Overview

Michał Zadara ’99 and Barbara Wysocka

Over the 2019-2020 Academic Year, Michał Zadara ’99 and Barbara Wysocka served as The Julien and Virginia Cornell Visiting Assistant Professors in the Department of Theater. They had previously been in residence at Swarthmore for a week in 2015 when they brought Chopin Without Piano to the College. Zadara and Wysocka were nominated for the Cornell professorship by Allen Kuharski, the Stephen Lang Professor of Performing Arts, who is an expert on Polish theater and contemporary directing practice.

Since graduating from Swarthmore in 1999, Zadara has directed about 50 plays and won the prestigious Passport Award in 2007, the Polish equivalent to a Pulitzer Prize. Wysocka has worked within theater, opera, and film, and also won the Passport Award in 2009 for her debut opera production of Philip Glass's The Fall of the House of Usher. Both Wysocka and Zadara are influential voices in contemporary theater and opera with recognition throughout Europe.
2019-2020 Activities

Presentations

On September 25, 2019, Zadara and Wysocka gave a joint faculty lunch talk in which they presented an illustrated overview of their creative histories in theater, opera, and film.

On November 19, 2019, Zadara gave a faculty lecture titled “THEATRE − POLLUTION − LAW: The Intersection of Art and Social Change.” His talk centered on Films from the Smog Years, a cycle of short films that he and Wysocka co-authored and co-directed, and in which Wysocka acted.

Two additional events were planned – a panel discussion and streaming event of Wysocka’s staging of Puccini’s Tosca at Warsaw’s National Opera on March 20, and Wysocka’s faculty lecture on April 30 – but they needed to be cancelled in light of COVID-19.

Teaching

Zadara taught a class in the fall of 2019 titled Tragedy in Contemporary Theatre, cross-listed with the Department of Classics. The course placed original Greek tragedies in dialogue with contemporary American screenwriting theory and European philosophy. The first in a sequence of two classes, Tragedy in Contemporary Theatre exposed students to a range of works as they chose a single text to focus on and translate into contemporary English. The students chose The Women of Trachis by Sophocles, and the semester ended with a staged reading of their adaptation with a production staged by the Department of Theater the spring of 2020.

Wysocka taught a class in the spring of 2020 titled Theater of Intervention: After Shakespeare and Müller, which was cross-listed in German Studies. This was a hybrid academic and studio class centered on a selection of plays by Shakespeare (Hamlet, Macbeth, and Titus Andronicus) that had been adapted by German playwright Heiner Müller. To accommodate the constraints of the pandemic, students continued working on scenes and monologues but instead of presenting their projects in the theater they created videos under Wysocka’s guidance. All students incorporated monologues from Hamlet with original material they created with inspiration from both Shakespeare and Müller. This material was transformed and edited into a 30-minute long film.
The Julien and Virginia Cornell Visiting Professorship provided Zadara and Wysocka with crucial means to make new connections and grow as artists, teachers, and thinkers, and brought two of Poland’s most influential voices in theater and performance to Swarthmore.

Although unplanned, the disruptions to classes caused by COVID-19 provided ground for Wysocka and Zadara to innovate formally and pedagogically, and in the process brought widespread attention to Swarthmore’s Department of Theater. Wysocka adjusted the creative portion of her Theater of Intervention course to accommodate remote instruction and collaboration and she compiled the final works into a film. As profiled in an article in The Washington Post (please click through the link for the article), the production of The Women of Trachis that resulted from Zadara’s class in the fall took place at the Frear Ensemble Theater to an audience of no one and with no crew present. The outcomes of both classes yielded thoughtful responses to the state of theater in the current social and political climate, and enabled Swarthmore students to collaborate in new ways and produce creative responses to the material and the pandemic.

