

Audience not / present

Marcin Kościelniak interviews Michał Zara



Swarthmore College Theater Department, *Trachinki* ; photo: Michał Zadara

1.

You emailed me about your latest show. At first I thought that I could not see it since it is being produced in the United States. Immediately afterwards, I thought that it would probably be shown online because of the coronavirus. Eventually it turned out that--although a performance took place on April 24 at 20.00 EST--no one could watch it.

You could watch it. You did watch it. The performance was played for absent spectators by absent actors. You were one of our viewers who did not watch the performance. We had a 100% attendance at the premiere: nobody came. We have as many spectators as there are people who can imagine this performance and know something about it.

I don't even know if it happened, I can only trust you that it did. But starting from the beginning: tell me what it's all about.

This is a staging of Sophocles's tragedy *Trachiniae*. The title can be translated as *Women of Trachis*, *Girls of Trachis* or *Teen-Agers of Trachis* because the chorus consists of young girls before a wedding. In the tragedy it turns out that Heracles fought a last war because he wanted to rape Iole, a foreign princess, fourteen- or fifteen-years-old. Her father did not want to give her to Heracles. Heracles was enraged, destroyed the whole city, killed the inhabitants and raped this girl. Deianeira, wife of Heracles, gives him a tunic soaked in a magical potion to restore his love. But this poison kills him, and Deianeira commits suicide. This play is the template for Juliusz Słowacki's [1845 Polish Romantic play] *Fantazy*. For example, the Major's long death

scene in *Fantazy* is understandable only when we refer it to the analogous death of Heracles in *The Women of Trachis*.

You performed the production as part of a course that you run at Swarthmore College, where you once studied, and now you have been invited back to conduct a one-year class.

Yes, I taught a class under the title "Tragedy as Contemporary Theater" for the faculties of classical philology and theater. In the first semester of the course we read mainly those Greek tragedies that I did not know. There were ten or twelve tragedies on the reading list. In addition, philosophical texts discussing the significance of the tragedy as such: Nietzsche, Ricoeur, Deleuze and Guattari, etc. The students' task was to prepare two scenes from the tragedy, one with a chorus, the other without. One of my theses is that staging the tragedy is synonymous with staging the chorus: the game is always about the chorus. Another key element are messengers who talk about what cannot be shown. Here you can make room for your imagination. At the same time, what is invisible is--especially in *The Women of Trachis*--the social principle, which is the violence that supports the whole of society, ideology, gods, etc. Heracles is a great hero--but his last war was about wanting to rape a teenager. Heracles killed all the monsters in Greece--but he is also a monster himself. And this tragedy reveals this monstrosity as what was previously hidden.

In the second semester, we chose *The Women of Trachis* and staged it. A normal staging with audience and actors was planned. Because the cast was small (three students), we added two production assistants to the chorus (students who worked for a fee). An important element was the recognition that in the Greek theater in each performance three--and sometimes just two--actors played all the roles (which was important in my staging of [Euripides's] *Orestes* a few years ago). Tracing which actor was to play each character is necessary to understand these plays. In *The Women of Trachis* there is a "super-role" because Deianeira and Heracles are both written to be played by one actor--in one evening that actor dies twice.

Did one actress perform for you? How did you decide who will get this "super-role"?

The young woman who played it, Alex Kingsley, did it as part of completing her acting studies, so her role had to be big. Remember, this is not a professional acting school, but a humanistic one--acting studies are one of its parts, but students are simultaneously completing other specializations.

I understand that the coronavirus interrupted the work.

Yes, the coronavirus erupted during the week-long vacation in the middle of the semester, the so-called *spring break*, during which two of my students, Josephine Ross and Nadia Málaya, returned home. That is, to Minneapolis and Moscow. The third student, Alex Kingsley, stayed here in Swarthmore.

Before the coronavirus we had most of the performance developed. I said to them: let's translate this work into moving images. These were not necessarily acting etudes. Sometimes they were, for example, I don't know, about cutting vegetables, applying makeup, shouting, the simplest equivalents of emotions. It was very difficult and a great exercise. You have to translate the experience of stage dialogue into images. And with zero production means (each student recorded and mounted the work on her phone). We had a lot of rehearsals, three times a week, we all discussed these etudes online, many of them were recorded multiple times.

Then you put it all together?

