

Research Space

Journal article

**Krytyczki as activists: On theatre criticism, affect, objectivism
and #MeToo in Polish drama schools: Interview with Monika
Kwaśniewska**
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***Krytyczki* as Activist: on Theatre Criticism, Affect, Objectivism, and #Metoo in Polish
Drama Schools**

Interview with Monika Kwaśniewska

Monika Kwaśniewska is a Polish scholar working as Adjunct at the Theater and Drama Chair of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland) and editor of *Didaskalia: Theatre Journal*. In her research she explores contemporary acting in the performative and institutional perspective, institutional critique in theatre and visual arts, and #metoo movement in the theatre. In the interview, she discusses how Polish krytyczki – a feminine and plural form of “critic” – took an active role in creating a platform for #metoo in Polish theatre. The interview focuses on the most recent events in Poland that led to an unprecedented avalanche of callouts from Polish state drama schools’ students and graduates. The callouts named leading figures in Polish theatre and film. In exploring Polish theatre training, its system, its complex relationship with the past masters, and its response to #metoo, the conversation tries to signal potential answers to: [what do we do now?](#)

Kasia Lech: Before this interview, we talked about the traditional master-student relationship in Polish drama schools. Through Stanislavski, Grotowski, and even Romanticism, the Polish theatre tradition is firmly rooted in this model. Classes in theatre schools are mainly taught by actors actively practising their profession.

Monika Kwaśniewska: We discussed the need for a critical “re-reading” of Stanislavski. While recognizing the specific socio-cultural context of his work, the value of the tools he offered, one should also notice the ethical problems related to the contemporary application of his methods and system of values. This, in my opinion, connects with the need to establish new ethics in theatre. Although few people talk about it directly, the Polish theatre is

dominated by an internalized ethics developed over 100 years ago by Stanislavski. It establishes a hierarchical model of theatre – with a master director ruling over actresses and actors. Stanislavski’s “Ethics” (see Stanislavski 578-605) precisely describes identity performances based on the infallibility of the “director” and the “radical consumption” of the “actor’s” time, strength and creativity. It presents theatre as a temple of art and not a place of work. Creating boundaries is, therefore, tantamount to betraying the art of theatre, but also to falling out of the “actor-artist-priest” role. It evokes real and/or symbolic sanctions such as expulsion from the theatre or the loss of “the artist” status. We need new ethics for theatre that are based on care, empathy, wellbeing, safety (also economic) that lead to the empowerment of all workers in theatre institutions and the democratization of work and creative processes. In this context, theatre is not a temple of art in which people are sacrificed, but a safe space for creative cooperation based on mutual respect, exchange, and shared goals (also see Kwaśniewska, “Jaka Etyka?!”).

KL: Yes, I graduated from the Puppetry Department of the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in 2004 (AST). We were taught that wellbeing means taking care of the body. It had to be perfectly fit, beautiful, young, with a strong voice. A perfect tool to realize the director’s vision. In general, our wellbeing was to be achieved through our hard work. You mentioned that Vasili Toporkov recalls that for Stanislavski, if the actors “didn’t get it right,” it meant they weren’t trying hard enough. I guess, it was like this in drama school. As a year group – a drama school develops an incredible sense of loyalty to your classmates – we had multiple strategies to deal with it. In voice classes, for example, you had to do a handstand, or you were thrown out of the session. I couldn’t do it, so my classmates would put me on hands before the professor could get angry. When we were hungry, and there was no break, one person jumped out of the window and ran for burgers for the whole group. We ate them backstage. These are not bad memories because we protected each other. I feel warmth and

love when I recall these. The handstand professor saved my voice when hearing tumours on the cords at such an early stage that a doctor could hardly see them. But I recognize that we were highly skilled in playing in-between “the rules of the game.” We were not able to read those rules critically. We were the “chosen ones” selected from hundreds of applicants. I know that my year is not an exception. It is the experience of entire generations. When and what changed that we started to speak openly about oppression in Polish theatre and drama schools?

