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## Madness and Method: Improvisation in the Theatre of the Eighth Day

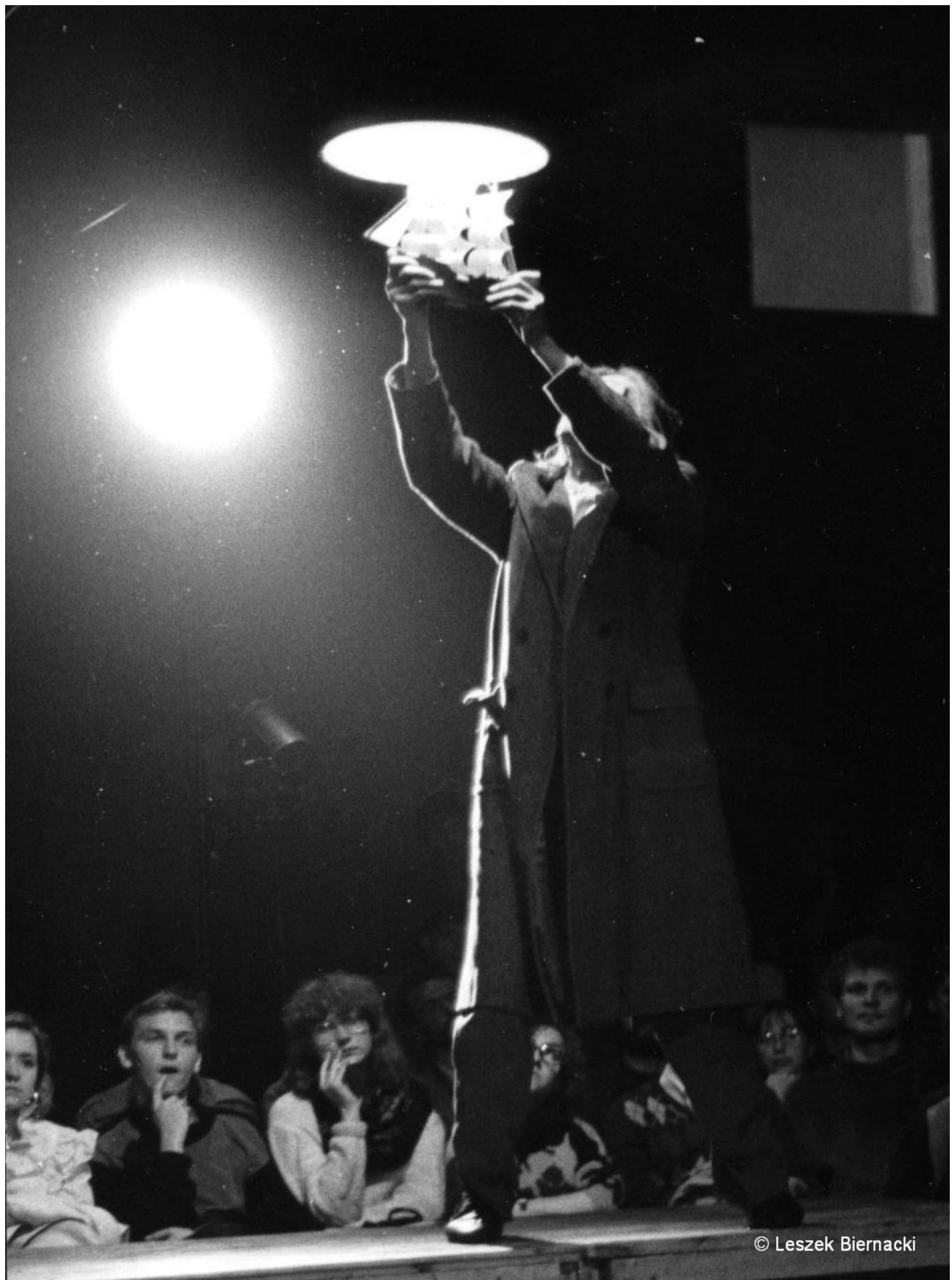
Lech Raczak

I would like to write about a unique experiment, a working method, which I believe was new and truly creative. I will say with pride, and without a tinge of modesty, that I was one of its coauthors, the main one.

