

Necessary Theatre

Remarks on the realization of the 2009
“Theatre Village” Project

Imagine a place where you can be yourself. Where you do not hear the roar of traffic beneath your window, but only the sounds of chirping birds, laughing children and maybe a barking dog. Where instead of driving to reach your destination, you walk down quiet country roads. Where art is not the domain of the privileged few, but an experience which all might share.

Welcome to the “Theatre Village,” a weeklong project which takes place each July in “Teatr Węgajty.” Open to people from all walks of life, this festival includes a wide variety of performances, concerts, workshops and discussions featuring artists from Poland, Europe and beyond. Workshops in dance, movement, voice and acting take place during the day; volunteers prepare meals that all might share in common; evenings are devoted to performances and concerts that culminate in long nights of music and dancing. This year’s festival featured a diversity of performances including a one-man adaptation of *Don Quixote* featuring Czech actor Martin Frys under the direction of Jan Pilatova; a performance of *The Ballad of Sweet Daphne* by the Warsaw-based Women’s Rights Centre, and *Blue Express*, a hip-hop performance based on classic songs by Wiera Gran. However, it also included pieces created by workshop participants; these included Forum Theatre, in which actors present a real-life problem and call upon audience members to solve it, and the Living Theatre Project, which seeks to open up a new, free space for theatrical exploration and innovation. In this publication, some leading participants in the “Theatre Village” project meditate on the profound need for this festival in a world that is rapidly undergoing many changes and continues to face drastic problems.

44 The series of articles begins with a piece entitled "Small Revolution" by actress and theatre researcher Joanna Wichowska. She starts with a motto from Heinz Bude's book *The Excluded*: "In our society we've seen a change in the number of people in need of our care. Nowadays we must concern ourselves with ever greater numbers of people. This doesn't mean sitting with a glass of wine over dinner and passively thinking, 'Oh, look at what's going on in our world.' Instead, we must turn to the people who have lost courage during these times and help them to understand that each and every one of us is capable of doing something." Wichowska suggests that, rather than an expression of pathos or overly simplistic optimism, these words can be put into practice in the real world. Citing the "Theatre Village" as a place where Bude's idea is transformed into reality, she takes note of the many forms of social and political engagement that could be found in this festival, calling people to react not only against racism and chauvinism, but also against one's own personal inertia and defeatism. This could be seen in all the projects, from Teatr Węgay's adaptation of Wyspiański's *Wedding* done in collaboration with elderly residents of the Jonkowo Social Care Home to the *Polish Jungle* photo exhibition inspired by the writings of Ryszard Kapuściński to the Roma dances in which all were invited to participate. The festival demonstrated the capacity of art to raise awareness about pressing social issues and, more important, to help people recognize their connectedness with one another and the world.

The next reflection is by novelist, poet, essayist and illustrator. Tamara Bołdak-Janowska, who was present for almost the entirety of the festival. This included a promotion of her latest book *Tfu! with People! Small and Miniature Sketches*. In an essay entitled "Moments" she reflects on various aspects of the festival that were especially striking to her. The first of these was *The Wedding* in which the wedding party used masks and large puppets, and their entrance was accompanied by live accordion and violin music. Bołdak-Janowska suggests that in some ways this rendition of Wyspiański had an even stronger impact than Wajda's famous film, for it was done in a very organic way that allowed the retired residents of the Jonkowo Social Care Home to look back on their own weddings and relive the experience through theatre. She then comments on Martin Frys's performance of *Don Quixote*, which employed a minimal use of props: a stool, table and broom, which at times came to symbolize Dulcinea, and Frys's own hands, which due to a birth defect are not fully formed. She adds that at one moment,

while holding the broom, she saw him as Chagall's image of Christ. She also mentions that the type of theatre found in this festival allows opportunities not offered by commercial theatre, where an actor with a disability or "of a certain age", no matter how talented, would have an extremely difficult time finding opportunities to share her ability with others.

