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Citation

Twitchin, Mischa. 2020. Angels in Poland. Contemporary Theatre Review, 30(4), pp. 584-588. ISSN 1048-6801 [Article]

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Angels in Poland

Published in *Contemporary Theatre Review* 30.4 (December 2020), pp.584-88.

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In the dedication of his book *The Skin* (1949) – in which he describes events during the liberation of Naples and Rome – Curzio Malaparte invokes the “American soldiers who... died in vain in the cause of European freedom” (2013: 3). The web of associations that could be spun out from this one invocation would be vast: trying to make sense, for example, of relations between a cause and its memory, an American “dream” and European totalitarianism, or imperialism and culture. Not that I was thinking of Malaparte when I went to Warsaw, at the end of February this year, to see the two productions discussed here – one new, by Krystian Lupa, and one more than ten years old, but still in the repertoire, by Krzysztof Warlikowski. Nor could I have been thinking, then, about any of what has occurred since, with so many other associations to try to make sense of.

Back in February, my reflections began on the train from Modlin airport into the city, as I wondered which would be the direction of travel and debated with myself which side of the aisle to sit on, not knowing whether I would be facing backwards or forwards as I continued my journey. In the event, I was facing the front, sitting by the window and looking out at the old red brick buildings that were once part of a world of railways. Although the buildings still stand, largely dilapidated, most of the tracks have gone. Only the artificially flattened ground and levelled embankments still suggest where they once were; while the train I was in was brand new – an example, perhaps, of the benefits of Poland’s membership of the EU and its transnational investments in infrastructure. Now, however, these reflections appear almost fictional, where – in the current “lockdown” – such associations in time and place seem like the tracks that are no more.

Travelling on the train, the bluish silhouettes of skyscrapers gradually come into view – and beside them the distinctive outline of the Palace of Culture, “Stalin’s gift to the Polish people”, opened to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the war’s end. Before the new millennium, except for the later Forum Hotel (now a Novotel) from the late 1970s, this building stood alone as a symbol of the city centre visible to the outskirts. Its alienating scale, however, is of a different kind to that of the new, glass monoliths nearby. Dedicated to “art and science”, rather than to Mammon, it remains an implicit monument to sacrifices in a cause that even at the time had ceased to be called “European freedom”. On this journey, before arriving at the central station, the train passes a large warehouse with a huge sign bearing the logo *Kaufland* and I wonder about possible translations. “World of shopping”? Or perhaps, more simply, “Consumerism”? A model of freedom of which the resurgence of authoritarian politics is also a symptom.

What will I learn at the sites of cultural privilege – the two theatres and the gallery – that I visit in Warsaw, conscious that this privilege includes its mediation for international visitors through English surtitles and bilingual curatorial texts? Especially in the light of Brexit, it is worth remembering that this international accessibility is not, of course, addressed particularly to the English. Those for whom English is their first (or, indeed, only) language may be just as “provincial” as anyone else in relation to the Anglosphere – despite the

delusions of some politicians who identify with it as if it were, indeed, a sort of new “English” imperialism. These same politicians, leaders of the Brexit cult, now also bear responsibility for the highest Covid-mortality figures in Europe, exposing the “underlying health condition” in the UK’s fatality rate: ever increasing inequality.

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Beginning with a prologue with the naked Adam and Eve, who emerged from beneath the stage to eat of an apple that offered the temptation of theatrical nourishment, the new production by Krystian Lupa at Warsaw’s Teatr Powszechny – *Capri, the Island of Fugitives* – offered a five-hour selection of scenes from Malaparte. Although the performance was already underway while the audience entered the theatre, the production “proper” began with a commentary on the bunker-like interior of Malaparte’s own villa on Capri (made famous by Jean-Luc Godard in *Le Mépris*, featuring Fritz Lang, playing himself, as the director of a film-within-the-film); and ended with the projection of a cave filmed on the island, at the back of which the cast were confined within a vision of Lupa’s own camera, staring silently out to sea.

In the preface to his first book about the war, *Kaputt*, elaborating scenes from his travels along the Eastern front (about which he reported in 1941-2 for the *Corriere della Sera*), Malaparte suggests that in his writing the war “appears not so much as a protagonist as a spectator, in the same sense that a landscape is a spectator” (2005: 3). Rather than the war as seen by someone, Malaparte’s pose is to present people as seen by the war. Ironising his own “authorial” gaze, Lupa also gives himself an ambivalent role as a “spectator” in the view of the stage – commenting on the performance as if he were the addressee of his own work of theatre. In a laconic tone, the director interjects comments about the performance through a microphone from the back of the stalls, ostensibly giving voice to the auditorium from which it is seen. Although occasionally funny, this improvised commentary adds to a sense of exhaustion in the production – to which some of the actors seem to have succumbed, although others appear to resist it. Perhaps some of the audience identify with this directorial voice, distancing itself from the decisions enacted on stage; but it felt (to me) like a strangely negative engagement with the potential of theatre and the question of “European freedom”, especially looking out to the Mediterranean today.

