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## WITOLD GOMBROWICZ Diary of a Playwright

I am a saint. Yes, I am a saint . . . and an ascetic.

—*Witold Gombrowicz*, *Diary* (1967)<sup>1</sup>

The state of [Witold Gombrowicz's] oeuvre in 1989 was still imbalanced: in his own words, a "half-cooked steak." Gombrowicz was certainly known, and above all as a playwright. His plays were staged in the largest theaters in Europe. Nevertheless, in most countries (excluding France, Germany, and the Netherlands) only a small part of his work was known, and the most overlooked and poorly-handled text was his *Diary*.

—*Rita Gombrowicz*, *Introduction to Kronos*<sup>2</sup>

### GOMBROWICZ CONTRA THEATER

Witold Gombrowicz's *Diary* does not fulfill any of the obvious expectations of such a work by a major playwright. Gombrowicz never attended the performance of his works or collaborated in any way with producers, directors, actors, designers, or composers. As a result, there is a complete dearth of theatrical anecdote in the text, though he expresses profound vindication at the positive critical response in Paris and Stockholm to *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia*. References to other contemporary playwrights such as Beckett, Brecht, or Weiss are fleeting and superficial.

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1. Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, trans. Lillian Vallee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 714.

2. Rita Gombrowicz, "Na wypadek pożaru," introduction to Witold Gombrowicz, *Kronos* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2013), 12. English translation by Charles Buchan.

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Gombrowicz's interest in Genet was apparently limited to the novels and [Jean-Paul] Sartre's critical biography *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr*. Virgilio Piñera was one of Gombrowicz's closest contacts in Buenos Aires and a major presence in the *Diary*, and he went on to become a prolific and influential playwright in his native Cuba, but their respective interest in playwriting was apparently not a significant part of their relationship. [Henrik] Ibsen receives several respectful mentions, but functions primarily as the author of the kind of plays that Gombrowicz is not interested in writing himself.

In the *Diary*, Gombrowicz does not make a single reference to the emergence of major Polish auteur directors at the time, such as Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, or Konrad Swinarski.<sup>3</sup> This indifference was not mutual, however: we now know that both Grotowski and Kantor were intensely interested in Gombrowicz's work, and Grotowski a particularly devoted reader of the *Diary*.<sup>4</sup> Gombrowicz does take time to demolish the dramatic works of his older compatriots Stanisław Przybyśzewski and Stanisław Wyspiański, but offers no opinion of the numerous plays of S.I. Witkiewicz (also known as Witkacy), his fellow traveler in Poland's interwar avant-garde, who otherwise figures prominently.

Gombrowicz in performance, meanwhile, continues to flourish both in Poland and internationally, with over 900 productions in at least forty countries to date—of which the majority have been performed in languages other than Polish. The performances of Gombrowicz's work globally have spanned a wide variety of performance genres and media and include a significant number of adaptations of his nondramatic works. Along with Sławomir Mrożek, Gombrowicz over time has become Poland's most produced playwright internationally, and Gombrowicz's *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* over the years has very likely been the most produced Polish play abroad. In live performance, in fact, the play has certainly been the most common first point of contact between Gombrowicz and international audiences (constituting his primary "readership" outside Poland). Before the publication of Monika Żółkoś's 2001 critical study *Ciało mówiące* (The speaking body), *Ivona* was

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3. Swinarski's production of the world premiere of Peter Weiss's *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade (Marat/Sade)* took place in West Berlin on April 24, 1964, while Gombrowicz was still in residence there. This was also roughly six months after Swinarski's wife, Barbara Witek-Swinarska, published her controversial "interview" with Gombrowicz in the Polish communist press, following a meeting with him shortly after his arrival in West Berlin. Gombrowicz and others denounced Swinarska's text as an intentional defamation, which may have been written at the prompting of Polish communist security forces.

4. See Ludwik Flaszen, *Grotowski & Company*, trans. Andrzej Wojtasik with Paul Allain and ed. Paul Allain (Holstebro/Malta/Wrocław: Icarus, 2010).

the most overlooked and poorly handled text in Polish critical writing devoted to Gombrowicz's work.<sup>5</sup>

In his "Final Interview," Gombrowicz acknowledged only three playwrights as influences on his work: Shakespeare, Goethe, and Alfred Jarry. Significantly, none of the three is Polish, and Jarry the only modern playwright on the list. These playwrights, however, all figure prominently in the *Diary*, which is peppered with quotations from no fewer than eight plays by Shakespeare, whose work he knew only in Polish translation. But other than invoking Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Goethe's *Faust* as models for the writing and staging of *The Marriage*, the references to these playwrights are rarely about things theatrical per se. The life and anarchic comic spirit of the surrealist Jarry clearly inspired Gombrowicz as much as did Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* (which Gombrowicz reviewed when it first appeared in a Polish translation in the 1930s).

