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Country Report – Poland

It's impossible to fully describe the large field of „performing arts in context” – to highlight the history, to map the different centers, companies, artists and portray their artistic and social practices. Therefore my country report will be highly subjective – I will choose events, phenomenon and strategies that I find interesting, significant, inspiring and representative.

History – system of public theatres

In Poland, the main and the dominant and main circuit of theatres is the “public theatre”. The system of public theatres in Poland began in XVIII century, when the king Stanisław August built the first professional public theatre in Warsaw (National Theatre). In his definition, the mission of public theatre was to modernise the country. Theatre should educate, be the tool of enlightenment of the society. Soon, the public theatre began to be the space of performing and presenting the conflicts and issues important for the nation. Despite modernisation and educations, the mission of public theatre was to be a space of agon, of (re)presenting the issues that are important for society. In some way you can say that public theatre in Poland, inevitably, was political and critical. This sense of mission lasted in Polish public theatre to this day (of course not everywhere, and with different modifications).

In XXth century, in the interwar period theatre in Poland began to develop new forms of participation. Amateurs theatres, workers theatre (directed by Witold Wandurski), travelling theatres (for example Reduta led by Juliusz Osterwa) created a new space for alternative forms of performance art. This heritage was important for different artists after World War II like Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Irena Byrska and Tadeusz Byrski, Jan Dorman, Wojciech Krukowski, and the whole movement of alternative and students theatres in '70 and '80 (for example ‘The Eights’ - <https://culture.pl/en/artist/teatr-osmego-dnia>; or ‘Academy of Movement’ - <https://culture.pl/en/artist/akademia-ruchu>). These artists and companies created their works on the margins of official, repertoire system of public theatres – sometimes in the frames drew by political system, sometimes outside of it. The most important was that more and more artists realised that theatre can be a space not only for producing spectacles, but also a space and a tool of change. As the title of most famous monography of alternative theatres put it – it was about “more than theatre” (*Więcej niż teatr* by Aldona Jawłowska, 1988). They created performances with non-professional actors, in public spaces, highly political and radical.

After the 1989 the international exchange began. Polish artists and pedagogues could easily study abroad, polish audience on festivals saw Teatr.doc, Rimini Protokoll, Public Movement, RambaZamba Theater and so on. Different aesthetics and different ideas about performing arts began influence the polish cultural field. Theatre made with marginalised groups (like people with disabilities, prisoners, local communities in villages or small cities) started to be perceived as not only a form of therapeutic workshop, but as a independent art genre.

Right now polish theatre system includes around 120 public theatres – that means 120 theatres financed by the state or the city, with permanent, full-time employed actors ensemble. After 1989 and economic transformation polish theatre system still have to deals with the structures left after communist system – in short description that means that institutions are over bureaucratic, focused on using the institutional resources, and eventually reluctant in providing experimental practices; unwilling to employ actors and performers from outside the institution. That means all of this “performing arts in contexts”, are in paradoxical position – they have to be very flexible and inventive in using and hijacking the system, looking for alternative spaces and resources (applying for grants, residencies, scholarships). They are in strange position: inside and outside the main system. And because of that, they are always political, alternative and critical.

Of course, public theatres in Poland in order to complete their mission, often use performing arts in contexts to show their openness and connection to the problem of “real people”. Institutions can produce a participatory projects but they are more like events not long term activity. You can gain money for special project, event or festival, but there is a little chance that you can gain money for continuing the work. So often performing arts in contexts are short-lasting, focused on making the final „product” (a performance, a workshop) not on artistic process itself. There is no money for exploitation, so after few shows – the projects disappear.

That is right now slowly, very slowly is changing (but of course pandemic is a huge obstacle in that). Also in theatre criticism and at the universities there is different approach to performing arts in context. More and more students are interested in reading, writing about and making art outside the official system. More and more people are convinced that representation in art matters and that art can be a tool to fight with hegemonic, capitalistic, white, male, heterosexual, non-disabled system.

