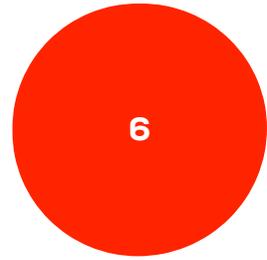


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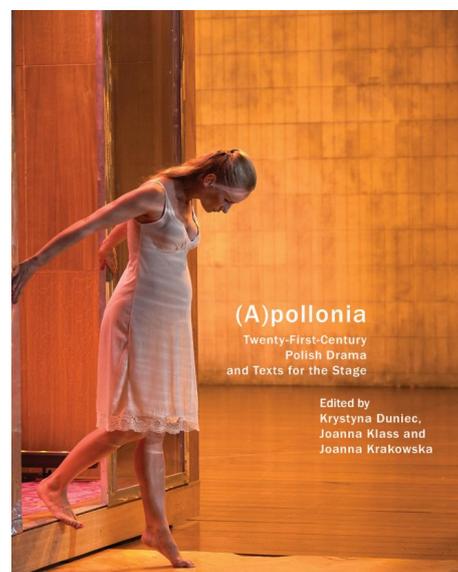
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Shattering Stereotypes: New Plays from Poland in English Translation

(A)pollonia: Twenty-First Century Polish Drama and Texts for the Stage, edited by Krystyna Duniec, Joanna Klass, and Joanna Krakowska. London: Seagull Books, 2014.

In 1920, just two years after Poland had regained its statehood after 123 years of partition by foreign powers, the poet Jan Lechoń gave voice to a feeling that must have been common to many artists in the interwar period: "And in the spring, let me see spring, not Poland."¹ During the time of the nineteenth-century partitions, poets, playwrights and other artists had felt a near-mandatory responsibility to make art concerned with the Polish cause. Similarly, during the period between World War II and 1989, artists also felt the burden of "Polishness" (*polskość*) as an obligatory topic. Nowhere was this topic more compulsory than in the theatre, which, according to a critic writing in the 1970s, had "collected a maximum of typically Polish traits and is thus capable of best representing the spiritual features of the country and its people."² However, since 1989 (much as in the interwar period when Lechoń wrote) Polish theatre has no longer needed to be tied to what I call 'the Polishness narrative' - the heroic story that the Polish people have traditionally told themselves about themselves. Now the theatre can 'see spring' and address human problems, not only



Polish ones. This new found freedom is evident in the plays collected in *(A)pollonia: Twenty-First Century Polish Drama and Texts for the Stage*, edited by Krystyna Duniec, Joanna Klass, and Joanna Krakowska.

The subject matter of the plays in the anthology ranges from the fate of the Jewish population in Poland during World War II, and the consequences of war in general, to transsexuality, postcolonialism, collaboration with the Communists, same-sex desire and life in a free-market economy. Some of these subjects were generally not deemed appropriate in the pre-1989 Polish theatre. Others might have been examined during the Cold War era, but their treatment is far more nuanced here. The style of the plays is similarly eclectic, encompassing one-man shows, docudramas, rediscovered footage compilations of various literary texts, absurdist comedies, and slam poetry—almost every style but the kind of realism that prevails in the English-speaking theatre. The main thing that the eleven plays included in the collection have in common, though, is that each one of them, in its own way, shatters stereotypes—not only stereotypes that non-Poles entertain about Poland and the Poles, but also stereotypes that Poles hold about themselves.

The plays collected in this volume represent trends in both Polish theatre and Polish thought that should fascinate English-speaking readers interested in theatre, in Eastern European history and in Slavic Studies. Theatre people, who have since the days of Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor been interested in developments in Poland, will notice the way that the plays have incorporated some earlier styles of Polish theatre, such as the absurdism of a playwright like Sławomir Mrożek or the textual collages of the early 1970s student theatres, and adapted them to new subject matter. The fact that Polish theatre seems to be moving away from being dominated by directors and toward playwrights' assuming a more important position will also be of interest. Historians will be fascinated by the diverse ways

that the plays incorporate events from Polish history, especially World War II, the fall of communism and Poland's involvement in the Iraq War. And Slavacists will discern the plays' rejection of Romanticism and their reaction against the traditional Polishness narrative, along with a new attention to gender and postcolonial themes. The plays in *(A)pollonia* manage to shatter the stereotype of the ultra-patriotic, ultra-Catholic Polish citizen that many outside of Poland have held. They plays instead present Poles becoming Europeans, sometimes to their own surprise.

