

BALKAN STRATEGIES

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The article is focused on Oliver Frljić's performances, that were staged in Poland. The political dimension of the works of the Croatian director is in the foreground and the agonistic model of democracy by Chantal Mouffe is the key research perspective. Frljić first worked in Poland at the invitation of the National Sary Theatre in Krakow, in 2013 where he was to direct Zygmunt Krasiński's *Nie-Boska komedia (The Un-Divine Comedy)*. In his work on the production, the director focused on two aspects: the anti-Semitic dimension of the text itself and confrontation with the production of the same drama directed at the Sary Theatre in 1965 by the legendary director Konrad Swinarski. *Nie-boska komedia. Szczątki (The Un-Divine Comedy: Remains)*, as Frljić's production was to be titled, never premiered, but is nevertheless one of the most radical and effective critical interventions in Polish theatre in recent years. The fundamental issue here was the hidden anti-Semitism and xenophobia in Polish society. In 2017 year Frljić was invited to the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, where he was to direct a classical drama, this time *Klątwa (The Curse)* by Stanisław Wyspiański. The drama was a starting point for the Croatian director to discuss contemporary Polish religiousness. In the performance Frljić asks: *To what extent are our decisions influenced by Catholic morals? How do they affect the perception of people who declare their independence from the Church, and what do they mean for those who regard*

themselves as Catholics? And most of all: to what extent is modern art defined by religious censorship, self-censorship, and avoidance of the accusation of »insulting religious beliefs«?

Key words: public theatre; agonistics; the political, anti-Semitism; Catholic church

THE AGON

In order to understand the nature of the political, the Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe introduces two key concepts: antagonism and hegemony. According to Mouffe, democracy is the possibility of juxtaposing different forms of hegemonic projects, even though they cannot be reconciled, and »the political« is the recognition of social antagonisms and divisions. Her theory of the political proposes that no society can function beyond division and beyond power. Certain disputes will never be resolved, because antagonism is inherent in every social order, constituting the very essence of the political. According to Mouffe, society is »the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency,« (Mouffe refers here to the Aristotelian »contingent being«), and »every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices.« So the natural order does not exist, but an infinite number of »other worlds« is possible. By creating those »other worlds«, or counter-hegemonic models of social relations, we must come into conflict with representatives of the dominant order – it is the only practice that makes a pluralist democracy possible.¹

¹ See Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistyka*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2015.

Significantly, Mouffe does not believe that a political consensus seeking to find a compromise between leads to pluralism. Consensus should only involve the establishment of the rules of political confrontation, not the acceptance of someone's arguments, because an identity can exist only insofar as there is a difference. Mouffe also writes that the agonistic model of democracy recognizes affects as an inherent element of the political – being aware of this allows us to work through affects so as to keep them under control in public space. Disputes are therefore intrinsic to pluralist democracy; as Mouffe writes, »They allow for different forms of citizenship identification and are the stuff of democratic politics. When the agonistic dynamism of pluralism is hindered because of a lack of democratic forms of identification, passions cannot be given a democratic outlet.«² This in turn leads to the establishment of radicalized nationalist or religious groups advocating strict moral values that they are unable to negotiate, which results in acts of violence. So the agon is the only space where social conflicts and dramas can be articulated and worked through.

The Croatian director Oliver Frlić seems the perfect example of an artist who fulfils the postulates of agonism.

THE UN-DIVINE COMEDY: REMAINS

Frlić first worked in Poland at the invitation of the National Stary Theatre in Krakow, where he was to direct Zygmunt Krasiński's *Nie-Boska komedia* (*The Un-Divine Comedy*). The premiere was scheduled for 7 December 2013. In his work on the production, the Croatian director focused on two aspects: the anti-Semitic dimension of the text itself and

² Ibid.

confrontation with the production of the same drama directed at the Stary Theatre in 1965 by the legendary director Konrad Swinarski.

Professor Maria Janion, a distinguished scholar of Polish Romanticism, referred to *The Un-Divine Comedy* as a »masterpiece tainted with anti-Semitism.« In the drama Krasiński describes the Jews as the murderers of Jesus Christ and the converts (»Neophytes«) as duplicitous and deceitful. Conversion to Catholicism is for them just a strategy to throw their opponents off guard – their only goal is to rule the world. The Jewish conspiracy and falsity and deceitfulness as Jewish qualities are well-established stereotypes in Polish culture. Frljić was surprised that the drama, considered a masterpiece and part of the Polish cultural canon, is discussed in school without reflecting on its anti-Semitic dimension. Konrad Swinarski addressed this issue in his 1964 production. The Neophytes were depicted as devils, his Satan wore sidelocks. Swinarski made grotesque use of a phantasmal image of the Jew to draw attention to the anti-Semitic feeling that was growing in Poland at the time, though temporarily excluded from the official sociopolitical narrative. (Yet, three years later, in March 1968, a systematic campaign to expel Jews from the country would take place in Poland).

