

THE HYPOCRISY GENE

Tygodnik Powszechny / 19.03.2017

Grzegorz Jarzyna, stage director and artistic head of TR Warszawa: We live under a system based on fear and servitude. At its core is the commercial exploitation of consumers. Theatre allows us to “log out” of that system.

ARKADIUSZ GRUSZCZYŃSKI:

You studied philosophy?

GRZEGORZ JARZYNA:

Yes, and it made me realize that the world can be described through many different and often mutually exclusive systems, and that truth is relative. My search was expanded by a number of anthropological trips.

AG **To Asia?**

GJ Yes. In Asia I was familiarising myself with those non-European ways of looking at the world and human relations. But mostly interested in finding the origins of the theatre, its genesis, the answer to the question whether the theatre could change reality.

AG **Among shamans?**

GJ I have taken part in many shamanic rituals and trance-inducing ceremonies, but initially I followed the paratheatrical experiences which as according to Grotowski, meant India, Tibet, China. Later, inspired by Artaud, I embarked on a passionate exploration of trance dances of Java and Bali.

AG **Were you also travelling while studying at the PWST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow?**

GJ Much less. My last trip was a 12-month field trip with our favourite professor of aesthetics, Piotr Mróz, and two friends from my class. Our goal was to meet the Papua New Guinea Highland tribes discovered for the Western world in the 1930s by the Leahy brothers. These Australian adventurers and gold miners found the tribes that were developmentally still in the early Bronze Age. With the help of Verbites we reached remote villages whose inhabitants had not discovered metal and lived as hunters-gatherers, believing in the power of ritual dances and ceremonies. What white people refer to as mimetic performance art, over there is called Tumbuna, a secret ancient knowledge of how

“mana” energy resonates with natural phenomena and fate and how it can affect the future of the tribe. At times, no more than a couple of rhythmic steps danced by the entire community were enough to ensure heavy rainfall a few days later.

After my experience in Papua New Guinea I felt sated and, having completed the final year of Philosophy, I went to work for a year at an Icelandic fish processing plant to pay off my debts and prepare for the entry exams to the Theatre Directing Faculty. I passed, was admitted and began studying under the tutelage of Krystian Lupa. What’s interesting, I never even as much as mentioned my travels since the first year at PWST. The world of theatre was so fascinating and intriguing that it swallowed me whole and opened an entirely new chapter of my life.

AG **Krystian Lupa was your master?**

GJ Yes. In fact, he was how I had imagined theatre should be since I was about 16 years old. In secondary school, I went to see his *The Lime Works* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Religiously, I watched his productions at the Chamber Stage of the Stary Theatre, as well as the graduation productions at PWST in Krakow. I was overjoyed to find out he would be my teacher.

I trusted him completely, never strayed or made any reference to my travels. The subject only came up towards my graduation, at 3rd year at the academy, when I was invited to produce a play at Teatr Rozmaitości in Warsaw. I then asked Krystian which play I should stage. ‘What do you like?’ he asked me. I said I liked Witkacy. Mind you, I wasn’t really a fan of his plays, I preferred his photographs, pastels, novels and metaphysical fabrications. Krystian’s first production was Witkacy, and he thought him a great playwright to start with. That was when I remembered Asia and Papua New Guinea.

AG **Those who saw your *Tropical Craze*, based on Witkacy, remember it as a highly energetic show. Today, it is considered a breakthrough for the Polish theatre.**

GJ When I was writing the script, all the emotions and the knowledge brought from those travels hit me with redoubled intensity. My thoughts returned to that experience and questions about the mystery of our existence.

Ritual and exoticism inherent in pop culture were what gave the momentum to that play. I was telling the actors about Papua, Indonesia, about the trances and different perspective on the world and human relations. My stories inspired dreams. I was telling them that somewhere there was a different place, one that we could recreate. The

dream really took off in the actors, and I found my own voice to stage Witkacy.

AG **In your opinion, what made this production a breakthrough?**

GJ I interpreted the eponymous tropical illness that afflicted the play's characters as extreme passion, a desire to experience the unnamed – in other words – a trance. This sensation infected the whole company, as well as the audience.

AG **And have you followed the same approach since?**

GJ That experience was present in later productions, but my goal has always been to find a new form and language for the particular subject of each play. And my ambition as of an artistic director is to build a company of unique artists, passionate and willing to experiment and take risks.

AG **The press at the beginning of the 21st century often described the Rozmaitości Theatre company as one big family. Was it really the case?**

GJ It was, initially, but soon the closeness and impermeability became uncomfortable. We would often be stuck in a rut. We became predictable, fashionable, we felt we knew how to be successful, and that was not how I imagined our journey.

AG **Back then TR was at the top.**

GJ And that was why I had decided to let in some fresh air. When you are at the top and making everybody happy - that is the first sign that your quest and your creative journey is all but over. We no longer were students who came to Warsaw to make theatre. I wanted to abandon the established hierarchy in the company, reboot things and look at that so-called "success" from a different perspective. Plus, that theatre, to me, will always be a place that provides young artists with opportunities to make their dreams come true. This is where I had my debut as a student.

AG **You wanted to return the favour?**

GJ No, I wasn't being the Good Samaritan. I wanted that theatre to become the incubator for new talents, innovative projects, and an exciting place for exchanging ideas. I was hoping that our accomplished team would help the young artists. Instead, some of the company felt threatened and gravitated towards Krzysztof Warlikowski, who had a different vision of Rozmaitości. In hindsight, I think I did make some mistakes.

