

Central-European Theatre Avant-garde: Reclamation or Reimagination

Essay by Dariusz Kosiński

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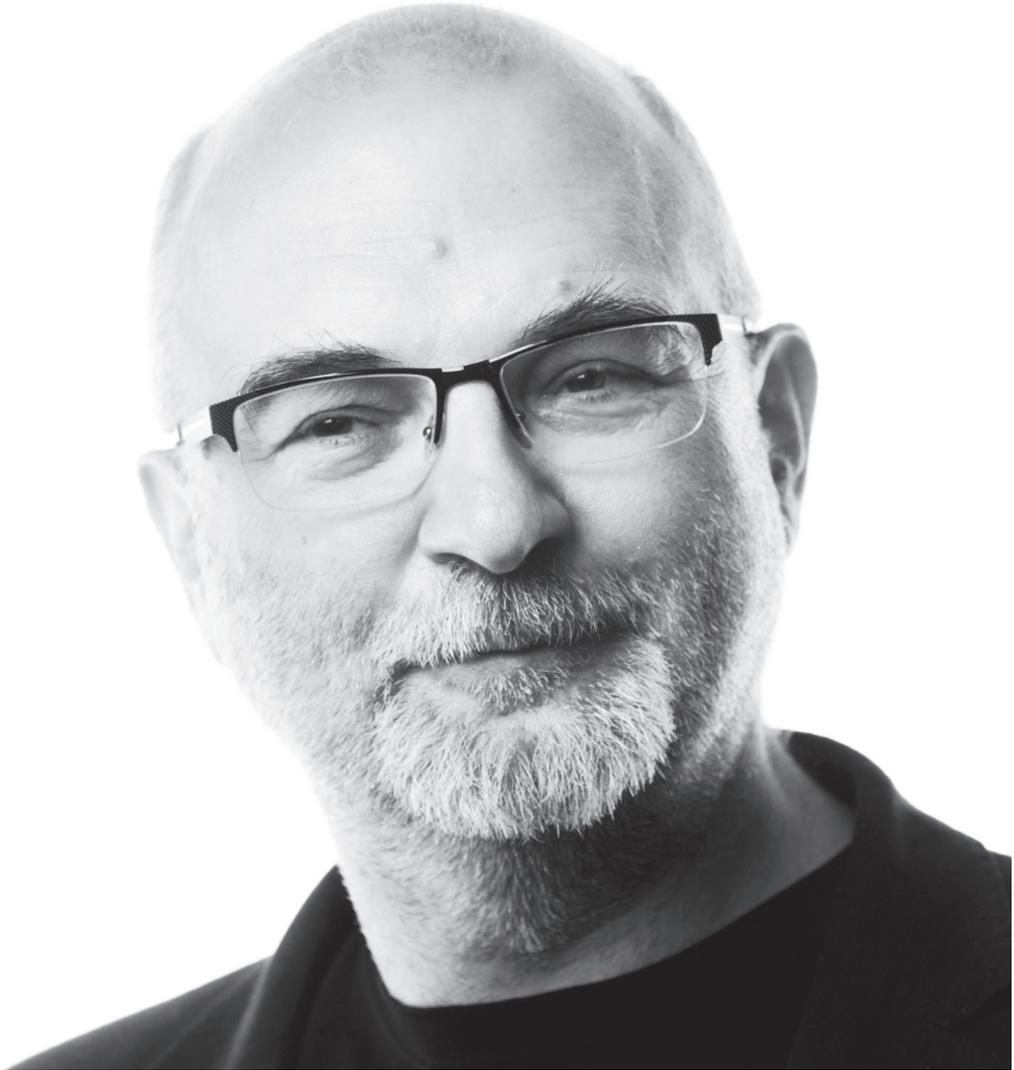
In theatre studies he is rather well-known for his research on the distinctiveness of Polish theatre and performance tradition, as well as theory and history of the 19th century acting and drama interpretation.

