

Alternative Theatre in Poland and the Communist Dystopia

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Abstract: Theatre as a means of social debate and commentary has always reacted to the political context of its time. One of the exemplary artistic movements of the kind is the Polish alternative theatre during communism. In communist Poland there were several groups, companies and alternative theatres that were more focused on the contents of their performances and on ethical values, rather than on aesthetic and artistic values. This means that the concern for theatre aesthetics was shifted towards theatre as a vehicle for ethical questions and problems, as well as one for social and moral change. The groups that were known for their political performances were, among others: Ósmego Dnia, Provisorium, Teatr STU, Teatr 77, Teatr Kalambur and Pstrąg. From Studencki Teatr Satyryków to Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, political theatre groups had always dealt with the ethical aspects of Poland's social reality. My paper aims to present the way the communist dystopia influenced and was reflected in the performances of some of the alternative theatre groups that came into existence in communist Poland between 1954 (the year when alternative theatre was born in the Polish community) and 1989 (the year that marks the fall of communism in Poland).

Keywords: alternative theatre, communism, dystopia, ethics, Poland, social change

The artist who engages in political activities by defending the higher ethical values in social and national life or in international relations remains consistent with his mission and implements the morality of the artist upheld by age-old tradition.
(Zygmunt Hübner, *Theater and Politics*)

Utopia, Thomas More's 1516 world-famous book, brought to the attention of its readers the image of a perfect country, of an ideal community, of a harmonious, non-entropic society. Four centuries later, the communist ideology, based on Marxism, was apparently trying to create that kind of changed world. The result, as we well know it today, was catastrophic: a real-life dystopia.

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Theatre as a means of social debate and commentary has always reacted to the political context of its time. One of the exemplary artistic movements of the kind is the Polish alternative theatre during communism, a phenomenon I have analyzed thoroughly in my PhD thesis, entitled *Poetic versus Political. Alternative Theatre in Poland (1954-1989)*. I owe a debt of gratitude to the American academic Kathleen M. Cioffi, whose work was a very important starting point in my research. In my thesis, I have identified two tendencies in the Polish alternative theatre movement: a poetic one, in which aestheticism was prominent, and a political one, concerned mainly with the ethical aspects of everyday life. The first strand of Polish alternative theatre consists of “poetic” groups such as Gardzienice, Scena Plastyczna, Pleonazmus et al., and two great directors (Kantor and Grotowski; I consider Szajna a special case). The second tendency – the “political” one - features groups such as Studencki Teatr Satyryków, Teatr 77, Teatr Ósmego Dnia, Teatr Provisorium, and even Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, a group preoccupied with what can be called „surrealist happening”.

According to Zygmunt Hübner, this second type of theatre, the one created by the political alternative groups, falls into the category of “agitational theatre” [Hübner 1992, 139]; briefly, a theatre made by and for the young Polish intelligentsia who were not willing to give in to the communist lies. My paper aims to present the way the communist dystopia influenced and was reflected in the performances of several alternative theatre groups that came into existence in communist Poland between 1954 (the year when alternative theatre was born in the Polish community) and 1989 (the year that marks the fall of communism in Poland). The methodology used in my paper implies a diachronic perspective based on historical studies and on works of theatre history, as well as on several literary and philosophical sources that aim to outline the nature of dystopia, a key-concept of this study.

1. Communism as a Dystopian Reality

When I think of communism, the first thing that comes into my mind is the difference between ideology and the way one applies it to real life. Communism is based on a utopian ideology, while the reality this ideology tried to create in 20th-century Europe became a dystopian one. In other words, theoretically speaking, communism is utopia. Practically, it has dystopian traits. Utopia, which means an imagined place or state of things where everything is perfect, becomes its very opposite in the case of communism: that is, a dystopia, meaning a place or state where everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian state.

Both utopia and dystopia are extreme concepts, similar to those of Heaven and Hell in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Examples of dystopian creations can be found mostly in literature. Thus, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* are some of the best-known literary dystopias. Among contemporary dystopias, the most famous one is *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins.