THEATRE PEDAGOGY

Theatre pedagogy in Poland is still kind of fresh thing, and of course we looked it up from Germany – mostly because of Justyna Sobczyk, the founder of Teatr 21, who studied theaterpädagogik at Universität der Künste in Berlin. More and more public institutions hires theatre pedagogues and educators for a full-time job, to make the public theatre not only a space for producing and showing performances, but also to educate the audience, make special projects for different local groups.

In Warsaw there is also a Theatre Theatre Pedagogues' Association, and since 2010 they making their own projects and performances but also working with cultural institutions in all country. They also write and translate texts about theatre pedagogy, and have very good website: <https://pedagogzyteatru.org/>

Dorota Ogrodzka, one of the members and founders of this Association, defined their aim as not only to make artistic, social, activist and political projects, but also to take advantage of the fact, that theatre (other than any other institution as school, or other than public sphere in general) can contain all of the human emotions – not only the „good” ones, but also the „bad” ones, and theatre pedagogy gives the tools to work with this different emotions, different affects in a very special way. And that brings another key term for the theatre pedagogy in Poland which is relations and relational. Theatre in its core is a space, when you can create relations, unexpected alliances – and that's the goal of theatre pedagogy.

At Warsaw University there is 2 years master study of “Social Arts” coordinated by Zofia Dworakowska. As they write on their website, the framework programme of this studies contains:

- Practical classes providing anthropological knowledge and teaching critical skills, e.g. applied anthropology of culture, media in culture, ideas for social involvement, participatory art contexts;
- Workshops where students learn and master the skill of applying specific research methods and tools inter alia needs analysis, community work, creative activities (e.g. through film, photography, sound or performative forms), as well as planning and financing a project;
- Internships involving students in the operations of different institutions, organisations and communities;
- Study trips to selected regions, towns, centres including workshops and meetings with representatives of local institutions and local communities;

- Site-Specific Project Work entailing the execution of a participatory project at a selected local community with its participation, preceded by a needs analysis, diagnosis and consultation.
- Diploma Project which along with a written thesis related to it constitutes a new type of MA thesis assuming the execution of a student's individual culture animation project. (<https://ikp.uw.edu.pl/studies/?lang=en>)

Zofia Dworakowska and Justyna Sobczyk also coordinates a 2 year postgraduate studies of Theatre Pedagogy. Students are learning not only theories and different approaches of theatre pedagogy, but also – as their diploma, they have to do practical project – a performance or series of workshops.

INCLUSIVE THEATRE

Right now I would like to focus on two terms, that covers “dynamic practices” and that I find the most inspiring and useful.

The term „inclusive theatre” is connected with two places and two persons. First is Agata Siwiak, curator of performing arts and inventor of the pioneer programme „Wielkopolska: Revolutions” (Wielkopolska is a region in Poland). The programme was based on the idea that famous avantgarde artist, who mostly work in public theatres and galleries, came to villages and small cities in Wielkopolska and start working with local communities, institutions and NGO's (seniors choir, threw jail, orphanages and local schools). The effects of this meeting was a performance. This programme was realised from 2012 till 2014 and was the first, on this scale, participatory project in Poland. You can read more about it in English, in article by Joanna Jopek: <https://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/51/109>

Right now, after all this years, “Wielkopolskarewolucje” is criticised for lots of things (as some kind „colonial approach”), but Agata Siwiak is still working on participatory field and change her practise throughout experience and criticism. She's also a coordinator of specialization on BA theatre studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, specialisation about curating performance art and she also teaches students a lot about what we called performing arts in contexts.

In her research and practise Agata Siwiak likes to use a term „inclusive theatre” or „inclusive theatre collective” which she defines as „focused on long-term collaboration of artists and non-actors, engaging peoples from different backgrounds and in hard situation in terms of economics, health or social. Aim of this collaboration is not only artistic, but also social and political activity, empowerment of marginalized groups and subjects”.