During the rehearsals, Frljić did not run through scenes from the play, but invited the actors to engage in a discussion of responsibility for anti-Semitism and a critical analysis of Swinarski's *The Un-Divine Comedy*, wondering to what extent hatred and fear of the Jews are still alive in our country. The actors were shocked by this form of theatrical preparation, demanding professionalism, which should manifest itself in working with the text. In an anonymous interview for the newspaper *Dziennik Polski* one of the actors said: »Not once have we worked with Krasiński's text, but we have participated in a series of provocations meant to illustrate the thesis that the Polish nation share responsibility for anti-Semitism.«³

³ Wacław Krupiński, *Nieboska prowokacja s Starym Teatrze. Aktorzy sami rezygnują*, the newspaper *Dziennik Polski*, November 22, 2013.

In the end, seven of the eighteen actors resigned. Ten days before the scheduled premiere, Jan Klata stopped work on the production, justifying his decision by the »paranoid atmosphere« created allegedly by the right-wing media's attack on the theatre, a conflict among the cast, and a danger to the institution's safety – the Stary received threatening letters and protesters gathered outside the theatre. Frljić and his team of dramaturges – Goran Injac, Agnieszka Jakimiak and Joanną Wichowska – issued a counterstatement, which included the following lines:

The decision of the management of the National Stary Theatre legitimizes a situation in which specific media and the interests behind them decide what is and what is not permitted in theatre. It also exposes the inability of the national theatre to put up strong resistance to the threats of those who want to impose by force the only right and valid interpretation of Polish culture and history. The message sent by the management of the National Stary Theatre is clear: it's enough to intimidate a state institution with a few aggressive articles for the institution to surrender. The decision of the management sets a dangerous precedent: it may be treated as a guideline on how to influence the artistic work of state cultural institutions.

Nie-boska komedia. Szczątki (The Un-Divine Comedy: Remains), as Frljić's production was to be titled, never premiered, but is nevertheless one of the most radical and effective critical interventions in Polish theatre in recent years. The spectacle surrounding the rehearsals – the protests outside the theatre, the withdrawal of several actors in an atmosphere of scandal, the media smear campaign, followed by Klata's comments, which questioned the sense of Frljić's work and his right to deal with Polish cultural heritage (Klata said in one of the interviews that »Balkan strategies don't work in Polish theatre« [sic]) – exposed many covert problems in Polish theatre and the sociopolitical sphere. The fundamental issue here was of course the hidden anti-Semitism and xenophobia, but also the oppressive

and extremely hierarchical character of the theatrical institution. In Polish theatre, not only on the national stage in Krakow, artistic freedom and working with identity – examination of archives and memory – are often blocked and censored. The methods of critical representation are conventionalized and limited, e.g. by textual hegemony, which is challenged by Frljić, who believes that the text is not necessarily the main factor generating and organizing meaning in the play. The charge of departing from the text was made by Klata himself when he gave his reasons for cancelling the premiere of *The Un-Divine Comedy*. It is remarkable insofar as the director of the Stary Theatre is considered a reformer of Polish theatre, who has staged some very bold, avant-garde productions of classic plays.

It is not only the text that proved to be sacred in the Stary Theatre. When Frljić analyzed Swinarski's production during the rehearsals and asked whether the scene with the Neophytes may be regarded as anti-Semitic, one of the actresses replied: »Let's leave Swinarski out of this. In this theatre he is sacred.«

The beatification of Swinarski has turned him into the chief representative of national culture, although he was, in fact, a rebel: he challenged the conventions of producing classics and theatre in general and was critical of national constructs.

I would like to add that the escalating spiral of censorship and violence at the rehearsals and after the cancellation of the play served as the dramaturgical material for Frljić's next Polish production, *Nie-boska. Wyznanie (The Un-Divine: Confession)*, created as part of the experimental anti-institution Teatr POP-UP in Krakow, which I curated with Professor Grzegorz Niziołek of the Jagiellonian University and the National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow. An independent production, it was the director's only performance that did not create an agonistic space – all the actors and of course curators were convinced that Frljić's theatrical strategy was right. The aim of the work was to discuss the issues highlighted by the scandal surrounding *The Un-Divine Comedy: Remains* – the specificity of Polish

national identity, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, power relations based on violence in Polish institutional theatre.

