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Creating for the Stage in the Most Recent Polish Theatre – New Biographies by Beata Popczyk-Szczęśna

Texts and performances inspired by biographical material form a significant part of contemporary dramaturgy and theatrical projects. In Poland, this type of activity is the domain of directors coming from different generations and representing various styles, for example, Jerzy Jarocki, Krystian Lupa, Michał Zadara, Wiktor Rubin, and Remigiusz Brzyk. Among the protagonists featured in Polish performances of the last half-century there have been, for instance, such famous people as Andy Warhol, Marilyn Monroe, Simon Weil, Oriana Fallaci, Maria Curie-Skłodowska, Witold Gombrowicz, Lech Wałęsa, Jerzy Popiełuszko, and Wanda Rutkiewicz. Various biographical data appear in dramatic texts and performances; they are subject to artistic transformations.

At the outset, I wish to point out that the latest trend in theatrical biography is a manifestation of contemporary concepts of relational identity and subjectivity that have been shaped in various situational and contextual acts of performing one's own «I» (Taylor 1989; Fischer-Lichte 1997; Bauman 2004). The growing interest in biographies that is observed nowadays among both artists and audiences, and the consequent development of literary, film and theater biography, no longer stems from the need to discover the truth about mankind and the tendency to reveal some content which has been displaced from the official discourse. Rather, it is a symptom of the cultural process of negotiating (or rather confronting) many meanings, which results from the need to show different «versions of life» of the individual, versions dependent not only on the creative potential or above-average features of a distinguished person, but most of all, conditioned by a specific ideological framework which sanctions the (narrative and rhetorical) schemata of stories about the individual that are established in a given age.

The creators of contemporary plays and performances are particularly sensitive to the aforementioned aspect of the production of a biography which is in line with seemingly neutral, *a priori* rules. Therefore, the biographical material they use in their stage work is clearly a pretext, in fact a starting point, and not the center and dominant feature of the stage narrative.

I consider the different directions/manners of using archival data by theater artists of the 21st century to be very inspiring. Consequently, I put forward three key hypotheses:

- theatrical performances inspired by biography are laboratories of personality, not only that of the protagonist of the stage narrative, but also those of the creators of the work (actors, director);
- stage representations of biography are a prime example of the revision of dominant narratives;
- biographical performances are reproductions of bio-/factography which seek to reveal a game of perspectives in the manner of showing the past.

European academic reflection on biographical texts – their systematics, genealogies, and transformations of the forms of expression – has a long-established research tradition, among which English and French research work ranks high (Clifford 2011; Benton 2009; Lee 2009; Boyer-Weinmann 2005; Dosse 2011). In the latest research on biography, which is closely related to the postmodern concept of historiography and theories of subjectivity, though, there predominate claims about the constructional and phantasmatic dimension of every biographical narrative, which is said to be formed by the development of a peculiar relationship between the author and the protagonist (Boyer-Weinmann 2005) and conditioned by two preliminary factors: a literary form and a formula for the social story of a human being adopted in a given literary period (Sugiera 2011). Account should also be taken of the hermeneutic model of biographical writing developed by François Dosse. He identifies a specific «reading contract» between the author and the reader; he mentions the inhomogeneity of a biographical work created by combining different cultural content and discourses (Dosse 2011).

Several important theoretical findings on the subject of contemporary artistic biography are emerging from current Polish reflection on the subject of «new biographies» – I refer to the volume entitled *New Biographies*, published by the Theatrical Institute (Warsaw 2012). One of them is the concept of a «biographical pact», formulated by Małgorzata Sugiera, which was introduced by analogy to Philippe Lejeune's «autobiographical pact». Notably, in a biographical work, more significant than the issue of the sincerity and/or referentiality of expression is the conviction that «the creator of a biography is as much the author whose name and surname appear on the title page, as are a specific literary form and the adopted schema of social stories about the human being preceding its creation» (Sugiera 2012: 187). In keeping with our late-modern suspicions about the integrity and impartiality of facts, it can be added that the measure of success of contemporary

biographical forms is not so much the power to reveal the hidden or omitted truth about a person, but a «good fabrication» which makes «biography acquire the capacity to send readers back to the world they share», while the information contained in it «takes on the status of facts for us» (Sugiera 2012: 188). Still, this is a «good fabrication» often prepared with detailed knowledge of various source data and based on the knowledge of many biographical materials or personal life documents about the portrayed person – which the creators of contemporary biographical texts and performances are quite willing to admit.

