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Craving for the West: In-Yer-Face Theatre in the Land of the Vistula

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Abstract

In the article, the authors use Rebecca Schneider's archival methodology and analyse two performances – Krzysztof Warlikowski's *Cleansed* and Grzegorz Jarzyna's *4.48 Psychosis*. Based on theatre reviews and popular magazines, they place these productions in the context of Poland's post-transition aspiration to belong to the Western world. Sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis described these tendencies as a tension between globalisation and adherence to tradition. Articles in women's magazines show a fascination with the figures of both directors, who have enjoyed international success, while critics' opinions are divided between those praising the adaptations of Kane's works for renewing the Polish theatre language and those criticising them for their controversial use of nudity. The anti-capitalist and anti-identity message of the writer's work has thus become an expression of Polish liberalcapitalist aspirations based on the struggle for LGBTQIA+ rights and on how to achieve commercial success in the West.

Key words

post-communism, Sarah Kane, capitalism, West, Warlikowski, Jarzyna, LGBTQIA+, Poland

The premiere of *Cleansed*, directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski, one of the most significant theatrical productions of post-communist Poland, took place in December 2001. Just a few months earlier, in May, the first Equality Parade in Poland had taken place in Warsaw, with just over 300 participants. They had their faces covered for fear of being recognised, and almost no traces of the event itself were left in the press. It seems that the first parade went virtually unnoticed. Only the march in Cracow three years later, when Poland joined the European Union, entered the public memory. The popular magazine *Przekrój* [Cross-Section] (2004) commented: ‘the aftermath of the first tolerance march in Cracow after Poland’s EU accession: 20 people detained, a policeman hospitalised with acid burns on his face’.¹ The behaviour of the march’s opponents – especially their chants of ‘faggots to the gas chambers!’ (PRZEKRÓJ 2004: 22) – led journalists of the time to compare them to barbarians who had failed the test of becoming tolerant citizens of the EU (see PRZEKRÓJ 2004). From the very moment Poland joined the community, its legislative bodies began serving as an appellate authority in matters concerning discrimination, as seen in the annulment of a ban on Pride Parades imposed by the conservative mayor of Warsaw in 2005. It appears that, in matters of local exclusion, external standards continued to serve as a moral and legal reference point for the country.

It was within this social and international context that the Polish theatre scene witnessed the rise of New Brutalism, represented by Sarah Kane. As Dorota Sosnowska (2024: 86) observes, the main criticism of the play focused on the perceived weakness of the text, its apparent senselessness, and a fundamental disagreement with its worldview. This stance was articulated by Jacek Kopciński, theatre scholar, researcher, and future editor-in-chief of *Teatr* [Theatre] magazine, who argued: ‘if we accept that the dramaturgy of the “New Brutalists” is a direct reaction to reality in a one-to-one relationship, then the world depicted in these plays would have to be a reflection of some exceptional, and therefore extremely rare cases’ (KOPCIŃSKI 2002). These texts were seen more as testimonies of mental illness than legitimate literature. For example, Elżbieta Baniewicz, critic associated with the monthly literature magazine *Twórczość* [Creativity], emphasised: ‘reading these works as a record of conscious authorial creation, without taking into account that the author’s psyche was somewhat distorted, also seems like a certain abuse’ (BANIEWICZ 2002).

Meanwhile, those critics who admired *Cleansed* saw it as a powerful hyperbole of the world we live in. The brutality of the characters’ pursuit of love – and simultaneously their path to destruction – was intended to convey the truth about contemporary experience. Among the supporters was Piotr Gruszczyński (2003), critic of *Tygodnik Powszechny* [The Universal Weekly], who in the future would establish a close collaboration with Warlikowski, serving as both a dramaturge and the deputy director of his theatre. He observed: ‘one cannot strip away the armour of hypocrisy and self-satisfaction by any other means than through theatre that attacks through the skin. War-

1 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Polish are the authors’.

likowski managed to produce paralysis through poetry. A physical paralysis through poetry' (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2003: 143).

Another point of contention among critics was the portrayal of violence. The staging employed a stylised and highly aestheticised approach (see SCHILLER 2002). Opponents considered this to be dangerous (MARCZEWSKI 2002), whereas critics, such as Roman Pawłowski (2001b) in *Gazeta Wyborcza* [The Electoral Gazette], argued that such choices shifted the violence from the physical realm into a psychological battleground.

Years later, Polish theatre scholar Joanna Krakowska (2019) described Warlikowski's *Cleansed* as the first Polish production to openly address issues affecting homosexual individuals. She identified *Cleansed* as a *signum temporis* in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights – after all, the year of its premiere also saw the founding of the Campaign Against Homophobia, which launched the *Let Them See Us* initiative, a series of photographs and billboards showcasing the lives of the queer community (KRAKOWSKA 2019: 167).

In this paper, we examine the Polish stagings of Kane's works from an angle often overlooked in discussions of Polish productions: the context of a still-fresh post-communist reality. To this end, we refer to the rarely cited context of the media and press reception of Kane's two most successful plays on the Vistula River² – *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis*. We argue that they fulfilled the capitalist desire for success, which in post-communist reality meant foreign popularity and shocking new aesthetics. We suggest that both works, although strongly detached from their original anti-liberal meanings, allowed Polish theatre to satisfy its craving for the West. Additionally, several other productions of Kane's plays realised both moments before and after Warlikowski's and Jarzyna's productions, are briefly discussed with the aim to emphasise the visibility of *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis* versus the invisibility or short-lived nature of the other plays. Suggested analysis presupposes using the archive as a methodology that emphasises the double distance involved. Following Rebecca Schneider (2017), we understand the archive as a space (literal and material, but also metaphorical) in which there is room for individual perspective. It is up to the person rummaging through, dissecting, and searching for materials to determine what narrative he or she will produce from the find (SCHNEIDER 2017). A wealth of press materials, reviews, and audience recollections forms a beautiful yet fragmented history of the immensely significant Polish theatrical productions in question. Therefore, we base our work on reconstruction of what these performances for the audiences of the time could have been about.

