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# GENDER DYNAMICS IN POLISH DRAMA AFTER 2000<sup>1</sup>

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My study of Polish theatre practices developed in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 events which confirmed that ostensibly gender-neutral rules are arranged, in fact, in a male idiom and are far from supporting women's needs. I reported many examples of "gender blindness" including (1) Elżbieta Baniewicz's critical writing on theatre (in which not a single female director was mentioned), (2) various discussions published in the monthly *Dialog* that focused exclusively on male protagonists created by male playwrights and (3) the premier of Krystyna Kofta's feminist play *Professor Mephisto's Salon* (*Salon Profesora Mefisto*, published 1993, performed 2003) in which the crucial feminist message was reversed by changing the female protagonist Fausta back to a male Faust (Grossman 2005).

Since I completed my first overview of new Polish plays in 2003 (publ. 2005), many positive developments have taken place and the situation has improved slightly. During the second decade of post-communist Poland, Krystyna Janda opened her own theatre Teatr Polonia in Warsaw and performed plays by Slavic writers such as Oksana Zabuzko, Dubravka Ugrešić, Vedrana Rudan and others. Janda also staged women-centred plays by Krzysztof Bizio, Przemysław Wojcieszek and Maciej Kowalewski. All of these texts have predominantly or only female casts and centre on women-related issues. They all draw the audience's attention to an area that was largely neglected by the mainstream theatre. In June 2007, Janda presented Bizio's play *Lament* (publ. and perf. 2003), featuring monologues by three women as a free street theatre performance staged on Plac Konstytucji and the spectacle enjoyed great popularity. Whether or not Janda's selection was consciously feminist, the point is that these women-centred plays have been staged and they have attracted massive attention, proving Poles' strong interest in this kind of repertoire.

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<sup>1</sup> I presented an earlier version of this essay at the workshop *Poland Under Feminist Eyes* held at University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, in November 2008. I thank the participants of the event for their useful comments which helped to revise the first draft. I am also indebted to Rictor Norton and Ursula Phillips for their helpful editorial suggestions. All translation of sources material is mine unless noted otherwise.

Another highly positive development took place in 2003 in Warsaw, when Tadeusz Słobodzianek created an experimental stage called the Drama Laboratory (Laboratorium Dramatu). At first it functioned as an annex to the Teatr Narodowy, but since 2005 it has been a part of the Association of Theatre Writers (Towarzystwo Autorów Teatralnych), which brings together several generations of playwrights. The main objective of this initiative is to stage contemporary Polish plays and create a platform for exchange between young playwrights and theatre practitioners. Drama workshops, readings and dress rehearsals followed by discussions are organized on a weekly basis. The list of young playwrights collaborating with the Drama Laboratory includes all recently published and performed names. Its leading role in shaping modern Polish drama cannot be overestimated. Thanks to Słobodzianek's initiative many young women (and men) can have their voices heard and their plays performed. In an interview conducted by Agnieszka Jelonek-Lisowska in June 2008, Słobodzianek publicly admitted that as a result of this experience he was forced to change his long-held belief that women were not capable of writing plays because "it's a creative activity that requires what they don't possess: overall synthetic thinking" (Słobodzianek 2008). The construction of women as irrational is a firm feature of patriarchal discourse which Słobodzianek's confession aptly reflects and leaves no doubt as to the widely held assumptions regarding the "nature" of women.

Meanwhile, theatre critics and scholars created a discussion forum called *Inna Scena (The Other Stage)*, established at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw. This organizes public and academic events such as conferences, book launches, workshops and public debates on selected drama and theatre-related topics. So far, the forum has held three conferences: in December 2005, the main theme was framed by the question: What does it mean to be a woman in theatre today? The following year's symposium focused on body, sex and desire while investigating sexual identity in Polish drama and theatre. The most recent symposium took place in March 2008 and centred on family constellations, exploring family images and values from the perspective of gender and queer studies. Three volumes of conference papers have been published covering all the meetings so far (Adamiecka-Sitek and Buchwald 2006, 2008, 2009). There is no doubt that *The Other Stage* is a valuable and much-needed initiative, but its discourse

tends to concentrate on the biological category of sex and on what “Western” scholarship classifies as “body studies.” It introduces elements of “queer studies” and consequently broadens the area of investigation by including lesbian and gay voices. However, very little (or virtually no) space is devoted to the symbolic representation of gender (as a cultural construct) in Polish drama and theatrical traditions. Most discussions are dominated by a search for sexual identity, “images of women criticism” and the crisis of family values in its broader social context. Such framed discussions stress the mother–daughter bond, the Mother figure/archetype, the father–son relationship and traditionally gendered marriages. The direction of the discourse developed by *The Other Stage* says a lot about the locally privileged paradigm of knowledge that marks the current scholarly horizons and defines its cutting-edge frontier. So I watch this space holding my breath in the hope that future participants will eventually acknowledge a significant contribution made by Polish scholars living abroad.

When one scrutinizes the language of Polish scholarship, it becomes quite obvious that the majority of both sexes still considers feminism to be a dangerous disease of people who are intellectually inferior. The stigma attached to the term “feminism” forces many to search for euphemisms when presenting their views in public. As a result, a feminist discourse develops on the margins of public debates and rarely makes its way into the mainstream critical and/or scholarly press. My experience shows that the general situation has not changed much over the past five years. What has changed, however, is the fact that female ghettos became bigger and louder but their voices and actions do not seem to affect the general pattern or distribution of power. Dubravka Ugrešić has expressed her own concern regarding this issue in a different cultural context:

Gender-oriented female literary critics are seldom of much help. It turns out that the sisterly concern for the status of writing women has contributed to promotion of women writers, but also to keeping the sisters ghettoized, with the one difference that the ghetto has become more visible and loud.  
(2007, 177–178)

A brief overview of the most recent publications devoted to modern Polish theatre and drama proves this observation to be true. The feminist voices (unless they are sensational in nature) are clearly separated from the mainstream press and scholarship.

