

POMP conference presentation: Natasha Oxley

Hello, I'm Natasha Oxley and I'm a Final Year DPhil Candidate at Wolfson College, here in Oxford. It's a pleasure to be here to talk to you all today about Modernisations of Polish Identities in Contemporary Polish Plays and The Right to Individuality.

My research concentrates on common themes and dramatic techniques in plays written since 2004. If any of you have had the chance to read my paper then I hope you found it interesting, and perhaps this talk might inspire others of you to have a look through it. I want to take the opportunity today to talk around some of the main points in the paper and to show you some images from stage productions. I'm going to discuss characters that represent a challenge to stereotypes about Polish identities, and who assert their right to individuality and freedom of choice.

My examples come from plays by four playwrights:



Paweł Demirski, born in 1979, who is also a journalist, and he debuted as a playwright in 2002:



Dorota Masłowska, born in 1983 and debuted as a playwright in 2006 when she was already a famous novelist:



Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, born in 1964 and debuted as a playwright in 2004 having worked in advertising and screenwriting and Przemysław Wojcieszek,



born in 1974 and debuted as a playwright in 2004 when he was already a filmmaker and director.

These four are all established and prominent playwrights, but of course this is by no means an exhaustive list of important contemporary Polish dramatists.

I am going to focus on just three of the main ways in which characters express or demand the right to freedom of identity:

[Slide : The freedom to define one's own identity, with relation to:

Attitudes to history

Sexuality

Religion]

firstly by rejecting imposed versions of history and rituals of commemoration,

secondly by asserting the right to be openly gay without fear of persecution, and

thirdly by choosing not to follow the Polish Catholic church.

The overarching point I want to make is that these playwrights convey the belief that Poles in the post-communist era, especially

but not exclusively those from younger generations, should be free to define their identity for themselves, without the constraints of oppressive social norms. In engaging with this issue, these playwrights both reflect and contribute to important public debate.

As Elwira Grossman has stated

‘the process of redefining Polishness is a complex task.’

During communism an

‘artificial, monolithic vision of “Polishness”

was promoted, in which Poles are seen as uniquely white, Catholic and heterosexual.

Versions of history have been imposed and memory of the past has been institutionalised.

Although contemporary Polish playwrights have artistic freedom, unlike their predecessors who were constrained by communist

censorship, they are still working within the framework of a society riddled with taboos, social stereotypes and national myths.

After Poland joined the EU in 2004, a series of initiatives sprang up to support new playwriting, many of which encouraged writers to represent contemporary Polish realities, and this practice has continued in a variety of forms that challenge existing structures, both social and theatrical.

How can I claim that the plays in hand relate to reality? How do I know that the themes and concerns are not simply as fictional as the characters?

Aleks Sierz, who is a British academic and theatre critic of Polish descent asserts that:

when two or more plays explore the same social issue, it's a clear signal of national concerns.

Anna Sobiecka, a Polish academic, says that contemporary Polish drama reflects contemporary Polish realities, and that this is confirmed not only by sociological studies but also by observations made by theatre critics.

In the plays in hand, one of the manifestations of the playwrights' freedom of expression and a result of their inclusion of real, though not realistic characters, is the use of very 'colourful' language, some of which I will quote.

Today I'm using English only, but in my paper I give the lines in English and Polish.



This image is from Grzegorz Jarzyna's production for the T.R.

Warszawa theatre of Dorota Masłowska's *Między Nami Dobrze Jest*, meaning 'Things are Good Between Us', but it has been translated by Artur Zapałowski as 'No Matter How Hard We Tried, Or We Exist on the Best Terms We Can'.

This production premiered in Berlin in 2009 and it has become the flagship production of this very important text, having toured internationally and in Poland, winning numerous awards. A film version was released in January of this year. There have also been several other productions of this play in Polish and in translation.

The play centres around three generations of women, a grandmother, mother and granddaughter, who are all imaginary in their current states because the grandmother was killed during the war as a young woman before having children.

In fact, they are all also imaginary because they turn out to be characters in a planned film that never gets made. However, they are all used by the playwright to highlight aspects of reality.

