

Research Space

Journal article

Lockdown verses and anxieties of presence: How Polish theatre rhymed a case for its purpose on the pandemic stage?

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Lockdown Verses and Anxieties of Presence: How Polish Theatre Rhymed a Case for Its Purpose on the Pandemic Stage

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To Olga Tokarczuk, the winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature, the impact of COVID-19 is that “a paradigm of civilization that has shaped us over the past two hundred years is blown away. (...) [n]ew times are coming” (Tokarczuk). This idea evokes Walter Benjamin’s (and Paul Klee’s) Angel of History with “his face turned toward the past” while “the storm irresistibly propels him into the future” (Benjamin 392-3). Awaiting an unknown future by remembering the past reflects experiences of many theatres during the pandemic. It also contextualizes the recent popularity of archival theatre material online. This essay reflects upon how verse – as a mode of language divided into a pattern of lines – helps artists to negotiate between these different temporal contexts and to avoid the position of a “witness that looks and remembers but cannot act” (LaCapra on Benjamin, 150). I argue that verse emphasizes the presence of theatre artists; articulates their socio-political concerns, emphasizing their immediacy; and supports a creation of community.

emphasizes presence of artists and immediacy of their work by articulating their socio-political concerns; Verse supports the artists in creating a sense of community and

I look at verse as a platform to address the anxiety of presence brought upon by the pandemic. I argue: verse has heteroglossic quality arising from its organization not only by rules of grammar or syntax, but also by verse structure. Verse structure is the patternized use of the verse line and the formal principles such as metre and rhyme operating within it. In a live performance, verse structure emphasizes verse’s rhythms. This, in turn, helps rhythmical levels of verse generate additional meanings to the lexical level of verse. For example, a metrical structure may refer to a cultural tradition, or a rhyme can connect two different

words revealing otherwise invisible contexts. The rhythmical and lexical levels of verse (and meanings they generate) interact. In other words, verse in theatre does not only (often) represent a dialogue, but it is always in-a-dialogue. A striking example is a practice of some Irish poets, including Seamus Heaney, who used Irish metrical systems to structure verse in English. Notably, the heightened pattern emphasizes the dialogical interactions between lexical and rhythmical levels, as well as the tensions evoked by them. It also highlights various presences, such as the presence of the actor and a virtual presence of the author. Through all that verse can simultaneously stage, investigate, and redefine existing relationships and contracts between theatre works, theatre-makers, audiences, and spaces (for more see Lech 10-34).

In the current context, using verse illustrates the heightened need of theatre artists to affirm and confirm their presence and agency, and avoid invisibility. The invisibility does not merely mean a lack of visibility. Instead, the invisibility and the anxiety of presence connect to the experience of absence, which is in turn closely tied to relationality (Grønstad and Vågnes 2). Thus, the experience of presence and anxiety thereof link to live theatre, its potential for immediacy, and the artist-audience communion. However, they also operate in a broader context of socio-political agency held by theatre and its artists. Moreover, the presence denotes “a perception of a collective community” affirmed by the public (Jensen 18). Verse, as I explain, facilitates new ways of presence, communion, and artists’ agency in all these contexts. It does so – as my forthcoming analysis exemplifies – by bringing to the fore cross-temporal liveness as “undecidable space between registers of what is live and what is passed,” (Schneider, “It seems” 155). This becomes a springboard for the artists to activate processes of “intrainimation,” allowing “the live and the no-longer-live to cohabitate, cross-interrogate, and pose old questions anew, or new questions of old” (Schneider, *Slough*

Media 72; Schneider and Ruprecht). In short, verse provides theatre with tools to lead in crisis.

The focus of this article is Polish theatre with experiences of absence deeply rooted in its troublesome histories. Arising from these are Polish theatre's role as a platform for performances of freedom, and the quasi-sacred status of theatrical space as a meeting point between audiences and actors. The twenty-first century theatre closures due to frequent national mourning periods have raised questions about the role of theatre in crisis, further emphasized now by the pandemic. Therefore, the governmental decision to close cultural institutions on the 12th of March 2020 had challenged artists' economic safety, artistic expression, and also "spoke" to Polish theatre's transhistorical experiences of absence. Even more so, as the governing party increased its divisive narratives in which consecutive groups – refugees, people with disabilities, Jews, or the LGBTQ community – have been assigned the role of the threatening other. Polish theatre needed to be a platform for performances of freedom once again. However, the theatre closure made the task difficult, heightening the anxieties of presence and absence.

All this provides a context to the alarming responses by leading theatre critics such as Łukasz Drewniak, Dorota Ogrodzka, and Dariusz Kosiński. Drewniak emotively announced that for the first time in modern European history "Theatre is NOWHERE!" (Drewniak). Ogrodzka linked the post-pandemic survival of theatre to its ability to "build connections and encounters, collective experience, a collective reimagining of the world" (Ogrodzka; all translations from Polish sources are by me). Even Kosiński, while defending online theatre, argued that it offered an opportunity for theatre artists to be actively present, shaping new ways of living (Kosiński). The upcoming analysis illustrates how verse facilitates these new ways of presence and experience and provides tools for artistic responses to a crisis.