And even when they do appear, they are immediately “framed” and consequently ridiculed and/or discredited. Critics and scholars such as Elżbieta Baniewicz, Anna Burzyńska, Jacek Kopciński, Piotr Gruszczyński, Roman Pawłowski and others have analyzed the major issues raised by the post-1989 theatre and drama scene by avoiding feminist concerns. While the majority of critics are preoccupied with the new theatre aesthetics, Burzyńska and Pawłowski point out the playwrights’ active engagement with current social problems. Still, I have found only one reference to the highly marginalized position of women in theatre in general. This exception was Pawłowski’s response to the point raised by Halina Filipowicz in her review of the drama anthology *Porno Generation (Pokolenie Porno, 2004)*. Filipowicz noted that the volume offers “a super masculine representation which gives readers a false impression that women in Poland no longer write plays” (Filipowicz 2004a). As a result of this comment, Pawłowski included three female writers in the second volume of the drama anthology and referred to Filipowicz’s point in his introduction (Pawłowski 2006, 8). In November 2005, the weekly supplement to *Gazeta Wyborcza* published his article “Women Make Drama” (“Kobiety robią dramaty”) detailing women’s artistic (and physical) involvement in building their own stage. He describes the history behind the creation of yet another women-friendly theatrical space in Warsaw called Teatr Wytwórnia. The initiative is supported by a foundation that involves two female playwrights, Małgorzata Owsiany and Monika Powalisz.

In June 2007, there was also a one-off initiative, which took place during the second Festival of Central European Theatre held in Lublin, Poland. Part of the festival was devoted to theatre created by women from the New Europe, which was followed by a panel discussion on feminine gender in performance. But, according to the reviewer, opinions as to what “feminine theatre” is were so divided that they did not lead to any substantial outcomes except a general “warning” that “theatre should approach feminism with caution and without drastic simplifications” (Kondrasiuk 2007). Kondrasiuk’s report makes it clear that women who participated in this discussion did not wish to be classified according to the biological category of sex because such essentialist thinking obscures rather than reveals gender-related problems. This issue of feminism and theatre

has been also discussed by such feminist scholars as Krystyna Duniec and Joanna Krakowska.

Other than that, general critical reflection rarely notes women-centred concerns and tends to exclude feminist issues altogether. When discussing recent drama, reviewers and scholars tend to elaborate on the following points: (1) the widespread invasion of nihilistic attitudes in all spheres of life; (2) a general disappointment with the free market economy and capitalism; (3) the widespread crisis of family values and a high level of crime; (4) the dominant role of violence in shaping society's behavioural patterns and collective imagination; (5) the triumph of a global economic empire which promotes commercial values as a universal life model; (6) a speedy decline in intellectual and spiritual values in people's lives; as well as (7) many different kinds of addictions that are not limited to drug problems but include the internet, virtual reality and computer games. Last but not least comes (8) a general lack of authority figures and role models that neither the Catholic church, the political scene nor the post-communist culture seem able to provide. This list obviously does not exhaust other social "aches and pains" that are occasionally coupled with problems related to sexual, ethnic, racial and religious minorities. Other theatre critics and scholars (including those who live abroad) join these voices by stressing that it's high time Poland shook off her "inferiority complex" and overcame the communist trauma (Stephan 1998; Trojanowska 2005). Halina Filipowicz is an exception that confirms this rule. She refers to staging and "framing" "Western" feminism on Polish stages in her article "Shifting a Cultural Paradigm" (2004, especially 175–177) but her voice regrettably has not yet been acknowledged by Polish theatre scholars.

Since the mainstream critical reception of recently published plays does not identify the feminist concerns raised by the playwrights, let me ask instead what do the plays themselves tell us about gender dynamics in Poland? To what extent do they reflect the presence (or absence) of feminist awareness that the non-mainstream Polish press such as *Zadra*, Fundacja *OŚKa*, the publishing house *eFKa* and others struggle to raise? To address these concerns I have adopted the lenses of "gender studies" in order to establish how the stereotypical roles shaped by Polish tradition and culture have been subverted (if at all) and what new alternatives of gendered behaviour (if any) these plays offer. In my

discussion, I have mainly focused on the construction of “femininity” in relation to “masculinity” and – where possible – the traditional history of these notions within the Polish cultural context. Thus in my reading, I regard gender less as a biological fact than as a social product of specific historical circumstances; an institution learned through and perpetuated by culture.<sup>2</sup>

My primary sources constitute plays occasionally published in the monthly *Dialog* and included in the two anthologies collected by Roman Pawłowski: *Porno Generation and Other Tasteless Plays (Pokolenie Porno i inne niesmaczne utwory teatralne, 2004)* and *Made in Poland. Nine Theatre Plays from Poland (Made in Poland. Dziewięć sztuk teatralnych z Polski, 2006)*. Two additional volumes were also published in other series: *Echoes, Replicas, Phantasms. An Anthology of New Polish Drama (Echa, repliki, fantazmaty. Antologia nowego dramatu polskiego, 2005)* and *TR/PL[Theatre/Poland]. An Anthology of New Polish Drama (TR/PL[Theatre/Poland]. Antologia nowego dramatu polskiego, 2006)*. I have also consulted separate volumes of plays published by Anna Burzyńska (2004) and Krzysztof Bizio (2003). Even though this selection offers a fragmented and incomplete list, it provides a representative sample of the most recent Polish playwriting and as such allows us to map out its general trends and tendencies. As a result of my preliminary findings, I have grouped my observations in selected thematic blocs regarding the major points I was able to identify and/or found worth addressing.