She then meditates on the Chechnyan children's theatre performance, *Tales from the Terek Valley*, which follows a fairy tale format as it tells the story of three brothers who, before receiving their inheritance, undergo a test of honour. They are told a story of a young woman who loves someone other than her betrothed. Granting her wishes, her betrothed allows her to visit the man she loves, who in turn tells her to go back home. Lost on the way, she meets a thief who helps her to find her way back safely. The question for the brothers, then, is which of these men has acted in an honourable way. Bołdak-Janowska cannot help but note that the woman in this play is treated as an object; it is truly a story of masculine honour. She mentions that after the play, she was able to speak to some of the children, many of whom do not know whether their parents are alive. They state that they are grateful to be living in a refugees' home in Warsaw, where they do not have to fear for their own lives.

Continuing with the theme of parents and children, she discusses Scream Theatre's dramatic production of *Exhale*, which reveals a crisis of paternity - not so much literal paternity as any sense of cultural fatherhood. The actors, who typed on computers and mechanically described all audience members as they entered the theatre, gestured toward the mechanical, impersonal nature of our interactions in contemporary society. Bołdak-Janowska finally turns her attention toward Belarus, mentioning Olga Koch's film *We are Family*, which documents the filmmaker's personal story as a young German woman traveling to Brest with her mother to visit her Belarusian relatives. Bołdak-Janowska then discusses the festival's final production, an adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* done by the Belorussian Teatr Svabodny. She praises its creative use of space, light, colour, pantomime and accordion music and costumes that gave this final production this jarring sensation of a cry - for Joseph K., for all of us, and for a Belarus in which it remains extremely difficult to voice any opposition to the dictatorial regime. She also laments the near-demise of the Belorussian language, which underwent Russification even before the Second World War and is spoken by fewer and fewer people all the time.

In the last reflection, "Culture as Relation to Others," Radio Olsztyn re-

porter Alicja Kulik interviews Wacek Sobaszek, who founded "Teatr Węgajty" in 1982 in collaboration with his wife Erdmute (Mutka). Her initial questions deal with Olsztyn and its surroundings: how was it changed since Sobaszek first began doing theatre there in 1977? What are the needs of the people who live there? Sobaszek responds that Olsztyn has changed drastically since he first arrived; from a small, provincial city it has developed economically and now aspires to become a major Polish and even European city. However, despite these economic gains, it is something of an "artificial world" where access to culture remains limited, as many young people prefer to spend their free time in supermarkets and malls than anywhere else. He suggests that it is better for people to spend their free time in a way that will offer them some kind of new experience and the opportunity to interact with new people. Moreover, for all Olsztyn's economic growth, the surrounding villages face continued unemployment, poverty and social problems. Speaking about the theatre's successes, Sobaszek cites the reception of the 2007 Polcul Foundation Prize as a great accomplishment and recalls a motto of the organization's founder, Jerzy Boniecki: "The measure of our culture is the way we relate to Others." He mentions the group's participation in the feminist March for Tolerance in Poznan, where they were confronted by egg-slinging opponents and the police, who arrested sixty people. "However, like Don Quixote, we continue to fight for what we believe to be right." Sobaszek again invokes Quixote when discussing the group's challenges in the form of material, technical and organizational needs. Getting young people involved in the theatre and seeking funding from bureaucratic European cultural foundations are ongoing challenges, but like Quixote, the members of "Teatr Węgajty" keep on fighting to achieve their goals.

Kulik and Sobaszek then turn their attention to the question of what it means to be "cultured." Sobaszek describes such a person as "open to everything and everyone." This does not mean snobbishly visiting museums and attending concerts in order to show off how much she knows, nor does it necessarily mean traveling extensively; after all, the current crises of energy use and climate change raise the question of the ethics of extensive travel. Instead, culture requires a certain degree of humility, a Socratic attitude of "All I know is that I know nothing." It is not possible for anyone to know or experience everything, but it is possible to continue learning without sinking into the stasis of dogmatism, just as it is possible to appreciate tradition without sinking into the stasis of narrow-minded

patriotism. Then, a person who follows this path can share what she has learned and act as a guide for others. 47

There is no question that Wacek himself and his wife Mutka are both such people. In the twenty-eight years that they have been making art in Węgajty, they have opened their home to people from all over the world; they have offered warmth and hospitality to all who come their way. Most important, however, they have created an open, ever-expanding community that includes young and old, citizens and foreigners, men and women of many social, religious and cultural perspectives. This theatre is indeed necessary; all of us who come to Węgajty are in need of something. And when we leave, we most certainly take something with us, something that we can share with others whom we meet on our own vast and varied roads.