In his publications, Kosiński offers an alternative history of Polish theatre and performance. His main publications include: *Polski teatr przemiany* [Polish Theatre of Transformation] (2007), *Teatra polskie. Historie* [Polish Theatres: Histories] (2010), and *Teatra polskie. Rok katastrofy* [Polish Theatres: The Year of the Disaster] (2013), *Grotowski. Przewodnik* [Grotowski: A Guide] (2009), and *Grotowski. Profanacje* [Grotowski: Profanations] (2015). As a member of the editorial team, he compiled a publication of Jerzy Grotowski's collected texts, published in Polish in 2012.

Mariana Orawczak Kunešová and **Andrea Jochmanová**, the guest editors of the issue and the organisers of 'The Czech Historical Avant-garde in the European Context', Brno *Theatralia* Conference held in 2021, invited Professor Kosiński to share his thoughts about his current projects and his views on the historical avant-gardes.

The text below is the essay which evolved from Professor Kosiński's keynote presentation at the *Theatralia* Conference, which the journal received on 19 February 2022.

[guest]



Prof. dr hab. Dariusz Kosiński. Photo by Kinga Karpati / Daniel Zarewicz.

From 2016 I have been involved in founding and developing the international research project 'Reclaimed Avant-garde. The Theatre Avant-garde of Central-Eastern Europe'. Here I would like to use this opportunity to present a short summary of its genealogy and history as a starting point for reflecting on some basic questions raised in its course. I need to stress that what I am presenting here is not a set of final conclusions accepted by the whole or even the majority of the research group I dare to represent, but rather a kind of 'thinking-in-progress' based on my personal interests and beliefs. I am of course inspired deeply by all of the people who contributed to the project, but

being in a constant dialogue with them and their many differing thoughts and opinions, I am only able to present here my personal way of thinking in its present shape. All of my numerous meetings with colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe (both members of our group and not) have taught me a lot and led me to change and, hopefully, deepened my thinking. Yet I am still asking myself the same basic questions. What is to be reclaimed in the 'Reclaimed Avant-garde' project? What is avant-garde? What is Central-Eastern Europe? What is theatre? Of course, in this relatively short article I am not able to deal in depth with all of these fundamental problems. But I will try to at least outline my current answers rising from the experience of the 'Reclaimed Avant-garde' project.

Genealogy

I have to confess that for many years of my work as a theatre historian and performance researcher I had not been especially interested in the historical avant-garde. Of course, in my research on Jerzy Grotowski that I had been leading for about fifteen years, the avant-garde inspirations were present (see esp. KOSIŃSKI 2009; KOSIŃSKI 2018) but I was far from studying these problems as such. It slowly started to change in 2010 when I was invited to work as the research director of the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław. Founded as the Centre of Studies on the Art of Jerzy Grotowski and Theatrical-Cultural Research, it quickly also became a centre for researching the traditions of the avant-garde that somehow had inspired or had been linked in different ways to Grotowski's theatre and performative art experiments. When I started to work there, I was very quickly involved in the research. Already in November 2010 we organised a one-day conference devoted to Les Kurbas and Ukrainian avant-garde, and we had the pleasure to host Professor Hanna Veselovska and her colleagues from Les Kurbas Centre in Kyiv. I heard about Kurbas before, but I must admit that it was only then, thanks to Hanna's visit and my later visit to Kyiv, that I started to become more and more interested in his art and in the marvelous world of Ukrainian theatre avant-garde. We came with a plan to co-create and co-publish two books with our Ukrainian partners: Polish translation of texts by Les Kurbas and a selection of Juliusz Osterwa's text in Ukrainian. It was not long before the Polish-Ukrainian 2012 European Football Championship and we were joking that the project should be sponsored by UEFA. But soon the jokes stopped as we faced serious problems with the realisation of our plan. The texts were translated, but on both sides we had troubles with finding money for the publication. Then the Ukrainian Maydan Revolution came, and it became clear that we would not be able to finish the project as we had planned. However, I promised Hanna and the Polish translators that one day the book would be published. And this promise stayed with me until this year when – in different circumstances, with a different editor but with the same translators – the book was finally published in the frames of the 'Reclaimed Avant-garde' project (KURBAS 2021).

