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## Scandalist and provocateur: Oliver Frljić in Poland

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This article looks at the work of Oliver Frljić, which has been identified with political theatre, as well as his presence in the Polish theatre. The first part of the text discusses the characteristic elements of Frljić's performances, both thematic and formal. It is easy to find numerous references to Chantal Mouffe's agonistic theory as well as inspiration from the works of Bertolt Brecht in his work. The artist is identified with unmasking various types of power relations and nationalism, especially those which are naturalized and internalized by society, which makes them invisible. By introducing surprising, different points of view or sharply formulated theses into his performances, the director pushes the audience out of their comfort zone and provokes their lively reactions. The second part of the article is devoted to the productions on which Frljić worked in Poland and discusses their political potential and stormy reception. The *Non-divine Comedy. The Remains* from Narodowy Teatr Stary in Cracow tackled Polish anti-Semitism. In turn, by looking at discrimination against women, pedophilia and the political power of the Catholic Church, *The Curse* from Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw proved the dominant role of Catholic ideology in the public space in Poland. These performances not only revealed the lines of ideological division in the Polish society, but also uncovered hidden connections between various entities of power.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** censorship in theatre, contemporary theatre, engaged art, Oliver Frljić, political theatre, politics and theatre

## Oliver Frljić's political theatre

*The Curse*, directed by Oliver Frljić and produced by the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw in 2017,<sup>1</sup> begins with a phone call from the theatre's actors and actresses to Bertolt Brecht. During this telephone conversation, the actors ask for his advice about staging a play by Stanisław Wyspiański, which they are currently working on with the Croatian director Oliver Frljić. They tell Brecht that they are calling from Poland, which has become „a very pro-fascist country“ recently and which did little to help its Jewish citizens during World War II. They comment on the appearance of the audience in a rather low-minded manner, and eventually, they summarize the drama by Wyspiański, which the production was based on. The play, as they say, is very Catholic.

There is a priest who has a child. Two children. With a girl from the village, called Młoda [Missy]. The village has been drought-stricken, and the villagers think it is a curse cast by God for the priest's sins, for these children of his. Then the priest's mother shows up and takes up about sixty percent of the drama, and no one has anything else to play. Missy wants to redeem her sins at the stake. Literally, she wants to burn herself and her illegitimate children. And this priest does nothing to help her. In the end, the young woman throws her children into the fire and returns to the village, burning herself.<sup>2</sup>

The prologue that opens the performance contains all the elements typical of Oliver Frljić's theatre, both in terms of the topics discussed and the form of his productions. One of the constantly recurring motifs is nationalism and the related growing socio-political tensions in Europe. The interest in this topic possibly results from the director's personal experiences related to the war after the collapse of former Yugoslavia and the post-war period, which became an important source in the artist's work. In interviews, Frljić repeatedly mentioned his stay in Split, where he ended up as a teenage refugee from

<sup>1</sup> The play opened at Zygmunt Hübner's Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw on February 18, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The script of the play (author's private archives).

Bosnia together with his family, and – as he claimed – the experiences from this period forever shaped his political views:

During this time, I did see everything. The harassment was constant, with endless explanations of „who and what“ you were. My refugee card, the only document I had at the time, had no special value. The police often told me that boys my age were fighting in the battlefields of Bosnia while I was studying there. I was often threatened with deportation to Bosnia. (Frljić 2016: 21)

The topic of nationalism, both the one set free in the countries of former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the one spreading throughout contemporary Europe, reappears obsessively in his work. He worked through his Balkan experiences in several productions, and they resonated most strongly in the plays sometimes referred to as *The Balkan trilogy – Turbofolk* (Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka, 2008)<sup>3</sup>, *Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!* (Slovenian Youth Theatre in Ljubljana, 2010)<sup>4</sup> and *Cowardice* (National Theatre in Subotica, 2011), and in *The Trilogy on Croatian Fascism* (Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka, 2014), which included *The Bacchae*, *Aleksandra Zec* and *Croatian Theatre*<sup>5</sup>. The stories told on stage were socially and historically rooted, but rather than reconstructing the past, he was interested in revealing what was repressed and in discovering the sources of nationalist violence, one of the manifestations of which was humiliation in the name of national or religious ideals.

