

Polish Theatre after the Fall of Communism

Polish Theatre after the Fall of Communism:

Dionysus since '89

By

Olga Śmiechowicz

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PREFACE

Poland is a country in which “theatre is for those for whom the church is not enough”.¹ A country in which, despite the German occupation, roundups and public executions, theatre productions were performed in private apartments. A country in which theatre had become an organ of opposition to externally imposed authority. A country in which to take off a play would cause national protests. A country in which you simply “do not walk into a theatre unpunished...”²

Polish Theatre after the Fall of the Communism: Dionysus Since 89’ is the first study on the latest history of the Polish theatre written in English. My work continues the narration at the point where Kazimierz Braun’s: *A History of Polish Theatre 1939-1989* (published in 1996 by Greenwood Press) ended. In April 1990, during a conference “Art and Freedom” (organised by the Jagiellonian University in Krakow), Tadeusz Kantor said: “A new trend in art will not come into being as a result of Poland becoming independent. Trends in art, certain changes, transformations, revolutions come into being on entirely different bases.”³ With typical pessimism, Kantor declared the new art dead before it had even appeared in the new democratic Poland. Luckily, looking back over recent years, his argument cannot be accepted. So many art trends in Polish culture have come and gone in the last quarter century that it would be impossible to describe them in a single monograph. It is particularly noticeable in the field of theatre. This is why my primary focus is on the most talented directors: Krystian Lupa, who at the end of the twentieth century became one of the most important creators of European theatre, and his two most eminent disciples: Krzysztof Warlikowski and Jan Klata. The work of the three completely different artists made a major impact on the character of contemporary Polish theatre. Their artistic interests reflect the image of contemporary Poland: problems confronting the Poles; the literature they

¹ Juliusz Osterwa, creator of the Reduta Theatre.

² Tadeusz Kantor, creator of the Cricot 2 Theatre.

³ Katarzyna Fazan, „Tandeta w złym, czy dobrym gatunku? Antyestetyka w polskim teatrze 20-lecia,” in *20-lecie. Teatr polski po 1989*, edited by Dorota Jarząbek, 347. Kraków: Korporacja Ha! Art., 2010.

choose; what they look for in it; and the cultural codes they adopt to communicate.

Theatre in Poland has a special significance. Being always close to reality, it constitutes a live commentary on the current situation in the country. No other artistic medium has such a strong impact in Poland. Information about theatre events often appears in main news bulletins and premieres are broadly discussed by the press: *Cleansed*, directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski; an actress making offensive gestures to Krystian Lupa during a premiere performance; an attempt to removing Jan Klata from the position of managing director of the National Theatre... the massive coverage these events receive in the Polish media may suggest that they are nearly as important as health care reform.

My work on this book coincided with several anniversaries:

- 2014 marked the 25th anniversary of the fall of Communism in Poland;
- in 2015 Public Theatre in Poland celebrated its 250th birthday;
- 2015 was officially announced by UNESCO as the Year of Tadeusz Kantor (6 April marked the hundredth anniversary of his birth).

Anniversary events coincided with current issues which proved critical to the future of Polish theatre. At the beginning of March 2015, after nearly thirty years of artistic work, Krystian Lupa left the National Stary Theatre in Krakow in an atmosphere of conflict. This event dramatically ended another era in the history of Polish theatre.

Some may think that this book is written too soon, and that there has still not been enough distance to describe what has happened in Polish theatre over the past 25 years. More than once I have been tempted to write using only the *tempus imperfectum*, as all the events described seem to be in progress, still brewing. As I was born two years before the fall of Communism, I often get a feeling that in describing the past 25 years of Polish theatre I am, so to say, describing my twin.

My main objective was to show how our theatrical tradition differs from that of other European countries. When describing the most important productions of the most talented directors, I was trying to capture the energy they generate, to depict how it flows from the stage onto the audience. As is always the case with this medium, it is a challenge to render the three dimensions of a theatrical experience using flat, one-dimensional words. Having observed contemporary theatre life for many years, I have to some extent subconsciously been preparing to write this

book. Notes taken during performances, and publishing reviews was completed in the final stage of my work, making detailed research of the vast archives of the Ludwik Solski Academy for the Dramatic Arts in Krakow. Working with director's copies, diaries and articles, I did my best to make sure that my book lets the creators of the productions I describe speak as well. Hence the numerous valuable quotations from interviews and texts published by directors and actors.

I took the liberty of treating the reader as someone similar to me. Someone who may have a differently tuned sensitivity, constituted by different cultural contexts, but who equally inquisitively pricks his or her synapses up to anything new and unknown. Someone who likes to look for things in the theatre where no one had previously looked. I hope, like me, that someone is in the habit of searching the Internet for information. And especially for that someone, to make the search easier, I have left the original titles of productions and the names of creators in the footnotes. I hope that having read the description of *Kalkwerk*, that someone will take advantage of the Internet to see with their own eyes Kantor's scenes which influenced Krystian Lupa's production. Similarly in the case of Krzysztof Warlikowski's theatre, we think differently about *The Taming of the Shrew* when hearing the sounds of Paweł Mykietyn's dangerously insistent music in our headphones.

