



I'm delighted to be here to talk to you about the lack of contemporary Polish drama on the British stage. I'm going to look at **why we should tackle this lack**, what **challenges** we might face in doing that, and **how** we might go about it. Within this I'm going to focus on some common characteristics of selected contemporary Polish plays. I will highlight the prominent question as to **how World War Two should be commemorated** (or not), and I'll ask **whether audiences that are used to British theatrical traditions and conventions can deal with the playwrights' use of irony and the grotesque in relation to this theme**. I'll also discuss the acting style these plays suggest, and I will ask whether current actor training methods can equip performers in Britain for approaching these texts.

This is a picture from Grzegorz Jarzyna's production of *Między nami dobrze jest*, by Dorota Masłowska. The title means *Things are Good Between Us* but it has been published in translation as *No Matter How Hard We Tried*. This is a very successful co-production between the TR Warszawa and the Berlin Schaubühne, and I'm going to refer to it later on, but for now it gives you something else to look at; you'll notice this distortion of reality, created by a

large magnifying glass, which is a useful symbol for these non-naturalistic plays.



The lack of contemporary Polish writing in Britain matters to me for several reasons. I am British but I'm also half Polish, and I learnt Polish as a second language as an adult. I have studied Polish plays for many years and I have worked with some of these texts as a translator and a director. I trained as an actor at LAMDA (here in London) and as an acting coach here at Central. London and I have observed acting classes and directing classes in Warsaw. I've seen a lot of contemporary Polish plays in production. For me, there are important differences between the acting styles in the two countries, which I will come to later.

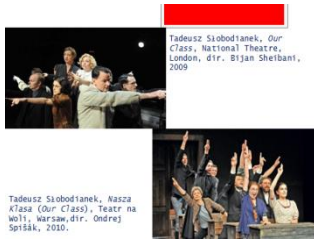


Britain has strong connections with Poland, through history and through migration. Polish is the second most common first language in Britain. Poland

has a rich theatrical culture and we should be routinely including Polish drama in our understanding of European theatre, beyond the influential work of Grotowski and Kantor. We are currently missing out on exciting new works in terms of both form and content.



There have of course been several examples of Polish productions, including recent ones, and we can immediately refute the idea that British audiences and producers just aren't interested in Polish theatre. Companies such as Teatr Biuro Podróży and Song of the Goat, for example, have enjoyed success at UK festivals and on tour. The internationally renowned director-auteur Jarzyna has brought several successful productions to Britain including his acclaimed version of Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis*. The influential director Warlikowski's *Phaedra(s)* made a strong impact at the Barbican in 2016. These are examples of company-based pieces in the first two examples and of directors' theatre in the second two. My focus today is on the playwriting strand of Polish theatre in which plays are often written by playwrights and submitted to directors, or sometimes commissioned by a particular theatre.



There have already been some high profile productions of some of recent Polish plays of this kind in translation in the UK. *Our Class* by the prominent playwright and playwriting tutor Tadeusz Słobodzianek, for whom I have had the pleasure of translating, was staged at the National Theatre in 2009. Here it is in the Polish and British versions. Both worked, but the performance styles were very different. Dorota Masłowska's play *A Couple of Poor, Polish-Speaking Romanians* was performed at the Soho Theatre in 2008 and Anna Wakulik's *A Time to Reap* was performed at the Royal Court in 2013 in Catherine Grosvenor's translation. So British audiences have demonstrated an interest in contemporary Polish theatre. There is also a theatre at the POSK Polish centre, and the brilliant Helena Kaut-Howson has recently directed some contemporary Polish plays there in production in Polish, though without surtitles. We can reject the idea that theatre producers simply haven't heard about Polish playwrights but there is no doubt scope to bring more Polish plays to British audiences.



Masłowska's *Things are Good Between Us* (Jarczyna 2009, TR Warszawa and Berlin Schaubühne).