The production offered a series of mostly enclosed spaces, defined by what is now Lupa’s signature glowing red frame, albeit with steps, the width of the stage, extending the scene into the auditorium (as if this also implied the reverse). Following the discussion with Godard and Lang, the first part of the production presented scenes from *Kaputt*; and, after an interval, the second part scenes from *The Skin*. The series of set changes were masked by a screen, flown in and out, onto which filmed sequences from “outside” the theatre space were projected, while the head-mounted torches of stagehands flickered like fireflies behind the images on the gauze.

In contrast to Malaparte’s sense (in 1944) of hope for the “broken” (or kaput) Europe (in the ruins of “the Europe of yesterday” [2005: 3]), Lupa (in 2020) – from a distance that is, after all, that of his own life time – seems to see little more than uncreative compromise in the post-war legacy of reconstruction, which we now see being destroyed all around us. The curious possibility of a pagan “rebirth” that Malaparte describes – a priapic orgy in which, as in ancient theatre, the women are played by men – is staged here within the very

representational frame that supposedly serves “official” violence, especially (as Lupa insists) in its complicity with the Church.

The critical framing of Malaparte’s scenes was applied to, rather than explored by, their theatrical means, leading to moments of spectatorial embarrassment (on my part, at least). The archaic homosexual ritual of rebirth, for instance, had the air of a student production rather than something scandalous; amplified by an admonition to the audience, from the on-stage figure of Malaparte, to “fuck off if you don’t want to watch, go to your fucking church.” The trivialisation of its own staging decisions (after all, we were already in “our” church: the theatre itself) also ran through the simple repetition of Malaparte’s own recitation of high-ranking Nazis’ appeals to *Kultur*, as if these clichés spoke for themselves. That Hans Frank was thought to be a sensitive pianist is surely no more interesting now than it could have been during the depicted soirée in occupied Warsaw; or, indeed, at Nuremberg where Frank was sentenced to death for his crimes “against humanity”. (These same scenes from Malaparte are also cited, for example, in Philippe Sand’s discussion of Frank’s career in *East-West Street* [2017: 221-235].)

The seemingly uncritical appropriation of material was also evident (for me) in the use of nakedness – from that of the actors within the directorial conception of the stage to that in the footage shown from the liberation of the camps, as if such film images also “spoke for themselves”; as if their framing was simply inscribed in their repetition here as theatre. Perhaps this trivialisation of the question of spectatorship was most obvious in the one excursion to contemporary warfare, with an insert of footage from the bombed-out Aleppo, accompanied by a homiletic admonition – but, really, addressed to whom? – that “war is not just on TV”.

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The second performance I saw was of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, one of the Nowy Teatr company’s most famous productions, now over ten years old. Since seeing it, the play’s interweaving of the private and public meanings of politics and death (from the end of one millennium and the start of another) has gained new resonance. How might the current vocabulary of “self-isolation”, “social distancing”, and “unprecedented measures for an unprecedented time”, inform a reading now – let alone a comparable future drama? Will there soon be a play that similarly reflects on the political and moral decisions exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic; including the closing of theatres? And now that the fatuous claim about the “great leveller” has been shown to be a lie of the privileged, what will have been learnt from – and not only about – its demographics of death?

This *Angels* production ends, as it began, with the cast sitting on chairs along the front of the stage. But where, at the beginning, the actors had their backs to us, looking onto the stage in anticipation of the stories in which they would shortly participate, this time they are facing us. In this theatrical afterlife, the main play now over, they offer an uplifting message that each one of us is better than we might suppose; or perhaps that we are all, collectively, better than is commonly imagined. While this may not be quite the end of Kushner’s text, it is in line with the production’s trimming of its “millennium” themes, along with much of the dialogue concerning both anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism (and their interweaving) in American society. (The relative absence of people of colour and of Jews in contemporary

Poland does not, of course, mean the absence of such prejudices, which thrive in phantasy, after all.)

The concluding appeal of Kushner's epic play, with its echoes of an alchemical transformation of the base into the spiritual, that "the Great Work Begins" (2007: 280), is the hope of *Angels in America*, just as here in Poland. With the visions that accompany the death from AIDS of Prior Walter, the play simultaneously allows for a sense of both the transcendent and the delusional (as well as the sentimental and the transforming). The great work is again invoked after a posthumous conversation between God and the utterly corrupt lawyer, Roy Cohn (who dies still wishing to deny the reality of his own "cause"). God needs someone to represent Him after being sued for having abandoned mankind and Cohn accepts the commission – advising his client, however, that He doesn't have a case. (That Cohn gets some of the best lines in the play shouldn't obscure the fact that one of his mentees is now the self-proclaimed "stable genius" in the White House, whose legacy, not least in the Supreme Court, will outlast his daily destructiveness.) Kushner's play offers testimony to a struggle that was urgent in the time of its writing, confronting Republican politics in the context of AIDS; and the performance today attests to the sense that society remains in danger from such politics, not only on the Potomac but on the Vistula.