The title: *Dionysus Since '89* is an erudite reference to the iconic book: *Dionysus Since '69*, edited by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley⁴. It is not, however, an "intellectual follow-up" to the book which was devoted to the reception of antiquity. I am merely adopting a suggested way of thinking introduced by the authors, in which the antique god became a prefiguration of the entire medium which is theatre. *My Dionysus*, as in the above-mentioned book, has many forms and meanings. He has the softness of a figure in a painting by Caravaggio, but also the impulsiveness of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. His heterogeneity is to me a perfect symbol of different incarnations successively adopted by Polish theatre. It may be Krystian Lupa himself, who by falling into dangerously ecstatic states during his own productions has the ability to infect his actors and audiences with them. Dionysus is an ecstatic deity, but he is also extremely dangerous...

⁴ Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, Amanda Wrigley, *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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A fascination with Krystian Lupa's work directly influenced my decision to undertake theatre studies. Neither Professor Jacek Popiel nor I believe in coincidence. Apparently, a coincidence is in fact an unconscious necessity... How else to explain the fact that he was the first person I spoke to the first time I stepped into the Krakow Theatre Studies building? In time, he became the dearest Professor who taught us classes devoted to contemporary Polish theatre. In time, he became the dearest Supervisor, under whose kindly supervision I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the reception of Aristophanic Comedy. In some interpersonal relations the present has no end: I would thus like to express my sincere and profound gratitude to Professor Popiel for his invaluable assistance.

Heidelberg, June, 2018

CHAPTER ONE

BEFORE AND AFTER '89

If we look at the geopolitical map of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century we soon realise that Poland's position at the time could not have been worse. It was located exactly between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. When the German army retreated from the Polish territories at the end of World War II, the Soviet Army took its place, bringing with it NKVD commissars who laid the foundation for Communism in Poland. The imposed political system, which firmly subordinated the state to the USSR, lasted on Polish territory until 1989.

The Communist Party assumed control over all spheres of life. All theatres were nationalised and their artistic expression tightly constricted by censorship. Theatre managements were obliged to submit a copy of each play they intended to stage to the censorship office. First of all, their "ideological content" was analysed, and particular attention devoted to those plays which might contain unwanted, anti-Soviet messages. Censorship controlled theatre brochures and posters. Even theatre critics were controlled, which resulted in the peculiar phenomenon of "controlled criticism". Artists obedient to the system were promoted, and the work of those who had the courage to speak with their own voice, independent of the current political situation, was made difficult. It was obvious that actors who were members of the party would be cast more easily. Members of the Communist Party were also appointed directors of better theatres.

In 1949, pursuant to directives from Moscow, Socialist realism was introduced in Poland as an official trend compulsory in all fields of art. What is interesting is the fact that the main task of Socialist realism was defined as presenting a reality which did not exist. It was the reality to which (according to party ideologists) the entire society should aspire. The art of acting was forced to use a debased version of the Stanislavski method, and the so-called "production novels" were introduced in the repertoires of all theatres. They were plays about the working class achieving 400 percent efficiency, and fighting the Western, capitalist enemy. It is not hard to guess that it was not top-class drama.

The theatre reality of the time was grey, sad and unimaginative. In 1952, Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble visited Poland which was an unconscious announcement of the broadly awaited "thaw". The ensemble presented: *Mother*, *The Broken Pitcher* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The performances provoked the harsh opposition of the party-supporting critics, but also delight and upheaval among those who dreamt of taking the risk of experimenting with new texts and forms. Influenced by the visit, Polish theatre started leaning towards "epic theatre" — it was far from the aesthetics and problems taken up by the Socialist theatre. After the death of Stalin in 1953, a significant weakening of censorship was noticeable and, most importantly, deviation from the doctrines of Socialist realism was allowed. National classics and plays by Beckett, Ionesco, Dürrenmatt and Williams, popular in the West, returned to Polish theatres. Brecht's visit blazed a trail for Western theatres. Peter Brook came to Poland with his production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1957), and Giorgio Strehler presented Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters* (1958). However, construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 reinforced the Iron Curtain: censorship was re-established and the repertoire once again limited to "Socialist" productions.

Brecht and his ensemble's visit was also pivotal in the creative development of one of Poland's greatest twentieth-century stage producers. In 1955 Konrad Swinarski made his stage debut (in the years 1955 – 56 he worked as assistant to Brecht in Berlin). In his work as theatre director Swinarski ceased offering classical interpretations of dramatic plays. His project for the staging of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* gained iconic status in Polish theatre. Swinarski planned to include the entire space of the Stry Theatre in his vision.¹ Among other things, he planned to set up an army camp on the square in front of the theatre (inspired by Velázquez' *The Surrender of Breda*), in order for spectators heading for the foyer to walk through barracks. He wanted to fit roofs of buildings surrounding the square with speakers emitting the hum of sea waves which, mixed with the sounds of the barracks, would reach inside the theatre. Swinarski was able to compile such a monumental vision with an ironically "cheap" effect — when the Ghost of Hamlet's Father appeared on stage his armour opened and visible inside it was a lit shrine with entrails. Old Hamlet was not very sensitive but, according to Swinarski, was well aware of the fact that his son never loved him and therefore tried to invoke his compassion in every

¹ The Helena Modrzejewska National Stry Theatre in Krakow remains one of the most important theatres in Poland.

possible way. (The project was unfinished — the work was interrupted by the director's tragic death in a plane crash in 1975.)

One of Swinarski's young assistants on this production was Krystian Lupa. Observers of contemporary theatre agree in pointing out Lupa as the creator closest to his theatre work. While Lupa was still studying at the Krakow Academy for Dramatic Arts, Swinarski told his actors about a very gifted student of theatre direction... but he (rightly) disagrees, and claims he managed to work out his own production style. However, Lupa adopted the basis, the deepest nuances of thinking about the art of theatre, from Swinarski.