***There is no clear connection between the writer’s sex and the problems reflected in their plays***

Oddly enough, feminist and women-centred issues are often explored with much greater sensitivity by male writers than by female ones. This is not the general rule but an observation that can be supported by many examples. A highly sensitive attitude to women-centred problems can be found in such plays as *Heritage (Spuścizna, 2004)* by Ireneusz Koziół and Marek Pruchniewski’s drama *Lucia and Her Children (Łucja i jej dzieci, published 2004, TV production 2003, performed on stage 2005)*. The latter was inspired by a real event and illustrates a kind of modern Medea theme in which the

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance of “local particulars” in gender reading, see Filipowicz (2005).

subaltern (female rural community in this case) is given a very strong voice. So far this is the only play that refers to such controversial subjects as marital rape and the anti-abortion law. It reveals the highly complex nature of these problems and by doing so indicates the urgent need for debating them publicly. Predictably enough, this never happened, and when the play was reviewed much more attention was paid to its aesthetic and generic format as well as universal moral values than the specific social and political background, even though the action is clearly set in a current Polish village. Not a single reviewer raised the issue of the controversial anti-abortion law which was introduced in Poland in 1993, even though Pruchniewski himself referred to it briefly when he was interviewed by Pawłowski (Pruchniewski 2003).

Przemysław Wojcieszek, another male playwright, presents the story of a lesbian couple and the complications they face when social prejudices put their dreams on trial. The play also addresses problems of sexism and homophobia in the workplace. The majority of texts by female writers steer away from such problems as they tend to concentrate on traditionally gendered relationships. Among the exceptions are still-unpublished plays such as *My Life as a Rabbit* (*Moje życie królicze*) by Izabela Filipiak, and *Couple of the Year* (*Para roku*) by Krystyna Kofta. Thus, for all practical purposes (and as far as I know), officially, Wojcieszek is the only playwright who has introduced a lesbian couple in post-1989 drama. This happened several years after the Polish playwright known as Ingmar Villqist established himself as a leading voice in raising gay concerns on the mainstream Polish stages.

A different example of a women-centred play is Robert Bolesto's *Oh Mother and Daughter!* (*O matko i córko!* published and performed 2006). It shows the fate of a mother and daughter turning to prostitution which begins as a sex phone business. Their newly acquired occupation paradoxically divides and bonds them together. Although their presented pattern of behaviour more closely fits the bill of male wish-fulfillment than a sympathetic depiction of such a bread-winning tandem, the play raises important questions regarding the status of single women in a male-centred and money-ruled world. It joins a list of other texts describing the "father-absent, mother-involved nuclear family." Its reception has been mixed but many critics stressed the play's comic appeal and its witty criticism of Polish-style Catholicism with its famous right-wing



broadcasting station Radio Maria. Others found the ease with which sex phone services were combined with the characters' Catholic upbringing and strict religious practices a bit surprising. Because of Bolesto's imaginative depiction and his perceptive eye, this paradox reveals society's double standard for dealing with many morally dubious matters on a much larger scale. However, the problems relating to women's unemployment and exploitation remained untouched by all nine reviews I read.

One more example is Michał Bajer's *Verklärte nacht* (2003, performed 2005), a Pinteresque play which explores an intriguing relationship between two women. Their obscure relationship offers a challenge to actresses as it is too ambiguous to be defined in clear-cut terms. The text provides a fascinating insight into the nature of human memory and psychological games that both characters "play for life" and hence mutually depend on. It's a rich dramatic tapestry that lends itself to many interpretations. *The Sphere of Military Actions* (*Strefa działań wojennych*, published and performed 2006) by the same author utilizes a similar but even more obscure convention where the ties between three nameless characters (A, B and Z) defy a clear definition, while their gender identities and relations framed within an idiom of colloquial language remain difficult to decipher.

The preceding examples do not compare well with texts by female playwrights, mostly due to the fact that women tend to focus on heterosexual couples and relationships. Their protagonists seem to follow the pattern of a female partner who nourishes a relationship by taking care of a male partner, fearing at the same time that one day he'll leave. The couples' emotional ties tend to be in jeopardy as a result of financial pressures and unemployment that affect either one or both sides of the relationship. The primary examples include the following plays by Anna Burzyńska: *Most Suicides Happen on Sunday* (*Najwięcej samobójstw zdarza się w niedzielę*, performed 2003); *Nothing Land* (*Nicland*, performed 2006) and (to a certain extent) *Survival, or, Coming out "Positive"* (*Surwiwal, albo "wyjść na plus"*, performed 2005); as well as *A Child* (*Dziecko*, published 2005) by Maria Spiss. All these plays seem to mirror each other in their representation of stereotypical gender identity: women are emotional (or emotion-hungry) while men are concerned with money and sex. Even if women are bread-winners themselves, they are happy with domestic roles ascribed exclusively to them (*Nothing Land*) and are often deeply concerned with their own looks.

If their beauty is in doubt, their male partners sooner or later will affirm it (*Survival*), while females will praise their male partners' love-making skills (*Survival* and *Most Suicides*). The most audacious subversion in this respect might reveal that love can be a con game while sex is primarily designed for empowering male egos. Yet, these basic roles remain intact in most of the texts I have read. The play *The First Time* (*Pierwszy raz*, 2004, performed 2005) by Michał Walczak reproduces such a pattern as well.

Many female writers also write overtly men-centred plays, either with a male cast only (*Farrago* and *Nondum* by Lidia Amejko) or with secondary roles for women (some plays by Ewa Lachnit). When a woman is occasionally placed in the centre, she is feminine in looks and her psychological make-up fits patriarchal expectations. Thus as a character she presents no potential danger for upsetting the existing political and social status quo. This is confirmed by such plays as Bolesto's *Oh Mother and Daughter!*; *Tiramisu* by Joanna Owsianko, *Testosteron* by Andrzej Saramonowicz and others. I trust the preceding examples demonstrate a variety of possible traps and other complexities involved in applying sex as a biological category to the analysis not only of the Polish drama scene but culture in general.

