

**Beata Popczyk-Szczęсна**

University of Silesia in Katowice

ORCID: 0000-0001-8924-8093

# Performed Biography, or the Playing Onstage (with) the Archive of the Life of an Actress A Case Study

## Abstract

This article deals with the issue of representation of biography in theater plays in which an individual life course forms a basis for the re-creational efforts. Among the latest often autothematic performances inspired by biographical material and oscillating between fact and fiction, a form known as *performed biography* can be identified. This article presents the play *Wielce Szanowna Pani* (Dear Madam, dir. Martyna Peszko, Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, 2020), inspired by the biography

of actress Halina Mikołajska and set in the poetics of playing (with) the archive, as representative of such a performance. The performance of Mikołajska's biography onstage draws upon the use of archival documents and film, literary works, and the performers' autothematic utterances and actions, as well as audience interaction. In this way, the fragmentary re-creation of an individual biography and personal and general reflections on the ethical and emotional challenges faced by a stage artist are intertwined. The analysis of the play centers around the concept of reenactment, introduced by Rebecca Schneider to refer to practices of recalling the past, in which the affective act of reconstructing history is simultaneously a creation of the performers' personal utterances.

### Keywords

biography, archive, performativity, autothematism, reenactment

### Abstrakt

#### **Biografia performowana, czyli sceniczna gra (z) archiwum życia aktorki: Studium przypadku**

Artykuł dotyczy kwestii reprezentacji biografii w sztukach teatralnych, w których bieg życia jednostki stanowi podstawę zabiegów re-kreacyjnych. Wśród najnowszych przedstawień inspirowanych materiałem biograficznym, często autotematycznych, które oscylują między fikcją i faktografią, wyróżniono typ określony jako biografia performowana. Jako reprezentatywny przykład takiego przedstawienia wybrano spektakl *Wielce Szanowna Pani* (reż. Martyna Peszko, Teatr Polski w Bydgoszczy, 2020) inspirowany biografią aktorki Haliny Mikołajskiej i utrzymany w poetyce gry (z) archiwum. Sceniczne performowanie biografii Mikołajskiej odbywa się dzięki wykorzystaniu dokumentacji pisanej i filmowej, utworów literackich, autotematycznych wypowiedzi i zachowań wykonawczyń oraz interakcji z publicznością. Dzięki temu fragmentaryczna re-kreacja jednostkowej biografii spleta się z osobistymi i ogólnymi refleksjami o etycznych i emocjonalnych wyzwaniach wpisanych w zawód artystki scenicznej. Podstawą analizy przedstawienia jest pojęcie *reenactment* wprowadzone przez Rebekkę Schneider na określenie tych praktyk przywołania przeszłości, w których afektywny akt rekonstrukcji historii jest jednocześnie kreacją osobistej wypowiedzi wykonawców.

### Słowa kluczowe

biografia, archiwum, performatywność, autotematyzm, reenactment

---

The theory of biography already has a considerable history. The diachronically ordered treatises on biographical writings not only show the evolution of this form of expression (conditioned by the variability of social and rhetorical models of representing an individual life course), but also depict and analyze the changes in the manner of representation of an individual life through the written word. Whereas in the past, from around the start of the 20th century, authors of works of this type concentrated on the biographer's duties relating to the selection and ordering of facts and on formal divisions within the growing and highly diverse biographical studies,<sup>1</sup> in the present day, approximately from around the turn of the 21st century the focus has been more on genre diversity, the borderline nature of the form and the issue of reception, in particular the various possibilities of positioning (oneself by) the reader in the act of reading a biographical work.<sup>2</sup> In a general sense, the scholarly discourse on biographical studies devotes a great deal of space to analyzes of biographies in terms of “a blurred genre” and to personalistic approaches related to them. The concept of a “biographical relation” developed under the latter approach,<sup>3</sup> having emerged in the process of redefining the creation and reception of biography as a form of meeting the Other, regardless of the way in which the two orders on which a biographical work is founded—that is, the empirical order and the textual order—operate. What is fundamental to biographical writing is “the referential pact”<sup>4</sup> which connects addresser and addressee of a work in the belief that the picture of life being offered up adequately reflects the facts and documented sources, without obscuring the creative and sometimes even counterfactual aspects of biographical narrative. The expectation of referentiality may involve full acceptance of overt writing strategies that build an effect of the re-creation of someone's life, given that today they both present an act of reading in terms of a symbolic “meeting between the actually ‘present’

<sup>1</sup> See Anita Catek, *Biografia naukowa—od koncepcji do narracji: Interdyscyplinarność, teorie i metody badawcze* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013), 21–44.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Benton, “Biografia teraz i kiedyś,” trans. Anna Pekaniec, *Dekada Literacka*, no. 4/5 (2010): 10–25; Małgorzata Sugiera, “Zgoda co do faktów—pakt biograficzny,” in *Nowe historie 02: Wymowa faktów*, ed. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Dorota Buchwald (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2011), 185–192; Agnieszka Dauksza, “Zmącone wody żywiołu biograficznego: Wstęp redakcyjny,” *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*, no. 2 (2021): 17–23, <https://doi.org/10.26485/zrl/2021/64.2/1>.