MK: This is an important issue. Why was the work organized in such a way that you didn't have a break for a meal? Why did the pedagogue kick you out of classes instead of helping someone who couldn't cope with a task, or accepting that she wouldn't be able to cope with this task fully, but could cope with another one? Actresses and actors have been trained into thinking that their needs are unimportant. Satisfying even the most basic needs is excess and must be sacrificed for the sake of the art and work. The unacceptability of weakness and the lack of individualization in training are the mechanisms of subjugation. I mean it in the sense in which Michele Foucault or Judith Butler apply it when writing about the formatting of subjects by systems of power. Under such conditions, the arguments that promote silence about violence are reinforced: “because it has always been like this and you have to accept it”; “because others have gone through it too.” In turn, the experience of violence takes on a formative dimension. You must go through it, just as you must go through other levels of training to become an actor/actress.

The beginnings of changes in Polish theatre training and artistic education are long and convoluted, but I will try to mark the key points. Before it happened, many women started to study at the directing departments at the two largest theatre schools in Poland - in Cracow's AST – including its departments in Bytom and Wrocław – and in Warsaw's Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy (AT Warsaw), including its department in Białystok. This

was a significant change because of the lingering belief that “directing” was a male role. There wasn’t even a word for a female director, as “reżyserka” - the feminine of male “reżyser” (director) – also referred to the space occupied by a director during rehearsals! Many of these female directing students had had experiences from other degrees, and many had a feminist consciousness. And probably for this reason, among others, they resisted the way they were treated in drama schools. They did not like that they were disrespectfully called “our girls”; that a lecturer texted them at night, commenting on their appearance, or violated their physical boundaries. They also did not like the methods of working with actors and actresses that they were taught. A great example is a situation recalled [in #metoo by the director Katarzyna Szyngiera](#): one of the pedagogues put his hand under her skirt to show her how she should deal with actors. This situation reveals the multi-level mechanism of the boundary violation being treated as a method of education and work. In addition, women also began to take positions of power within the drama schools’ structures. They were eager to enter alliances with the new generation rebelling against the established “methods” and looking for collaborative practices stripped of manipulation, violence, and humiliation. Some men also joined these alliances, usually students, but not only. The slow accumulation of these changes coincided with the global #MeToo movement. And it was – from today’s perspective – the breaking point.

The year 2018 was critical. The processes that started then had very diverse courses, dimensions, and scopes. In AT Warsaw, it took a form of an immediate and active change. Female and male students of the Directing Department complained about the years of abuse (mental and physical) perpetrated on them by one of the pedagogues. The case became notorious when female and male graduates of the AT Warsaw supported their younger colleagues by publishing an open letter. The public telling of a prolonged power abuse and the AT Warsaw’s passive reaction to the complaints triggered a wave of change. A “Code of

Ethics” was created; a Student Ombudsperson was appointed; and in autumn 2019, there was a conference “Change - Now! What we have been silent about in theatre schools.” It featured discussions about specific cases and mechanisms of sexual, psychological, and physical violence or discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation in theatre training. It also invited representatives from progressive international organizations to speak about tools for safe education and artistic work. The conference attendees – probably for the first time – heard about an intimacy coordinator ensuring safety during rehearsals with nudity, intimacy, and violence. A coordinator from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland presented a model rehearsal. It was a significant experience.

In Cracow, at the AST, the changes began in a completely different way, initiated by works co-created by actresses and actors. It was crucial because actors, and especially actresses – actively involved in the creative process and protected by the agreed rules of collaboration – started to talk about various kinds of violence – symbolic, sexual – which they experienced at the National Academy, during castings, and in theatre. These creative actions were a form of constructive sabotage. How else are we to treat the final graduation showcase *#Rape of Lucretia* (dramaturgy by Martyna Wawrzyniak, directed by Marcin Liber) at the AST Acting Department? In the piece, the actors re-tell sexually allusive jokes told by their lecturers and rebel against the idea of acting transgression instilled in them for years. They claim that it is too often based on the aestheticization of violence against women, reproducing it on the actresses’ bodies. How else to understand [*Actresses, or Sorry I Touch You*](#) written by Michał Telega for his directing exam at AST? Based on interviews with female students across all years of acting training, the play paints a terrifying image of humiliation, sexual harassment, and discrimination in film and in theatre, including the AST. This text – thanks to the support of Iga Gańczarczyk and Iwona Kempa from the AST Theatre Directing Department – began the process of change at the AST. After the exam, during which *Actresses* was presented,

there was a reading of letter to the Rector Dorota Segda, calling for changes analogous to those that had taken place in Warsaw. In response, the AST created its “Code of Ethics” and appointed people responsible for its observance (see also Kwaśniewska, “#MeToo”).

