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The Renewal of the Twenty Years in Theater: Revisions Based on *The Danton Case* by Stanisława Przybyszewska from 2008

Teatralne dwudziestolecie od nowa –
rewizje oparte na inscenizacjach
Sprawy Dantona Stanisławy Przybyszewskiej z 2008 roku

Abstract: The article results from the author's participation in a project proposing interdisciplinary perspectives on contemporary revisions of the interwar period (1918–1939), including the interwar period in theater. The change in the way of interpreting the culture of this period was presented by the author using the examples of two 2008 productions of Stanisława Przybyszewska's *Danton's Case*, staged by important directors active after 1989: Jan Klata (Teatr Współczesny in Wrocław) and Paweł Łysak (Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz). This makes it possible to bring to the fore not the monumental theater of Leon Schiller, built on Polish Romanticism as a continuation of the freedom tradition, but on a program of rejected – both in the 1930s and during the communist period – leftist ideas, important for socio-cultural progress. The mentioned stage production of the twenty-first century draw attention to the current of aesthetic-political engagement in Polish interwar theater, and inscribe this theme in the program of dismantling earlier theatrical hierarchies built on the concept of a national community united by Romantic myth. Despite the fact that Stanisława Przybyszewska was not part of the feminist movement, the renewal of the meanings and form of her drama can be linked today, firstly, to the appreciation of her as an important voice of a politically and socially conscious author, proposing Brechtian-style theater, and secondly, to the revision of the twentieth century seen anew as a moment of women's attempt at breaking the masculocentric order of social life.

Keywords: theatre, revolution, interwar period, Stanisława Przybyszewska

Abstrakt: Artykuł jest efektem udziału autorki w projekcie proponującym interdyscyplinarne spojrzenia na współczesne rewizje dwudziestolecia międzywojennego, w tym dwudziestolecia w teatrze. Zmianę w sposobie interpretowania kultury tego okresu autorka przedstawiła na przykładzie dwóch przedstawień *Sprawy Dantona* Stanisławy Przybyszewskiej z 2008 roku, zainscenizowanych przez ważnych reżyserów działających po 1989 roku: Jana Klatę (Teatr Współczesny we Wrocławiu) oraz Pawła Łysaka (Teatr Polski w Bydgoszczy). Prezentowane studium przypadku proponuje ujęcie koncepcji teatru publicznego opowieści o mikrologiczne; artykuł opiera się na wnioskach Krystyny Duniec i podejmuje idee jej monografii *Dwudziestolecie. Przedstawienia* z 2017 roku. Pozwala to wysunąć na plan pierwszy nie monumentalny teatr Leona Schillera, budowany na polskim romantyzmie jako kontynuacji tradycji wolnościowej, lecz

na programie odrzuconych – zarówno w latach 30. XX wieku, jak i w okresie PRL-u – lewicowych idei, ważnych dla społeczno-kulturowego postępu. Wspomniane inscenizacje XXI wieku zwracają uwagę na nurt zaangażowania estetyczno-politycznego w polskim teatrze międzywojennym, wpisują ten temat w program demontażu wcześniejszych, dwudziestowiecznych hierarchii teatralnych budowanych na koncepcji narodowej wspólnoty scalanej mitem romantycznym. Mimo że Stanisława Przybyszewska nie należała do ruchów feministycznych, odnawianie znaczeń i formy jej dramatu może być dziś związane, po pierwsze, z docenieniem w jej wypowiedziach ważnego głosu świadomej politycznie i społecznie autorki, proponującej teatr w stylu brechtowskim, a po drugie, z rewizją widzianego na nowo dwudziestolecia międzywojennego jako momentu dochodzenia do głosu kobiet przełamujących męskocentryczny porządek życia społecznego.

