

Theses of the PhD Dissertation

**CONTEMPORARY POLISH DRAMA
(1990–2005)**

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Debrecen, 2011.

I.

OBJECTIVES OF THE DISSERTATION, DESCRIPTION OF THE TOPIC

„Mrożek” – cries out everyone almost automatically in Hungary, when the conversation turns to modern Polish drama. After some thinking Witold Gombrowicz, or even Tadeusz Różewicz might be mentioned, sometimes the names of Witkiewicz or with a slight „anachronism” that of Wyspiański, an author from the turn of the 19th and 20th century might spring to mind. It seems well-founded to presume, that the average Hungarian intellectual reader’s knowledge on the topic dates back to the 60s and 70s. A few decades ago we all were more or less up-to-date concerning the actual public events, cultural trends of the other nation, but the change of the regime and its well-known consequences reorganized the settings. The social and political changes in the last few decades resulted in the loosening of the Hungarian-Polish ties. This tendency affected the relationship in all spheres, thus, in that of the genre of drama. After 1989 the flow of information on each other’s drama stopped at the level of the 60s.

My choice of topic rooted in my research in the Doctoral School of Modern Literary Studies at the University of Debrecen and also in the Theatre Institute of the Jagiellonian University, as well as my experience as a drama-translator. I was inspired to write the present paper most of all by the fact, that there have not been published any comprehensive critical, literary-historical overviews concerning the latest Polish drama (i.e. after 1989) neither in Hungary, nor in Poland. This lack is comprehensible to some degree, as there was not developed such a research methodology, with which this special field on the edge of literary history, theatre history, literary criticism and theatre criticism could be examined. The present work aims to fill this gap, examining the main phenomena and tendencies of Polish drama after the change of the regime.

My aim is to present the oeuvre and works of contemporary Polish authors working between 1990 and 2005, who are mostly unknown in Hungary. Beside that I would also like to introduce and analyze the new Polish dramas of the abovementioned period. Resulting from the special nature of my work and research I aimed to study not only those authors who are considered the most outstanding ones by literary critics, and not only dramas that have already been published in periodicals or anthologies. The last drama anthology mentioned in my research is the latest one published in Poland by now.

As we are not so far away in time from the literature of the present, which distance could form the basis of a solid judgement, it is impossible to write a paper with a completely grounded viewpoint, or to provide scientific synthesis. On the scale of literary history, those twenty years that have passed since the change of the regime are hardly analyzable especially in the field of drama. Therefore it is difficult to discuss contemporary literature within the categories of literary history. Yet, even if the period I observed – i.e. those fifteen years since the change of the regime – does not convey an inner unity, it is relatively coherent from a literary historical perspective (as well). Therefore I considered it highly important to present the main tendencies - even if I had to be careful with the categorisation into the different movements because of their being so recent.

With the present paper I attempted to answer the following research questions:

- Which were the most significant ambitions, tendencies and features of the Polish drama of the turn of the millennium?
- Which were the new challenges authors had to face in the period of the economic and aesthetic transition?
- Which techniques, what kinds of rhetorical and linguistic devices did the Polish dramatists use to answer the questions, raised by the „new reality”?
- Which features of form and content reflected the crisis of the Great Masters after 1990?
- Who were the new dramatists after 1990? Is it possible to categorise them?
- What were the (social, political, economic) circumstances of the reception of the dramas? What further factors might have formed their interpretation?

Drama and the strongly connected theatre make up a special field of culture, as in comparison to other genres they are affected more by politics and economics, and respond to social changes in a more direct way than, for instance, poetry. Therefore the other important aim of this paper is to find a place for Polish drama and theatre after 1989 within the whole cultural scenario, and to examine, how drama and theatre reflected the new challenges of the era, and how they reacted on their entirely changed circumstances.

II.

RESEARCH METHODS

The main material of my studies was the written text of the dramas, with the exception of those works that have not been published yet, only performed in theatre. So far there were not published any comprehensive volumes dealing with contemporary Polish drama (not even in Poland), therefore my main resources were the anthologies, drama anthologies and dramas published individually between 1990 and 2005 in Polish and Hungarian, as well as articles from Polish and Hungarian periodicals.

In the case of the unpublished dramas, that were presented only on stage, it was not enough to study the drama in question, but also its interpreters – the audience, the perceiver. For that reason an analysis of the reception of those works in theatre is provided. Beside the formal and stylistic analysis of the works, it is essential to consider the perceiver's point of view, which takes into account the (social, political, economic, etc.) circumstances that might have influenced the reception of the dramas, and the other factors that determined their interpretation.