These changes, while necessary, were not sufficient. It soon became apparent that the regulations did not solve the problems. A report was made about the sexual harassment of actresses during rehearsals for the graduation showcase at the AST’s Dance Theatre Department in Bytom. It turned out that the school’s reaction to the events was highly insufficient. The director was eventually removed from the production, but the school gave “the conflict with students” as the reason. And we’re talking about forced nudity and night-time rehearsals with nudity, recorded without the consent of the actresses. This case has clearly shown how much there is still to be done.

Immediately after, the third drama school appeared “on the stage”: the National Film, Television and Theatre School in Łódź. Its graduate actress Anna Paliga used the programme board and social media to tell about the psychological, physical, and sexual violence she had experienced or witnessed during her training. She also named perpetrators, including many highly placed and influential people. Her courage triggered an immediate reaction from the school – which promptly started the remediation process – and an avalanche of callouts – in the media and social media – concerning all drama schools in Poland.

However, before theatre and film began to speak out about violence en masse, there were three more big #MeToo cases in Polish theatre. The first, almost completely forgotten, involved the Akademicki Theatre at the University of Warsaw, which some people use to prepare for drama school auditions. In 2018, a journalist - Iwona Poreda-Łakomska - from a large, non-state station TVN had received information that the director was sexually harassing actresses. Undercover, she joined the ensemble and recorded shocking situations of

sexual harassment with a hidden camera. She also collected many testimonies from the survivors. Her reportage showed that many people felt harmed by the director of the Akademicki Theatre but did not want to speak publicly about their experiences because they became well-known in Polish theatre and film. This story showed that the legitimization of violence sometimes starts even before one goes to a drama school. But, since the case concerned “unprofessional” theatre, it is unlikely it impacted the Polish theatre community’s self-reflection.

This was not the case with the Bagatela Theatre in Cracow. When its female employees told the TVN channel (thanks to journalist Szymon Jadczyk) about years of sexual, psychological, and economic violence they had been subjected to by the long-term director and manager of the theatre, they received a flood of letters supporting their fight for dignity and justice. They also stressed that the problem was systemic. It was rooted in a ruthless hierarchy attributing almost absolute power to the managers, artistic directors, and directors, and in silence about and consent to violence. The silence was justified, the Bagatela female employees said, by arguments such as “because he is like that” or “because we all put up with it for years, so you should do the same.” The reaction of the theatre community, almost unanimously condemning the Bagatela manager (at least in terms of public statements), seemed to me both necessary – due to the emotional support of the female employees – as superficial as it did not have much impact on the systemic level. This might be because the Bagatela Theatre is primarily an entertainment stage with little influence on the development of theatrical aesthetics and practices in Poland. And, since it was “just” one theatre, the violence within its walls could have been “excused” by the “specificity” of the place.

However, the next case demolished the complacency of theatre and film communities, including theatre scholars. Mariana Sadovska initiated a public [coming outs](#) about the psychological and physical violence of the Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices director.

He is a former associate of Jerzy Grotowski. Gardzienice is an internationally established company, once avant-garde and now subsidized by public funding. For years it was considered one of the most important places on the theatrical map of Poland. Leading scholars in Poland have written about Gardzienice in monographs and articles that are now part of the canon of theatre education.

After Sadowska's coming out, former female (and occasionally male) employees broke their long silence. They recalled sexual and economic violence, insults, humiliation, long hours of late, and exhausting rehearsals filled with abuse. Their numerous "coming-outs" also contained criticism towards researchers who had observed work in "Gardzienice" for years and had never reacted to the violent practices. The reactions were very ambivalent. Some of the current "Gardzienice" employees started to publicly defend the "Gardzienice" director. Their statements confirmed many issues described in the coming-outs but ascribed violence to the working method or the atmosphere of the place. The researchers, seemingly listening to the callouts, at the same time, declared that they had no idea about anything. They also stated that even knowing about the violence, they would not have changed their previous scholarly engagement with Gardzienice. But no one asked them to rewrite or burn their books! The coming-outs invited a reflection about academic ethics and the need to include the testimonies to the subsequent discourses about "Gardzienice". So little and yet so much. I have to say that the conflict in the academic circles caused by the "Gardzienice" case was very intense. It sometimes took a personal form. For me, this was a sign of a significant change that is needed in theatre. But it was also a call for me to ask myself how I write and how I teach theatre history. What is the reason for the current hierarchy underlain by the cult of theatre masters and the lack of actorial subjectivity? I questioned how I researched contemporary theatre and whether, while attending rehearsals to observe the creative process, I would have been able to react when, in my opinion, someone was being harmed.