Younger and more talented

A witness to the transformations in the Polish scene was the theatre critic Piotr Gruszczyński (2003). He pointed to the crisis of Polish theatre in the 1980s, resulting from the gradual departure of the 'old' masters (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2003: 5). Romantic

² The Vistula is the longest river in Poland.

dramaturgy, which had driven Polish theatre thought for years, had also reached its limits (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2003: 11). After the fall of Communism, the sacrifice and fight for the homeland ceased to be the main model for protagonists. In this prevailing stagnation, a new generation of directors emerged, whom he referred to as ‘younger and more talented’ (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2003: 17). What set them apart was that they came of age in communist Poland but made their debuts after the political transition. This allowed their work to be freed from national and political obligations, shifting their focus toward existential themes. They also had the opportunity to engage with and draw inspiration from Western Europe. German theatre became the main point of reference. Institutions such as the Volksbühne and the Schaubühne, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, became new European theatrical centres (SAJEWSKA 2012: 62–63).

The representatives of the ‘younger and more talented’ generation (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2003: 7) were Krzysztof Warlikowski and Grzegorz Jarzyna. The evening of 18 January 1997 became legendary when the simultaneous premieres of *Bzik Tropikalny* [Tropical Craze] by Jarzyna and *Electra* by Warlikowski were both proclaimed as groundbreaking moments in the history of theatre in Poland. They both worked in the *Rozmaitości* [Variety] Theatre contributing to its legend as the ‘fastest theatre in the city’. Its audience were ‘young audience, people in Dr. Martens shoes’. The *Rozmaitości* Theatre was ‘a cult theatre, just like youth music is cult’ (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2003: 22–23).

Here, both directors staged plays based on Kane’s dramas, using the same creative team: Małgorzata Szcześniak (set design), Felice Ross (lighting), and Paweł Mykietyń (music). The performances were often treated as twins by critics, frequently compared to one another, and described together (see BANIEWICZ 2002; CZAPSKA 2002; GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2002). Jarzyna’s *4.48 Psychosis* received a similar response to Warlikowski’s *Cleansed*. Critics echoed the arguments both for and against the play, but it did not generate the same media buzz as its predecessor. Instead, there were more negative reviews, even from those people who had previously supported *Cleansed* (see e.g., CIEŚLAK 2002b; DREWNIAK 2002b). While *Cleansed* was often described – mainly by critics of the production – through the tragic fate of its author, Sarah Kane, Jarzyna himself deliberately referred to her biography. Magdalena Cielecka, who played the lead role, admitted that she used facts from Kane’s life to embody the character, including reading literature that had inspired the playwright (CIELECKA 2002). The actors also did not take curtain calls, further breaking the wall between theatrical fiction and historical reality (see MIŁKOWSKI 2002; PAWŁOWSKI 2002). Jarzyna additionally consulted a psychiatrist to accurately portray the course of the illness and even sought to physically make Cielecka resemble Kane (WEGRZYŃIAK 2002). This representation of a personal world of illness – one that is hard to relate to – provoked disagreement among critics (cf. BANIEWICZ 2002; CZAPSKA 2002; CIEŚLAK 2002b; DREWNIAK 2002b; GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2002; OBREBOWSKA-PIASECKA 2002a, b). The interpretation of Kane’s texts as records of her depression (considered clumsy by CZAPSKA 2002 and PAWŁOWSKI 2002) was rejected by both opponents and supporters of adapting her work. From the very beginning, there was a desire to see something more in these stories – something beyond mere records of suffering or illness.

The younger generation's interest in Western dramaturgy, as Gruszczyński (2003: 12) pointed out, was driven by the lack of a corresponding Polish dramaturgy to address the needs of the changing theatre in the new reality. The premiere of *Cleansed* was undoubtedly accompanied by a sense that it introduced new qualities to Polish stages (CIEŚLAK 2002b). This opinion continued to be echoed many years after the premiere (see e.g., BARAN 2010; DERKACZEW 2011; NYC 2007; PIEKARSKA 2013). Warlikowski himself emphasised that one of the reasons for staging *Cleansed* was the desire to present a text that was pivotal in Europe to the Polish audience (Warlikowski quoted in PUŁKA 2001b).

Łukasz Drewniak (2002a), one of the supporters of *Cleansed*, proudly reported that the production 'meets all European standards':

A few days earlier, I saw in Berlin the latest work by Christoph Marthaler: *The Ten Commandments, Supermarket* by Thomas Ostermeier, *Goya* by Johann Kresnik. In Wrocław,³ I didn't feel any cultural leap or aesthetic boundary. I watched the same level of acting determination and directorial finesse. (DREWNIAK 2002a)

Drewniak (2010) repeated his observations nearly ten years after the premiere as well. However, he was not the only critic who saw the potential for entering a new circuit of cultural exchange. Krzysztof Kucharski (2001b), writing in *Gazeta Wrocławska* [Wrocław Daily], also pointed out that the performance had the potential to conquer not only Polish stages but also European ones.

The influence of European trends was also felt by the opponents of the performance. According to Janusz Kowalczyk, *Cleansed* was 'yet another play belonging to the trend of "new brutalism", transplanted to us from the West. And not the first one that our stages could easily do without' (KOWALCZYK 2002). Works that are received here with 'idolatrous admiration', according to the reviewer, constitute 'a marginal part of the repertoire' among our Western neighbors (KOWALCZYK 2002). Jacek Kopciński (2002) saw in Warlikowski's production a lamentation 'over various deviations of the bourgeois West'. Robert Jarocki, writing in *Rzeczpospolita* [The Republic], asked:

Why have young female artists, including talented writers, now – in the era of globalisation – chosen the so-called male organ as the main subject of their art? Perhaps philosophical explanations for this phenomenon can be found in such feminist classics as *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir. (JAROCKI 2001)

The staging of Kane's text was thus associated not only with Western aesthetics but also with its philosophy. Roman Pawłowski, in summarising twenty-five years of theatre in the new Poland, listed *Cleansed* among the groundbreaking productions – one of

³ *Cleansed* was a coproduction of the Rozmaitości Theater in Warsaw, the Polski [Polish] Theater in Poznań and the Współczesny [Contemporary] Theater in Wrocław, where the actual premiere took place and Drewniak saw the performance.

those that helped prevent the further marginalisation of 1990s theatre in Poland and ‘helped its audiences find their place in a new, complex reality’.

As Warlikowski said: ‘During communism, we had the Church as a place of refuge, opposed by a specific ideology, and thus necessarily unambiguous. But today, neither the Church is monolithic, nor is any ideology strong enough to impose itself on us. We are confronted with ambiguity – which means we are very lost people’. (PAWŁOWSKI 2014)

Kane’s plays not only allowed the creation of a language that permitted Polish theatre to speak about the new world but also opened up a chance for Polish culture – after years of communist backwardness – to catch up with Europe, both economically (in the 1990s, the concept of ‘Europe of two speeds’ existed) and culturally.