In *Aleksandra Zec* (2013), the fact-based story about the murder of a Serbian family near Zagreb, Croatia, including a 12-year-old girl, by Croatian soldiers in 1991, nationality turns out to be a stigma which causes aggression and leads to violence even many years after the war. In Nebojša Slijepčević's documentary film entitled *Srbenka [The Serberian girl]* (2018), dedicated to the process of creating the play, the story of the mur-

<sup>3</sup> In Poland, the performance took place as part of the Malta Festival in Poznań, June 23-24, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The play was shown twice in Poland – during the „Dialog“ International Theatre Festival in Wrocław, October 12-13, 2011, and at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, November 22, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> In Poland, the *Aleksandra Zec* play was performed during the Premiere Festival in Bydgoszcz on October 3, 2015, and the *Croatian Theatre* was performed at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw on November 14, 2017.

dered Aleksandra Zec is superimposed on the story of a Serbian girl invited to the casting (she is a Croatian citizen of Serbian nationality). The young actress, afraid of the aggression of her surroundings, at one point wonders whether she should talk about her origins on stage (Slijepčević 2018). Frljić also depicted the demon of nationalism in the play *Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!*, in which he returned to the post-war trauma. In the grotesque scene of a fashion show, the role of haute couture creations is played by national flags, from under which knife blades suddenly emerge. For now, they serve as fashion gadgets, but perhaps they herald something much worse. This is suggested by the next scene, which begins with an innocent conversation between the actors in the dressing room after work, about holidays, a house in Croatia and a boat moored to the shore, and ends with a decisive question about the nationality of the flag on the boat, the nationality of the actor as well as the nationality of his mother and father, with gunshots and corpses lying on the proscenium, wrapped in national flags.

The critical assessment of the socio-political situation in the Balkans is also accompanied by a lack of illusions about the future of Europe, torn apart by successive democratic crises, expressed by the artist regularly in various conversations. In one of them, conducted in 2017 for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a national daily paper, Frljić stated that: „The situation in Europe will only get worse. There is no institution or country that can stop the spread of fascism in Europe. It would be naive to expect art to change anything“ (Frljić in Szymańska 2017). This belief was expressed in *Gorki – Alternative for Germany?*, produced at the Gorki Theatre in Berlin in 2018. It should be added that the Gorki Theatre, with which the director has been cooperating as artistic director since the 2022/2023 season, is currently one of the most progressive and politically engaged German theatres, promoting openness to various social and national groups and taking into account the immigrant and post-immigrant perspective in its artistic program. The clash of ideas promoted by the theatre with the program of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), an extreme right-wing party based on xenophobia and exclusion, denying the Holocaust and building its anti-European and anti-immigrant policy on nostalgia for fascism, revealed the weakness of artistic institutions in the clash with nationalist propaganda seducing contemporary societies. Right-wing and left-wing

populists were meeting on stage, wanting to save Germany from refugees or fascism. Paradoxically, however, the young generation was not interested in getting involved, showing indifference to social or political engagement in the name of national values.

When defining his political theatre, Oliver Frljić once said in an interview that the role of theatre „is not to create social consensus, but [to] antagonize different social groups. We do not belong to the same social class, our opinions on gender issues or same-sex marriages are not the same, we do not operate within the same ideological system, so theatre should highlight these differences, instead of hiding them“ (Frljić in Niedurny 2017: 20). In another interview, he criticized institutional theatre that „does not work on developing a critical attitude, does not unmask existing social antagonisms and is not an impulse for consistent theatrical thinking“, and the art that is created there „produces only apparent aesthetic differences. Even though these differences are in fact ideologically determined, they want to be presented as neutral“ (Frljić 2016: 18). In his views on the role of theatre in social life, the artist is close to the thinking of the Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, who calls for overcoming the post-political consensus in favor of the „radicalization of democracy“ and an agonistic debate enabling the confrontation of different social visions. She sees the value of critical art in making visible what „the dominant consensus tries to obscure and blur“ and in giving a voice to all those „who are silenced under the existing hegemony“ (Mouffe 2015: 100). Frljić is also aware that political theatre must face many traps and look at its own operations in a much broader context: one cannot criticize, for example, nationalism and its mythology while ignoring the entire complexity of economic processes because „after all, nationalism is just another instrument to make capitalism work without any major problems“ (Frljić in Soszyński 2017).

A broad understanding of the context in which art is practiced also applies to the very process of creating a performance, the role of theatre as an institution and the position of theatre from which it articulates its ideological and political stance. The director emphasizes that it must not be forgotten that the interests of various social groups collide in theatre; „that is why political theatre must constantly redefine itself“ (ibid.), must look at itself and question its own status quo. He also revises himself as a theatre director because this role

means that he is always in a position of power. In his plays, actors frequently comment on the production conditions of a given performance, comment on their position in the institution and cooperation with the director. In *The Curse*, the annoyed actress Klara Bielawka talks about her wages and a humiliating way of depicting women in leftist theatre. Another actress, Barbara Wysocka, reflects on the paradox of Frljić, who talks a lot about freedom of speech and who agreed to be the curator of the Malta Festival in Poznań (2017), and he was commissioned to do so by another director, who cancelled the performance of Rodrigo García's *Golgota Picnic* in 2015 in a gesture of self-censorship. The memory of this event is important in the Polish context because the festival director's decision to cancel the performance of the Argentine artist's performance under pressure from politicians and the hierarchs of the Catholic Church resonated widely – this was the first such significant act of self-censorship in Poland after 1989. Moreover, in a gesture of opposition to preventive censorship, readings of the script of *Golgota Picnic* took place in various cities in Poland, on central squares and in many cultural institutions, and the recordings of the performance were shown, protested by Catholic organizations.