First, I would like to stress that our experiment with the [Theatre of the Eighth Day](#), like most innovations in the theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, was made possible by the work done earlier in Wrocław, and before that in Opole, by [Jerzy Grotowski's group](#). The relationship between the dramatic text and the theatre needed to be redefined, and the consequences of the process of transforming the written word into theatre needed to be acknowledged (I am talking in shorthand, without a chronology, separating facts that were actually taking place simultaneously). The obvious and comfortable space of the theatre building needed to be eliminated. Both spaces where the action took place and where the actor and the spectator met needed to be redefined, one production at a time. Everything that usually only serves to beautify and cover up defects in the craft—makeup, costumes, scenery, colorful lights, music flowing from loudspeakers—needed to be rejected. At the same time—and this was most important and most fundamental—we needed to ask questions about skills and morality in the actor's work. And to answer these questions not only from the perspective of the theatre's needs today and tomorrow, but also from the perspective of the issues addressed in the plays, issues—if I may say so without fear of pompous dissonance—that have been around since the beginning of time and will be until the end of it.

I will now begin to tell my own, little-known story which, I hope, will be interesting. It is the story of a group of, initially, very young people, my contemporaries (so this is already ancient history), impertinently rebellious, enraged twenty-year-olds who found an opportunity to satisfy their most basic spiritual needs in the theatre. This was taking place in an era in which we felt the pain of a universal life of lies: the domination of public life by propaganda, the censorship of literature, the reduction of philosophy into some kind of religion of dialectical materialism. In those days, the simple words “tell the truth” sounded like a risky or provocative challenge. But this challenge exploded as a social fact in the form of the [student rebellion of '68](#); the “New Wave” in literature attempted to continue it some time later, and some scholars tried to continue it; and several years earlier, the people of the Laboratory Theatre had wrestled with this challenge, albeit from a different perspective. No wonder then that the group of young people who were students then and who were engaged in the theatre were forced to take up this challenge. This is how we found ourselves in a place which already had a name and a hierarchy of values, the [poor theatre](#), although we had a different idea about the role of the theatre in society.

Anyway, the facts were obvious, the choices limited: there existed a group of rebels convinced of the social necessity and explosive potential of the theatre, who had no permanent place to work, no equipment, and no money at its disposal for “the resources for putting on a production.” And it already knew that it would have to make theatre in a way that would depend on no one, not give in to manipulation, and belong exclusively to us alone.



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*Wormwood*, 1985. Reproduced courtesy of the photographer.

While working on their productions, this group of young people learned that in this lie-laden and repressive world of “[real socialism](#)” the theatre could serve not only as the place to search for one’s own individual truth (whose public revelation may be a catharsis) but also as a place of freedom: creative freedom for the group and a kind of short-term spiritual asylum for the spectators. (Today, after all these years, I can say cynically that freedom is a short-lived act, an instant; then, we were convinced that it was a lifestyle. And we managed to stretch that instant into years.)

We also knew that we were not alone in our desires and in our explorations. We felt that we were participating in [the world rebellion of ’68](#), that we were a part of the [counterculture movement](#). It was clear to us that the old rules that limited expression – artistic expression, theatrical expression – were no longer in force. That a theatre does not need a building with a stage and an auditorium, and that in fact that division must be abolished. That a theatre could and should be a medium for projecting its own views and thus that it cannot rely on existing literature. That since it is a meeting place for people who are equal and who are seeking similar values, it may not emphasize divisions between those acting on behalf of society and that society itself (this would be a step in the direction of opposing the idea of “ritual theatre,” but a consequence of the concept of the “[naked actor](#)”); therefore the actor should rid himself of the external attributes of “priesthood,” such as the stage, costumes, and the manifest mastery of the techniques of bodily and vocal expression. And now for an important aside: there is yet another “paradox about the actor” that must not be forgotten. There is only one way to “rid oneself of acting technique,” to go beyond the visible signs of the craft: it is to work on technique, on the means of expression, on the skill of giving meaning to gesture and movement. An actor can reach a state in which the theatrical action he expresses, transmits, and repeats to the spectator becomes – is – a natural, spontaneous, and, indeed, unique process, but only through hard work which involves his psyche and his physicality in repetitive and extended exercises.