In the same year that Swinarski made his stage debut, Tadeusz Kantor founded the Cricot 2 Theatre in Krakow (Kantor's life's work was a continuation of his artistic endeavours under the occupation, and lasted until his death in 1990). Four years later, in 1959, Jerzy Grotowski founded the Theatre of 13 Rows.² Grotowski creatively researched dramatic texts, and by placing them in non-traditional contexts introduced new interpretations. However, his method of working with actors proved to be most important in the history of Polish theatre. *Akropolis*, staged in 1962, was presented in the reality of a concentration camp marking the beginning of "poor theatre", which in time extracted a sequence of notions such as "bare acting" and "via negativa". These notions constituted Grotowski's method of working on productions. It was a method of intense, many hours' trainings, demanding extreme physical strength of actors. Such maximum tuning of the body was to allow them to reach the deepest areas of mind and spirituality, as well as to fully release actors' abilities. *The Constant Prince*, staged in 1965 (as well as *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* in 1968), is considered to be one of the most important artistic expressions in the history of Polish theatre. Ryszard Cieślak, who played the title role, proved definitely that a "total act" in art is possible.

The year 1968 was not only the year of Jerzy Grotowski's *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* premiere: on 25 November 1967, on the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution, Kazimierz Dejmek, hitherto an ideologically correct director of "production novels", staged Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* at the National Theatre in Warsaw. It is the most important dramatic text in Polish theatre. The Party considered the production a "stab in the back" of Polish-Russian friendship and banned any publication of positive reviews. The authorities' official antipathy provoked the obvious and eager interest of the public. As a result, the production was ordered to be closed. The final performance (30 January

² In 1962 it changed its name to the Laboratory Theatre.

1968) developed into a national manifestation which marked the beginning of a series of protests all over the country. They were primarily initiated by students, many of whom were arrested, and many (including protesting lecturers) were expelled from universities. The Communist Party began large-scale propaganda against the Polish intelligentsia. Dejmek lost his position as manager of the National Theatre. In a gesture of solidarity, most of its actors left with him.

Student theatres, strongly involved in political and social issues,³ emerged in 1970s Poland on a mass scale. (Obviously, the authorities did their best to limit such activity.) Repertory theatres stages abounded in outstanding productions by esteemed directors: Jerzy Jarocki, Andrzej Wajda and Jerzy Grzegorzewski. However, critics accused these artists of indifference to current issues and lack of involvement in political life. Official theatres seemed not to notice the unrest exploding in Polish society. Such were the circumstances surrounding Krystian Lupa's directing debut in 1976, still unnoticed at the time. He was bound to patiently await the right moment to turn Polish theatre upside down...

In 1980, the "Solidarity" movement was founded, which threw down the gauntlet to the Communist Party, and began enforcing changes in the management of the state (including its cultural policy). In the same year, Tadeusz Kantor staged *Wielopole, Wielopole*, one of his best plays. Social unrest and growing discontent with the situation in the country were suppressed by the introduction of martial law in December 1981. Strikes were crushed with live ammunition, and "Solidarity" was made illegal. Theatre artists, boycotting performances of the Party-controlled radio and television, also suffered repression. Such artists were savagely attacked by Communist propaganda. (Those who decided to cooperate with the authorities, on the other hand, paid the price of infamy within their circles.) Funds were drastically reduced and theatres were often banned from staging performances altogether. Censorship was reinstated. In response, underground theatre was created (as during World War II). Performances took place in private apartments and churches to which access by the Communist authorities was limited. All cultural events had heavy political undertones. In 1982, Jerzy Grotowski left Poland for good to continue his paratheatrical projects abroad. (In 1997 he was appointed to the chair of Theatre Anthropology, created specifically for him, at the Collège de France.)

³ Włodzimierz Staniewski began his artistic career at the time at the Krakow STU theatre. Over time he joined Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre, and in 1978 founded the Centre for Theatre Practices Gardzienice.

Communism lasted in Poland until 1989. Artistic circles greeted the new, democratic system with enthusiasm. However, the beginnings of capitalism negatively affected theatre funding. The state budget (which previously supported all theatres) could no longer be burdened with such a heavy load. Severe cuts were introduced and many artists lost their jobs. Profit-making productions were chosen over artistic ones. In 1990 censorship was completely abolished, but theatre had already lost its social importance. It ceased to be the carrier of banned metaphors. "Denmark is a prison" was no longer so loaded with meaning, and Lear's division of the kingdom was no longer associated by Poles with the Yalta Conference of 1945.

The death of Tadeusz Kantor on 8 December 1990 was the end of an era in Polish culture. *Today Is My Birthday*, an unfinished production which premiered one month after the death of its director, became a symbolic summary of the past century. Once again, like Konrad Swinarski, "the greatest one" was working in fringe theatre, uninterested in political issues of the day Krystian Lupa, together with a group of his devoted actors, worked at a provincial theatre until the end of the 1980s. He was often ridiculed by condescending critics. However, he patiently perfected his work and offered his audiences an intellectual retreat from politics and social involvement. With his productions he asked about the elusiveness of human sensitivity and how not to reduce existence to the level of banality. He treated a written dramatic play as a "landscape in which one can take an easy walk, stop in one's favourite spots to contemplate them, gazing at a detail — and eventually look at one's watch, conclude that it is late, get up and return home".⁴ Lupa, who constructed his performances with moods and climates, was finally noticed in the late 80s. The director became well-known when he staged *The Dreamers* (1988) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1990). During the 90s he became one of the greatest creators of Polish and European theatre. He became a teacher, a paragon, and a guru for subsequent generations of artists. From the early 90s he was head of the Directing Department at the Ludwik Solski Academy for the Dramatic Arts. A new generation in Polish theatre was composed mainly of Lupa's disciples. The best-known of them, Krzysztof Warlikowski and Jan Klata, transformed repertory theatre into an artistic theatre of risk taken by artists, directors and audiences alike. Lupa tuned their sensitivity, pushed them to experiment. What is most important, neither of them tries to copy their beloved master.

