

Ivona, Princess of Burgundia

dir. Grzegorz Jarzyna



REVIEWS



IVONA – AN ALIEN

Witold Mrozek, "Gazeta Wyborcza"

Grzegorz Jarzyna has directed a play by Gombrowicz in the State Theatre of Nations in Moscow. This successful Russian debut of one of the most important Polish directors in Russia proves that instead of reaching for film screenplays, Jarzyna should more frequently direct dramas.

Most people usually thought *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia*, a play from 1938 to be a parody of dramas of Shakespeare. *Ivona* is presented as a play about violence and the power of mechanism of projection. At the royal court, everyone sees in clumsy and charmless Ivona what he or she wants to see. She reminds King Ignatius of an abused and long forgotten young girl; Queen Margaret associates her with her own graphomaniac poems. Prince Philip proposes to a "vagabond" – a bit in attempt to rebel against his parents and against royal etiquette, but more for the cruel joke. Everything leads to the final as much dreadful as grotesque – during the dinner the royal family tries to deprive the stranger of life... with a crucian, with which she is supposed to get choked.

Among the other plays by Gombrowicz, *Ivona* is one of the most often staged in Poland in recent years. Agnieszka Glińska has just successfully staged it in the National Theatre. Earlier Krzysztof Garbaczewski, in Opole, made it to be one of his most important performances about the power of the gaze – with the actors acting behind the curtain, between screens and cameras, in the endless chain of the precisely set reflections.

Ivona created by Jarzyna does not necessarily personify passivity; she rather actively participates in the game on her own terms. She does not only stand for the mirror reflecting fears and fantasies of other characters, she is more of a stranger – unintelligible and causing aggression. Jarzyna follows the tendency, returning to the theatre, to include sexual violence into the relationship between Ivona and the King (like it was presented for example, in *Ivona* directed by Agata Duda-Gracz in the Stefan Jaracz Theatre in Łódź). Jarzyna does that with a strong and brutal manner. Daria Ursulak, who plays the title role, is like a visitor from another planet driven by a mysterious energy. She sings using vocalise; she tries to communicate with sweeping gestures (choreography by Ivan Yevstigneyev is the asset of the performance) – as if she was speaking in another register, incomprehensible for the entourage.

The director created the performance as eclectic as the costumes designed by Anna Nykowska – from the cyberpunk uniforms that make the courtiers look like dark and gloomy officers of the security forces from the future, up to the funny suit with the oversized hat and a gigantic flower in the buttonhole, as if from the children's theatre. Piotr Łakomy, the set designer, divides the dark space with light and the openwork constructions. Polish spectators of *Ivona* may be also recollecting technological obsessions from the theatre of Garbaczewski – not only because of the CCTV cameras circulating over the heads of the actors.

Even though the literary adaptation keeps the axis of the plot, yet there are some supplements. The courtiers attach electrodes to the Ivona's body or conduct the Rorschard test (which tests subjects' perception of inkblots). Szczepan Orłowski, dramatist (who



cooperated in the past with Krzysztof Garbaczewski and Krzysztof Warlikowski among others) has interspersed the text of Gombrowicz with voice-over interludes that sound like the Discovery Channel. It seems that they were intended to provide the spectator with associations, helpful in interpreting the meaning. Chilean pioneers of cybernetics from the times of Allende, mirror neurons, control of social media that allows the police to anticipate in advance the threat of terrorism and to stop dangerous individuals... It is difficult to say why these interludes are in English. The performance would rather have not missed anything if they were omitted.

Jarzyna took good care of the second plan. For example, the character of Iza, the lady-in-waiting and the lover of Philip, is in the play of Gombrowicz just a puppet in a grotesque game of the courtiers. This time – wonderfully performed by Maria Fomina -she becomes a rival of Ivona.

The final scenes impress with precision and baroque verve, the perverse last scene changes the meaning of the play by Gombrowicz with a single gesture, without the need of adding anything. In the crowning scene of the drama – the hypocritical mourning ceremony - unlike in the original text, Prince Philip (Michał Trojnik) does not allow his entourage to persuade him to kneel down. By counteracting, he wins such attention like Ivona in the opening scene, he becomes the centre of attention and he makes people bow to him.