<sup>3</sup> Martine Boyer-Weinmann, *La Relation biographique: Enjeux contemporains* (Seysssel: Éditions Champ Vallon, 2005); Ewa Partyga, “O wyższości troski nad prawdą: Dramat w świetle filozofii biografii Adriany Cavarero,” in *Nowe historie 03: Nowe biografie*, ed. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Dorota Buchwald (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2012), 41–44.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu: O autobiografii*, trans. Wincenty Grajewski et al., ed. Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 47.

reader and the ‘present,’ though culturally created, character represented in a biography, who is a textual representation of the ‘absent’ original.”<sup>5</sup>

The feedback between fictionality and factuality, the undecidability inherent in the relation between truth and fiction co-creating the effect of reality, and the associated oscillation between representation as a projection of things and representation as their substitution<sup>6</sup> are the distinguishing features of contemporary biographical literature (in its many variants). A similar markedness of the process of making present/recreating someone else’s life can also be seen in other artistic practices, especially theatrical ones. Among the numerous examples of stage representations of biographies—created in the process of adaptation of a completed biographical work or as part of team work on a script based on different source materials—it is possible to identify a group of plays in which the factual material is openly and intentionally counterpointed by fiction. The observation of the style and work of producers of such stage projects leads to the conclusion that their activities are close both to the views held by empiricists, who wish to see a record of an individual’s life experiences in a biography, and those of constructivists, who perceive biographical narratives to be the result of a reconstruction of the past enriched with fiction. Driven by “an archival impulse,”<sup>7</sup> the creators of performances of this type play with the use of archival materials, undermining the static and ordered nature of a set of documents; in other words, they play (with) the archive—often “out of a desire to formulate counter-histories alternative to official history.”<sup>8</sup> Theatrical engagement in playing (with) the biographical archive, understood in this sense, will be the object of reflection of this article.

## 1.

Biography-inspired plays in Polish drama from the first two decades of the 21st century fit within a broader trend of artistic activities related to recreating the past, in which a combination of several key interdependent tendencies can be seen. Theatrical updates of pieces of various biographies marked with fragmentariness and autothematism and directors’ gestures of representation of “an individual life

---

<sup>5</sup> Anita Catek, “Biografia jako reprezentacja,” *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Folia 207, Studia Poetica* (2016): 38, <http://hdl.handle.net/11716/8307>.

<sup>6</sup> See Michał Paweł Markowski, “O reprezentacji,” in *Kulturowa teoria literatury: Główne pojęcia i problemy*, ed. Michał Paweł Markowski and Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), 287–333.

<sup>7</sup> See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October*, no. 110 (2004): 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>.

<sup>8</sup> Magdalena Rewerenda, *Performatywne archiwum teatru: Konsekwencje “Nie-Boskiej Komedii. Szczątków” Olivera Frlijicia* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2020), 20.

course” reflect not only “a biographical fever”<sup>9</sup> characteristic of contemporary culture, but also a growing interest in the archive as an object of creation and the process of performatization of theater. These three phenomena determine, to a large extent, the direction of the stage practitioners’ activities and the poetics of the performances, which become not so much a stage version of a given character’s life as a performance concerning the creation of biography. The metatheatrical and processual aspect of such theater work serves to emphasize the heterogeneous nature of stage narrative. The, artistic message becomes an overtly theatrical play of many references: to the character’s *bios*, that is, an individual’s life course available in mediation (thanks to the material testimonies of someone’s existence); to *logos*, that is, the existing meanings preserved in various biographical records; to *spectatores*, that is, the audience comparing their ideas and knowledge about the individual to a stage version of his or her life; and to the very creators (*creatores*) of the performance, who—inspired by the Other—often prepare performances which are also about themselves. The accumulation of such references during the process of preparing the performance and in real-time during the performance itself makes it possible to see contemporary (para)biographical plays as performed biographies, made available in fragments on the basis of a combination of factual material and fabulation, in the atmosphere of “a game with vestiges,” in a specific stage activity with the use of archives. These performances can be analyzed in terms of the concept of reenactment introduced by Rebecca Schneider:<sup>10</sup>

Reenactment determines the participants’ behavior and actions, fills them with enthusiasm, but is always unfaithful to the past. It disrupts the course of an apparently known story in many ways, which is in fact the performers’ personal story repeatedly played/told, and belonging to them—with all its repetitive falsifications, simulations, errors, anachronisms.<sup>11</sup>