⁴ Tomasz Kubikowski, „Pustka i forma,” in *Strategie publiczne, strategie prywatne. Teatr polski 1990-2005*, edited by Tomasz Plata, 18. Izabelin: Świat literacki, 2006.

They each draw autonomous conclusions from his teaching and offer something of their own as superstructure. They depart from poetic theatre in favour of socio-political commentary and pop-culture. Their productions, reaching deep for new media, are similarly constructed to music videos. The generation of Lupa's disciples is the first one to fully function in the new political system. They produce their performances abroad and are guests on breakfast TV programmes. In Poland they have become stars of mass culture. Krystian Lupa also maintains the pace of his theatre experiments and refuses to become outdistanced. He continues to test the scope of possibilities of the great theatrical machine: "The soul lab is working at full speed".⁵

⁵ Piotr Gruszczyński, *Ojcobójcy. Młodzi zdolniejsi w teatrze polskim* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2003), 54.

CHAPTER TWO

KRYSTIAN LUPA

1. To believe in the communion of souls

Krystian Lupa was born on 7 November 1943 in Jastrzębie Zdrój, a small town in the south of Poland. He had liked to draw ever since he was a child. His sketches depicted a world of non-existent images and remote lands which he continues to map out to this today. Having finished school, and following his parents' suggestions, he applied to study medicine, but he failed the first stage of recruitment as he insulted the examiners by calling them "materialists". He studied physics for six months at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, but studying exact sciences guaranteeing a stable profession was not fulfilling. Having dropped out of physics Lupa next entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Faculty of Painting. He lists Vermeer, da Vinci, Caravaggio, Friedrich, Ernst, Klee, Delvaux and Magritte as some of his favourite artists (whose influence can also be observed in the stage designs he creates). His poetic, and very "literary", paintings are characterised by the distinct influences of surrealism and symbolism. In his drawings, Lupa becomes an illustrator of his own fantasies. Such artistic predilections were behind his move from the Faculty of Painting to Graphics at the same Academy.

During his studies at the Academy, Lupa became enchanted with the French New Wave, and the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard in particular. When he graduated from the Academy in 1969 Lupa therefore applied to the Directing Department of the School of Film and Theatre in Lodz. He was fascinated by the cinema of Ingmar Bergman, Luchino Visconti and Andrei Tarkovsky. However, he got lost in his own immature attitude and pretentious pose of "extreme avant-garde".¹ Today, Lupa likes to refer to himself from that period as "Narcissus fascinated by his own pranks".² He enjoys telling the story of how after the second year of studies he got

¹ Beata Matkowska-Świąś, „Wciąż noszę te siedem dachówek – rozmowa z Krystianem Lupa,” *Magazyn Gazeta*, June 1, 2000, 12.

² Matkowska-Świąś, „Wciąż noszę...,” 12.

expelled from the famous film school for eccentric and provocative behaviour. However, many of his lecturers and co-students agree that the films he presented at exams were simply poor.

Expulsion from studies brought about his two-year crisis. He was unable to decide upon the direction to follow. He tried to get to the Directing Department at the Warsaw Theatre Academy (1972). Unfortunately, he could not faint in a way that satisfied the commission auditioning candidates. Instead, he passed the exams for the newly-created Directing Department at the Ludwik Solski Academy for the Dramatic Arts in Krakow. Educators at the Academy soon recognised his talent. At the time, directors such as Jerzy Jarocki and Konrad Swinarski staged their best productions at the Krakow Stry Theatre; young Lupa was particularly drawn to Swinarski's productions. He became his assistant, working on rehearsals for *Hamlet*, however, in his own productions he was far from copying his teacher. He was not interested in Brecht, Shakespeare, or the Romantics. In his own words, Swinarski merely taught him "great distrust for all initial ideas, for general and immediate classifications. He developed a habit of penetrating the structure of each scene, its atoms".³

Besides Konrad Swinarski, Tadeusz Kantor had a great influence on Lupa's work. Their first encounter was when Lupa was still studying at the Academy of Fine Arts and attended his lectures on modern art.⁴ (This was where he first heard of Andy Warhol and pop-art.) The first performance directed by Kantor which Lupa saw was *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes, or The Green Pill: A Comedy with Corpses* by Witkacy. The performance enchanted him. As a student of directing he participated in rehearsals for *The Dead Class*:

Soon after that I went to the performance and cried my eyes out. Such great fulfilment of artistic dreams always touches me in an almost archaic fashion. I remembered Kantor's fraudulently yelling that it would be the greatest production of European theatre, and suddenly I said: yes, it is the greatest production of European theatre. After *The Dead Class* I was obsessed with Kantor. Kantor was something holy. I remember that also because of him I engaged in a fight with someone and showered them with sugar. (...) Later there was *Wielopole, Wielopole* — all right, everything was the way it should be. And later Kantor began to die inside me, but I also claim that Kantor suffocated in his own greatness and fulfilment. He

³ Joanna Boniecka, „Ja służę demonowi – rozmowa z Krystianem Lupa,” *Odra*, no. 4 (1992): 30.