Dystopia is "a utopia gone wrong" [Gordin, Tilley, Prakash 2010, 1] and many a political utopia often goes wrong because political utopias are states of mind which are incongruous with the state of reality within which they occur [Mannheim 1936, 73].

In most of the literary works I have mentioned above, the nature of dystopia is a totalitarian one. And in real-life totalitarian states, there is a strong connection between politics and art. The state apparatus has always tried to control the artists' views (see, for example, Jdanovism in literature). Theatre is well-acquainted to these harassments. In Romania, for instance, mainstream theatre – which was almost the only form of theatre during communism – tried to escape censorship by alluding to the everyday problems people were facing. Loud opposition was out of the question. Poland's case is more or less similar when one speaks of mainstream theatre. Although the institutional model of the Polish theatre had been the Soviet one, during the "Polish October", Social Realism was given up and the censors allowed theatres to produce plays that had been banned. Political messages appeared in productions of completely non-political plays. But no matter how obvious these half-words were, they were only hints. The '50s mainstream theatre never talked about political issues, although allusions were used heavily [Cioffi 1999, 20-22]. So, during communism, just like in Romania, the artists and intellectuals who did not want to leave their country were faced with a *tertium non datur* situation: they either had to make a pact with the regime, entering thus a „velvet prison“¹, or they had to fight the oppressing powers by all means. According to the sociologist Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, as a consequence of the 1968 student protests in Poland, the authorities started to intervene decisively in mainstream theatre [Goldfarb 1980, 34]. After Gomułka's fall and Gierek's coming to power, the Party's control became more subtle: the artists were offered awards, medals and contributions in kind [Braun 1996, 66-67]. The '70s were less prolific than the '60s in mainstream theatre, but Poland became a center of visual theatre *per se* [Braun 1996, 71]. In 1981,

¹ The expression "velvet prison" belongs to Miklos Haraszti, a Hungarian politician, and it refers to the situation of those members of the intelligentsia who would sign a pact with the regime and, as a consequence, were spoiled by it. [apud Cioffi 1999, 17].

after Martial Law was declared, the Polish actors started a boycott on the media, refusing to appear in any radio or tv show [Cioffi 1999, 147]. In the '70s and the '80s, Poland witnessed the birth of the generation the most prominent member of which was Krystian Lupa. The Polish mainstream theatre was starting to show its experimental side more fully, and, after the fall of communism in 1989, it started to regain its audiences, which, having been disappointed by the mainstream, had mostly turned to the alternative theatre.

The ethical (political) branch of the Polish alternative theatre reflected more deeply than the mainstream the dissent of the artists and of the young intelligentsia. In order to understand their problems and concerns, I would like to briefly discuss the political environment of communist Poland:

2. The Social and Political Context in Poland during Communism

Although the Polish were one of the most liberal nations in the communist block, their freedom was also restricted. The adverse conditions in mid-20th-century Poland were of a political nature: at the beginning of the '50s, the communists had completely taken over the country. This suffocation of Poland's freedom would relax though, what with the denunciation of Stalinism by Nikita Khrushchev and the growing opposition in the country. October 1956 remained in history under the name of "Polish October", marking the beginning of the political thaw and Władysław Gomułka's coming to power. He did not keep the reformist promises he had made; therefore, at the beginning of the '60s, communism was flourishing again in Poland.

The next period in the country's history is known as Gomułka's "Little Stabilization". The idea that theatre was strongly connected to the everyday life of the Polish individual is enhanced by the fact that the expression "Little Stabilization" comes from the title of a play: *Świadkowie albo nasza mała stabilizacja* (*The Witnesses or Our Little Stabilization*), written by Tadeusz Różewicz. This period, which lasted up to 1970, was characterized by unsuccessful politics and a dull daily life. The only colorful events – baleful ones for that matter – were the 1968 student protests, which came up as a consequence of the authorities' ban of a performance based on *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), a play written by Adam Mickiewicz and staged at the Warsaw National Theatre by Kazimierz Dejmek. The anti-Russian scenes were thoroughly applauded, and this was followed by street protests.