The term „inclusive” is also used by Justyna Sobczyk, the leader and founder of Teatr 21 (21 theatre), a theatre made by people with autism and Down syndrome. They are existing since 2005, and right now members of Teatr 21 created a bigger thing – „The centre of inclusive art: Downtown”. They don’t have a permanent space or resources, they collaborate with public theatres and museums, applying for refunds from state and city grants. Their activity is focused on the problem of visibility and representation. Downtown publishes books, translates foreign articles, organises debates, conferences and workshops connected with the problem of visibility and the situation of people with disabilities in Poland. As you can expect, there is still a lot of stigma around disability in Poland – and the economic and social situation of persons with disabilities is disastrous. Public space is still not adapted for people with alternative motor skills (alternative motor skills – is the term made by Rafał Urbacki, a Polish choreographer and artist with disability). In public spaces you don’t see a lot of people with disabilities because of shame and stigma. In 2018 persons with disabilities and their families occupied Polish parliament building in an act of protest against the horrific social and economic situation. The occupation lasted 40 days and during that time the protesters were covered by the curtain in order to hide them. Teatr 21 made a performance about it „Rewolucja, której nie było” – revolution, that didn’t happen, a moving, funny and political performance. You can read about it in Monika Świerkosz’s article: <https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/revolution-beyond-politics>

AMBULATORIUM THEATRE

The last term I want to discuss is quite new. During the pandemic, and lockdowns lots of institutions are rethinking their ways of operations, their aims. And during the lockdowns, right now, in Poland we have a huge debate about #metoo movement in theatres, according to lots of call-outs and affairs of mobbing and sexual harassment in cultural institutions. Because of that scholars and artists, using the tools from institutional critique, try to rethink the institution. One of the effects of that is the come-back of a category invented by Polish director Lidia Zamkow in the early seventies. In the contrast of Jerzy Grotowski’s theory of „laboratory theatre”, she proposed THEATER OF AMBULATORY CARE (in Polish: teatr laboratorium against teatr ambulatorium). Katarzyna Kułakowska, Katarzyna Kalinowska, Olga Drygas and Michał Bargielski in their article about Polish alternative theatres during the pandemic, used this category ‘theatre of ambulatory care’ to describe the different model of working – focused on creating the common space, for healing and tenderness, for not exploiting people and resources.

The ambulatory care metaphor encompasses a number of wartime and hospital tropes: at their emotional core, they are temporary, makeshift and transitory. Although the

ambulatory care center offers the opportunity to “put one’s thoughts on what goes on around us [...] into words,”¹⁰ the nurses and orderlies working there make no attempt at a conclusive diagnosis, but focus instead on offering preliminary, makeshift insights. This is because adaptability to change is the main forte of the theater of ambulatory care, and flexibility is its virtue. The ambulatory care center is a medical post on the front line, where first aid can be administered before the injured are seen by consultants. According to theater historian and theoretician Joanna Krakowska, “irrespective of the shape it takes in artistic terms, the concept of theater of ambulatory care entails recognition of its temporary and makeshift quality, and its readiness to serve.”¹¹ The social practice of theater consists in actions imbued with care and tenderness, and released by unlocking the potential shown via collective methods. This is not metropolitan or mainstream theater: destined to remain local, it will stay close to its community, for which it feels a sense of responsibility. While laboratory theater takes on classic literary works, theater of ambulatory care remains constantly on the move, fueled by subsequent crises as it comes up with, and implements, one remedy after another. (Full article: <https://www.czasopisma.ispan.pl/index.php/pt/article/view/455/440>)

Theatre of ambulatory care is open for new experiences and have no pressure to produce masterpieces, they use low theory, not high theory.

I think that especially today, the practise of ambulatory care, of caring about people is probably the most important task that performative art have to faced. Ambulatory care means also creating a new ideas, utopian ideas for making theatres and society a better place. Even if it’s only for a short, ephemeral moment.

More on performing arts in contexts in Poland – an issue of Polish Theatre Journal 1(2)/2016 – “Theatre and Community”: <https://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/issue/view/12> and 1/2015 “The Politicality of Theatre” <https://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/issue/view/6>