What is important in this short story of the promised book is that while visiting Kyiv and speaking to our colleagues, I realised how little we know about the theatre of our close neighbour! Of course, there are some specialists of Ukrainian theatre in Poland, but generally our knowledge of the history and present of Ukrainian theatre is far weaker than our knowledge about German or Russian ones. As the research director of the Grotowski Institute, I was also travelling with lectures on Grotowski to other countries of our region, becoming more and more aware that the same was true of Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Croatian, and Latvian theatre history. Of course, some names were known – for example, Emil František Burian – but I was (and still am) sure that even my colleagues from the Jagiellonian University’s Chair of Theatre Studies do not know much about the achievements of the important artists of Central European theatre avant-garde.

Fortunately, this discovery had come to me by the time Professor Richard Gough invited the Grotowski Institute to be a partner in the project he created with the grant from the Leverhulme Trust. It was called ‘The Laboratory Theatre Network’ and led by the Centre for Performance Research in Aberystwyth (Wales) that Richard founded and is still leading. Grotowski Institute became one of the main partners of the project scheduled for 2012–2014 and devoted its attention to the tradition of theatre laboratories of the second part of the 20th century. We started however – as I did today – with genealogy. In July 2012 Richard organised a wonderful meeting in Aberystwyth where in a small room an equally small group of deeply interested researchers discussed the theatre laboratories and studios. I was there as the leader of the Polish research group listening to presentations focused mainly on the tradition of Russian studios and laboratories. I tried to show that – as important as this tradition was – there were also other sources of the idea of the theatre laboratory. For example – if the word laboratory was brought to the theatre world by Jerzy Grotowski, then the most important source for it was Reduta of Juliusz Osterwa and Mieczysław Limanowski. Yet, only Richard had heard anything about Reduta! And in the course of our discussions I realised that the same is true with other great names of Central-European avant-garde. It seemed that in the theatre history as it was known by our Western colleagues there was a big dark hole between Germany and Russia. I shared my observation with Richard, and we arrived at the conclusion that there was a need to produce an anthology of Central-European theatre avant-garde – in English and for the English-speaking theatre community.

I came back to Poland with this idea. Soon, in 2014 I was invited to become the research director of the Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw. So, I brought the concept of the international anthology along with me and started to work on it with the help of the Institute’s department of international cooperation. By the time Raszewski Theatre Institute was led by Dorota Buchwald – a wonderful boss who always unconditionally supported any initiative she found valuable. So despite not having any special funds, in 2015 we organised the first meeting of the group of researchers from the countries of Central Europe. There were representatives of the Czech Republic (as far as I remember correctly it was Jan Jiřík), Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Ukraine, Estonia, and Lithuania. Some of them, like Hanna Veselovska from Ukraine,

Asta Petrikiene and Martinas Petrikas from Lithuania, Edite Tisheisere from Estonia, Kamelia Nikolova from Bulgaria, and Boris Senker from Croatia are still with us, but many new people came later.

The general conclusion of this first meeting was in line with my previous intuitions: that we did not know much about ourselves and that the 'world' also knew almost nothing about Central or Eastern European Theatre avant-garde. But there was one even more important conclusion and question asked at the very beginning by almost all of our colleagues: Was the Central European theatre avant-garde a real historical phenomenon or was it just our projection?

Despite some doubts, we all agreed that we need and want to perform this phenomenon. For this we needed a budget larger than the one the Raszewski Institute was able to give us. We tried to get some European money, but these attempts failed. Luckily in 2016 Jarosław Suchan, director of Art Museum Łódź, holding the biggest and the most important Polish collection of avant-garde art, invited us to join the project celebrating the centenary of Polish avant-garde in the form of 'The Year of the Avant-garde 2017'. Strangely enough it was organised under the auspices of the president of Poland and in strict connection with the huge celebrations of the centenary of Polish independence. A very clever move and a very smart performance – to use a conservative politician and a national celebration to support the project on the avant-garde. We joined it, of course! And thanks to it in 2017 we performed Central-Eastern European Theatre avant-garde by the publication of an anthology in Polish (GUDERIAN-CZAPLIŃSKA and LEYKO 2017). The sourcebook was organised in the 'national' order with a chapter devoted to each country of the region. Each such chapter consisted of source texts chosen by a specialist from the given country and a short introduction written by her or him. The list of the countries included Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. It is easy to notice meaningful gaps on the map of Central-Eastern Europe we performed with the book with Belarus and Serbia as the most important countries that were not represented in the anthology.