Another important interpretative perspective which may be useful in discussions on contemporary biographical plays is the issue of the author's programmed game with the spectator in each work created from biographical material. Given the remarkable combination of fiction and fact that to a large extent produces the effect of the real (English studies of artistic biography use the term «faction» to designate the strong relationship between fact and fiction), «biographical references pull the knowledge and expectations of the reader into the orbit of drama» (Partyga 2014). The reader experiences an «encounter with another person» in the process of the perception of art – this can be compared to the concept of «biographical relation» introduced by French writer Martine Boyer-Weinmann (2005), who makes the dependency between the author and the protagonist of a biography the central point of her research: this relation has its epistemological, ethical and aesthetic aspects.

Biographical works are a clear example of an interactive model of artistic creation as an effect of the interpenetration of various cultural spheres of influence: the time and place of the creation of a given work, environmental conditions, dominant existing narratives, ideological frameworks with their rhetorical strength, and individual authorial fascinations or suspicions.

I place the contemporary biographical stage works between two opposite strategies of representation: namely, between the explicit construction of texts/performances from numerous biographical sources and the technique of subjectivized presentation of the person acting on the stage, which is an attempt to plausibly present the experiences of the protagonist of a biography in the process of an artistic representation of their life. These two dominant manners of creating a theatrical biographical narration are expressed in several different strategies of recalling and reconfiguring various biographical material and related genre formats preferred by playwrights. These playwrights implement their dramatic ideas in two principal ways. In the first case, they take the role of a biographer who «writes by himself», establishing a strong, intimate relationship with

the protagonist. They treat the text as a form of expression, serving both as a recognition of the «Other» and as self-reflection, or even self-therapy. This is a clear example of the creative practice that Martine Boyer-Weinmann describes in terms of «biographical relation», meaning a strong emotional relationship, a kind of identification of the creator with the protagonist. At the same time – somewhat paradoxically – in biographical plays of this type, playwrights remain in the shade; they merge their voice with the character's speech. They choose a monologue or a blend of different monologues to authenticate a message which is focused on some specific individual experience. In the second case, the writers and directors of plays assume the role of «biographer-researcher». That is, they reveal various sources of inspiration in their works, which are sometimes documents, and above all they evince a method of dealing with the available or selected biographical material. In this variant, much more important than the relationship between the artist and the «portrayed» protagonist is the «contract with the audience», which is provided with illusion-free moments of the technique of presentation, the manner of creating a story. Consequently, different variants of autothematism of the text prevail. Theatrical texts of this kind are dominated by two aspects of presenting/creating biographies: first, a confrontation between several alternative possibilities of creating a story about the protagonist's life, which is therefore constructed before «the very eyes of the reader/viewer», with numerous references to the present day, and second, revision of the dominant narratives in order to stimulate the reader/viewer to think critically about the past. Plays such as these are self-referential, metatheatrical and, one could say, meta-biographical. The following are selected examples and techniques for representing biography in dramatic arts.

1. The biographical play as a laboratory of the protagonist's/author's/director's personality

As the first example, I would like to describe Krystian Lupa's play entitled *Persona. Simone's Body* (first performance at the Dramatic Theater in Warsaw, 10 February 2010). This is one of a series of biographical plays by Krystian Lupa, based on a biography of Simone Weil, and also inspired by *Persona*, a film by Ingmar Bergman. The play is an indication of the director's interest in the personality of the heroine-mystic: he is fascinated by the spiritual, and by the repressed, the hidden, and the mysterious. Lupa wrote the script based on various sources of inspiration (documents, Simone Weil's writings, and the philosophy of Carl Gustav Jung). This script's main features are autothematism, the revealed theatrical situation, and the multi-layered world of fiction. The

dominant theme is the preparation of the performance, and the process of creation of the character of Simone Weil, who was originally played by Małgorzata Braunek.

