

# ‘Close but Far, Human but Square, Normal but Exhausting’: Pandemic Theatre in Poland

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*The purpose of this article is to explore different ways of countering the COVID-19 pandemic in Polish theatre that were not only attempts to provide protection against the potentially lethal coronavirus, but also attempts to actively combat other ‘viruses’: the capitalist compulsion for productivity and the exclusion of Others (the disabled, the elderly, women or LGBT+ people). Several Polish artists of the lockdown era (participants in the Quarantine Project, Beyond #quarantine and DIY 2020 Masterclasses, members of Theatre 21, Joanna Szczepkowska and Wojtek Ziemilski) have managed to draw the attention of a wider audience to these problems. During the pandemic, they practised the art of resistance in various ways, including the ‘art of failure’ as a resistance against neo-liberal systems. Therefore their projects can be seen as a dress rehearsal before the emergence of a post-pandemic, post-capitalist, post-growth, more ethically conscious theatre of the future.*

Contrary to the way the mass media write about theatre (separating political theatre with a thick line from theatre that offers audiences primarily aesthetic experiences), the relation between politically engaged art and autonomous art is not dualistic. As researcher Dorota Sajewska writes, political and economic conditions provide a stimulus for change on the aesthetic and symbolic levels, and these in turn may lead to political revolution. When analysing the transformations in European theatre just after the shock caused by the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, Sajewska notes,

Every important art must consciously participate in the sociopolitical life of its own epoch, but it must do so in a manner free of any commands from outside. It should first find in itself the principles of its own existence, its own precepts (those not normalized externally) and discover its own necessity in a particular historical time.<sup>1</sup>

With all the extremely significant differences resulting from the historical context, these observations can be applied to the situation in which Polish theatre found itself at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Admittedly, the national and local authorities responsible for culture reacted quickly, suggesting a specific manner of operation, or even imposing it on the theatres and offering assistance that would enable at least partial continuity of work in the changed conditions. However, for many artists the

main question of that period was not 'how to make theatre during the lockdown', but rather 'why make theatre during the lockdown?' The most important projects created in this period were focused on searching for a fundamental principle of one's own existence, on working out new aesthetic rules – but without losing sight of theatre's institutional, economic dimension. It is out of this search that a new way of engagement, a new politicization of art, could emerge.

Lockdown has disrupted and unsealed the previously existing understanding of the key concepts in contemporary theatre. One of them is a concept of value: the pandemic has complicated the complex relationship between value in political economy and value in aesthetics, symbolic and financial capital (as defined by Pierre Bourdieu<sup>2</sup>) even more, especially in relation to the distinction between productive and reproductive work. Whereas productive work leads to the production of goods or services that have monetary value in the capitalist system and are therefore rewarded by producers in the form of wages, reproductive work is associated with the private sphere and concerns everything that people need to do for themselves and their loved ones. It raises the question: what kind of work is theatre, productive or reproductive? Or better still, what kind of work should it be in an ideal world?

The purpose of this article is to explore different ways of countering the COVID-19 pandemic in Polish theatre that were not only attempts to provide protection against the potentially lethal coronavirus, but also attempts to actively combat other 'viruses'. The most important of these was the capitalist compulsion for productivity, which for years has infected both the deepest structures of cultural institutions and interpersonal contacts (including those between artists and audiences). However, this critique was not framed in terms of an open rebellion or a dismantling of the existing structures, but played on artistic procrastination and used the work-to-rule strategy, i.e. meticulous, precise execution of duties and following the rules so closely that their absurdity is fully exposed.

The pandemic also made other problems more acute. First and foremost, was the failure to notice or even the deliberate exclusion of Others: the disabled, the elderly, women or LGBT+ people. To a certain extent (measured not only by tens of thousands of views, but also by discussions on the Internet), several Polish artists of the lockdown era (participants in the *Quarantine Project*, *Beyond #quarantine* and *DIY 2020 Masterclasses*, members of Theatre 21, Joanna Szczepkowska and Wojtek Ziemilski) have managed to draw the attention of a wider audience to these problems. During the pandemic, they practised the art of resistance in various ways, exploring different dimensions of the 'art of failure' (in the sense given to the term by Jack Halberstam<sup>3</sup>) as a resistance against neo-liberal systems. Therefore their projects can be seen as a dress rehearsal before the emergence of a post-pandemic, post-capitalist, post-growth, more ethically conscious theatre of the future.

### **Closed factories of cultural products**

The first case of COVID-19 was discovered in Poland on 4 March 2020. The decision to introduce a partial lockdown was made just a week later, on 11 March – the haste was

mainly due to the fear that the national health system would not be able to cope with the burden of the wave of illness.<sup>4</sup> It was then that cultural institutions, such as philharmonic halls, opera houses, theatres, museums, cinemas and art schools and colleges, were closed to the public. However, this did not mean a complete and immediate halt to all their activities. Although performances had been cancelled, attempts to have rehearsals for planned premieres still continued for several days; there were also attempts at performing plays to empty auditoriums and streaming them to the audience. These experiments also included broadcasting backstage tours in the closed theatres, thus introducing the audience to every nook and cranny that are normally inaccessible to them and making visible the usually hidden and underappreciated work of tailors, make-up artists, electricians, technical crews and so on. Many viewers expressed their amazement at the number of people working backstage;<sup>5</sup> therefore the value of this type of project lies in making people aware that the cultural institution is a work environment, and in the democratization of the theatre: interpersonal (if only virtual) contacts between theatre-makers and audiences became much more empathic. Later on, however, stricter lockdown rules were imposed in the country, most workplaces were closed, and people were only allowed to leave their homes in order to satisfy their basic needs. Consequently, theatre-makers were also compelled to stay at home and only contact each other via the Internet.