For this reason, an important part of my work is an overview of the reception of the dramas. The research of that field could only rely on theatre criticism, as in contrast to the reception of poetry or prose, there are hardly any articles on new tendencies in drama, and even these are criticisms about certain performances, not analyses of plays. Certainly, the history of the reception of performances does not equal the history of critical reception of the plays, yet, it also cannot be neglected, that drama and theatre are functionally inseparable, as plays are written in order to be performed. The function of the excerpts from theatre criticisms is neither to provide the literary analysis of a certain drama, nor to prove right or wrong those criticisms. My primary aim was to present as objectively as possible, what their fates were, their critical reception and their follow-up like, the latest of which equals their being performed on stage and interpreted by the audience.

Regarding research methods – because of the abovementioned necessities – the hermeneutical approach proved to be the most suitable, as it suggests multifaceted examination of the phenomena, reconstruction of the vehicles and formulae that formed those phenomena, and revealing of the connexions between the historical context and the perceiver audience. As a result of that, over the analysis of recorded or written texts of those dramas I attempt to throw light not only on the deeper layers of meaning and inner connexions within

the dramas, but also on the way of their being perceived, the method of their being understood, and the interaction between the works and their audience.

III.

RESULTS

Researching the drama of the period of 1990–2005 the following results could be concluded:

The year of 1989 inaugurated a new era in Polish literature – that fact is not questioned any more by literary historians or literary critics. The turning point was indicated not only by the appearance of the capitalist economy, but more notably, by the abolition of censorship. Yet, the first breath of freedom brought rather perplexity than redemption for drama and theatre (as well). There was a general feeling of crisis, it became popular to complain about the lack of modern dramas and contemporary stage adaptations, professional assemblies were held regularly, urging that this „awkward situation” be solved.

The crisis of Polish drama at the early 90s was induced by several factors: first of all, the social transformations generated by historical-political changes, secondly, the infrastructural alterations, coming as a result of economic(al) reforms, and thirdly, the transformed language of theatre, as it was altered by the new trends and ideas. These changes questioned the further existence of pre-1990 drama-writing and theatrical traditions.

With the change of the regime the former special political-historical atmosphere, which provided the „appropriate” grounds, a „dramatic situation” and „inspiration” for artists, disappeared. Before that the majority of the authors chose the metaphorical language in order to avoid being censored, and this „winking at each other” with the audience created a special relationship, a sense of community between the reader/viewer and the author. As soon as pluralism appeared, the social, political and ideological *unity* broke up in post-communist countries: the image of the common enemy disappeared, and thus the binding force that kept together the society and defined drama and theatre was also lost. The new diversity of value systems and the divergence of interests divided theatre professionals but also the audience. Theatre studios, which earlier functioned like a family, either split up or started to restructure, only some of the most important centres of theatre life could remain untouched after the change of the regime.

The composition and the demands of the audience also changed. The homogenous, like-minded audience and the common basis of criteria fell apart. The new opportunities, the diversity of political, philosophical and aesthetic views, the proliferation of viewpoints, opinions and beliefs brought along so heterogeneous values, that the former „standard” repertoire and a single artistic language could not satisfy these different demands any longer. Theatre formerly functioned also as a meeting-point for social and patriotic purposes, and triggered „collective reactions”. Now it turned into a place for entertainment, which should satisfy the personally defined artistic demands of individual viewers, who all have different beliefs and worldviews.

The appearance of the „concurrent” new media of mass entertainment (i.e. video, DVD, internet, etc.), the altered taste and new expectations of the audience generated a significant change in the language of the stage and in the repertoire. Theatre, after losing its role in community-forming and its societal value, not having any other options, turned back to its original function: leaving its public role, it turned away from politics and focused on itself again. For this reason, not only popular plays and musicals filled the stages, but also *l’art pour l’art*-style performances, which aimed to attract audience with the name of one or another excellent actor.

The changing political and economic situation affected the institutional side of theatre as well. The politics of decentralisation and the new, free-market circumstances, forced theatres to undertake mass dismissals, and within the transformed economic scenario theatre companies fought for their existence in different ways. This phenomenon, on the one hand, automatically induced the mass production of probable box-office hits: popular dramas and musicals, on the other hand, it resulted the disappearing of ambitious, experimental, so called „artistic” performances. Theatres, pled the difficult economical situation for their being afraid of premiering new, experimental pieces, in which they suspected probable fiascos. This situation made directors look for solutions to the recent problems in the classical and the foreign repertoire.

As for Polish drama, the doldrums of the 90s coincided with the crisis of the language, and within that the language of literature. As the image of the inner-outer enemy disappeared, the inherited system of symbols, which enabled the tacit communication between the artist and the perceiver, became redundant. The metaphorical codes, the social-political allusions lost their sense and relevance, and together with the formerly valid ideas and values became meaningless, the words and expressions conveying those notions turned into clichés. The sign language-like „camouflage-aesthetics” came to an end, and the abolition

of censorship opened up the way for the free, intelligible, plain speech. Stage became again the place for simple stories.