Krystian Lupa is an artist known for various forms of direct and indirect expression. He creates plays about other persons and at the same time about himself; he is inspired by unusual personalities and difficult biographies. He often records the process of his creative work in notes, rehearsal notes. His book *Persona* (Warsaw 2010) shows his dedication to and fascination with the people who are the protagonists of his plays. This is both an emotional mark of stage work and proof of his keen interest in the Other, which is accompanied by the full conviction of the difficulty of representing the protagonist on the stage. The process of making the protagonist present therefore takes place in *Persona. Simone's Body* by means of an alternating order of actors' entrances and exits from the role, planned as early as at the stage of the composition of the script. Consequently, the text becomes a project of a play-show of making the character present, which is a spiritual experience for the audience.

In the Rays by Artur Pałyga may serve as another example of this kind of biographical text. It is a play that presents a biography of Maria Skłodowska-Curie – a monodrama in the form of letters by the female protagonist that she has written to herself. Her internal monologue is an emotionally marked statement. The dramaturgy of the message of the work lies in the reduction of the biography of the woman to one formative experience – the passion of a scientist who becomes totally engrossed in research that requires sacrifice but gives her a sense of fulfillment. Events from Maria Skłodowska-Curie's biography appear as mentions or suggestions, never directly, and without extended description. Pałyga created a metaphorized statement that indicates various psychosomatic states in the female protagonist: body pain, rapid mood swings, and affective reactions triggered by memories. This monodrama is a combination of poetic phrases and scientific language. The way the protagonist is represented is very suggestive, private, and almost ascetic. It fully corresponds to the assumptions of biographical writing as a process of establishing a private and intimate relationship between the author and the protagonist. Artur Pałyga acknowledges this type of composition. He says:

«I simply have to become a protagonist in some way to create it. It is always quite a big mental effort. Sometimes it brings about a rather schizophrenic situation – I think of a dialogue involving

a few characters (...) You need to enter a character, feel it, become someone else. All my characters are me» (*Pisanie dla sceny [Writing for the Stage]* 2019: 407).

II. *Texts – revisions of existing cultural narratives*

Tsarina Catherine, Joanna the Mad, Countess Bathory – this is a biographical triptych by Jolanta Janiczak (the texts refer to biographies of Tsarina Catherine the Great, Queen Joanna the Mad of Castile, and the Hungarian noblewoman Elizabeth Bathory, known as the Bloody Countess of Čachtice). Jolanta Janiczak chose female protagonists who are historical figures caught up in conflicts of a political and/or moral nature. The plays were written with the intention of revising the conventional patterns of biographies of women that are established in culture. These texts are strongly marked with various discourses – passages of highly ideological "ready-made narratives" are the basic material for dialogue or dramatic monologue. The power of the patriarchal language, which appears in dramatic dialogue as clearly demonstrated and quoted word, contributes significantly to the creation of the gloomy and constraining atmosphere of Janiczak's plays. The process of taming the identity of Tsarina Catherine, Joanna the Mad and Countess Bathory essentially follows the same pattern. The first two protagonists are subjected to mind discipline techniques by immediate family members (mother, father, husband), while Countess Bathory is enslaved to obsessive care for her body. Consequently, all three heroines live in a world of their own or someone else's limitations. This state generates bitter frustration which leads to destructive actions: either aggressive or sadistic conduct (Tsarina Catherine and Countess Bathory) or exacerbation of health problems resulting in death (Joanna the Mad).

Janiczak adopts a technique of compiling historical accounts, literary texts, and sentences. She writes from a feminist point of view – it is her form of resistance to the prevailing, often stereotypical visions of the past. Her female protagonists are subjected to training, they are figures of subjugation, individuals entangled in the cruel mechanisms of the struggle for power in the male order of the world. These theatrical plays are an example of emancipatory discourse – Janiczak create a message in the name of women – in defense of their right to freedom, independence of actions and opinions, and self-determination and development.