Among biography-inspired plays—as the subject matter, pretext and object of stage representation—accounts of male and female artists (persons of letters and/or theater) occupy a special place. The practice of reenactment combines with autothematism in performances that fall into the pattern of performed biographies described above. Pieces of an individual’s life or existing material traces of

<sup>9</sup> See François Dosse, *Le pari biographique: Écrire une vie* (Paris: La Découverte/Poche, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Pozostaje performans*, trans. Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Dobrochna Ratajczakowa, “Splot czasów: Teatr, performans i odtworzenia,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 70, no. 3 (2021): 191, <https://doi.org/10.36744/pt.836>.

his or her existence are frequently enriched with a metatheatrical commentary which relates to the actual process of creating the performance on the basis of biographical data (offering many different perspectives on a specific person) or to the condition of the creative individual themselves (where biographical references are of a parabolic and pretextual nature). Sometimes even the very titles suggest the discursive potential of such drama relating to the process of presenting a biography or to the strategies of capturing an individual course of life in various narratives of (real and symbolic) power. Examples include *Komornicka. Biografia pozorna* (Komornicka. The Ostensible Biography) by Bartosz Frąckowiak and Weronika Szczawińska from the Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz (opening night 9 March 2012); *Sienkiewicz Superstar (czyli zupełnie spóźniona anegdota biograficzna na chwalebny okazję odzyskania niepodległości)* (Sienkiewicz Superstar or a Far Too Late Biographical Anecdote for the Glorious 100th Anniversary of Regaining Independence) by Jan Czapliński and Aneta Groszyńska from Jerzy Szaniawski Dramatic Theater in Wałbrzych (opening night 23 February 2018), or *Autobiografia na wszelki wypadek* (An Autobiography Just in Case) by Michał Buszewicz from the Łaźnia Nowa Theater in Cracow (opening night 6 December 2020). However, here I intend to discuss another theater project that combines many characteristic features of contemporary biographical plays, and is therefore an excellent example of acting (with) biography. *Wielce Szanowna Pani* (Dear Madam) from the Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, directed by Martyna Peszko, is a play that attracts attention due to its theatricality, performativity and affectivity in reenacting aspects of the life of actress Halina Mikołajska.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.

The act of performing Mikołajska's biography started even before the Bydgoszcz performance was completed. As part of the *Nikt mnie nie zna* (Nobody Knows Me) series of play readings in the Theatrical Institute in Warsaw, a reading of a typescript of "Wiosna 1966" (Spring 1966) from Halina Mikołajska's private archive was held.<sup>13</sup> The project gave rise to the idea of a play in the form of an autothematic performance by three actresses: Dorota Landowska, Małgorzata Trofimiuk, and Małgorzata Witkowska. Its shape was influenced by a number of

<sup>12</sup> *Wielce Szanowna Pani* [Dear Madam], dir. Martyna Peszko, dramaturgy Justyna Lipko-Konieczna, scen. Oskar Dawicki, opening night February 22, 2020, Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz.

<sup>13</sup> *Scena niepodległych kobiet—Wiosna 1966*, June 13, 2019, [https://www.institut-teatralny.pl/2019/06/13/scena-niepodleglych-kobiet-wiosna-1966\\_2019-06-13/](https://www.institut-teatralny.pl/2019/06/13/scena-niepodleglych-kobiet-wiosna-1966_2019-06-13/).



*Wielce Szanowna Pani*, dir. Martyna Peszko, Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, 2020

factors: the fascination of the creators of the performance with Mikołajska; a desire to rise to the challenge of representing fragments of the life of a well-known actress who experienced the hardships of her profession; the consequences of social involvement and illness; and finally, a strong need for self-reflection on the condition of a woman / stage artist. The performance on the small stage of the Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz is set in the poetics of the playing (with) the archive: pieces of Mikołajska's life are reconstructed using archival documents and film, quotes from dramatic works and the three modern actresses' interaction with audience.

The script was based on documents of Mikołajska's life—her diaries, letters relating to resignation from work or employment in theaters, letters from audience members, and audiovisual materials (voice-overs, frames of selected stage roles, the actress's utterances recorded on film). Mikołajska is the main protagonist of the stage narrative and, from the perspective of the producers of the play, also a character that the performers must face aided by “texts of her life” in front of an audience. Among the significant verbal materials used in the performance



*Wielce Szanowna Pani*, dir. Martyna Peszko, Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, 2020

are excerpts from Mikołajska's "Wiosna 1966," a peculiar confession of a mature actress written when she was convalescing from surgery—so at a time when her professional activities were suspended—and colored with an extraordinary touch of insight and self-irony.<sup>14</sup> What is striking is the deep self-awareness of the female artist, who draws uncompromising conclusions about her creative condition and also makes a reckoning with the profession of an actress—both from a personal perspective, when she mentions the beginnings of her career and her significant roles, and in more general terms, when she makes cynical comments on personal conflicts in the theater community and offers remarks on the status of actresses in society and the formation of their public image both in the past and at the time of the People's Republic of Poland. Mikołajska's observations, derived from facts, resemble essayistic writing in their emotional and stylistic content, and gain