In its satire of encounters between the liberal and the conservative, the out and the closeted, the caring and the vicious, the drama remains confined to the stage though. Is the theatre really a civic space – or simply a refuge for those who have chosen to be there, who wish see themselves in its image? The production gets an immediate standing ovation on the night I attend; but I wonder whether it is the actual performance that is being affirmed or, rather, the idea of it (and, indeed, the very presence of the audience themselves). Besides the story of the play's characters and the society it invokes on stage, the ovation is a sign of solidarity between the audience and the actors – and there is extra cheering when Warlikowski also joins the cast in this afterimage of the "great work". What though do we learn here about ourselves, let alone about – or, rather, from – others; as, for example, political enemies?

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Both of these Warsaw productions explored the cultural presence of homosexuality in society. Unexceptional, one might think (even if its recognition is still not to be taken for granted); but in Poland (as, depressingly, in many European countries) LGBTQ+ rights are now on the front line of the culture wars. Some municipalities – with the support of the governing, right-wing "Law and Justice" party – have even publically declared that they want to be "LGBT-free areas". This expression has chilling resonances, especially in a country once occupied by the Nazis, with their ambition to make Europe *Judenrein*.

There are also those – even heads of state (for instance, in Hungary and the Czech Republic) – who publically talk about a cultural "extermination" of Europe, supposedly enabled by the settlement of migrants from other parts of the world. Asserting forms of ethnic nationalism rather than civic identity as the basis of citizenship, these politicians represent the very danger that they evoke. I must admit that I have not read Renaud Camus or Thilo Sarrazin (let alone Ayn Rand or Samuel Huntington); but I feel sure that my reading would differ from these – all too successful – politicians. Is it simply naïve to wonder how it is possible that what used to be called the "lessons" of the twentieth century are so readily deformed (or simply denied) in views that have now become mainstream? Between violence and law,

perhaps fascism is, then, always already “neo” when nothing fundamentally changes at the level of political economy.

In these two Warsaw theatres, such concerns are part of the culture – but they are also theatres that are viewed (indeed, “targeted”) by the current government as supposedly “anti-Polish”, as supposedly “defaming” a national community in their choice of repertory. The cultural imaginary of these theatres is being made “oppositional” by a government that refuses to recognise their cultural independence. This echo of a “nationalisation” (a *Gleichschaltung* even) of cultural space seems to be a return to pre-1990 (or, as some, such as Jan Gross [2019], would say, pre-1939) politics. Once again, as on the train in which I arrived, I wonder whether I am facing backwards or forwards – given, of course, the privileged freedom to travel.

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One could, perhaps, relate “the great work” evoked in *Angels* to a recent work by Natalia LL shown as part of Karol Radziszewski’s exhibition, *The Power of Secrets*, which I also saw at the Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw’s Centre for Contemporary Art. Part of Radziszewski’s ongoing “Queer Archives Institute” project, the exhibition offered glimpses of gay art and life in the former “East”, both past and present, including his own collaborations with Natalia LL. Her famous film work, ridiculing the gendered iconology of consumerism in the 1970s – last year the subject of a censorship controversy at Warsaw’s National Museum of Art – was also on display in the CCA’s own collection in the adjacent galleries. Perhaps it suffices to say that this work, *Consumer Art*, involved bananas, as did the protests organised against the decision – by a “Law and Justice” government appointee as the museum’s director – to remove it from the permanent exhibition of twentieth century Polish art. Meanwhile, the CCA has itself been embroiled in controversy following the recent imposition of yet another government appointee as its new director.

The current work by Natalia LL was not tied to questions of life and death associated with HIV, nor to the response of the state to the existence of gay cultures – in which the AIDS virus was seen as a metaphor for “life styles” that could be politically denigrated as somehow “worth less” than the normative, as somehow “dangerous” to the “health of the nation”. Nonetheless, reading her text in the gallery, written in November 1980 and now associated with a project entitled *Dulce – Post Mortem* (2016-19), was very resonant: “Energies charge our actions, our existence. I do not believe in human death. What’s more, I do not believe in the death of any entity. Life only changes the form of its manifestation. It can be good or bad. Happy or sad” (2019: 40).

Back home in London, I looked through the catalogue from an exhibition about the PERFAMO Gallery in Wroclaw (1970-1981), of which Natalia LL was one of the founders. (The Gallery had no permanent space, its existence being that of the experimental events and publications that it produced in the more-or-less unofficial “openings” in a public space otherwise defined by the Communist authorities.) Here I find another translation of the whole of the 1980 text, entitled *States of Concentration*, from which this one paragraph of an artist’s credo was drawn: “Energies stimulate our activity and support our existence. I do not believe in the death of an individual. I will say more. I do not believe in the death of any being. Life can only change its form. Life may be good or bad, happy or unhappy, but every individual existence is singular, unique, and exceptional. With this unique existence we will travel

together until the end. Until death. But what is death if not a form of change (metamorphosis) of our life?" (2013: 379)

Perhaps this is what my travel to Warsaw in February gave me to reflect on, as I write this now in "lockdown": that in the web of associations between 1980 and 2020, between Polish and English, between facing backwards or forwards, art – including theatre – offers a commitment to the "great work" (however exhausted it may seem) in an attempt to resist the exclusion of life from death, of difference from identity, and of justice from law.

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