In the course of 2017 and thanks to the support of the project of the 'Year of the Avant-garde' we also managed to organise an international conference on the avant-garde stage and space design together with some artistic actions reinterpreting the tradition. The papers presented on the conference were published in the second book with the 'Reclaimed Avant-garde' label, edited by myself and Zoltan Imre (see IMRE and KOSIŃSKI 2018). Soon after the publication of the book, we applied for a grant from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and luckily in 2019 we got it.

So now we are in the middle of the five-year project funded by the Polish National Program for Developing Humanities. The leader of the project is Professor Małgorzata Leyko from Łódź. Alongside the group of Polish researchers there are colleagues from all the countries that participated in the earlier phases of research but also from Belarus, Serbia, and Georgia. The book of Les Kurbas I mentioned before was the first result of this project. Recently we have published the new anthology of Polish theatre avant-garde (FOX and KOSIŃSKI 2021). There will also be a book with Polish translations of the texts by Emil František Burian edited by Jan Jiřík and the final result of

the project – *The Lexicon of Central-Eastern European Avant-garde* in English that will be published in 2023 with the Performance Research Books led by Richard Gough. This publication will finish the long loop started by our talk in Aberystwyth.

The avant-garde as performance

Complicated as it was, the history of the ‘Reclaimed Avant-garde’ project raises some crucial and fundamental questions. First – it is obvious that one can criticise and even deny its basic element, namely the very concept of the Central-Eastern European avant-garde. From the very beginning of the project we – the people who created and developed it – were not convinced that we can speak of such a unique historical phenomenon. We were of course sure that there were important theatre avant-gardes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. But what allowed us to transform this multiplicity into uniqueness, the plural into singular? Are we ever able to talk about the Central-Eastern European avant-garde as such? What is this that we are doing in the frames of our project?

When my colleagues asked me such questions, I used to answer: we are performing Central-Eastern European Theatre avant-garde.

As I mentioned before, I consider myself to be not only a theatre historian but also a performance researcher. I was a cofounder of the Chair of Performance Studies at Jagiellonian University and wrote a history of Polish theatres that was translated into English as *Performing Poland* (KOSIŃSKI 2019). So, I am used to treating performance and performativity as real, concrete phenomena. Thus, saying that we are performing Central-Eastern European theatre avant-garde I did not mean that we were creating something that had not existed, that we were creating an ‘illusion’. We were rather (re)establishing a certain set of phenomena in such a way, that they are emerging from a sea of different, multi-layered, and complicated nets of relations, events, works, projects, and circumstances. However, they are emerging not as a unity, a single phenomenon, but as a multiplicity invited to act, to perform on the stage we set for them – and this is something quite different than the definition that traditional academia asked for. While creating a definition we seek out borders and criteria of differentiation and division. While performing historical phenomena we are inviting different elements to appear on a stage and play with each other not as a certain entity but as actors creating a series of changing relations. Instead of asking what the avant-garde was, we are trying to show how it was performed.

Performative turns such as this are, in my opinion, especially important in the case of the avant-garde because its crucial paradox was that the performance had been its very core, as James Harding and John Rouse (2006: 1) famously proposed. The avant-garde did not exist – it was in the constant process of becoming. That is why performing the theatre avant-garde means to be faithful to the crucial aspect of the movement and to one of its most important discoveries: that we as humans are existing by the means of performance.