***A mechanical reversal of gender roles seems to be one of the favourite devices applied by female writers***

Gender switching is presented by Ewa Lachnit in many of her plays, where women act like men while men are disempowered (Grossman 2005). However, the most drastic example of this and an image that is clearly an intended parody occurs in the play *The Daughter of a Hunter, or a Devourer of Poles* (*Córka myśliwego albo Polakożerczyni*, published 2005) by Monika Powalisz. The beautiful 18-year-old protagonist runs around the country with a gun in order to kill "all those who don't think." Although the hunter's daughter loves Poland, she cannot stand Poles. Strangely enough, her victims tend to be men but by the end of the play it becomes clear that such a mechanical and symbolic reversal of roles only confirms the rules of patriarchal society and paradoxically strengthens rather than thwarts the process of their fossilization. This witty black comedy proposes, however, a powerful metaphor for the generational frustration experienced by many who have grown up in post-1989 Poland. The fact that a young woman occupies its

central place and is a daughter of a hunter is also meaningful. Since we know nothing about the protagonist's mother, we are led to believe that her personality is a result of her male-centred upbringing and that being her father's daughter, she (unknowingly?) copies his behaviour.

This kind of empowered femininity is often accompanied by a symbolic image of dethroned masculinity, which is well illustrated by such plays as: Burzyńska's *Men on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mężczyźni na skraju załamania nerwowego*, published 2005, performed 2006), Marek Modzelewski's *The Coronation* (*Koronacja*, published 2004); Michał Walczak's *A Journey Inside the Room* (*Podróż do wnętrza pokoju*, published 2004) and *The First Time*, Tomasz Man's *III* (performed 2004) as well as Anna Burzyńska's *Nothing Land*. But symbolically empowered and masculinized women presented alongside disempowered men do not seem to offer any tempting alternatives for a progressive way forward, whether they are created by men or women. It seems as though the presented world is eternally trapped in a pattern of patriarchal structures which nothing can dissolve and no ideas can subvert.

***There seem to be more female than male dramatists who sympathize with the fate of women dominated by other women who are clearly masculine in their gender behaviour and male-centred***

Before I discuss some recent examples, let me say a few words about an earlier prototype for this kind of character. It can be found in the well-known play *The Morality of Mrs Dulski* (*Moralność Pani Dulskiej*, 1906, first British performance 2004) by Gabriela Zapolska. Being a domestic ruler, Mrs Dulski takes on a masculine role and imposes this mode of behaviour on all her children (a son and two daughters) while her husband turns into a silent non-entity. Mrs Dulski predictably turns her back on other women within her social milieu, proving that sisterhood can never be taken for granted.

Another infamous character with a similar psychological make-up features in Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska's (1891-1945) play *A Woman of Wonder* (*Baba-Dziwo*, 1938). A fascist matriarch, the main protagonist Valida Vrana, surrounds herself with weak, servile women and men who together become a kind of distorted mirror that reflects Her Highness's imagined greatness. Valida abuses her position of power by

dominating and enslaving other women whom she forces into motherhood. She is eventually overthrown by a smart female chemist, Petronika, who produces a poisonous fragrance which leaves the ruler powerless. This is a clever fairy-tale drama where the “good witch” kills the “bad witch” and where female wit and intelligence are rewarded. Nothing can be more misleading when it comes to real life, but the play is chiefly remembered today as a warning against patriarchy and power-hungry women. Few critics reading the play as an anti-feminist manifesto seemed to realize that Valida Vrana illustrates a classic male-centred figure and as far as her gender is concerned, embodies stereotypical masculine not feminine features. Both of these classic plays can be read today as insightful depictions of male-centred women who support the patriarchal structure of power through actions and thoughts that couldn’t be more removed from genuine feminist principles. Keeping this in mind, let’s return to the post-2000 scene where this precious “life lesson” until quite recently has seemed to go astray.

Dana Łukasińska’s dramatic text echoes, in many ways, the prototypical figures just discussed. However, the play focuses on problems concerned with the current job market for women in Poland. Written in a genre of realistic satire and a picaresque story, *Agata in Search of a Job* (*Agata szuka pracy*, published 2003, performed 2005) – unlike other plays – refers directly to feminism in its local context. I shall discuss the play’s major concerns with some sociological interjections that may explain its background in more detail.

The playwright makes clear from the start that the Polish job market for women is, in fact, a sex market since sexual services on behalf of male employers are attached to all job offers. This particular theme has also been explored in such plays as *Facing the Wall* (*Z twarzą przy ścianie*, published 2004) by Anna Bednarska, *A Mark* (*Skaza* (published 2004) by Marzena Broda and *The Price of Silence* (*Cena milczenia*, published 2005) by Iwona Ruskowska-Pawłowicz. All these examples indicate the ubiquitous nature of this problem when women’s employment is concerned. In such a situation, having real skills becomes almost superfluous and Agata (Łukasińska’s protagonist) learns this fast when she applies for a job as a waitress. Since she is not willing to be a sex worker under cover, she decides to sign up for various “trainings” which are offered by the “No Job Centre” and which are supposed to teach her practical skills. The comic

scenes parody initiatives offered to unemployed women in Poland by referring to the two extremes “A Training for Catholic Secretaries” and “Meetings of Vagina Readers” that are meant to raise women’s feminist consciousness. While the first course aims at keeping women in their “proper places,” referring to Catholic modesty as a virtue and necessary obedience to male (Church) rulers; the second one is supposed to enable women to discover a “woman within” and help them get in touch with a primordial Eve. Predictably, none of those courses secure Agata a job, but she learns from these experiences *who she does not want to be* before she is forced to try her luck again as a waitress. While Agata’s humorous “adventures” continue, Łukasińska makes it clear that the attitudes of prospective employers repulse and anger her with the utmost seriousness, no matter how comical the scenes are.