This situation was unprecedented in the history of Polish theatre after 1989. It was then, after the change of the political system from communist to democratic and capitalist, that the rules relating to the functioning of cultural institutions were introduced.<sup>6</sup> These rules have remained almost unchanged to this day (despite the rapid changes that have taken place in the world in the last three decades). The pandemic exposed the imperfection, anachronism and injustice of these rules. One of them states that actors working full-time in state theatres have very low basic salaries (regardless of their activity), but are paid extra for each performance (they have no control over the number of performances; they may, for instance, rehearse for a whole year and then perform only three times). Directors, playwrights, stage designers, choreographers, composers and light designers do not work full-time in theatres, effectively having the status of freelancers; as a rule, they are paid only after the premiere (and are rarely offered an advance). Even more difficult is the situation of the actors who do not have employment contracts and, of course, that of fringe theatre. Most of the artists without an employment contract do not have social and health insurance either, because the premiums for private insurance are too high.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when the lockdown was announced, many thousands lost most or all of their income as well as their sense of security overnight.<sup>8</sup>

In order to maintain continuity of financing, in the first days of the lockdown, theatres appealed to their audiences who had already purchased tickets not to return them, or even to buy vouchers on the assumption that both could be used after the end of the pandemic. Additionally, online crowdfunding campaigns were organized, asking viewers to pay whatever they could afford for streamed performances.<sup>9</sup> Of course, such solutions could only help to a minimal extent (their symbolic value was certainly greater, as the audience could show their support in this way and prove that

theatre was still important to them). What was needed was state aid and systemic solutions. The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage proposed financial benefits for artists. Alas, those were one-off payments of ridiculously low amounts, i.e. 1,800 złotys or less than four hundred euros. A system of support for artists, art institutions and groups (both state-owned and independent) was also worked out under the name *Kultura w Sieci* (Culture on the Net). In order to receive support, artists were obliged to present a plan for sharing their work online. This programme proved particularly important for theatre-makers, who, unlike writers or painters, could not sell their work any other way during the pandemic. Unfortunately, it also had its dark side: it was a competition, a constant pursuit, an artistic overproduction.

As for the vast majority of state-owned theatres (drama, puppet and musical), their activities within the programme appeared to be comparable to what was offered elsewhere in Europe. The core of the offer consisted of the streaming of existing archive recordings of performances, occasionally supplemented by discussions with the artists via video conferencing platforms. The new offers were very modest: typically, actors read poems or extracts from a novel in their homes (unsurprisingly, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* featured quite prominently – a collection of tales told by a group of young people who shelter in a secluded villa to escape the Black Death epidemic of 1348 unexpectedly had become very relevant again); at times there was also joint singing of popular songs in a Zoom choir. If those activities were to be judged from the point of view of purely formal, aesthetic values (originality, power of expression and quality of performance), the conclusion would have to be that theatre failed miserably. The more the ministry encouraged artists to burst with ideas and enthusiasm, offering something new every night to audiences in front of computer screens and smartphones, the more it became clear that the tired, underpaid, frightened and sad theatre-makers were unable to live up to these expectations. It almost amounted to cruelty to demand that they should make several hundred per cent of their pre-pandemic quota without having the necessary infrastructure or sufficient financial support, or the feedback from fellow performers and audiences that is natural for the performing arts. The capitalist market is not capable of tolerating a vacuum and downtime; theatre, being a machine for manufacturing performances, has to work all the time and at the same rhythm and pace.

As the researcher and critic Piotr Morawski noted in an article with the telling title 'We Must Slow Down', once again the triumvirate of capitalist values, such as productivity, competitiveness and visibility, triumphed over social values, such as solidarity, attentiveness, involvement and meaningful and unfeigned presence.<sup>10</sup> During the lockdown in Poland, it seemed most important to serve the deities of overproduction and excellence, in the sense that Bill Readings describes them in relation to the contemporary academy: 'All that the system requires is for activity to take place, and the empty notion of excellence refers to nothing other than the optimal input-output ratio in matters of information.'<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Marta Keil and Igor Stokfiszewski, authors of the manifesto 'Feminisation, Democracy, Labour: Towards a Socialised Cultural Institution', published before the outbreak of the pandemic, wrote, 'Public cultural institutions

operate according to the primacy of productivity and competitiveness, which turns them into competing factories of cultural products and brand prestige.<sup>12</sup>

However, lockdown meant throwing theatre-makers outside the institution's walls – literally and metaphorically. On the one hand, this exceptional situation exacerbated the various problems mentioned above. On the other hand, it finally allowed artists to look at Polish theatre from the outside. It is thus no wonder that among the hundreds of similar, secure and clichéd suggestions for lockdown theatre, there also appeared a few projects that subjected the new rules of the game to critical analysis instead of agreeing to them unquestioningly (while at the same time subjecting themselves to self-analysis).

### Against productivity, against mastery

The first unusual lockdown initiative came from Tomasz Plata, one of Poland's most important and creative curators. For years he had been devising and running thematic series in his fringe, strongly socially engaged theatre *komuna//warszawa*, to which he invited young artists from the field of the performing arts, directors, choreographers, performers, dancers, actors and filmmakers, who carried out small projects based on specific rules. The series *Re//mix* involved remixing important works of contemporary art (from Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, through *Paradise Now!* by the Living Theatre and Trisha Brown's *Accumulation*, to Jérôme Bel's *Shirtology*); Micro-theatre (*Mikroteatr*) was about making performances no longer than sixteen minutes and involving a team of no more than four people, and Macro-theatre (*Makroteatr*) was about preparing performance events lasting sixteen hours.