And there are plenty of good plays to choose from. After Poland joined the EU in 2004, there were many initiatives to support new writing. These facilitated the development of a lot of new writers, including several now prominent playwrights such as Dorota Masłowska, Paweł Demirski, and Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk. Many of these initiatives required submissions to respond directly to contemporary Polish realities, and to seek new stage languages. This contributed to a proliferation of socially engaged plays which thematised uniquely Polish situations and, indeed, 'Polishness'. These issues might not be familiar to a British audience, and they might not recognise some aspects of the socio-historical context of these plays. This is a challenge for the translator and for the director. They might decide to cut some references, or find substitutions, or transpose the setting to a different cultural context. Or they might decide that it doesn't matter if the audience doesn't get all the references. In Masłowska's *Things are Good Between Us*, a grandmother (who turns out to be fictional, having died in the war), sits with her fictional daughter and fictional granddaughter, listening to a speech on the radio. The presenter reminisces about the old days:

‘when the world still lived by divine laws, when everyone in the world was Polish. The Germans were Polish, the Swedes were Polish, the Spaniards were Polish, everybody was Polish; everyone, everyone, everyone. [...]. We were a great power, an oasis of tolerance and multiculturalism, and everyone not coming here from another country, because, as we’ve said, there were no other countries to come from, was welcomed with bread’

We can probably recognise this as funny, even if we don’t realise that it is an ironic means to underline Poland’s stereotypical lack of tolerance towards outsiders and otherness, or that it refers to a crucial historical Polish autostereotype that references the pre-modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its exceptional religious tolerance, with Polish as lingua franca. It alludes to the sermon-like style of the Polish Catholic radio station Radio Maryja, and ridicules the messianist myth in which Poland is seen as the ‘Christ of nations’. An audience member with no connections to Poland couldn’t be expected to detect all of these references. Even if an audience doesn’t fully perceive all the irony in a given example, they can still perceive some, and enjoy the experience. Ultimately we don’t simply say that we can’t understand a play because it’s not set in the country in which we live. We find the points of connection. It has been translated and staged in many other European countries so it clearly doesn’t need to stay in its original context. One of the themes in this play is Polish perceptions of Germans, along with the cultural memory of World War 2.



As I mentioned earlier, the shared European history of World War Two is one clear and common theme that can speak to a British audience. Key playwrights including Słobodzianek, Sikorska-Miszczuk, Masłowska, and Demirski all tackle questions about the ways Polish society can come to terms with difficult aspects of its past, including Polish-Jewish relations, and the commemoration of World War Two. These playwrights favour a democratisation of memory, preferring individualised methods of remembrance over rituals of commemoration. The argument presented in these plays could contribute to British narratives and discourse. However, the ways in which some of the playwrights present this point might seem unconventional for a British audience. In Demirski's *Long Live the War!*, Szarik is a dog-veteran: part dog, part veteran – a man turned into a part-dog by his experiences of war. He barks orders at younger characters to observe a minute's silence to commemorate a major event in World War Two, the Warsaw Uprising. They try, but they can't stop laughing. After four real-time attempts they speak out. One of them says:

“I have these various emotions
But I prefer to have them alone
Than with you
I can stand for a minute
But my minute is against the authorities
Who gave the order to start the uprising
And then tell us to celebrate the order.

The playwrights I've mentioned are not from any one school, but they all share a total rejection of Aristotelian unities and a three act structure in favour of open, sometimes abstract structures. In their plays there are clear traces of some absurdist, grotesque, symbolist, and poetic characteristics of some of the playwrights' literary ancestors such as Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Mrożek and Różewicz. The playwrights also draw inspiration from European playwriting, postdramatic concepts, contemporary artworks of all forms, and from everyday life. There are examples of characters that are objects, such as a book, or that are part-human, such as the man-dog, and a personified answerphone. There are characters that never lived, and dead characters who seem to be alive. When approaching a Polish play as a British or other non-Polish translator, director, designer, performer, or audience member, it's vital to leave behind any assumptions that you are dealing with naturalism as a dominant approach. It is crucial that we interrogate the assumptions that we bring to a text from our own theatrical traditions, cultures, and backgrounds, whatever those might be.



In her award-winning play *The Suitcase*, Sikorska-Miszczuk takes a darkly comedic approach to the topic of Holocaust museums. The context is clear, is the use of irony here too much for British audiences? Do they have enough experience of irony and grotesque in mainstream theatre to be able to receive it in relation to this topic without being offended? Has irony lost its power in the social media age, where anything ironic posted online is followed by a winking emoji, or previously by the L-O-L? In *The Suitcase*, as in many other plays, the use of irony and grotesque is unmissable, in this case specifically in relation to whether museums such as that at Auschwitz should be kept. I directed a successful staged reading of this play at the Greenwich Theatre Studio in 2017, performed by a cast of students and professional actors. It wasn't until I was in the audience that I realised how unsure I was about how a London audience would respond, but the reception was good.