While reading this play, it is important to realize that equal opportunity law has not yet been confirmed by the Polish Constitution. Even though female MPs proposed the first draft of such legislation in 1996, the document has been unsuccessfully debated by the Polish Sejm (Parliament) ever since (Fuszara 2007). As a result, no law guarantees equality between the sexes in Poland, which means that the discrimination depicted in the play is practically legal. And so is the appalling sexist attitude of male employers who people the stage. They are indeed much less caricatures than their real-life counterparts. Since a sexist attitude passes for the norm, it also explains why sex and gender discrimination were hardly mentioned in the play’s reviews. Those who visit Poland frequently know that there is not much exaggeration in the claim that what earns the status of sexual harassment there is almost rape by “Western” standards. Sexism and misogyny are either subjects of jokes or taboo topics – and as far as I am aware, neither has been *seriously* debated in the mainstream press. Thus, Agata’s overall attitude gives hope but this is more of an exception than the norm. The character of Agata’s mother supports this claim as she is very well accustomed to the widely accepted sexism that her daughter rejects. Thus the stereotyped generational roles are here reversed: the daughter marks her ground firmly and refuses decisions that would jeopardize her sense of pride and integrity, while her mother calls her a misfit and a silly girl, using the colloquial youth jargon. In the end, however, it is Agata who assumes the leading “motherly” role and holds on to her empowering principles even though they still bring her no job. It is

clear that Agata's character subverts the construct of traditional femininity as represented by socially accepted and reproduced practices. As an independent subject she attempts to negotiate a partnership for which there seems to be no room in her social milieu, hence it makes perfect sense that in the end she walks out of the play. Łukasińska ends the plot with a utopian flight into an imaginary no-land. In the performance directed by Krzysztof Rekowski, her character walks out of the play (and off the stage) into the audience, so viewers who expect an easy answer are instead left with a big question mark as their traditional expectations for a smooth resolution are challenged.

What transpires from this satirical vision proves that a woman is primarily perceived as a sex object. Or to put it differently, women's understanding of their own status in the community is predominantly identified with the male's perception of it and by extension the role that supports the current distribution of power. This type of femininity is a mixture of the myths of obedience, beauty and sex machine. Łukasińska clearly points out that available models of gendered identities for women form a limited list of straight-jacket roles that do not attract her protagonist. The list includes (1) a Matka-Polka type, (2) a sweet idiot, (3) a butch-femme unisex (babochłop) – meaning here a tractor driver from the socialist times – and (4) a businesswoman (who is a sex worker in disguise). Since Agata cannot identify with any of them and admits to the leader of the “Vagina Readers” group that her gender identity “has not yet been formed,” she hears in response that what counts is “to be aware.” But Agata's further question “to be aware of what?” is left unanswered.

By staging such an exchange, Łukasińska shows the lack of accessible information that could empower women or help them to strengthen their stand. She seems to argue that most women blindly follow stereotypical roles as the only ones presented and available to them. Paradoxically, this is also depicted by the leader of the “Vagina Readers” workshop who has to be hospitalized after she herself takes a prolonged look “inside.” It seems obvious to Łukasińska that officially promoted models are nothing but hollow stereotypes. In fact, the “Vagina Readers” leaders turned out to be working for male managers and are there only for monetary gain, which explains their inability to answer valid questions. To reinforce such disillusionment, Łukasińska introduces a choir of women that – following the classical ancient tradition – comments on the action and

issues warnings to the characters. These warnings remind us of “lessons” that can be drawn from *The Morality of Mrs Dulaska* and *A Woman of Wonder*. They warn women against other women, here especially those who utilize feminist disguise in order to pursue their own male-centred goals. Łukasińska redesigns the slogans in a humorous and creative way; for instance, the choir chants: “One person is an Eve to another person” (“człowiek człowiekowi Ewą”), converting the famous Latin phrase *homo homini lupus*. But on another occasion, the choir incites Agata to join the con game that all other characters seem to support:

Be a woman,  
no man will hire a unisex!  
Men always go after women,  
while feminists go down.  
Say what they want to hear! (2006, 302)

Such lines reveal that Łukasińska is not an anti-feminist writer but one who realizes that there is always a price to be paid for adhering to one’s genuine principles, hence “feminists go down.” The “feminists” she depicts, in fact, reinforce patriarchal relations and by doing so present no danger of abolishing gender inequality. Instead, they paradoxically support the establishment and its current rules of conduct. Consequently, they are rewarded at the expense of feminist-minded women.

There is also another “coded warning” of significance in this play. It has to do with ignoring the Polish local context and looking up to a mythical superior “West.” Łukasińska parodies a mechanical transfer of “Western” feminist slogans and practices that are thoughtlessly imitated rather than comprehensively explained and properly adapted. The primary image of women looking at their mirror-reflected vaginas is one such example. Another one comes with Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “One is not born a woman.” The phrase is taken out of context and thrown into the faces of puzzled female audiences, attending the meetings of the “Vagina Readers”. Thus instead of the intended feminist consciousness-raising workshop, one sees the process of ever-growing confusion. The scene reflects well the state of public affairs regarding feminism in Poland but it is also a “double-edged sword.” On the one hand, the play

admits that mass-produced and mechanically transferred feminism does not offer a real alternative to locally enslaved women. What happens instead is that the slogans are used by female sharks to climb the social ladder via press scandals (or other means) while their actions have very little to do with local feminist concerns and genuine support. On the other hand, the danger of such a device closely approaches “throwing the baby out with the bath water,” since the “warning voices” could be interpreted at worst as an anti-feminist stand, and at best as a funny but confusing image. The local reviews of the play fully support this claim.