The *Quarantine Project* (*Projekt Kwarantanna*), which Plata organized as a collaboration between two institutions, i.e. *komuna//warszawa* and Studio Theatre (a respected medium-sized state theatre in Warsaw, with a rather progressive repertoire), was in some ways reminiscent of Micro-theatre as it, too, was meant to be a kind of exercise in self-limitation. This time, however, the self-limitation was due not only to limited financial resources, but also to strict lockdown rules. In the project descriptions, the curator announced that these would be micro-performances by the most talented artists of Polish theatre, dance and performance of the young and middle-aged generation, prepared in private flats using the simplest means. On the one hand, the objective was to be a formal experiment, and Plata made no secret of the fact that he was inspired in particular by two famous projects, *52 Portraits*, accomplished at the initiative of choreographer Jonathan Burrows, composer Matteo Fargion and video artist Hugo Glendinning, and *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*, produced by the Forced Entertainment group (both in 2016). On the other hand, funded by the ministry as part of the Culture on the Net scheme, the *Quarantine Project* was intended to provide real support for artists out of jobs who had no opportunities to make a living during the pandemic.

In formulating the principles of his project, Plata used the ministry's aid programme in a subversive way. He intercepted the lockdown rules imposed by the

state (the obligation to stay in; the prohibition of contact with people outside the household; the recommendation to buy primarily the most necessary, durable and healthy products) and implemented them with such seriousness and accuracy as to fully expose their absurdity. The project rules were:

- 1 Find a large table in your home; set it against as monochrome a background as possible.
- 2 Prepare a performance that takes place entirely on the surface of the table stage.
- 3 Film the performance with your phone or something better – if you have access to something better.
- 4 The performance should be filmed in one static shot.
- 5 There are no limitations on the duration of the performance.
- 6 Only people with whom you are currently in home quarantine can take part in the performance.
- 7 You can ask for outside help, but this can only be provided via the Internet (e.g. music sent by a befriended composer).
- 8 You may only use items from the following list as props: pasta, rice, toilet paper, flour, yeast, bread, milk, tins, frozen food, garlic, onions, vitamin C, zinc and other immunizing agents, soap, cleaning chemicals, rectified spirit.<sup>13</sup>

Within the framework of the *Quarantine Project*, twelve miniature performances were created, lasting from a few minutes to over ten minutes and streamed on the YouTube and Facebook channels. Instead of showing off excellent skills and creativity, so happily presented in the pandemic projects by actors reciting great literature in a gripping manner, ballet dancers pirouetting on balconies, or opera singers performing showpiece arias on TikTok, they were rather an admission of impotence, disappointment, fatigue and a sense of meaninglessness.

In the episode #3/*Anti-theatre*, a couple of playwrights, Agnieszka Jakimiak and Mateusz Atman, recline on a sofa watching a recording of their own performance made a few years earlier as part of the Micro-theatre series. The words from their one-time performance, criticizing the inefficient theatre system, sound particularly bitter as they seem to suggest that the pandemic may not be the main culprit behind the current state of affairs. Had the institutions been reformed, the situation during the lockdown would not have been so hopeless and would not have required resorting to panic measures. Faced with this situation, Jakimiak and Atman refuse to create – there is a sign displayed above their heads, 'Anti-theatre is not theatre ... In unproductive times, in the face of overproduction, instead of producing, they reproduce. Instead of making new, they watch old. They watch their own.' Their attitude is shared by most of the artists invited to the *Quarantine Project*. The theme as well as the structural principle of many of the performances is, as the critic Julia Kowalska aptly put it, 'an outright refusal to produce anything that would sanction the crisis and show that capitalist mechanisms can even marketize the lockdown situation'.<sup>14</sup>

The criticism of the institution resounds most poignantly in the episode #4/*Would Fancy*. Weronika Szczawińska (one of the most important directors of the younger generation) and Piotr Wawer Jr (playwright, actor and performer) call a friend of theirs, freelance actor Maciej Pesta, and ask, 'Would you fancy earning one thousand two hundred złotys now?' They show their smartphones to the camera, and the displays show the actor's mouth and eyes. 'Well, I'd love to,' replies Pesta, grateful for this unexpected financial rescue, but slightly embarrassed by the situation (Figure 1). The performance, which lasts over ten minutes, consists solely of this exchange, repeated over and over again. Thus institutional criticism is accompanied here by a call for solidarity towards artists in an even worse financial situation – as if in defiance of the competitive nature of the support scheme. It also points to the deepening differences between directors' and actors' positions (and earnings) over the years. This difference was recently exposed by the case of the celebrity director Grzegorz Jarzyna. In addition to the salary of the artistic director of the TR Warszawa theatre, he also collects remuneration for each production directed; the sum was kept secret for years. When the ensemble forced its disclosure, it turned out that an actor in this theatre must work fifteen years to earn as much as Jarzyna did from directing one performance.<sup>15</sup>

A slightly different approach to the imperative of productivity and not wasting time, which was predominant during the pandemic, was taken by Nowy Theatre (founded by director Krzysztof Warlikowski and co-managed by the city of Warsaw) in its *DIY 2020 Masterclasses* project. In this case, the straightforward capitalist ban on 'stopping the production line' was the target of criticism only to a lesser extent, with more attention to the soft violence of Internet lifestyle coaches and their commands to see the lockdown as a gift and an opportunity – a gift of unlimited time at one's disposal to indulge in self-reflection and self-care, and a chance to improve oneself by doing



FIGURE 1. Director Weronika Szczawińska, actor and dramaturg Piotr Wawer Jr and actor Maciej Pesta (whose virtual eyes and mouth on the screen overlap with Szczawińska's face) in #4/*Would Fancy*, part of the *Quarantine Project*. Screenshot from the video shared by Weronika Szczawińska.