⁴ Kantor had been a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts since 1967.

grew old and became like a childish king, ruffling and experiencing his grandeur or godliness in a... naïve... or sclerotic way.⁵

Of the revolutionary works by Jerzy Grotowski, Lupa saw only *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* (staged in 1969). He did not join the crowd of his followers and admirers:

I was put off by the solemnity with which the performance tried to enforce a message and offer "soul food" to me as its viewer in some almost Eucharistic pretension. What is behind this gesture? Is this sacrifice real? Can it be real each time? In comparison, I absorbed productions by Tadeusz Kantor with fascination. He did not pretend to offer me something, as some angel of wisdom. On the contrary, he appeared with the rough energy of his nature, he revealed his buffoonery! (...) My reservation towards Grotowski began, as we can see, with superficial motifs. I did not appreciate the great effort he made creating his image.⁶ (...) Everyone has different access to the instrument of their own body and their own soul. Therefore, I do not believe that the so-called collaborative training, as was the case with Grotowski, is the right way of working with actors. Such a method unifies, and as a result changes these people into a... flock of sheep... brainwashed by the faith. And even if the charisma of a breath of faith can work this miracle and allow actors to reach beyond, I still am sickened by such a brainwashed actor.⁷

(Krystian Lupa was to have participated in the ceremony to award Jerzy Grotowski with an Honorary Doctorate at the University of Wrocław (1991). However, Grotowski, who always carefully followed what people said about him, did not allow it. Lupa, on the other hand, continues to call him a "false prophet".)

In 1976 Lupa made his professional theatre debut. He staged Sławomir Mrożek's *The Butchery*⁸ at the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Krakow. In the performance, Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor was drowned out by the shrieks of slaughtered animals to symbolise murder of culture. Next

⁵ Grzegorz Niziołek, „Aktor w obnażających sytuacjach – rozmowa z Krystianem Lupa,” *Didaskalia*, no. 10 (1995): 11.

⁶ Łukasz Drewniak, „Falszywy mag świątyni teatru – rozmowa z Krystianem Lupa,” *Dziennik*, April 4-5, 2009, 11-12.

⁷ Beata Matkowska-Święś, *Podróż do Nieuchwytnego. Rozmowy z Krystianem Lupa* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), 70.

⁸ Original title of the production: *Rzeźnia*

Date and place of premiere: May 8, 1976, Juliusz Słowacki Theatre, Krakow

Direction: Krystian Lupa

Set design: Krystian Lupa

year Lupa staged his graduation performance at the Academy for the Dramatic Arts: Witkacy's *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* was produced in the spirit of Kantor's work. At the production, Lupa met Alicja Bienicewicz and Andrzej Hudziak for the first time. Together, they created his breakthrough productions: *The Dreamers*, *The Sleepwalkers* and *Kalkwerk*.

After graduating from the Krakow Academy, he was employed by the Cyprian Kamil Norwid Theatre in Jelenia Góra. That was also to where he transferred his graduation production.⁹ Initially, his works were received by reviewers with reservation, generally in a negative way, but the artistic director of the Jelenia Góra theatre at the time saw a mature artist in him. A distinct feature of Alina Obidniak's management was her talent for attracting young directors ready for bold artistic experiments at the theatre. It was in Jelenia Góra, a small, provincial theatre that Lupa managed to create his first theatre laboratory. He had perfect conditions for working and finding his own form of artistic expression. He created an atmosphere of constant experiment, and attracted a group of devoted actors and achieved "community" in created works. His actors were referred to as "a group of fanatics". They spent all their days together, reading, deliberating and listening to music. A "gang" was founded in Jelenia Góra, headed by Lupa, who was characterised by constant intellectual exploration. Merely a dozen or so enthusiasts came to see his productions, and usually the audience shrank by half after the first interval.

Witold Gombrowicz, Frank Wedekind, Stanisław Przybyszewski, Stanisław Wyspiański, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Sławomir Mrożek and Alfred Kubin: looking for texts for his productions Lupa trawled through modernist and contemporary dramatic works. He tried to include them in discussions about changes in contemporary culture and spirituality. He staged texts which were difficult, grotesque, and required in-depth reading. He also staged his own literary works, including *The Transparent Room*¹⁰ and *The Supper*.¹¹ He worked in Jelenia Góra for nine theatrical

⁹ Original title of the production: *Nadobnisie i kockodany, czyli Zielona pigułka*
Date and place of premiere: February 19, 1978, Cyprian Kamil Norwid Theatre, Jelenia Góra

Direction: Krystian Lupa
Set design: Krystian Lupa
Music: Krzysztof Lipka (consult).

¹⁰ Original title of the production: *Przeźroczysty pokój*
Date and place of premiere: February 17, 1979, Cyprian Kamil Norwid Theatre, Jelenia Góra
Direction: Krystian Lupa

seasons. Unfazed by the approaching deadlines of premieres, he prepared nine productions. While working on them, Lupa developed his own method of working with actors. *Maciej Korbowa and Bellatrix*, based on a play by Witkiewicz, was his last production prepared in Jelenia Góra.¹² When Lupa moved to Krakow, the group of artists focused around him disintegrated.