The play that gives the anthology its title - *(A)pollonia*, by Krzysztof Warlikowski, Piotr Gruszczyński, and Jacek Poniedziałek - represents the textual collage genre, with texts taken from Aeschylus and Euripides, two of Hanna Krall's nonfiction stories and many other works of literature. It examines the idea of sacrifice by juxtaposing the stories of Iphigenia (who sacrifices her life so that the Greek fleet may reach Troy) and Alcestis (who sacrifices her life for her husband) with the story of Apolonia Machczyńska, one of the Righteous among the Nations, who lost her life for hiding Jews during the war. The play does not dwell on the heroism of their sacrifices, but instead interrogates the mythology of sacrifice: Iphigenia's death, for example, leads directly to the deaths of her father and mother, and Apolonia's self-sacrifice causes the collateral damage of depriving her son of his mother. In this play, Warlikowski and his collaborators ask if laying down one's life for others is really the unalloyed good it is portrayed to be in Christian martyrology, Hollywood movies and Israeli ceremonies honoring the Righteous. Doesn't it also mean acquiescing to the violence upon which our history is built?

The other play in the volume that addresses the Holocaust is *The Mayor* by Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk. This two-part play is based on the real-life story of Krzysztof Godlewski, the mayor of the town in eastern Poland where the atrocity described in

Jan T. Gross's book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* occurred in June 1941. *Neighbors*, which was published in 2000, brought the attention of the Polish public to the fact that the Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne had, at the instigation of the German occupiers, rounded up the Jewish residents, herded them into a barn, and burned them alive. *The Mayor* does not attempt to depict the massacre itself; instead, it focuses on the fate of Godlewski, who resisted the wishes of his fellow townspeople and spoke about the pogrom at the sixtieth anniversary commemorative ceremony held in Jedwabne. As a result, Godlewski lost his job and wound up emigrating to the United States. Sikorska-Miszczuk tells the mayor's story twice: in Part I, she relates a kind of parable about a town that sacrifices its hero to learn the truth about itself; and in Part II, she retells the same story in a less metaphorical way, with real historical characters who appear and comment. Both parts of the play mix fantasy, biting satire that pokes fun at Polish narrow-mindedness and grandiosity, and a deep compassion for Godlewski, an everyman figure who tries to do what he thinks is right and gets punished for it.

The consequences of World War II are also the subject of *Transfer!* by Dunja Funke and Sebastian Majewski. A docudrama based on the recollections of Poles and Germans who were displaced after the borders of Poland were redrawn at the end of the war, the play starred actual community members who played themselves along with three professional actors who portrayed Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference. The elderly Germans, expelled from what had been a German city, Breslau, and the elderly Polish men and women who were uprooted from what had been the Eastern part of Poland but after the war became part of Ukraine, had similar experiences of interruption and dislodgment. By focusing on the individual stories of real people and placing them alongside the machinations of the leaders, the production asks its audience to

feel empathy for both Poles and Germans. This mutual compassion for the former enemy gives *Transfer!* a universality that is paradoxically derived from the particularity of its individual participants' stories.

In *Trash Story* by Magda Fertacz, World War II trauma is connected to the violence of the Iraq War and by extension, to all wars everywhere. The play takes place in a house that is currently occupied by a Polish family but which used to be in Germany. The ghost of Ursula, the ten-year-old daughter of a Wehrmacht soldier who was killed by her own mother to prevent her from being raped by the conquering Red Army troops, haunts the house. The other inhabitants of the house are the widow of an Iraq veteran who commits suicide as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder and his mother, the daughter of an Auschwitz inmate whose childhood was dominated by her father's wartime ordeal. The play criticizes the blind patriotism that fuels the engine of war and leads not just to violence on the frontlines, but also to genocidal, sexual, and psychological violence behind those frontlines.

Another play connecting World War II to the present day is *right left with heels* by pilgrim/majewski. This play has an absurdist concept: its narrators are the right and left shoes of Magda Goebbels, the wife of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda. The shoes tell their story, thanks to somehow escaping being burned along with their owner after she and her husband commit suicide, instead being sentenced to exile in the East at the Nuremberg Tribunal. They are then passed on from a female Red Army soldier to the Polish wife of a doctor, to a secret police interrogator, to a Solidarity activist, and finally, to a transvestite who is beaten to death. The shoes thus give us a kind of encapsulated history of postwar Poland and its changing political conflicts and mores that highlights, as in *Transfer!* and *Trash Story*, the universal elements in the

individual stories.

While *right left with heels* takes us through five different periods in Polish postwar history, *Foreign Bodies* by Julia Holewińska is set in two, the 1980s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. It was inspired by the life of a male Solidarity activist who led one of the illegal union's underground groups during the period of Martial Law but after 1989 decided to undergo sex-reassignment surgery and become a female. In the play, the protagonist is called Adam in the 1980s scenes and Ewa in the modern scenes. The play alternates between the two periods: in the eighties Adam is both struggling with his sexual identity and wooing his girlfriend, who will give birth to his child in the 2000s, Ewa is struggling financially and for acceptance by society and by her son, now an adult. Adam/Ewa's brave and extremely moving struggle in a conservative Catholic society that had been allied with the Church in the battle against Communism becomes a metaphor for the social transformation that Polish culture has undergone since 1989. At the same time, it also depicts the individual tragedy of a person who loses her community in order to gain selfhood.

