

Węgały or Celebrations

There are no mirrors or dressing rooms in the Teatr Wiejski Węgały (Węgały Village Theatre). There is no division between the stage and the auditorium. The actors do not disappear behind the heavy curtain at the end of the performance but come out with music to the audience. At this the area where the play was viewed is filled with dancing pairs as the cordial hosts play and sing for the dancers. But this division too vanishes quite quickly, some spectators take up the instruments while the actors dance together with the others. A specific theatre event becomes a celebration for all. The division is very fluid and the two realities may not be easy to separate from each other. At the Teatr Wiejski Węgały the theatre and the celebration interlock, and the driving force of all this activity is music.

The programme conducted since 1982 by Erdmute and Waclaw Sobaszek in Węgały, a village in the lake region of Warmia, has been closely related to folk music from the beginning. In no way,

folk trends in music so popular recently with its easily accessible form that introduces no new ideas. The actors of Węgały work in the rhythm designated by the calendar of rituals; they treat folk songs as one of the most important elements of their activity. For it is these that contain the cultural content that defines the area of traditional culture, an important field of research conducted by the Węgały ensemble. Leaving the city (1986) and installing the theatre in a village barn was the first step on the road of discovering other aspects of reality. Thus from the beginning the ensemble made expeditions to various regions of Poland and of other European countries. The knowledge acquired during the expeditions, meetings with old balladeers, musicians and story tellers form the specific language of the performances staged by the Węgały actors. Opening up to other cultures enabled them to discover new qualities in their own culture and to identify common traits or mutual influences. Thus one can find in their work influences of Gypsy and Jewish culture, both highly important to our understanding of many aspects of the Polish culture.

Recourse to village customs, traditional songs, folk tales transmitted to our times is an important component of Węgały's theatre programme. The first play produced in 1988 was inspired by Stanisław Vincenz's *Vincenz's Tales of a Real Jew, Antichrist and the Most Reverend Metropolitan* (*Historia Vincenza o prawdziwym Żydzie, Antychryście i Preoswieszczonym Metropolicie*). The next two plays, produced at four year intervals were: *The Eternal Peace Inn* (*Gospoda ku wiecznemu pokojowi*) after the Story of Magdalene from *The Valley of the Issa* (*Dolina Issy*) by Czesław Miłosz, and

Chaucer. In recent years three productions were regularly revived and presented to every new public.

The crossing of bounds of the institutional theatre brought with it specific changes. The activity of the theatre was expanded to include research that finally crystallized into two separate programmes of the theatre's activity: the Schola of the Teatr Wiejski Węgały headed by Wolfgang Niklaus and the Field Project run by Waclaw Sobaszek. The Schola does research on Medieval music, liturgical drama and the tradition of sacred art. It has produced the liturgical dramas: *Ordo stellae, Ludus paschalis, Ludus Danielis*. The Field Project was set up in 1996 and is now being pursued by four actors: Trev Hill, Maria Lubiancowa and Waclaw and Erdmute Sobaszek. Extras, mostly students, also take part in specific projects. Cooperation with ensemble allows them to broaden their theatre and ethnographic interests and reinforces their cultural and social consciousness.

The Field Project is a natural consequence of the research conducted by the founders of the theatre in 1986. For the departure from the city, from the repertory theatre, was only the first stage on this road. Their subsequent activities led them to locations that were more and more remote from the theatre, and even more, to locations where the term theatre seems to sound strange.

The Field Project adheres strictly to the traditional ritual calendar and to the customs linked with it. The traditional holidays, that designated the rhythm of the life and work of the village communities are actually not observed anywhere else any longer. The progressing globalization of culture



Spectacles synchrétiques du Carême
prenant/Syncrétic Madri Gras-carnival
production.
Reg. Waclaw Sobaszek.
Teatr Węgajty (2000).

Photo Andrzej Koszyk

caused the specific native characteristics of the Slavic world to disappear. Visits of carollers to village households where they were welcomed with food and gifts that took place during the Christmas season and disguised mummers during the carnival as well as at Easter (this custom called 'wołoczebne') as well as Sobótka, celebrated on the equinox are in the fact no longer practiced. The celebration of important dates in the calendar year by whole village communities belong to the past.