In Krakow he signed a contract with the Helena Modrzejewska National Stary Theatre, which became a twentieth-century cultural phenomenon. The theatre was particularly fortunate in managers, directors producing, actors performing and, finally, the repertoire. The phenomenon of the Stary Theatre artistic ensemble is quite problematic to many researchers of contemporary Polish theatre. It is a phenomenon that totally warps the semantic spaces of adjectives and which is, in a way, created at the time of a performance, and constructed out of the superb coordination of great artistic individuals and a disciplined ensemble. The Stary Theatre has always attracted the greatest names in Polish theatre: Swinarski, Wajda, Jarocki, Grzegorzewski, and eventually Lupa. In 1988 he produced *The Dreamers*, based on a play by Robert Musil.¹³ Initially, the production did not attract much interest: it was often performed to an almost empty auditorium. But those who did attend could sense something new in this content, a vague announcement of something great that would cause revolution in the way of thinking about the art of theatre. Despite the initial conservative reception, the production brought Lupa national acclaim (including the Konrad Swinarski Prize awarded by the monthly *Teatr*). It was recorded and broadcast by Polish Television. However,

Set design: Krystian Lupa.

¹¹ Original title of the production: *Kolacja*

Date and place of premiere: April 27, 1980, Cyprian Kamil Norwid Theatre, Jelenia Góra

Direction: Krystian Lupa

Set design: Krystian Lupa.

¹² Original title of the production: *Maciej Korbowa i Bellatrix*

Date and place of premiere: April 6, 1986, Cyprian Kamil Norwid Theatre, Jelenia Góra

Direction: Krystian Lupa

Set design: Krystian Lupa.

¹³ Original title of the production: *Marzyciele*

Date and place of premiere: February 28, 1988, The Helena Modrzejewska Stary Theatre, Krakow

Direction: Krystian Lupa

Set design: Krystian Lupa

Music: Marcin Krzyżanowski.

many still perceived Lupa as a curiosity which would burn out after two seasons...

2. Insanity measured out with steps Krystian Lupa and the writings of Thomas Bernhard

One of the most controversial figures in European literature, and one of the greatest visionaries of European theatre: One cannot help feeling that the two of them simply had to meet. Reading each of Thomas Bernhard's work we are struck by a maniacal, very repetitive narrative, as if addressed solely to the persona of the protagonist. It is very persistent and intrusive, a delirious repetition of thoughts circulating rhythmically around the entire text. It is frequently off-putting to readers new to his writings. Too heavy, too infantile because of visible conscious stylistic procedures by the author, who wanted to make a very specific impression on his readers. However, if we immerse ourselves in this manner of imaging and expression of thoughts, with time we will notice that it becomes so infectious that we are no longer able to think independently and begin to filter the world in a brand new fashion. Reading it, we sense that this fierceness and intensity of Bernhard's prose is untranslatable. Austrians refer to its musicality; literary theorists find it to be babbling and barbaric. We could quite justifiably raise doubts as to whether these texts can be used in theatre at all.

Krystian Lupa staged *Kalkwerk* in November 1992,¹⁴ two years after the death of Tadeusz Kantor. Looking back, the two events have much in common: the death of the creator of *The Dead Class* closed a certain era in Polish theatre, whereas the premiere of *Kalkwerk* is the symbolic beginning of another. To this day, *Kalkwerk* remains one of the most important productions staged in Poland after 1989. It was Lupa's first encounter with Bernhard's prose. It was the first of the author texts he read, and which he immediately decided to stage. He faced the challenge of translating the extremely complicated system by which Bernhard's characters expressed themselves into the language of theatre, but succeeded in

¹⁴ Original title of the production: *Kalkwerk*, (adaptation based on the short story: *The Lime Works*).

Date and place of premiere: November 7, 1992, The Helena Modrzejewska Stary Theatre, Krakow

Direction: Krystian Lupa

Adaptation: Krystian Lupa

Set design: Krystian Lupa

Music: Jacek Ostaszewski

creating his own adaptation.¹⁵ After the premiere, reviewers were convinced that it was Lupa's greatest achievement, his crowning work so far (the director was almost fifty at the time), but it soon became apparent that *Kalkwerk* was merely to be the first of his greatest theatrical achievements.

Scenes from *Kalkwerk* are nocturnal. The ascetic composition of the stage space immediately brought to mind the productions by Tadeusz Kantor: old, rusty equipment with paint peeling off; a cold, metal bed; brown police uniforms; cold, blue and grey light streaming through the window. Lupa himself comments on the window reappearing in his theatre sets:

A window is a kind of valve or opening to all kinds of possibilities, to the outside world. (...) The mere fact of there being a window and its opening is a symbolic act aimed at changing the space and filling it with new meaning and new power. The spaces are staged; they grow and at some point develop roots in the audience, stem from acting and reach outside with their branches where they create a metaphysical model. The character's universe infiltrates the universe of reality which penetrates the character.¹⁶

Kalkwerk, appearing in the Polish title, is the name of an old lime works. Its interior, filling the entire stage space, resembled an abandoned factory hall with cast iron ornaments in the windows, which Konrad (Andrzej Hudziak) had removed as soon as he bought the house. It seems that *Kalkwerk* was an eerie place from the very beginning, not unlike its inhabitants. Had they been that way before they moved in here? We cannot tell. Konrad bought the house to finish his monograph on the sense of hearing to which he had devoted the past twenty years of his life. Each day, for hours on end, he tortured his disabled wife by testing the so-called *Urbantschitsch's Method* on her. Tension growing between the two eventually results in crime.

The entire production was presented in reverse order. Policemen enter the stage. They finally find Konrad, who had been hiding in a cesspit for three days. Screaming at each other and at Konrad, the policemen try to conduct an initial interrogation. In the middle of the stage is a wheelchair covered with an old sheet over a woman's body. Konrad cowers from the cold and is clearly scared of the increasingly aggressive policeman who

¹⁵ Lupa added two scenes in his adaptation: the initial scene with police officers and the scene of Konrad's dream.