Despite the expectations of the initial enthusiasm, no new, monumental repertoire was created. The reason for this was that even though those problems that formerly raised protest disappeared, yet, as a legacy of the former system, there was some kind of paralysis in the air against the problems of everyday reality. The majority of the contemporary authors could not deal with the new situation and for a long time went on using the same code-system, that they had used in the former decades. The collective language of theatre, operating with allusions, elements of absurd and grotesque disappeared, but other, new forms of the dialogue with the audience had not developed yet. The realignments and solution-seeking temporarily generated perplexity.

In the changed situation the main problems were – paradoxically – freedom, plain speech and the freedom of expression. The disappearing of „the image of the enemy” lead to experiencing the relativity of truth and the „struggle” of freedom.

The change of the regime-generated crisis, which affected drama and theatre as well, was quite short in Poland. The complaints about the lack or the shortcomings of contemporary plays soon gave way to an unprompted and effective crisis managing activity in all fields of the profession, and to professional discussions. Within the so called transition period – approximately between 1990 and 1995 – the social-economic transformations, and also the infrastructural and aesthetic changes opened up new dimensions for Polish drama and theatre: the turn of generations in literature have started.

The post-1989 period can not be considered a homogeneous period. From a literary historical point of view the dramas of the last period could hardly be classified or grouped on the basis of literary trends, schools, or tematics. It would also be misleading to identify the problems of contemporary Polish drama with the emergence of the newest generation of playwrights. Yet, there are some criteria, which might help the deeper analysis of the era in question. Even though some authors' choice of topics or concepts about the dramaturgical language do not necessarily correspond with the criteria of the generation-based classification, there is a certain grouping, which might give a picture about the basic structure of contemporary Polish drama. According to this typology, while discussing plays written after 1990, three major groups of authors could be distinguished:

To the first group consists of those old, „Great Masters” (Sławomir Mrożek, Tadeusz Różewicz), whose name rings a bell for the average Hungarian reader or theatre-goer, as the figures and oeuvres of those authors are connected to the era, when Hungary and

Poland, belonging to the same communist „barrack” had much more information about each other’s culture. The authors of this age group could not always cope with the „new dimensions”: when facing the transformed reality some of them could not find their own voice, while others produced plays only by restructuring the former elements of their older dramas. The standard of these plays is often down below that of the former works. Yet, some of the „Big Old Authors’”, for instance S c h a e f f e r ’ s and G ł o w a c k i ’ s art not only remained unharmed by the change of the regime, but this turn even brought additional success for them. It is true for both authors, that the profile of their work has never operated with the formerly so popular parabolistic writing technique.

Those dramatists who debuted as young authors after the change of the regime, who are now in their 50-ies, belong to the m i d d l e a g e - g r o u p . These authors fought to secede from the most well-known and characteristic symbolic-allegorical forms of Witkiewicz – Gombrowicz – Mrozek. We can distinguish two new ways of breaking out. The authors of the so called d r a s t i c r e a l i s m (Nawrocki, Koterski, Lachnit, Bukowski) gained inspiration from the everyday life, and were looking for new forms of expression, using a realist-naturalist language, which was formerly less popular in Polish literature. The „masters of psychology” (Łukosz, Amejko, Villqist), on the other hand, found their original, special style in the genre of psychological drama. Apart from those two trends, we should discuss separately the outstanding dramatist, T a d e u s z S ł o b o d z i a n e k , who became famous for his mythical stories and his special poetic language, and who created an autonomous, homogeneous world. He not only plays an important role in today’s drama, but also became one of the most important people in the recent history of Polish theatre by founding the Drama Laboratory.

The third category is that of the young, talented dramatists – usually b o r n a f t e r 1 9 6 0 – who were recognized in the last decade. This group could be divided into two subgroups: the authors debuting between 1995 and 2000, and the ones starting their career after 2000. This is so, because concerning tematics and artistic language the period 1990-2005 consists of two parts: the first one is from the change of the regime to the turn of the millennium, and the second one is from 2000 to the present, when new significant changes happened on the field of Polish drama and theatre. In the case of these authors we can even speak about some kind of a generation shift in the Polish drama of the turn of the millennium, if we define generations on biological terms.

