

## Lech Raczak: In Memoriam

ON 17 JANUARY 2020, Lech Raczak, one of the greatest Polish theatre artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as a theoretician, animator, and teacher, left us forever at the age of seventy-four.

His understanding of theatre can be summarized with a quotation from his essay, written in 1972:

Work in the theatre . . . is a kind of autopenetration. It is a constant search for what is unconscious and presumed . . . It is the search for the truth about oneself and the transmission of this truth to others, so that they may . . . get to know themselves better and become aware of their own abilities.

This is also the moral and cognitive mission of the theatre. Because it can, through realizing the role and capabilities of the individual, assessing people and facts, [and] giving an example, accelerate the necessary changes.<sup>1</sup>

He was a co-founder of The Theatre of the Eighth Day (1964), its leader from 1968 to 1993, leader of the Sekta (Sect) Theatre (1993–5), director of the Polish Theatre (1995–8), artistic director of the International Theatre Festival Malta (1993–2012), and leader of the Third Theatre (2013–20). All of these institutions were based in Poznań.

At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, The Theatre of the Eighth Day under Raczak's leadership developed an original version of expressive political theatre: it was deeply experienced, artistically processed, intellectually profound, and well embedded in collective emotions. The best performance created by them at that time was perhaps *In One Breath* (1971), which established the position of The Theatre of the Eighth Day within the student theatre movement and in Polish theatre as a whole.

The main discovery in the development of this kind of theatre was the combination of the

archetypal penetration of a human being modelled on the practice of Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre with 'violating social taboos', that is, saying 'what was not publicly discussed', because either unwelcome to the Communist authorities of the Polish People's Republic or else banned by them.<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-1970s, The Theatre of the Eighth Day completely changed its personnel and transformed into a community that created a revolutionary cultural milieu in opposition to mainstream cultural systems, both Communist and Catholic. Here theatre-making integrated the individual aspirations of community members, and this unique interpersonal experience resulted in an original and very radical kind of collective creation based on collective improvisations. The imperatives of team co-creation and co-responsibility were brought here to the extreme – hard to imagine, even for professionals.

Raczak had repeatedly stressed that his role as an observer-inspirer and analyst-co-creator of a composition in The Theatre of the Eighth Day was much more demanding than the role of the director in traditional drama theatre:

It's a stronger experience. Although work is more difficult . . . Because while composing material out of improvisations in The Theatre of the Eighth Day, I had the feeling of creating a coherent world out of chaos, without having to respect the structure and the message of the literary pattern (or literary inspiration) for the performance.<sup>3</sup>

With this working method, the Poznań group created several performances that became masterpieces of the twentieth-century Polish theatre canon: *Sale for Everyone* (1977); *Oh, Have We Lived in Dignity* (1979); *More than*

*One Life* (1981); *Wormwood* (1985); and *No Man's Land* (1991).

In the second half of the 1970s and into the 1980s, this ensemble was a leading group of the Polish experimental theatre, as well as a legend of the democratic, anti-Communist opposition and one of its symbols. Its uncompromising attitude towards the authorities of the Polish People's Republic provoked a series of severe persecutions, which included a ban on a touring abroad and the censorship of positive reviews.

This group now found a new formula for street theatre, the most original examples of which were *Report from the Besieged City* (inspired by poems by Zbigniew Herbert, 1983), *Miracles and Meat* (1984), and *Meat* (1989). The Theatre of the Eighth Day departed from the joyful fairy-tale and entertainment performances that prevailed in street theatre at the time, in favour of performances with an existential and political message meant to shock, whose content referred to everyday oppression.

Younger groups followed this discovery – Teatr Biuro Podróży, Teatr Usta Usta Republika (Mouth to Mouth Republic), Teatr A Part – becoming 'classics' of street theatre. Echoes can also be heard in many street creations of the Teatr Snów (Theatre of Dreams) and Theatre KTO.