According to Frljić, political theatre not only influences the public debate, but it also takes notice of the political subjectivity of people creating theatre. It is critical of itself and of the viewer. As Frljić himself claims, he always tries to „question the habits of the audience and the aesthetics prevailing in theatre“ (ibid.), and he does this by using strong theatrical signals, grotesque, deformations, rough jokes, radical words and images. And all of this leads to the effect of alienation. Also, Frljić radically breaks the rules of representation, introducing the elements of national and religious iconography to his theatre, changing their official meaning. In *The Curse*, the actress performs *fellatio* on the figure of the pope, and in another scene, the cross is cut down. In *Our Violence, Your Violence* (an international co-production of HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Wiener Festwochen, the Mladinsko Theatre, Kunstfest Weimar, Zürcher Theater Spektakel, the Croatian National Theatre Ivan pl. Zajc and the International Theatre Festival MESS 2016), the actress removes from her vagina miniature copies of national flags of different countries, depending on where the performance is staged, and in the *Ristić Complex* (the Mladinsko Theatre, 2015), the

actors urinate on the map of Yugoslavia.

The director perfectly controls various rhetorical models, skillfully evokes various discourses of the political debate and makes use of different models of political, critical and documentary art assimilated in theatre. *Aleksandra Zec* was a production based on facts, and the work on the performance was accompanied by conversations with the actors, which were recorded and used as the main material for *The Serberian girl*, a film about relations between the Croats and the Serbs. They revealed the fact that mutual prejudice is still alive even twenty years after the war. This was also confirmed by the protests organized in front of the theatre, whose participants could not understand why the Croatian director, aware of Serb war crimes, paid so much attention to the story of a Serbian girl murdered near Zagreb (Slijepčević 2018). The director replied to these arguments that the case of Aleksandra Zec is proof that „the majority of Croatian society still divides the victims of war crimes into ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’, which is why the case of the Zec family, despite obvious evidence, has never had an appropriate judicial epilogue“ (Frljić 2016: 22). On the one hand, Frljić uses explicit theatrical images, and on the other hand, he flawlessly makes social diagnoses and touches on sore points, which means that his performances trigger wide-ranging social discussions, and stage performances are transformed, as in the case of *Aleksandra Zec* or *The Curse*, into media performances, reaching far beyond the walls of theatre.

### The story of a cancelled performance

Before I move on to discuss *The Curse* at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw and the stormy reception of this performance, I would like to mention the project thanks to which Frljić became known in the Polish media space and was even labelled a scandalist in certain circles. In a sense, this project also heralded the Warsaw performance. In 2013, the director was invited to cooperate with Narodowy Stary Teatr [National Old Theatre] in Cracow. At that time, the director of this theatre was Jan Klata, a recognizable and appreciated artist, identified with left-wing views and politically engaged theatre, who deals with national myths and Poland's past in his artistic work

and reinterprets Polish and European classics using the aesthetics of popular culture. Under his mandate, Klata planned to organize seasons around artists important to the theatre in Cracow and to stage texts which, under their own direction, went down in the history of Polish theatre (Derkaczew 2012). The patron of the first season was Konrad Swinarski, considered an outstanding theatre director, whose life and work became legendary in Poland. Oliver Frljić was invited to produce one such text, i.e., Zygmunt Krasiński's *Non-Divine Comedy*. It is worth adding that the Polish audience had the opportunity to see his play *Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!* two years earlier at the „Dialogue“ International Festival in Wrocław. Inviting such an uncompromising artist to cooperate can be seen as an act of courage by the new management of the Stary Theatre, although it does fit in with Klata's program premise. The premiere of the play was scheduled for December 7, 2013, but a week earlier, on November 26, rehearsals for the performance were stopped, and Jan Klata was accused of preventive censorship (Majmurek 2013).

To understand what actually happened, it is worth going back to November 14, 2013, when an organized group of spectators interrupted *To Damascus*, the play directed by Klata at the Stary Theatre, based on August Strindberg's drama, and verbally attacked the theatre management and the actors on stage. Although Klata's idea of how to run the Narodowy Stary Theatre was appreciated by the theatre community, it was not well received by the group of Cracow conservatives associated with the national weekly *Gazeta Polska*. An incident in the audience, justified by the theatre's defense against indecency and the flood of trash, was probably the result of disagreement with the program of the national theatre, which had been criticized in the right-wing media for a long time. The memory of this event is important because the previously experienced reluctance of conservative viewers and the deteriorating media atmosphere around the Stary Theatre possibly influenced Klata's decision regarding Frljić's play. Not without significance was the decision of seven of the eighteen actors cast in the *Non-Divine Comedy* to resign from the production shortly before the premiere due to the message of the play and the disagreement with the work method adopted by the director, which involved provoking the actors to verbalize issues intended to cause an ideological conflict. One of the actresses, Anna Polony,

who played in Swinarski's play years ago and was considered an authority in Poland, accused Frljić of slandering the name of the outstanding director. She considered the creation of a „provocative event“ under the „signature of a classic drama“ to be „an act unworthy of an artist“. She also added that „attributing anti-Semitic tones to Swinarski's production is a huge abuse“ (Polony in Krupiński 2013).