In this context, it is no surprise that Warlikowski’s and Jarzyna’s media images were associated with freshness, dynamism, and courage (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2003; see also selected issues of *Twój STYL* [Your Style] from 1999, 2000, 2001). They were directly identified with the new model of people who knew how to seize the opportunities offered by the Polish version of the *American Dream*, especially outside the country.

The first productions of Kane’s plays in Poland

Cleansed by Warlikowski and *4.48 Psychosis* by Jarzyna were not the first attempts to stage the works of Sarah Kane in Poland. Initially, Kane’s adaptations were grassroots initiatives. The productions did not take place in public theatres but in small, off-the-beaten-path institutions. The director of the first staging of Kane was Paweł Wodziński, who, together with Paweł Łysak, founded Towarzystwo Teatralne [Theatre Company]. They began producing shows without funding, relying heavily on trial and error and experimentation. In an interview with Igor Stokfiszewski, Łysak (2024) emphasised their sense of alienation in the theatre, viewing it as detached from reality and neglecting contemporary issues. Artists were witnesses to, on the one hand, immense poverty, and on the other, the rise of capitalism. The activities carried out by the Towarzystwo Teatralne were meant to be a space for presenting young foreign dramaturgy. Łysak (2024) told the story of acquiring the copyright:

We bought a computer, cell phones, and connected to the Internet. We found the right agency, and Paweł says: ‘Listen, write them an email, let’s ask if the rights are available’. And so we wrote. We had a coffee, smoked a cigarette. Usually, it takes about six months to settle the rights, but here we got a response immediately. We only had to pay a thousand pounds. I contacted my wife and told her that I needed to spend our two and a half thousand zlotys we had saved in the account.

Eventually, they managed to stage *Blasted* at the Norblin Factory Hall in October 1999. The old building was unheated, which meant performance could be played only

in October, as it was too cold afterward. The location was supposed to serve a symbolic function, but, as the director noted, it was chosen because they did not have the funds to build scenery (KARDASZEWSKA 1999). The show received poor reviews. Critics, when writing about the performance, used numerous negative expressions, pointing out that the production caused shame, embarrassment, and shock. It was emphasised that the production was drastic and brutal. Critic Tomasz Mościcki (1999) stated:

When asked to support the group's activities, I made a gesture of goodwill by buying a poster for 9.90 zł. After 20 minutes of *Blasted*, I bitterly regretted it. The new dramaturgy imported to our country does not provoke a metaphysical shock. This literature, along with its Polish interpretations, is worth pity, at best.

The staging of the play based on Kane's text in the critical reception from the very beginning was filled with negative affectations, aversion to the content presented. The next adaptation of Kane's text caused similar reactions. This time Bartosz Szydłowski was responsible for the staging. In 1996, while a second-year directing student, he founded the Łaźnia Theatrical Association in Cracow, initially hosting student exams, concerts, and film screenings. On 2 May 2001, the premiere of *Phaedra's Love* took place there as part of the *Taboo without Violence* project, which focused on transgressions. Before the full performance, individual scenes were shown, accompanied by a lecture by professor Małgorzata Sugiera, designed to 'acquaint' the audience with the topics addressed by Kane. According to the professor, the shock caused by Kane's plays stemmed from the fact that 'the author wrote like a man' and such topics are more easily accepted when presented by a male playwright (TARGOŃ 2001). During the lectures, she explored the 'phenomenon of the "bad girl" in contemporary theatre' (TARGOŃ 2001). The performance, similarly to *Blasted* from 1999, did not receive good reviews. Joanna Targoń (2001) pointed out: 'There's something in the fact that in Łaźnia the meetings and discussions go wonderfully, but with theatre, it's worse'.

Despite many unfavourable reviews, both productions can be considered emblematic. They were created by young people who were searching for their own stage language and felt misunderstood by institutional theatre. Wodziński, Łysak, and Szydłowski, through Kane's dramaturgy, wanted to address the issues of contemporary reality. Each of them emphasised that Kane's plays spoke to them, and they identified with the content of her texts. Secondly, both performances were staged in grassroots and off-the-beaten-path spaces. Thirdly, there was a clear emphasis on the provisional nature of the performances, the experimental attempts, the lack of funds, and the small space available for presenting Kane's texts.

The first critical reactions to the productions were unanimously negative. Perhaps they were too literal, perhaps they aroused discomfort? Perhaps they aroused too much disgust? We ourselves wonder what kind of audiences watched these performances – it was probably mainly professional – the stage space of *Blasted* was not large enough to accommodate a full audience, as in theatrical halls. Access and visibility were therefore limited. Perhaps their strength was to be an anti-capitalist gesture –

Łysak and Wodziński's performance took place in a post-industrial space, the remains of a factory's everyday life: in a place from which, after the mass production of the metal company, only empty spaces remained. Both of these examples provide a clear contrast to later productions, much more metaphorical, solemn, devoid of rebellious literalism, such as *Cleansed* by Warlikowski or *4.48 Psychosis* by Jarzyna, which were co-productions of several of the largest theatres in Poland.

Cleansed in co-production

Cleansed was a co-production of the Rozmaitości Theatre from Warsaw, the Współczesny [Contemporary] Theatre in Wrocław, and the Polski [Polish] Theatre from Poznań, along with foreign partners – the Hebbel am Ufer Theatre in Berlin, Theorem (an organisation supporting theatre from Eastern Europe), and the European Commission for Culture. The decision to combine forces was a widely discussed venture. It stemmed from several reasons, some of which were outlined by Agata Siwiak, the then head of the marketing department at Współczesny Theatre: '[...] Besides, I won't hide the fact that we needed a protective umbrella because of the sharpness of Kane's text' (MIZURO 2001).

