

Joanna Ostrowska, Juliusz Tyszka

Alternative Theatre in Poland after 1989

Summary. The term “alternative theatre” assumes the conscious adoption of a critical and rebellious attitude against the existing social and political status quo. What is more, it assumes a desire by artists of the theatre to supplant the existing methods of social communication with other, more creative ways, which better contribute to the self-development of individuals who participate in the process. Here, theatrical performance signifies the wish of theatrical artists to change the structure of their contemporaries’ perception and valorisation of the world. Bearing in mind this preliminary assumptions the authors of the article focus on the selected topics: the concept of alternative theatre, the Polish alternative theatre experience as a part of universal countercultural movement, the outdoor and site specific theatre festivals as a tool for social change and the future prospects of the alternative theatre in Poland.

Keywords: alternative theatre, countercultural movement, site specific Theatre Festivals

Joanna Ostrowska, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, Institute of Cultural Studies, Szamarzewskiego 89A, 60–568 Poznań, Poland, e-mail: joanna.ostrowska@amu.edu.pl.

Juliusz Tyszka, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, Institute of Cultural Studies, Szamarzewskiego 89A, 60–568 Poznań, Poland, e-mail: juliusz.tyszka@amu.edu.pl.

Why "Alternative"? What is "Alternative"? The Polish Alternative Theatre Experience as a Part of Universal Countercultural Movement

Why have we chosen the term "alternative theatre" to name the phenomenon we are going to describe and analyse? We are perfectly aware that in the English-language literature the term "experimental theatre" is in common use. However, we remain somewhat sceptical towards it. Taken from the world of science, the notion of experiment was perhaps appropriate to describe the efforts made by the artistic avant-garde from the 1920s till the early 1960s, when artists served "the cause of progress" in the field of art. But presently, at the time of the post-modern dispersion of norms and notions, when the image of the world subjected to permanent progress has been negated and rejected, experimenting in the realm of art is a dated, suspicious procedure.

The term "alternative theatre" assumes, in contrast, the conscious adoption of a critical and rebellious attitude against the existing social and political status quo. What is more, it assumes a desire by artists of the theatre to supplant the existing methods of social communication (both inside and outside the theatrical performance) with other, more creative ways, which better contribute to the self-development of individuals who participate in the process. Here, theatrical performance becomes an element of social revolution (or at least consciously executed evolution); it signifies the wish of theatrical artists to change the structure of their contemporaries' perception and valorisation of the world.

Attempts to revolt against the social and cultural mainstream became widespread in the countercultural environment of the sixties. At the beginning it was enough for some people to "get together", to isolate themselves from the masses. The genuine resistance that such a "countergroup" met with from the social structures either broke it or solidified its existence.

The "countergroups" used to fight for their "true" identity. They helped to protect a group's separate character in order to define it. For many groups, the initial impulse or final point of inner evolution was the decision to do theatre.

Members of various theatre "countergroups", who treated their mission most seriously, knew or sensed it was necessary to create not a new style of acting, but rather a new style of life, a new paradigm of culture: through theatre, by means of theatre, through living theatre and living for theatre.

So endeavours were made to form and disseminate new models of world perception and categorisation, new ways of organizing social communication and regulating social life. New models were also proposed for individual-social group rela-

tions and for new expressions of one's "ego" – models radically different from those commonly accepted at the time.

Generally speaking, those radical changes involved a break with the hierarchisation, functionalisation and rigidity of social relations and arrangements. They also showed a characteristic tendency to "horizontal" communication within "horizontal communes". Anything that had its well-established place in value hierarchies and social stratification outside the "countergroup" was considered hostile and objectified.

Nevertheless – most obviously contrary to their members' intentions – "counter-groups" contributed considerably to delineating new routes of theatre development. The revolution in art was here carried out somewhat in passing, without being the main object of their striving – as it is in avant-garde art. For it was not the changes in art but rather the changes in social reality that were their principal objective.

The history of Polish alternative theatre goes back to the period of the post-Stalinist "thaw" (1954–1989), when the movement of so-called student theatre emerged in the milieu of students and young intellectuals. It was a unique artistic and political phenomenon in the countries of the Soviet block. Its creators, young students and graduates, together with their public – people of the same generation – were an important part of the artistic avant-garde and a potential source of political opposition. In the times of political breakthroughs (1955–56, 1968–71, 1976–81) they were the first to join the revolt against totalitarianism. The student theatre was protected by the relatively independent Union of Polish Students (ZSP) and from 1973 the Socialist Union of Polish Students (SZSP), which was not as independent as before. The censors did not check student theatres' scripts and performances very strictly as their circulation was limited. Shows that took place outside student cultural centers, clubs, and university halls had to have special permission. The average number of active groups was around 100–150, all over the country.