Gombrowicz's unfinished play, *History*, edited into a publishable form by Konstanty Jeleński for *Kultura* in 1975, is Gombrowicz's only explicitly autobiographical work in drama or fiction and is his only play set explicitly in pre-World War II Poland. In Jeleński's seminal introduction to the play, "From Bare-Footedness to Nudity," he argues for the text as a kind of Rosetta stone for Gombrowicz's theater, laying out a consistent typology of characters in the three major plays for which the template is the Gombrowicz family as portrayed in *History*.<sup>6</sup> At the center of the play is the only character in Gombrowicz's plays called "Witold," and in the manuscript and published text his speeches are preceded by "I" instead of the character's name. Gombrowicz's "I" in *History* is a variation on the "I" that provides the opening refrain to the *Diary*. Both *History* and the first years of the *Diary* were written at the same time.

Gombrowicz's theatrical career was paradoxical, yet its contradictions also reflected his character. His obsession with theater and all other forms of public spectacle (duels, religious services, formal banquets, fashion shows, masked balls, etc.) was combined with an eccentric, egotistical and self-absorbed character. His

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5. This curious phenomenon is in part of reflection of the very different circulation of Gombrowicz's texts in Western Europe and communist Poland before the 1970s, when *Ivona* was widely produced and published abroad in foreign languages, it was not produced or published in Poland between 1958 and 1975. While *Ivona* is performed as often as the rest of Gombrowicz's writing *combined* abroad (50 percent of all productions to date), in Poland since 1974, the play constitutes instead a significant minority of the total stage productions of his work. In the German-speaking world since the 1960s, 70–80 percent of all stage productions of Gombrowicz's work consist of *Ivona*. Over time, the play has been performed more than twice as frequently in German as in Polish and has long enjoyed the status of an evergreen modern classic in the German theater world, alongside the works of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, or Jean Genet.

6. Konstanty Jeleński, "Od bosości do nagości: O nieznannej sztuce Witolda Gombrowicza," *Kultura* 10, no. 337 (1975): 3–28.

instincts for self-dramatization and rebellion were matched by an acute sense of shame, all of which were only heightened by his experience in exile in Argentina. Bruno Schulz aptly diagnosed the deep sources of the playwright's insights in his 1938 review of the novel *Ferdydurke*:

[Gombrowicz's] discoveries are not made on the smooth, safe path of pure speculation and cold cognition. Gombrowicz comes to them by way of pathology, his own pathology.<sup>7</sup>

To which Gombrowicz decades later replied in *A Kind of Testament*:

This was true.

My accursed pathology. Yet I ripped it out of myself, it was in the book, it was simply the subject matter of *Ferdydurke* and no longer myself. So pride yourself, author! You have disinterred your deepest shames, you have cast them from you. And now, transformed into a "zone of subculture," your dustbin has become your claim to fame. So pride yourself, inventor of the zone of subculture!

Ugh!<sup>8</sup>

In Gombrowicz's work through *The Marriage*, he repeatedly attempted a *diagnosis* of the pathologies that Schulz pinpointed in his work.

The dilemma for Gombrowicz was that in the very source of his greatest insight, his own "pathology," also lay the greatest potential for public shame. Yet it was precisely to the most public form of expression, the theater, to which he was obsessively drawn. His attempts to resolve this dilemma provides one of the essential keys to the theatrical logic at work beneath his life and writing, particularly in the *Diary*.

Various sources of shame are easy to identify in Gombrowicz: Polishness, exile, his refusal to conform to conventional categories of masculinity and sexuality. A less obvious source of shame was his fatal attraction to theater, which no less than the others was a life-long source of both turmoil and creative energy.

#### PLAYWRIGHT, ACTOR, AND DIRECTOR

The first appearance of Gombrowicz's *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* in print in *Skamander* in 1938 inspired exactly one press review, and the play was otherwise ignored in Polish theater at the time. Years later, Gombrowicz would share this anecdote in *Polish Memories*:

At last *Ivona* was finished. I asked [Adam] Mauersberger's advice on what to do with it.