At last, the word “spontaneous” has appeared. Two fundamental spiritual needs are fused in this word, truth and freedom. I can begin to talk directly now about the fundamental work method of the Theatre of the Eighth Day, which was improvisation. Improvisation stems from the pursuit of the truth, which uses the spontaneity of expression to build a space for an anarchic freedom. This is what formed the basis of creativity in the Theatre of the Eighth Day: the whole troupe’s improvisation, collective improvisation through contact, a sort of conversation without words among all the actors.

I stress the motif of action without words because this improvisation never intended for us to agree on a view or to present an opinion or to discuss an issue. Of course, the work of a theatre group would be impossible without the exchange of views and discussion. But in our case there was an established order: first, we did something, improvised an action, a tense situation between people or a conflict, a clash between positions. And then we discussed this fact as we searched for its consequences in thought and in staging.

It is possible to improvise in different ways, around different topics. Our fundamental assumption concerned the method and the way, and it was clear: we improvise through movement, actions vis-à-vis others, and our partners respond, with an action, a movement, or a gesture. We could use our voices to say individual words that protect from misunderstandings or a fragment of a text, stripped of all its meaning, which became merely the reason for the voice, a sound carrying a message.

In the first stage of rehearsals, actors improvised by using repeatable elements of movement exercises of many types, at first attempting to use them to create particular gestures and rhythms with their own forms. Then, they would try to give meaning to their formalized gestures so as to make them legible to their partners and, with their help, to create a spatial action, which by then would always be permeated with emotion. At this stage, the semantic legibility of the improvisation was secondary; it was most important to find the specifics of movement, its rhythms, types of voice, an opportunity to act and to release the characters that had “been born” of the actors’ improvisation. Now, emotional stresses appeared among the characters, both positive ones and distrustful ones or ones that carried the embers of conflict. Often these tensions were instantly transformed into cooperation and action.



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*Wormwood*, 1985. Reproduced courtesy of the photographer.



*Oh, How Nobly We Have Lived*, 1979. Photographs by Krzysztof Furmanek. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Ósmego Dnia.

Immediately after an improvisation ended, the director, who had not intervened earlier but only observed, would lead a conversation to explain the individual actions, the intentions of the participants in the actions and the contacts among them. It was essential to eliminate any potential misunderstandings right away (these were often made likely by the incomplete clarity of signs), to interpret what had happened and to determine possible directions in which the action could develop. Straight after this discussion, the improvisation would be repeated, and the formalized gestures of the rehearsal would be replaced with actions that were legible and as unambiguous as possible. Extraverbal “dialogues” would be developed, there would be an opportunity to add new characters to the action and, if the occasion arose, to improvise new events.

After the next discussion, the group would decide, generally in harmony with the director’s opinion, which threads to develop, what was indispensable, what should be preserved, and what should be eliminated. Then, the action resumed. There was less and less improvisation as gestures, cooperation, rhythms, and essential sounds were repeated, creating semantic material and theatrical fiber. We would go back to the material prepared in this way in a few days or a few months and add new tasks or confront it with other actions created in other improvisations.

The outcome of these improvisations consisted both of actions that would become focal points for whole sequences in the performance and of minor scenes, situations between people on the margins of the principal theme, or even individual actions by the characters. It also happened sometimes that we would discard materials created through improvisation, despite their unquestionable theatrical value, because they did not prove useful for the performance we were creating (for example, for thematic reasons). It also happened that an action was preserved in the memories and bodies of the actors and would return years later in a different context.

