toward the regime. A new skepticism brought about the beginning of Polish alternative theatre.

The Polish October

The Polish October and the beginning of Polish alternative theatre were both a reaction against Stalinism, but in the first period after the war, roughly from 1945 to 1949, Stalinism did not operate at full force in Polish society. Literature, for example, was not subjected to the intense scrutiny by the censor that it was to fall under only a few years later. According to poet Czesław Miłosz, the period "was marked by debates on what literature should be in a country aiming at socialism," but writers were not dictated to (*History* 453). In addition, there were certain egalitarian features of the new government's cultural policy which attracted the intelligentsia. For example, members of the pre-War peasant and proletarian classes were now encouraged to go on for higher education and so become members themselves of the intelligentsia. Tickets for concerts, plays, and other cultural events were government subsidized and priced low enough so that workers could attend; though these low prices were designed for the benefit of the working class they also enabled intellectuals to afford attendance at many cultural events. However, this period, when the intelligentsia was wooed and allowed considerable intellectual freedom, came to an end as the cold war intensified in the late 1940s.