

The independent theatre scene in Poland



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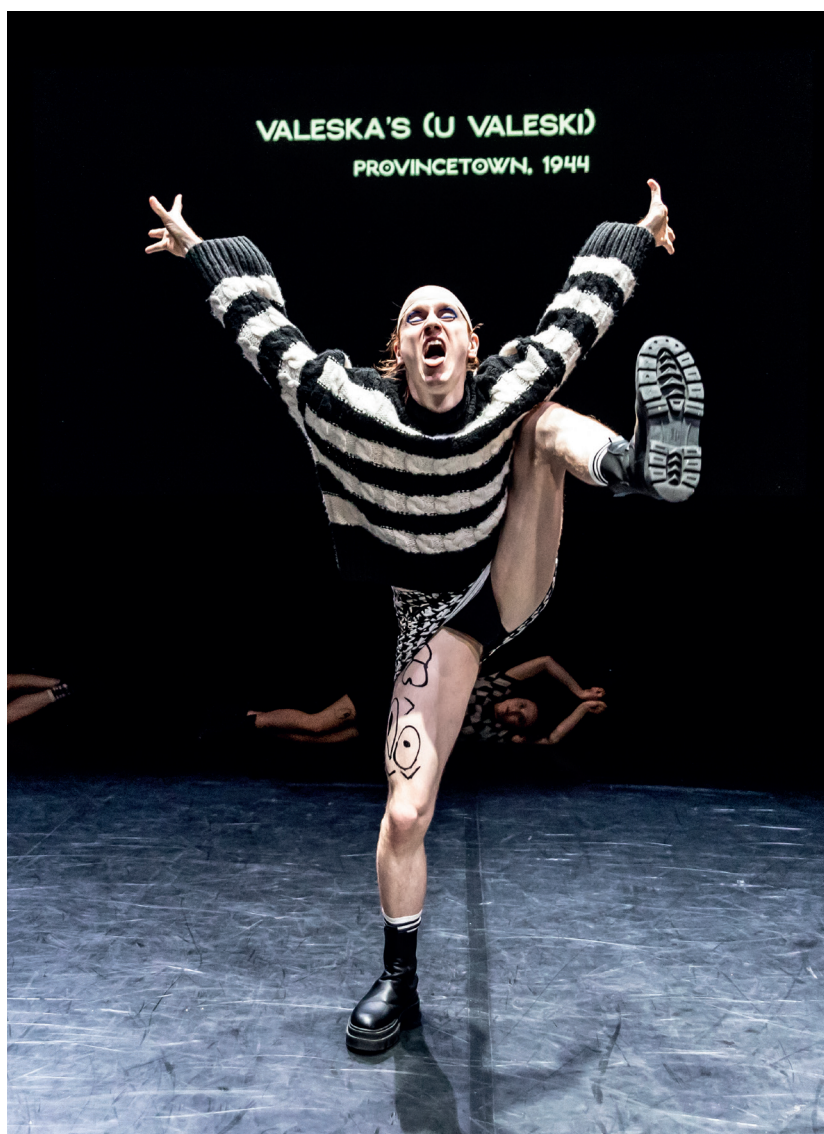
EAIPA regularly commissions portraits of the wider European independent performing arts scene in order to get a bigger picture of the developments and current artistic practices and artists in the EAIPA member states

The situation of the independent theatre scene in Poland is far more complex than it appears to be. It is therefore worth mentioning specific numbers at the outset. According to statistics from the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw, there are almost 800 independent entities actively operating in Poland. This number includes companies with a legal title (foundations, associations), private theatres (operating as a business), informal collectives and freelance artists. Compared to 180 institutional theatres (dramatic, puppet and musical), the number of independent theatres seems impressive. The difference in the level of systemic support for both groups, obviously to the advantage of institutional theatres, is all the more acute, however.