Aneta Kyzioł, who reviewed the performance for the weekly *Polityka* while the show was still on, called it a “mud of banalities” and criticized the play’s structural and artistic weaknesses. Joanna Derkaczew, in her highly affirming piece, named Agata a super-woman with an IQ of 180, who stays in her shining armour on a high horse (note the image of knighthood for which there is no female equivalent). She generally applauded the playwright for her audacious jokes and observed that “It’s a woman’s revenge on people, who thoughtlessly imitate roles imposed on them by culture; roles of those who are users themselves and those who are used” (Derkaczew 2005). Although she referred to sexual discrimination and a sexist attitude, she did so in passing, focusing on the play’s humorous aspect. Roman Pawłowski also pointed out that the play addresses an ever-growing problem of discrimination against women in the job market but ended there (Pawłowski 2005). Only one feminist scholar, Ewa Graczyk, analyzing the play three years later in the *The Other Stage* volume, noticed that the female choir supports Agata throughout and consequently enables her to remain a strong individual who seeks fulfillment and independence against all odds. Graczyk also stressed the importance of the mother–daughter bond which she interpreted in highly positive terms. She also soberly observed that Łukasińska might make fun of feminism now but she wouldn’t be a published and produced writer today if it were not for feminist activists who had come before her.

I do not think Łukasińska ridicules feminism, but rather points out the absence of genuine feminist support for women in need. She populates her stage with stereotypes and characters who are reconfigured *Validas*, adapted to the twenty-first century and the ostensible post-feminist phase we are supposed to have entered. Her play does not shy



away from revealing the bitter truth that feminism (here especially in its hoax version) can be used as a career vehicle and if this happens, it is always done at the expense of other women. It was a great disappointment to find out that the play did not initiate any real debate about important feminist concerns. Yet, its presence on the stage and its critical reception have undoubtedly confirmed that to Polish society, women's problems (if identified at all) are their own problems only, and as such are associated with loneliness as well as with the total lack of real supportive networks and/or legislative guidance that could actually help them out of their current predicament.

Another comedy, *Tiramisu* (published 2006, performed 2004) by Joanna Owsianko, leaves behind the land of unemployed women and centres instead on successful female workers. At the same time, it presents female characters who accept offers which Agata rejected: meaning jobs that come with attached (more or less explicit) sex services. Moreover, the female characters are women who (often unknowingly) utilize and promote patriarchal values and rules of conduct. All of them work for a famous advertising company but with time become work and sex machines trapped in a blind race for money, success and men's attention. The falsity of the global sisterhood slogan could not be revealed with more sarcasm and power as the women mercilessly compete and fight with each other.

The play was viciously attacked by such leading feminists as Kazimiera Szczuka, Magdalena Środa and Hanna Samson. According to Pawłowski, they accused Owsianko of presenting lies and false womanhood on stage. Is it possible that they expected to see a prescriptive rather than a descriptive play? Pawłowski's report from the meeting organized by the Drama Laboratory, where the argument took place, does not seem to make this clear but it does include the following comment attributed to the playwright herself:

I could not depict women representing a high level of self-consciousness because my play addresses a lack of such consciousness and hypocrisy in women. The feminists claim that women like the *Tiramisu* protagonists do not exist. I can give them several phone numbers to prove that they do.  
(2005)

It would be disingenuous to deny the fact that by casting women in such roles, Owsianko reinforces conventional patriarchal femininity as a model. One may argue that the way women are represented here promotes such engendered constructions without transgressing them. Since texts generally operate as technologies of gender, they not only represent the subjects but construct them as well. So it is up to readers and viewers to resist the practice of such a representation by asking disruptive questions like: What do women gain by reproducing and consequently implanting such roles? Do I as a reading/viewing subject want to support the pattern of thought and behaviour the play stages? Do I want to be where these women are? Do I want to be like them? I would argue that we need to leave the temptation of judging these women behind and ask instead questions about the broader mechanism that keeps women in a vicious circle of repeating these conventional roles forever.

***A modern depiction of femininity in Poland would be incomplete without addressing motherhood***

This issue tells us a lot about how strong the shaping force of Polish cultural mythology is and how difficult – if not impossible – it has been to rework the Polish Mother (Matka-Polka) model. According to a widespread conviction attached to this symbolic archetype, “womanhood equals motherhood” and if a woman does not become a mother she is an incomplete and unhappy being. The fact that she can be a very unhappy mother has not undermined this particular principle, as it is generally believed that maternal suffering (rendered as a Mater Dolorosa image) ennobles. This way of thinking has framed social and cultural imaginations regarding women in Poland for at least the past two centuries and it has served very specific political and historical purposes (Szwajcowska 2006). It should not come as a surprise that all “matriarchs” (unlike the Valida Vrana prototype), featuring in the plays I have discussed, are biological mothers at the same time. Interestingly enough, if a desire to have a child is expressed in post-2000 plays, such a feeling is almost never attributed to male characters, who resent or fear parenthood in general and fatherhood in particular. *A Child* by Maria Spiss illustrates this phenomenon in a tamed and almost tacit way, while *Nothing Land* by Burzyńska advocates parenthood (initiated by a female character only) as a miraculous

remedy for most of the aches and pains that life under capitalism embodies. On the other hand, male characters who decisively reject fatherhood feature in Przemysław Wojcieszek's *Made in Poland* (performed 2004), Michał Walczak's *The First Time* and Krzysztof Bizio's *Let's Talk about Life and Death* (*Porozmawiajmy o życiu i śmierci*, performed 2001). These are only some primary examples which do not exhaust the list of no-father families or fathers-to-be characters. One would expect that the plays focusing on initiated motherhood would be followed by some rewarding (even though complex) illustrations of this socially encouraged role, but one could not be more wrong.