Słowa klucze: teatr, rewolucja, dwudziestolecie międzywojenne, Stanisława Przybyszewska

The New Twenty Years

In the year 2012, the project “Public Theater. Performances” was initiated at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute in Warsaw: it covered the history of performances and the history of the depiction of public affairs from 1765 (the founding of the National Theatre in Warsaw) onwards. As part of the project Krystyna Duniec published *Dwudziestolecie. Przedstawienia* (The Twenty Years. Performances) (Duniec, 2017). In brief, in her view, this period was a time of freedom, emancipation, and awakened aspirations, but simultaneously, a time of struggle against Polish nationalism and xenophobia. The teatrological vision proposed in the volume focuses on details and specifics because of the author’s approach that recognizes the value of microhistory.

A year after Duniec’s publication, in an introduction (Kordjak, 2018) to the book that accompanied the *The Future Will Be Different* exhibition held at Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, entitled *Glass Houses: Visions and Practices of Social Modernisation after 1918*, Joanna Kordjak similarly referred to the topic of the culture of the interwar period. She pointed out, as the author of the conception and the curator, that “rewriting” the history of the interwar period today should be done from the perspective of the “other,” that is, previously excluded groups – women, children, physical workers, and folk circles. Moreover, both Duniec and Kordjak shared the opinion that the inconclusive assessments

of the period required revisions. This was because, earlier, those assessments had either been falsified by the politically oriented establishment at the time of the People's Republic of Poland or mythologized by the intelligentsia, who longed for the lost independent Poland from before the Second World War.

By following the context of revisionist thinking about both modern theater and the culture of the twenty-year interwar period, my approach fits in with the above mentioned synthetically described agendas. On the one hand, the main idea is to look at the changes in Polish theater that took place after 1989 and that concerned the rethinking of public affairs “here and now,” as well as the problematization of the question of regained independence. On the other hand, it is to see how, today, the theater revises and disassembles the twenty years of theater from 1918 to 1939 and how this process can be seen against the background of changes in the scientifically created orders of historical thinking. However, I do not want to disregard the specificities of performance itself, so I will address two adaptations of the same drama *The Danton Case* by Stanisława Przybyszewska, both from 2008. The two performances – one directed by Paweł Łysak and the other by Jan Klata – can be read as different ways of dealing with historical and political issues, and as two attempts to place the text originating from the interwar period within a new interpretive framework. I would like to use the micrological perspective adopted by Duniec to analyze what can be said when using a particular example. All the more so because, in her monograph on the author of *The Danton Case*, Duniec had almost entirely excluded Przybyszewska, in fact, the playwright's name was mentioned only once. While extracting ideas about right-wing thinking that was antithetical to theatrical experiments and left-wing authors, Duniec quite rightly quotes a statement by Antoni Słonimski, in which he referred to the “case” of Stanisława Przybyszewska during her theatrical debut in a highly condescending way:

Shortly before the premiere of *Rodzina Słonimski*, in a review of Stanisława Przybyszewska's *The Danton Case*, staged at the Teatr Polski (...), attacked

her for her totalitarian inclinations: “This Robespierre, smelling faintly of Hitlerism, would be in his place – if not with Soviets, then definitely in today’s Germany. Where did you wander, poor Marxist, with your anxiety about humanitarianism, this human obstacle, standing in the way of an impatient revolution?” (Duniec, 2017: 372)

In a sense, the chauvinistic tone of this judgment, pointing to the “troublesome for society” case of Przybyszewska, is not surprising, since Stanisław Przybyszewski had already written to Jadwiga Kaspro-wiczowa in 1920: “As an illegitimate child and, due to her terrible misfortune, a highly educated child in a free and independent Poland, she found herself in a worse position than a Jew” (Fik, 1975: 127).

Regarding theater, what I propose is an attempt to place Stanisława Przybyszewska’s work – the author’s inconvenient (also for her own father) oeuvre – a body of work that is representative of the twenty-year period, right at the intersection of the various tensions that create the vision of the epoch, which she makes us aware of in a very symptomatic way. In a sense, Przybyszewska embodies the status of a “lowly being” (an abandoned orphan from an illegitimate relationship) in a class-stratified society; she represents poverty (including her material situation), however, at the same time, she embodies the emancipation of both women and artists, not backwardness.¹ I want to consider the following questions: Did stage interpretations of the historical drama contribute to a change in the perception of the position of this writer from the interwar period and, at the same time, to a different evaluation of the dramatic legacy and theater of that time? Furthermore, by using this particular drama, did the theater artists manage to create a model for modern political theater? Moreover, what impact could the theat-