KL: We started from female directors and actresses naming their experiences as violence, but you led us to the crucial role of scholars and their silence or activism. I think it is essential to speak about critics in Poland finally rejecting the discourse about the ideality of Polish theatre's masters. It is a departure from the dominating Romantic model of an artist who talks to the spirits that reveal art to him. I am using the masculine form on purpose. Your 2018 paper on Krystian Lupa was a breakthrough.

MK: I don't know if this was a breakthrough. The need for a critical reflection on Jerzy Grotowski's or Tadeusz Kantor's methods was at that time already signalled in artistic and academic works. There were several reasons why my paper "[Between Freedom and Manipulation: the Situation of Actors in *Factory 2*](#)" caused unrest. Firstly, it concerned a production considered a breakthrough in thinking about acting methods and the status of the actor/performer in Poland. *Factory 2* was an example of a work based on the personality and subjectivity of actors who became co-creators of the performance. It was, therefore, a symbol of the actors' empowerment. However, based on conversations with people working on it, I pointed out the mechanisms of manipulation used by the director to achieve the artistic goal. The manipulation seemed dangerous to me precisely because of the personal involvement of the actresses and actors, who were often building on their own experiences, emotions, biographies, and conflicts within the ensemble provoked by the director.

Moreover, my presentation concerned a living director and an undisputed master. I delivered it at a conference devoted to him, sitting almost opposite of Krystian Lupa. I will never forget the feeling I had at the conference, when I listened to very interesting, but at the same time almost unequivocally laudatory papers delivered in the presence of the master, who was asked to comment time and again. I realized, quite simply, that I had misunderstood the "rules of the game." I had gigantic anxiety. The only other similarly "problematic" presentation at the conference was that of Lupa's student Radosław Stępień, who spoke about

the difficult, almost impossible, process of getting out from under the influence of the master. I think that my speech was important and perhaps critically effective precisely because it was given in a public forum, in front of other scholars and the artist himself. Therefore, it was difficult to ignore or silence it. I later experienced various reactions to subsequent texts I wrote about violence in theatre. One of them I haven't published so far, terrified by the comments of readers on the draft version. It's sometimes challenging for me to judge whether what I write is not the result of over-interpretation and – I'll put it bluntly – my paranoia. In the case of the paper on Lupa, the comments from international colleagues helped me a lot. I wrote this paper in Kyiv, where – together with people from Finland, Latvia, Georgia – I was a judge at a theatre festival. When I described the methods, I had observed in Lupa's work, they were very moved and had no doubts that these were examples of power abuse.

KL: The Lupa story shifts the role of a theatre scholar from an objective observer of reality to an activist.

MK: Yes, it is challenging work and asks for multifocal viewpoints and research methods, often emotionally involving. Invaluable contributions to the Polish #MeToo movement came from journalists, who are often the first to describe the problem and create a framework or even vocabulary for further discussion. This framework must not be that of a scandal. It is essential that, without losing sight of each testimony's idiomatic nature, we draw attention to the systemic problem that manifests itself in individual cases. It is also important to listen to the voices of the survivors, who often describe mechanisms of violence to which they were subjected very clearly. It helps the discourse when initial reportages are by people close to theatre and its community. This was the case of Witold Mrozek's piece on "Gardzienice", or Iga Dzieciuchowicz's coverage of the Dance Theatre Department in Bytom. Their awareness of how Polish theatre works, and its complexity, underlies the factuality of the texts. The task of scholars, who then analyze these issues from broader temporal, historical, and

methodological perspectives, is also not easy. We are still learning how to react. I see us adopting different attitudes. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek – an academic and the Ombudsperson for Students' Rights at the AT Warsaw – focuses on conveying knowledge and offers tools for understanding the events. She also discusses remediation strategies that are practical – and have been already successfully applied in other countries (for example, in the UK) – and philosophical and ethical concerns. Her postulates' impressive range spans from analysis of intimacy coordinators' methods to radical, promiscuous care and empathy (see Adamiecka-Sitek).