Between 1984 and 1986, the Poznań group – condemned by the authorities to operate in the underground as 'second-cycle theatre' – created a unique phenomenon on a global scale, which its members called 'the avant-garde folk theatre'. Its foundations were created during The Theatre of the Eighth Day's performances in churches, when the inexperienced audience responded flawlessly to difficult, non-narrative action thanks to the rebellious attitude that connected the audiences with the actors. Raczak left The Theatre of the Eighth Day in 1993, confiding it to his long-time 'comrades-in-arms'.

Raczak co-created the Malta International Theatre Festival in Poznań. The Theatre of the Eighth Day supported the organizers of the first and second festival years, providing them with international contacts from the period of

its forced emigration marked by wandering around Europe (1985–90). From 1993 until 2012, Raczak was the artistic director of the festival – one of the main authors of its huge success.

During 2003–17, Raczak closely cooperated with the Modjeska Theatre in Legnica, producing eight excellent works of which the most successful was *Time of Terror*, based on the drama *The Rose* by Stefan Żeromski (2010).

In 2013, he created The Third Theatre in Poznań, and its outstanding *The Smolensk Conspiracy* (2014), which was devoted to the consequences of the tragic plane crash that killed the President of Poland in 2010; *Oh, Have We Lived . . .* (2014); and *Journeys through Dreams. And Returns* (2016) – all three of which were based on his own scripts – as well as Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo* (2014) and *Forefathers' Eve* (2015), based on the drama by Adam Mickiewicz. Raczak's two most personal and most moving creations with The Third Theatre – *Oh, Have We Lived . . .* and *Journeys through Dreams. And Returns* – openly referred to Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death.

As far as his writings on the theatre were concerned, Raczak undoubtedly had outstanding literary talent. His miniature prose sparkled with sophisticated irony; it also contained the distant – although not always forgiving – reflections by the Sage about people, facts, and strange, surprising twists of fate.

His texts on theatre – even those among them that were ad hoc, arising from the needs of the moment – contained important reflections on the rapid changes experienced by Polish and world theatre in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

Raczak received many important awards. During Martial Law in Poland, he and The Theatre of the Eighth Day received the Cultural Award from the underground Solidarity movement (1983); the Konrad Swinarski Award (awarded by the editors of the monthly *Teatr*, 1994); the Artistic Passport award from the weekly *Polityka* for participating in the organization of the Malta

Festival in Poznań; the Witkiewicz Award from the Polish ITI Centre (2008); the Medal for Cultural Merits Gloria Artis (awarded by the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art, 2012) and the Artistic Award from the City of Poznań (2018). He attained important achievements abroad, especially in Italy, his second homeland.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, it is necessary to add that Lech Raczak formed many people, thanks to his way of life, his creativity, and his teaching (he was a lecturer at the Poznań University of the Arts from 2003 to 2018), writing, performing, reflecting, talking, joking . . .

This was enough for more than one life.

## Notes and References

1. Lech Raczak, 'Mój teatr studencki' ('My Student Theatre'), in *Szaleństwo i metoda: 48 tekstów o teatrze (Madness and Method: 48 Texts on Theatre)* (Poznań, 2012), p. 34.

2. Raczak's words are from an interview with Monika Mazurkiewicz on 16 May 1992.

3. A fragment of Raczak's letter to Juliusz Tyszka, in Lech Raczak, *Więcej niż jedno życie: Kreacje zbiorowe Teatru Ósmego Dnia 1977–1985: Post-zapisy (More than One Life: Collective Creations by The Theatre of the Eighth Day: Post-records)* (Poznań: City Editorial House Posnania, 2012), p. 9.

4. See especially 'Some Remarks on the So-called Political Theatre', 'Theatre without Drama', 'Political and Artistic', 'Theatre in Dangerous Places', 'Winded, Sweaty, by the Floor', 'Two Avant-gardes', 'On the Longing in the Time of the Monologue', and 'Madness and Method' (all in *Madness and Method*).

5. In 1984 he married Daria Anfelli, an Italian actress, director, screenwriter, and theatre critic.