Yes, on Adobe Premiere I edited it as one video with three image channels and sent them so that they could imagine what would happen on stage. Finally, in the theater, each of these channels was exported to a separate computer. Sound was a separate channel. I launched these channels plus the lighting program on the opening day and left the theater. After twenty minutes, everything started, the spectacle began. By then I was in the back room of the building.

And what did you do during the premiere?

There was a cast party on Zoom. It was very nice that no one had to work during the premiere. There was also all the tension about whether anyone would actually come and how many. That is to say: I was worried someone would show up. Everyone did not come, so it was a total success, we had a full theater. More precisely--there was one audience member. Alex Kingsley made a doll and this doll was the only spectator. I asked her to sew something in it, which is a carrier of guilt. For Freud, who wrote a lot of nonsense about the Greek tragedy (from the point of view of the Greek tragedy, not psychoanalysis), the genre of tragedy has always been associated with the economy of guilt in society. Hence the idea that some trace of her guilt should be sewn into this doll. I placed this doll in the audience. After setting up all the equipment, I left my computer in the room and set up its camera in such a way that we could watch live not the spectacle, but the doll and its reaction to it.

2.**Why did you decide on this form of non-presentation of the performance?**

In the spring of 2020, there was a discussion around the world among theater and dance instructors on how to work in such conditions. Some completed and shared exercises by Skype or Zoom. Theaters, as we know, deal with this in various ways, e.g. by playing old performances online, doing live monodramas. It is the same in the United States, and a lot is being said and written this way. For me, of course, this evolution of expressive forms is interesting. Except that theater is a special art form that has existed as long as the human race, which involves the direct interaction of actors and spectators in one space. Probably it also depends on other things, imagination is also a key element of the theater... But if you watch a performance through Skype or through Zoom, then actually everything is there except theater. I've recently watched the Wooster Group's *Hamlet* in this way and I was frustrated: yes, I learned something about theater theory and practice, but I did not have access to the event that took place there. I got information about the performance, but I didn't get the performance.

So you did your anti-performance in the name of defending traditional theater?

Yes definitely. As many people have said, I am the most conservative director of Polish theater--only somehow nobody among the current authorities wants to acknowledge it. It was even a reactionary production. It was a way to save what is happening in the theater, this unspeakable event, something unique, which makes a visit to the theater unique. I wanted to save this "something". But it was also a reflection on how theater works. The most important performances are not the ones that many people have seen. We often say [in Poland]: it is impossible to understand Jerzy Grotowski's method without understanding his *Hamlet*--but literally twenty people saw Grotowski's *Hamlet* in live performance.

But it is not only what someone has seen that will certify the truth about the performance. Something else is going on in history, also in the history of theater. Our knowledge about performances is mediated in texts and interpretations. In this sense, it doesn't matter how many people saw Grotowski's *Hamlet*. One can say: it does not matter if the performance took place at all. What do you think about that in the context of your performance? Is its "materiality", the fact of what actually happened, of consequence?

This is such a Borgesian moment of oscillation between mockery and metaphysics. Borges in *Secret Miracle* tells about a Jewish writer in Prague in 1942 or 1943 who was arrested and is to be shot. He prays to God to give him a year to complete his greatest work. The bullet that is supposed to kill him stops in front of his face--the whole world will die, and him as well, but he gets to write his work for a year. He manages to finish it within a year—then the bullet strikes him and shatters his head. End of story. Jan Kott described how Borges delivered a lecture titled *Shakespeare's Secret*. Everyone hoped Borges would reveal this secret. He spoke from memory, he was already blind then, he had no written text—but as a result of nervousness no one was able to set the microphone at the correct height. Borges spoke next to the microphone, indistinctly, and audible only at times was the word: *Shakespeare, Shakespeare ...* Kott writes that Borges probably shared the secret of Shakespeare, but no one heard it.

I worked with the idea of an absent work in my production *Messiah*, which was an adaptation of the non-existent book by Bruno Schulz. This did not prevent me from adapting it, because it carries some of the content of Schulz's *Messiah*—which is a book different from all others that do not exist--because of what we know about this unwritten book and its author.

The theme of the inexpressible is one of the most important motifs in Romantic music. We tried to emphasize this in *Chopin Without Piano*. There is a piano piece by Schumann, where on one staff there is one voice for one hand, on the second the other, and in the middle an internal voice, which is notated, but is not played. It's an unspoken, but still existing, melody.