The „boom” in drama after 2000 triggered the appearance of such an amount of authors and works, that it is hardly possible to categorize those plays into certain trends, and

in addition to that, they are still too recent for us to look at them in general. Yet, it might already be concluded, that there is a special divided nature in the drama of the last fifteen years, the opposition between symbolic-metaphorical and the realistic-naturalistic approaches, which contrast was present in Polish art for centuries. Apart from this dividedness, there are some features of Polish drama after the change of the regime, which were not characteristic before 1990. These are the following:

- Total apoliticism – after the fall of the totalitarian system the social mission of theatre came to an end: artists do not take the role of political mouthpieces any longer, usually there are no political allusions within the dramas, inter alia the change of the regime has never been deeply discussed by any of the dramas of the abovementioned period.
- The dramatist is not a vates any longer. The majority of the writers have civil jobs, thus they do not make a living of writing dramas, but beside their original professions (engineer, economist, sociologist, speech therapist, doctor, teacher, etc.) writing dramas is like a part-time job for them.
- Dissociation from the great literary predecessors – contemporary drama has completely broken away from the symbolic-allegorical language and form of Witkiewicz, Gombrowicz and Mrozek
- Writing for stage gained popularity – in the new millennium a practical and fruitful relationship developed between dramatists and theatres, the primary target audience of the writers are no longer the readers, but the theatre-goers. Several new plays are very successful on Polish stages without actually being published.
- Presence of the media and its active role – the forming of contemporary Polish drama was keenly followed and supported by the interest of the press and the electronic media, which thus extended the otherwise more quiet transformation trends into a phenomenon.
- The „big boom” of the post-1989 Polish drama, coming in two waves: in 1995 and in 2003 – as far as one can decide without the perspective gained by the distance in time – has not produced masterpieces or milestones of drama history, no new Wyspiańskis or new Mrożeks, but it dissolved the temporary crisis on the turn of the 90s, definitely and visibly consolidating the position of drama, as a genre on the scale of Polish art. The valorisation of drama gave the new authors opportunities for experimenting. As a result of this process a large amount of remarkable, first-rate plays were written – and this is a fact, even if those works are not defined as masterpieces.

IV.

PUBLICATIONS CONNECTED TO THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

Book chapters

- Pászt, Patrícia, *Afterword*, In: *Ilja próféta. Mai lengyel drámák*, red. Pálfalvy Lajos, Európa, Budapest, 2003. 315-329.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Biography notes*, In: *Ilja próféta. Mai lengyel drámák*, red. Pálfalvy Lajos, Európa, Budapest, 2003. 329-334.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Mai lengyel drámairodalom*, Kalligram Kiadó, Pozsony, 2010.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Afterword*, In: *Fiatal lengyel dráma*, red. Körner Gábor, Kalligram Kiadó, Pozsony, 2010. 420-428.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Biography notes*, In: *Fiatal lengyel dráma*, red. Körner Gábor, Kalligram Kiadó, Pozsony, 2010. 429-432.
- *Kolizje. Antologa nowego dramatu węgierskiego*, red. Pászt Patrícia, Panga Pank, Kraków, 2010.

Other publications

- Pászt, Patrícia, *Színház a síparadicsomban*, Szín-Világ, 1995/10, 18-19.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Színházi levél Krakkóból*, Szín-Világ, 1995/02, 8-9.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Színházi levél Krakkóból*, Szín-Világ, 1997/01, 14.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Az alkotás öröme*, Játékos, 1997/01, 31-34.
- *Lengyel mozaik*, red. Pászt Patrícia, Színház, 1996/10, 24-36.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Utak, irányzatok*, Színház, 1996/10, 24-26.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Színház-Forma-Művészet*, Színház, 1996/10, 27-28.
- *Párbeszéd a lengyel színházzal*, red. Pászt Patrícia, Színház, 1997/11, 25-31.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Van-e kortárs dráma?*, Színház, 1997/11, 25-26.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *A gyermekarcú halál*, Színház, 1997/11, 27-29.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *A színház, mint önmaga témája*, Színház, 1997/11. enclosure 1.
- *Formaművészek*, red. Pászt Patrícia, Ellenfény, 1997/3, 36-41.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Lengyel színházak Budapesten*, Ellenfény, 1997/3, 36-39.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *„Képekben gondolkodom”*, Ellenfény, 1997/3, 37-38.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Gólyalábakon az égig*, Ellenfény, 1997/3, 40-41.
- *Képzőművészeti színház*, red. Pászt Patrícia, Színház, 1999/08, 39-46.

- Pászt, Patrícia, „Értetek, fiatalokért”, Színház, 1999/08, 45-46.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Látvány, mítosz és agresszió*, Színház, 1999/11, 15-18.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Kelet és Nyugat között*, Színház, 1999/11, 18-20.
- Pászt, Patrícia, *Üres az ég a fejünk felett*, Hajónapló, 2002/5-6, 6-7.