This contact, which costs Ivona's life, teaches him something, he takes something out of this situation and stands on the palace throne like at the barricade. This shift is the most interesting. I would like Jarzyna to reach more often for the dramas, instead of directing film scenarios in theatre.

The premiere took place within the frames of the Territory Festival. The next presentations will take place in the State Theatre of Nations in Moscow on November the 12th and 13th. The performance is co-produced by TR Warszawa. When will we get the chance to see the Moscow *Ivona* in Warsaw? TR Warszawa has informed that the talks about presentation in Warsaw next year are underway.





**The shocking space, pulsating
with the complex video- and
audio-vibrations, pierces into
conscience as a living organism.**

Alena Karaś, www.colta.ru

“IVONA...” IN MOSCOW WITH POLITICAL OVERTONES

Izabela Szymańska, “Co Jest Grane 24”

On Monday, October the 10th, at the premiere of Ivona, *Princess of Burgundia* by Witold Gombrowicz, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna the State Theatre of Nations in Moscow was filled to the brim. It is not so obvious, because the city, with its 20 million inhabitants, has many fans of the theatre, but it also has many scenes, e.g. MChAT (the Moscow Art Theatre), the chamber theatre PRAKTIKA, or the independent Doc Theatre presenting theatre performances based on real events.

The Moscow audience truly celebrates going to the theatre. People arrive early to step into the buffet, enjoy a glass of cognac with lemon, eat a cream puff of with a salty stuffing or a glazed éclair. At the end of the performance they come up to the stage and they hand flowers to the bowing actors. So it was this time.

Ivona, Princess of Burgundia by Witold Gombrowicz is not well recognized in Russia. Staging this play in Moscow has been a huge challenge - Witold Gombrowicz was a master of manipulating and presenting any form of interpersonal behaviour, but above all he was a master of a language. So the question arose how to translate his words and ideas into Russian.

Gombrowicz in important moments.

Ivona appears in the works of Grzegorz Jarzyna in the important moments. This play was the basis of the second performance in his career, staged under the pseudonym Horst Leszczuk, at the Stary Theatre in Krakow. The title role was then performed by Magdalena Cielecka whose magnetic beauty hardly anyone could resist. The young director attempted to extract from the text live characters, not the formal puppets. After the premiere, that took place almost 20 years ago (in 1997) the critics wrote that it was a clear proof for the emergence of the original style of Jarzyna. This particular sentence I would like to repeat today, while writing about his latest performance.

If the spectator was suddenly thrown into the first part of the play he would not have been able to recognize that it was the performance directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna. First of all, because the staging is very cold and moderate: a black scene, two large cubes covered with black material, no furniture, no objects. Members of the royal family who go out for a walk, wear clothes with luminous elements and cover their faces with plastic masques - they remind of robots or people, who came out of the bunker after some catastrophe. When Prince Philip (Mikhail Troynik) meets Ivona (Daria Ursulyak), she is not a charmless and unhappy girl looked after by her aunts. Ivona has a short haircut and she wears a black jumpsuit. She sits alone, out of the way, leaning against the wall, as if she was resting after the fight, the escape or the effort. She reminds me of two characters: the real one - Nadia Savchenko, Ukrainian lieutenant and political activist imprisoned in Moscow, as well as the fictional character - Eleven from the TV series “Stranger things”, which conquered the world last summer. Both Savchenko and Eleven have to function in the empire, whose forces took away their freedom, yet they have managed to escape. However, the Moscow Ivona keeps on falling from one trap to another.



Ivona tries to find a space of freedom.

Gombrowicz did not write any text for Ivona, her strength, and a catalyst for a revolution on a royal court, which is full of clichés and bows, is her silence.

However, the character created by Jarzyna seems to be the most loquacious Ivona I have ever seen.

First of all, she is trying to utter a sound, sometimes even a single word escapes her mouth, but the other characters wonder if she really said something or if only they thought she did. Daria Ursulyak uses her body in a very active manner, she makes many gestures, she nods her head, she is not - unlike in many other stagings of *Ivona*, a neurotic and sensitive person.