During the 35 years of its existence, the movement elaborated a great variety of experimental ways of theatre production, and established its own institutional and material base and a network of festivals. The social milieu of student theatre (and of the whole so-called "student culture") was very attractive for young newcomers and for the whole world of Polish academia. The movement belonged to the world of pre-counterculture and counterculture itself, bringing to life a network of artistic groups that we can understand, in sociological terms, as "counter-groups".

The entire student theatre movement, with its cultural patterns radically different from communist parallels, stood apart from the daily life of "real socialism" and the vision of the future portrayed in communist propaganda. This movement evad-

ed the “four-powers” of the Party, whose apparatus wielded tight control over the legislature, executive, judiciary and media.

Polish alternative theatre – driven by students – was an important part of the world countercultural artistic movement before 1989. Its activity after 1989 shows a direct continuation of their pre-1989 work with regards to method of production, shaping of the script, and actor-audience relationship. However, the social circumstances have changed. Alternative theatres are no longer challenging a totalitarian system through their very existence and their artistic methods. They no longer have to respond through their productions to the tensions caused by the drastic constraints on their activity. The creative impulses of these artists can now be focused on what they have “always” wanted to do – thoroughly analyse the processes of society which have brought about the identity crisis of the Contemporary Individual. Linked to this is the desire to revive the structure of social communication, which has been a theme of Polish alternative theatres from the beginning of their existence.

What is needed now is to prove that the “alternativeness” in the milieu of Polish student theatre was aimed at values and goals which went beyond theatre understood as the domain of art. Let us go back to the moment when members of the best student theatres chose the name of the association they tried to found at the end of 1981, a tumultuous year marked by deep structural conflict between the rulers of communist Poland and the mass revolutionary movement of “Solidarity”. The chosen name was: The Union of Alternative Theatre. In the document called *Information and Remarks before the Founding Meeting of UAT*, they wrote: “Alternativeness concerns not only contemporary theatre but also the social life that we are experiencing nowadays in Poland. The basic feature of alternative theatre is that it is ethical theatre, understood as an alternative model of society (but remember: we start the reconstruction of the world from the reconstruction of ourselves).”¹

When we take into account also the advice for the actors from the brochure entitled *An Actor*, edited by Teatr Ósmego Dnia (The Theatre of the Eighth Day) from Poznań in the spring of 1981, it is easy to conclude that the attention of the ATU founders was focused not on the problem “What kind of theatre should we make?” but rather “What kind of people we should be?”²

The intentions of alternative theatre activists, both before and after 1989, can be related to some theoretical works by Polish sociologists and cultural analysts. Andrzej Siciński defines social “alternativeness” as the kind of worldview and activity

¹ L. Śliwonik, *Powróćmy jak za dawnych lat?*, in *Catalogue of Łódź Theatre Meetings*, Łódź 2001, p. 6.

² V. Aktor. *Materiały z sympozjum*, 3–5 April 1981, Poznań 1981, pp. 8–9.

“bringing to life (or only suggesting) a different hierarchy of values, different behaviour (...). Their essence resides in making our world better. (...) It is essential just to make it better, not to destroy it, that is why we do not understand modern-day terrorism (...) as an alternative proposition in the sense that we have applied.”³

Another eminent sociologist, Aldona Jawłowska, who in the 1970s was doing intensive research on “young (alternative, student) theatre” defines it as “a movement which was aimed at the sphere beyond artistic activity. (...) What was important was not only artistic creation but also social activity, encouragement to be active, the enhancing and widening of a proper orientation in social and political life among its members and in their social milieu.”⁴

Jawłowska was also the first Polish researcher who tried to give a concise description of alternative society. In her famous book *The Roads of Counterculture (Drogi kontrkultury, 1975)*, after stressing the fact that the term ‘alternative society’ already had its place in the international vocabulary of the counterculture, she wrote: “It signifies new forms of being together and of the organization of social activity which goes together with the values of dissenting ideology. The examples of alternative society are many different forms of communal life, countercultural forms of health service, cooperatives, free schools, free universities etc., as well as all kinds of groups and organizations active for the sake of social change. Those new forms of social life were, according to the intentions of their creators, a prologue to total change in the whole of society.”⁵

The cultural analyst Grzegorz Dziamski defines the four points of alternative theatre that constitute its four basic functions:

- it expands the avant-garde attitude beyond the territory of art, to the whole attitude of an actor-participant of social life;
- understands collective creation not only as a method of artistic creation but also as a way of life;
- makes a close emotional and intellectual link with its spectators through recreating the actual problems of social and political life in its performances;
- its performances have an open structure and thanks to this openness they may change
in constant dialogue with spectators-partners.