It is worth adding here that Krasieński's drama is considered an outstanding work of Polish romanticism, which is discussed in Polish schools, although little attention is paid to the anti-Semitic themes present in it.<sup>6</sup> As Frljić said in one of the interviews, he was not particularly interested in the drama itself (Frljić in Soszyński 2013). He was more interested in Swinarski's production from 1965, in the way in which the Polish director read the romantic drama and how it is discussed today. References to the historic staging were to appear on several levels. One of them was the set design, referring – as its author, Anna Maria Karczmarska, recalled – to the set design of Krystyna Zachwatowicz, a collaborator of Swinarski, who placed the action of the *Non-Divine Comedy* in a „baroque church“ with an altar as the central location where the story is set (ibid., commentary on the set design). The director, in turn, emphasized that what intrigued him most was not the play itself, but its complicated historical context and, as he put it, the accompanying „communication confusion“ (ibid.). This resulted in the idealization of Swinarski by the actors who worked with him, who „transformed him into the main representative of Polish national theatre culture“, created an excessively apologetic narrative about him and falsified his achievements (ibid.). As the director argued, „Swinarski tried to break the barriers imposed by the language of theatre and the concept of national identity. With his adaptation of the *Non-Divine Comedy*, he challenged both of these constructs. After all, you cannot use a man who practiced transgression years later to define norms that must not be violated!“ (ibid.).

The transgressive dimension of Swinarski's staging, according to Frljić,

<sup>6</sup> The third part of the play features Jews in the role of revolutionaries. They are shown in a caricatured manner. Although they have converted to Christianity, they are presented as an alien and hostile element. The anti-Semitism present in the *Non-Divine Comedy* is based on the belief that Jews are the embodiment of evil. Changing religion does not change their „nature“. The baptized seem even more dangerous because they are more difficult to recognize.

was manifested primarily in the „hyperbolization of anti-Semitism hidden in common ways of portraying Jews“, which allows us to read the stage interpretation of the *Non-Divine Comedy* from 1965 as „an ironic commentary on the anti-Semitic layer of Krasiński’s work“ (ibid.). His main source of inspiration were various ways of reading and understanding anti-Semitism. He wanted to diagnose Polish society and show the role of anti-Semitism in the functioning of the so-called nation states: „...how nation states work, how anti-Semitism can be used to force the homogenization of the nation, and then how homogenization limits the awareness of class divisions that we deal with every day“ (ibid.). The idea was to study the process that serves to create community and collective consciousness, while masking what divides it. This understanding of anti-Semitism, as it soon turned out, became the most important source of the conflict. According to the sketch of the play prepared by playwrights collaborating with the director, apart from rumors, this is the only source of knowledge about the performance, which was ultimately titled the *Non-Divine Comedy. The Remains*. On the one hand, it was intended to examine the ways of appropriating tradition and the tactics of objectifying memory, and on the other to deal with contemporary anti-Semitism by directing provocations at viewers. Moreover, the scene of the reconstruction of Swinarski’s production, referring to national and religious symbolism and the „recognizable literary and iconographic topoi“ (Jakimiak, Wichowska 2014: 17), ended with a manifesto given by one of the actresses: „Ladies and gentlemen, today we will not put on Zygmunt Krasiński’s *Non-Divine Comedy*. This evening, we will burn this drama because we think it is a shame that any national culture should have such a work in its canon“ (ibid.).

The premiere of the play was cancelled, and Klata was considered the censor, although the director explained his decision was based on the growing hatred towards the unfinished play and the safety of the theatre group (Pawłowski 2015). Interestingly, in mid-November, when Klata went on stage during the interrupted performance of *To Damascus* to defend the actors against protesting viewers, he acted as a defender of artistic freedom, and this is how he was perceived by the theatre community. At the beginning of December, his attitude and the perception of the community changed radically. A year later, he explained that he had made a mistake

by not disclosing the reasons for his decision to the public, but he wanted the producers not to lose face under the circumstances (Kosiński 2015). The cancelled premiere at the Sary Theatre electrified the media that represented various ideological positions, creating an impact beyond the theatre community. Opponents of Klata's management and Frljić's premiere spoke of tarnishing national values. In turn, the team of producers working on the performance claimed that „the decision of the management of the Sary Theatre legitimizes the situation in which specific media and the interests behind them decide what is and what is not allowed in theatre. It also exposes the inability of the national scene to decisively resist the threats of those who want to use violence to establish the only correct and valid way of interpreting Polish history and culture“ (Yes 2013). This attitude was supported by some theatre critics and commentators. The director was accused of adopting the strategies of politicians who are guided by particular interests in order to maintain and strengthen his power, as well as of failing to understand the role of public cultural institutions. If theatre reproduces the mechanisms it should expose, it „celebrates the crisis of democracy“ (Adamiecka-Sitek 2015).