Yet, this body, she tries to speak with is very often oppressed on stage. That is the second issue, which is striking in this performance – brutality. Every member of the royal family wants to abuse Ivona; they want to take revenge for their failures, frustrations and mistakes. Philip and his companions tie her legs and hands and connect a sophisticated apparatus to her head. A scene, when the King (Alexander Feklistov) rapes Ivona for reminding him of the sins of the Queen Margaret and of his own sins is absolutely dreadful – the King wants to suppress his obsessions by hurting the weakest character around. It is immensely cruel.

Despite this, Ivona is still trying to find a space of freedom. And just as long as her body is what suffers so much, it also is an element of her liberation. Like Albertine in Operetta, she stands on stage naked, but instead of singing the song that glorifies nudity she uses an electronic instrument that makes sounds anytime when a human being comes near.

It is time for Russians to open their eyes.

Yet it is a swan song. It is time dinner. Ivona, introduced by Philip, is dressed in a beautiful, pale pink dress and a hat, but these clothes do not embellish her; they only enslave and strangle her, she has been forced to wear this lavish costume. She is aware of what is going to happen. Crucians are being served, Ivona tries to escape. She bounces off the closed door once or twice and then she is being dragged back to the table by force. Eventually, with tears in her eyes, she reaches for a fork and places a bite of fish in her mouth. There is a lot of fuss and confusion around, Innocent (Mikhail Popov) keeps on running around and trying to save her, but the courtiers do not let him get close. Ivona dies.

Is this why the revolution has not been successful? It seems, that just at the very moment of her death, Philip realises how big was a chance of making changes and to what extent he did waste his chance. It brings him to his senses. Not only he refuses to kneel down, on the contrary, he stands on the table like a commander who is going to lead his people to the barricades.

The performance directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna has strong political overtones. The director has admitted in various interviews that it is time for Russians to open their eyes.

Is it achievable through theatre activities? *Ivona* has been presented in a city of drastic social differences, where, in the subway you see people with bodies deformed because of different disease, but getting off the subway you enter a residential building, which looks like a glass Palace of Culture. And yet, on the other hand, it is a city and a country of the theatregoers.

I also wonder whether these cold, precise scenes, full of electronics, combined with



very emotional fragments constitute the style deliberately adopted for this particular theatre in Moscow or perhaps it opens a new phase in the work of Grzegorz Jarzyna. Probably I won't know until he directs his next performance.

Ivona, Princess of Burgundia, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna in Moscow, with the political overtones. So it was at the premiere.





For us, it matters that Grzegorz Jarzyna made an important attempt to permeate into the unobvious of the drama and to provide us with a message (...) Without parrhesia, no knowledge and no philosophy is possible, but the meaning of the word slips away from philosophers, Foucault argues. The word means the truth, and this is what Ivona's silence was.

Dmitrij Lisin, www.syg.ma

LONELY PLANET

Przemysław Skrzydelski, "wSieci"

In his Moscow version of *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* Grzegorz Jarzyna kills Gombrowicz of the grotesque and the absurd, in order to appoint Gombrowicz, the catastrophist. It is a darkest transformation of the playwright, which we could ever imagine - and on the largest scale. This is the elegy about the agony of the world. It is the great triumph of Jarzyna.

Many critics, but also many spectators, who knew the theatre of Grzegorz Jarzyna since the very beginning, recently have been quite troubled with his favourite director. The reason was, that for at least six years, Jarzyna was dealing mainly with aestheticization of the theatre; he was less involved in what he intended to tell us or explain, on the contrary, he was interested in what he intended to show us - reaching in that sense everything what was theatrically possible. So his recent performances were buzzing with this "how", the mechanism of which Jarzyna got to know to the extent incomparable with anyone else in the Polish theatre.