Independent theatre has a rich historical foundation in Poland. Despite the fact that Jerzy Grotowski died in 1999, to this day the question that Polish independent artists most often hear abroad is: „Is your work related to Grotowski's method?“ The honest answer in a substantial number of cases should be „no“. The type of post-Grotowski theatre is marginal in Poland today, his heritage is referenced by individual artists of the older generation, who run their theatres and educate the younger generation in numerous workshops. But this does not change the fact that young and middle-aged independent theatre in Poland does not refer to Grotowski, and often – out of spite or misunderstanding – avoids him like the plague. The situation is similar in the case of another widely recognised creator of Polish theatre – Tadeusz Kantor.

Closer – although rather indirect – are the connections of the contemporary independent theatre with the alternative artists of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, e.g. Teatr Ósmego Dnia, a group of artists originating from student theatre

Dominika Knapik, VALESKA VALESKA VALESKA VALESKA
© Natalia Kabanow





Hertz Haus, Unbody © Anna Zglenicka

and involved in the political and social anti-communist opposition. Many young independent groups in Poland engage in political debates, although today it rarely has an anti-government dimension. Political gestures in today's Polish independent theatre are productions dealing with the situation of LGBTQ+ people, women, the ecological or migration crisis. But, unfortunately, they often do not convey unequivocal postulates of rebellion against those authorities supporting chauvinistic or xenophobic attitudes.

The political involvement of Polish theatre is perhaps most evident in the recent pronounced trend of theatre for and with people with disabilities. In recent years, this approach to theatre has evolved from art therapy to an autonomous art form that is on a par with other varieties of theatre, recognising the inherent original tools, great sensitivity, unique way of looking at reality and imagination, but also the dimension of its professionalisation – and the need to pay people with disabilities for their creative work in the first place. It is this theatrical trend that has recently been most recognised at Polish theatre competition award shows. For the last five editions, the frontrunners for the most important award of the scene, *The Best Off* competition organised by the Nie-Taki Theatre Foundation, were

theatre productions featuring people with disabilities (Pod Fontanną Theatre from Poznań, 21 Theatre from Warsaw), and at the last ceremony one production even won the award for best performance of the season (Klucz Theatre from Poznań with the production of *Tranquillo*).

As far as strong trends are concerned, we should mention the leading and best organised scene: dance theatre. In Poland, the majority of dancers received their formal and professional training at foreign universities and education centres, as the only but very good dance school in Bytom does not satisfy the demand of the scene. These professionals have formed numerous collectives and have been able to secure various local, central and European grants, because they know that their chances of getting a full-time job are close to zero, as there are only very few institutional dance theatres with very small full-time companies in Poland, and drama theatres are usually not interested in taking on dancers on a full-time basis. In addition to its own critical journalism and publications, lobbying power (The Institute of Music and Dance), programmes, competitions, festivals and art fair (The Stage for Dance, Spaces of Art, Dance Platform), the Polish dance scene probably most frequently represents the country at foreign performing arts festivals.

Mikro Teatr, FAKTORIA PRZYJEMNOŚCI © Marek Zimakiewicz





Sticky Fingers Club © Klaudyna Schubert

Also, from the previous years' lists of nominees and award winners at the aforementioned *The Best Off* competition, which attracts around 200 performances a year, about 60 % are associated with dance theatre. Still, it is difficult to list all the companies from this scene that deserve attention, but some of the most prominent are: Sticky Fingers Club, o.de.la Theatre, Sztuka Nowa, Krakow Dance Theatre, Lublin Dance Theatre, and Hertz Haus. It also good to remember that dance ensembles are collectives, and collectives are flexible in nature - they often swap members, mix, become bigger or smaller, and their members are part of more than one company, while most of them are also solo performers.