The youngest of the three generations joyously proclaims that she and her family are not Poles but normal people. She declares that she decided long ago that she was not Polish but European.

This is important for two reasons: firstly that she felt free to make this decision, and secondly that she felt there were defining characteristics of a Pole.

During the play, she recurrently pretends to hear, or to be, World War Two knocking at the door.

Although she knows more about the concept of a price war than the Second World War, and all she knows about the Germans is that “they yodel” , she has acquired an awareness of the war’s lasting impact.

I want to talk now about characters from post-war generations who, in contrast to Masłowska’s young girl, are fully aware of their country’s history and refuse to let it define their personal identity.



In the play *Burmistrz*, translated by Zapałowski as *The Mayor*, and its sequel *The Mayor Two*, Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk sets the abstract action in the town of Jedwabne, which was the site of a 1941 massacre in which at least 340 Polish Jews were killed by their non-Jewish neighbours, but culpability was assigned to the Nazis.

The truth has only been publicly acknowledged in recent years, and it is still a controversial issue.

In *The Mayor Two* there are three members of the Young Generation, numbers I, II and III, all of whom are tired of being defined by their town's difficult past and, importantly, by World War Two in general.

Young Generation III says:

We were born fifty years after the war. Got that? We don't give a shit about the war. We don't give a shit about World War II.



Sikorska-Miszczuk has the Young Generation sing the Polish national anthem with altered lyrics:

March, march Dąbrowski

We want iPhones

The Jews were killed by Voldemort!

Down with history!

Down with memory!

We want to live!

We want to live!

Here, the playwright clearly uses comedic techniques to encapsulate the idea that members of the young generation are in a state of tension with national narratives.



In *Niech żyje wojna!* (Long live the war!), Paweł Demirski tackles head on the issue of imposed rituals of commemoration.

This image is from the production directed by Monika Strzępka, which premiered at the Teatr Dramatyczny in Wałbrzych in 2009.

This is Szarik, an elderly war veteran who has been transformed into a man-dog by his experiences of war. He barks orders at a group of younger characters, ordering them to observe a minute's silence to commemorate the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. They initially attempt to comply, but they can't keep still or stop themselves laughing, and after four failed attempts they eventually speak out against .

One character, Gustlik, says:

I haven't got any minute's silence like that in my head.

I can remember these two hundred thousand people

But why does he have to tell me what I have to remember?

Really?

Another character, Czereśniak, wants to find his own way to express his emotions about the past, and also to include a protest against the authorities who gave the command to begin the Warsaw Uprising.

He 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.

I stand against these commemorations.

Clearly, Demirski is arguing for an individualisation of memory, and for the permission for members of young generations to develop their own relationships to the country's past.

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In another of Demirski's plays, *Był Sobie Polak, Polak, Polak i diabeł*, 'There was a Pole, a Pole, a Pole and the Devil', seen here in Strzępka's production, which premiered in Wałbrzych in 2007, all the characters are dead and awaiting transportation from limbo.

'Boy', here, distances himself from Polish history, saying

I don't want to be the child of an insurgent, or a shipbuilder or a commie, I want to be the child of a R al Madrid player'.

In the same play, the young actress character, a devoted capitalist, puts her feelings bluntly but clearly in the lines:

I want to be free and have a contemporary identity

And what good to me is your history – can I fucking wear it or
can I fucking buy anything with it?

And what good to me is your national identity - can I fucking
wear it or can I fucking buy anything with it?

While she may be shallow, this character clearly feels free to construct her own identity on her own terms.

These examples show that the writers advocate the democratisation of memory, giving the clear message that it is, or should be, acceptable for postwar generations to define their own responses to Polish history.

Moving on now to my second set of examples, in which characters express or demand their right to be openly homosexual without fear of prejudice.



Warkocki wrote in 2013 that

‘the homosexual taboo is fading’

in Polish society. However, as Czapliński asserted in 2009,

‘constructing the homosexual as nationally-alienated derives from the fantasy of a real, unchangeable core of national identity.’