After developing a few or a dozen improvisations which, we were certain, included new and interesting things, we would become aware of the fundamental questions we were working on, the direction in which we were going and the issues to which we wanted to draw attention. I must mention an important, basic fact here. For us, the theatre was not only a means of conveying fears, phobias, hopes, or points of view. It was, most importantly, a method of learning about ourselves and a tool for getting to know the world. This system of improvising about the various sources, subjects, and events which we were passionate about was also a way to learn and to create.

One can look for subjects for improvisation everywhere, both in the realities of everyday life and in experiences gained from reading or from coming into contact with the art that moves us: poetry, music, painting, and so forth. One thing is important: whatever is to serve as the reason for improvisation must make us active and not contemplative. It must give rise to tension, anguish, and conflict, and not a smile of satisfaction and harmony. It must create an urge to ask questions and not to give answers. The subject should therefore concern the values, images, and temptations that we carry in our bosom, which trouble and even pain us. And it must place these values and emotions in a concrete, physical and biological, world. Yet experience has taught us that one should avoid literal topics that are devoid of mystery or even of metaphor, for their materiality, their obviousness, will obliterate dramatic possibilities and make the action banal.

Let me try to give a few examples. It is difficult to improvise on the subject of “flight,” since it is too general. But one can improvise on interpretations – of birds of prey, actions involving birds, or the myth of Icarus – that have been processed concretely. It is difficult to improvise about life at a railway station in a big city, but one can work on waiting for a particular train (to a hospital, a prison, a religious pilgrimage, a military swearing-in ceremony or “a miracle” as in *Piotun* ([Wormwood](#)) or to imagine that it is precisely there, first and above all, that the angels of revolution or of the Apocalypse will appear (*Ach, jakże godnie żyliśmy* [[Oh, How Nobly We Have Lived](#)]). We will inevitably descend into triteness if we use revolutionary hymns to create a reaction of revolt, but we can uncover shocking virtues by laboring to penetrate hospital memories, mythological motifs, or even drunkards’ troubles. Improvisation based on rhythmic music will always yield the same effect of releasing energy without a theatrical structure, but improvisation launched by listening to fragments of a symphony may lead to a surprising series of events. We can improvise by accepting a painting or a series of drawings as our subject, provided that we do not intend to recreate the painter’s interpretation as a tableau vivant but that we want to stretch the moment captured on the canvas, to give the figures a chance to disentangle themselves from oppression or to explain themselves.



*Report from a Besieged City*, 1983. Photograph by Krzysztof Furmanek. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Ósmego Dnia.

We frequently improvised by using fragments of poems as a starting point. One of Zbigniew Herbert's poems gave us enough material for a whole production (*Report from a Besieged City*), just as Ryszard Krynicki's "The Battleship Potemkin" turned out to be rich enough to construct another distinct production (*Cuda i Mięso* [*Miracles and Meat*]) around it, of course also using the actors' own experiences and at times remote associations. I remember that we frequently improvised around the quotation "for this earth is merely an inn on the path of our eternal journey," each time differently and never repeating the poetics of the Laboratory Theatre, even though it is the motto of their *Constant Prince*. Everyone has a different "earth that is their inn" and views his "eternal journey" differently.