After the great era of Krystian Lupa, his student - Grzegorz Jarzyna, developed his own, entirely separate style in no time. It is hardly possible to say that someone else has achieved that much during the last 20 years. One might mention Krzysztof Warlikowski, but we should not forget the important fact, that Warlikowski had declaratively cut off himself from Polish dramaturgy already many years ago, and strange enough, also from the post-war dramaturgy - he denied Gombrowicz, Mrożek and Różewicz. Jarzyna chose a completely different path on the threshold of his career - he started from the dialogue with our classics, even with our avant-garde, which seemed to be rather lifeless at the time of his debut. His talent was proved in a short time, with a literature terribly difficult in many ways. Who of the young directors, in the late 90s, was thinking seriously about Witkiewicz or Fredro? Staging Tropical Madness in the Warsaw Rozmaitości Theatre on January 18th, 1997 is considered to be a beginning of a new era in the Polish theatre.

I have mentioned the phenomenon of aestheticization, so it is time for the examples. A year ago "Martyrs" by Marius von Mayenburg annoyed us with the fact that it was a drama written almost exclusively in the language of slogans. Yet, Jarzyna once again turned this text into the defence of rationalism at all cost, without noticing that a threat was not the absolute faith, but the emptiness of today's reality. The surgical precision with which the director composed the performance deserved admiration. However the question was whether this was truly the kind of literature tailor-made for him.

Although one, main thing should be noted, which also decided about the Moscow production of *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* and its interpretation. Jarzyna, since the times of T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T (2009) has been examining the emptiness of our era. All his recent performances might be connected by the common denominator of melancholy, which consists of both the doubt in the sense of the times we live in, as well of the impotence of creation resulting from paradoxes, which are connected with the work of the artist on stage. In these paradoxes lies the irremovable problem with the restrictions, in which the theatre often gets caught up, when it begins to talk about itself. In the recent *Second Woman* (2014) Jarzyna seemed to be talking exactly about that, knowing



already everything about the pitfalls inherent for the theatre and its creator. Earlier, we had watched, presented on the national stage, *Nosferatu* (2012), in which the sense of resignation led to expecting for a new messiah, even though he eventually turned out to be only the semblance of salvation, because the immortality offered by him was only the vestibule of another emptiness, a fairy tale for the naïve people.

And yet, all these performances, including *T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T* - the best among them, contained misconception. Trying to get a broad scale Jarzyna was losing it at the same time; he was sliding onto the hard shoulder. In fact, it was constant dreaminess, which after a while became a manner and another variant of helplessness. And everyone was waiting for specific defining of reality.

I did not expect Jarzyna to perform a radical turn while preparing this version of *Ivona*. I had in mind a scheme, which dictated rather a reference to the staging of the same title, which he had presented 19 years ago, in the Stary Theatre. Anyway the truth is that the foreign premieres are subject of different rules, one needs to re-poke ones own theatrical language to establish at least basic communication with actors who not only speak a foreign language, but also use a different cultural code. In such a project Gombrowicz, as a playwright, requires verification whether the meaning of his drama may be understood in the foreign country, even if theoretically Gombrowicz is recognizable and theoretically tangible in this country.

What is really striking at the very beginning of this *Ivona* is the coldness, the icy coldness of the emptiness, which - once exposed – turns out to be repellent. Everyone who is able to read Gombrowicz on stage would say that such conditions would be rather suitable for the beginning of *The Marriage*, as the drama of existence. Like *The Marriage* was begun by Jerzy Jarocki in his canonical interpretation in 1991. And yet, at the first glance, this *Ivona* suggests the adoption of something far bigger. Although, for the spectator who sits in front of a big stage of the Theatre of Nations this is not the most important thing, as it should rather be justified ex post. But now, from the perspective, it is worth emphasizing: it is difficult to imagine this performance in a chamber version; Jarzyna perfectly understood that only the big space was the right option, if he was ever to reach again for this drama after so many years. It would turn out later on, that he also knew that this was the only possible place on the theatre map worth considering. Time, place and space are the contexts, which, in this case, interact with each other in every minute.

Thus, we have a dark perspective and, at the beginning, only two signs in the back of the scene: a big ball and a vertically set rectangle. Both these strange objects are in grey colours, like the emptiness around them. Later we'll see more of strange objects.