7. Bruno Schulz, *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz, With Selected Prose*, ed. Jerzy Ficowski and trans. Walter Arndt with Victoria Nelson (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 161.

8. Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, ed. Dominique de Roux and trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), 66.

“Show it to Mira,” he said. “She’s the most intelligent actress I know, and she has a fine understanding of the theater. She’ll tell you if it can be played, and who you should give it to.”

Mira Zimińska was indeed intelligent, and witty, too. However, I had my reasons for concern, since with actors, and especially actresses, I was in a state of war. Was it because as I was fond of saying in theater circles, someone who puts on faces in public is not a respectable person? No, the real reason was deeper and more hidden. I didn’t like performers: I considered them a lower category of artist, and it angered me that they enjoyed greater fame and recognition than true creators. This was probably one more manifestation of my inner protest against second-rateness in art, which irritated me all the more because it made me think of our Polish second-rateness in world culture. But I was even more critical of actresses than of actors and was in the habit of pretending that I didn’t know them—I would introduce myself to each one every time I met them. Once, when for the fifth time I presented myself courteously and with a gallant bow to a certain diva, she immediately seized a glass of water and poured it over my head.

Mira luckily was not set against me. But her theatrical horizons were insufficiently broad for her to appreciate an innovative play like *Ivona*. She told me that the beginning wasn’t bad, but that the rest was hopeless.<sup>9</sup>

*Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* would wait almost twenty years to be produced.

Gombrowicz neglected to take the play with him on his fateful voyage to Buenos Aires in 1939 and obtained a copy of the text again only after the end of the war. *Ivona* proved the only play by Gombrowicz professionally produced in Polish in his lifetime—while he was still living in exile in Argentina. The play enjoyed a successful critical and popular debut in Warsaw’s sparkling new Palace of Culture in 1957, directed by Halina Mikołajska. The production was also broadcast on Polish television in 1958, before the ban on the performance and publication of Gombrowicz in Poland was renewed by the country’s communist leaders. Polish theater had clearly come a long way since the days of Mira Zimińska. In interwar Poland, his dramatic work suffered from incomprehension and neglect; in postwar communist Poland, it was suddenly both an opportunity and a threat.

In 1965, *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* was successfully launched internationally at the Odéon Theater in Paris in a production directed by the Argentine Jorge Lavelli and designed by the Pole Krystyna Zachwatowicz. Though already living in France, Gombrowicz did not attend the production.

The only occasion on which Gombrowicz ever attended any of his plays in performance was a production of *Ivona* by an amateur theater company in Nice in 1967. Overcome by a severe asthma attack, Gombrowicz was forced to leave the theater at intermission and missed the second half of the performance. According to Rita Gombrowicz, who was with him at the time, the cause of the asthma attack was the intensity of his emotional reaction at seeing the play actually performed.

9. Witold Gombrowicz, *Polish Memories*, trans. Bill Johnston (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 105–14.  
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Since then, the silent character of Ivona has proven one of the greatest female roles in the Polish repertory and demands an actor capable of both great physical eloquence and deep inner life. Among the many distinguished actors that have played the role was the young Pina Bausch in Boris Blacher's 1973 German opera version of the play. The play has inspired more operatic versions than any other twentieth-century play (the most recent in 2009 by the Belgian composer Philippe Boesmans). This with an all-but-silent title character.

Gombrowicz, a playwright who was denied access to the stage until he was past fifty years old, instead became an actor in his personal and literary life, an actor whose most accomplished role was as his own alter ego. Gombrowicz as a major playwright represents an extreme in theater history in both his absolute distance from the working world of the theater and in his purposefully contradictory and ambiguous use of his own persona within and around his work.