¹ Biographical problems related to the fate of Przybyszewska have been hinted at in important publications: Introduction to *The Danton Case. Thermidor. Two Plays*, trans. B. Taborski, with Introduction by D. Gerould, Northwestern University Press, Illinois, 1989; J. Kosicka, D. Gerould (eds.), *A life of Solitude. Stanisława Przybyszewska: a biographical study with selected letters*, Northwestern University Press, Illinois, 1989.

rical concretizations of this specific text have on the discussion about modern Polish political theater, as well as on the reassessment of the idea that was originally presented by this artist with her left-wing worldview – a worldview that, today, is understood in a different way than it was in the time of the People's Republic of Poland?

The Case of Przybyszewska in the People's Republic of Poland: Renewal

Since the contemporary stage reception of Stanisława Przybyszewska's drama did not appear in Krystyna Duniec's overview of the twenty-year period, it is worth recalling it briefly, the more so because the first two stage productions of this text had already proved the unusual dialectical meaning of the work. Przybyszewska completed *The Danton Case* in March 1928, but it was not until the beginning of 1931 that work on its staging began at Teatr Wielki in Lviv. It was directed by Edmund Wierciński, despite Przybyszewska's protests, who wished only Leon Schiller to implement her stage vision. The second production was staged in Warsaw in 1933 at Teatr Polski, Aleksander Zelwerowicz having been its *regisseur*. However, the second performance became entangled in the Sanation's political games, which was paradoxical, considering the previously mentioned opinion of Słonimski and the views of Przybyszewska herself. The play was perceived as an attempt to rehabilitate Józef Piłsudski after he had the political activists from the Centrolew detained in Brest. As Roman Szydlowski wrote: "A parallel was suggested between the motives that prompted Robespierre to arrest Danton and the motives that prompted Piłsudski to arrest opposition MPs" (Szydlowski, 1967: 134).

Before I attempt to define the role of her play from the perspective of the two productions of *The Danton Case* in 2008, I cannot help but outline Przybyszewska's standing in the culture of the People's Republic of Poland, which appreciated the various qualities of her writing. The

unpublished drama was staged in 1967. What was characteristic of the constant ambivalence of her situation – regarding not only her life but also her artistic reception – was the fact that despite having been recognized as a communism-oriented intellectual, thanks to the two productions – first by Jerzy Krasowski, and then by Andrzej Wajda (1975) – a historical drama telling the story of events from the distant past was interpreted as an attempt to show the social, existential, and biographical complications that each revolution or political turn had brought. After Krasowski's and Wajda's respective productions, it was noted that Przybyszewska, as a woman had written a "male drama"; this evaluation was supposed to be ennobling for the author. This process was summed up and critically analyzed in an excellent way by Marta Fik in her article published in 1975 in *Twórczość* (Fik, 1975). As Przybyszewska was discovered through theater at the end of the 1960s and as critics had discussed her position, it is not surprising that Andrzej Wajda proposed her play for the opening of the Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw and staged the drama with outstanding roles by Wojciech Pszoniak as Robespierre, and Bronisław Pawlik as Danton. Wajda's second creation was a production made at the beginning of the 1980s in Teatr Wybrzeże in Gdańsk, in which the artist, according to the reviewers, used spectacular asceticism as a backdrop to the outstanding performances by the actors. In his stage readings of the play and later on in the movie version, Wajda appreciated the value of Przybyszewska's original drama, but, characteristically, he did not follow her emphasis on idealizing Robespierre as a ruthless leader devoted to revolution who subordinated his being to social progress. Wajda's three productions differed from one another. In the last one, the film, he turned away radically from the possibility of seeing Robespierre positively; this was due to political circumstances and resulted from the fact that the topic of the revolution was to be shown to the French public. Gerard Depardieu who played the part of Danton, according to many critics, personified the tribune of the people, which Wajda had witnessed in the figure of Lech Wałęsa, when the Polish workers' Solidarity movement had been gaining its momentum (Szturc, 2017).