Jarzyna takes us into the world full of surprises. We are at the royal court, which is located somewhere in the outer space, or perhaps this is the Earth, which we could imagine in a few years or decades, or perhaps, it is a place that we already know very well, but we do not realize it clearly. It looks as if everybody here was from the Gombrowicz drama, yet their form, clothing and appearance contradict each other, mixing epochs and rules. King Ignatius (Aleksandr Feklistov – it is difficult to express any opinion about the Russian actors without watching the local theatre on daily basis, but apart from Queen Margaret played by Agrippina Steklova, this is the most important role in this performance) looks like the leader of the nation, while Chamberlain (Siergiej Jepiszew) is presented as a character in a black suit, stiffened and tall as if he was walking on stilts and this is also the way he is moving around.



This is a mixed world; one can say that everyone remains in it, in his status, which he was able to achieve, although it would be rather funny, because each and every one of them feels disturbed, ridiculed and degenerated by this status. Jarzyna determines his characters in such a sense: they are trapped in their functions; they have got what they deserved. They seem to be even more tragic than Gombrowicz intended them to be. They come from a nightmare, dreamt by someone who has lived through the twentieth century and already knows that it was the most dreadful century in the history of mankind. Gombrowicz, when creating his characters, tended to distort them through the grotesque and the absurd, through just the form. But Jarzyna mercilessly takes advantage of the fact that we are already in a completely different place. The playwright wrote *Ivona* before the Second World War, sensing already a lot. The director stages Ivona nowadays and he admits that this is the only way he can present it; as a catastrophist, already carrying this burden of knowledge. This burden influences the rhythm of the performance, among others. Let's forget that something is taking place here. Actually, the whole performance carries on in a constant rhythm, sometimes one might get the impression that it is a scientific process, which demonstrates the state of mind at a given time and place.

And at last, let's forget about the grotesque and the absurd, which, seemingly could not be possible to be forgotten in *Ivona*. Jarzyna deprives the performance of almost everything that he used when he was working on this text for the first time. Actually the moments when the Moscow audience responded with laughter were few and far between: it was, for example, the scene when the courtiers insisted on Ivona to bow to them, yet eventually they bowed to her. Anyway, this scene was very similar to the relevant one from 1997. In this context calling Ivona *Cimcirimci* sounds also completely different. Uttered by the King, this word reflects the echo of contempt and disgust. Because nowadays Jarzyna interprets Gombrowicz not through the deformation of human relationships, in which we might find fear and trembling about what would happen to us in the future, but through the deformation of humanity that already happened. And which repeats every single day and in most places, in the version, which would match the statement that the mankind already lives on the planet Hell. Contempt and disgust seem to be the proper words to describe what they are all doing with Ivona in this reality. Prince Philipp (Michał Trójnik), together with Cyril (Kirill Byrkin) conducts on her various experiments, in order to find out what is on her mind. Whether Ivona is a mixture of an animal and artificial intelligence? Obviously she is someone who arrives at this royal court as a representative of a far better world. She stands for all human impulses, feelings and - symbolically – the whole of metaphysics, worth fighting for. Therefore Ivona rebels against them, hoping that she may teach something those who have remained only a lifeless form of life. In one of the final sequences she even stands naked, and by singing, she brings out of herself, more and more uncertain, yet beautiful sounds. For a short moment she touches the absolute. It's just a moment of bliss, before the worst is going to happen.

But Jarzyna leaves no hope. And even, if for a short moment there is some hope, it is immediately and brutally interrupted. In one of the strongest scenes, and maybe even the most drastic ones, which the director has ever shown, King Ignatius rapes Ivona in a sophisticated manner, putting on latex gloves. At this particular moment we don't see any nudity, at the beginning it looks as if an officer was going to check if she carries with her any dangerous objects. It seems to be a fake act of inspection. In a depressing light incapacitated Ivona looks just like a hunted animal. We are in a totalitarian world, and yet,



at the beginning some characters seemed to be someone else, they were encouraging us to meet them.