<sup>14</sup> Halina Mikołajska, "Wiosna 1966," in *(Nie)świadomość teatru: Wypowiedzi i rozmowy*, selected and ed. Joanna Krakowska (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszeńskiego, 2018).



credibility thanks to their extreme honesty, in which she does not spare herself. She writes about the reasons she chose her profession and her relationship with audiences, but primarily, with self-irony, she reveals the foundations of her life and artistic activity, that is, self-love and a desire to be admired.

Excerpts from “Wiosna 1966” are used in scene III of the play *Wielce Szanowna Pani*. Quotes from a diary, isolated from the original context and repeated by the actresses in the manner of a chorus, give the impression of sententious generalizations:

DOROTA: Let me say it openly, I took up the theater not to love, but to be loved.

GOSIA T: Let me say it openly, I took up the theater not to love, but to be loved.

MAŁGOSIA: Let me say it openly, I took up the theater not to love, but to be loved.

DOROTA: Again, it is no small thing to offer people an opportunity to love . . .

GOSIA T: You’ve got my most attractive, though not always the best “parts” of person, soul and body, watch my hands, legs, neck, head, and I will carefully cover what cannot amaze or even interest you.

MAŁGOSIA: I will confide to you what is unworthy in the form of admirable suffering. I will give myself to you in all my mediocrity. But I don’t love you, I dislike you because I must win you over.

GOSIA T: But I don’t love you, I dislike you because I must win you over.

DOROTA: If I loved you, I’d join a convent and pray for forgiveness for you, I’d dress your wounds anonymously, I wouldn’t suffer when you are not won over and when you can’t stand me, I’d simply be truly disinterested.

MAŁGOSIA: I don’t love art, either. If what I do is art at all, I treat it as a tool that will enable me to win your love and admiration.<sup>15</sup>

The phrases from the diary, delivered by the performers in a demonstrative rather than illusive style—“in one tone, with a slight distance, without outplaying the text

<sup>15</sup> Archive of the Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, Martyna Peszko and Justyna Lipko-Konieczna, *Wielce Szanowna Pani*, script of performance, computerscript, 2–3.

or emphasizing individual passages”<sup>16</sup>—set the basic tone for the stage message. They direct the audience’s attention not only to a specific individual biography, but also to the specificity of the life of actresses, who operate in a constant tension between “to be” (*être*) and “to seem” (*paraître*). Mikołajska continuously experienced tension of that type. Given her social bent (“The world in which she lived interested, worried and distressed her”, as Joanna Krakowska notes in the actress’s biography<sup>17</sup>), the inner conflict between privacy and public image intensified in direct proportion to the degree of her involvement in opposition activities at the time of the People’s Republic of Poland and was a significant factor determining her career and life choices. It is no surprise that the experience of “a dichotomous condition” is the leitmotif of many of her utterances,<sup>18</sup> in particular in the case of the text “Wiosna 1966,” which was a major inspiration for the producers of *Wielce Szanowna Pani*. Since the text also includes the theme of the interpenetration of the material and the work (that is, actor and interpreted work of art), the play staged in Bydgoszcz can be seen as a personal message from the artists (three performers and director—who is also an actress). As Mikołajska wrote:

Unfortunately, co-creation is one of the rudimentary laws of theater, as is the interpenetration of the material and the work itself, which is not entirely thrown outside. My body is the material and also a co-creator, it will never break away from the work (just as a painting from the painter or a symphony from the composer), it will be connected with it at every moment of “creation” and temporary duration, if my body suddenly changes, the work itself, depending on these changes, will take on a different expression, and maybe even meaning.<sup>19</sup>

The biographical subject matter of the play, inspired by Mikołajska’s life, combined with the three actresses’ playing style, makes it possible to describe this type of theater as stage performance in which a constant shift in the perspective of message occurs. The performance Landowska, Trofimiuk, and Witkowska created on the basis of archival materials surprises the viewer with its authenticity and subjectivity of expression, thanks to the contiguity, or even similarity, of experiences of women

<sup>16</sup> Katarzyna Lemańska, “Aktorka: Osoba prywatna i publiczna,” *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, no. 156 (2020), <https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artukul/aktorka-osoba-prywatna-i-publiczna>.

<sup>17</sup> Joanna Krakowska, *Mikołajska: Teatr i PRL* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WA.B., 2011), 221.

