

Brexit Stage Left

Conference

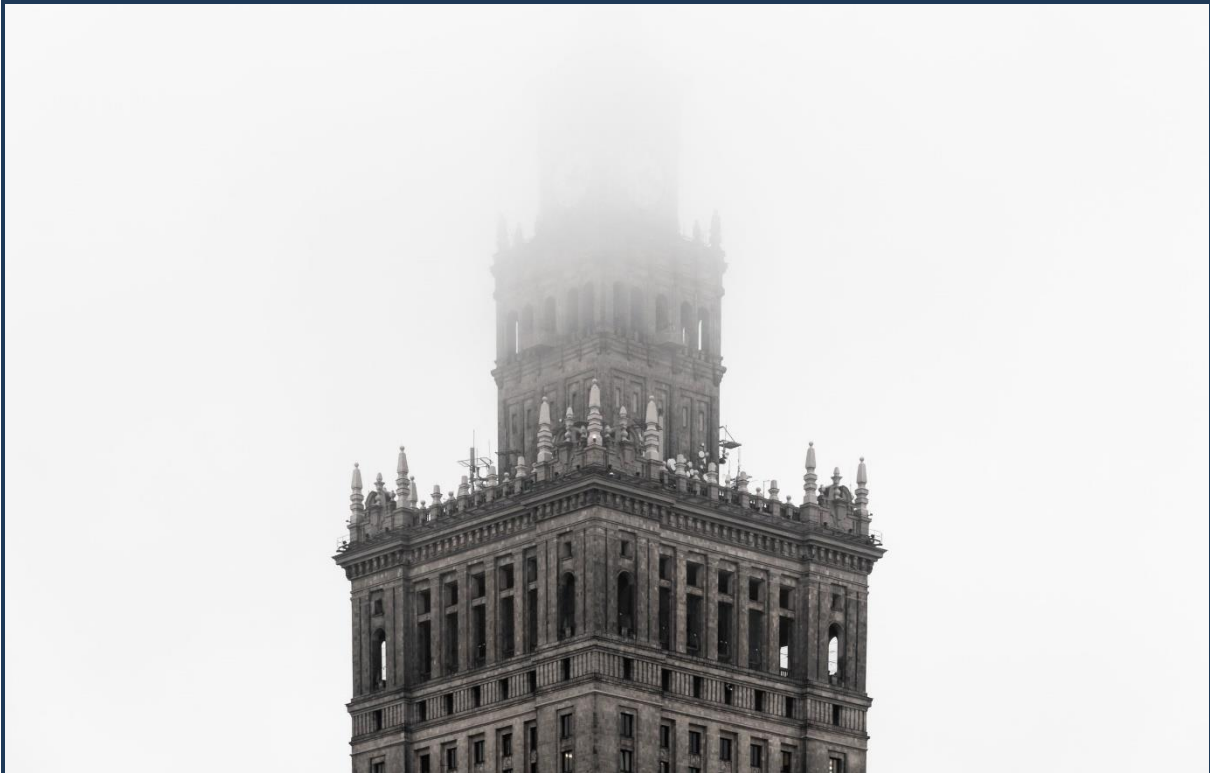
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Polish Plays on the British Stage?



European plays in translation on the contemporary British stage are undoubtedly rare. Patrick Marber's 2018 adaption of Ionesco's *Exit The King* at the National Theatre was a welcome surprise, and was the National's first staging of a play by this Romanian-French writer. Perhaps this marks the beginning of a new openness to European plays ... or does the aftermath of the Brexit vote mean that audiences and producers are generally wary of all things non-British? This wariness, if it exists, could be one of the many reasons for a lack of international plays on the British stage. Polish plays provide a good example. There are several prominent Polish playwrights who have come to the fore since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, and many of their plays have been produced in translation in several other countries, so why not in Britain? Why are we missing out? Although Masłowska's *A Couple of Poor, Polish-Speaking Romanians* was produced at the Soho in 2008 and Słobodzianek's *Our Class* was produced in translation at the National in 2009, this

did not represent the beginning of a wave of Polish plays in English in the UK. This is not to say there is not an appetite for Polish theatre in Britain. Several Polish companies have enjoyed success in the UK at theatre festivals and with touring shows, such as the work of Teatr Biuro Podróży and *Song of the Goat* (*Pieśń Kozła*). The TR Warszawa company brought Jarzyna's production of *Kane's 4:48 Psychosis* to the Barbican in 2010 (following its success at the Edinburgh Festival in 2008), and in 2012 they returned with Jarzyna's *Nosferatu* (co-produced with the Teatr Narodowy). Warlikowski's *Phaedra(s)* made a strong impact at the Barbican in 2016. Yet, plays by writers such as Sikorska-Miszczuk, Masłowska, and Demirski are not yet being embraced by British directors or producers.

One reason, apart from reticence in Brexit-Britain, might be that producers simply don't know about these plays. Another reason might be a lack of good translations that not only read well but 'play' well on stage in English. These issues are relatively simple and can be addressed fairly easily, albeit over time. Two significant anthologies of contemporary Polish plays in translation were published by Seagull press in 2014 and 2015, so several plays are now readily available to an English-speaking reader.

Some contemporary Polish plays might be perceived by a potential translator, director, or producer as 'too Polish'. After 2004, in order to encourage new playwriting, there were several competitions and other initiatives that required plays that responded to life in contemporary Poland. This means that some plays written in the last decade to fifteen years in Poland are about social issues that are very specifically Polish. Arguably, the British audience member might not recognise the socio-historical context of the plays and might therefore be unable to understand the texts without the play being transposed to a different cultural context. However, there are also several Polish plays that have universal themes and issues of shared interest and shared history with other countries, including Britain. The main example of this shared history is, of course, World War Two. A common concurrent theme among plays by several writers is the issue of how Poland's past should be remembered. In particular, all three playwrights mentioned above include questions around the democratisation of remembrance as well controversies and truths around particularly difficult aspects of Poland's past and present, such as Polish-Jewish relations.

These playwrights also have stylistic characteristics in common, such as postdramatic elements, and the use of irony and grotesque humour. Since irony requires the audience to understand what is really meant rather than what is said, there needs to be some shared sense of understanding between the writer and the audience. This can be difficult to create in translation but it is far from impossible. Furthermore, in the social media age in which anything ironic is followed by 'LOL' or a winking emoji, perhaps irony has lost some of its power.

Importantly, the ironic and grotesque features common in many contemporary Polish plays are portrayed in Polish productions through a very detailed physical acting style that differs significantly from many mainstream British styles. Perhaps a current exploration of Polish physical acting styles beyond Grotowski and Kantor would lead to a greater potential for contemporary Polish plays to be performed in translation in the UK. This would in turn allow British audiences to enjoy new Polish plays in a version close to their original, if producers facilitate this by taking a risk on something new.