Paweł Wodziński, director of the Theatre in Poznań, also admitted that the coproduction can help 'remove the "scandal" label that has been attached to Sarah Kane's plays in the past. It will be easier to achieve with three theatres rather than just one. Together, we are stronger' (PAWŁOWSKI 2001a: 292). Wodziński and Łysak, besides working on Sarah Kane dramas also made other brutalists' plays, for example *Shopping and Fucking* by Mark Ravenhill. The play had been performed amidst protests from right-wing councillors, despite the fact that the show operated as an independent production, staged outside of institutional theatres, which later influenced the decision to suspend funding for further premieres of Kane's plays by Warsaw's local councillors. Dorota Wyżyńska held an interview with the directors: 'One day, members of Country Woman Association appeared at the performance of *Shopping and Fucking* in Rozmaitości. "We expected the worst, but they sat still and listened. Only the AWS councillors slammed the doors"' (WYŻYŃSKA 1999). After this experience for Paweł Wodziński the coproduction was an important aspect. It was also appreciated, even in reviews that had a negative view of the play (SCHILLER 2002). For Rafał Bubnicki (2001), the journalist in the *Rzeczpospolita*, one of the biggest (rather conservative) newspapers, it was only 'from this perspective that the venture can be considered a success'.

A promised scandal

Cleansed was promoted in the Polish press primarily as the much-anticipated adaptation of a foreign writer – 'the English playwright and suicide victim' (PRZEKRÓJ 2001: 69). The label of 'scandal' that had been attached to Kane's name appeared in numerous

pre-premiere articles. Past opinions on the staging of the playwright's works, both in her homeland and other Western countries, were frequently referenced. *Cleansed* was declared the most controversial production even before anyone had seen it. Krystyna Meissner, the director of the Współczesny Theatre in Wrocław, responded to the media frenzy during the pre-premiere press conference: 'The performance is absurdly announced as the greatest scandal that will happen on this stage. But I expect a very beautiful, touching play about love' (FUR 2001).

This was later contrasted with the reception after the performance. Theatre critic Pawłowski (2001b) spoke about the atmosphere surrounding the show in quite harsh words: 'Sarah Kane's works have arrived in Poland with the label of scandal and pornography. [...] After the Wrocław production of *Cleansed*, the authors of these words should bite their tongues off'. Dorota Hartwich (2002), publisher, literary translator, and editor, informed future viewers that those 'who in Wrocław were waiting for another scandal were disappointed'.

The West

A year before the premiere of *Cleansed*, in the Polish post-communist reality and on the verge of joining the European Union, the well-known Romanticism scholar Maria Janion published *To Europe, Yes, But with Our Dead* (2000). In this work, Janion explores the repressed aspects of the past that Poles, as a nation aspiring to European integration, must confront. The most pressing issues seemed to concern the Jewish community, which was of particular importance in the context of the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbours* (2000) about the Jedwabne pogrom against the Jews perpetrated by Polish townspeople. Despite this distribution of accents, it is still Janion's 'Twilight of the Paradigm' – it contains the thesis about exhaustion of the romantic myth (messianism, national hero, sacrifice) after the political transition – that remains the most discussed essay on Polish culture. The text refers to the experience of Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz and makes him the figure of a Romantic poet who, for his country, won the highest prize in the Western world (JANION 2000: 21). The global recognition overshadowed earlier accusations of renouncing Polishness and fleeing abroad (Miłosz left Poland in 1951). Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue with the significance of the international prize and the publicity that accompanies it.

This kind of reception model of exalting and simultaneously questioning the artist's achievements due to their growing potential as a cultural export product seems to be characteristic of post-communist countries. According to sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis, after the regime change, Polish socio-cultural reality is subject to a constant tension between following progressive globalisation and sticking to what is very traditional (neo-traditional) and familiar (STANISZKIS 2001: 137). The effects of these conflicts translate into a simultaneous distrust and fetishisation of everything Western.

This mechanism is also visible in the reception of Polish directors entering international stages after 1989. Warlikowski and Jarzyna had achieved success abroad even

before staging their versions of Kane's plays – they were widely recognised in the popular press (JANIKOWSKI 1999: 136). *Twój STYL* was the first local women's magazine mapping the post-transition demand for a breath of novelty and luxury in the press market. Coming out continuously since 1990, the magazine was undoubtedly modelled on Western magazines such as *Vogue* or *Marie Clarie*, and skilfully combined global trends with the addressing of important social issues (psychology, relationships), thus promoting the model of the modern, professionally active urban woman. At the same time, it is difficult not to notice that *Twój STYL* proposes an identity model heavily immersed in consumerism. One might call it Pop-Feminism, that is, based firstly on the belief that feminism has achieved its goals, and secondly on the encouragement of 'appropriate purchasing decisions and fighting for the freedom to make those decisions' (KŁUSEK 2017: 55). Designing desires, thanks to globalisation, means following Western role models, which in practice involves imitating idols, usually celebrities from the world of popular culture (KŁUSEK 2017: 56).

In this connection, it is not surprising that Polish readers are interested in public figures, i.e., theatre directors who can boast foreign successes. They mentioned various European stages – Paris, Milan, Hamburg – as evidence of their greatness and membership in the global elite. About Jarzyna, it was written:

He turns the classics into avant-garde hits. He provokes with aggression, shocks with nudity, but teenagers in the audience stomp, whistle, and clap like at a rock concert. His play *Iwona, Princess of Burgundy* caused a sensation in Avignon and forced European critics to learn how to pronounce 'Jarzyna'. (JAROS-KROPIDŁOWSKA 2000: 115)

The Polish artist taking European stages by storm certainly easily realised the social demand for images and stories about the successful man on a global scale. Magda Szcześniak, analysing the 1990s, notes that historically 'the horizon of the desires of Poles (and representatives of other Eastern Bloc societies) was determined by the idea of Western normality' (SZCZEŚNIAK 2016: 23). In practice, this means the existence of Polish identity in a constant leaning towards the West, in the long-term perspective of catching up with socio-economic arrears, especially after the experience of communism.

In the case of directors making foreign careers, as emphasised in the aforementioned magazines, they somehow became Polish export commodities, i.e., products that not only fit in with Western norms but also offer originality and competitiveness towards the West (SZCZEŚNIAK 2016: 60).

Polarisation embedded in aesthetics

The new brutalism – intimate performances on small stages, using shock and transgressing bourgeois notions of good taste – not only introduced a new theatrical language to Polish theatre but also engaged audiences in ways that made indifference impossible.

In reviews, beyond the breaking of sexual taboos, there was mention of the impact of violence (KOPCIŃSKI 2002) and the shocking display of nudity (CZAPSKA 2002; KOWALCZYK 2002). Both elements fit into the concept of visibility intended to compel the audience to look – a deliberate aesthetic choice involving shock, disgust, and shame.