<sup>18</sup> See Halina Mikołajska, “Aktor jako osoba prywatna i aktor jako osoba publiczna,” in *Świadomość teatru: Polska myśl teatralna drugiej połowy xx wieku*, ed. Wojciech Dudzik (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007), 410–413.

<sup>19</sup> Mikołajska, “Wiosna 1966,” 251.

from different generations who are all nevertheless representatives of the same artistic profession. *Wielce Szanowna Pani* can therefore be considered an example of performed biography. The stage activities were composed as a continuous repetition of a few threads of Mikołajska's life supplemented with the performers' soliloquies, in which they share with the audience their own stage experiences and reflections on the status of the actress in public life. The basic staging concept is therefore based on the phenomenon of osmosis consisting in the interpenetration of different space–times and building analogies of emotions and life experiences of the character–actress and actresses–characters. The process of representation of biography takes place in each subsequent resumption/act on stage—it is not only Mikołajska's biography, but a biography of a stage actress as a person exposed to the gaze and evaluation of audience, confronted with criticism, dependent on her own desires and obsessions. The theatrical figure of that actress is created by four women: Mikołajska present on the stage in mediated form (through written records and on the screen) and the three performers acting here and now in front of the audience. As a result, two aspects of representation, “which substitutes what it represents and at the same time makes it present,”<sup>20</sup> combine and affect each other in the play. The complexity of the message arises from the nuances between the making-present and substitutive nature of the staged biographical narrative.

Playing (with) the archive, or the “collection of remains distant from the mythologized completeness,”<sup>21</sup> is possible thanks to the application of two measures: the performatization of theater and the combination of various materials and interpenetrating conceptual planes of the message in a palimpsest narrative. The prominence given in *Wielce Szanowna Pani* to the situation of representation, combined with the focus on the actresses' presence and specific actions and the openness of their play, offer a clear example of the performatization of theater, which consists—as Marco De Marinis argues—in the prevalence of elements of “self-referential presence and materiality over the elements of the staging: a fictional plot and referential meaning.”<sup>22</sup> The palimpsest nature of the message is pursued thanks to the alternation and parallelism of threads that function on the basis of feedback and counterpoint or complement each other. Apart from the aforementioned records of Mikołajska's life and the actresses' utterances about themselves, their own professional experiences and relations with audiences, the

---

<sup>20</sup> Markowski, “O reprezentacji,” 290.

<sup>21</sup> Ratajczakowa, “Splot czasów,” 195.

<sup>22</sup> Marco De Marinis, “Performans i teatr: Od aktora do performer a i z powrotem?” trans. Ewa Bał, in *Performans, performatywność, performer: Próby definicji i analizy krytyczne*, ed. Ewa Bał and Wanda Świątkowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013), 33.

palimpsest structure of the play is co-created by dialogues of the characters of *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov and *Mary Stuart* by Friedrich Schiller, as well as pieces of Jacek Kaczmarski's songs and stills from a newsreel of the People's Republic of Poland. The performing of Mikołajska's biography on the stage takes place by virtue of the parallelism/simultaneity of the verbal, sound and visual narrative. Some more detailed remarks on the course of the performance are presented below.

### 3.

*Wielce Szanowna Pani* starts with a scene depicting the actresses warming up, as they introduce the audience into the space of play by doing a series of bends, flexes and stretches, rhythmic gestures and movements, including sticking to the ground. During their exercise and dance routine, they talk about acting and the pressures and challenges of their profession:

MAŁGOSIA: The ills and problems of contemporary acting?

An actor's role is a one-off, unique fruit of a given moment. After many years (let alone decades), no one can say who was wrong here; the actor who created a given role, or the audience who did not receive it.

GOSIA T: Some communities, certain cities, specific groups of audience create, at least around an actor who has gained a certain position, an atmosphere of warm kindness. This is the case, for example, in Krakow. The local audience places great trust in the actor. Warsaw seems much cooler to me, Warsaw is insensitive, it reaches out to fashion, not to an artist.

DOROTA: The specificity of the acting profession in the theater creates a state of constant tension. Because victory can be dearly paid and defeat becomes an unrepairable evil, everyone feels threatened. Often mutually threatened. And yet we are all "doomed" to constant cooperation. Nothing is achieved in isolation; all is done through cooperation. Literal, physical, and imaginative cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>Peszko and Lipko-Konieczna, *Wielce Szanowna Pani*, 1.