The core of the word ‘performance’ is ‘form’ and as I have already noticed in my introduction to the Polish chapter of our first anthology – Polish avant-garde was obsessed by the word *forma* – the form (see KOSIŃSKI 2019: 203). The search for a ‘new form’ was the synonym of basic avant-garde gesture and that was probably why the very first Polish avant-garde group founded in Cracow in 1917 very soon changed its initial name ‘Polish Expressionists’ into ‘Formiści’ – ‘The Formists’, the ones that focus on the form. In the Polish context this focus was strictly related to critical reinterpretations of the ‘the art of an idea’, especially that national art dealing mainly with the nation, serving the nation. The concept of ‘formism’ also meant that the artists were aiming at discovery of something that was hidden under the ‘real’ visible surface. They wanted to reveal the inner rules or forces that governed the world by pre-forming reality. And as we know from John MacAloon (1984: 9), ‘there is no performance without a pre-formance’. And I would say that these two words: pre-formance and performance are the two poles of the avant-garde that wanted to discover the hidden powers (be it metaphysical, political, psychological) pre-forming the world, and use or destroy them to change the world by performing a new one with a new man, and of course – a new theatre.

The most obvious element of the avant-garde is a drive towards the future – in our case usually – the future of theatre and the theatre of the future. Of course – as we know at least from Renato Poggioli’s famous theory (1968) – ‘antagonism’ towards the existing, acceptable forms was one of the pillars of the avant-garde. Still, we need to remember that the avant-garde was critical not to improve anything but to free itself from the past and run towards the future. And this aspect – let us call it futuristic – is something that, in my opinion, decided that the avant-garde was mainly performative. In many avant-garde manifestos one can find a recurring notion: we need to enter the future being free of the memory of the past and the rules of the present and then we will see what is going to happen. As Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz wrote at the end of his *Introduction to the Theory of the Pure Form in the Theatre*: ‘We must unleash the slumbering Beast and see what it can do. And if it runs mad, there will always be time enough to shoot it before it is too late’ (WITKIEWICZ 1973: 297).

And this is for me a decisive factor of the avant-garde as a performance – we have to see what will happen and then we decide, if we follow the course of events, or stop it. Being prepared, having certain ideas, concepts, knowledge, scripts, the avant-garde did not want to know what really was going to happen. Its creators were not planning a future and forcing everyone to act according to the plan (as ideologists did) but they were setting the stage for the performance of the future.

From this perspective, researching the avant-garde not as some precisely defined set of elements established once for all, but rather as an open field that is still in motion, open for a change, still in process, means that we are following the process in accordance with its own inner logic. It also means that studying the performative arts – theatre, dance, happenings and attempts at what was later called ‘performance art’ – is crucial to understand the avant-garde in general. I know that it may sound like I was praising our research, but I do believe that – simply speaking – to understand the avant-garde one needs to understand performance.

Central-Eastern Europe: Transnationality and independence

The concept of Central-Eastern Europe that is present in the title of our project is at least as problematic as the idea of the avant-garde. Does a certain separate entity called Central-Eastern Europe exist? Did it ever exist? If so, what parts of the world – geographically and culturally – does it consist of? And – putting these questions in the context of our research project: what is the cause and the outcome of creating the notion of the Central-Eastern European theatre avant-garde?

While presenting the genealogy of the project I recalled that it all had started from a recognition that the history of the avant-garde theatre of the countries lying between Russia and Germany was not known to the Western world. Thus, one can say that it started from a quite stereotypical recognition of cultural marginalisation that used to work in the case of our countries. We decided to unite because we all had felt the need to remind the (Western) world about our existence. But almost immediately this strategic drive was supported by the intuition and assumption that our theatre avant-gardes indeed had something in common and that this ‘something’ differed them both from German and Russian avant-gardes. So, what we were and still are searching for somehow is an independence for the Central-Eastern European theatre avant-garde.