Yet, was it possible back then to create political theater by an involved theatrical reading of the play? Opinions are divided here; they view the theatrical practice of the period of the People's Republic of Poland through the lens of today's interpretations of it. Grzegorz Niziołek denied it the status of truly engaged theater that would be responsible for building ties with the public and influencing social choices (Niziołek, 2022: 275–290). Psychological theater that analyzes the mechanisms of revolution and the theater of political allusion, are not fully recognized as such, that is, according to the concepts of engaged theater formulated by playwright Demirski and theater in the Piscatorian or Brechtian style (Kościelniak, 2022: 374–387). Therefore, it can be presumed that only after 1989 did stage productions stand a chance to use this text as a politically vital show that would attack not only the aesthetic sense and, albeit depicting history, would also shape current social positions of the audience.

The Danton Case as a "Common Task"

One may suppose that the directors of the two stage adaptations of *The Danton Case* from 2008 intended to take on the dramatic model created by Przybylska to analyze the reality after the political change of 1989, which did not result in stable political circumstances, but rather lead to new socio-political challenges and dangers, including the threat of populism. Both, Łysak's and Klata's, performances were staged in the first months of the PO [Civic Platform] party's rule, which occurred after the fall of the government following the ruling PiS [Law and Justice] party's resignation, whose political formation had tried to shape the conditions of a pseudo-democracy in a biased and populist manner. Still, both performances were not uncritical of the new liberal power or the new political order but especially Paweł Łysak's production, which allowed the audience to participate in the acting, not only manifested the threat of political terror but also tried to create engaging theater.

From the very beginning of Łysak's activity in the provincial theater in Bydgoszcz – the profile of which he wanted to change and revolutionize – he declared that he was interested in an interactive dialogue with the audience and, above all, in regaining the audience's participation in the theater by addressing plays to wider circles of the public (Kowalczyk, 2011: 118–123). In the program for Łysak's performance, it was declared that the authors had taken up the drama's subject of revolution because it directly related to the current political conditions in Poland, and was in reference to the tensions between liberals, nationalists, and the remnants of the old regime; and between a hard-handed policy constantly sliding towards terror, and polished, flexible policy.

The Marseillaise theme of a modernized arrangement by Paweł Mykietyn had been incorporated already in the opening of the performance, which begins in the foyer where actors, audience, and extras gather. The various scenes of the play transpire at the same time, with the action overlapping, and the viewers are engaged in searching for their own point of view – they peer closely at the actors in dialogue, is questioned, and encouraged to react directly. In the first part of the performance, the audience is served bread, sausages, and mugs of wine; so, literally, the atmosphere at a rally for quasi-elections is created. References to Erwin Piscator's stage performance as well as its relations with the present day, were instantly seen in Łysak's production – and in accordance with the postulations of Schiller's engaged theater, although not from the time of his monumental performances or staging of Romantic dramaturgy, but in relation to the convention of the fact-montages he created (Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, 2015: 14–15). The producers managed to create an entirely new situation in which the audience merged with the actors, and in which the text was included in the mechanisms of democracy. The performance did not so much present the specific theses of the director's political stance but urged the viewers to formulate their own views. It was pointed out that the actors guided the audience through the intricacies of the revolution and the dispute, and thanks to this they could work out which option to choose. However, the actors' creations were quite explicit, sometimes caricatured; Łysak's Robespierre (M. Czachor)

and Danton (M. Łasowski) both gave the impression of being blasé players, representatives of particular party interests, and pursuing their own goals related to the ruthless maintenance of power.

Appreciating the political potential of the play, Joanna Krakowska said:

The Danton Case by Łysak is one of the best portraits of populism I have happened to see so far. It showed clearly the mechanisms that drive us in public situations, rallies, and during political quarrels. By revealing the techniques of crowd manipulation, it distances itself ideologically from each of the conflicted parties, leaving the decision in this matter in our hands.²

The audience communicating its decisions and influencing the course of the play was an indispensable part of the performance and was intended to have a wider impact, that is, to mobilize the attention of a large group of viewers so that, in the future, they would understand the meaning of their own choices in political reality. Shortly after the production of this performance, Paweł Łysak became the director of the Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw. He created an important cultural space there and co-organized the creative milieu, which, according to the theatre's mission statement, interferes with social matters and puts them into the milieu's own hands.