AG **Such as?**

GJ I acted too hastily. I failed to realize that many of my friends from the Academy had become stars. Stars are good for the theatre: they draw large audiences. But it was getting more and more difficult to

coordinate our shows and rehearsals. Soaps, commercials and movies were more important. For many of the actors, the theatre no longer came first.

This was a difficult time, but it was then that I fully realized what our mission was and who I wanted to work with. Today our company is less a family and more a tribe. It reminds me of a tribal village in Papua New Guinea. In the middle of a tropical jungle there is, all of a sudden, a round clearing with some dozen huts and several dozen inhabitants living in isolation from the outside world. This space needs constant attention to ward off the encroaching tropical vegetation.

AG **It is obvious from your professional history that the theatre company is what you find important.**

GJ While working on *G.E.N.*, our latest production, I was thinking a lot of what we'd been through. I believe our company is a group of people who want to work together in a theatre that describes and probes reality. This play is an experiment in which we throw pieces of our reality into a centrifuge and watch as layers peel off. We section, analyse, cut, and describe situations, emotions, analysing humanity and the world.

AG **In GEN neither the names of the stage director, nor of the performers or actors are specified. There is only a list of names with no assigned functions.**

GJ We decided to approach this production as an adventure and an experiment. In later rehearsals we decided to abandon the roles of actor, director, playwright or costume designer and replace them with community and collaborative creation. The first idea was inspired by Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*, a film following a group of people who deliberately rebel against the bourgeois Danish society. They pretend to be disabled; the term used in the film is "Spasticing" as the act of rebellion which leads to the discovery of true individuality. Those people were mostly opposing the privileged class in Denmark, accusing it of hypocrisy: wealthy people give money to charity, pay taxes, expect the system to take care of those who are marginalised, but actually they want to push them out of the system, away from their community. Where the film ends, our play begins. We are not interested in condemning the outside world but in analysing ourselves and our mutual relations. I believe that true revolution is only possible if the rebels undergo internal transformation. The term "logged out" popped up early during the rehearsals.

AG **What does it mean?**

GJ We live under a system based on fear and enslavement. At its core is the commercial exploitation of individuals, consumers living in the

digital reality. You have to “log out” to be able to imagine a different world. The characters in *G.E.N* achieve that by creating an alternative community and cutting off their ties to the outside world.

AG **The play opens with a recording of the cast pretending to be homeless people who are thrown out of a shopping mall. Later we watch videos of actors play-acting various everyday situations.**

GJ We created actions that could motivate people to think about the other, the alien, the one who’s excluded, and his place in the consumer system. This is why we played homeless people, among other things.

AG **This is risky, the actors were homeless only for a little while, unlike the actual homeless, who are homeless all the time.**

GJ Playing homeless was not a game but a test of empathy. Our intention was to throw people off their habitual behaviour.

AG **How did they respond?**

GJ Regular citizens responded quite well. We were offered a lot of food and support. The response of security officers was more oppressive. We were shooting in Warsaw, but I know that at the mall in Krakow there are official regulations that state what the homeless can and cannot do at the premises. For Poland, this is still quite liberal. The system in this case behaves in a typical manner: it absorbs and legitimises, but never actually solves the problem. All possibilities of resistance are neutralised. Nothing has changed since *The Idiots*: the rich are still placating their conscience with charity work, and the system absorbs the excluded, reinforcing inequalities. This situation forces the theatre community to “log out.”

AG **And yet, the play made me think of recent events: Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Trump seizing power, Russia’s meddling in international affairs. Is the world in crisis?**

GJ The crisis in Europe has been going on since the Trojan War. Since then we have failed to solve any problems.

AG **What crisis is that?**

GJ A crisis of humanity. We are in love with our white race; we love the colour of our skin which today imposes boundaries and views on other parts of the world. However, for many other races we are not merely a point of reference, we are the aggressors. We keep fighting for our values to dominate those of others. The refugee crisis is merely a new stage of this struggle for domination.

AG **And dialogue is out of the question.**

GJ As is the exchange of ideas. White people are masters of hypocrisy: despite the pretence of tolerance, God, and democracy they have never truly accepted anything which is different. They have failed to realize

the simple truth that without difference there is no development or evolution. For white people, only their own values, traditions, religion and pigmentation are normal and proper.

AG **This sounds pessimistic.**

GJ According to the Christian doctrine, we are all guilty of the original sin; we are infected with fear even before we are born. Over the millennia, man has built up quite a carapace: for fear of himself he has accumulated the layers of values, religion, and social convention. All those elements make us think civilisation is progressing. We no longer eat one another, we have abandoned savage warfare, we live longer lives and follow a moral code. The religious and socio-political spheres make it seem as though we are closer to important, progressive human values. But we are deluding ourselves. We should abandon the established patterns of thinking and the herd instinct and look within ourselves to discover and develop our own strategies of resistance. The way forward is not just through rational thinking, but, more importantly, through honesty, emotion and our true intuitions. ©

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is the artistic director of TR Warszawa, a stage and film director. His recent productions are "Ivona, the Princess of Burgundia" at the Theatre of Nations in Moscow and "G.E.N" at TR Warszawa.