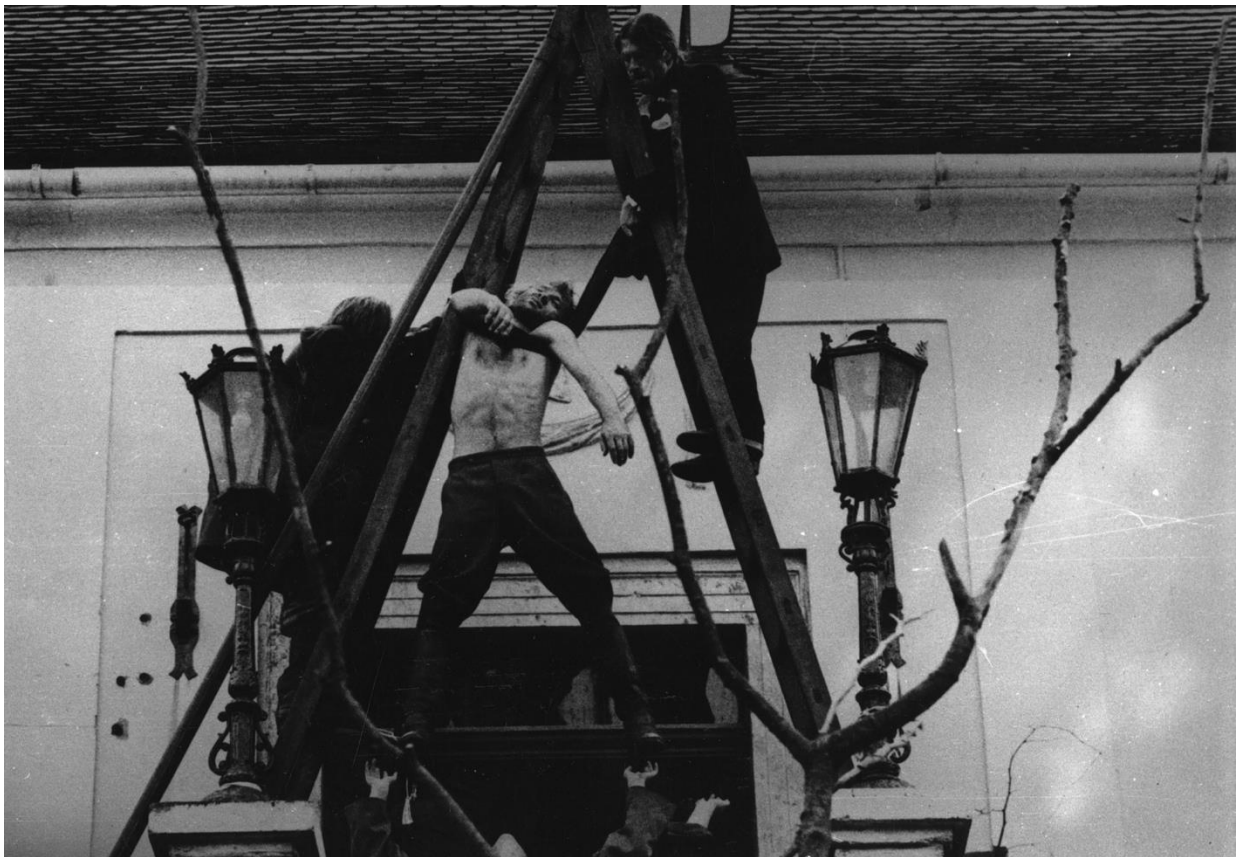
It is quite easy to find a memory or an experience, or to create a formula which will give the actors an opportunity for a free and outright insane improvisation. But it is enormously difficult to plan a whole system of themes in such a way as to mark the coordinates of a territory which the performance that is being created can analyze and describe. And this is the most important task, which for the director can be terrifyingly difficult, laborious, and exhausting.

Theatrical improvisation aims to construct a production. But its character conceals traps that make this basic task difficult. They are many, and I will not talk about all of them. It happens that when improvisation lacks a disciplining force and the director's control that can be felt by the improvisers it is transformed into a sort of psychotherapy that naturally aims to relieve and destroy the psychic tensions indispensable in the theatre. It happens that it is transformed into the sort of uncontrollable excess of an avalanche. It happens that, contrary to what is wanted, it stops at external signs, manifestations devoid of the necessary impetus to delve more deeply into getting to know oneself and unveiling inner secrets, discarding the next mask or shell. Rules of action must be created to avoid these dangers. I mentioned this at the beginning: work on improvisation, which is spontaneous and free, must be accompanied by in-depth work on the techniques of expression. The actor needs to be competent to feel free in his action, to go beyond technique and then to reject it.