By restoring the ceremonies of local holidays, the actors try to revive their ritual character. Therefore in the period of Christmas, carnival and Easter they set out on expeditions to the various regions of Poland. For each holiday they prepare a different programme. In the case of Christmas mummers (carollers) it is a *Home performance*, in the carnival it is syncretic Mardi Gras-carnival production (*Widowisko synkretyczne – ostatki, zapusty*), for Easter it is the *Alleluia* (*Allilujki*). The short plays composed of Polish, Ukrainian, German and even Italian motifs are presented in various

locations. The place of a syncretic performance may be the old people's home, a homeless refuge, a hospice or a prison, a school or a fire station. With a *Home performance* or an *Alleluia* the actors go door to door. There is no time for rehearsals then. In all three cases (Carolling, carnival, Alleluia) a specific form of performance is put in motion. The progress from one household to another gives the actors a chance to prepare for the culmination, that is crossing the threshold of each successive home. This is enhanced by traditional songs and refrains that accompany the actors in all their peregrinations. The same scenario is followed even when the goal is only one location as if the music designated the route of the expedition.

Another important feature of these expeditions and performances are the masks used in them. The actors use old ritual masks which could serve as exhibits at ethnographic museums. They also make their own masks which they then use in their theatre. In this case the mask is the link between two realities – the world and the ritual. Actors-carollers arrive from the darkness of the night. They do not wear special costumes, they do not make-up their faces. The masks that cover some of the faces are not stage props but an element of the carolling world. They emphasize the unique nature of the encounter. What counts is the participation of the hosts and the guests in one event. From the outset of the visits to households, the distinction between the actors and the public disappears. The guests emerge from the darkness to take part in the celebration together with their hosts.

The carollers, the Mardi Gras masqueraders, Easter mummers are characters of the ritual theatre which is revived each year thanks to the Field



Spectacles synchrétiques du Carême
prenant/Syncrétic Madri Gras-carnival
production. Trev Hill.
Reg.: Waclaw Sobaszek.
Teatr Węgajty (2000).

Photo Andrzej Koszyk

Project programme. The aim of the ensemble is not to reconstruct the form of the ritual. The point is to reach the core of what is alive and creative in tradition, to contribute new elements thus creating a singular transmission of tradition. By reanimating the old forms of the ritual theatre the holiday is revived. Teatr Wiejski Węgajty is found far from the main road. Yet there is never a lack of guests who arrive for a performance or in order to take part in an event organized by the theatre. In addition to strictly theatrical events, the theatre offers training as well as workshops, seminars, photographic exhibitions, film showings, dance parties and concerts. Guests are invited from Poland or abroad: non-professional musicians met during the travels, dancers, theatre groups. Visitors are often invited to hear accounts of expeditions to Guatemala and Mexico, to Lithuania and Byelorussia. Some of the visitors are familiar to the local people, others come for the first time not to return again. But there is a constant exchange, a constant flow of people and the stories they bring with them. The life rhythm of the theatre is

insignificant excuse is enough to set off the music of a violin and make the stage floor buckle under the weight of dancing couples.

Recently the actors have come to use masks in their work on the Finnish epic which they have staged under the title *Kalevala, Unwritten Fragments* (premiere, January 2001). The director of the performance, Waclaw Sobaszek, has this to say about the research which in a certain way crystallized in this production:

"A capital opportunity for a meeting of two huge expanses of European theatre tradition, the commedia dell'arte and the ritual theatre, as seen at one time by Jan Dorman. We follow in his footsteps in some part. We see that the two expanses are like the East and West of culture. When seen up close the division is not so great. Various influences overlap and tie into unexpected knots."

Performances, expeditions, events that take place at this theatre, all this creates the specific character of Węgajty. It is one of rare places where tradition is still kept alive. It is not an open air museum, not a historical village where history is at a standstill.

KATARZYNA REGULSKA

KALEVALA.
Maria Lubiancowa, Trev Hill.
Reg.: Waclaw Sobaszek.
Teatr Węgajty (2000).

Photo Krzysztof Skłodowski

KALEVALA.
Maria Lubiancowa, Trev Hill, Erdmute
Sobaszek.
Reg.: Waclaw Sobaszek.
Teatr Węgajty (2000).

Photo Krzysztof Skłodowski