Going back to the time and place, and perhaps mostly to the place: Jarzyna interprets Gombrowicz as the catastrophist or even the author of science fiction, yet without skipping anything from the phrase of the drama. Nevertheless, the well-known sentences, practiced repeatedly in the Polish theatre this time reveal to us new meanings. And when, in some moments, they sound ironic, it is only the camouflage, under which is hidden another cruel intention towards the stranger. The space in which this *Ivona* is placed leaves no doubt how important are here the references to Vladimir Sorokin and his *Ice*, as a description of a totalitarian world, as well as to the prose of Stanisław Lem. Let me recall, for example, *Solaris*, with the main axis of this novel: the psychologist Chris arrives at the space station, where everyone keeps on reminding him about the past, moreover, no one is able to escape from the past; life becomes impossible if anything sends us back to the world of old values.

In the Lem's novels, there were no easy answers and the mankind got lost in the universe. Jarzyna presents the world, which is even crueler. *Ivona* reminds us about humanity, when everybody has already forgotten about it. In a famous scene, one of the three or four when she speaks at all, she declares that she believes in Christ who was crucified. The question asked by Philip is a pure formality of someone who repeats familiar clichés, but Ivona responds with the naivety of a child.

Perhaps that is why the director has added to the performance the narratives telling about the psychological experiments, like for example the one conducted by Ash, which proves that we behave under the influence of the father figures. Even if one of the three famous lines is certainly identical with the length of the fourth, we will choose the one indicated by a significant majority. Then, breaking out of the group is almost impossible. The spiral of convictions about Ivona, in which the courtiers start to believe, explains scientific stories added by Jarzyna with the whole spectrum of multimedia images, which are also forming this performance. They could be discarded, but the director, together with the set designer Piotr **Lakomy** (they have co-operated for the first time) create also some kind of a resume of the history of research of a human being, on a human being. We have learnt so much about ourselves and where has it led us? - the director seems to ask.

The final scene, where the royal family organizes the gala dinner with "crucians in sour cream", coup de théâtre of Gombrowicz, Jarzyna, in turn, presents in a way as if he was transferring us to the reality of fairy tales. The scene is almost flooded with the shades of pink, Ivona is dressed like the eighteen-century princess and she wears a hat made of feathers; she looks rather like a picture from a child's imagination. When the dream of a child turns into a nightmare we touch ruthlessness of the world. Jarzyna marvellously presents how Ivona is trying to swallow a bite of a "difficult fish". The sequence last for a good few minutes - there is running around the table, Chamberlain oppresses Ivona, the rest of the characters keeps on waiting. Then again, another desperate attempt to delay the torture is presented. And finally Ivona dies. Some characters show pity, but when they come and try to offer her the glasses of water, Chamberlain throws the glasses out from their hands. This is, of course, the fragment added by Jarzyna, but he knows where to put such additions, to save the theatre in our memories for a long time.

I remember, when, after the premiere of *T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T*, Jacek Kopciński wrote that with this performance Jarzyna came back to the top of the three. And now, I can



easily repeat these words. But there is also something else in this journey of the director: he comes back to look at the great literature from the distance of the way he travelled. Therefore, he can afford such courageous interpretations, showing at last where we are with our world. And where are the everyday spectators of the Moscow performance. It also takes courage of the director.

I also see this moment as the perfect time for Jarzyna to go back to the catalogue of the works of the greatest playwrights and to build with them the most courageous visions. I always wished that he directed *The Marriage*. Would it be as cold as this *Ivona*? Would he compete with Jarocki from the past? I don't know, but I know that it is worth waiting for this kind of challenges in the theatre. It's worth waiting for those who can afford it.





But it seems that the question asked by Jarzyna to the audience of the Theatre of the Nations is a different one: don't you need Ivona as she is, silent and mirroring your own speaking and silence? Or perhaps we do not need anything else at all because further on, beyond the limit of stability, there is danger?

Ludmiła Bredichina, www.kultpro.ru

THE GAME OF REFLECTIONS

Alla Shenderova, „Kommersant”

<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3119378>

Ivona, Princess of Burgundia, the premiere of the State Theatre of Nations opened the 11th Theatre Festival TERRITORIA. It is the first performance directed in Russia by the Polish theatre director Grzegorz Jarzyna. It was produced in cooperation with the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and with the Polish Institute in Moscow.