*Wielce Szanowna Pani*, dir. Martyna Peszko, Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, 2020

The actresses' activities, accompanied by Tarantella music, as specified in the script,<sup>24</sup> bring associations not only with physical exercises being part of actor training, but also with the behavior of tarantist girls who, through the medium of dance, release their fears, "giving expression to subconscious impulses."<sup>25</sup> A note in the script that "spider-girls" appear on the stage makes suggests an association of the performers' rhythmical body movements with the cultural symbolism of dance after a tarantula bite "as a mythical-ritual means of revealing, discharging, and solving unresolved mental conflicts that lie in the darkness of the subconscious mind."<sup>26</sup> In turn, the actresses' utterances during the music and dance part highlight the autothematic orientation of the play, which is staged in an aesthetics of performativity. The artistic solutions applied by the creators at the very start

<sup>24</sup> Peszko and Lipko-Konieczna, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ernesto de Martino, "Tarantyzm," trans. Wojciech Marucha, in *Antropologia widowisk: Zagadnienia i wybór tekstów*, ed. Leszek Kolankiewicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2005), 517.

<sup>26</sup> Martino, "Tarantyzm," 518.



*Wielce Szanowna Pani*, dir. Martyna Peszko, Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, 2020

indicate that the process of re-creation of pieces of an individual biography will be strictly connected with a transmission of the performers' affects resulting from the actresses' personal involvement in the content and essence of the stage story.

Landowska, Trofimiuk, and Witkowska appear in single-color costumes—dressed in turn in blue, red, and yellow. Each of them wears a grey wig, bringing to mind Mikołajska's hairdo and cancer. The actresses do not play the part of the protagonist, but they significantly index her behavior as an artist and opposition activist. They address the audience in an equally intriguing way, on the verge of provocation and neurosis—they define their own status in relation to her, treating themselves as tools, objects of view and, simultaneously, narcissistic subjects who crave recognition and admiration. Similarly to *Offending the Audience* by Peter Handke, the performers thematize the situation of the performance: first they charm the audience (at the start of the performance they bring chairs for the spectators), they bow in exaggerated choreographic poses to the rhythm of a pre-recorded applause, and then they ruthlessly articulate dislike of spectators that

arises from the condition of the actress as a “person selling herself” and therefore subject to varying, not always favorable, audience reactions. Mikołajska’s archival utterances or her letters relating to employment contracts in theaters intertwine in those addresses to the audience with the three actresses’ remarks about played or lost roles, which resonate surprisingly well with the excerpts from *Three Sisters* by Chekhov, in particular with Irina’s lines about longing for work. Fiction and fact intertwine, and the resulting heterotopia effect hypnotizes spectators and stimulates their attention.

The dramaturgy of the performance owes a lot to the idea of juxtaposing the scenes taken from dramatic works with records of Mikołajska’s life. Quotes from her letters relating to her role of Queen Elizabeth are woven into excerpts from *Mary Stuart*:

Witkowska reads Mikołajska’s letter to her parents informing them about the emotions before the opening night of the play directed by Erwin Axer (1969). Trofimiuk as Mikołajska-Elizabeth and Landowska as Mary Stuart—passionately getting into character—perform a scene of a confrontation between the Queens from Schiller’s play.<sup>27</sup>

The scene is based on the effects of contrast and counterpoint. The actresses get into character brilliantly, expressing the emotions of their characters, and the illusiveness of their play contrasts with the make-believe nature of the set design: Trofimiuk, as Elizabeth, sits on a chair set on a table next to a sofa with bedclothes laid on it; aprons draped as dresses are the characters’ costumes. Passages of Schiller’s play enter into a contrapuntal relationship with testimonies from Mikołajska’s life: Queen Elizabeth’s position when she condemned Mary Stuart to death for political reasons may be deemed the opposite of the attitude adopted by Mikołajska, who was not willing to compromise, even at the cost of losing her job and criticizing part of the theater community. Mikołajska’s words, delivered by Witkowska, sound highly emphatic at this point in the play:

One thing that comforts me is that I have nothing to reproach myself for in this regard, that I did not use any filth for my own defense, although I could have, that I did not look for any defenders and protectors, I have clean hands, I do not lie and I defend myself only with my work. When I stand firmly on my feet, I will not take revenge, if I ever have a strong position here, I will

---

<sup>27</sup> Lemańska, “Aktorka.”



*Wielce Szanowna Pani*, dir. Martyna Peszko, Polish Theater  
in Bydgoszcz, 2020

only use it to tell a few people in person what I know about them and what I think about them.<sup>28</sup>

In the staged excerpts from *Three Sisters* and *Mary Stuart*, illusiveness combines with the documentary aspect. However, the producers of the performance took care not only of these two dimensions of theatrical message. Building a relationship between actors and the audience through the inclusion of spectators in the act of archive activation is an equally important aspect of creation. In scene x, a very evocative device of “the performatization of vestiges”<sup>29</sup> is adopted: each performer gives selected spectators cards with a request to read its content. These are copies of letters to Mikołajska (in fact, the play’s title

<sup>28</sup> Peszko and Lipko-Konieczna, *Wielce Szanowna Pani*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> See Ratajczakowa, “Splot czasów,” 195.