things for which there had never been enough time, such as learning new foreign languages, dancing, physical exercise, improving your style of dressing and your ability to influence other people (which in the end is supposed to boil down to the capitalist requirement of competitiveness anyway, by improving the skills that are required in the labour market). When the virus of self-improvement took over the Internet, the Nowy Theatre's website tempted, 'During their master classes, experts from various fields will give advice on how to create something, learn something, how to spend time pleasantly and usefully.'<sup>16</sup> Within the framework of the project, eighteen online workshops were created, each lasting about half an hour. A number of people associated with Nowy Theatre and having miscellaneous competencies were invited to conduct them. Poker-faced experts gave advice and instructions, about which much could be said, but not that they would in any way improve anybody's skills required in the labour market. Admittedly, the series includes a foreign-language lesson, but it is sign language: Adam Stoyanov, who collaborates with Nowy Theatre, recorded a tutorial during which he demonstrates basic sign language phrases and explains how to make a deaf person smile. As part of her grotesque presentation, costume designer Hanka Podraza advises *How to Wrap Yourself*, i.e. how to use materials available at home to create a protective anti-COVID-19 outfit (and also an outfit for the post-capitalist, post-growth future). In his show *How to Wreak Havoc with Drag*, drag queen Gąsio teaches men skills such as sexy walking in sky-high heels and the basics of burlesque and lip-sync. Choreographer and dancer Paweł Sakowicz, instead of teaching spectacular dance moves that ensure success at a post-pandemic disco, encourages viewers to do some monotonous jumping (incidentally, the jumping motif was at the centre of his most famous performance *Jumpcore*, inspired by Fred Herko's suicidal jump).

Jędrzej Piaskowski's workshop, entitled *Funny Domestic Theatre*, is the most convincing exercise in the art of failure (in defiance of the idea of a masterclass). The director fervently sets about creating a toy theatre using a cardboard box, some porcelain figurines, a potato and a candle, only to admit at a certain point that several hours of work have not led him to any satisfactory result. The older generation of viewers will no doubt immediately recall the cult communist-era television programme *Do It Yourself*, in which the host Adam Słodowy argued that shortages of supplies, which were commonplace in the communist era, were not an obstacle; he announced that he would demonstrate how to build a lamp or a model Hoover from junk materials available at home; he showed how to glue, nail and assemble pieces of wood and sheet metal, and after half an hour or so (allegedly to save time), he produced the finished appliance from under the table. Piaskowski's performance does not end with such a triumphant *deus ex machina*. On the contrary, the artist is surprised that creating a domestic toy theatre can be much more difficult than directing a professional production on a large stage. One cannot, however, deny his disarmingly lopsided toy theatre a peculiar charm. It has something of the doll's houses made by grandparents for their grandchildren, imperfect but unique, unlike the shiny plastic sets from the malls.

It is no coincidence that instead of giving the virtual space to the stars among theatre directors and actors, in *DIY 2020 Masterclasses* it was given to people who are



less visible on a daily basis (the directors invited, Piaskowski and Magda Szpecht, are no exception because they belong to the youngest generation of Polish artists who are only just establishing themselves). They find themselves in an incomparably worse financial situation than Krzysztof Warlikowski or Krzysztof Garbaczewski, who are sought after by theatres across the world, so the support from the ministry programme helped them a lot. Equally important is the fact that their presence helps to flatten the existing hierarchies, to launch a new kind of dialogue about the purpose and meaning of theatre.

In both projects referred to above, the figure of the master, sage, prophet and demiurge (in the style of Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor or Krystian Lupa), which is still very much present in Polish theatre, has been replaced by the figure of a do-it-yourselfer and bricoleur. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, bricolage is the skill of using whatever is at hand and recombining it to create something new.<sup>17</sup> The political, anarchistic aspect of Lévi-Strauss's idea was brought out by Jacques Derrida: the bricoleur's discourse is decentred; he uses the terms without acknowledging the validity of the system that produced these ideas.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the artists taking part in the project draw heavily on the resources and ideas of Polish theatre, but not in order to affirm its values. The artists that are considered the most talented, those who are known for their diligence and commitment, deliberately presented themselves as imperfect, uncreative, powerless and unable to understand what was happening in connection with the pandemic, and thus incapable of giving advice to others and teaching them. At the same time, in their performances they resisted the bad, undemocratic practices that are present in contemporary Polish (and not only Polish) theatre: strictly hierarchical relationships, authority enforcement, exclusion of particular voices.

### Heroines of social distancing

The democratic, bottom-up-oriented (in contrast to the top-down perspective typical of professional theatres) projects of *komuna//warszawa*, Studio Theatre and Nowy Theatre were not, however, as inclusive as they might seem. Their appearance, although received with great interest and kindness from the theatre community, critics and audiences, also provoked some critical voices from artists who were in a much worse situation, being virtually invisible as people, citizens and creators also before the pandemic, and condemned to complete non-existence during it.

The vision of the pandemic as an exceptional time was challenged by four artists with disabilities, Katarzyna Helena Żeglicka, Patrycja Nosowicz, Tati Tatiana and Filip Pawlak. They recorded and shared a Facebook video entitled *Beyond #quarantine*. The title is an explicit reference to the *Quarantine Project*; the disabled artists ask their non-disabled colleagues what they can know about self-restraint, having only spent a few weeks in isolation. In a comment on the video they announce, 'We will teach you to sit at home. Many of us do it professionally!'<sup>19</sup> The video shows their bodies' struggle with space limitations, financial constraints and lack of help from other people. The artists, for whom even moving from a wheelchair onto a table in a cramped flat, not adapted to their needs, is an acrobatic feat, present choreographies with an off-screen commentary:

Dear Artists, we sit at home professionally, we are the titans of self-restraint, the problem-solving specialist, the full-time unemployed, the experts in maladies, the heroines of social distancing, the invisible participants in reality shows, the acrobats of awkwardness. We are sorry, but in many competitions we win against you. We have been exercising self-limitation for years, and we will not easily surrender our primacy.<sup>20</sup>

In a similar vein, the *Strategies for Survival* series of performances was prepared by Theatre 21, a group of professional actors with Down syndrome (the number in the name comes from the number of chromosomes) and autism. In addition to preparing artwork, keeping diaries and writing literary texts, the actors recorded a video called *The LockDown*, in which they act out authentic quotes from posts submitted by non-disabled Internet users frustrated by the pandemic restrictions. Embellishing their posts with sad or angry emoticons, Web users complained about not being able to go to a football match (preferably in their own car), attend a hipster music festival ('first time in 12 years without Open'er Festival!'), eat at a fashionable restaurant, do some luxury shopping in Dubai, or have a lavish wedding on the scheduled date; instead, they have to stay at home with annoying kids who do not go to school. 'When the lockdown is over, our actors still won't be able to have a driving licence or a bank account, or to get married. It's a good thing there is theatre',<sup>21</sup> was the final comment in the video. Apart from being a voice in the discussion about the fact that the pandemic does not mean the same thing to everyone, the film was also part of a campaign encouraging people to support the Centre of Inclusive Art, a new theatre home for people with disabilities being established in Warsaw.