In the play, the Guide at the Holocaust Museum in Paris (though it could really be anywhere in Europe) is trapped in the macabre and psychologically bizarre situation of being faced with the details of the Holocaust every day, fearing she will lose her identity to madness, like in the

aspect of the grotesque that Bernard McElroy describes as a fear of the loss of the psyche. If this were presented naturalistically it would be brutal and difficult to watch, but in the 2009 Kruszczyński production at Teatr Polski, Poznań, when the character reaches a level of traumatic experience she cannot process on a day to day level, she ascends to an even less natural mode of language, first to poetry, and then to song. Her mental malfunctioning is presented in an extreme state, in high-pitched, intoned speech, then operatic song. It is comedic and the audience can laugh, even though - and because - it is so awful.

In the same play, Narrator and his lover Żaklin, who began as an answerphone but fell in love with his voice and came down the phone cable to join him, describe the Holocaust museum excitedly, in grotesquely ironic phrases parodying the language of advertising and consumerism, resulting in uncomfortable dark comedy that again allows the audience to laugh at a completely unfunny situation. The scene is clearly ironic in that although the characters mean what they say, the playwright cannot. It is extended irony, or what Claire Colebrook calls a figure of thought.



[audio clip of excerpt from play].

The Narrator begins with: "You'll never guess what you can see in a
holocaust museum. It's a museum of surprises!" And Jackleen replies:

"There's something for everyone." Narrator continues:

"Photo buffs will be
pleased as punch:
So many photos, so many faces,
A multitude of landscapes and interiors."

He goes on to reference a pile of shoes, and Jackleen says :

"footwear designers will be disappointed:
Details they look out for, like buckles, the shape of the toe, the colour
Are crushed in the heap of other shoes
The holocaust museum shows you that you can make a mountain out of shoes
Another surprise!"

The grotesque atmosphere builds, as Narrator says there is "A real cattle
wagon, you can step inside, kids love it", and peak of the grotesque is when
Jackleen says 'the first yellow star', and the rhythm means that she has to say
this as if it's something completely amazing. The Narrator continues: Stripy
clothes. Suitcases, and the section ends with the repetition of the line "What
haven't they got here?".

The performance of this section has to be stylised to be bearable and
to serve its purpose. The way in which a play is directed and acted greatly
affects the tone and can heighten or suppress elements such as the
grotesque and exaggerate or play down the ironic. As I mentioned earlier,
there is an acting style in Poland in a style that seems to be recognisably
different from anything I've seen or trained in here in the UK. There seems

to be a particular type of acting that combines very detailed physical work and diverse vocal work simultaneously. It seems to be entirely embodied. Nothing is ever pedestrian or mundane. The closest reference point I have is the bouffon section of my Lecoq-based clowning classes at LAMDA and the corporeal mime elements of my physical theatre training. There might also be a sprinkling of commedia dell'arte and perhaps the influences of Grotowski although the legacy of his work is mainly in a different strand of theatre.

There is effectively a rep system in Poland and rehearsal process are far longer, which leads to a depth of performance that I don't think it's possible to reach here by the beginning of a run. I think, though that if we could identify, distil, and borrow key actor training methods from contemporary Polish schools, then actors trained in Britain, and directors, could be better prepared to serve a wide range of European texts. Meanwhile one option is to stage a contemporary Polish play in English using Polish actors trained in the performance methods for which the playwrights have written, which would allow an authenticity of style and playfulness of delivery without requiring the audience to read surtitles. But there are already several published translations available. Some work better than others, and there is a challenge in convincing a producer to take on an unknown, abstract play

by getting them to read it, since the text is only one part of the performance language. But with good translations, open minded directors, producers, and designers, and with enough rehearsal with well-trained physical actors with strong vocal skills, it is entirely possible to stage successful productions of contemporary Polish plays in Britain. As long as the audiences are prepared for some irony.