THE CURSE

In February 2017 Frljić and his dramaturges – the same ones who had worked with him twice in Krakow – staged a production of *Klątwa* (*The Curse*) at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, based on a drama by Stanisław Wyspiański, a rebellious artist who unflinchingly portrayed the Polish society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, breaking the greatest taboos of the era. The heroine of *The Curse* is the Young Woman, the mistress of a local priest, with whom she has two children. When their village is hit by a drought, the villagers believe they are being punished for the girl's sins. They visit a hermit, who tells them that they have to make a sacrifice to God. Feeling guilty, the Young Woman burns her children at stake and is then stoned to death by the village community. The priest does not come to her defence.

When interviewed by Paweł Soszyński for Dwutygodnik.com, Frljić said »...Polish society is, after the era of Solidarity, a hostage of bishops and it's the Church that is the 'curse' of the Poles«. In Frljić's *Curse*, as in Wyspiański's drama, the greatest victims of the Church are the weakest: women and children.

Wyspiański's drama was merely a starting point for the Croatian director to discuss contemporary Polish religiousness. Frljić completed the production at a very special time for Poland. Poland is theoretically a secular country, but since Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice; abbreviated to PiS) came to power in 2015, the influence of the Church has been increasing. PiS is an extreme right-wing party that wants to seize absolute power; it has adopted a consistent policy against refugees and sexual



*Scenes from The Curse, Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, 2017,
(foto Magda Hueckel)*

minorities, supports radical nationalist groups, takes over more and more theatres, violates the Constitution and controls the most intimate areas of human existence, such as women's right to decide over their bodies. The Catholic Church is the propagandist mouthpiece of the party, which pays its debt of gratitude to the Church, making it an institution that enjoys unprecedented political influence, a co-ruler of the country.

One of the first scenes of *The Curse* features an extremely powerful by the actress Karolina Adamczyk, who shows her naked belly and tells the audience that she is three months pregnant and is going to have an abortion. She asks the women in the audience: »Which one of you has had an abortion?« At the premiere, which I attended, three hands were raised. It is a gesture of extraordinary courage: the women who have had an abortion are regarded by the Church, the ruling politicians and their supporters as murderers and social outcasts. The PiS government and the Church now want to pass a more stringent anti-abortion law that will require the giving of birth to a terminally ill child or to one that will die immediately after birth. Moreover, the ruling party shifts the entire burden of caring for severely ill children onto women. Care allowances in Poland are extremely low and insufficient to cover treatment. There is no system of assistance to people with disabilities, support upon completion of compulsory education, effective employment support program or financial help for parents and carers. We are witnessing the realization of the dystopia depicted in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which women are forced to bear children and their sexuality is controlled by a theocratic state, all in the name of »morality« and religious principles.

The proposed anti-abortion law is one of the most burning political issues in Poland today. When Frljić was working on *The Curse*, a mass movement had already grown around the »Black Protests« to oppose the tightening of anti-abortion legislation. On 3 October 2016 around 250,000 people turned out in the streets to protest against the state and Church violence against women.



*Scene from The Curse, Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, 2017,
(foto Magda Hueckel)*

Another issue addressed by *The Curse* is pedophilia in the Catholic Church and the responsibility for it of John Paul II, who made no attempt to solve this problem. On the contrary, he was complicit in sexual violence against children, as he covered up cases and failed to take appropriate measures against the offending clerics who were allowed to continue as priests and be in contact with minors. Not a month passes without the liberal press, mostly *Gazeta Wyborcza*, reporting another instance of child abuse by clergy. Another much-publicized case, brought to public attention by the reporter Justyna Kopińska, was that of a children's home run by nuns, where the children raped each other with the sisters' approval.

In one of the play's scenes, a figure, a life-size statue of John Paul II, is suspended from a noose above the audience. Around its neck is a sign that reads »Defender of pedophiles«, and attached to its crotch is a dildo, on which the actress Julia Wyszyńska performs a passionate fellatio. Because of this scene, Wyszyńska was later fired by the director of Polish Television from the show in which she acted. Public television, which is now controlled by those in power and, like the Church, serves as their informal PR agency, played an important role in the events that were soon to unfold around *The Curse*. Shortly after the premiere, it aired an excerpt from the play in its main news bulletin – the manipulated material, removed from its wider context, presented *the Curse* as a scam posing a threat to national and religious values and state order. As a result, the theatre became the object of aggressive attacks by nationalists, who sent threats to the management, besieged the building and finally broke their way into it, set off flares and poured out a corrosive acid (after this event the theatre hired professional security personnel who ensure that the spectators are not armed before they enter the house). Nationalist groups have a privileged position in Poland today, because they provide real electoral support for those in power. Mouffe would say that such activation of radicalized, destructive attitudes results from the lack of space for agonistic confrontation in Polish public debate. We did not learn our democracy lesson in the conditions of relative peace and we are now suffering the consequences.