In 1970, the government raised the prices of the basic products, which led to new uprisings and also to Gomułka's fall. His successor was Edward Gierek, who doubled the prices in 1976, repeating his predecessor's mistake. Strikes burst

out and the oppositional activities increased. Thus *Komitet Obrony Robotników* (KOR) was born. It was an organization the purpose of which was to help those workers who were oppressed by the authorities.

In 1978, Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope. His visit to his native land coalesced the Polish society even more, becoming thus a starting point for the change that was yet to come.

On July 1st 1980, the government raised the prices again. Strikes started anew, especially on naval yards. In Gdańsk, Lech Wałęsa became the leader of the strike and thus *Solidarność* (*Solidarity*), the first free legal trade union in communist Europe, was created. *Solidarność* became legal in September 1980.

The next leader after Gierek was Stanisław Kania, and in February 1981, General Wojciech Jaruzelski became Prime Minister. Due to the increasing conflicts between the people and the government, and to an apparently imminent Soviet military intervention, Jaruzelski declared martial law on December 13th, 1981 [Wandycz 1998, 265]. *Solidarity* again became illegal, operating underground, but before 1984, the arrested members of the trade union were freed and martial law was lifted.

In 1989, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a close friend of Wałęsa's, had become Prime Minister, and the issue was not how to reform communism, but how to make the transition to capitalism smoother.

Thus, in 1989, like many other Central and Eastern European countries, Poland was on its way to become free from communism; the road was paved with the people's discontent with those in power and it was built by the solidarity among workers, the intelligentsia and the Church.

3. Political, Ethical, Social Theatres - From *Studencki Teatr Satyryków* (STS) to *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*

In communist Poland there were several groups, companies and alternative theatres that were more focused on the contents of their performances and on ethical values, rather than on aesthetic and artistic values. This meant that the concern for theatre aesthetics had shifted towards theatre as a vehicle for ethical questions and problems, as well as for social and moral change.

The Polish alternative theatre groups which were formed during communism were mostly student theatres and they placed themselves in opposition to the government. This is the strand which made Polish alternative theatre famous worldwide at the time. Not many had heard of *Scena Plastyczna*, a "poetic" theatre, but the entire Western world had learnt that *Ósmego Dnia*, a „political" company, was one of the top Polish theatre groups. These „political" groups fought the authorities through their art. Not all of them survived. For

instance, Ósmego Dnia was disbanded (only to reform later, after the fall of communism) because some of its members had left their country; artists belonging to other groups, such as Provisorium, were harassed or sent to prison.

It was not easy to make political theatre in communist Poland. Some artists resorted to apartment theatre, which was oppositional in nature. The performances were held in secret and there was no applause, for fear that the authorities would intervene. Nevertheless, there were also alternative groups that were known more widely throughout the country – and not only -, for their political performances. They were, among others: Ósmego Dnia, Provisorium, Teatr STU, Teatr 77, Teatr Kalambur and Pstrąg. From Studencki Teatr Satyryków to Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, political theatre groups were dealing with the ethical aspects of Poland's social reality.

3.1. *Studencki Teatr Satyryków (STS)*

Between 1954 and 1957, the most influential alternative theatre in Poland was Studencki Teatr Satyryków, or the Satirical Student Theatre. The group was formed by students from the Warsaw University who were writing mock-satires which were addressing life in the universities [Cioffi 1996, 25].

STS was, from the very beginning, a political theatre. Instead of resorting to metaphors and other poetic means of expression, the members of STS were portraying reality in a very straightforward manner. No wonder that one of their performances was called *Idź na spacer alegorio! (Take a Hike, Allegory!)* [Cioffi 1996, 25]. The company was influenced by Mayakovsky, Głeczyński, Piscator, Brecht and Meyerhold [Tyszka 2010, 165]. STS created a theatre that was political *par excellence*; it was an intellectual kind of theatre, engaged not only in entertainment. The company dealt with other issues beside student matters; they were interested in the problems of their day [J. K. 1964, 26].