In one of the later interviews, Klata was critical of the idea by Frljić, who, in his opinion, intended to manipulate the actors, to turn them into „shahids for his cause“, and used a „shock strategy“ and „advancement to conflict“ (Klata in Kosiński 2015). It was aimed at provocation, not at a critical deconstruction of the work, which discredited the idea of engaged theatre (ibid.). Klata also mentioned intimidation and threats directed at him since he became the director of the Sary Theatre, which in his opinion justified his decisions (Klata in Pawłowski 2015). The work on the *Non-Divine Comedy. The Remains* was interrupted, and this resulted in over a hundred press articles, comments and interviews with Oliver Frljić and the producers, and the Polish theatre journal *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna* published a reconstruction of the performance. At the Theatre Institute of Zbigniew Raszewski in Warsaw, a meeting called *Non-Divine Comedy. Afterimage* took place. It was a performative event, a kind of open rehearsal, followed by a conversation with the authors of the performance about what had happened in Kraków, both in the theatre and in the media. In 2015, as part of the Pop-Up Theatre project, the creators of *The Remains* staged fragments of the

play on a temporary stage in a spherical tent at the University of Economics in Kraków, entitled the *Non-Divine Confession*. As Agata Siwiak, the curator of the Pop-Up Theatre announced, „It will be about what happened around the rehearsals for the canceled *Non-Divine Comedy. Remains* in Stary Theatre, and the hype surrounding this event. It says something about us, about our approach to what national is and to anti-Semitism“ (Siwiak in Cagiel 2015).

The story of the cancelled premiere of the *Non-Divine Comedy. The Remains* and the media hype caused by this event showed not only the impact of art on the society, which is defined by triggered collective resentments and imaginations; that event also makes us aware of the dynamics of changing social affects, revealing their impact on the performance, the meaning and values of which are ultimately dictated by the social context, even if the performance was ultimately not created. Frljić's strategy of revealing and radicalizing the dispute existing in the public space was certainly successful; it precisely indicated the lines of demarcation of ideological divisions. In a sense, the conflict caused by the unfinished play also announced the conservative revolution, which gained momentum in Poland after 2015, when the Law and Justice party came to power. The continuation of mapping the centers of power and playing out social conflicts outside the theatre building took place four years later.

### ***The Curse in the Powszechny Theatre***

What inspired Wyspiański to write *The Curse* was a press article about a tragedy that occurred in a village near Tarnów (Cracow area), where the village community burned at the stake a girl who had an affair with a priest, which allegedly inflicted drought on the village. Also, it is worth adding that Wyspiański is regarded as one of the most important authors of modernism in Poland and the creator of modern Polish theatre. Therefore, the choice of *The Curse* to be staged at the Powszechny Theatre was by no means accidental. Not only did Frljić choose the drama by one of the canonic Polish playwrights, who himself dealt with socio-political issues in his works, but he also decided to stage *The Curse*, which was considered a

controversial play at the time of its creation and later. Austrian censorship,<sup>7</sup> under the influence of some conservative circles, banned the premiere of the drama in Cracow. The premiere of this play took place in Łódź in 1909, and a year later at Teatr Wielki in Warsaw, but it is said that Catholic and conservative journalists still demanded that the play be removed from there as well (Araszkiewicz 1951). The critics of subsequent stagings of the play were offended above all by the fact that Wyspiański made the priest a negative hero who, despite declaring celibacy, had two children with the young woman.

However, Frljić did not stage Wyspiański's drama as it was written over a hundred years ago. He only used the title and drew on the topics related to the humiliation of women and sexual abuse by Catholic clergy. The original text proved to be the starting point for the playwrights cooperating with the director – Agnieszka Jakimiak, Joanna Wichowska and Goran Injac – to create a new stage work, which included commentaries on the present day, actors' improvisations regarding their cooperation with the director as well as parts quoted from the original. The artist treated the subject raised by Wyspiański as a pretext to diagnose the socio-political situation in contemporary Poland, to identify major problems and taboos, which include – as it turned out soon after the premiere – the political power of the Catholic Church. Interestingly, Frljić has made Bertolt Brecht the patron of his production, appealing to his authority as a visionary and the most iconic representative of political theatre. The fact that the actors call the director who has been dead for more than sixty years and ask for his advice at the beginning of the play is an ironic meta-commentary on the play, especially since they also reveal that they do so at Frljić's request. The mocking tone accompanies this scene until the end. The icon of political theatre tells the artists that since they are calling from Poland, they should ask the pope for a recipe on how to stage Wyspiański's drama.