In the words of the Hungarian-born French actress and translator Véronique Charaire, who frequently visited Gombrowicz in Venice:

He always said the opposite of what someone else said in order to provoke a reaction. He loved paradoxes. He loved contradictions. He loved to play. Every discussion with him, regardless of the subject, was a theatrical performance. He would play act, disguise himself, assuming the mien of a different person. He was neither stagey nor a ham. He was an excellent actor, who never overdid anything.<sup>10</sup>

The most significant and complex character created by Gombrowicz is the one that he modeled on himself in his novels and plays. "Witold" in his many and varied incarnations allowed Gombrowicz to dramatize various potential "selves" rather than a coherent, factually autobiographical one. The most intentionally ambiguous form of this "character" is as the author of the *Diary*, which is best understood as an exercise in the conscious creation of a literary persona, rather than as a factually reliable account of Gombrowicz's day-to-day life. Reading Gombrowicz's *Kronos* today together with the *Diary* and his late memoir *A Kind of Testament* reveals numerous discrepancies and his literary manipulations of fact in the earlier books. Rita Gombrowicz has gone so far as to say that Gombrowicz's novels could be described as his autobiography and the *Diary* as a novel. Konstanty Jeleński argued for the autobiographical nature of the major plays, beyond the obvious case of *History*. To this, I would add that everything Gombrowicz wrote can be understood as *performance*.

To grasp the totality of Gombrowicz's life in fact requires the comprehensive reading not just of the *Diary*, *A Kind of Testament*, *Polish Memories*, *Argentine Wanderings*, and *Kronos*, but also of his plays, fiction, and the reportage provided by his friends, colleagues, and disciples in Rita Gombrowicz's two books *Gombrowicz en Argentine* and *Gombrowicz en Europe*. Gombrowicz hid certain truths of his life

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10. Véronique Charaire, in Rita Gombrowicz, *Gombrowicz en Europe* (Paris: Denoël, 1988), 293. English translation by Allen Kufarski.

in plain sight in his fiction and plays, and blatantly invented episodes out of thin air in his *Diary*. While the coldly factual text of *Kronos* fills certain essential gaps in our knowledge of Gombrowicz's life, it still provides at best only a partial truth. The American Gombrowicz scholar Beth Holmgren has written that:

Gombrowicz's *Diary* offers neither a definitive portrait of the artist nor a private record of an individual's thoughts and experiences, but, rather, a provocative, instructive, mystifying, and self-defending enactment of the artist's personality and self-styled personal mission—an enactment, moreover, which avails itself of the possibilities and, ultimately, must abide by the limitations (both stylistic and ontological) of artistic expression. . . .

In the *Diary*, therefore, Gombrowicz must somehow combine two different models of expression: the "normal" reporting voice of a personal diarist and the "artifice"—the devices and various modes of narration—employed in a fictional work. Moreover, in order to ensure his text as an act of personal engagement, an act by which the artist can, on his own behalf, address and involve his readers, the persona represents the *Diary* as an aggressive dialogue, a work unfolding "in action" (*w akcji*) with its audience.<sup>11</sup>

Gombrowicz uses many tactics in the *Diary*, but his objective is always to provoke the reader into active response (*w akcji*). There is no "fourth wall" between Gombrowicz and the reader of his *Diary*, and the author's tacit relationship with the reader is not merely that of an actor/character speaking a soliloquy directly to an audience but of one actor sharing the stage with another (the reader). Gombrowicz's theatrical sensibilities are therefore not found in the contents of the *Diary* but, rather, in the performative style of its voice and gambits with the reader.

The performative conceit of Gombrowicz's *Diary* is more understandable as that of a private improvisatory rehearsal between the author and the reader than of a public performance. The experience of reading the *Diary* could be compared to an improvisational exercise for two actors, with givens that recall Edward Albee's *Zoo Story* or Gombrowicz's own *Ivona*: plays with silent characters provoked and challenged by a loquacious and vaguely desperate stranger. In these works, the speaking character *insists* on the establishment of a relationship with the listener and fails in his/her gambit if the listener is only provoked to leave. It also recalls the premise of Louis Malle's classic 1981 film *My Dinner with André*, which confronts a loquacious and vaguely desperate character named André Gregory (played by the actual stage director André Gregory) and the anything-but-passive listener Wallace Shawn (also a character played by a well-known actor with the same name). Gregory and Shawn also shared screenwriting credit for the film. For a theater artist no less than for a writer, the experience of Gombrowicz's *Diary* is of a powerful goad to *making one's own work*.

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11. Beth Holmgren, "First Person Liberties: The Persona in the Work of Witold Gombrowicz and Abram Terc," PhD diss., Harvard University, 1987, 69, 111.