The first three productions by STS were *To idzie młodość (There Goes Youth)*, *Prostaczkowie (The Simpletons)* and *Konfrontacja (Confrontation)*, which were all moral attacks on the opportunism in the communist system. *Myślenie ma kolosalną przyszłość (Thinking Has a Colossal Future)*, their next show, parodied the mass recitations that took place during Stalinism [Cioffi 1996, 28-29].

STS dealt with the communist dystopia by means of irony and parody. Another theatre, Kalambur, took to poetry:

3.2. *Teatr Kalambur and the performance W Rytmie Słońca – Poetry and Politics*

Teatr Kalambur was founded in 1958, and it became one of the best-known poetry theatres of the 1960s. The 1968 student protests influenced the members of this company to the extent that Bogusław Litwiniec, the founder and manager of the group, felt that his theatre should react to what had happened. Therefore, he selected for a stage adaptation the poem called *In the Rhythm of the Sun*, written in 1968 by Urszula Kozioł, from Wrocław [Cioffi 1996, 108].

In this performance, the artists of Kalambur were „seeking a renewal of idealism. Theater Kalambur told its audience to dream: ‘look for a while at the sun, consider the spring of life...’. They implored their audience to nurture that dream and not be consumed by the vulgarities of the past, nor the conformism of the present” [Goldfarb 1980, 35].

So, in the beginning of the 1970s, Teatr Kalambur became concerned with the communist dystopia, as a consequence of the 1968 events. Litwiniec chose to create this aesthetically valuable but also socially-oriented type of theatre, which he called “open theatre”. *W Rytmie Słońca* remains the most important performance of this group. It propelled Teatr Kalambur to the top five alternative theatres in Poland.

3.3. *Teatr STU – From the allegorical to the universal*

In 1966, Krzysztof Jasiński founded in Cracow, the capital of the Polish arts, an alternative theatre company called STU. It was the time of counterculture and brave theatrical experiments, so Jasiński, together with future professionals from Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna – PWST, the Theatre University in Cracow - , created this group because they were dissatisfied with what they were taught in school [Cioffi 1996, 111]. One of their best shows was called *The Falling*.

Together with *In the Rhythm of the Sun*, *The Falling (Spadanie)* (...) premiered nationally at the 1970 Student Theatre Festival at Lodz (sic!). In this play the members of STU explored the meaning of Tadeusz Rozewicz’s (sic!) poem ‘The Falling’, and specifically his words, ‘before, we fell vertically, now we fall horizontally’. STU expressed a mood of uncertainty and disquietude, that somehow something was fundamentally wrong with the social order” [Goldfarb 1980, 35].

Spadanie was composed of several scenes „presenting anomalies of socio-political thought and rethoric” [Goldfarb 1980: 35]. The first part of the production was a critique of literary models, while the second part was raising the issue of the part young people were playing in a socialist society. After Gomułka’s fall, Teatr STU improved the performance so as to reflect the change

in the nation's political consciousness. Thus, the second version ended with the question: 'How do we go on and with what?' [Cioffi 1996: 113]. Kathleen Cioffi thinks that the political message of *Spadanie* was combined with a moral one and that this moral exploration was the most valuable contribution that this performance made to student theatre, because it framed political questions as ethical ones [Cioffi 1996, 114-115].

In their following productions, *Sennik Polski (Polish Dreambook)* and *Exodus*, the artists of Teatr STU transcended the allegorical approach to politics and tried to deal with universal problems. While STU was trying to maintain a balance between the ethical and the aesthetic, there was another theatre the members of which were consciously experimenting with ethical problems. The name of that theatre was Teatr 77:

3.4. Teatr 77 – *Playing with the audience*

Zdzisław Hejduk, the manager of Teatr 77, told Jeffrey C. Goldfarb:

For us, the most important thing is not to realize a successful play, we try rather to bring to society some of our political ideas with the help of the theatrical form. We try to activate action beyond the theater...[Goldfarb 1980, 133].