Challenging Homogenizing Narratives by Demarginalizing Diverse Experiences

The first example is the National Theatre's *POECI POLSCY* (*Polish Poets*). The Warsaw-based company framed it as a meeting point between its audiences, actors, and Polish poetry. The project took a form of individual YouTube videos published on the theatre's website and social networks between April and July 2020. There is no director attached to it, which creates a sense of collaborative ensemble creation. However, the first poem is the sixteenth-century epigram *Na zdrowie* (*On Health*) by Jan Kochanowski performed by Jan Englert. Englert is a renowned actor, director, and the National Theatre's Artistic Director. His presence brands it as an official National Theatre's project (rather than as an actors' initiative). The humorous epigram opening reaches to the past and yet firmly roots *POECI POLSCY* in the present moment. In doing so, it plays with cross-temporal liveness and intrainimation and creates a sense of immediacy. All this is important because of the project's aims that I will now discuss. The collection has sixty-two videos with all poems translated into Polish Sign Language and seems like a conventional national theatre project. It performs the National Theatre's artistic and civic responsibilities by reflecting on Polish cultural legacy, and opening it to broader, more diverse audiences (also see Wilmer 1). However, *POECI POLSCY* is also a response to homogenizing and hateful narratives. It attempts to redefine the Polish canon by including and reflecting on marginalized experiences in Poland as evident in its final performance: Zuzanna Ginczanka's poem "Miłość" ("Love").

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CN_j9SZN6RU&list=PL08Lamk9qvh1Pr124QCpnFOFFZIG4ZEe&index=63

Ginczanka, Zuzanna. "Miłość." *POECI POLSCY*, created by the Polish National Theatre in Warsaw, performances by Henryk Simon, Patrycja Soliman, Monika Dryl, et al., *YouTube*, 12 Jul. 2020, Polish National Theatre in Warsaw,

Almost all featured in this work poets are well known and taught during compulsory education. However, Ginczanka is not. The poems by this multilingual Polish-Jewish artist of the interwar period explore female Jewish experiences, including physical – or even physiological – and sensual ones. Agata Araszkiewicz says that the poet’s biography and the changing status of her poetry speak to Polish struggles with identity and fear of otherness (Araszkiewicz 105-7). These struggles and fears arise from the always-present tensions between multicultural Polish histories and the mainstream discourses on Polish identity. The latter focuses on the white, Catholic, and male experience. Despite Ginczanka’s efforts to be recognized as a Polish poet and professional acclaims from her contemporaries, she could not free herself from the status of the “(b)autiful Jew whose assimilation was welcomed as long as it was not fully completed” (Araszkiewicz 98-9, 102). Ginczanka was killed in Cracow in 1944 by the Nazis. Largely ignored until 1990s, her poetry gained attention thanks to Izolda Kiec and Araszkiewicz.

POECI POLSCY emphasizes Ginczanka’s “Miłość” as the last performance and the only one delivered by the ensemble. Other poems are delivered by individual actors sitting in front of a camera, a symbolic image of the global pandemic theatre. The collective performance of Ginczanka’s poem puts the multi-voiced humanness at the forefront of the national canon. Verse rhythm highlights the virtual presence of multiple actors and the poet, which links with several actors delivering each line. The lines vary from seven to sixteen syllables. Each actor’s performance space, delivery pace, and emotional colouring are different. For example, the line “kochać własne mocne mięśnie w smukłych rękach, w prężnych nogach” (“to love your slim hands’ and resilient legs’ muscles”) starts with Henryk Simon, joined by Patrycja Soliman and Monika Dryl. The latter prolongs the final vowel “a” in the word “nogach” (“legs”) as she runs joyously through the fields (Ginczanka 00:31-00:40). This dissonance

between different temporal lengths of the verse line (as delivered by the three actors) strengthens what Attridge describes as the heightened public quality of verse. Verse ceases to be perceived as the speech of one person (Attridge 12). Besides, Dryl's delivery shifts the grammatical paroxytonic stress NO-gach to oxytonic no-GACH, which enhances a sense of multivoicedness. At the same time, there is a rhythmic consistency, causing the work and the group to be perceived as a whole (see also Attridge 12). It arises from the regular rhyming scheme and consistent pausing at the end of each line. For example, in the line discussed, the different delivery lengths highlight the rhythmic pattern by emphasizing the end of the line, which is not the end of the thought.

All these connect with how verse in general highlights contexts that escape simple social, physical, geographical, national, or cultural boundaries (Lech 80-114). In "Miłość" this is manifested by different actors, diverse interpretations, and contrasting physical spaces. The performance of Ginczanka's poem, through its polyvocal rhythm, also brings to the fore questions of language, highlighting the presence of different languages, cultures, and experiences within the broader project and the Polish canon it proposes. This includes transnational identities of the flagship Polish poets like Czesław Miłosz (American, Polish, Lithuanian) or Adam Mickiewicz (Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian); multicultural identity of actors (Patrycja Soliman is Polish-Egyptian for example); and the presence of Polish Sign Language, which is still not recognized as an official language of Poland. By emphasizing these diverse contexts within the project, the National Theatre invites reflection on their absence in discourses of homogeneous Polishness.