The nature of the *Diary* on this score is also reflected in the history of Gombrowicz in performance: since 1988 there have been over twenty attempts to adapt the *Diary* in myriad ways into theatrical form in Poland, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Perhaps the most telling example is the 1986 experimental Argentine film *Gombrowicz o la seducción (Representado por sus discípulos)* (Gombrowicz or seduction: As presented by his disciples), directed by Alberto Fischerman. In this film, a half-dozen protégés of Gombrowicz in Argentina improvise a kind of séance in honor of their deceased Polish mentor and the conversations he led in various cafés while in Argentina. This séance consists of each performer in turn “becoming” Gombrowicz and provoking the other members of the group in kind. The paradox of this homage is the lack of actual quotation of Gombrowicz: each speaks as him- or herself *under the influence* of Gombrowicz, with the result being a new collective work. The café table was perhaps the most effective stage for Gombrowicz’s own improvised performances with friends and acquaintances as described by Véronique Charaire and many others.

The impact of Gombrowicz’s literary persona and his power to goad other writers are reflected in the number of original fictional and dramatic works in which his influence is openly acknowledged and the various ways in which he appears as a character. These include Jerzy Andrzejewski’s novel *Idzie skacząc po górach* (He cometh leaping upon the mountains, 1963), the Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia’s *Respiración artificial* (Artificial respiration, 1981), English novelist and journalist Piers Paul Read’s *Polonaise* (1976), and Maurice Dantec’s French detective novel *Les racines du mal* (The roots of evil, 1995). In 2013, the American playwright John Guare (the author of *Six Degrees of Separation*) wove Gombrowicz as a character into his play *3 Kinds of Exile*, which was widely reviewed in the American press. John Guare’s own performance in the play, performing a character named after himself, very much followed the precedent of Gombrowicz’s own collection of performed personas.

In the *Diary*, Gombrowicz openly admitted the directorial nature of his thinking and behavior. In one of several passages where he talks about himself in the third person and in italics (as if a character in a novel), he writes:

*Gombrowicz felt that exceptionally malicious circumstances forced him to such directing of his personal drama in the Diary (although perhaps it was also justified by the spirit of his writing, in which the idea of directing and the figure of the director appear so often)—therefore, no one ought to reproach him for this. (1960)<sup>12</sup>*

More concretely, Gombrowicz wrote of *The Marriage*:

What should I do? *The Marriage* without theater is like a fish without water. Yes, because not only is it a drama written for the theater, it is also, in its intention, the very liberating theatricality of existence. I, however, fear that no one besides me will be able to direct it and that the production will flop to my great shame, ruining the stage career of that work for many years to come. (1954)<sup>13</sup>

12. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 461–62.  
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13. *Ibid.*, 77.



This passage captures the defining paradox of Gombrowicz and theatrical performance: he understands that the work is only complete and alive when performed, yet he remained aloof from every aspect of actual theatrical practice, neither attending performances of his work nor involving himself collaboratively with the various theater artists that eventually made his work a success in performance.

Gombrowicz's tacit identification with the role of director made his working relations with the actual directors of his work either distanced or volatile. He denied notable Polish directors such as Tadeusz Byrski and Tadeusz Kantor permission to do his plays in Poland. Given Kantor's later international fame, Gombrowicz's decision against Kantor's request to direct *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* in the 1950s today looks like a particularly perverse and self-confounding one. The young Jerzy Jarocki, eventually the greatest Polish director of *The Marriage* in multiple productions in Poland and abroad, probably benefitted from doing the first Polish production of the play in an underground student venue without the playwright's advance knowledge or approval (Jarocki's first professional production of *The Marriage* took place several years after Gombrowicz's death). Jorge Lavelli, the Argentine director whose production in Paris in 1964 launched *The Marriage* to international success, summarized Gombrowicz's relations with him as defined by mistrust. In an unprecedented move, Gombrowicz requested permission to attend Lavelli's rehearsals in Paris, a request which the young director warily denied. While never grudging about later acknowledging the success that Lavelli's staging ultimately enjoyed, Gombrowicz never attended a performance of the production.

In contrast, Gombrowicz was charmed by the Polish scenographer Krystyna Zachwatowicz, who collaborated with both Jarocki in Poland and Lavelli in France, and by Véronique Charaire. But then, designers, actors, and translators are essential collaborators for a director, and generally not rivals for control of a production. Charaire had the good judgment to wait until after Gombrowicz's death to adapt and direct two of his short stories for French radio.