comes from the heading of one of these letters). The content of the letters—in particular those full of insults—sounds exceptionally painful when articulated by non-professionals: reading aloud unmask the oppressive nature of the correspondence addressed to an actress/woman/opposition activist and written by persons utterly incompetent to give such opinions and also objectified and indoctrinated by communist authorities. The performative dimension of the scene consists not only in enhancing the dramaturgy of recreating the events of the actress' life with the involvement of audience, but it also implies an artistic repetition of the mechanism of violence, which at the time of "Solidarity" gave rise to doublethink and conformist mimicry in people.<sup>30</sup> The letter-reading scene thematizes the problem of oppression and violent behavior towards the actress and performatively updates the example of personal pressure similar to events from the past. Taking part in an enforced performance, the spectators become not only co-participants in the play, but also to a certain extent pawns in a staged demonstration of verbal violence. This performative aspect of the play reflects the ambiguity of roles in the system of dominating and dominated individuals.

The play directed by Martyna Peszko is characterized by a multiplication of content plan and expression plan. The condensation of meanings of the message, marked equally by theatricality and performativity, results not only from an accumulation of stage material—that is, the script as an effect of a compilation of various texts, the actresses' bodies (including representation of the absent character on the screen), the playing with props, which are set on the stage in the course of acting, or, finally, the vocalization of the performance with musical illustrations and singing by the performers. The show also takes the shape of an act of performing a biography due to the changeability and dynamics of forms of expression. *Wielce Szanowna Pani* is a play performed in the form of the actresses addressing the audience; it is a kind of psychodrama in the style of Chekhov's staging, where the performers—in underwear and with bottles in their hands—neurotically recite like a mantra the lines of the characters from *Three Sisters* while intoxicated; it is a rhythmic, repetitive chanting of song lyrics in the musical part that recalls the character-actress's notes; it is also a symbolic message in the form of "a stay in space scene" conceived as representing the chemotherapy Mikołajska underwent during her cancer treatment. The final parts of the play combine three themes pointing to the palimpsest arrangement

---

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Krakowska, *Mikołajska*, 419–431.

of theatrical message. First, the issue of stage role—Halina Mikołajska’ archival words appear on the screen:

stage role . . . this strange product is nobody’s truth, because it’s in part the truth of each of us: the author’s, actor’s, set designer’s, director’s . . . nobody has said all that he wanted here . . . or what he understood because one made it conditional for another, one restricted another . . . gave a prompt, backbit . . . and finally there is something that is nobody’s . . . or something common, and everyone is under the illusion that he has spoken . . . .

Second, the actresses make admissions concerning their dreams and aims (spoken directly to the audience or as a voice-over). Third, human behavior is compared to “pure theater” (with the song *Puero Teatro*, performed by La Lupe). A dance performed by Małgorzata Trofimiuk and a man selected from the audience is the last staged image highlighting the affective dimension of the biography-inspired performance.

If a comparison between the finale and the beginning of the play is made in the context of the aforementioned association with tarantism, then the performance may be closed in a fairly unexpected bracket in its reception. The actress’s dance with a man from the audience can be seen as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation that ends tensions and conflicts, especially in the relation between stage artist and spectator. The biographical and autothematic play *Wielce Szanowna Pani* has the potential of a quasi-ritual community act: it progresses in the form of “an evocation, discharge and removal of specific crisis and conflict contents”<sup>31</sup> to restore a state of balance at the end, which is symbolized by dance. All the artistic devices within the performing of Mikołajska’s biography function in two dimensions. They are an attempt at reenacting the character of the actress on the basis of a paradox—highlighting the inability to gain an insight into a character does not diminish the effectiveness of building a relation with Mikołajska (after her death) through playing with access to sources and the artistic use of archival materials. This is possible primarily because playing (with) the archive of the actress’ life is, as I seek to prove here, an example of performing not only that particular biography but, at the same time, a series of actions/reenactments during which the performers speak and also appear under their own names.

---

<sup>31</sup> Martino, “Tarantyzm,” 526.

## 4.

The stage project *Wielce Szanowna Pani*, based on Halina Mikołajska's life and created by female artists for the Polish Theater in Bydgoszcz, is a representative example of a contemporary (para)biographical performance. In its aesthetics, *Wielce Szanowna Pani* combines two areas of creation: biographical writing and the performative value of a theatrical show. The palimpsest nature of the stage narration and the continuous oscillation between the factual and fictional framework make it possible to see in the poetics of the performance an equivalent of the *faction* strategy, which is typical of contemporary biographical writing. In turn, the prominence given to the order of presence rather than representation in the actors' actions makes this play an example of performed biography, that is, a biographical performance that is created/happens in front of an audience, with full awareness of the heterogeneity of the form and incompleteness of the biographical message. The play is therefore close to creative practices referred to as "reenactment." Its constitutive aspect is formed by the creation of a sort of a snarl of times in the play's space, using the archive as a tool for the establishment of connections between past and present. The affective and autothematic re-creation of biography takes place in "a theater of retroaction"<sup>32</sup>—provided that "the exact reenactment of someone else's fate is less important than an attempt to tell—also by means of fictionalizing trick—a more or less universal story that happened to someone."<sup>33</sup>