In *The Curse* the actors are in a very direct relationship with the spectators. The monologues addressed directly to the audience tell of their experiences of abuse by priests. All the stories sound terrifyingly authentic. Then Julia Wyszyńska fantasizes about murdering the Law and Justice leader, Jarosław Kaczyński – she says this scene is inspired by *Kill Helmut Kohl*, a work by the German director Christoph Schlingensief.

The text of *The Curse* is dense, the successive scenes and monologues erupt with manifestoes, shouts of rebellion and the victims' confessions. But one scene takes place in absolute silence. Karolina Adamczyk – the

actress who spoke about her planned abortion – slowly changes into work clothes, then picks up a chainsaw and looks at the cross hanging above the stage from the beginning of the performance. She goes calmly about her business, methodically cutting the cross until it falls down towards the audience. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, a Polish scholar of contemporary critical and political theatre, writes about the scene:

The image, violating cultural taboo to an extent that it almost constitutes a »critical exception« in Polish symbolic space, aggressively demands an audience reaction – a reaction I'd describe as »affective cooperation« of a decisively relational nature. The image strives to divide the audience into those who feel satisfaction or relief, seeing that such an act is possible in our public sphere so deeply dominated by political influence and symbolic hegemony of the Catholic Church, and those who experience terror, outrage or revulsion at the act of cutting down a cross (those terms – especially revulsion and disgust – recur most in negative comments about the production). The experienced affects condition one another: revulsion at the theatrical image is stimulated by awareness that for others it's a source of pleasure. Satisfaction is enhanced by the feeling that the cultural transgression here is experienced as violence by others.⁴

The relief that some of the spectators may have felt when the cross was cut down has to do with a deep-rooted feeling of humiliation by the Church and the simultaneous fear of it. Now, as in the past, children learn in religion classes that masturbation is a grave sin. During confession priests query children about impure thoughts, and that in light of pedophilia in the Church is a blatant violation of children's dignity and suggests an erotic

⁴ Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, *How to Lift the Curse? Director Oliver Frljić and the Poles*, Polish Theater Journal, 1-2 2017, <http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/111/593>, accessed on April 26, 2018.

subtext to the situation in the confessional. Women are forced to bear dead or deformed babies.

»BALKAN STRATEGIES« IN POLISH THEATRE

The Croatian director does not strive for a consensus either in the artistic process or the social and political process resulting from the work. Frljić revealed, named and demonstrated the scale of the dramas experienced by us in Poland.

By creating an »agonistic public space« in theatre, he gave the floor to those who are silenced as part of the current hegemony, and his work has made visible what consensus obscures. Mouffe and Frljić think that the agon is the only path to democracy (which, as Derrida wrote, will always be a »democracy to come«, a project that will never be realized). The Croatian director presented a painful, terrifying diagnosis for Poland, but I believe in the positive potential of his work; exposing the mechanisms of hegemony and the related violence provokes affects, which, in turn, increases resistance and gives us the strength to act – to create »other world(s).«

The Curse consolidated a huge part of the Polish theatrical community, which protested against censorship. The directors of Powszechny Theatre Paweł Łysak and Paweł Sztabowski did not yield to the threats, media attacks and hundreds of nationalists protesting outside its building. By staging the successive performances, they demonstrated the power of art. If in the case of *The Un-Divine Comedy: Remains* we as theatrical community failed to stand up for democracy and freedom of speech, then, faced with danger, we proved mature enough to fight. Why was it not the case with *The Un-Divine Comedy*? Perhaps because of the relations in our community, but also due to the apparent comfort and lack of threats to

democracy – after all, the performance was staged at a theatre promoting the ideas of freedom.

An important lesson for Polish theatre is Frljić's institutional criticism. Significantly, the artist practices it in public theatres. This strategy has a lot of common with the views of Chantal Mouffe, who does not accept a position deeply ingrained in countercultural movements, which advocates rejection of the membership of institutions and focusing on the creation of alternative spaces. According to Mouffe and Frljić, virusing the institutions is a strategy for combating the hegemonic practices within them. This is driven by a deep belief that change is possible – since institutions, including public theatres, are not condemned to repeat the same roles.