Transgenerational Rhythms of Warsaw in Site-specific *Katarynka 24h*

The second example is *Katarynka 24h* (*Barrel Organ 24h*) created by actor and composer Hanna Klepacka. *Katarynka 24h* searches for communion by expanding on how the rhythm

of verse may refer to the rhythm of earlier versified works (Attridge 15). Klepacka, Jan Paweł Jastrzębski (barrel organ), and Piotr Wróbel (trombone) travel through Warsaw's courtyards performing pieces that combine traditional barrel organ with more contemporary sounds like Hip Hop. These performances are not available online with the exceptions of the lead song: "Katarynka 2020." Its video, recorded by actor Tomasz Tyndyk, features Klepacka, Jastrzębski, and Wróbel on a typical Warsaw's tenement courtyard. They are dressed by Agnieszka Roszkowska (also an actor) in a mixture of contemporary and interwar clothing. Zbigniew Ugielski's animations remind of an old TV and enhance historical references. And the sounds of barrel organ played on a Varsovian courtyard evoke iconic soundscapes of Warsaw before the Nazis destroyed it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB2MEcBCcxs>

Caption: Hanna Klepacka, Jan Paweł Jastrzębski (barrel organ), and Piotr Wróbel (trombone). *Katarynka 2020*. Written and composed by Hanna Klepacka. June 2020. Warsaw.

While "Katarynka 2020" starts with traditional sounds referring to the past, the line "I też był wtedy dziwny świat" ("And the world was also strange then") becomes a cross-temporal bridge as the song turns into Hip Hop (Klepacka 00:51-00:57). Klepacka (the author and composer) raps her loneliness and frustration with the deluge of (dis)information coming from the media and Polish government. Like *POECI POLSCY*, she highlights the immediacy of her work. This is visible in the "2020" in the title but also her rhyming schemes:

Hej ludzie słuchajcie to nie jest powstańcza ani żadna piosenka narodowa

Ona jest **nowa**, ona jest moja. Ona jest **nowa**, ona jest moja. (Klepacka 01:00-01:11)

Hey people, listen, this is not another uprising or a **national** song

It's **new**, it's mine, it's **new**, it's mine.

The rhyme (marked for clarity in bold in all the quotes) links words “national” and “new,” emphasizing the contemporary context of “Katarynka 2020”. However, it also suggests the need to change. The word “teraz” (“now”) flashes on the screen several times (for example 01:00-01:05, 01:40-01:47). Its aesthetics and meaning strengthen the immediacy of the project and the urgency to start the process of change. For “Katarynka 2020”, this means building a new community, a courtyard by a courtyard. As Klepacka’s three-times repeated chorus states:

Mamy moc! Produkujejmy w naszych domach mnóstwo **miłości**.

Żeby zmienić coś, trzeba zacząć od małych rzeczywisto**ści**. (Klepacka 01:37-1:58, 02:40-02:50, 03:07-03:27)

We have the power! Let’s produce loads of **love** in our homes.

To change anything, we need to start with small **actualities**.

The rhyme describes a new potential reality filled with love and marks the process of change towards it as a communal effort. Later, Klepacka raps that she wants a society in which people seek to help rather than kill. A rhyme “zabijamy (we’re killing) and pomagamy (we’re helping) (03:00-03:06) emphasizes her aims and the chasm between her experiences of the present and future she raps for. As she chooses Hip Hop – “a global, multiethnic, grassroots youth culture committed to social justice and self-expression” (Banks 2) – as her platform, one can assume that the community she seeks is multirepresentative and equal.

Through her rhythmic references, Klepacka emphasizes cross-temporal liveness of “Katarynka 2020” and, to recall Schneider’s points, allows Warsaw’s past and presence “to

cohabitate” and “cross-interrogate” (Schneider and Ruprecht). Rhythms and sounds evoke intergenerational traumas and stories of the Warsaw people dying because of hateful discourses, but also resisting them. These stories contextualize the presence, asking questions about individual and communal response-ability to the present and for the future. One can only imagine that this effect was magnified in live performance through transgenerational stories of people and families living in each tenement.

Conclusion

Both “Katarynka 2020” and *POECI POLSCY* use verse to affirm the presence of its artists; create a sense of community; articulate their socio-political concerns, and emphasize their immediacy. In short, verse provides a “stage” to address the anxiety of presence. At the same time, the artists reach, like the Angel of History, to the past. Dialogic nature of verse helps the theatre-makers to facilitate cross-temporal liveness and intrainimation, activating the socio-political potential of their projects. By putting the past in a dialogue with contemporary aesthetics and concerns, “Katarynka 2020” and *POECI POLSCY* interrogate Poland’s past, presence, and future communities. This, in turn, places theatre at the forefront of critical public discussions in Poland, affirms its active role within it, and shows how and why theatre is possible and needed during a crisis.

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