Brecht, whose support the actors are seeking, in a sense patronizes Frljić's work. Both artists are in agreement at the basic level of understanding the

<sup>7</sup> In 1795, after the so-called Third Partition of Poland, Cracow found itself within the borders of the Habsburg Monarchy. The city reappeared inside the borders of Poland after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the declaration of Poland's independence in 1918.

political nature of art, recognizing the important role of theatre in the shaping of the public space by provoking discussion and taking part in public debates. The aim of theatre, which Brecht calls epic theatre, is to shift the focus from the stage action recorded in the drama to the storytelling and development of events. By focusing on the narrative and the means of expression, the stage illusion, so typical of psychological theatre, gets destroyed, and it allows for an intellectual and critical distance to the fiction presented on stage. The effect of strangeness obtained in this way is supposed to stimulate the viewer's ability to think in a deconstructivist way. Since man is a political being, controlled by various ideologies, which he finds impossible to liberate himself from because every choice is ideologically imbued, the only way to get to know oneself and recognize the world is by alienation. Theatre provides the tools to go through this process. The disruption of theatrical illusion through various techniques of alienation, such as maintaining distance in acting or one actor playing several characters, prevents the viewer from identifying himself with the fictional character and allows for a critical distance. This does not mean giving up on emotions, but only – as Brecht wrote – their better application. The purpose of epic theatre is to draw attention to certain social and political issues, to stimulate the viewer's awareness and to develop an engaged attitude. It is in the viewer's engaged attitude where the potential to change reality lies. Therefore, the idea of epic theatre is to influence consciousness of the viewer, and then to effectively influence the reality outside theatre, i.e., socio-political relations. The audience is supposed to be „productive even when the spectacle is over“ (Brecht 1960: 105).

*The Curse*, produced at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw in 2017, has gained the status of the most politically engaged play in recent years in Poland, and Frljić has become, in a sense, a politically inconvenient person. The Malta Festival in Poznań, where he was invited as a curator in 2017, was deprived of the subsidy granted two years earlier by Piotr Gliński, the Minister of Culture on behalf of the ruling Law and Justice party. As Gliński justified his decision in 2019, „...in the application for funds, the phenomenon and event to be financed were described and there, stating, among other things that it was ‘an inclusive socio-artistic event, involving the recipient in dialogue and action, opening him to the experience of art’“, while Frljić, in his various activities, „proved that he was not interested in inclusive socio-artis-

tic events involving the recipient in dialogue or opening to the experience of art, that his understanding of functioning in the public space in connection with events that are artistic or para-artistic in nature is completely different” (Gliński in Krzykowska 2019). He also pointed out that *The Curse* was an action „which involved a very deep conflict and a wave of social protests“ (ibid.). The minister withdrew the subsidy, but ultimately, in 2019, lost the court case brought against him by the festival. By the court’s judgment, the State Treasury was obliged to pay out the entire subsidy including interest (ibid.).

The play, whose starting point was Wyspiański’s drama about a girl abused and humiliated by a priest, met with great reluctance from the ruling politicians and hierarchs of the Catholic Church because it perfectly diagnosed power relations in Poland. It turned out that the most important political player in a theoretically secular state is the Catholic Church, which uses the moral blackmail of the „Catholic majority“ to influence politicians in the field of law-making (e.g., this is why there is currently a total ban on abortion in Poland).<sup>8</sup> The play caused an affective storm on a scale unseen in Polish theatre for a long time, and the flashpoint turned out to be three scenes: the fellatio performed by the actress on a plaster figure of the pope, to which a plaque with the inscription „Defender of Pedophiles“ was attached and which was then symbolically hanged. This scene referred both to the person of John Paul II, who has the status of a saint in Poland, as well as to the institution he represented and the pedophile crimes committed by the clergy. The next scene concerned an attempt to collect donations to hire an assassin – Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the then ruling party. And the last scene that aroused controversy was the cutting down of the cross tree, which was proclaimed blasphemous by the Polish Episcopate three days after the premiere: „During the play, the cross is publicly desecrated, which hurts the religious feelings of Christians to whom the cross is sacred. In addition to religious symbols, the person of Saint John Paul II is insulted, which is particularly painful for the Poles“ (Rytel-Adrianik 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Donald Tusk, the leader of the opposition that won the parliamentary elections in October 2023, promised changes in this area. In April 2024, four bills liberalizing the abortion law were submitted to the special parliamentary committee. At the time of writing this article, it is not yet known what the outcome of the committee’s work will be and whether the abortion law in Poland will change.