A new topic for Polish theatre is the postcolonial critique. Weronika Szczawińska and Bartosz Frąckowiak's play *In Desert and Wilderness: After Sienkiewicz and Others* subject Henryk Sienkiewicz's still-popular Polish children's book, *In Desert and Wilderness* (1912) to this kind of critique. Like *(A)pollonia*, this play is a collage, in this case a collage of the Sienkiewicz novel with many other texts, including fiction, philosophy, journalism, encyclopedia entries and songs. While basically following the already fairly ridiculous plot of the novel, the play, enhanced by all the other texts, shows how absurd the colonial mentality, which assumes the superiority of one race over its Others, is. The text plays with the idea that Poles, themselves a once-colonized people, might still harbor within themselves dreams of empire; these colonial aspirations

were an escape from feelings of inferiority in times of foreign domination, but today they are ludicrous.

The fall of Communism and the subsequent calls for the 'lustration' of former Communist collaborators is the background for *Small Narration*, in which the performance artist Wojtek Ziemilski grapples with his own family's personal history. In 2006, it was revealed that his grandfather, Wojciech Dzieduszycki—a well-known writer and performer in the Communist era—had been an informer who collaborated with the secret police. Ziemilski's performative lecture is not only concerned with his own reaction to this revelation, but is also a philosophical examination of the nature of identity itself. He narrates fragments from his autobiography as quotes from Wittgenstein, fragments of the script, clips from the work of performers who have inspired him, and scans of official documents and press clippings appear on a screen behind him. Ziemilski's performance acts as a memoir about his grandfather, an interrogation of his own personality, and a meditation on the poetics of memory.

The three plays that conclude the volume all take place after 1989, when Poland entered the free-market economy, and they critique the new world that capitalism has wrought. In Dorota Masłowska's *No Matter How Hard We Tried: Or We Exist on the Best Terms We Can*, the characters of Gloomy Old Biddy, her daughter Halina, and her grandchild Little Metal Girl, all reside together in a one-room apartment. The Gloomy Old Biddy lives in the past, constantly talking about the day World War II broke out, Halina tries to cope with the meagerness of her existence by clipping coupons and finding bargains, and the Little Metal Girl mocks everything, especially Polish myths. The characters, who may all be figments of a screenplay author's imagination, speak in the language of advertising, mass media, and the Church-run Radio Maryja. Masłowska's buoyant satire makes fun of the tackiness of everyday life in the new, highly commercialized economy, yet also paradoxically pays homage to

the traumatized memory of the oldest generation.

Paweł Demirski's *Diamonds Are the Coal That Got Down to Business* is also a critique of that economy. In it, Demirski adapts Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and sets it in Poland after the economic 'shock therapy' initiated shortly after 1989. Vanya becomes Wojnicki and Professor Serebryakov becomes a spokesperson for the neoliberal ideas of Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz, who initiated the Balcerowicz Plan to reform the Polish economy, a reform that eventually succeeded, but not without cost to those who failed to adapt to the new economic realities. Just as Chekhov's characters weren't able to cope with the rapid changes in early-twentieth-century Russia, Demirski's can't handle a post-1989 world that sees them as failures.

In Przemysław Wojcieszek's *I Love You No Matter What*, capitalism also victimizes the characters, but they are redeemed by love. The main characters are Magda and Sugar, lesbian lovers and aspiring slam poets. Patriarchal Polish society—here represented by Sugar's brother, recently returned home from a tour of duty in Iraq, and her slam poetry friends with their macho raps—does not approve of lesbianism. The triumph of their unconventional love at the end of the play thus defies cultural preconceptions, and lifts the play itself above sentimentality.

So where is Polish theatre going? Based on the evidence offered by these plays, it certainly is not going in the direction of Anglo-American realism, and that's a good thing. It continues to experiment with many different genres and to be unafraid of mixing comedy with serious philosophical questions. I hope that as Poland gets more and more European, it will keep on exploring the thornier parts of its own history that were avoided and censored during the Communist period. Finally, I also hope that the trend we see in this collection, of finding the universal in particular stories, persists and mixes with the fine sense of irony and the absurd that permeates many of the plays in *(A)pollonia*.

- 1 Jan Lechoń, "Herostrates," qtd. in A. Pajgk, "The Polish Way to E-literature: From the Baroque to the 21st Century," trans. Katarzyna Rudzka, <http://cybertext.hum.jyu.fi/articles/133.pdf>.
- 2 Witold Filler, *Contemporary Polish Theatre*, trans. K. Kępicz (Warsaw: Interpress, 1977), 7.