¹⁶ Aleksandra Szydłowska, „To nie znaczy, że jestem fryzjerem - rozmowa z Krystianem Lupa,” *Notatnik Teatralny*, no. 11 (1996): 93-96.

repeats the accusatory word “murderer!” He changes into dry clothes. He is slow and clumsy. His fingers are numb from the cold and seem to be holding on to the buttons of his trousers as though to prevent himself from falling to the ground.

This opening scene is followed by a sequence of events leading to the murder. Morning at the Konrads. Warm morning light streams through the window. Konrad’s wife is lying on a bed. She is trying to summon her husband with a bell but he does not arrive. She rings the bell once again. There is growing impatience, even in the movement of the wrist. There is growing impatience in the movement, in the sound of the bell which keeps ringing in vain. The bedroom door remains closed. She has to manage on her own. She removes an overly heavy, mouldy, down duvet. She makes the effort to sit up by holding on to the bed rail and slowly moving her paralysed body. She lowers her numb legs to the floor carefully and slowly. Everything happens in real time, every moment is needed to draw a breath of air and gather new strength. (During her meetings with members of the audience, Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik often said that as early as in the morning on the day of a *Kalkwerk* performance, her body as if subconsciously, begins to feel ill, and adopts poses typical of Konrad’s wife.) Struggling with the dead weight of her crippled body she moves into the wheelchair only succeeding after several attempts.

Lupa is exceptionally sensitive to unplanned coincidences happening during rehearsals. On one occasion, the moment that Konrad’s wife was already sitting in her wheelchair, exhausted by the effort, coincided with the sound of an aeroplane flying over the theatre. The airplane became part of the production. Having heard the sound, the woman follows the plane with her eyes as if it might become entangled in the fly-tower mechanism above her.

Konrad appears in the door of the room. He puts a tray with breakfast on the table, as he does every day, and does not even notice the extreme effort she must have made a moment before, without his help. Konrad opens a wardrobe and takes out one of the dresses; his wife sits with her back to him. She cannot see him, yet she shakes her head — not that one. Lupa’s actors are masters of comedy in such situations. They use a slightly extended pause, or catch the partner’s eye. Konrad dresses her like a rag doll. He pulls the clothes over her head and keeps tugging at her. He is unceremonious and indifferent. His thoughts are constantly immersed in his study. His duty towards his wife only gets on his nerves — every morning, the same questions are asked:

Konrad's wife:
Did you sleep well?

Konrad:
I obviously did not.
(*after a while*)
Did you sleep well?

Konrad's wife:
Obviously, I did not.¹⁷

Konrad pours tea and sets up plates, impatient that all these activities interrupt his work. They eat without saying a word. Konrad finishes breakfast abruptly, and without a word of warning takes away his wife's plate, and grabs a tea cup from her hand before she has finished drinking it: "The creative process hates prolonged breakfasts!"¹⁸ He is a domineering tyrant whose entire life is subordinated to his work on hearing. There is no way for his wife to protect herself or refuse him. She has to surrender to the brutal discipline imposed by her husband who is ruthless towards her. Konrad begins his tirade (iconic for theatre researchers) on the sense of hearing:

There is a distinct difference between listening and hearing. Listening and hearing. On the one hand listening, and on the other hand hearing... LIS-TENING?... LIS?

(*he says it softly, gently, carefully*)

... and... HEARING!!! HEARING!!! He goes on: catching, listening in... can you hear and distinguish it?... Pricking up one's ears and eavesdropping. PRICKING UP ONE'S EARS AND EAVES-DROPPING (*higher regions of longing and lower regions, sneaky and clandestine*)

...and on: being hard of hearing, mishearing and so on... Lending an ear, overhearing, hearing through the grapevine...TRYING NOT TO HEAR!!! TRYING NOT TO HEAR!!! TRYING NOT TO HEAR!!! Can you hear? TRYING NOT TO HEAR!!!¹⁹

Konrad's body follows every syllable, as if becoming an apparatus for emitting and receiving stimuli. His body shrinks compulsively, as if the sounds he makes are provoking his muscles to physical response, not unlike the rapid repetition, in ever-changing ways, during therapeutic, schizophrenic exercises, of the short "i" in "Im Innviertel habe ich nichts".

¹⁷ *Kalkwerk*, stage script, (Krystian Lupa's private archive), 13.

¹⁸ *Kalkwerk*, 13.

¹⁹ *Kalkwerk*, 13.

Quickly, in a high pitch, as if surprised. He is joined by the off-stage voice of Lupa, sitting, as always, in the back row of the auditorium, and chanting individual sounds into a microphone. Eerie and ominous. Konrad's wife falls into a trance and begins to speak about laughing mice and pins.

Their entire married life has been subjected to Konrad's study on the sense of hearing. They sacrificed everything to the study — has it been in vain? Is Konrad merely a psychopath sadistically tormenting his wife? Or is he a genius? Could he hear more than others? Were the voices he heard merely spectres of a sick mind? Or was he a jester, as his wife often thought? Did she believe in her husband? In his study? Or perhaps she gave up because she had no other choice, anyway? "I would rather not see what is in your head..."²⁰ We do not know whether her words express dread of some terrible brain dysfunction, or fear that all that joint effort will prove futile. Lupa himself made things even more complicated in one of his texts:

It is not an accident that it is a study of the sense of hearing. The ear is, so to speak, a prophets' choice of a sense organ. God comes through the sense of hearing, nature whispers its mysteries through the sense of hearing in such a way that it almost becomes speech. (...) It is through the sense of hearing that world comes to man and becomes word. Particularly in special, critical moments...²¹

Konrad kept pacing up and down the stage, as if his growing insanity could be measured out with steps. Trying to protect herself from his despotism, the wife becomes intoxicated by memories, reading old letters, looking at photographs taken when she was young, at a time when their life was completely different. It was filled with travel, receptions and new dresses. When she reads them it seems the letters had just been delivered, envelopes had just been torn open, and not picked up, for the hundredth time. It seems that the people who posted them still care about how she is.