Immediately after its premiere, the show caused a wave of outrage, which was spread mainly by the right-wing media. It must also be said that it was a long time since any performance in Poland had been written or talked about so much in the media representing various ideological attitudes. The discussion about the performance quickly spread beyond the theatre community. Journalists and theatre critics admitted that „*The Curse* is a much more important social event than an artistic one“ (Łuczewski 2017). The director „was never interested in staging Wyspiański’s play about an archaic, conflict-torn village collective that seeks liberation by a burnt offering of children and stoning their mother. Frljić wanted to transform Warsaw itself into such a collective“ (ibid.). As a result of the crusade against *The Curse*, various centers of power and pressure groups, such as representatives of the Catholic Church, right-wing politicians and publicists, people associated with radical right-wing or religious organizations tried to use preventive censorship and ban the play from appearing on stage. A crowd of protesters, consisting mainly of religious and national organizations, gathered regularly in front of the Powszechny Theatre almost since the day of the premiere. There were also some breaches into the theatre premises, which forced the management to introduce special procedures to ensure the safety of viewers, such as police protection of the theatre, searches of backpacks and bags and using a metal detector to screen viewers arriving at the performance.

The Minister of Culture criticized the theatre organizer, the city of Warsaw, for not intervening into the case of *The Curse*. He thus supported the protesters, making it clear that their opposition to the performance of the play was justified (PAP 2017). The political machine aimed at the play was set in motion quite quickly. A few days later, the head of public television, Jacek Kurski, cancelled the premiere of a television play with one of the actresses, Julia Wyszynska (Mrozek 2017). Other actors and theatre employees were also subjected to enormous pressure. A year later, the theatre’s directors mentioned e-mails, telephone calls and very aggressive reactions towards the people working in the Powszechny Theatre. On the other hand, they admitted that the audience had received this performance with ovations (Szymańska 2018). There was indeed a lot of interest in the performance, and for a long time it was difficult to buy tickets. Meanwhile, on February 22, 2017, the

Prosecutor's Office in Warsaw initiated an *ex officio* investigation into offending religious feelings and public incitement to the crime of murder, which is punishable by imprisonment in Poland (Orlik 2017). This investigation was soon connected with another case – accusations made against Frljić after the screening of his play *Our Violence, Your Violence* as part of the Premiere Festival in Bydgoszcz in 2016. The Prosecutor's Office then received eight reports of a crime involving „offending religious feelings“ and „publicly insulting the flag“. One of the Law and Justice politicians who initiated these actions argued that the show “was full of pornography and contained obscene and blasphemous scenes“ (PAP 2016). In one of them, a naked Muslim woman touched her private parts and then took out a rolled Polish flag out of them. In another, the figure of Christ allegedly raped an Arab girl (ibid.). In the case of accusations directed against Oliver Frljić and his art, the most paradoxical thing is that most of the people making the accusations did not see these performances and gained knowledge about them from reviews, other people's reports and gossip (ibid.).<sup>9</sup>

As a result of harassment from the state authorities, some festivals and theatres backed out of inviting *The Curse*, and those which did so, such as the Rozrywki Theatre in Chorzów, had to take into account protests or, like the International „Dialogue“ Festival in Wrocław, finance the staging of the play from the ticket sales purchased, even though the festival received a ministerial subsidy. Interestingly, the trial for „offending religious feelings“ and for „public incitement to crime“ ended in 2024, seven years after the premiere of the play. During this time, the co-authors of the show, actors, employees and the theatre management were interrogated, the Prosecutor's Office collected evidence in the form of fingerprints on props and elements of the theatre set, and expert opinions were also called in. Ultimately, „the Prosecutor's Office did not bring charges against anyone in this case, even though it had previously indicated that the elements of a prohibited act had been present“ (E 2023). Oliver Frljić left Poland immediately after the premiere of *The Curse* and chose not to come to the Malta Festival in Poznań in June 2017, where he was the curator together with Goran Injac. In the statement issued on this matter, he confirmed that his decision was influ-

<sup>9</sup> I have also written about it in the article „*Klątwa w Teatrze Rozrywki. Cenzura w afekcie*“ (Głowacka 2022).

enced by the withdrawal of the Malta Festival subsidy by the Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński and the atmosphere of a fanatical campaign by the right-wing circles that had been mounted against *The Curse*. He also recalled the acts of violence directed against the actors and management of the Powszechny Theatre, for which no one was held responsible. He treated his refusal to come to Poland as a protest against limiting freedom of speech and artistic freedom (Frljić 2017).