“The weather was beautiful, the princess was ugly” – the beginning of the drama by Witold Gombrowicz might be briefly summed up in these words. The Royal family is strolling around the park, contemplating the fact that a human being may become a better one admiring the beauty of a sunset. Prince Philip sees a simple girl, Ivona, who is “so infinitely delicate, proud and timid” and she so much gets on his nerves that he decides to marry her. The King and the Queen are shocked, but eventually they approve his choice: compassion for the sick and miserable people also makes a human being become better.

Everyone who knows even a little history of literature, when listens to the text of Ivona (Russian translation by Yuriy Chaynikov), will instantly recall not only Dostoyevsky and his Nikolai Stavrogin who married a crippled Lebiadkina, but also Princess Maleine by Maurice Maeterlinck. The Symbolist Maeterlinck in 1889 invented the princess with “a green face and white eyelashes,” doomed to being a victim - Witold Gombrowicz likely borrowed this decadent image and decided to explain why society rather kills, than rejects princesses.

Ivona was written in 1938, when Freud had already said everything (Bruno Shultz compares Gombrowicz to Freud) and the Germans were preparing to invade Poland. Gombrowicz understood what fascism really meant earlier than the others. He left Poland a few days before the beginning of the Nazi occupation. During the Second World War he lived in Argentina and after the war he chose to go to France, instead of coming back to socialist Poland. In Poland his books were banned until the end of the 50s.

The student of Krystian Lupa, director of TR Warszawa, one of the most talented rebels of the Polish theatre, Grzegorz Jarzyna had already directed *Ivona* once, at the threshold of his career, almost 20 years ago. Now he again reached for this drama, trying to figure out which instincts may cause fear towards the strangers. As a result, he has succeeded with something, which is very often discussed but eventually happens very rarely: *Ivona* of the State Theatre of Nations is a performance in which the reflections on the eternal themes are presented in a contemporary form.

Jarzyna cooperated with a talented artistic team. For example Piotr Łakomy, who never worked in the theatre before, says the he was designing not the set design but the space. Yet when you watch the performance one does not have any impression that these great and meticulous actors had to face some problems while coping with this, probably strange for them form. This particular space multiplies and reflects their acting. Cubes, cylinders and blocks, among which move around the characters of the Gombrowicz drama, attract attention not through resemblance to the compositions of Suprematists. They seem to be simple, but in fact they are as incomprehensible as the complexity of our consciousness.



“She consumes me with her eyes... She is shameless... Bring a fireplace poker and heat it up until it is red-hot...” says the Prince (Michał Trojnik) unable to bear her morbid lusts. “But Phillip!” his friends rebuke him. While Ivona is tied hand and foot, the courtiers make the EEG test of her brain and the results are displayed on the walls. When King Ignatius (Aleksandr Feklistov) tries to make fun of his daughter in law and he drives her mad, the walls cover with the pulsing, light violet patterns – the cardiogram of a secretive, tortured soul. And the air from the black and white luminous sphere escapes gradually while the Queen (Agrippina Steklova) loses her enthusiasm for forcing Ivona to talk or to eat.