In Wojcieszek’s *Cokolwiek się zdarzy, Kocham cię*, translated by

Zapałowski as ‘I Love You No Matter What’, seen here in a

production for the T.R. Warszawa, premiered in 2005, directed by

the playwright, the central protagonists are a female couple, Magda and Sugar.

Sugar’s brother Piotr is a nationalist, an ex-soldier who refuses to accept his sister’s homosexuality, but their mother supports her

daughter, allowing Magda and Sugar to live in her house together, telling Piotr they have as much right to live there as he does.

Sugar declares that she and Magda will

‘start a little lesbian family. A tiny, subversive cell that will blow this fucked-up society to smithereens.’

Magda’s father comes to visit her at work and asks her to come home to see her ill mother. He tells her

‘a family should be together’.

She replies that he should have thought about that when he threw her out. He is still unable to say the word ‘lesbian’, and Magda refuses to go with him, effectively throwing him out. This is a personal triumph, but her father’s prejudices make intergenerational harmony impossible.



This is Demirski's *Tęczowa Trybuna*, translated by Zapałowski as Rainbow Stand, seen here in Strzępka's production, which premiered at the Teatr Polski, Wrocław, in 2011.

The protagonists are a group of Polish gay football fans petitioning for their own stand in the stadium for the 2012 European Cup final because they fear violence. One character, a gay teacher, wonders at the beginning of the play where two years of martial arts got him since he is scared to go outside, but he later declares:

I won't stand for it any longer

because the time has come to stop being ashamed of going out
in the street

I've overcome that.

In this same play, Demirski presents what is surely one of the most controversial and complicated characters possible in a Polish context: a transsexual priest who used to be a nun, who can be seen here at the back of the image, played by a female.

This example leads us on to the final section on the church.

Another clear commonality in plays by several playwrights is the presence of characters who feel unconnected to the Polish Catholic church.

Boguś from Wojciech's *Made in Poland* is one of them.

Here he is [press] from Wojciech's own production of the play, which premiered in Legnica in 2004:



Boguś is a 19 year old ex-altar server who wakes up one day and decides to have this tattoo done and to cut himself off from the church.

In Dominika Laster's translation he tells the priest Edmund

I've had enough of these lies...The lies you feed your flock. I don't believe them.

Edmund asks :

‘Would you like to talk about it?’, to which Boguś replies:

‘With you? So that you can give me this worthless crap all over again? I’ve been here five years and for five years every Sunday you try to push this shit on me. I don’t believe in eternal life, I don’t believe in the New Testament, I don’t believe in the revelations of the prophets.’

Edmund tries to reassure him that Boguś exists, saying

‘He is real and true – like you and me’,

but Boguś replies:

‘In your diseased brain maybe, you fucking missionary!’

True to form, Demirski’s actress character from ‘There was a Pole, a Pole, a Pole, and the Devil’ asks:

‘what fucking good to me is your whole fucking religion?’

Can I fucking wear it or can I fucking buy anything with it?’



Sikorska-Miszczuk's play *Popietuszko* takes its title from the name of a murdered priest, killed in 1984. This is from Paweł Łysak's production that premiered at the Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz in 2012.

The protagonist is 'Antypolak', an Anti-Pole, who says very simply:

My church presents me with a choice.

A choice about nation.

If I'm a Pole, I must believe in the Catholic church.

If I'm not going to believe in the Catholic church, I'm not going to be a Pole.

What I can do is get up off my knees, and I urge you all to get up off your knees.

Yes, I'm getting up off my knees, and I'm saying: I don't need the church to believe.

I am a Pole.

A free man.

These lines are delivered face on, in direct address to the audience, which makes the speech feel quite controversial in performance.

The playwrights here clearly challenge the myth of the

Polak-Katolik

in favour of freedom of choice about religious practices.

In the plays I have discussed, the writers also clearly engage in contemporary Polish public debate and social discourse in relation to history and sexuality.

Read together, these plays project a sense that greater freedom of expression and the right to define one's own individual identity are having, and will continue to have, a positive impact on contemporary Polish society. These playwrights, and others, demonstrate, advocate and contribute to the ongoing modernisation of concepts of Polish identity.

Thank you.

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