## Conclusion

The events surrounding *The Curse* and the premiere of the *Non-Divine Comedy. The Remains* in the Stary Theatre in Cracow, which eventually did not take place were both, in fact, predictable. Before he came to Poland, the artist was called a provocateur for a reason in Croatia (as well as in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), where much controversy was caused not only by his plays, but also by his two-year term as the director of the National Theatre in Rijeka, from which he resigned in 2016. For this, he received death threats and his apartment was broken into, and the theatre's budget was reduced (Isenberg 2016) without any reasonable justification. In Poland, on the other hand, both *The Curse* and *Our Violence, Your Violence*, shown in Bydgoszcz, quickly became subject to an absurd investigation from the Prosecutor's Office, which intensified interest in the work of the Croatian director and positioned him as an uncompromising artist. With his stage productions, Frljić powerfully impacted many levels of social life in Poland, highlighting the lines of social divisions and centers of power. On the strength of artistic provocation, he diagnosed the conditions of the debate in art and revealed repressive mechanisms in the public sphere: the effectiveness of the language of violence, the weakness of state institutions and the hidden relationship between the centers of state and Church power. His productions became both catalysts and symptoms of social processes. Theatrical events attended by a relatively small number of people triggered media reactions which were followed by a much larger audience. In an interview conducted before the premiere of *The Curse*, the artist emphasized that in his work, he is not always interested in the effect of a finished performance:

You could say that in Cracow I didn't have to stage anything anymore because my goals were achieved without it. It was similar in 2008 in Split, where I wanted to stage *The Bacchae* by Euripides. The director cancelled the play, which resulted in a very heated public debate broadcast by the media. And when they finally gave in to public pressure and we were allowed to stage the play, I gave up on it. It was very difficult for the actors to accept my decision and understand that in this way we could destroy what we had already achieved in a much broader sense. (Frljić in Soszyński 2017)

It seems that in recent years, since he started working in German-speaking countries, Frljić has been much less interested in the radicalization of the dispute in the public space. The reason for this may be that in Western Europe, and especially in Germany, provocation as an artistic strategy does not work today. A democratic and liberal society is open to different content and does not react strongly to provocation. On the other hand, the mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism appropriate rebellion, provocation or scandal, neutralizing their power. Apart from the controversy caused by *Gorki: An alternative for Germany?* primarily among activists of the AfD party, who were threatening to cut the theatre's subsidies, other performances seem aesthetically refined, although surprisingly conservative in terms of their social impact. This change is visible both in his productions and in the artist's public statements. In an interview given before the premiere of *Danton's Death / Iphigenia* (2022), which opened the war triptych staged by Frljić at the Gorki Theatre, he said:

I don't think it is the task of literature and theatre to chase the politics of the day. It should also not ignore the world in which we live. But if theatre tries to compete with other media in sensationalism and click-ability, it will lose. It took me a lot of years and mistakes to understand that theatre is not a sprint, but a marathon. What I am trying to express in my theatrical work is stretching over a longer period of time. (Mustroph 2022)

I believe this text can be ended with a few questions which will probably be answered in the future: Does this change of the director's artistic strategy

who has so far been identified with subsequent scandals and provocations, breaking taboos and precisely diagnosing social ailments, changed his artistic strategy because he lost faith in the power of theatre's political influence? Is this related to the position of the director, which provides a sense of security and discourages artistic risk? Or maybe aestheticization and theatrical metaphor offer salvation from the brutality of the world, which has recently manifested itself in the form of a war? I will not try to answer these questions in this article as it deals with a different topic. However, they are certainly worth asking in some future paper. In the context of the performances I have written about, it is clear that Oliver Frljić has certainly changed his creative strategy.

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## Skandalist i provokator. Oliver Frljić u Poljskoj

Ovaj se članak bavi radom Olivera Frljića iz perspektive njegove pripadnosti političkom kazalištu te njegove prisutnosti u poljskoj kazališnoj sredini. U prvom dijelu teksta raspravlja se o tipičnim obilježjima Frljićevih izvedbi na tematskoj i na formalnoj razini. U njegovoj je poetici lako identificirati mnogobrojne aluzije na teoriju agonizma Chantal Mouffe, kao i nadahnuće djelima Bertolta Brechta. Postao je prepoznatljiv po demaskiranju različitih tipova odnosa moći te svih vrsta nacionalizama, pogotovo onih koji su se u društvu udomačili i internalizirali te postali nevidljivi. Time što uvodi iznenadne i drukčije perspektive ili oštro sročene teze u svoje izvedbe, Frljić publiku tjera da iskorači izvan granica vlastite ugode, provocirajući pritom žustre reakcije. Drugi dio rada posvećen je produkcijama na kojima je Frljić radio u Poljskoj te se bavi njihovim političkim potencijalom i burnom recepcijom. Predstavom *Ne-božanstvena komedija. Ostaci*, u krakovskom kazalištu Narodowy Teatr Stary, redatelj je prokazao poljski antisemitizam. Nakon toga, analizom diskriminacije žena, pedofilije i političke moći Katoličke crkve u predstavi *Kletva* Teatra Powszechny u Varšavi, ukazao je na dominantnu ulogu katoličke ideologije u poljskom javnom prostoru. Te izvedbe razotkrile su ideološke podjele u poljskom društvu, ali i skrivene poveznice između različitih instancija moći.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** angažirana umjetnost, cenzura u kazalištu, Oliver Frljić, politika i kazalište, politički teatar, suvremeno kazalište