An absolutely separate voice in the pandemic chorus was that of Joanna Szczepkowska, one of Poland's best-known and most respected film and theatre actresses. As a protest against violent and misogynistic practices spreading like viruses (difficult to detect and difficult to treat) in Polish culture, Szczepkowska quit her job at a state-run theatre in 2017 and set up her own Theatre Downstairs (*Teatr na Dole*), an auteur theatre in the basement of a Warsaw café where she practises something between one-woman theatre and feminist stand-up. The artist drew attention to the fact that most pandemic programmes selected artists to collaborate with in a very arbitrary manner (who, and according to what criteria, decided who were the 'most talented?') and above all closed the door to artists of older generations, a judgement which was probably being guided by unconscious ageism. Szczepkowska was right to point out that as a woman over sixty, with no formal links to any public institution and acting alone, she stands no chance against dynamic duos and trios of thirty-year-old performers, playwrights, directors and actors. Therefore she launched an ironic lockdown project called *Box Theatre (Teatr Pudło)*.<sup>22</sup>

*Box Theatre* performances involve Szczepkowska sitting inside a huge cardboard box and broadcasting by means of a cheap camera. On the one hand, this is reminiscent of the conditions of the *Quarantine Project* artists who are encouraged to impose constraints on themselves, and on the other hand the poor, ugly, wobbly box

contrasts with the trendy sofas and tables in the stylish, minimalist interiors inhabited by the young artists.

The power of the *Box Theatre* is based on the tension between Szczepkowska's acting mastery (her technique qualifies her for great roles in the classical repertoire; she has played prominent parts in plays by Shakespeare and Chekhov) and the coarse, amateurish conditions of her work. After the inaugural recording, the *Box Theatre* started broadcasting several-minute-long miniatures on a regular basis, every few days: excerpts from monodramas, poetry and prose recitations, songs and satirical sketches. Not only did the artist not hide her errors, minor or major disasters (lighting, set design, editing), but also she celebrated this peculiar 'art of failure'. In Jack Halberstam's words, Szczepkowska 'makes a detour around the usual markers of accomplishment and satisfaction'.<sup>23</sup> In the case of online performances, 'accomplishment and satisfaction' mean a professional studio, good lighting and sound, masterful editing, and polished make-up and hairstyle, but also captivating, masterful performance, and – last but not least – online exposure and feedback. The creator of *Box Theatre* not only ignores all these things but consciously suppresses her acting skills and discourages journalists from writing about her.

Szczepkowska rejected (to an even greater extent than her younger colleagues) the categories of success and originality, refusing to fit into the framework of the neo-liberal 'crisis management' which consists of constantly looking for new, creative solutions to problems on the basis of improvisation and self-improvement. However, she does not put herself in the position of a rebel and uncompromising authority, 'the only righteous' among online celebrities. Thus the researcher and critic Joanna Krakowska is right when she stresses that Szczepkowska 'has an outstanding talent for the queering of reality, twisting it in any direction, pissing everyone off, operating with embarrassment, exaggerating seriousness and refining comicality, turning weakness into strength and failure into admiration'.<sup>24</sup>

In this sense, the reception of *Box Theatre* is a continuation of the most famous and notable episode in Szczepkowska's life. On 28 October 1989, she appeared on television news and announced, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, on 4 June 1989, communism in Poland came to an end.' Although she was known for her involvement in earlier opposition activities (she supported the Workers' Defense Committee), her speech was ridiculed. As a young woman and artist, she was deemed unworthy to speak on matters of state importance; sexist journalists remarked that 'insufficiently staged little actresses' should rather recite Shakespeare. Polish researcher and critic Katarzyna Waligóra (referring to Peggy Phelan's theory) claims that Szczepkowska was punished for entering the field of visibility where only white heterosexual men can act transparently, thanks to the fact that they are marked with value from the start.<sup>25</sup> Waligóra names Szczepkowska's gesture 'an embarrassing female performance' and explains,

Embarrassing female performers consciously enter the field of visibility and are always marked in various ways by those who watch them. They are ridiculed, heroized, fetishized, downplayed, and so on. Their performances, however, consist in surprising and embarrassing the audience. Embarrassment is associated with the discomfort caused by the feeling of losing control of a situation, which violates the

process of marking – the viewer who is marking no longer knows what to expect from the performer who is being marked.<sup>26</sup>

At the Box Theatre, Szczepkowska plays with the idea of the failure of vision and visibility. This time, however, she is not 'insufficiently' but 'too well' qualified – the place of the acclaimed, senior 'grande dame of Polish theatre' is in the spotlight, on the ornate stage, reciting national poetry, not in the dark of the cardboard box, singing frivolous songs. Constantly oscillating between surprising her audience with inventiveness and wit and embarrassing them with mistakes and the abysmal technical quality of the broadcast, the actress reminds us that – in Halberstam's words – 'possibility and disappointment often live side by side'.<sup>27</sup>

### The opposite of the Matrix

Another unexpected consequence of the pandemic was the emergence of a new kind of participatory project. For a very long time, the political impact of theatre in Poland was measured by its activity, or rather its ability to activate others, who were understood in the most literal way (key words: co-creation, integration, immersion). In participatory performances by artists such as Wiktor Rubin and Jolanta Janiczak, the emphasis shifts from 'watching art' to co-creating art. This shift is achieved by such measures as, for example, breaking the stage–audience boundary: the audience is invited to the stage, comes into physical contact with the actors and makes decisions about the course of the performance.<sup>28</sup> The shortened (or even eliminated) distance between artists and viewers during the pandemic lengthened unprecedentedly. A new kind of audience emerged during the lockdown, and, as it turned out, the challenge was to invent a new type of digital co-presence and, last but not least, digital activity.

