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New Polish performing arts in vital festival

Released bodies and dreams of a future of openness and tolerance - these are some themes expressed in the younger Polish performing arts. In impressive new works, the artists create and explore a reality beyond the PiS government's national conservative and moralizing cultural dictates.

'Welcome to the free theatre city of Warsaw!'

This was pronounced several times during the Polish theatre days *Generation After*, which earlier this year was arranged for the third time. New works by younger Polish performing artists were presented in a generous program, organized by the Nowy Teatr, in collaboration with Warsaw's artistically leading city theatres. The productions, which are played in repertoire and on tour, convey the vitality and diversity of new Polish theatre, dance and performance.

Generation After highlights work by stage auteurs around the age of 30-35, who have emerged after internationally established directors such as Krystian Lupa, Krzysztof Warlikowski, Jan Klata and Grzegorz Jarzyna. Significant for the artists of this younger generation is that they often create cross-disciplinary pieces, in expressions that combine dramatic theatre, choreography and performance. Thematically, several among them focus on investigations of the individual's body and freedom. This is not uncontroversial. In view of the upcoming parliamentary elections in October, the theatre has an important role in convening actors and audiences around open-minded reflections on identities, ideas and shared values.

The Polish performing arts are generally under the ideological pressure of the PiS government whose stated cultural policy aims to support a theatrical repertoire that celebrates 'Polish values', 'morality' and a national conservative view of society. It's in accordance with the Catholic Church's traditional norms of family life and sexuality. The city of Warsaw however is still ruled by a centre-liberal majority after last year's municipal elections. This means that the 19 locally subsidized city theatres are financially independent of the national cultural policy and thus form a kind of free zone for contemporary exploratory performing arts.

This is evident, for example, in Michał Borczuch's fantasy *Żaby*, at the Studio Teatrgaleria, which is based on Aristophanes' comedies *The Frogs*, *The Clouds* and *The Birds*. It begins with a group of actors talking about myths and dreams in Greek antiquity and longing for the "good old days, when democracy was uncorrupted". They are playing with scenes from the classical texts, trying to explain ancient notions about sexuality and death against their own experiences, relating the ancient culture to contemporary speech and social realities.

The adaptation is written by Tomasz Spiewak and is partly based on the actors' improvisations. In keeping with Aristophanes' cultural sphere and rustic idiom, an emancipated male homosexuality is described, described in highly concrete, contemporary terms, which provides a connection between the present and the ancient. Maybe even the classic culture was primarily about basic relationships,

desires and release of bodies, though transcribed into myths that we have come to regard with reverence?

Language as a boundary between people

Bodies and languages are also at the centre of three excellent pieces by three female performers. *Future Tongues* by Ania Nowak, *Pure Gold Is Seeping Out of Me* by Renata Piotrowska-Auffret and *You Are Safe* by Agata Siniarska all address specific motifs in choreographic performance installations. All of them are about an hour long.

Future Tongues is staged on a small podium, with three women and two men, in thin white linen clothings. The audience sits on four sides around them, and on two side walls are projected in different languages quotes from the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel, the place where God gave people different languages so they could no longer understand each other.

The five people are wordless for a long time; they are physically intimate, caressing and touching each other's bodies, and then start kissing, in pairs and in groups. They drink water with which they make gargling sounds and spit it out into rhythmic sounds or sprinkle into each other's mouths. In a final act, they begin to say words. Words such as *algorithm*, *alcohol* or *homage*. Their voices and bodies are becoming increasingly militant. The language becomes both a connection and a separation between people.

Future Tongues is part of a project where performers imagine the future. Ania Nowak's performance depicts how language and text are reduced to slogans that establish separate communities of shared interests but also induce a physical distance between people. We live in a time where collective projects and ideologies are communicated via short messages in digital forums, but where the cells in our bodies may still be at a pre-verbal stage? One aspect, however, which I miss in this work, is the idea that speech and language could also be a way of avoiding physical confrontations. Nowak's wordless stage seems relatively harmless, but even our bodies can forcibly claim territories and dominance over others. Then we need the words, the language, to mediate.

Dance Theatre on Family Policy

Renata Piotrowska-Auffret's *Pure Gold Is Seeping Out of Me* is a piece that, in text and dance, critically illuminates Poland's policy towards involuntarily childless women. Piotrowska and two other dancers represent women who, for various reasons, have sought help with fertility treatments. In Poland, medically assisted conception is reserved for heterosexual couples in stable relationships. It is illegal to offer IVF to gays and singles. In addition, care is provided only at private clinics, at a high cost, although the underlying problem may be pathological.