There is a whole tradition of ineffable things in art. But for them to matter, they must really *exist*. That was important for us. I told students: usually in the theater what we do on stage does not fully reach the viewers, because someone is bored, someone is sleeping, someone will not hear, because they are sitting in the back row. But now we are doing a spectacle for nobody, so it must be decent.

But for you, and for the group, it has a different sense. I don't know if the performance took place. From my point of view, this is not so much about a theater event as it is about a media event that produced that theater event. And what about the question of what this uncertainty means?

In my opinion, it is essential for the performance that it took place. You may think, of course, that this is a joke and I'm playing games with you, but you can trust me. When I was a student here, a visiting Buddhist monk on campus on a residency was creating a sand mandala in the university library. You could watch it, also from above, since the library has several floors. The monk worked on it for three weeks; at the end a ceremony took place during which this mandala was poured into the creek [on campus]. The point is, you create something extremely beautiful and then destroy it. We could broadcast our show through Zoom, there were a thousand possibilities to record it, and yet we decided that it must not be destroyed.

You are talking about the extreme ephemeral nature of a theater event. Its uniqueness and elusive truth. But hasn't any documentation been preserved? On what basis will the students of your course get credit?

The faculty and university have their own criteria. Big money is involved. Tuition for students is very high, about fifty thousand dollars a year. Many people, especially US citizens, have reduced tuition fees, but there are also people, mainly from abroad, who pay the full amount. When I studied here, the tuition fee was much lower, but my parents paid the full amount. Do you know what you do then? You work so that you do not sleep at night, with constant guilt, if you do not have the best grades. And you don't get one because everybody ends up the same. There must therefore be a system to ensure reliability. Our spectacle was recorded by a professional team and is available to the examiner; on this basis of which he will examine the student for [whom this an honors thesis for] a specialization in acting.

Was the premiere, the only performance, recorded in its entirety?

No, I played the performance for the video crew the next day. If someone comes here and goes to the library, they can watch this recording. Although I do not encourage it, because it is not watching the performance. Watching the performance-recording is not watching the performance. It's like going to Paris to find out how Brook works, and watching the kitchen in that theater making coffee and sandwiches. In our case, the performance that we've created is something you haven't seen. In this sense you, Marcin Kościelniak, are one of our spectators. By the way, the crew responsible for this recording (Gabriel Johnson and Rob Harris) are making a documentary film about the work on the show. It was planned earlier. We had funds for work and research, and the production of the production turned out to be cheap, because this is about the word, not the scenery and effects--so I suggested spending that money on such a film. Fortunately for the crew, the coronavirus exploded and the documentary film really did become "about something."

When I read the press release of your performance, I thought that the ideology of theater was at stake. We have already learned that in the arrangement: the stage--the audience and the live presence of actors--is not necessary, that they lose in competition with the video image, they are replaced by holograms. You deprived the theater of that spectator. However, I understand that this was also done in opposition to what is important and valuable to you in the theater. However, was there something inspiring about this that could be continued—or is it a one-time, forced situation?

If it were Pinter or Brecht—and I could teach Brecht with the same passion as Greek tragedy--then such a production would make no sense. Everything here came together. That it took place without an audience was appropriate for this tragedy. It was very Greek, this not-spectating.

It is about the metaphorical sense of the staging: that the testimony given by *The Women of Trachis* is not heard by anyone?

Yes. But that's not all. There is a scene there: the women of Trachis are waiting for Heracles to arrive--but before that he must sacrifice a hundred bulls. This is incredible content: one hundred fully-grown creatures are murdered during this drama. Let's remember that in the exposition of this play, a whole city is slaughtered. There is also the rape of a teenager. Everything that cannot be seen is a very important element that anchors the play in suffering and experience. When we decided to make our production for non-spectators, we changed it. It was no longer a matter for the viewer who watches the play to imagine something that is not there. It was not about a political theater that tells this truth to power, instead it indicates what is invisible, intentionally hidden. We therefore concluded that violence must be fully shown. The performance has consequently become extremely brutal. It was full of brutal images of killed animals. And

people. It was very literal. Something that would be difficult to show--monstrous photos of monstrous crimes--we included here in the staging, because this is something that no one will see. Normally in the theater we would say: why be so shocking?--here we were truly shocking.

Do you regret that original production that you and the ensemble didn't finish? Which one would have been better?

That's a good question. I would love to stage Sophocles' *Teenagers from Trachis* one day.

3.