Most of them (if not all) subvert the Polish Mother archetype in a very audacious, if not terrifying way. For example, a vicious and fanatically religious mother, who turns all the family members into dysfunctional beings and eventually murders them (if not in realistic then in symbolic terms) occupies centre stage in Tomasz Kaczmarek's play *A Suffering Mother* (*Matka cierpiąca*, published and performed 2006). A slightly tamed version of such a character features in Kofta's earlier play *The Umbilical Cord* (*Pepowina*, published and performed 1990, TV production 1991). Lucia's mother-in-law from the Pruchniewski play discussed earlier represents an equally abusive and parasitic type, even though this mother-in-law does not become a central consciousness of the play. She mirrors Kofta's protagonist in becoming a single mother of an only son. The differences, however, come with the generations they both represent. While Kofta's stage Mother lost her husband during the war, Pruchniewski's character had to struggle through life alone because of her husband's alcohol addiction. What both characters have in common is the overprotective attitude towards their sons. In both cases their motherly clinging is so powerful that it verges on incest. This attitude in the long run turns their sons' future relationships into totally dysfunctional unions that bring tragic suffering to all parties involved. Kofta's play is a multi-layered poetic drama, rich in visual and theatrical effects. Pruchniewski's text is a semi-documentary piece with Ibsen-like characters. But both dramatic worlds openly engage with the social problems of their action's times. While Pruchniewski criticizes Catholicism based on empty rituals, Kofta centres instead on Polish antisemitism. The critical reception of the plays reveals a high level of tolerance for discussing the first attitude but nil for the second one. Both mothers conceal different "demons" beneath the veneer of their Catholic customs, and if read as

symbols for an engendered motherland representing their own historical times, both subvert not only the Polish Mother archetype but Poles' mythical belief in being a chosen nation as well.

I could not identify an equally vivid depiction of abusive mothers in other plays, but there are abusive and aggressive macho type "father" figures in *Kill Them All (Zabij ich wszystkich, 2004)*, by Wojcieszek and some plays by Krzysztof Bizio, who also created a disempowered mother figure in *Let's Talk about Life and Death*. Unlike other stage mothers, Bizio's character is not very emotionally connected to her family. She is also a mother of an only son but being married to a successful businessman and dominated by him, she withdraws from her role, explaining sarcastically to her son "Men are always right, only women cry at night" (Bizio 2003, 123). She eventually allows the patriarch to raise their offspring as his own clone, but with time they all become part of a loveless and remote union, drifting more and more apart. While the husband enjoys time with his young lover, the mother looks for occasional erotic thrills such as spending a night with her girlfriend's fiancée. Meanwhile, their son (who is involved with the local mafia) gets his girlfriend pregnant and talks her into having an abortion. Disasters pile up when the mother is diagnosed with breast cancer, the father is attacked by armed thugs and the son's life is threatened by the mafia guys. Mother's surgery shakes them all up and seems to create a turning point for the whole family, for whom matters of life and death gain unexpected urgency. Yet, when it comes to the family "time of honesty," the mother – who has found out about the abortion of her son's girlfriend – unexpectedly confesses: "When I got pregnant, my mother wanted to throw me out of the house, while your father gave me money for an abortion. But it was the only moment I was really myself. I decided to have you against his will [...]" (Bizio 2003, 136). In light of this confession, pro-choice politics achieves a high profile and the mother's decision is presented as a universal pattern: the only right choice for all times and circumstances.

Even though we are never told what the girlfriend's situation is, the illegal aspect of abortion is conspicuously absent from the play, suggesting clearly that money in Poland exempts the privileged from the anti-abortion law with no difficulty. What is being stressed through the play's rhetoric is not abortion but killing and the moral stigma forever attached to it. Even though Bizio's character, unlike the Polish Mother archetype,

is a sexual being, this slight subversion of the eternal type does not undermine the widespread belief that womanhood equals motherhood. Polish society will learn from the play yet again that the only moment when a real female self can be experienced is through her decision to give birth against all odds. Everything else in a woman's life seems to be false and secondary when compared to this unique and superior moment. Following Bizio's stage vision, I'm tempted to ask what happened to that "real self" later in the mother's life? Why did it never re-surface again? Was it suppressed against her will for the rest of her life? Is it possible that social and marital (meaning: patriarchal) forces were indeed so strong that they never allowed the mother's "real self" to re-emerge? And if this is the case (as it could have been), shouldn't this issue be at the centre of the debate that such a play might have initiated? Shouldn't its critical reception continue this theme at high volume? Well, it did not. The play and its reviews showed yet again that democracy in Poland is masculine and that such a state of affairs is widely accepted by the majority of both sexes. The play also confirms that women are first of all procreators and that not only biology but also geography is – in this case - their destiny.

That thinking along the gender lines is shaped by the local context was revealed through the Polish-Scottish production of *Cherry Blossom* (2008) by Katherine Grosvenor. This bilingual performance had its premiere in Edinburgh in October 2008 and later in that year was also staged in Bydgoszcz and Warsaw. Although the play focuses on Polish migration issues and was written by a British playwright (who studied Polish culture at Cambridge), it also shows what happens when a "Polish Mother" with no previous employment record (either in Poland or abroad) migrates to Scotland in a desperate attempt to support her two children and jobless husband back in Poland. The female protagonist, Grażyna, becomes a super work machine to meet such a challenge and not only does she succeed, but in the process she also becomes aware of her own potential and needs for self-fulfillment. Oddly enough, Grażyna's desire for emancipation is revealed to her through a religious vision. The Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, appears above the Ocean during Grażyna's crossing to Scotland, encouraging her "to have faith in herself," and not to worry about her children as they are not left alone but with their father. In her final words, she assures Grażyna: "There is so much out there, my child. Go. Go and seek it" (19–20). The context of the play makes it clear that

this is an invitation to explore her newly gained freedom. Joanna Derkaczew pointed out this particular aspect of the play, commenting:

The theme of a family demise and the woman's determination to rescue her closest as well as to realize her own dreams constituted the strongest aspect of the performance. Migration, from a woman's point of view, becomes a chance for emancipation, self-development, liberation from the Polish stereotypes of women as good mothers and wives only. *Cherry Blossom* also shows Polish women's flexibility and ability to cope in a situation of crisis. This theme, in the context of a new emigration, does not appear for the first time. (2008)

The reviewer has undoubtedly defined the key issue, a theme that has a sort of "tradition" among the Polish émigré playwrights of previous generations. In many plays written abroad by writers such as Teodozja Lisiewicz, Stanisław Baliński, Danuta Mostwin, and others, Polish women (unlike their male partners) often appear as characters empowered by both migration and self-realization that might come along with it.<sup>3</sup> It is a pity that this important point raised by Joanna Derkaczew seemed to pass unnoticed by thirteen other reviews I have read. It goes without saying that hard work abroad does not always liberate a different kind of femininity in Polish women, but the point is that by leaving the local context, people leave behind a certain set of convictions as well. Some might take advantage of this situation, while others might not. It is also obvious that not all the women who seek an alternative gender role and who are "trapped in bad scripts" (to borrow Diana Taylor's phrase) have an opportunity or willingness to leave their own country behind. So one might be tempted to ask: What happens then?