³ A. Siciński, *Alternatywność jako element współczesnej kultury*, in *Spontaniczna kultura młodzieżowa*, eds. J. Wertenstein-Żuławski, M. Pęczak. Wrocław, 1990, p. 10.

⁴ A. Jawłowska, *Skrót wypowiedzi wygłoszonej podczas poznańskiego sympozjum Aktor*, „Bulletin of The Young Theatre Confrontations in Lublin” 1981, no. 4, p. 11.

⁵ A. Jawłowska, *Drogi kontrkultury*, Warszawa 1975.

The first point shows absolute and unqualified advantage of the activity aimed at the construction of a new system of values which is strong and stable enough to organize both individual and common existence. This social goal prevails absolutely over the creation of new artistic values.

The second point shows the intention to understand the theatre work as a direct participation in the changes of contemporary culture through a change in the life of theatre group and its members, aimed at the application of the new ethos.

The third point shows that simple interhuman relations are much more important than 'artistic' relations between a theatre-maker and the audience.

The fourth point shows the open attitude of alternative theatre activists who do not want to impose their values and truths on anybody but are in constant search for them, in close contact with their audience."⁶

Therefore, our point is that Polish alternative theatre should be considered as a part of alternative society (a narrow section of Polish society, both in the communism era and after 1989) because its principal aim has always been the peaceful, gradual change of social and political life.

It was to be expected, therefore, that Polish alternative theatre companies would establish a network of cultural centres after 1989, which would be active in many fields, not only in the area of theatre. These include: Teatr Ósmego Dnia (Theatre of the Eighth Day), Teatr Strefa Ciszy (Zone of Silence) and Teatr Usta Usta (Mouth to Mouth) in Poznań, Akademia Ruchu (Academy of Movement) in Warsaw, Teatr Kana in Szczecin, Teatr Wiczy in Toruń, Teatr Klinika Lalek (Puppet Clinic) in Wolimierz, Stowarzyszenie Teatralne Gardzienice (Gardzienice Theatre Association) in Gardzienice-Lublin, Teatr Provisorium and Teatr NN in Lublin. In the cultural centres they have run, these theatre companies have designed programs of activities that are aimed at the creation of a "new society"; programs based on their experience in different kinds of performance.

In some cases, the activity of the cultural centres created by alternative theatre companies is even more alternative than their current theatre productions.

This shift of current alternative theatre (and culture) makers from a radical attitude towards the social and political status quo was the object of the analysis made by Aldona Jawłowska who, sixteen years after the publication of her book *Więcej niż teatr* (*More Than Theatre*), wrote an article focused on the current alternative culture in Poland. Her opinion: "Alternativeness may not merely signify (...) an attempt to formulate the proposition to change whole social and political system and the culture which is part of it. Neither must it be closely connected with the attempts to

⁶ G. Dziamski, *Od studenckości do otwartości*, in *Teatr Kalambur*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 100–101.

reject everything which is connected with the institutions of dominant culture. (...) It seems that today the common platform for alternative milieus (...) is first and foremost the high valorisation of creativity, authenticity, self-fulfilment and spiritual development, as well as a negative attitude towards all possible mechanisms of exclusion and consumption, understood as mechanisms of social regulation. (...) At the end I would like to stress once more that the greatest merit of alternative milieus nowadays is that their activists discover some new areas of repression which are still invisible and not recognized in our open and permissive culture. They also are first to discover some new kinds of human potential and new possibilities of auto-creation and they try to search for (or to create) conditions to make their fulfilment possible.”⁷

In some cultural centres created by Polish alternative theatres we may observe how this can be done. The examples are Warsaw’s Akademia Ruchu with their project ‘Tratwa’ (‘Raft’)⁸, some activities undertaken by Komuna Otwock (now Komuna Warszawa),⁹ projects: *Transformatorownia* (Rectifier Station’), *Ćpanie sztuki* (‘Getting High on Art’), Festiwal Okno (presentations of young theatre groups), *Pobyt tolerowany* (Tolerated Sojourn) and *Zachodniopomorska Ofensywa Teatralna* (Theatre Offensive in Western Pomerania) by Teatr Kana from Szczecin¹⁰, or the project *Spółeczeństwo alternatywne* (Alternative Society), and the series of events focused on important, actual social and political problems organized by Teatr Ósmego Dnia from Poznań.