Undoubtedly, the critical theater of Jan Klata took yet another direction in interpreting Przybyszewska's drama. Klata was especially interested in the revolution and its historical functions, also in the context of the Polish transformation of '89, about which he produced the play *H.*, that is, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, at the Gdańsk Shipyard – also examined this theme in *The Shoemakers at the Gates* based on Witkacy's drama *The Shoemakers*. The director was interested in seeing the transformation in Poland not as a mythology of freedom but as a form of brutal revolution, with the slums, the Warsaw bazaar at Stadion Dziesięciolecia,

² Potęga kontekstu, J. Jaworska, J. Krakowska, C. Morawski et al. (discussion), "Dialog", July–August 2009, <https://e-teatr.pl/potega-kontekstu-a78568/> [access: 12.08.2023].

and the fledgling consumerism that did not free society from post-socialist poverty, but, on the contrary, rather introduced new threats of pauperization that came hand in hand with the exclusion of those who found themselves unemployed due to the effects of the capitalistic and predatory restructuring of industry in provinces. In an interview from 2007, Klata himself – writing about “the Fourth Republic of Poland” (a political slogan used by PiS) and its populist inclinations – berated Jarosław Kaczyński, calling him “Robespierre,” and seeing in his attitude a betrayal of the ideals of the Solidarity tradition. Fortunately, the performance did not use such literal and unambiguous code and it turned out to be much more interesting in its form and meaning: critical of the current state of politics but esthetically refined. Scenography, music, and actors’ performances all played very important roles: barracks appeared in the theater space, and elements of damaged cardboard forms were scattered on the stage at Świebodzki station (part of the Teatr Polski in Wrocław), which the audience entered through backstage. Klata humanized Robespierre: a tall and slender actor (M. Czarnik) with a gray, disheveled wig on his head, dressed all in black, turned out not to be much of a Robespierre, as he distanced himself from those traits usually exposed by the character. Describing his intentions, Klata said that he saw the political situation in such a way that several years had passed since the revolution, by which he meant the transformation of ’89, but one still felt that there was no end to it: “We ask whether stopping the changes means their betrayal, whether the political leader should be a visionary that brings society to the brink of risk, or rather a demagogue who flatters and pampers society” (Cieślak, 2008). Grotesquely depicting revolution, disarming the discursiveness of the drama with carnival tricks – a little like from cabaret or entertainment theater – did not tear down the image of the horror of political breakthroughs, especially in the final scenes, when crazy and dangerous Robespierre entered the stage with a chainsaw. Klata had found a historical text suitable for critical and engaged theater. As he believed, to understand the essence of political changes and turns, one should refer to their basic matrix – the French Revolution, which was, in his opinion, the first project for

rebuilding civilization that was fully carried out. The show, however, did not suggest ready-made conclusions or solutions to political dilemmas. Instead, it was supposed to draw the participants into a “political séance” out of their passive stances in social life toward possible, projected activity. The production ended with a monstrous close-up of Robespierre’s face asking, “what have you done with your freedom?” Przybyszewska’s drama thus became anchored in the reality of Poland in 2008. It became a mirror offered to the audience, or rather two mirrors for two important productions.