In this context it is worth mentioning Wojtek Ziemilski's project *Enter Full Screen* accomplished within the framework of the international *European Ensemble* project as a co-production of theatres: Schauspiel Stuttgart, Nowy Theatre in Warsaw and Zagreb Youth Theatre (Zagrebačko kazalište mladih). The performance was enacted in English in real time on the Zoom platform. Young actors from Poland, Germany and Croatia, as well as the audience, participated in a teleconference (although not on an equal footing). Most of the actor–performers joined in from their private flats, where they were staying because of the pan-European lockdown. Only one actor, Pole Jan Sobolewski, stayed outside. Armed with a smartphone that functions as the simplest video camera, he streamed (in a first-person perspective reminiscent of a video game) his journey through one of the communes that were declared 'LGBT-free zones' by resolutions of their extreme right-wing authorities.

Situated very close to Warsaw, the commune of Kobyłka is unremarkable: it is a tidy locality with a church, a supermarket and detached houses surrounded by gardens. Yet it is this ordinariness that is most disturbing, and watching Sobolewski (who openly identifies as homosexual) wander alone through the increasingly dark streets, accompanied by the barking of guard dogs behind fences and the suspicious glances of passers-by, arouses discomfort, and then fear for his fate. The actor repeatedly addresses other actors and the audience directly, seeking support and a sense of security; he also shows

photographs of victims of homophobic attacks beaten in the street in the months leading up to the performance. Hidden behind colourful filter masks, colleagues from other countries sympathize but 'can do nothing', which clearly shows the attitude of the European Union towards those countries where not all human rights are respected.

The analysis of *Enter Full Screen* can be built against the notions of 'outside' (stepping outside the boundaries of the theatre building) and 'outsider' (well educated, cosmopolitan, gay actor Sobolewski coming from the big capital city to a small homophobic enclave, whose community gathers around two centres: a Catholic church and a shopping mall). The emancipation of outsiders by refusing to fit into a ruling system is an important theme and postulate of the 'queer art of failure'. However, it seems that Halberstam's conclusions about the empowering potential of failure and outsiderhood are overly optimistic.

Halberstam believes that by finding themselves in the position of losers in the face of a heterosexual society endowed with visibility and power, LGBT+ people should celebrate the critical potential of losing and the power that comes from refusing to fit into the system (and gives numerous examples of 'glorious failures' from the fields of film, literature and the visual arts). It seems, however, that Polish art critic Agata Pyzik is right to note, 'The potential of failure in culture is precisely what makes it so useless in the social world.'<sup>29</sup>

Ziemilski's decision to move Sobolewski out of the safe walls of the New Theatre (where he works full-time) was primarily dictated by the lockdown. But it is a significant decision on several levels. Situated in Warsaw's affluent central district, Nowy Teatr is a world-renowned and fashionable LGBT+-friendly stage. On this stage, queer sensibilities of directors such as Krzysztof Warlikowski and Michał Borczuch or actors such as Jacek Poniedziałek could fully emerge, outsiders became stars, and their struggle for visibility played an essential role in the emancipation of LGBT+ people in Poland. Today, however, these stylish, wealthy, famous artists, travelling with their performances from New York to Avignon to Tokyo, can no longer be considered representatives of the excluded or the losers.

The uniqueness of Nowy Teatr makes it possible to forget that in conservative, ethnically and religiously homogeneous societies, such as Poland's, not only are the 'Others' a glaring minority (at least officially – for the percentage of people who have come out as LGBT+ is very small), but their quest for visibility can be life-threatening. Sobolewski is thrown into a completely alien environment and must remain an invisible guide to a world unknown to the audience. Thus Ziemilski's project can be seen as a test of Halberstam's theses under specific conditions. Art and social reality, the real and the virtual, are profoundly different areas of human activity, and measuring them with the same yardstick is difficult. The performance seems to repeat the question posed by Pyzik: how should we apply Halberstam's theories of failure to our everyday reality? Are culture and art supposed to be a constant reflection of the impossibility and failure inherent in actions of a political nature, or does the social world have to try out specific strategies on the testing ground of art?

But the inside–outside relationship is also central to theatre as such (the correlation between performers and audience), and *Enter Full Screen* disrupts this relationship

interestingly. The viewers in front of the screens have limited opportunities for physical action – they cannot accompany the delicate, defenceless, likeable Sobolewski on his lonely journey, and the weight of powerlessness is even physically felt. However, the director of the performance draws the audience into various activities offered by the Zoom platform, such as voting or filling in questionnaires (the questions concern, among other things, sexual orientation and whether the viewer believes that LGBT+ people are discriminated against in their area). At the key point in the performance, viewers are given a choice, either to turn on the cameras and show their faces in an act of solidarity with the protagonist or remain in the virtual twilight. For viewers dressed in loungewear, without make-up, often with the household clutter visible behind them, this choice proves unexpectedly difficult, perhaps more so than stepping into the spotlight from the dark audience. The conclusion is bitter: since discomfort keeps us from taking such a small step, can anyone count on us as LGBT+ allies?

Computer viewers of *Enter Full Screen* turn out to be more active than viewers of the vast majority of pre-pandemic live performances, which should not come as a surprise since it is the Internet that teaches us to be active and to co-create content. On the other hand, it is theatre that can teach us to be critical and responsible for our decisions, which is invaluable on the Internet, which provides almost unlimited access to information and almost unlimited possibilities to comment. Ziemilski draws far-reaching conclusions from these facts. His performance shows very bluntly that every personal choice made by viewers in the darkness (and freedom) of their rooms has consequences in the open public space, which in turn becomes a place of oppression for the individual (embodied here by Sobolewski).