Hejduk's words are an accurate description of the type of theatre created by the members of 77 – it was a political theatre, aiming beyond the borders of art. In *Koło czy tryptyk (Circle or Tryptych)*, their first important production, the artists of 77 raised a question: Will Poland fall again into old patterns? Will it return to the old intolerable habits, or will this be the last new beginning? Will Poland avoid the problems it had previously faced? [Goldfarb 1980, 97]. During the performance, the audience and the actors are listening to recorded voices of ministers who made speeches in times of political crisis. Then the actors start asking questions, and sometimes, members of the audience join them [Cioffi 1996, 128-129].

In their next productions, *Passion II* and *Retrospective*, the artists of Teatr 77 also deal with aspects of the communist dystopia. For example, in *Passion II* there is a scene of a revolution, while in *Retrospective*, the performers act out important events in the history of Poland. Jeffrey C. Goldfarb writes:

Polish people, who are acquainted with the work of 77 speak of the theatre group only with admiration. People in and out of theater, people from all over the country, speak of the quality of their work and of their bravery" [Goldfarb 1980, 133].

But by the end of the 1970s, the authorities had started to restrict the work of this theatre, so that the group could not produce performances as powerful as those at the beginning of the decade. [Cioffi 1996, 134]. Teatr 77 aimed to create

productions that were more performative than contemplative, playing thus not only *for* their audience, but also *with* their audience. All the performances I have mentioned here could be characterized, „in Richard Schechner’s parlance, as works of ‘environmental theatre’” [Cioffi 1996, 128].

3.5. *Teatr Ósmego Dnia as a leader of Polish counterculture*²

Ósmego Dnia or the Theatre of the Eighth Day is a world-famous Polish alternative theatre company. The artists were influenced mainly by Jerzy Grotowski [Kornaś 2007, 54], but the group created their own style based on improvisation. The company was founded in 1964, in Poznań, as a student theatre. In the 1970s, their views and their inability to compromise with the political regime brought them to the attention of the authorities. Even so, they managed to produce some of the most valuable performances of the decade. Among them we can count *Jednym Tchem (In One Breath)*, 1971, or *Musimmy poprzestać na tym, co tu nazwano rajem na ziemi...? (Do We Have to Settle for What Has Been Called Paradise on Earth?)*, 1975.

In 1970, the group premiered *An Introduction To...*, a performance which was „a parody of the celebrations commemorating Lenin’s birthday” [Cioffi 1996, 122]. In the 1971 performance with *In One Breath*, The Eighth Day presented a commentary of the 1968 events. The production was based on poetry by Stanisław Barańczak, and it was a success. Tadeusz Nyczek wrote, in 1971:

In One Breath [...] clarified the lies we, the contemporary Poles, tell about ourselves, while we are living among deeply entrenched falsehoods, among illusionary truths and hidden lies (...) [Nyczek 1971/2009, 209].

The ideal of the Polish group was freedom, and this is what they expressed in their art. Grzegorz Kostrzewa-Zorbas was writing, in 1982, that The Eighth Day was a part of the Polish countercultural movement [Kostrzewa-Zorbas 1982: 13] and I would like to underline the fact that they became the leaders of this movement, at least in the theatrical field. According to Professor Tadeusz Kornaś, in the seventies, the artists of Ósmego Dnia „experienced problems in their everyday lives: police searches, arrests without cause, prohibited performances and provocations” [Kornaś 2007, 55].

Between 1976 and 1979, there was a media blackout on The Eights. But they continued to produce quality performances all this time. One in particular drew my attention when thinking of the communist dystopia. It’s called *Przecena dla wszystkich (Discounts for Everybody)*, and it premiered in 1977. In this production,

² For an extended case study of this group, see my paper *Teatr Ósmego Dnia – a Vision of Freedom – in Symbolon*, issue 1/2012 (year XIII, no. 22).

the artists of the Eighth Day resorted to irony, and they tried to show the effects that a corrupted political life had on the common man. The artists were using irony in a fashion that permitted them to say things like margarine is better than butter and brass shines more than gold [Cioffi 1996, 158].