As with *Ivona*, Gombrowicz the playwright avidly followed the success of *The Marriage* around Europe from afar. In *A Kind of Testament* he happily acknowledges that in addition to Lavelli's success with the play that:

*The Marriage* was . . . produced by a great director, Alf Sjöberg, at the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Stockholm. Sjöberg put a great deal of work and passion into the rehearsals of *The Marriage* and then of *Princess Ivona*, and the two plays had a tremendous success. The third of the best productions of *The Marriage* was at the Schiller Theater in Berlin, where there were fifty-one curtain calls on the first night. I owe that to the director Ernst Schröder and a troupe of excellent actors, above all to Helmut Greim.

Schröder and his troupe, in collaboration with the renowned Czech scenographer Josef Svoboda, would go on to do all three of Gombrowicz's major plays at the Schiller Theater.

The passage above is followed by a necessary explanation, and an uncharacteristically vague and meek disclaimer.

Unfortunately, by a concurrence of annoying circumstances, I didn't see any of these performances. To tell the truth, I haven't set foot in a theatre for at least thirty years. I write plays, but I never go to any. . . . I don't know why . . . out of laziness, perhaps.<sup>14</sup>

Could any of these first-rate directors, actors, or designers be blamed for finding this apology less than unconvincing?

#### DIARY OF A TRAGEDIAN

Gombrowicz explodes the frame of theatrical practice per se when he writes in the *Diary* of "the liberating theatricality of existence." Improvisational theatricality was the key to Gombrowicz's philosophical view of identity, meaning, and ethics. It defines what might be described as his secular spirituality, what in the *Diary* he called "the interhuman sphere" and what the protagonist Henryk in *The Marriage* calls "the human church" in his climactic soliloquy (it has become common to conflate these two phrases into "the interhuman church" in writing about Gombrowicz).

It is worth noting on this score the frequency of the terms "spirit" and "soul" in the *Diary*. This from Gombrowicz, the avowed agnostic.

Explicit references to "tragedy" and "the tragic" are also numerous in Gombrowicz's *Diary*, and they span the entire breadth of the text from 1953 through 1969. Uncannily, since it could not have been by the author's design, the last word in the text is "fate." There are many such significant connective tissues in the *Diary*, but the theme of "the tragic" is as emphatic as any. So it is here that we touch the pulse of the text as the diary of Gombrowicz the playwright.

If Gombrowicz was a saint, it was in these terms. If he was a strict and mocking ascetic in his relationship to both organized religion and the working world of the theater, he was at the same time a zealous believer in the ecstatic potential of the theatrical in real life. The betrayal of this ecstatic potential is the essence of his tragic vision.

*The Marriage* was the first embodiment of these ideas in Gombrowicz's writing. The play represented his first cathartic return to serious literary activity after his departure from Poland in 1939. In *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz described the experience of writing the play:

When I wrote:

Johnny:	Nothing.
Henry:	Nothing.
The father:	Transformed.
The mother:	Dislocated.
Johnny:	Overthrown.
Henry:	Distorted.

14. Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, 98-99. From *The Polish Review*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2015. Copyright 2015 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Complimentary copy—not for distribution without permission.

I suddenly burst into tears like a child. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before or since—my nerves, of course!

I wept bitterly and my tears ran on to the paper. What filled me with such despair was not so much the fact that these words evoked a personal catastrophe, as the fact that they came to me so easily. I felt their rhythm and their rhyme like a relentless thorn. I wept with horror at the internal coherence of misfortune. Then I stopped weeping and started writing again.<sup>15</sup>

The cathartic essence of *The Marriage* operates on three levels: in Gombrowicz's experience of the writing; the content of the play; the workings of the play in performance. The intense psychological demands of the play on the actors performing the roles of Henry and Molly, in particular, requires scrupulous attention to maintaining inner psychological boundaries in the performers. There are several accounts of actors experiencing serious emotional problems in the wake of performing the play. Gombrowicz's ecstatic and tragic principle embodied in the performance of *The Marriage* operates like a homeopathic cure or a vaccine: the potential cure is made from the same virus as the disease. Both the virus and its vaccine are behavioral: they involve *enactment* (or the inability to act). Writing and performing are both potentially such acts.