Years later, Warlikowski was accused of using too universal a language and ‘ignoring the entire social and economic context [...], and which was still foreign to Polish audiences at the time – and focusing on moral and aesthetic transgressions’ (DUNIEC and KRAKOWSKA 2014: 237). The lack of reference to Polish reality may have made important political issues seem like an export from the West. Eight years after the premiere of *Cleansed*, the director, in an interview with an important Polish liberal magazine, touched on the presence of Kane’s language, and in particular ‘cleansing’, not only in his own works but also in Polish reality, which, despite the passage of time, he still saw as a wild space and therefore incompatible with his, as we believe, Western perceptions. Warlikowski views the contemporary reality as outrageous, and Warsaw, the city where he works, as barbaric:

After all, we are only slowly returning to civilisation, to the forms of life of civilised nations! I do not suffer as a Pole because of this, I just don’t understand why we close our eyes to this fact, which results in my theatre. Theatre simply reflects reality. And purifies it, performing a cathartic function towards it. (WARLIKOWSKI 2009)

At the time of the interview’s publication, the director of *Cleansed* had already staged *Angels in America* (2007), a performance openly addressing the situation of gay people (naturally, American gays) in the face of the AIDS pandemic. The play became a pilgrimage destination for non-heteronormative theatrical individuals from across Poland, a work that was one of the first open representations. As Bryce Lease described:

Warlikowski’s determining staging provoked a new public discourse around homosexuality that allowed for a crucial representational counterdiscourse to the Kaczyńskis’ neoconservative Fourth Republic. He also established a broadly identifiable historical shift in the treatment and perception of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. (LEASE 2016: 123)

However, the concept of ‘cleansing’ borrowed from Kane still played a key role in Warlikowski’s thinking. So, while *Angels in America* was the first to depict diverse homosexual characters, *Cleansed* in its metaphorical conventions began with the shocking corporeality of Shakespeare productions. The artist in the interview also spoke about the brutality and relevance of the author of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, arguing that these works, especially, are contradictions to all forms of ‘political correctness’ concerning Jews, women, and races (WARLIKOWSKI 2009). At the same time, he acknowledged that when contemporary society offers only a euphemism of the problem, Shakespeare turned these issues into scandals.

Warlikowski seems to capture this language of shock, supplementing it with ‘non-normative associations’ (ŚMIECHOWICZ 2018: 193) evident in his productions of *Hamlet* (1997) or *The Taming of the Shrew* (1998) and incorporates it into his work, especially the realisation of *Cleansed*.

In the book-interview *Shakespeare and the Usurper*, the Polish director, talking about the author of *Romeo and Juliet*, often treats it as the first stage in the development of his work, which culminated and at the same time naturally evolved in his encounter with Kane’s plays:

When you start, you have a potential within you that will eventually lead you to Koltès or to Sarah Kane. But you start with Shakespeare [...]. It’s fair to say that Sarah Kane was no more extreme than Shakespeare in creating her bundle of horror titled *Cleansed*. [...] Wandering through Shakespeare’s plays, you pick out what the essence is, you learn the method. And then, already working on contemporary texts, you learn to reopen Shakespeare from their perspective. (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2007: 82)

Warlikowski emphasises the closeness between Shakespeare and the author of *Cleansed*, while at the same time stating explicitly that his working method derives from what he calls the essence from the English writer’s plays: the constant cross-dressing of sex, the entrapment in norms and attempts to transcend them by showing various kinds of perversion and abolishing the taboos associated with it (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2007: 32). The director notes the same motifs in Kane, and appreciates her contemporary, economical, blunt, and frank language that differs from Shakespeare’s poetic approach of ‘words, words, words’. In order to bring these two worlds closer together, Shakespeare had to narrow down the meanings and give them a more concrete character, while Kane had to decipher her contemporary poetic language (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2007: 56). Warlikowski’s key to combining these two types of aesthetics seems to have been his initial shocking of the audiences with his handling of nudity and departure from the heteronorm in his portrayal of men. The issue of nudity in *Cleansed* appears in many reviews; numerous polemics emerged, sometimes published in the same magazines. Some texts were written by people who had not seen the performance but felt the need to join the heated debate. Unfortunately, this often led to overlooking the question of interpretation in Warlikowski’s plays, with the authors focusing mainly on their emotions and attitudes toward the display of nudity on stage. This is particularly evident in *Taming of the Shrew* (prem. January 1998), where in the scene of Catherine’s dressing up, essentially a training in femininity, the role of the customary tailors is played by men dressed in dresses, or as the director described them: ‘transvestites’ (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2007: 114). Also Warlikowski’s previous production, *Hamlet* (1999), had already caused a great deal of emotional reactions related to ‘crossing boundaries’: the fact that Hamlet was gay was commented upon even on television. Krzysztof Warlikowski emphasised in an interview with Piotr Guszczynski: ‘Yes, there were discussions in television, where somebody bravely said that he’d prefer Hamlet non-homosexual’ (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2007: 140). Also because male nudity on stage

was something new in the 1990s, Polish audiences were not used to it. When Jacek Poniedziałek, who played the title character, undressed in front of his stage mother Gertruda, people were shocked. The audience shouted ‘put on underwear’. Agata Adamiciecka-Sitek, theatre scholar, describes one of the arguments during the spectacle in a special edition of *Notatnik teatralny* [Theater Notebook] about Krzysztof Warlikowski. Roman Pawłowski quotes her in his puckish article ‘Naked Happily’ alluding to her *Naked Humourlessly*:

‘This is too much. Please get dressed and act in your clothes. Normally!’ As Adamiciecka-Sitek reports, the actors froze and only returned to their performance after a long break. [...] ‘Did you hear me? How much longer do we have to watch this? You are insulting us!’ Then there was a commotion in the hall, someone shouted: ‘Speak for yourself.’ [...] Through the noise, the voice of a woman, who insisted that she paid for a ticket, was heard saying that she had the right to watch dressed actors. ‘I don’t go to the theatre to see naked butts,’ she shouted. ‘If you don’t feel like it, then leave,’ someone from the first row suggested. [...] The woman finally left the theatre, slamming the door. (PAWŁOWSKI 2003)