Some critics include their own experiences in the texts. Zofia Smolarska did it most radically in her analysis of the Gardzienice female employee's testimonies and of the reactions of theatre researchers (see Smolarska). She intertwined her own experiences of violence into the documentary and scholarly narratives, revealing that the theme of violence is personally close to her. The piece also featured her inner dialogue with potential criticism, which she might encounter after the publication of the text. This is also a significant gesture, one that is exceptionally close to me.

I always feel an increased fear when I speak publicly about violence, whether in an article or a radio interview. Firstly, I'm afraid of appropriating the testimonies; fitting them into some totalizing theory; ripping them off from individual experience; and unconsciously contributing to secondary victimization. Secondly, I am always afraid of adverse reactions; undermining; threatening with court action; embarrassment; suggestions that I am paranoid; that I do not understand the realities of artistic work; that I exaggerate minor problems; that I put myself in the position of a censor, a guardian of morality; or that I have a sense of ethical superiority. Or even that I strengthen gender disparity by writing about "female victims" (I never use the word victim!) and "male perpetrators" (which is not true). I have heard such accusations against me and others that write about violence in theatres and drama schools. I

sometimes have had an impression that by writing about violence, I start to be subjected to almost analogous mechanisms of violence. And I feel overwhelmed with the feelings they evoke despite critically understanding the process. That's why at some point, I started to analyze the affective dimensions of #MeToo: the silence and the callout. I look at the structures of reactions and emotions. My focus is on affects that are difficult to name or understand. Yet, they determine our responses to direct and indirect experiences of violence; they determine the silences and speaking-up. By inscribing the role of one who listens and reacts in my scholarly perspective, I also inscribe my reactions and myself into the text.

KL: So scholarship becomes not only an act of activism but also an act of performance, and a critic becomes an actress acting through affect. What is next?

MK: So far, theatre schools have actively engaged in the remediation processes. There are numbers of initiatives. Drama schools have finally opened to working with external people to monitor anti-discrimination and anti-violence issues. It all sounds very constructive, so let's hope it brings positive results. As for the scholars and journalists, our role is, on the one hand, to observe these processes carefully, to point out potential directions for further actions, to pay attention to whether these actions are not ostensible. But, we must remember that we are all, so to speak, debuting on this stage of change. Problems and mistakes will happen. The point is, while remaining vigilant, to not undermine these constructive actions and the process because of one stumble. Let's not say: "the Code of Ethics does not work." Let's ask why it did not work in a particular case and what can be done to improve it. We should support good initiatives as much as possible. This is also a way to rebuild trust to and within drama schools. Without it, students will not report problems. And what is not reported will not be solved.

Another issue is that anti-violence measures are not enough because the Polish theatre training system generates violence and needs reform. I think the task of researchers is to revise history of Polish theatre and theatre training critically. We should look at the history of theatre from today's perspective. What are the reasons for misconceptions and malpractices (including scholarly ones)? Why are these still practised and even fetishized? It is not about throwing history away. But as long as we approach this hierarchical and patriarchal tradition uncritically, we will continue to reproduce behaviours and judgements, without realizing their potential oppressiveness. It is worth considering how to expand the role of physical training and give students more practical tools drawn from different techniques and methods to mix them freely. Researcher Małgorzata Jabłońska has been exploring for years how to work with the body. Physical training relates to the awareness of the body and its limits. A person who is aware of their body may find it easier to set boundaries. Although this is not given, as the "Gardzienice" case has revealed.

KL: During our talk on Stanislavski in the context of the Great Reform, you mentioned that the objectification of the actor in Stanislavski's writing is partly rooted in the hegemony of actors in the 19th century. How can we avoid this pattern? How do we protect the dignity of Polish theatre, its people, and their memories in the process of change? How do we avoid undermining the dignity of brilliant professors who devoted their whole lives to work in this violent system?

MK: I think it is essential to make a distinction between the fact that the perpetrators of violence should be punished – at least by removal from school or some kind of "rehabilitation" – and the fact that the whole system needs reform. The word "reform" seems critical to me. It assumes that a system was once considered the best possible and worked adequately in the circumstances, possibilities, and needs required at its time. However, when

the context, needs, sensitivity, ethics, and notions of wellbeing change, we also need to reform the system.

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