In the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium many new street festivals were created, some in very small towns. Their driving force was the people from the milieu of alternative theatre. One of their main aims was to create “a community holiday” for city (town) inhabitants, with the financial and organizational support of the public authorities and they were examples of community spirit. These festivals were examples of attempts to make Polish society more civil. Significantly, the festivals were organized together, hand in hand with local elites and authorities, chosen by local communities in free elections – not against them. In small towns they sometimes were the only examples of cultural life. These kinds of festivals, which even took place in bigger cities such as Poznań (Malta Festival) Gdańsk (FETA) or Warsaw

⁷ A. Jawłowska, *Kultura alternatywna – przeszłość czy kontynuacja*, „Contemporary Culture” 2004, no. 3, pp. 16, 23–24.

⁸ The descriptions of socially oriented projects by Akademia Ruchu can be found in: *Akademia Ruchu*, eds. T. Plata, Warsaw 2003; *Akademia Ruchu. Miasto. Pole akcji*, eds. M. Borkowska, Warsaw 2006.

⁹ „Association Komuna Otwock – anarchistic commune of activities which has run local socio-cultural program aimed at expanding borders of freedom, tolerance and social sensitivity”. A self-presentation in „The Bulletin of Łódź Theatre Meetings”, Łódź 1997, p. 25.

¹⁰ V. *Głosy czasu. Teatr Kana 25 lat*, eds. M. Poniatońska, R. Jagucki, M. Mostek, Szczecin 2006.

(Sztuka Ulicy – Street Art), were instinctively understood by people as a symbolic “takeover” of public space.

The Polish tradition of cultivating the theatre in the street, which was shaped, first of all, by such groups, as Akademia Ruchu or Teatr ósmego Dnia, gives credence to the idea that “civic” theatre treats public space as the *agora* where artists voice their opinions on socially relevant matters. Founded in 1983, under martial law, under the regime of General Jaruzelski, the first Polish International Street Theatre Festival, in Jelenia Góra, is a good example. Here, street theatre played a very important role for the viewer-member of a community. Theatrical performances were intended to “assimilate” the street, to turn it into a space that belongs to the people, and is not only used by the authorities to mark official occasions. In its time, it was this event, as well as the International Street Theatre Festival, which originated in Cracow in 1988, where passer-by viewers “reclaimed” the space of their town, and familiarised themselves with a new type of theatre, which until then – and not only for political reasons – had been almost unknown in Poland. Since a number of Polish companies chose to perform in the street (for at the time it was the only space available to them), these performances also bore witness to their rebellion against the political system (e.g. the 1983 *Raport z oblężonego miasta* (*Report From a Besieged Town*) by Teatr Ósmego Dnia. Originally created for the festival in Jelenia Góra, it was based on works by the blacklisted poet Zbigniew Herbert). At that time, street theatre festivals made a splendid example of audience development on different planes – both civic and theatrical.

This might be the reason for the immense popularity – or “bumper crop” – of street theatre festivals in Poland in the early 1990s. Describing the newly-emerged phenomenon, Juliusz Tyszka drew attention to its character of “a school of being together.” “Open-air encounters with the theatre create opportunities for a festive being together in a large group, which for us, contemporary Poles, is of particular importance. (...) People come (...) to a number (...) of ‘non-theatrical’ (...) places of their own free will, and want to be there with other people. As simple as that. During these ‘theatrical feasts,’ the daily rules of the game and ways of reacting to other people are suspended. This way, new, authentic social bonds unmediated by a plethora of restrictive institutions are born.”¹¹

Unfortunately, nowadays open air theatre festivals, which in the 1990s taught people that art did not necessarily have to be the part of the message of the official authorities, are more than ever obeying the rules imposed on them by authorities of various levels.

¹¹ J. Tyszka, *Szkoła bycia razem*, in *Teatr w miejscach nieteatralnych*, eds. J. Tyszka, Poznań 1998, p. 281.

The Bright Side and the Dark Side

A dark future for Polish alternative theatre can be clearly seen, mostly by veterans. Lech Raczak, the leader and stage director of Teatr Ósmego Dnia between 1968 and 1993 defines it as "commercialization (...) which is an ongoing process. (...) The stress is put not on direct communication with the audience, but on spectacular effects and on provoking the audience to 'be enchanted.'"¹²

We do hope, however, that this pessimistic diagnosis by Raczak is only, as he wrote himself, the "grumbling of an old man". There are still many Polish groups whose members remember that theatre can be something more than a "laboratory of beautiful forms", that it can also be a laboratory for social change, an area of self-fulfilment and of supporting others, especially younger people, in developing their personal potential.

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¹² L. Raczak, *O tęsknocie w czasach monologu*, in: *Teatr – przestrzeń dialogu. Wokół granic konwencji i technik teatralnych*, eds. J. Ostrowska, J. Tyszka, A. Skórzyńska, Szczecin 2004, p. 64.