In *Cleansed*, not only Poniedziałek but almost the entire cast undresses. Some critics take a sarcastic approach: ‘[...] in his staging of *Cleansed*, you can admire not only the Polish penis, from Wrocław or Warsaw, but also foreign ones, from Hamburg. Each beautifully lit. In this production, by the way, everyone, except for Mrs. Celińska, has penises, even Mrs. Hajewska’ (KOCUR 2002). Others were outright outraged, speaking of ‘the aggressive ugliness of nudity’ (KOWALCZYK 2002), or ‘parading one’s naked body like a plastic mannequin’, and ‘exposing one’s corporeality in the rhythm of porno declamation’ (KOPCIŃSKI 2002). Jacek Kopciński (2002), speaking on behalf of the entire audience, described them as ‘turned into lewd voyeurs (and eavesdroppers), “raped” by word and image’. However, he also emphasises that ‘Warlikowski does not cross the line beyond which begins a porno club, a lavatory, or a slaughterhouse; his actors do not masturbate together, they only touch, they do not expel waste but only pretend to defecate, they do not mutilate themselves or others, they only drip paint’ (KOPCIŃSKI 2002). Conservative critics did not fail to notice that in Warlikowski’s theatre, ‘fashionable’ transgressions occur. Kopciński ‘does not agree with crossing theatricality’ and ‘refuses to participate in this game’ (KOPCIŃSKI 2002). Another critic recalled: ‘I will [...] insist on another, equally unfashionable idea, that what is permissible on stage should not deviate from decency’ (KOWALCZYK 2002).

Cleansed is thus one of the earliest contributions to the growing debate about the ‘corrupt West’, which, in right-wing discourse, is also linked to the LGBTQIA+ movement. Krzysztof Warlikowski said, ‘People were leaving *Cleansed* after the scene, where two men were kissing, but weren’t leaving when one man chopped off the other one’s feet or tongue. As it can be seen, in Poland love of two men hurts society more than aggression and inflicting death’ (Warlikowski quoted in GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2007: 163).

The very use of the English acronym LGBTQIA+, often mockingly distorted on Polish internet forums, evokes a sense of foreignness – something imposed from the outside, a process indirectly set in motion by Poland’s entry into the EU. A similar pattern can be observed with feminism in Poland. In the 1990s Polish discourse, it appeared in glimpses, always through the lens of foreign names like Simone de Beauvoir or Betty Friedan. In the famous book *Świat bez kobiet* [The World Without Women] by Polish feminist Agnieszka Graff, a popular legend appears about how the author went abroad on a scholarship and brought back notes from feminism classes. Right-wing media often refer to the foreignness of both feminism and the discussion about the rights of non-heteronormative people. Both movements have been considered as discourses transplanted from the mythical West, mainly from Anglo-Saxon countries. The effects of this were described by Krakowska (2019: 340) in her publication summarising 25 years of Polish democracy through the lens of theatre. One of her most important conclusions highlights the discrepancy between discourse and representation – visible today not only in discussions about women’s rights but also those of homosexual individuals – and what can be termed practice, meaning actual access to equal rights, particularly in areas such as abortion and partnership recognition (KRAKOWSKA 2019: 340).

In Poland’s post-transition conditions, minority rights framed as equality and freedom aspirations have been virtually monopolised by Western liberal discourse. Przemysław Czapliński in the text ‘Wojna wstydu’ [War of Shame] describes a story of transition and inscribes the category of shame into it. Researcher notes that:

[...] Polish culture today participates in a war of two legitimate shames. Both are impenetrable to each other [...]. What for some is a source of shame, for others is a source of pride. Two different systems of inclusive repulsion operate within two conflicted and non-communicating cultures. The first, fragmented, internally incoherent and conflicted, grows out of an ethical concern for the rights of minorities; the second, narrow and aggressively inclusive of all differences, appeals to an ethic of majority rights. (CZAPLIŃSKI 2016: 44)

Shame has a ‘magic function’ of polarising the society into foreign (humiliated) and their own (proper, adequate) groups. The liberal narrative based on the memory of intolerance towards the Other began to rely on mechanisms of shaming the majority – a model of the typical Pole-Catholic, a xenophobe who hates all otherness, emerged – and at the same time promoting a modern, European identity based on tolerance (CZAPLIŃSKI 2016: 36). At the same time, liberalism is still based on the dominance of capitalism and the promotion of consumerism. Meanwhile, the effect of shaming is also the refusal to help and support the social claims of those groups that fall into the cited image of the backward Pole (CZAPLIŃSKI 2016: 26). Perhaps that is why various Western emancipatory practices become extremely susceptible to commodification. They are often reduced to an essence, a short slogan, and incorporated into a short-lived fashion and delight. Right-wing parties do not understand these tendencies and try to make liberal thought an alien and ‘unwanted’ construct.

Contemporary language, or capitalism in the theatre

According to Świerczyńska (2019: 60), what distinguished Warlikowski and Jarzyna from other directors was that they talked a lot about their private lives in the media, sharing stories of loneliness and being misunderstood by others. The group from the Rozmaitości Theatre built a very close relationship with the audience, blurring the line between the private and the public. The researcher notes: ‘The publicised relationship between Grzegorz Jarzyna and Magdalena Cielecka in a popular women’s magazine, the photos of the group from their joint vacation, the direct tone of their statements – all of this created an incredibly intimate image of the group’ (ŚWIERCZYŃSKA 2019: 23). The artists, especially Jarzyna, understood the media potential very well, consciously operated and used it. According to Świerczyńska (2019: 63), the director of *4.48 Psychosis* was well aware that media support was crucial for achieving the best theatrical success. He emphasised in one of the interviews that ‘there was a time when our society was just learning its rights, but there was still a taboo. I felt I was crossing it in my small theatrical field. I was saved by the media’s support. I know that the people who decide about us take them into account’ (JARZYNA 2006).

In a Jarzyna’s biography, it was written: ‘the director, in his opinion, should be young. Only then does he have the necessary freshness, energy, and audacity for this profession’ (JAROS-KROPIDŁOWSKA 2000: 114). This is especially visible in the media presence of Warlikowski and Jarzyna, as well as the actors playing in their productions. Photographs of the *Cleansed* director unequivocally refer to the image of Western rock stars: a dishevelled black shirt, eyes outlined with dark pencil, and wild hair (*NOTATNIK TEATRALNY* 1998). In popular magazines, photos from the director’s private archives appeared, clearly from vacations (probably abroad), specifically selected to match the bold, naked scenes in Warlikowski’s theatre. The two most recognisable actresses of the Rozmaitości Theatre almost became trademarks of its brand. Maja Ostaszewska not only appeared on the cover of *Twój STYL* (2001), but, along with Magdalena Cielecka, also posed in elegant, decadent dresses for a carnival-themed photoshoot in the magazine (*TWÓJ STYL* 2001: 66–69). For Kopciński (2002), the media image of the actors was also reflected in the reception of the *Cleansed*. He saw them as stars of reality shows ‘passionately consumed by the contemporary viewer’ (KOPCIŃSKI 2002).