Like the *Diary*, *The Marriage* is the unexpected fruit of Gombrowicz's extreme solitude early in his exile in Argentina. The play is an improvisation performed in the echo chamber of the playwright's own dreaming consciousness, a solipsistic anxiety dream. The protagonist Henry's tragic situation is his isolation; his tragic action is his slippage from potential exaltation to violent paranoia. He begins the play imagining himself as a young Hamlet returning home from abroad; in the course of the play he reveals himself to be more like Macbeth or Richard III. As in *Ivona*, the Shakespearean elements in *The Marriage* freely borrow from the tragedies as well as the comedies, as if *Othello* suddenly were played like *Much Ado About Nothing*, and vice versa. The world of the play is claustrophobic: Elsinore turned into a war-ravaged country house now functioning as a shabby and disreputable inn. Henryk and his family live with a perpetual siege mentality.

The *Diary*, unlike *The Marriage*, was Gombrowicz's public and self-conscious improvisational performance, an intimate chamber theater performed according to the conventions of the public space of a Buenos Aires café. The book is an open-ended invitation to join the improvisation. Gombrowicz's *Diary*, like *Trans-Atlantyk*, provided a *prognosis* for the pessimistic visions found in *Ivona* or *Ferdydurke*, or later in his postwar novels *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*. This new line of work, beginning with *The Marriage*, was the fruit of his years living in exile in Argentina, initially as a stateless refugee and later as a political exile.

This line of later work embodies in various ways the "liberating theatricality of existence" that he first defined in his self-criticism of *The Marriage* in the *Diary*. In a related but contrasting way, Gombrowicz's 1960 novel *Pornografia* treats the

15. *Ibid.*, 98. From *The Polish Review*, Vol 60, No. 2, 2015. Copyright 2015 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Complimentary copy—not for distribution without permission.

collective betrayal and corruption of performance. Significantly, the setting of the novel is occupied Poland, not Argentina. Similarly, the despairing vision of Gombrowicz's last novel *Kosmos* (1965) is also set in prewar Poland. These novels are also characterized by an increasingly perverse erotic tension between the young and ever more "mature" characters. Around the writing of these novels, there is ample independent confirmation of Gombrowicz's own consistent social success with much younger people, most notably his large circle of young admirers in Argentina and his future wife, Rita (who is Québécoise by birth). The English writer Piers Paul Read, a unknown twenty-two-year-old when he first met Gombrowicz in Berlin, recalls the playwright today as "one of the most amusing people I have ever known."<sup>16</sup>

We now know from *Kronos* and Véronique Charaire's report in *Gombrowicz en Europe* how often Gombrowicz was close to suicide between 1953 and his death in 1969. This is hinted by a cryptic passage in the *Diary* from 1965:

Illness.  
Stone.  
Night and vampires.  
With the Charaires under the chestnut tree.  
Death.<sup>17</sup>

What is doubly striking is how often these accounts of suicidal thoughts were shared when Gombrowicz was also writing his most passionate affirmations of liberation through theatrical play in works such as the *Diary*, *Trans-Atlantyck*, and *A Kind of Testament*. This explains the extraordinary stakes of the *Diary* in particular: in it, and other works starting with *The Marriage*, he was repeatedly writing himself out of suicide. The goal of this writing was an existence liberated by the experience of deep and spontaneous improvisational interaction with others. An end to solipsism.

This required overcoming his sense of shame and fear of second-rateness in regard to theater and performance.

### WORDS WITHOUT MUSIC

I don't know what to write. I don't know what to write having finished *Operetta*, and I don't know what to write this minute in my diary. An unenviable predicament. . . .

In my life there is a contradiction that knocks the plate out of my hands at the very moment it nears my lips.

—Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary* (1967)<sup>18</sup>

Don't introduce me to people who never laugh; they are not serious.

—Frédéric Chopin

16. Piers Paul Read, email correspondence with Allen J. Kuharski, July 12, 2013.

17. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 672.

18. *Ibid.*, 714. From *The Polish Review*, Vol 60, No. 2, 2015. Copyright 2015 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Complimentary copy—not for distribution without permission.

Gombrowicz's last play, and last major work in any genre, was *Operetta*, completed in 1967. It was the only play he completed after *The Marriage* and alongside his reflections on tragedy in the *Diary*. The first drafts of *Operetta* were written in 1951. Outtakes from the early drafts of the play were published and performed posthumously as *History*. Significantly, *History* is Gombrowicz's most explicitly autobiographical play or work of fiction—and the final text of *Operetta* among his least autobiographical works and the most open and expansive.