***The only location left for female characters who actively seek an alternative gender identity is the afterlife***

Such women are often cast in roles of "newly born" characters in an imaginary life after death. The theme of "re-born women" featuring in the post-1989 drama has turned out to be much more ubiquitous than I at first suspected. It includes the female Fausta (Krystyna Kofta); the reborn character of Em in a third gender form, albeit

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<sup>3</sup> For an insightful gender-focused analysis of Baliński's play *A Polish Woman Straight From Poland* (*Polka prosto z kraju*, 1977), see Filipowicz (2002).

unsuccessful (Izabela Filipiak); and the female protagonist Karolina, who is given the afterlife of a dead bride speaking from beyond the grave (Magdalena Fertacz). Fausta is newly born in a beauty parlour (*Professor Mephisto's Salon*), Em forces her mother to deliver her anew in a form that can be described as a third gender (*The Book of Em; Księga Em*, published 2005) and although this leads to her existence in a totally isolated world that with time is labelled “madness,” it reinforces the presence of women’s strong desire for a gendered identity that defies existing definitions and roles. Em is the only character based on a historical prototype, that of the Polish modernist writer Maria Komornicka (1876–1949) who at the age of 31 invented a male identity for herself. The Bride, Karolina, who is the main protagonist in Fertacz’s play *Absinthe* (*Absynt*, published 2006, performed 2005) talks from the stage after her suicide, which she engineers on the day of her wedding. Being outside this world gives her freedom to explore earthly matters with a directness and honesty which she could not exhibit earlier because of the constraints and fear of punishment that such transgressions evoke.

To me, all these scenes and plays point to the woman-centred dramatic prototype titled *Orpheus* (*Orfeusz*, 1946). This play by Anna Świrszczyńska (1909-1984) is a re-worked version of the Orpheus myth, written during the Second World War and produced for the first time in 1946. Following in Świrszczyńska’s footsteps, all the playwrights reveal that the earthly world cannot accommodate individual assertive female beings who do not fit any roles prescribed to them by the androcentric universe where men’s interests are continuously privileged over women’s interests. Since they cannot change the world in which they happened to be born, they prefer to leave it. Eurydice in Świrszczyńska’s version remains in Hades of her own free will and rejects her return to “the world of Orpheus.” Her symbolic gesture foreshadows the choices of female protagonists in the most recent plays. For example, in terms of gender dynamics, the dramatic world of Fertacz mirrors and strengthens even more the patriarchal practices reproduced in other plays. Her attention does not centre on a utopian, out-of-this-world place, proposing an amended and women-friendly set-up as attempted by Kofta. She scrutinizes and reassesses Karolina’s earthly existence, pointing out her painful entrapment in patterns and paradigms she does not wish to reproduce anymore. The play stresses strongly that a

no-exit situation, loneliness and great discomfort are the main markers of life embodied by female characters born within the Polish patriarchal microcosm.

As this brief overview of plays written and performed in Poland after 2000 suggests, the majority of texts perpetuates the system that generally devalues women by ascribing to them a supportive role for men rather than a partnership in a world of equal opportunities. The plays at their best illustrate a very painful paradox: although society has gained access to free thinking and free speech, the life choices that women face are so limited that they are almost non-existent. The legal situation defined by the anti-abortion law and constitutionally legalized gender inequality is hard to accept by many people (not only women) whose continuous struggle brings little or no change. Women have inherited a socially constrained and highly sexualized job market with no effective support network that would protect their needs and their status as equal partners.<sup>4</sup> The fact that in 2005, the unemployment rate among women had reached 19.2 per cent (and is still rising) forces us to acknowledge that recent political changes have not brought much improvement for women (Skrzek-Lubasińska 2006). Many plays, regardless of the writer's sex, address this issue one way or another. They also point out the absence of effective solutions. Consequently, the question "How does one go beyond patriarchal myths and perceptions that enslave minds as well as practices?" is left unanswered.

A sobering lesson for feminism that many playwrights convey indicates that divisions among women are as strong as the ties binding them together. Thus their sameness (understood more in terms of their femaleness than femininity) has to be considered along the lines of difference. It is time to acknowledge differences among women such as class, sexual orientation, educational privilege, nationality and ethnic background. This is not a new lesson but one that still awaits its serious discussion and application in the Polish context. The most recently published dramatic texts such as *A Text on Mother and the Fatherland* (*Utwór o matce i ojczyźnie*, 2008) by Bożena Keff and *Things are All Right Among Us* (*Między nami dobrze jest*, published 2008, performed 2009) by Dorota Masłowska address some of the neglected issues, but whether their

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<sup>4</sup> While visiting Poland in June 2009, I was pleasantly surprised that the issue of partnership in the family and in workplaces constituted a large part of the agenda addressed by Kazimiera Szczuka and Agnieszka Graff during the Congress of Polish Women, which took place in Warsaw, 20-21 June 2009 (Szczuka 2009; Graff 2009).



critical reception will refer to them and/or initiate a public debate regarding serious issues that concern women is another matter. I have collected enough evidence to prove that even quite audacious dramatic texts such as *Agata in Search of a Job* failed to do so, so there is little reason for optimism. However, following good feminist practice one should never give up hope or stop trying to expand the space for urgent debates. Let us hope that progressive plays produced on women-friendly stages and that the voices of feminist critics and scholars will make a change in the not-so-distant future.

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