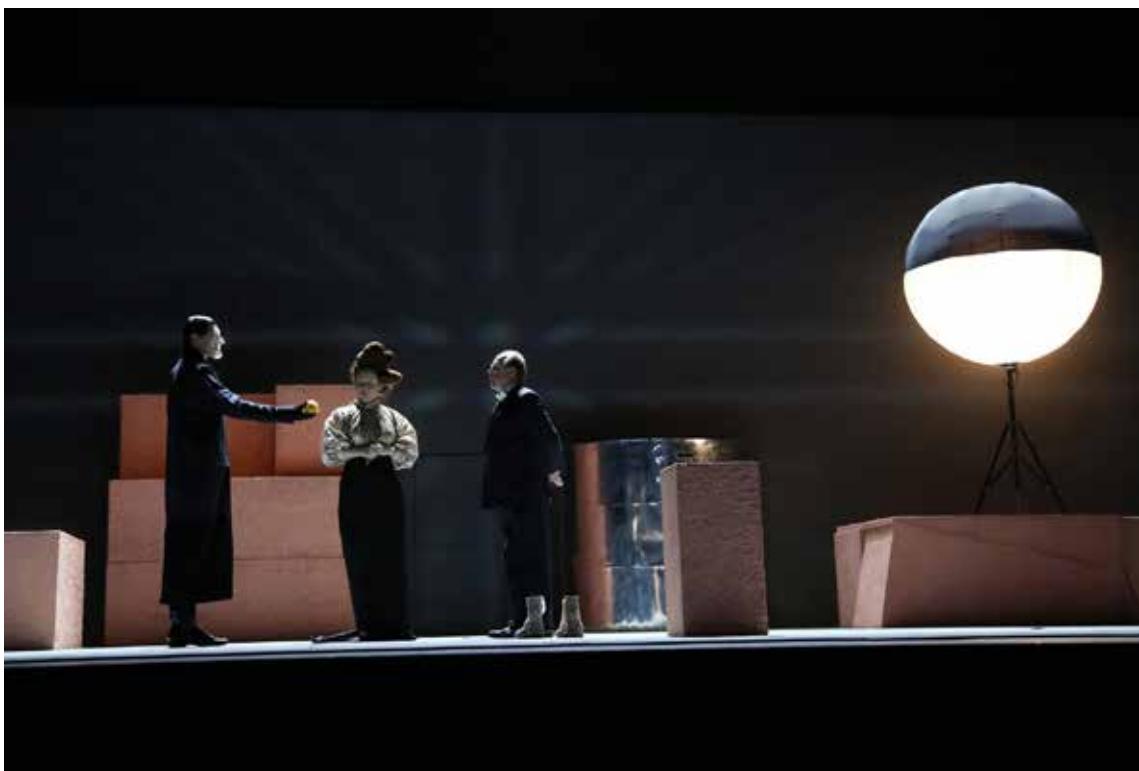
Gombrowicz does not reveal who Ivona is until the very end – neither the director does.

He does not perform, unlike the Prince, any experiments on the strange, although clearly rather smart girl, who in almost wordless, but strong performance by Daria Ursulak, shows the moments of liveliness and even passion. He tries to understand how Ivona influences other people. Why do they feel the need to kill her, instead of getting rid of her? Why does her presence remind the Queen about her paltry poems hidden under the mattress? Why does her presence remind the King and the Chamberlain about a seamstress they abused “perhaps on this sofa” in the times of their crazy youth? “But she was a thin brunette but this one is a plump blond,” says the Chamberlain, holding Ivona, whilst the King is giving a terrified victim an injection. Sadism, seasoned with the Royal etiquette, thickens in the air, covering the walls with sophisticated mapping (the author of video projections is Marta Nawrot).

Visual culmination takes place in a scene of the wedding: huge roses appear on the walls (there are flowers, which the characters from Alice in the Wonderland used to paint, as well as the glamour reduced to the grotesque) and then they gradually fade away, creating bloody patterns. Ivona, dressed in an elegant white dress (costumes designed by Anna Nykowska) all of the sudden seems to be beautiful. But she doesn’t want to sit at the long table – she fights trying to free herself from the hands of the Chamberlain. It is he who suggests the King how to get rid of Ivona in accordance with the etiquette. It is he who implements this plan, making sure that none will help the dying victim.

This role, precisely designed by the director and wonderfully performed by Sergey Epishev, leads us to solving the mystery: we hate others and we want to get rid of those who break even the most senseless but commonly established rituals, which we replace the real life with. Finally Ivona stiffens on the table and the order is restored. In the drama there is an absurd conversation about mourning, about a tailor and about a funeral, and in the performance there is such a conversation as well. But suddenly Prince Philip jumps on the table, shouting to turn off the light. It seems that in a moment he may wince in a pathetic grimace of an Ivona’s smile.





How precisely did Gombrowicz describe human instincts in his drama, and how carefully this was shown on the stage by Jarzyna! Philosophic deliberations about the inner freedom, about the nature of power, about the fear of leaving the comfort zone, sounding in the video-and-light Matrix-style solution, do not only speak to the audience, but remain inside people's heads.

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