

## Theatre as a Vehicle of Social Change?

### *On the margins of the SYLFF SRA project entitled "Ludwik Flaszen as an intellectual and the transformations of the Polish post-war public sphere (1945–1989)"*

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#### **Paradoxes of the Politics of Visibility**

If we have some reservations about Walter Lippmann's critique of democratic public sphere which he describes as a phantom public, we should have no doubts about communist public sphere being a pure fiction. Under communist regimes – and Poland is one of the most interesting examples – the political was a contradiction of the public. The public sphere was strictly controlled by the state and whichever form of free public discussion was dosed as a medicine and only to the chosen elite.

By definition communist public sphere was restricted to a narrow circle of active minorities (intellectuals, artists, producers of cultural artifacts) and party functionaries. Certainly, there were newspapers, magazines, and from 1960s also a public television, however either they were soaked with propaganda and supervised by censorship or permeated by the works of the so called socialist mass culture, colorful and accessible but devoid of any political ideas. In a sense the general public in Polish communist state could not be considered as a public which engages in a process of public/political problem solving, rather it should be called the general *unpublic* which plays the part of the silent "rest" observing the course of action but not willing and not allowed to engage politically. But even for the aforementioned active minorities, though well informed about the mechanisms of communist political decision making process, any influence on public issues or a public debate was a mirage.

The Polish communist regime controlled *his* publics by specific politics of visibility. Intellectuals and artists were allowed to articulate their opinions but the ones which were political in nature were made invisible and hidden from the public eye, they were simply not shown, either because of censorship or due to restrictions in travel (intellectuals often could not leave the country). At the same time the state created the so called "nature reserves" for its elites in which they could freely discuss non-political issues, e.g. art, music, literature and theatre, but not history, ideology, or works of art which had any political implications (Romantic art – yes, Romantic art which tries to be critical of imperialism – no). So in those "wildlife parks" of communist "free discussion sphere" polemics were allowed as long as they were "safe" for the "health of the society" and confined to the borders of the "park".

Still one of the paradoxes of the communist regime was that on one hand it forbade any uncontrolled visibility (e.g. political demonstrations), on the other it allowed public appearing in art and theatre. For the functionaries of the authoritarian regime the only "dangerous" and ideologically "suspicious" behavior was linked to traditionally understood political activity. Art and literature were not regarded as a threat to the political authority, nevertheless artistic discourse had a power of changing the conditions of thinking and acting, and – what is crucial – it could redesign the landscape of communication.

#### **Art as a Vehicle of Change**

Both Ludwik Flaszen and his partner Jerzy Grotowski were not only actors of the communist public sphere described above but to a large extent re-described its nature.

Flaszen, the member of the Kraków's Group of Critics, theatre critic and theoretician, and Grotowski, theatre director and innovator of theatre, in 1958 founded an experimental theatre in Opole called the Theatre of 13 Rows (later the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław). At that time they both were political outcasts of the Polish October, a period of political liberalization in Poland, which was soon proven false as the state gradually became more oppressive.

I call Flaszen and Grotowski outcasts of the Polish thaw because at the beginning they were both very much engaged in the political critique (Grotowski wanted even to create workers' self-government) enabled after the death of Stalin and the following though restricted slackening of censorship. But already in 1957 Flaszen and Grotowski knew well that the period of liberalization has ended and although the terror was abolished the fundamental character of the state and the rules of public debate have not changed (censorship soon resurfaced). These events forced them to abandon politics (understood differently by each of them, nb. the same can be said of other members of the Kraków's Group of Critics) and begin their search in the sphere of art – literature and theatre. They both left Kraków for a small town of Opole and started an experimental theatre in the middle of province. Nevertheless their gesture was not an act of escapism or dodging the responsibility after revolutionary days of Polish October, it had a more profound meaning. As through art Flaszen and Grotowski were both looking for a universal dimension of human experience. They understood art as a vehicle of individual metamorphosis which served as a tool used for the search of individual freedom.

What is peculiar about this endeavor is that in a captive society like Poland this process of "soul searching" could have been easily translated into an act of opposition towards political power. For theatre was considered a type of public association which could (but did not have to) be used to perform political functions. Nonetheless for Flaszen and Grotowski such an understanding was a form of reductionism as the most important characteristics of theatrical work was to drop off masks and start describing ourselves without our own version of censorship. This potentiality of free, open acting, hidden in a theatrical work, was later brought to surface with a great success by Polish opposition groups in 1970s.

### **Contemporary Questions**

To sum up, there is no doubt that there was a link between theatre, art, and politics in post-war Poland, and there is no doubt that this specific connection influenced politics. Still one can be justified in asking the following questions: was this relationship accidental or essential? Was it possible to engage in the communist public sphere through art? Was this type of activity restricted only to elites – intellectuals and artists – or was it open to audiences as well? In other words, was the public sphere as projected by the party functionaries indeed restricted only to the limited groups of active minorities, people who have the power to articulate opinions? These are also some of the questions of my research. Yet they are not only historical, they are posed by the contemporary critics of liberal public debate as well who point out that with television and new media public sphere becomes more and more elitist and undemocratic. It seems worthwhile then to focus on a specific experience of the Kraków's Group of Critics which can add up to our understanding of contemporary public debate and its *malaises*.