III. Reproductions of bio-/factography as a game of perspectives in the presentation of the past

Popiełuszko is a play by Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk's about a priest – a Solidarity Movement chaplain who was brutally murdered during the period of Martial Law in Poland (first performed at the Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, 9 February 2012). The author tackles a difficult topic filled with many contradictory opinions and does not fail to mention it in the initial, self-referential passages of the play. The play about the Polish priest features compositional elements typical of works by Sikorska-Miszczuk – she very often composes her dramas from many scenes with different stylistic, lexical, and graphic qualities. These scenes create a constellation of forms and meanings, shaped on the principle of contrast, as a puzzle composed of various conventions in the literary description of the world and many points of view. Lyrical passages mingle with the grotesque, fantastic creatures with real characters, fictional or historical. *Popiełuszko* shows the phantasmagoric journey of a character who is locked with the priest in the boot of a car to witness his death. The playwright draws upon various documents and opinions on Jerzy Popiełuszko's death, and she plans the scenes of the play in such a way as to make the individual experiences of the charismatic clergyman an experience shared by contemporary Poles. Consequently, she encourages contemporary audiences to reflect on the priest's mission and on the meaning of his conduct in the modern world. This play may be viewed as an original example of updating biographical data in a dramatic work.

Between the Cup and the Lip by Martyna Wawrzyniak and Remigiusz Brzyk is an interesting biographical performance. The script of the play is based on the life of Maria Rodziewiczówna, a transsexual writer of popular novels, and it addresses the issue of the reception of her writings (first performance at the Zagłębie Theater in Sosnowiec, 17 May 2019). The text is based on a confrontation between scenes from the past and contemporary scenes: the protagonist of the biography and persons making comments on that protagonist's life. The fragmentary action lacks a linear time structure and cause and effect sequence; real-life scenes intertwine with phantasmagoric moments. The dialogue has a patchwork structure (blending quotes, archaisms, stylization, and colloquial language). Suspense is built by means of the dynamics and a variability of perspective in which the characters and their achievements are presented.

The plot focuses on the relationship between two young friends and the action starts with a conversation about a popular novel entitled «Between the Cup and the Lip». A distinctive feature of the stage action is the compilation of various spacetimes: the dialogues of contemporary women are juxtaposed with scenes from the life of Maria Rodziewiczówna and the dialogues of scouts who

are participating in the opening of a museum dedicated to the writer (this is an ironic thread of the play which touches on contemporary mechanisms of commemorating the past). These levels of action carry a scenic message at the root of which is the staging gesture of opening the text of popular literature and the writer's biography to many possible meanings. The text is therefore some kind of task for the audience, who are invited to participate in a game of meanings by making their own individual cognitive decisions based on a designed puzzle of scenes, story ideas and biographical data.

The form of the theatrical texts described above is of great importance in the staging process. Regardless of whether they are autonomous dramatic texts that exist prior to their performance or scripts written specifically for the needs of a given theater project, their dramatic model contributes substantially to the aesthetics of the spectacle. In specific stage productions, these texts – due to their performative properties – combine other stage matter in a coherent manner, thus creating an important tool for representing reality and an instrument for engaging the audience.

All the above biographical plays, regardless of their form, are in fact messages composed as a verbal sphere of tensions between fact and fiction. The last two variants, i.e., revision and game of perspectives, are examples of self-referential creativity that refers both to external reality and to itself (De Marinis: 2011). For directors, this provides excellent material with which to emphasize the ambivalent role of representation. The performances are often put on in contradiction to mimetic aesthetics, although great emphasis is placed on the materiality and media content of the staging through the use of electronic media as a tool for the perceptual game with the audience.

The first strategy – the personality laboratory – is an example of establishing a «biographical relationship», i.e., an emotional relationship between the author, the protagonist, and the recipient of the art. The experience of co-presence is important as regards both the reading of such texts and their stage production. The meeting of actors in the roles of protagonists and spectators takes place in general acceptance of the rules of the theatrical metaphor – in the act of recognition that the performers' actions are a form of embodiment of the protagonist of a biography (making the protagonist present through traces), a lifelike person, by means of various techniques of expression and signs. It may contribute to strengthening interpersonal ties and generate an impulse for the creation of a temporary theatrical community based on similar feelings.

In conclusion, any artistic gesture of presenting / producing part of someone's biography on the stage is a reconfiguration of previous data and an example of a «biographical pact». The theatrical

creative practice inspired by texts – «new biographies» – thus reflects the essence of contemporary culture of participation, provoking artists, audience and students of artistic performances alike to engage in a dialogue in which the possibility of a free, subjective interpretation of artifacts does not preclude taking into account other reasons or views.

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