Polish – Secular, Not Catholic

Dwudziestolecie. Przedstawienia by Krystyna Duniec opens with the chapter *Polish-Catholic*. The first part of the monograph consists of a critical assessment of the theater, which, along with the dominant political tendency of a reborn Poland, sided with the Catholic Church – seen as the foundation of Polishness and as the bedrock of its statehood – in order to evolve towards a concept that, following Roman Dmowski’s views, emphasized that Catholicism was not an addition to but the essence of Polishness. From this point of view, the position of the Stanisława Przybyszewska was excluded, and her thinking about history based on secular prerogatives and not burdened with the messianic-Romantic paradigm in which God or Providence decides the fate of the nation, seemed difficult to accept. For Przybyszewska, the strength of Poland was not the army, its Romantic tradition, or the cult of the Slavdom, but the progress brought about by enlightened individuals promoting ideas about society and freedom. Nonetheless, Polonization through Catholicization is shown in a critical light in Krystyna Duniec’s monograph and the author also polemically refers to the concept that the Romantic words used in theater built a unified community capable of resisting the past and creating strategies of resistance during the war and the communist period. She argues with the thesis stating

that “the messianic Romantic tradition was [therefore] the superior integrating value at the threshold of independence” (Duniec, 2017: 39). Przybyszewska may be seen as an exception, a writer who is very attractive to today’s engaged audiences because she was not concerned with the “Romantic fixation of Polish culture and the messianic complex of Polish politics that inhibits the potential of modernizing forces in a free country” (Duniec, 2017: 39). Her personal cult of Robespierre may be opposed to the kind of thinking that sees the salvation of the nation through individual martyrdom and her theater stands in opposition to the kind of thought, like, for example, Juliusz Osterwa’s about the *Książę niezłomny* (*The Constant Prince*) by Pedro Calderón de la Barca/Juliusz Słowacki. For Przybyszewska, the reality of the idea was not based on “angelization” or “mystical suffering” but on the progress of thought and constant work. Her concept of acting through theater refers to the intellectual order and cannot be based on the mission of theater exercising rule over souls, referring to the religious order. As such, her position might match the many-sided thinking of Leon Schiller – but mainly, not as an author of monumental Romantic performances but of political fact-montages. She re-appeared thanks to the intuition and efforts of people in theater: practitioners who have proven the importance of this text in their stage productions. Her role during the twenty-years of the interwar period itself was only a marginal one, underestimated or even rejected from the beginning for various reasons, but also on political grounds: a leftist vision of history in which progress would be based on the revolution and the implementation of the people’s demands. She was an author, a woman who tried to emancipate herself and who experienced rejection. The problem of her female condition is important for nowadays literature revision, for example for the “HyPaTia – The Women’s History of Polish Theater,” a feminist research project aimed at documenting and collecting knowledge about women who make up the history of Polish theatre.³

³ “HyPaTia – The Women’s History of Polish Theater”: K. Berwińska, *Ogień na wichrze. Rzecz o Stanisławie Przybyszewskiej*, <http://www.hypatia.pl/osoby/krystyna-berwinska> [access: 12.08.2023].

The theatrically renewed text is situated in the context of the role of progressive, left-wing artists and creators discovered in theater today: Antonina Sokolicz, Irena Solska's Theater in Żoliborz in Warsaw, Maria Jarema and other Cricot's artists in pre-war Krakow.

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After 1989, Polish theater has been very eager to practice revisionary forms (Krakowska, 2019); it has emphasized the meaning and importance of old texts that have been re-read, and drawn attention to the creation of new tensions in the context of the reception of on-stage declarations. It is a reaction to today's cultural needs, but it also happens that the ways of shaping those techniques are adaptations of suggestions sprouting up in the arts of the interwar period to open up to audience participation and geared towards its social activation. This phenomenon can be witnessed in a return to the rediscovered leftist traditions of culture, which lead, among others, to the creation of theaters in provincial centers such as Bydgoszcz, where there are disputes about the victims and costs of the liberal transformation in the provinces. The concepts of Klata and Łysak drew attention to the trend of esthetic and political involvement in Polish pre-war theater, and placed this topic in the program of the deconstruction of the former theatrical hierarchies and conventions, which were built on the concept of a national community united by a Romantic myth. Although Stanisława Przybyszewska herself did not belong to any feminist movements, the renewal of the meanings and the form of her drama is today related, firstly, to a revision of the twenty-year period, seen anew as the moment the women who broke the male-centric order of social life were gaining their voice, and, secondly, as an important voice of a politically and socially aware author proposing critical theater due to a project created by Jan Klata, and to "intrusive," or engaging theater offered by Paweł Łysak.

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