The performance was accompanied by English-language post-show talks with all participants, gathering audiences from Chile to Iran. Such a wide audience, incomparable even to the largest international festivals, made one aware of the uniqueness of the situation. At the same time, many audience members argued that despite appearances, what everyone had just participated in was simply theatre, and one in which the three classical unities of time (Zoom), place and action still apply. At the same time, the director's notes from the beginning of the rehearsals make it clear how many doubts he had about the sense and effectiveness of such a format:

Zoom seems like a bad thing. (Close but far, human but square, normal but exhausting ...)

So we start from Zoom. And we feel awkward. Like it's a substitute that we're trying to make ours, to believe this is not just a sex doll. (Because it's not)

We want to make it bearable. Not just bearable. Cosy. And nice.

Now, stay with us: maybe it's a metaphor of Europe. Or the EU. The universal language of Europe has this awkward quality, like it's a substitute. Focus on it not being virtual.

The opposite of Matrix – there is a spoon. There is a spoon.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, the Zoom show did not turn out to be a substitute for 'normal' theatre, and the virtual tools facilitated thinking about contemporary man as a social being and studying him as a political being. Ziemilski seems to agree with Chantal Mouffe, who claims that in today's world, the division into the private 'seen as the realm of

particularity and difference' and the public sphere defined as a homogeneous universalism oriented toward consensus – into the sphere of the freedom of the individual and the duties of the citizen – is no longer valid.<sup>31</sup>

Although Ziemilski's play, which is produced in an international co-production and has a larger budget, at first glance differs from the projects mentioned above, it results from similar observations. Coronavirus is just one of the viruses plaguing society and the theatre; the combination of pandemic and turbo-capitalism (with its deepest social repercussions) is truly deadly. Polish theatre as an institution suffers from many viruses and undoubtedly requires radical treatment. However, instead of waiting for it to heal, the artists decided to take matters into their own hands, preparing performances that could act as vaccines and weaken the effects of these viruses.

### Conclusion: third phase of institutional critique

The artists involved in the *Quarantine Project* and the *DIY 2020 Masterclasses*, and Joanna Szczepkowska, could take as their patron famous Bartleby, the scrivener from Herman Melville's short story, who 'would prefer not to'. Or the philosopher Paolo Virno, claiming that 'the key to political action (or rather the only possibility of extracting it from its present state of paralysis) consists in developing the publicness of Intellect outside of Work, and in opposition to it',<sup>32</sup> and promoting the idea of Exodus understood as engaged withdrawal: 'Only those who open a way of exit for themselves can do the founding; but, by the opposite token, only those who do the founding will succeed in finding the parting of the waters by which they will be able to leave Egypt.'<sup>33</sup>

Paolo Virno's philosophy is deeply rooted in the sociopolitical context of the 1960s and 1970s. The 1960s saw the emergence of the so-called first generation of institutional critique that sought a distance from the institution. The second generation, from the 1990s, discussed the inevitable involvement in the institution. Participants in the *Beyond #quarantine* project and members of Theatre 21 show that in cases such as theirs, institutional support is essential – they cannot afford an exodus; in their case, Virno's postulates are unlikely to work.

Is there any alternative to these two modes of institutional critique? Philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig announces the advent of the third phase of institutional critique. The central concept of this phase is supposed to be the Greek term *parrhesia*, meaning 'to say everything'. Raunig claims,

What is needed here and now, is parrhesia as a double strategy: as an attempt of involvement and engagement in a process of hazardous refutation, and as self-questioning ... Here exodus would not mean relocating to a different country or a different field, but betraying the rules of the game through the act of flight: 'transforming the arts of governing' not only in relation to the institutions of the art field or the institution art as the art field, but rather as participation in processes of instituting and in political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions.<sup>34</sup>

Wojtek Ziemilski's *Enter Full Screen* performance – international, multimedia, participatory, simultaneously embedded in and transcending the institution's boundaries – seems to best fulfil Raunig's assumptions. However, all of the reviewed pandemic projects successfully linked social criticism, institutional critique and self-criticism. This link developed – in the words of Raunig – 'from the direct and indirect concatenation with political practices and social movements, but without dispensing with artistic competences and strategies, without dispensing with resources of and effects in the art field'.<sup>35</sup> Surprisingly, the COVID pandemic led to the discovery of the potential of the Internet as a tool ideally suited to the third phase of institutional critique.

## NOTES

- 1 Dorota Sajewska, *Pod okupacją mediów* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, 2012), p. 122.
- 2 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1986); Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', trans. Richard Nice, in John G. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 241–58.
- 3 See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 4 Poland was one of the first EU countries to introduce COVID-related restrictions and did so without waiting for a common EU position. By May 2021, Poland had one of the strictest lockdown policies in Europe: almost everything except hospitals, grocery shops and pharmacies were closed (schools, universities and even churches). See Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak, Agnieszka Sowa-Kofta and Ryszard Szarfenberg, *Social Protection and Inclusion Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis: Poland* (Brussels: European Commission, 2021). Some observers saw such severe restrictions as a sign of totalitarian control. Indeed, the strengthening of the abortion ban by the Polish Constitutional Court in October 2020 can hardly be considered a coincidence – it was meant to prevent demonstrations, as the government imposed the public assembly ban during the lockdown. However, despite the police action, mass demonstrations took place across the country – the largest protests in Poland since the political changes in 1989. At the same time, numerous demonstrations by entrepreneurs and farmers who disagreed with the lockdown policy took place. In July 2021, the Supreme Court decided that the ban on the organization of and participation in assemblies had been introduced without due legal basis. See Aldona Domańska, 'Constitutionality of Restrictions on Freedom of Assembly during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poland', *Białystok Legal Studies*, 2 (2022), pp. 147–61. Yet it is difficult to see the rapid closure of the theatres as a political gesture – even though the conservative, right-wing government has been in ideological conflict with (usually left-wing) Polish artists for years. In reality, the lockdown and loss of earning capacity have primarily worsened the situation of commercial, conservative and non-political theatres (puppet, comedy, musical). Progressive, politically engaged theatres (such as Krzysztof Warlikowski's Nowy Theatre) operate on a European rather than a national level, as most of their premieres are international co-productions. Thus their financial situation has remained more stable. See Jacek Cieślak, 'Pandemiczna katastrofa teatru', *Teatr*, 6 (2002), at <https://teatr-pismo.pl/7769-pandemiczna-katastrofa-teatru/> (accessed 3 October 2022); the annual report of Nowy Theatre (2020–1 season), at [https://nowyteatr.org/public/upload/files/RAPORT\\_FINAL.pdf](https://nowyteatr.org/public/upload/files/RAPORT_FINAL.pdf) (accessed 3 October 2022).
- 5 See Anna Buchner, Katarzyna Fereniec-Błońska, Katarzyna Kalinowska and Maria Wierzbička, eds., *Obecność teatrów w przestrzeni online w trakcie pandemii* (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2021).
- 6 See Paweł Płoski, 'Theatre Organization System in Poland', *Polish Theatre Journal*, 3–4, 1–2 (2017), at <https://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/118/595> (accessed 25 June 2022); and