During her residence at Swarthmore, Wysocka developed her future opera projects at major venues across Europe. She will be directing at the Berliner Staatsoper (with Daniel Barenboim conducting), the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, and the Opéra national de Paris, and the Teatr Wielki Opera Narodowa in Warsaw. Wysocka also collaborated with Professor of Dance Stephanie Liapis, with whom she is working on a future performance devoted to the Polish-born, Jewish modern dancer and choreographer Pola Nireńska.

Zadara and Wysocka are completing the academic year with a four-week creative residency centered on the early work to mount the first professional stage adaptation of 2018 Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk’s novel Flights; this work is slated to premiere in December of 2020 at Warsaw’s Teatr Powszechny. Four students are working with Zadara and Wysocka as research and production assistants on the project with support from the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility, the Department of Theater, and the Swarthmore Project in Theater.

Films from the Smog Years is currently an official selection of numerous international film festivals, including ECU European Independent Film Festival, Tokyo Lift-off Film Festival, Switzerland International Film Festival, Near Nazareth Film Festival, EuropeNow Reykjavik, and the Long Island International Film Expo.
Dear Cornell Family,

With this letter I would like to express my gratitude to you. I would also like to share my experiences from the year that I spent at Swarthmore, which was made possible by your generous grant. For the last 15 years, I have been working as an actress and a theater and opera director. This past year was the first time that I had a chance to stop for a moment.

It has been a privilege to spend this time in this place that is both beautiful and conducive to studying. I was able to take advantage of the opulent resources of the College, including the libraries, from which I could check out numerous films, books, and sheet music, and the proximity of Swarthmore to the cultural spaces of Philadelphia and New York City. I was able to meet incredible people, and — what was particularly important for me — the great community of women scholars and administrators on campus. From this community of women, I felt true support, faith in my abilities, and interest in my work. My active contacts with professors from the departments of Music, Dance, and Film and Media Studies allowed me to widen those aspects of my work.

Above all, I am deeply grateful for the chance to take responsibility for the development of young people. Working with them was a great lesson for me as well, and its effect was a mutual therapeutic event in the difficult times of the pandemic. The pandemic changed the mode of our work and disconnected us from one another. It required us to find different approaches to work and to engaging with people. But thanks to the great resources and conditions of my work here, this work was possible and finding new ways of communicating became valuable in itself.

I am very grateful for the chance not only to work for the College, but also for the time to develop my own projects here. The research grant allowed me to develop a project that will premiere next spring - a theatrical essay about a Polish-Jewish-American artist Pola Nireńska.

In the hope that the world will return to normality, in the hope that the events of the last few months will make humanity wiser and not the other way around - I rejoice in going back to work with the knowledge that someone trusted me and was ready to invest in my development and my work. This knowledge and gratitude will remain with me, always. This year has been a gift. I am sure that I will feel its effect for many years. In the future, I will be proud to say that I was the Cornell Visiting Professor at Swarthmore in the 19/20 academic year.

Thank you,

Barbara Wysocka
Dear Cornell Family,

This year has been a pleasure and a much-needed break from my regular work as a theater director. It has allowed me to learn with the students and from the students. During my fall semester course "Tragedy as Contemporary Theatre", we read 10 tragedies that I had not read before. The material was as new to me as it was to the students: I was able to give them a structure through which to understand Greek tragedy, and they gave me a contemporary understanding of the themes present in these plays. In the spring semester, I directed one of these tragedies, Sophocles's *The Women of Trachis*. Although this was reminiscent of the work I usually do as a theater director, I did not have to rush and be so effect-oriented as one usually is in the theater. We worked patiently through Sophocles' text, consulting the Greek original, reading German and Russian versions of this play in order to understand how different translators had interpreted Sophocles's words. I hope that I was able to convey to the students that reading classic literature is a challenge to our contemporary world, and that it allows us to take a different perspective on ourselves. In return, the students gave me a glimpse of what a contemporary, social-media oriented version of tragedy could look like.

Thank you very much for making this adventure possible,

Michał Zadara