Today Beuys's slogan "everyone is an artist" has again become widespread. In fact, it's just the opposite: today nobody is an artist. It's impossible. The meaning of this slogan, contained in institutional criticism, remains in force. We are waiting impatiently for a return to "normalcy"--but maybe it's worth using this time to re-evaluate? I was thinking, for example, of inspirations from conceptual art: I can realize the craziest idea. Impossible and potential projects. And I don't need an institution or money for this. My project does not have to materialize--which does not mean that it will not have a real effect. What do you think? Has the pandemic changed anything in your thinking?

For me, the change is that I listen less to philosophers, humanists, and more to scientists who deal with epidemiology. My considerations of Žižek or Sloterdijk about coronavirus seem boring to me, in this situation they only see confirmation of their own theses. Scientists and epidemiologists give specific information. That seems to me much more interesting today.

But is there, for example, a production that you can only realize now--precisely because you can't realize any production? You've always dreamed about it and finally you have the opportunity.

You know, I've already had such experiences behind me. *Chopin Without Piano. Forefathers' Eve* without cuts. *Salomea's Silver Dream* without actors--that is, with one actor, myself. And this production of *The Women of Trachis*--without actors and without spectators--is a kind of end point to this path of reflection on absences.

Yes, but you had to work hard on this production, you had to realize it. You encountered a number of limitations: technological and human. And you could do a performance in spite of those limits. Now has come such a time. The craziest idea that comes to your mind.

I don't enjoy it. Spectators--although absent from the theater, although they are not in the audience--are necessary for me. Audience members like you.

That's right, I'm not talking about a production for the desk drawer, but instead one "produced" and "presented" on different terms. Does this mean that this is an experience with no consequences for your work?

This is not the case. I think that the measurable effect is that I got used to working with the media. I am now ready to work with media more. I imagine a production in which there are no actors--but I use the media, pictures, and a script made by computers and machines. I am interested in this as an option. This is, of course, a new situation, but we must remember that during Shakespeare's life, theaters were closed twice because of the plague, and for about two

years. These things happen. This is not the end of the world and this is not the end of the theater.

As you say, this is not the end of theater, and that is sad for me. In the sense that this is not the end of the theater or the world as we know it, and therefore not a chance to start something different.

I think it's megalomania that we want to participate in some ultimately crucial moment. As I said, theater is an art form that has existed as long as humanity has existed, it is very primitive, it belongs to humanity, so this theater that we know--in the sense that someone performs and someone else watches--belongs to us as human beings, and so never changes.

You are indeed a conservative.

Why?

A reference to sources, to what is human, universal, to what always is. And this hope, this joy that nothing will change.

Well... It reminds me of a situation, probably from Artaud, that during a plague someone starts dancing like crazy without reason, and others look at them without understanding, and that this is the theater...

When this coronavirus story came out, I wrote to the professors at the university who hired me a letter saying how I plan to stage the production. And there I used a quote from Nietzsche, which I always loved: it's true that God died and that we killed him, and that God will remain dead, but still his shadow will be shown in the caves for another thousand years. Well, the theater has died (maybe for a while) and we will now show the shadow of the theater. Then the Chair of the faculty of classical philology, classics, Grace Ledbetter, wrote that for her this idea is very Platonic, reaching back to the sources of European thinking. Of course, Nietzsche himself referred to Plato, to the cave motif, where shadows are shown and pretends that this is reality. The situation of the cave, where there are shadows--this is the situation in which we are living now.

So you think like Plato, and not like Nietzsche, who, however, wanted to get rid of these shadows.

Yeah. Nietzsche would like to kill God once and for all. I am also in favor of killing God. But now I am happy to show these shadows... You know, for years I wrote and practiced something completely different. I bet on popular theater. I thought--I think--that a theater that does not attract hundreds, thousands of viewers is not needed by anyone. My last major production in Poland, *Die Fledermaus*, was played during the year in six runs, always to a full house, always with euphoric reactions. This is my biggest commercial success. I enjoyed it very much, I did not treat it as something lesser. I loved this audience and this joy. I think I gave viewers something very beautiful. It was a popular theater I'd really like to do. In *Didaskalia* you wrote that it was not a work of political theater--as if I had ever promised that. There was no review at all in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. When it comes to criticism, this production did not exist, but it has had great success with audiences. This is a direction that really interests me. I think it is something that should be done in the theater. And now I have created the opposite of this: *The Women of Trachis*, a performance for no one, considered by specialists and connoisseurs.