We did not plan that our research would be conducted in parallel to the celebrations of the centenary of the end of the first Great War that changed the course of the history of Europe and brought political independence to many countries of our region. But I do not believe that it happened by mere chance. When we look for specificities and common points of the avant-gardes that developed in the relatively small countries of Central and Eastern Europe, historical and political context comes as one of the first crucial factors. Its importance derives from the fact that most parts of the region for a long time were under the control of empires foreign to them that fell after the Great War. Despite some crucial differences between the countries and nations that for many years were deprived of the right to exist independently (like Poland or the Czech Republic), and those ones, which were privileged parts of the fallen empires (like Hungary), they all were trying to act on the great stage of twentieth-century Europe, performing themselves as modern, civilised political entities. In most of the newly established independent states, modern and avant-garde art played an important role in this performance, supporting the efforts to create an attractive modern style far from the image of traditional, rural lands on the margins of European civilisation. We encounter this drive even in countries that lost their independence quickly (like Ukraine and Georgia) and developed the avant-garde art under the Soviet regime partly against a national tradition.

That is the reason why the avant-garde was accepted by some of these states more widely than it ever happened in Western Europe. Of course, there were states that tried rather to reinvent and reenvision themselves from their situation before WWI (like Hungary) – and here the avant-garde was regarded as a threat for the nation and its survival. Yet, generally in the Central and Eastern part of the continent the opposition between the avant-garde and the mainstream culture was much more complicated, with

many states supporting (at least partly) the avant-garde as a part of the modern image they wanted to present for themselves and for the world. This is the first element allowing us to speak about the common experience of Central and Eastern Europe.

The second one is connected with the feeling of uncertainty. Despite the differences of histories and political situations in the first decades of the 20th century, what we all shared was an experience of instability of the basic aspects of common identity. Because of so many changes of borders, ruling governments and citizenships, the people of Central-Eastern Europe experienced a crucial gap, disruption between the political and cultural identity. Being ruled by powers that spoke different languages, preserved alien modes of behaviours, people of our region treated their traditional cultural identity as a basic force of resistance against authorities and models of life that were considered culturally alien. Because in many cases the situation of dependency and cultural supremacy of foreign models had lasted for many years, the scripts for performing traditional local identities became radically anachronistic. And when independence was (re)gained, there was a strong need to modernise what was regarded as the national culture by using modern and/or avant-garde aesthetics to present a set of traditional values.

The third important common element and at the same time a further complication of the situation in Central-Eastern Europe emerged from the fact that the whole region was strongly influenced and endangered by the two mighty neighbouring countries: Germany and Soviet Russia, that between the two World Wars slowly evolved towards totalitarianism. It is obvious and has been proven many times in our research that there were multiple and strong relations between the theatre avant-garde of Central and Eastern Europe and the Russian and German art innovators. Not following the one-dimensional notion of 'influence', we have to remember however that in many aspects the avant-garde theatre we are dealing with was working in the field of complicated tensions, intertwining inspiration and rejection, fascination and repulsion, temptation and refusal. Avant-garde artists of Central-Eastern Europe acted internationally, but always facing the pressure of being swallowed together with their nationals by the mighty powers of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Some of them had a strong feeling of being the part of their national cultures that were in most cases endangered by the very same states and societies, where the most important avant-garde centres worked. Some of them accepted the new totalitarian powers as the forces that needed to be supported because they were bringing the change that the avant-gardists had longed for. But almost none of the artists were able to escape the question about the relation between the state and the nation, which in some cases became a question about life and death.

Of course, these crucial specificities need much more elaboration than I am able to offer now but I would say that this complicated geopolitical and cultural situation resulted in the richness of the avant-gardes of our part of Europe. All these specific tensions between local and international (if not global), between traditional and radically experimental and innovative, and also between the dream of a new future and the fear of the same future – all of it resulted in Central-Eastern Europe avant-gardes being far more historically matured, if not simply wiser, than the Western ones.

I would also say that this specific context resulted in the Central-Eastern Europe avant-gardes being strongly interwoven into the national mainstream. I used to analyse this aspect in the context of Polish avant-garde theatre, where some artists (Andrzej Pronaszko was the most important example) acted in the core of what was highly respected and praised as an achievement of modern national art. Some of my colleagues (like Zoltan Imre from Hungary) strongly opposed a thesis that similar processes might be observed in all the countries of the region. Nonetheless, I would still dare say that there is a specific relation between the avant-garde and the modern national identity even if it was (as in Hungary) not accepted and supported by the state or – like in Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia – supported by a state that was not national or simply anti-national. Whatever the attitudes of the ruling powers were, in our region the avant-garde was treated as a leading style of a world to come. If there were any future at all (which was not so sure) it would be avant-gardish.