Unfortunately, as Polish dance theatre has increasingly become an export commodity, this can no longer be said of the previous long-running international bestseller: open air theatre. Polish open air theatres experienced a boom in the 1980s and 1990s, with the city of Poznań at the heart of this development thanks to such theatres as Strefa Cisy, Porywacze Ciał, Biuro Podróży or Teatr Ósmego Dnia. Other prominent production venues are Akademia Ruchu from Warsaw and the KTO Theatre from Krakow (the latter continues to tour extensively). Unfortunately, the conditions for producing and operating large-scale outdoor performances

have become more difficult. Such productions are simply too expensive, and the market for them has apparently shrunk - there are hardly any festivals in Poland that are interested in outdoor performances. The situation is somewhat salvaged by the Nowy Circus, with great groups such as Kejos or the Sztukmistrze Foundation and a major circus festival in Lublin, but this is simply not enough to conclude that open air theatre has much relevance in Poland today.

Finally, there are two more scenes that should be included in an overview of contemporary independent theatre in Poland. The first one is very fluid and difficult to describe. It comprises young artists with diplomas, who either cannot find work in institutional theatres, or do not want to look for it there, or run away from such theatres because they lack creative freedom and independence. These artists, like dancers, join temporary collectives, shuffle around, constantly looking for new challenges and people to work with. They are not interested in forming permanent ensembles, although they sometimes become part of one for a while. Thanks to them (these are not only actors but also set designers, musicians, directors or playwrights), Polish independent theatre increasingly becomes more professional. Migrations between the off-stage and the institutional

scene allow for an exchange of energy, experience and taking the best from both sides: from the institutional theatre structure, security, methodology, and from the independent theatre openness, fresh ideas and courage. Well-known Polish artists, such as Dominika Knapik, Weronika Szczawińska, Wojciech Faruga, Łukasz Kos and many others, move smoothly between the independent scene and institutions. Thanks to such alliances, many young artists come together and form groups during their studies and continue to work together afterwards (Układ Formalny, Zakład Krawiecki, Mikro Teatr).

Despite the clear turn towards temporary collectives, there are also several thriving long-standing 'companies' in Poland which have their own theatrical centres and, in addition to producing productions, are involved in a wide range of social and artistic activities: They run workshops with different age groups, organise festivals and residencies. Among the most recognisable ones is the Brama Theatre from Goleniów (which is particularly successful in finding international partners and working on projects outside Poland), the Chorea Theatre from Łódź (rooted in the legacy of Grotowski and Gardzienice, but nowadays rejuvenated and searching for new theatrical languages), the Kana Theatre from Szczecin (with a focus on social issues), the Scena Robocza from Poznań (which is more of a production house than a regular company) and several others.

As can be seen, the panorama of the independent scene in Poland is colourful and wide, but even wider is the spectrum of its problems, so wide that their description would require a separate, extensive article. Lack of performance

space, insufficient funds, limited possibilities for touring, lack of interest of theatre critics – these are just a few of the many problems the independent scene is facing. It should be noted, however, that the independent theatre community – although not united and not always in agreement – is beginning to lobby more and more effectively on its own issues. There are especially two organisations: the Polish Theatre Offensive and the Union of Independent Theatres. The former is an informal platform bringing together many of the smallest theatres scattered across Poland, including the provinces. The operator most strongly involved in the Offensive and dealing with issues concerning independent theatre is the Nie-Taki Theatre Foundation, which publishes the only magazine in Poland dedicated to this scene, *nie-tak!t*, and organises a school for young critics of independent and dance theatre as well as the annual competition for the best performance of independent theatre *The Best Off*. The Offensive also spearheaded the creation of the first nationwide grant programme dedicated exclusively to independent theatre, Off-Polska, which annually subsidises around twenty productions with €20,000 each. The Union of Independent Theatres, on the other hand, brings together larger, mostly private-run theatres from the city centres, and uses its experience and human resources to lobby on financial and legal issues (e.g. social and pension protection for independent artists). Both organisations therefore strive for solidarity and unity. The strengthening of the sense of community thus gives hope for positive change in the organisation and funding of independent theatre in Poland, but the road ahead is still long and windy.

Katarzyna Knychalska



Teatr Klucz, *Tranquillo*
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