In the process of working on *The Curse*, Frljić mobilized the ensemble of Warsaw's Powszechny Theatre in a very special way. He wanted the actors to be »political beings«: he encouraged them to express openly in the rehearsals and performances their opposition to the ideas and suggestions of the director, who has real and symbolic power in Polish theatre. According to Frljić, theatre is not limited to what we see on stage.

It's a much deeper and more complex network of relations, which is not established the moment you enter the theatre and take your seat.⁵

The actress Klara Bielawka talks about the humiliatingly low fee for her work and the way women are depicted in leftist theatre:

Somehow, it's always the woman who ends up on her knees, sucks dick and is raped in this fucking modern self-referential theatre.

Barbara Wysocka sneers at Frljić's declarations of being uncompromising in his fight for freedom. The artist did accept the offer to curate the

⁵ *Kłątwa Polaków*, Paweł Soszyński talks to Oliver Frljić, no. 205, 02.2017, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/7024-klatwa-polakow.html>, accessed on April 26, 2018.

Malta Festival from Michał Merczyński, director of that event, who called off Rodrigo Garcia's performance *Golgotha Picnic* three years before under pressure from the local archbishop and the city mayor.

Frljić wanted the rehearsals and performances to become an uncensored space in which to articulate inconvenient facts and irreconcilable attitudes and conflicts. This turned the work on the production into a training ground of the political and for the practice of pluralist democracy – creation of structures that are counter-hegemonic to the theatre system, the figure of the director, church and state structures, etc. This way of producing plays is hardly ever practiced in Polish theatre, in which two models of work collide. One is a strategy that gives the director absolute power; the other is a collaborative process in which like-minded artist and actor friends are invited to take part.

I believe that Frljić's presence in Polish theatre offers hope for a new opening, both in the sociopolitical space and in the very theatrical institution. His work allows us to see more clearly the things we turn a blind eye to: sexual violence against the weakest, censorship, religious oppression and the ossification of the theatrical institution. This gives rise to the hope that we will think more critically about Poland, the Church and the theatre that highlights all those issues.

BALKANSKE STRATEGIJE

S a ž e t a k

Članak se usredotočuje na predstave koje je Oliver Frljić režirao u Poljskoj. U prvom je planu politička dimenzija rada hrvatskoga redatelja, a agonistički model demokracije Chantal Mouffe ključna je istraživačka perspektiva.

Prvo poljsko kazalište u kojemu je Frljić počeo raditi bilo je Narodowy Stary Teatr u Krakowu, gdje je godine 2013. režirao djelo *Nie-Boska komedia* (*Ne-Božanstvena komedija*) Zygmunta Krasińskiego. Radeći na predstavi, redatelj se usredotočio na dva aspekta: antisemitsku dimenziju samoga teksta i sučeljavanje s predstavom koju je godine 1965. u Starom kazalištu postavio legendarni redatelj Konrad Swinarski. *Nie-boska komedia. Szczałtki* (*Ne-Božanstvena komedija. Ostaci*), kako se Frljićeva predstava trebala zvati, nikad nije doživjela premijeru, ali je unatoč tomu jedna od najradikalnijih i najučinkovitijih intervencija u poljskom kazalištu proteklih godina. Spektakl koji se stvarao oko pokusa iznio je na vidjelo mnogo skrivenih problema poljskoga kazališta te poljske društvene i političke sfere. Temeljno su pitanje ovdje bili prikriveni antisemitizam i prikrivena ksenofobija u poljskom društvu.

Godine 2017. Frljić je ponovno bio pozvan na suradnju s poljskim kazalištem – ovaj put bio je to Teatr Powszechny u Varšavi. Kao i u Krakowu, i s tim je kazalištem dogovorio režiju klasične poljske drame, ovaj put bila je to *Kłątwa* (*Kletva*) Stanisława Wyspiańskog.

Drama je hrvatskomu redatelju poslužila kao polazište za preispitivanje suvremene poljske religioznosti. U predstavi Frljić postavlja ova pitanja: *U kojoj mjeri na naše odluke utječe katolički moral? Kako katolički moral djeluje na percepciju ljudi koji se deklariraju kao neovisni o Crkvi, a što on znači ljudima koji na sebe gledaju kao na katolike? Napokon, ono najvažnije: u kojoj mjeri modernu umjetnost određuju vjerska cenzura, autocenzura i izbjegavanje optužbe za »povredu vjerskih osjećaja«?* (Prema internetskoj stranici Teatru Powszechnego).

Ključne riječi: javno kazalište; agonistika; politizacija; antisemitizam; katolička crkva