It means that the avant-garde was treated seriously not only in an artistic and cultural context – not as something that society was playing with in theatres, galleries, and reading rooms, but something that really influenced lives, cultures, identities... Even when it was fought against, the avant-garde in Central-Eastern Europe was considered an important part of the social ecology of a community. Maybe not because the art was regarded as important on its own, but because the national or rather – local identity was not certain, and culture – as I mentioned before – played a crucial role in the process of its empowerment.

Am I idealising Central-Eastern European culture? Or maybe I am projecting my diagnosis of the Polish situation? It may be so, but I have quite a strong intuition that even today we do not perceive ourselves as fully developed, self-certain entities. And because of that – we deal so much with art and culture. To explain my attitude towards the Central-Eastern European avant-garde, let me recall a contemporary example. In November 2020 there was a strong wave of women's protests in Poland that somehow were combined with a wave of scandals in the Catholic Church. The patriarchal rule supported by the Church was radically attacked and openly criticised on the streets, but also in the media and in political debates. Three years earlier on a smaller scale, an equally strong debate took place in the theatre. It was caused by the performance called *Klątwa* [The Curse] staged at the Warsaw Powszechny Theatre. The performance furiously attacked the church and its power and ended with the scene of cutting down the cross. It resulted in a series of fierce protests in front of the theatre but was also strongly criticised for being too far from what we used to call the stage art. The word 'avant-garde' also appeared in the reviews, usually in the context of suggestions that if someone wanted to propose such wild experiments, one should do it in their own private theatre, not in a public institution financed mainly with public money. Simply – such radical avant-garde should not be sponsored by the common tax-payers. The performance premiered on 18 February 2017, so in the very beginning of the Year of the Avant-garde. What is more, it was created by Olivier Frljić, making it an example of Central-Eastern European theatre, that still causes troubles and succeeds in being treated very seriously...

Does 'the theatre' mean the same thing everywhere?

Here we finally get to the third problematic word we used in the name of what we were researching and establishing in the frames of our project – theatre.

I have to say that I am quite devoted to the idea that the noun 'theatre' is not the universal name for all different kinds of artistic performances, but the term for a specific historical type of performances that was created in modern Europe in the 16th century. It reached its higher power and fullest form in the 19th century, first in Europe, then in the United States, and later in the countries colonised by the European powers. By the same time, it gained a stable institutional and architectural form, becoming the landmark of Western modern town culture. Since the beginning of the 20th century, it has been in a constant state of crisis that needs to be understood and described not as a negative state of weakness but as a creative process of constant research and self-criticism.

Understood that way and seen from the perspective of Central-Eastern Europe, the presence and position of the theatre is not so obvious and strong. I am not so well-oriented in the history of the theatre of all countries of the region, so my thesis may seem especially risky, and I may be accused of simplifications. But let me take that risk also as an important starting point for future discussion. Thus, I would say that the theatre, as it was created in Western Europe and spread around the world, came to Central-Eastern Europe as the institution of a modern civilisation of Enlightenment and – at the same time – as a tool of performing the national identity. It generally happened in the 18th and 19th centuries raising the problem of relations between the theatre and indigenous performances. Because we all had our indigenous performances before, – not only the folk ones with the most important of them – *kołęda*, *koliada*, *kolieda*, *koleda*, but also some civic ones, sometimes developed to such a degree that they became a general style of life (this is the case of Polish noblemen performing 'the Sarmats' – see KOSIŃSKI 2019: 147–150). When the theatre arrived from the West together with the Enlightenment's ideal of universal rational civilisation, we accepted it because we did not want to be seen as non-civilised. But in the largest part of Central-Eastern Europe the theatre started as an institution created and supported by the empires that were against the development of the national culture or at least wanted it to develop according to the universal models. Therefore, here is the basic paradox: in the 19th century – the century of national states and theatre – Central-Eastern European cultures tried to transform the universal institution into a shrine and refuge of national values, or even one of the basic vehicles of developing national culture. It is definitely so in the case of Poland, occupied by neighbouring empires, that it existed as the performance – the national identity had been performed in the many different ways that I described in my *Performing Poland* (see KOSIŃSKI 2019: 157–168). The theatre was transformed by the most important Polish poets into a vehicle of the social and spiritual life of the nation. Such poetic pieces as *The Forefathers's Eve* by Adam Mickiewicz and many of the dramas by Juliusz Słowacki, full of impressive visions, performative imagination, and powerful poetry, were almost immediately considered national and their authors received the