Regardless of opinions about the performance, Warlikowski’s relationship with mass culture was the subject of discussion. Sometimes it was seen as a sign of the decline of art, while at other times it was considered the best way to speak about contemporaneity. According to Leszek Pułka (2001a), a reviewer for *Gazeta Wyborcza Wrocław*, by using elements of pop culture, Warlikowski shows that ‘we all have a television imagination’. Individual elements of the performance are familiar to us because we have seen them ‘on album covers, magazines, and tapes in the nearest shop’ (PUŁKA 2001a). However, Jerzy Pilch (2002) believed that Warlikowski, like his supportive critics, was catering to the popular tastes of the new generation, ‘raised on cabaret sketches, music videos, and newspaper news’. The fear of what the audience likes is also visible in Kopciński’s (2002) review. In his view, the context for *Cleansed* is

[c]ontemporary mass culture, constantly referring to erotica and sex. Brazenly shaping the imagination of supermarket clients using a rather simple system of associations leaves a strong mark. After a while, erotically programmed ‘clients’ remain so at home, on the street, in the cinema. So why not in the theatre? (KOPCINSKI 2002)

It seems, therefore, that a turn towards popular culture was seen in the work of ‘younger, more talented’, which in post-transition reality usually meant a fascination with all things American (ZIÓŁKOWSKI 1999: 55–56). So, is the progressive Americanisation, and therefore the glut of capitalist products, paradoxically not at odds with the anti-consumerist message of Kane’s plays? In the context of *Cleansed*, the very reference to peep shows, allowing one to buy erotic experiences (just like buying a candy bar from a vending machine), shows that for Kane, entanglement in consumerism was an important theme. Polish directors’ detachment for this critique is most evident in Jarzyna’s *4.48 Psychosis*, whose production was completely removed from anti-capitalistic ideas.

Kane in the off-theatre

The issue of the appropriation of Warlikowski’s and Jarzyna’s stagings of Kane’s works is evident in subsequent Polish productions of her plays. Interestingly, these mainly took place in off-theatre venues. Most of these were student projects, performed by young people who were looking for their own stage language. The first production after Warlikowski’s and Jarzyna’s performances was *Phaedra’s Love* by Robert Talarczyk (interestingly, a peer of Jarzyna) at the Gier i Ludzi Theatre [Theatre of Games and People] in Katowice (which was based in a former railway station). Talarczyk tried to tell a story about universal feelings and the desire for love in a consumerist world (MRÓWKA 2002). The director dealt with the same issues that were confronted by Wodziński-Łysak and Szydłowski. They were small, niche performances, although – worth emphasising – some of them had a subversive potential. This was the case with the performance by the Artistic Group Teraz Poliż – *Our Daily 4.48 Psychosis* (directed by Ula Kijak). The production was created as a manifesto. Four acting students rebelled against the performance they were supposed to perform at the end of their studies. Katarzyna Niedurny (2020) emphasised:

Although there were several female students and only three male students in our year, Jan Machulski decided to make a performance in which two main roles were played by men. The two women in the play – playing a bartender and an unhappy, lovesick prostitute – only had a few lines of dialogue.

The women, using Kane’s play as a base, created a performance in which each of them had space to showcase their skills. This allowed them to form their own artistic

group the following year (which continues to operate today), and it became the only professional feminist theatre in Poland.

It is surprising that even the productions of Kane's plays in 'major' institutional theatres were mostly doomed to failure. We define as 'failed' short-lived performances that did not enjoy high visibility, were seen by a small audience, and did not enter the media circuit. The performances were misunderstood by the audience and thus had short lifespans. Joanna Jopek, analysing the performances in the context of negative performativity, emphasised: 'It is not about strong presence or total absence: it is rather about a slight sliding into disappearance, reluctance, abrogation; a clearly performative failure of presence-visibility-productivity' (JOPEK 2015: 158). We want to highlight how the short lifespan of the plays in theatrical circulation affected the disappearance of any tangible traces of them in the archives. The performances constituted the reverse of (in)visibility in relation to Warlikowski's and Jarzyna's productions. The perceptibility of *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis* is strengthening, while the vitality of other realisations is diminishing, slowly passing away into oblivion. After some performances no reviews or texts have survived; after others we find inconsistent 'remnants' in the archives. The play *Blasted* directed by Maja Kleczewska from the Stary [Old] Theatre in Cracow was performed only four times. The researcher Katarzyna Waligóra (2018) describes her analysis of the performance as the archive of 'failure'. For instance, critic Łukasz Drewniak (quoted in WALIGÓRA 2018) called this performance 'the greatest failure in the director's career'. Waligóra sees this discourse also as the failure of the archive itself, unable to preserve a single, coherent narrative (WALIGÓRA 2018). Waligóra (2018) states,

What interests me is that this briefly performed, negated, mocked production has not been forgotten. That after ten years since its premiere and the death of the play, I have heard about it dozens of times, that it returned uninvited in surprising moments.

The author of the text attempts to analyse a performance that, on the one hand, many wanted to forget immediately, but on the other hand, for many, it was an important and groundbreaking event (see WALIGÓRA 2018). Greater visibility of these productions condemned them to more criticism. This was the case with *Phaedra's Love* at the Polonia Theatre, a private theatre founded by Krystyna Janda, without full-time actors, relying on the image of celebrities. The performance was the debut of director Julia Pawłowska and, according to critics, it was a failure. The word 'false start' appeared in most reviews in connection with the performance. Critics also mentioned that they lacked appropriate words to evaluate it (WYŻYŃSKA 2007). Łukasz Chotkowski, staged *Crave* in 2009 at the Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz. Critic Michalina Łubecka (2009) commented on this performance: 'the creators announced that the performance would be a manifesto for the generation of these young actors. I belong to the same generation as the actors, but I cannot sign off on that manifesto'.

It was not until 2021 that another staging of Kane's work appeared in the Polski Theatre in Poznań. The direction was taken by Paweł Demirski, a well-known creator

of the theatre group that fiercely opposed the language of younger, more talented individuals. He chose *4.48 Psychosis*. In an interview, Demirski (2021) clearly opposed ‘typically Polish appropriation’ of Kane:

At first reluctantly, if at all – what it is. Then a few viewings, and it was ticked off by the Polish intelligentsia. It seems to me that she is important in the sense that everyone has an opinion about her, and in fact about her legend – legends in this country are liked by the majority. Sarah Kane in Poland is neither well-translated, nor somehow particularly well-read.