*Report from a Besieged City, 1983. Photograph by Krzysztof Furmanek. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Ósmego Dnia.*



*Miracles and Meat*, 1984. Photographs by Krzysztof Furmanek. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Ósmego Dnia.

It is necessary to memorize the improvisation or, rather, whatever was most important in it, the impulses that provoked an action or a sequence of events. In the short term this seems quite simple and natural, but because the process of working as a group is practically endless, the actor must learn to register it. In our experience, describing actions, manifestations, and the external image of events was not very useful. But to register seemingly remote reflections, associations, and loose images triggered by improvisation is exceptionally useful. It not only reminds the actors of the course of inner action but also becomes a source of texts for performances.

I must add here, however, that improvisations were never the sole material sufficient to create a performance. They built a foundation, key scenes, even sequences, they helped to form characters, determined the style or the language of the performance. But alongside it, a long list arose of problems in need of solutions. Many discrete situations needed to be joined together into a whole that was developed according to accepted rules; and here, it was essential to formulate new tasks for the actors and to correct their actions, their mutual tensions, and their emotional rhythms. It was necessary to invent and to stage scenes which would develop, to make whole or even transform the trains of thought created in the course of the improvisation. It was necessary to develop the whole dimension of the performance as a spectacle, from the interior design to the interaction with props and the lighting. It was necessary to add texts to wrap up the action or to lead it in the desired direction. Or it could all be composed anew, coordinated rhythmically on all levels (from the inner rhythms of particular individual actions to the rhythms of sequences). All this was up to the director: from the first impulses to improvise to the oversight of the course of these impulses, the choice of important elements to develop further and the interpretation of the materials being created, to its final form as spectacle and thought. I must add here that in the Theatre of the Eighth Day the entire creative process and all its elements remained open to all its members. On top of actions that were strictly theirs, the actors all contributed their own ideas for staging, creating artistic visions, and planning texts, and they all took part in the discussions and heated disputes about the artistic form and intellectual meaning of the performances.

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In conclusion, I should answer the question about whether the working methods that I have tried to describe are a unique experiment, characteristic only of the Theatre of the Eighth Day or whether they would have a chance to exist, to serve as creative potential outside this group?

I do not know.

In the Theatre of the Eighth Day the method of collective improvisation yielded creative results that clearly had an impact on audiences. We learned elements of this method in dozens of workshops in a dozen countries. Perhaps somewhere else this method does exist ... I know that it does exist, does work, but it has been transformed, subordinated to the needs and visions of other creators, in elements, shreds, fragments ... It is good this way.

In my work, with different groups, I still use improvisation, both individual and collective, to develop the basic materials for productions. I am certain that this method is creative, that it opens up unknown and interesting paths to the actors, leading them to surpass their existing abilities.

Yet I fear that our generation's experience, which fused artistic revolt with social rebellion, ended together with it. After all, it was we ourselves who chose our stance of avant-garde rebels, fully aware that one of the characteristics of avant-gardes is their rejection of the achievements of their predecessors. It is time for a new avant-garde now, it is coming, and it will cut us off from the future. This is why I can appear here with a clear conscience, as a historical witness and as a theoretician.

– *Translated by Maya Latynski*

**Lech Raczak** was one of the cofounders of the Theatre of the Eighth Day and from 1968 to 1993 the artistic director of the troupe. Since 1993, he has been the artistic director of the international theatre company Sekta, the Polski Theatre in Poznań, and the International Theatre Festival Malta in Poznań. In addition, as a freelance director he has directed plays all over Poland, as well as in Italy. Altogether, he has directed nearly seventy productions. He leads theatre workshops all over Europe and teaches at the Artistic University in Poznań. He is the author of many theoretical and critical texts about the theatre published in Poland and abroad, among them the recently published *Szaleństwo i metoda: 48 tekstów o teatrze* (Madness and Method: 48 Texts about the Theatre).