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"Theatrology at a Crossroads". Notes from a conference

Konferencja naukowa "Teatrologia na rozdrożach" podczas I Otwartego Forum Twórczego i Naukowego [Scientific conference Theatrology at a Crossroads during the 1st open creative and scientific forum in Jaśkowice], 2-4 Apr 2014, Jaśkowice, Poland.

A theatre-related conference held in a town that has no theatre; but where you find people for whom theatre means life, however cliché that sounds. An idea of an open forum for both theatrologists and theatre artists. Will they be able to communicate without "sending each other to Coventry"?

In April 2014, the Polish town of Jaśkowice hosted a conference named *Teatrologia na rozdrożach* (Theatrology at a crossroads). It focused on the relations between theatre theory and practice. This symposium was organized by the University of Silesia in Katowice and theatre society House in Jaśkowice.

The name of the conference signalled an opportunity to think about the place of theatrology among other art-related studies. At the same time, the conference aimed at asking questions about whether theatrology should redefine its tasks, and whether it is able, in its current form, to reflect the contemporary situation and be of use to practising theatre artists as well. Cooperation between theatrologists and theatre artists could be discussed because representatives of both groups were present.

The majority of presentations concerned the relationship between actors and the audience. Bartłomiej Juszcak mentioned a theatrical scandal during the staging of *To Damascus*, directed by Jan Kłata in the Old National Theatre in Krakow, where the audience had

interrupted one of the performances by chanting and booing. He also commented on the relationship between theatre artists and critics, and on the methodology that theatrologists should use to analyse performances so that the artists can make use of it. The contemplation whether cooperation between theoreticians and practising artists is at all possible (and under what conditions) reminded me of the escalated situation at the OST-RA-VAR theatre festival, where attempts at discussions from which both parties would benefit have failed in years past.

The section dedicated to education hosted teachers from drama schools in Krakow and Wrocław. Milan Lesiak and Piotr Rudzki outlined the teaching approaches at the University of Wrocław and informed about the specifics of this university, where theatrologists and film theorists work in close cooperation. Włodzimierz Szturc presented the educational philosophy of two schools in Krakow. As he teaches both at the theory-oriented Jagiellonian University and at the PWST (a practical drama academy for theatre artists), he gave an insightful summary of the different teaching methods and graduate profiles. He also pointed to the alarming fact that both types of school produce an excess number of graduates who subsequently cannot find jobs.

The conference was interdisciplinary: it was attended by theatrologists, literary

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scholars, teachers and art-school graduates from Warsaw, Krakow, Katowice, Łódź or Toruń. Łukasz Borowiec confirmed the growing popularity of translation studies in his presentation about the art of translation. Beata Popczyk-Szczęsna focused on the phenomenon of scenic reading. Adriana Świątek, who studied wedding ceremonies in Hutsul folk culture, documented theatrical interest in anthropology and ethnography. Barbara Maresz presented digital databases concerning theatre; apart from Polish resources she also mentioned Czech portals www.divadlo.cz and www.divadelni-ustav.cz. However, Czech digital resources pale in comparison with the multitude of Polish websites documenting particular productions, materials concerning selected directors, or resources related to certain drama history periods.

Directors Krzysztof Popiołek and Piotr Tenczyk did their presentations in a form resembling the way they talk to actors. Theatre artists who ventured to attend the forum and meet the theoreticians were the only participants to bring the necessary perspective "from the other side of the creative process". Although it saw numerous discussions about the necessity of scholars and artists listening to each other, the conference left much to be desired in this respect. Theatrollogists (who formed a majority) either ignored or belittled the artists' input. The problem arises whenever artists trespass on the scholars' territory, and vice versa. If the former attempts to generalize their practical experience and postulate theoretical conclusions, it is almost certain that a 'pack of theoreticians' (who use this kind of thinking commonly, and who have read a few more books after all) will tear them to pieces.

Nevertheless, the biggest stir was caused by Jacek Mikołajczyk's presentation concerning the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Mikołajczyk tried to prove that theatrollogical terminology can be applied to this event. Of course, when describing the New York tragedy we can apply terms such as 'live', theatricality, mediality or communication. But is terrorism theatre? And can we describe terrorist attacks as performance? The most resolute reply to these provocative questions came from Eleonora Udalska, who said she didn't see a reason why theatrollogists should deal with something that was already being studied by politologists, psychologists, sociologists etc. According to Udalska, such events should not be the focus of theatrollogy because they miss an aesthetic element.

The conference *Teatrologia na rozdrożach* aimed at discussing the possibilities of interconnecting dramatic theory and practice. The symposium confirmed that understanding between scholars and theatre artists does not come automatically because each group 'operates on a different frequency'. Still, it is a step forward that the reasons why the theory/practice communication does not work properly were named, and opportunities for improvement were identified.

Following the use of theoretical analyses in practice, scholarly institutions were the next topic. The discussion centred around whether to support highly specialized theatrollogical institutions where all staff members study the same topic in detail, or whether an institution employing experts devoted to various disciplines and topics would be more desirable. In other words, whether to go with specialization or interdisciplinary cooperation.

The conference presentations covered a wide range of topics. From music theatre (Marek Bielacki), dance theatre (Anna Duda), theatre for children (Marzenna Wiśniewska) to scenography (Ewa Dąbek-Derda) or cultural management (Kama Pawlicka). Nevertheless, they had one thing in common: almost all of them concerned the contemporary theatre scene. That topics of historiography are being sidelined could

well be an indicator of the current course of Polish teatrology, which now progressively develops performance studies as well as theatre anthropology.

As the name of the conference suggests, teatrology is standing at a crossroads. The way to go is, reportedly, still being considered. Nevertheless, in my opinion at least, Polish theatre studies are already moving in various directions in leaps and bounds.