Further the director of *4.48 Psychosis* bitterly states that if Kane had been born in Poland, she would not have been noticed and probably no one would have read her texts. It is clear that Demirski also looks at the British writer through the prism of his own playwriting experience.

Before Demirski directed *4.48 Psychosis* in 2012, he staged, together with Monika Strzępka, *Tęczowa Trybuna* [Rainbow Tribune], which openly referred to homoerotic meanings found in Warlikowski’s *Cleansed*. The figure of the director was used to create a privileged gay character who is indifferent to the issues of the marginalised. Undoubtedly, even the parody underlines the cult status of the adaptation based on Kane and its creator, who has grown into something of an idol. The creators of the performance see Warlikowski as a person who believes in the politics of small steps, a strategy unsuited to the realities of the excluded (the character of Kelner personifies the fate of those who are both non-heteronormative and simply poor as a result of political change), who can no longer wait for new solutions and demand change now. This is precisely why *Rainbow Tribune* was most strongly associated with the powerful statement made by one of the characters: ‘we are all fags’, which, can be ‘a sustained critique of the transition order’ and ‘an expression of the alliance against the transition dictate of normality’, understood as that which is xenophobic and homophobic (SZCZEŚNIAK 2016: 285). Paradoxically, this line, despite its political incorrectness, becomes a contradiction of the liberal-emancipatory perspective inscribed in the Polish realisations of *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis*. This is all the more important because Kane’s original message focused on the stripping away of identity. Mark Ravenhill, one of the Brutalists, describing the playwright years later, emphasised the difference in their thinking about the sociopolitical environment:

My artistic world was the claustrophobic bubble of high capitalism; Kane’s was a more brutally naked environment. The horrors of Auschwitz and Kosovo provided her with inspiration; mine came from the hollow world of the Big Mac and Disney World. I wrote on a laptop, Kane on a manual typewriter. (RAVENHILL 2005)

The author of *Shopping and Fucking* places his art in the realm of a critique of capitalism, while he sees Kane as an artist who had found her language in a refusal to participate in any form of consumerism. Neither of these themes appear in Warlikows-

ki's and Jarzyna's performances. Only the mocking portrayal of brutalism in *Rainbow Tribune* indirectly introduces anti-liberal themes in the Polish reception of Kane.

Conclusion

The discussion surrounding the adaptation of Kane's works in Poland serves as a lens through which we can examine the moods, fears, and hopes accompanying Poland's entry into the realm of Western culture and art. Undoubtedly, in the post-communist reality, they were a new theatrical proposal, bringing fame to Polish directors and satisfying the social and theatrical craving of the West.

The Polish audience had to learn to speak openly about political issues and address matters once considered private, breaking the taboos of the past. 'Europeanness' became associated not only with the free market but, more broadly, with the idea of free love in all its forms. *Cleansed* immerses us in a world of stigmatised, marginalised, and rejected individuals being mocked, insulted, and even killed. *Cleansed* remains a caesura in the history of Polish theatre to this day, a reference point for both contemporary creators and critics.

'The discussion around this performance, often hopelessly stupid and fierce, is pleasing because it means that theatre is no longer treated marginally by the media, that they have also noticed its great power and success with the audience' (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2003: 12). This is how Gruszczyński wrote about *Cleansed*, and we would like to be able to say the same about any of the performances discussed in the media in recent times. Unfortunately, the language of public and political debate has changed, decisively polarising and intensifying conflict within the public. The political campaign against LGBTQIA+ individuals in Poland has escalated, particularly after 2015, when the right-wing party came to power. Since then, it is not difficult to recall other Polish productions raising similar debates and emotions, including those based on classic texts, such as *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve] written by Adam Mickiewicz, directed by Maja Kleczewska at the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Cracow (produced 20 years after the premiere of *Cleansed*). These shows faced media condemnation, political protests, and financial consequences. Far more radical voices and more hysterical reactions, than those seen during the discussion of Warlikowski's performance, were heard with the premiere of *Klątwa* [The Curse] by Oliver Frlić in 2017 or *Kora. Boska* [Kora. Divine] directed by Katarzyna Chlebny in 2021. Right-wing media and politicians rose to the occasion, organising protests in front of the Powszechny [Universal] Theatre in Warsaw and ensuring that the Nowy Teatr Proxima [New Proxima Theatre] in Cracow did not receive funding. We recall and write about these situations to look for connections to thinking about Kane on the Polish stage. We do not remember Warlikowski's and Jarzyna's stagings; we are much closer to the events just described. Perhaps each of these situations shows and constructs a further history of post-communism? Is polarisation proving to be an inherent part of the transition? Do we face any change in this area?

It is hard to imagine how *Cleansed* would be received if its premiere was held in 2025, especially because it is a year of presidential elections, which was once again won by a right-wing candidate. In the previous campaign, the current president of the right-wing party, Andrzej Duda, uttered the infamous words, saying that LGBT was ‘not about people, but an ideology’ (*to nie ludzie, to ideologia*). In the president’s words, LGBT ideology was also much worse than communism. This statement became a symbol of the dehumanisation and discrimination of LGBTQIA+ individuals by right-wing political groups (BBC 2020). ‘Ideology’ in the language of the right has become a negative and alien concept, illustrating the ease with which media discourse can be manipulated. At the same time, Polish conservatives see US President Donald Trump as the prime example of a strong leader who will finally restore order in the world and thus crack down on ‘spoiled’ left-wing identity politics. Given this context, it remains to ask: What would happen today around a play that directly depicts the physicality of a homosexual relationship, where one of the characters could be seen as a transgender person undergoing transition on stage? As it seems, the extension of queerness from a principle based on fluid identities might be more in line with Kane’s thinking based on radical unsubscribing from capitalist reality. All the rainbow marketing (such as the colourful bag from Ikea) that is supposed to support the LGBTQIA+ community becomes a way for big companies to increase their profits, which are not really committed to supporting excluded people. One may wonder whether Kane’s Polish productions – emancipatory in their expression, but at the same time completely ignoring the criticism of the liberal order contained in the original texts – are not theatrical equivalents of such rainbow gadgets.

Thus, in the Polish post-transition realities, Kane became an advocate of emancipation in a Western, progressive style. Her rebellious approach to capitalism and any entanglement with norms, on the other hand, was overlooked.

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