Piotrowska puts the IVF question in relation to the artist's role. In a humorous way, she performs how she prepares for a dance work on death, thanks to her being granted a number of international residencies. At the same time, at a private clinic in Warsaw, she is given a schedule of the days where an IVF treatment should take place, which collides with her planned working periods abroad. A dilemma arises: should the artist prioritize creating a work on death rather than creating new life? The residence also comes with a salary, which she needs to pay for assisted fertilization ...

Renata Piotrowska-Auffret extends her personal issue to discuss Polish family politics in general, standing up for women who for social and economic reasons do not have access to IVF. Along with the other two dancers, she shapes a composite, dynamic choreography reminiscent of Lloyd Newson and DV8 Physical Theatre.

Mother Earth

Naked bodies on stage are not uncommon at the Nowy Theater (and in the works above, the actors are partially undressed). In the current political climate, which, by virtue of a new moralism, promotes 'decent' expressions, it is particularly important for artists to defend the achievements previously made to affirm the naked, sexually and socially liberated body.

Agata Siniarska makes an almost offensive conquest of both female narrative and physical space in the installation-like work *You Are Safe*, at the Nowy Teatr. Three completely naked women lie on a piece of greenery, as if they were a classic painting of the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. They will crawl and twist in all imaginable positions for 35 minutes, without hiding their most intimate openings, which brings to mind the formless life of microorganisms and the most primitive cells. Then the women start working with soil, pushing it and gathering it around them, as if they are forming mainland and continents. From this, eruptions arise, and in the final scene, women have cleared away all soil, sitting in a climate-changed reality where they plant plastic plants with plastic filling, from piles of plastic objects: anything from dish-brushes to toys.

In fact, *You Are Safe* tells the story of our earth, where human presence and "civilization" have for a short time completely changed the conditions. The long section of seemingly unstructured movements reflects the evolution of the earth before the human species existed. It has a bold narrative, bringing forward the manifest expressions of female bodies, without any sexual objectification. Siniarska creates an alternative to conventional, 'efficient' dramaturgy. The very form of this short work thus reflects her dystopian critique of man's industrially determined depletion of the earth's nature and resources. The long scenes of organic movement are set against the short final scene, where all material is synthetic plastic.

Future Dreams

Thoughts about the earth's future crisis are also found in the piece *The Polaks Explain the Future*, with the sibling actors Jaśmina and Piotr Polak, directed by Wojtek Ziemilski. The Polaks act as DJs, mixing a collage of sound and images around a conversation with their mother about the future. They combine absurdist, playful games with wild techno music and light effects, while imagining humanity being wiped out by waste and deadly viruses, in a world of idiotic drivers and no more theatre. But then the siblings turn to logic and instead try to convey visions without fear and negative projections. Maybe we will be healthier, wiser and have a better world – after all, nobody knows?

You can of course also act like the innovative director Krzysztof Garbaczewski, and create an alternative reality with the help of virtual reality, VR. Garbaczewski (born 1983) is trained by Krystian Lupa at the famous theatre school in Krakow. He has also been an assistant to Lupa in performances that are primarily based on the explorative processes of the actors. But in recent years, Garbaczewski has become increasingly interested in expanding the stage's expressions through VR. With his

performing arts collective called the Dream Adoption Society, he creates poetic visual worlds that can play with and against the text and action on stage.

Krzysztof Garbaczewski's latest production with the Dream Adoption Society is called *Nietota* and is based on a metaphysical fantasy novel by the Polish author Tadeusz Miciński (1873-1918). It is played on Powszechny Theater, using VR technology whereby spectators in a fictional country interact via visible avatars. Personally I am a bit inexperienced with VR and computer animated environments, so I may have lost bits of the story. But I perceived it as a trip to some kind of remote Shangri-La, a place where we would gather and establish a new contract between people. With new, secular rituals, a language that everyone could share, and spiritual communities.

Garbaczewski will work increasingly with VR technology and partly leave the limitations of stage and physical bodies behind. Perhaps *Nietota* is an expression of his longing to reach beyond the suffocating dictates of the nation, church and ideologies? In the virtual reality, one can be poetic and ambiguous without restraints. There you can actually dare to dream of personal freedom and social tolerance. This is precisely what seems essential to today's performing artists in Poland.

Theresa Bener, 2019