*Operetta* is Gombrowicz's last and grandest shell game with genre: what is apparently a *passéist* return to the most self-indulgent theatrical project of the belle époque—the world of Kálmán, Reynaldo Hahn, and Gilbert & Sullivan—is, in fact, a brutal and unforgiving satire of the destruction of the flabby and inept bourgeois world by two successive violent revolutions: one from the fascist right and the second from the authoritarian left. The ingratiating theatricality of the operetta genre is doubled by the play's plot spun around a failed fashion show. *Operetta* ends with an apotheosis in the form of the nude resurrection of the beautiful but narcoleptic ingénue Albertine. Among the play's many innovative features is arguably the first call for full-stage nudity in Western drama. Gombrowicz's comic hand was never lighter, his theatrical canvas never broader, and his intellectual reach never surer. He was at the peak of his command of pure theatricality and still a step ahead of the theatrical avant-garde of the day.

It took as long for Gombrowicz to complete the play to his satisfaction as it took to write the entire *Diary*. In the *Diary* in 1966 he wrote:

*Operetta*, what's wrong with you, what am I supposed to do, what methods am I supposed to devise so that your sacks speak with the voice of History? . . . The raving of history in sacks, this how I see it right now. . . . Unexpected, ironic, venomous, gale-thunderstorms, and sudden, interrupted songs and dances. Theater is a deceptive thing, it tempts one to be trenchant. How much easier it seems it would be to get to the end of a play than to finish a many-paged novel! But the minute you allow yourself to be drawn into all the traps of this disgusting, awkward form—when the imagination feels overcome by the weight of the people on stage, with the awkwardness of the “real” man who makes the floorboards creak . . . when you understand that you have to affix wings to this burden, to change it into a sign, fable, art . . . bah, then one version after another ends up in the wastebasket and this trifle in several acts begins to swell with the months of your life.<sup>19</sup>

Gombrowicz's completed text for *Operetta* is a libretto for a piece of musical theater with lyrics provided, but no set score. In this, it is like Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* without Kurt Weill's music. Gombrowicz specified to Rita Gombrowicz in his will that each new production of the play must commission a new score and that there must never be one set score for performance. Gombrowicz's infectious

19. *Ibid.*, 686. From The Polish Review, Vol 60, No. 2, 2015. Copyright 2015 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Complimentary copy—not for distribution without permission.

viral theatricality in *Operetta* assumed new dimensions in this work. The result over time has been dozens of scores written for the play by composers from all over the world, and every production therefore is both a new version of the play and a new staging. No other play in theater history has inspired as much creative work by composers. To borrow Guillaume Apollinaire's phrase, *Operetta* is built to create perpetual proliferations of the imagination, both musical and theatrical. The same quality that is found in Gombrowicz's *Diary*.

In *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz wrote: "some say [*Operetta*] is cruel and tragic, others that it is overflowing with an optimistic faith in the perpetually renaissant and naked youth of humanity."<sup>20</sup>

*Operetta* was first produced in Italy and France less than a year after Gombrowicz's death in 1969. Of all his plays, its path to performance was the swiftest and the smoothest.

If Gombrowicz as a playwright was a saint, then he was also, as Genet was for Sartre, a martyr.

Gombrowicz's last two completed works, *Operetta* and *A Kind of Testament*, are both striking for the witty lightness of their tone, which is in stark contrast to the grim accounting of the playwright's daily life at the time provided by *Kronos*. The *Diary*, as well, contains some of Gombrowicz's boldest and most playful passages in 1967–68, the years of his steep final physical decline.

In Gombrowicz's words from the *Diary* in 1962, writing again of himself in the third person and in italics:

*In contrast to the philosopher, moralist, thinker, theologian, the artist is endless play, it is not that the artist conceives of the world from one vantage point—endless shifts take place within him and only he can oppose his own movement to the movement of the world.*

*That is why lightness often becomes profundity—for the artist. Lightness—this is perhaps the most profound thing the artist has to say to the philosopher. And isn't it here that one should look for the reason that epochs with overwhelming metaphysical and moral anxieties, in which people try to fix man in a specific character (as God's creation; as society's creation; as freedom finally), were heavy epochs, bluntly oppressive, the least artistic. How pronouncedly the artism of our lives has changed since 1930, in proportion to our reviving desire for responsibility!*

*Let us continue to look at our little jester—with what sort of leaps and somersault will he continue to amuse us?*<sup>21</sup>

The more tragic his life and circumstances, the lighter Gombrowicz's touch.

20. Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, 145.

21. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 518.  
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