- Monika Kwaśniewska, 'The Actor in the Deadlock of Contemporary *Folwark* Relations', *Polish Theatre Journal*, 3–4, 1–2 (2017), at <https://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/108/574> (accessed 25 June 2022).
- 7 See Dorota Buchwald, 'Institution: the Defence of Necessity', *Polish Theatre Journal*, 3–4, 1–2 (2017), at <https://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/124/599> (accessed 25 June 2022).
- 8 See Dorota Ilczuk, ed., *Artystki i artyści teatru w czasach COVID-19* (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2021).
- 9 For example, a group of actors from Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw produced an online performance of Shakespeare's *Richard III* thanks to funds from the Polish crowdfunding platform Zrzutka. See <https://zrzutka.pl/xtsjy5> (accessed 28 June 2022).
- 10 Piotr Morawski, 'Musimy zwolnić', *Dwutygodnik*, 3 (2020), at [www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/8826-musimy-zwolnic.html](http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/8826-musimy-zwolnic.html) (accessed 1 April 2022).
- 11 Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 39.
- 12 Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Marta Keil and Igor Stokfiszewski, 'Feminisation, Democracy, Labour: Towards a Socialised Cultural Institution', *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, English issue 3 (2020), at <https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/feminisation-democracy-labour-towards-socialised-cultural-institution> (accessed 20 June 2022).
- 13 See <https://archiwum.teatrstudio.pl/pl/aktualnosci/projekt-kwarantanna> (accessed 3 April 2022). Recordings of all the performances can also be found at this address.
- 14 Julia Kowalska, 'Żeby już nie żałować tego, jak będzie kiedyś', *Didaskalia: Gazeta Teatralna*, 2020, at <https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artukul/zeby-juz-nie-zalowac-tego-jak-bedzie-kiedys> (accessed 3 April 2022).
- 15 See Dawid Karpiuk, 'Upadanie', *Newsweek* 27 (2022), <https://e-teatr.pl/upadanie-27172> (accessed 20 June 2022).
- 16 See <https://nowyteatr.org/pl/cykle/zrob-to-sam-2020> (accessed 8 April 2022).
- 17 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. uncredited (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966).
- 18 See Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278–93.
- 19 See [www.facebook.com/filip.pawlak.33/videos/2807973012583608](http://www.facebook.com/filip.pawlak.33/videos/2807973012583608) (accessed 11 April 2022).
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 See [www.facebook.com/teatr21/videos/671136120101432](http://www.facebook.com/teatr21/videos/671136120101432) (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 22 See [www.facebook.com/joanna.szczepkowska.14/videos/2875304942506325](http://www.facebook.com/joanna.szczepkowska.14/videos/2875304942506325) (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 23 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 186.
- 24 Joanna Krakowska, 'Pudło, czyli co nas nie zabije', *Dialog*, 9 (2002), at [www.dialog-pismo.pl/w-numerach/pudlo-czyli-co-nas-nie-zabije](http://www.dialog-pismo.pl/w-numerach/pudlo-czyli-co-nas-nie-zabije) (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 25 See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 26 Katarzyna Waligóra, "'Are You Very Stupid or Very Intelligent?'" Joanna Szczepkowska and the Embarrassing Performance of Announcing the End of Communism', *Didaskalia: Gazeta Teatralna*, English issue 3 (2020), at <https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/are-you-very-stupid-or-very-intelligent> (accessed 3 October 2022).
- 27 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 105.
- 28 As curator Anna Lewanowicz wrote, 'Polish performing and visual arts in recent years more often do not just treat the viewer as a passive recipient. Many projects are being developed in non-institutional spaces to take advantage of the context and to experiment with strategies of viewer reception. There is talk of a socially engaged art, community-based art, dialogic art, participatory and collaborative work – all being described as "relational practices"'. See Anna Lewanowicz, 'Changing Audience Participation in Polish Contemporary Art', at <https://culture360.asef.org/magazine/changing-audience-participation-polish-contemporary-art> (accessed 30 June 2022).
- 29 Agata Pyzik, 'Pozorna sztuka porażki', *Szum*, at <https://magazynszum.pl/pozorna-sztuka-porazki> (accessed 4 October 2022).
- 30 See <https://nowyteatr.org/en/kalendarz/enter-full-screen> (accessed 15 April 2022).
- 31 Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 71.

- 32 Paolo Virno, 'Virtuosity and Revolution. The Political Theory of Exodus', in Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 189–209, here p. 195.
- 33 Ibid., p. 196.
- 34 Gerald Raunig, 'Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming', *Transversal Texts*, 1 (2006), at <https://transversal.at/transversal/0106/raunig/en> (accessed 3 October 2022).
- 35 Ibid.

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