honorary title of *wieszcz* (national prophet). These dramas were radically different from the conventional well-made play written for stage of the time. Inspired by such works as Goethe's *Faust*, they transgressed the material conditions, technical possibilities, and the imagined borders of the contemporary bourgeois stages. When they were finally staged at the beginning of the 20th century, their performances were welcomed as important political events but most of the early productions were met with disappointment and a growing desire for a 'new theatre' to be invented that would embody and materialise the visions of the 'prophets'.

And this is the exact moment when the avant-garde enters the stage! There was a very strong and quite widely accepted idea that to create 'true' Polish national theatre one needed to break through the conventions of the Italian box stage and develop a new art, the performative art of the future that at the same time would be the stage of the national 'eternity'. This process was started by the most important Polish director of the first part of the 20th century Leon Schiller, who with the help of a Formist painter and Constructivist and stage designer Andrzej Pronaszko developed a phenomenon that may be called the national avant-garde. At the same time another important figure, actor and director Juliusz Osterwa was slowly freeing himself and his company, Reduta from the conventions and modes of operations typical to the theatre and developed a new form of performative art based on the living word and the performer's transformation. Additionally, Osterwa was the one and only artist that Jerzy Grotowski accepted as his artistic ancestor in his drive to create a new form of art – again starting from theatre, but finally creating a new genre of performing arts – the Art as vehicle.

I am telling this very long and complicated story in a very short and simple way to show that in Poland the avant-garde fight against conventional drama and opera theatre may be easily interpreted as a fight against the cultural colonisation of an 'universal' model produced by the historical powers ruling over our cultures. I do not mean to say that the traditional theatre is not 'ours'. Yet, I would dare suggest that the motivation to develop some other models of performances and performing arts is closer connected with the drive to perform our specific cultural dispositions and experiences than with the fight for a new theatre for a new society. In other words – our, i.e., Central-Eastern European theatre avant-garde, is not so much futuristic as it is a source one. As Jerzy Grotowski used to say: we are not searching for something radically new but rather for something that is so old that it was completely forgotten (see GROTOWSKI 1997: 374).

Of course, the thesis that the Central-Eastern European avant-garde consists of a series of attempts to create not the theatre of future but the 'theatre of sources' is risky and needs to be verified. However, in the course of our research I heard many of our colleagues talking about an alliance between avant-garde art and the deep mythical sources of national cultures: Polish *Dziady*, Serbian, the Slovenian and Croatian idea of 'barbarogenius', Ukrainian attempts to modernise folk performances, Georgian national and avant-garde performances of Grigol Robakidze's *Lamara* based on Georgian myths – all these and many others can be interpreted as symptoms of the efforts to use the avant-garde to create performances that reveal and develop the spiritual and social uniqueness of the communities living in this part of the world.

What I need to stress in the conclusion is that my intention is to create a general model of one theatre culture of the Central-Eastern European theatre avant-garde. What I had learned from the research developed in the frames of our project, is the richness of avant-garde theatres of the region. And I am far from putting it all into one box – I would rather celebrate the diversity and multiplicity of the artistic search we are dealing with. But on the other hand, I would dare to consider also this multiplicity as the meaningful difference as opposed to the unity of traditional theatre with its stable space dispositive and canonical repertoire. So finally, if there is any community of Central-Eastern European theatre avant-garde I would say that it is a paradoxical disunited community of plurals.

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