The Theatre of the Eighth Day artists were friends with members of the *Solidarity*; they were harassed by the authorities and produced many of their performances in churches; they separated due to the oppression of the government. Some of them immigrated and then returned when they were invited back home after the fall of communism. I had the honour of interviewing Ewa Wójciak, now the manager of the theatre, and she told me that in their minds, the artists of *Ósmego Dnia* did not respect any censorship. That is probably how they survived.

3. 6. *Text, image and dissent: Teatr Provisorium*

Teatr Provisorium was created by Janusz Opriński in Lublin, in 1976. The members of this theatre were more philological in nature, they were friends with the artists from *Ósmego Dnia*, and they were fighting against the politicization of art, typical for communism. The first notable production by Provisorium was *Nasza Niedziela (Our Sunday)*, which, according to Kathleen Cioffi, „attempted to portray the ethical and practical dilemmas resulting from what it felt was the abnormality of Polish life under the Communists” [Cioffi 1996, 168]. The performance was censored because it was based on the writings of Czesław Miłosz and Provisorium became thus an „oppositional theatre” [Cioffi 1996, 168]. Another one of their productions was banned for reasons of national security [Kornaś 2007, 69] and eventually several Provisorium artists went to prison.

This group is compared to *Ósmego Dnia* because of their heavily-oppositional stance towards the communist regime.

3. 7. *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa and the surrealist happening*

Last but not least, I would like to tackle the subject of Pomarańczowa Alternatywa or The Orange Alternative. They created happenings, painted graffiti and were led by Waldemar Frydrych, nicknamed „The Major”. Frydrych published a manifesto which postulated that what was happening in communist Poland was no less than „social surrealism”. The happenings of the Orange Alternative took place at first on the occasion of every national holiday and then they were organized even more often. They parodied communism, and not only. Some of their „victims” were Solidarity, the Church and even The United States.

For Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, the colour orange became an alternative to red, which evoked the authoritarian symbols of the time [Nizyńska 2011, 68]. Once, they created a happening in which everyone was supposed to wear something red as a parody of the authoritarian regime in Poland. Over 150 people were arrested, some of them unaware passers-by dressed in red [Cioffi 1996, 177].

Through their happenings, the members of Pomarańczowa Alternatywa succeeded in creating a culture of protest the main purpose of which was, just like that of other politically-engaged theatres, the fight for freedom.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have tried to shift the focus from theatre as a vehicle of aesthetic achievements and place it on theatre as a means of social change and socio-political reflection. I have chosen to do this by briefly analyzing the oppositional strand of Polish alternative theatre during communism. I have stated above that communism is a utopia gone wrong, i. e. – a dystopia. The Polish alternative theatre groups, from STS to Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, were all politically engaged and less concerned with aestheticism, unlike those (Gardzienice, Scena Plastyczna, Bim-Bom et al.), belonging to what I consider the other strand of Polish alternative theatre: the poetic one. Some of the alternative groups in Poland, Ósmego Dnia for instance, balanced aesthetic experiments with ethical messages, while others, like Teatr 77, were concerned with social change and not with aesthetically pleasing the audience. STS used irony and parody to mock the communists, Kalambur started its endeavours to change the social environment by resorting to poetry, while STU was trying to play with the subtleties of meaning (from the allegory to the anagogy). Such was the landscape of the political alternative theatres in Poland, and the forms of dystopia-reconstruction on stage were varied in this landscape, since each remarkable group had its own remarkable artistic voice. If one were to compare their work, one would find similarities between the artists' attitudes toward the oppression that kindled the revolutionary spirit of their performances. Another similarity would be the fact that most of them started as student groups but became professional companies in the '70s. All of them were concerned with socio-political matters; however, each company tackled these matters in its own way, using its unique voice.

The Polish alternative theatre movement is a top example of what the aesthetic and the ethical can do for a society when their powers are combined. Alternative theatre was a means of reflecting social dissent in Poland and it contributed to the major political changes of 1989, a year that marked the end of a dystopia for many Central and Eastern European countries.

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