*Translated by Marcin Gorgol*



## Bibliography

- Benton, Michael. "Biografia teraz i kiedyś." Translated by Anna Pekaniec. *Dekada Literacka*, no. 4/5 (2010): 10–25.
- Boyer-Weinmann, Martine. *La Relation biographique: Enjeux contemporains*. Seyssel: Éditions Champ Vallon, 2005.
- Całek, Anita. "Biografia jako reprezentacja." *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Folia 207, Studia Poetica* (2016): 25–41. <http://hdl.handle.net/11716/8307>.

<sup>32</sup> Schneider, *Pozostaje performans*, 218.

<sup>33</sup> Justyna Tabaszewska, "Na granicy faktu: Kategoria *faction* w badaniach nad współczesnymi biografiami," *Teksty Drugie*, no. 1 (2019): 78, <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2019.1.5>.

- Całek, Anita. *Biografia naukowa—od koncepcji do narracji: Interdyscyplinarność, teorie i metody badawcze*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013.
- Dauksza, Agnieszka. “Zmącone wody żywiołu biograficznego: Wstęp redakcyjny.” *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*, no. 2 (2021): 17–23. <https://doi.org/10.26485/ZRL/2021/64.2/1>.
- De Marinis, Marco. “Performans i teatr: Od aktora do performerera i z powrotem?” Translated by Ewa Bal. In *Performans, performatywność, performer: Próby definicji i analizy krytyczne*, edited by Ewa Bal and Wanda Świątkowska, 19–40. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013.
- Dosse, François. *Le pari biographique: Écrire une vie*. Paris: La Découverte/Poche, 2011.
- Foster, Hal. “An Archival Impulse.” *October*, no. 110 (2004): 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>.
- Krakowska, Joanna. *Mikołajska: Teatr i PRL*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2011.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu: O autobiografii*. Translated by Wincenty Grajewski, Stanisław Jaworski, Aleksander Labuda, and Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska. Edited by Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska. Kraków: Universitas, 2001.
- Lemańska, Katarzyna. “Aktorka: Osoba prywatna i publiczna.” *Didaskalia*, no. 156 (2020), <https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artukul/aktorka-osoba-prywatna-i-publiczna>.
- Markowski, Michał Paweł. “O reprezentacji.” In *Kulturowa teoria literatury: Głównie pojęcia i problemy*, edited by Michał Paweł Markowski and Ryszard Nycz, 287–333. Kraków: Universitas, 2006.
- Mikołajska, Halina. “Aktor jako osoba prywatna i aktor jako osoba publiczna.” In *Świadomość teatru: Polska myśl teatralna drugiej połowy XX wieku*, edited by Wojciech Dudzik, 407–416. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007.
- Mikołajska, Halina. “Wiosna 1966.” In *(Nie)świadomość teatru: Wypowiedzi i rozmowy*, selected and edited by Joanna Krakowska, 243–255. Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2018.
- Partyga, Ewa. “O wyższości troski nad prawdą: Dramat w świetle filozofii biografii Adriana Cavarero.” In *Nowe historie 03: Nowe biografie*, edited by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Dorota Buchwald, 40–46. Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2012.
- Ratajczakowa, Dobrochna. “Splot czasów: Teatr, performans i odtworzenia.” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 70, no. 3 (2021): 189–202. <https://doi.org/10.36744/pt.836>.
- Rewerenda, Magdalena. *Performatywne archiwum teatru: Konsekwencje “Nie-Boskiej Komедii. Szczątków” Olivera Frljicia*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2020.

Schneider, Rebecca. *Pozostaje performans*. Translated by Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2020.

Sugiera, Małgorzata. "Zgoda co do faktów—pakt biograficzny." In *Nowe historie o2: Wymowa faktów*, edited by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Dorota Buchwald, 185–192. Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2011.

Tabaszewska, Justyna. "Na granicy faktu: Kategoria *faction* w badaniach nad współczesnymi biografiami." *Teksty Drugie*, no. 1 (2019): 61–79. <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2019.1.5>.

### BEATA POPCZYK-SZCZĘSNA

Associate Professor in the Institute of Culture Studies in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Silesia in Katowice. Drama and contemporary theater researcher. Her interests are the theory and practice of reading a dramatic text, the latest Polish stage drama, biography in 21st-century theater, and the issue of experience in literature and performing arts.

---