Everything had been subordinated to his work. It seems that everything had already been gathered, thought through, but at the climactic point, when he should simply sit down and put the study to paper, everything falls apart. Every day there comes the ideal moment to write the study but there is always an interruption. A postman, a baker, the wife demanding her pillow be straightened. Everyone thoughtlessly ruins Konrad's work with their petty needs, and he always has to treat these people politely

²⁰ *Kalkwerk*, 25.

²¹ Krystian Lupa, „Kalkwerk Thomasa Bernharda,” *Notatnik Teatralny*, no. 7 (1993/94): 61.

because he cannot write anything today, anyway. The whole day is wasted. "Our reality is shaped by what we neglect to do, not by what we actually do..."²² *Kalkwerk* is a production about great inaptness, great unfulfilment. About an idea which explodes in the brain. Which cannot be resolved as easily as Konrad would wish:

One should empty one's brain from time to time, drain off the surplus brain, as we do taking a leak, nothing more (...), empty the brain like the bladder, answer the call of nature, take a brain break like you take a bathroom break.²³

The study is put on paper only once. In Konrad's dream about a vision come true.²⁴ In that dream, Konrad wrote his work down. From the beginning to the end. All the words have finally been arranged in the right order. All it took was to sit at a desk. To quietly take out the paper, carefully, so as not to scare away the words which came to him that night. His wife also appears in this dream. Healthy, beautiful in a blood-red dress. She burns the study.

We will never know why Konrad actually killed his wife. The final scene is another return to the memories of a past life. Trying on long-unworn dresses and the sudden, categorical demand of powder; Konrad's wife will apply layers of cloud-creating powder. After a while the powder will settle on everything, her face, her shoulders, and the table. Its particles in the air will carry the final words of the performance: "Scandal has hit our house."²⁵ But even after they could no longer be heard the audience would remain silent in their seats. In dead silence, as if any sound penetrating this space would be a *faux pas* in the face of the immense drama which had just unfolded on stage.

Lupa and his actors managed to create a production with unusual intensity. The air on stage seemed to thicken around Konrad and his wife from the very beginning, when we started observing their psychomachia. They both implemented a scorched-earth policy. The participants in this marriage had nothing more to say to each other. Not one scene made the cold emotionality of the performance brighter. The only ray of happiness was going back to the memories of the time from before the illness... of both of them. Andrzej Hudziak, who played Konrad, was slim, petite, "the

²² *Kalkwerk*, 37.

²³ *Kalkwerk*, 21.

²⁴ Scene added by Lupa in his adaptation.

²⁵ *Kalkwerk*, 44.

embodiment of mediocrity”.²⁶ Nevertheless, he created a legendary performance which landed him in a psychiatric hospital. Cast alongside him was Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik, not quite thirty at the time, who was given the task of playing a mature woman, wheelchair-bound for years, mentally drained by her domineering husband. Looking back, it seems inconceivable that such a difficult production was created by such young people. The production was difficult both for the artists and the audience who often found it hard to bear. People were leaving, running away during performances. There were also those who came to see the production several dozen times. Each time they allowed this peculiar story about the demon of the brain to drain them inside.

Another text by Bernhard directed by Krystian Lupa was *Immanuel Kant*.²⁷ It is widely considered to be the funniest and the most absurd of all texts by the Austrian author. Once again, it would seem that it is completely unstageable, but to Lupa it was ideal. The plot is historically impossible: Immanuel Kant (Wojciech Ziemiański) is on board a transatlantic liner, going to America for cataract surgery. In fact, the philosopher never left Königsberg. Even Lupa realized his struggle with the text he was staging:

Are we going to demonstrate that Kant used to be Kant, or is it completely unnecessary? Or do we simply answer the question: “how did it actually happen?” with: “Whatever...” The myth of a truly GREAT MAN became (gave rise to) a kind of FREAK... A whim of imagination. Undermining historical truth. Everything is a contradiction of itself. Where did this creative gesture stem from? This question should somehow be answered... We are cast-off pupal skins. What remains is piteous... It is an excuse! The meaning of this caprice seems deeper... As if an inexplicable cataclysm of perspective... A sudden emetic reflex in response to once-worshipped (also personally) figures of authority. What remains from past admiration is a silly and embarrassed distaste... It all does not make sense!²⁸

²⁶ Marek Mikos, „Konrad. Bernharda, Lupa i Hudziaka,” *Notatnik Teatralny*, no. 7 (1993/94): 77.

²⁷ Original title of the production: *Immanuel Kant*

Date and place of premiere: January 13, 1996, The Polski Theatre, Wrocław

Direction: Krystian Lupa

Adaptation: Krystian Lupa

Set design: Krystian Lupa

Music: Jacek Ostaszewski.

²⁸ Excerpt from Krystian Lupa’s journal published in the brochure. *Immanuel Kant* (Wrocław: The Polski Theatre, 1996), 10.