

Daniel W. Pratt

McGill University

ORCID: 0000-0002-5209-7049

Reimagining Theatre History

Abstract

This article presents the edited volume *A History of Polish Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) as a welcome addition to the growing English-language scholarship on Polish theatre. The reviewer appreciates the editors and contributors' strategy to make the past intelligible through the present. He emphasizes that this strategy contributed to developing a coherent set of articles dedicated to a wide range of topics. As a new source in English, the book will be immensely valuable, both for students and for those interested in finding out more about specific themes in Polish theatre. The scholarship is fresh, and the articles demonstrate connections of the past to the present, emphasizing the importance of each era, not in service to the narrative of progress but rather in Benjamin's constellation metaphor. The reviewer further notes that the book assumes some knowledge of Polish theatre, Polish culture, and Polish history from the beginning. He argues that the book will therefore not serve as

a complete replacement for more traditional histories but rather contributing to the reimagining of how to tell them.

Keywords

history of Polish theatre, historiography

Abstrakt

Nowe spojrzenie na historię teatru

Artykuł stanowi recenzję tomu *A History of Polish Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). Recenzent docenia wkład autorów i redaktorów w anglojęzyczne badania dotyczące polskiego teatru i wysoko ocenia ich strategię polegającą na próbie zrozumienia przeszłości za pośrednictwem teraźniejszości. Podkreśla, że w jej rezultacie udało się stworzyć spójny, a zarazem szeroko zakrojony tematycznie zbiór artykułów. Jako nowe anglojęzyczne źródło wiedzy książka będzie cenna zarówno dla studentów, jak i czytelników zainteresowanych konkretnymi aspektami historii polskiego teatru. Opracowanie jest oryginalne, artykuły uwypuklają związki przeszłości z teraźniejszością, podkreślając znaczenie każdego okresu nie w ramach narracji akcentującej postęp, ale za pomocą Benjaminowskiej metafory konstelacji. Recenzent zauważa ponadto, że książka od początku zakłada pewną znajomość polskiego teatru, polskiej kultury i polskiej historii. Przekonuje, że w związku z tym nie zastąpi tradycyjnych historii, lecz raczej uświadomi potrzebę, by na nowo wyobrazić sobie, w jaki sposób je opowiadać.

Słowa kluczowe

historia polskiego teatru, historiografia

Katarzyna Fazan, Michal Kobialka, and Bryce Lease, eds.
A History of Polish Theatre

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022)

Cambridge University Press's *A History of Polish Theatre* adds to their growing list of national and regional theatre histories, and the book is a welcome addition to the expanding English-language scholarship on Polish theatre. With the translation of Dariusz Kosiński's *Performing Poland*, Bryce Lease's own *After '89: Polish Theatre and the Political*, and the continuing work of Michal Kobialka, Beth Holmgren, Halina Filipowicz, and Tamara Trojanowska, we are living through an exciting moment in English-language scholarship about Polish theatre, increasing both the breadth and depth of academic works dedicated to the understudied field.

Although the book is titled *A History of Polish Theatre*, it is by no means a traditional history, that is, a text that moves chronologically through performances, plays, and productions, relying on key moments to flesh out a historical narrative of development. Instead, the editors, and clearly the contributors as well,

wish to move away from strictly devised forms of periodization [to] build historical narratives through “constellations,” a direct reference to Benjamin, who constructed novel conceptions of historical time and historical intelligibility based on the relationship of the past and the present.¹

The text takes Benjamin's challenge seriously, trying to show the connections between the past and the present, to make the past intelligible through the present, relying not on historicism, that is a claim to a positivist history, but on the interpretation of the importance of the historical past to the present moment, to the current epoch. Even the articles dedicated to the earliest periods in Polish theatre, to “Staropolska,” contain references to contemporary performances, demonstrating the links between the then and the now.

The book also problematizes the term “Polish,” again destabilizing the certainty of the title. The editors have made a conscious effort to

¹ Katarzyna Fazan, Michal Kobialka, Bryce Lease, eds., *A History of Polish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 6, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108619028>. All further quotations from this book are provided in parentheses.

extend the discursive limits of Polish national and cultural identity, placing at risk any implicit shoring up of ethno-nationalism that delimit, for example, the participation of ethnic minorities in the production of a national culture. (2)

This emphasis can be seen as a direct response to Dariusz Kosiński's *Performing Poland*, which was critiqued in a review in this journal because "it effectively supports rather than questions the nineteenth-century romantic notion of a unified Polish identity."² Instead of centering the "Polishness" of the theatre, *A History of Polish Theatre* presents a more intertextual understanding of Polishness, both within what has been traditionally construed as Polish, but also, most prominently, with the relation to Lithuanian, Russian, German, and English theatre. The focus lies on the lines that connect old Poland to new, Yiddish-language theatre to Polish-language theatre, Shakespeare's plays to Polish performances, wartime spaces to contemporary theatrical practices. What makes Polish theatre in these pages is not any static identity, but rather a particular network of connections, a particular constellation to refer back to Benjamin.

The result is a collection of twenty eight articles, written by thirty authors (not counting the introduction), that make connections between theatres, actors, plays, and performances from Old Poland to the present moment in a variety of methodological angles. The articles are divided into fourteen sections, most with two articles, that vary between periodical and thematic organization. Many collections with such a large number of authors and methodologies fall into the trap of unrelated articles without any interconnections, but in this case the editors and contributors have avoided this pitfall. Even without direct references to other articles in the collection, the editors have done a tremendous job of ensuring an even style, broad coverage of material, and minimal repetition.

The first chapter, "Where is Poland? What is Poland," contains two articles that set the tone for the entire work. The cultural critic Krzysztof Zajas begins the book with a dialectical history of Polish culture, with several sets of oppositions:

openness versus closedness, neighbourly kindness versus xenophobia, civil rights versus slave serfdom, religious tolerance versus pyres for heretics, freedom for the notions of Europe versus fierce fights against Ukrainian independence movements, the bulwark of Western Christendom versus the reluctance of the "rotten West." (16)

² S. E. Wilmer, "Performing 'Polishness,'" *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 70, no. 2 (2021): 168.

For him, there is no single Polish culture, but rather a polyphony of voices, and the task of the contemporary cultural historian is to ensure those previously ignored can find their rightful place in the choir. Dorota Sajewska focuses on the postcolonial interpretations of Polish cultural history, showing how Poland has been both colonizer and colonized. She focuses on two performances that demonstrate this dual perspective, Grotowski's production of Wyspiański's *Hamlet Study* in 1964 and Zygmunt Hübner's 1961 production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. In looking at the latter in particular, Sajewska points towards a new, more complicated history of power structures in Poland against the more traditionalist one in the work of Zbigniew Raszewski. In opening the book with these two texts, the editors make clear their intention to decenter the triumphalist, messianic, and martyrological narratives of Polish culture.

The next three chapters turn to more traditional periodical organization: "Staropolski Theatre," "The Public Stage and the Enlightenment," and "Romanticism." The first two articles about Old Poland from Agnieszka Marszałek and Mirosław Kocur are perhaps the most traditional histories in the book, but even they do not merely tell a story about the origins of Polish theatre. Marszałek draws links from late medieval plays to Reduta and Wyspiański and from religious texts to reinterpretations by Kazimierz Dejmek and Piotr Cieplak. Kocur broadens the forms of performance to include courtly gestures and religious rituals, blurring the lines between the theatre and the real. Piotr Olkusz and Dobrochna Ratajczakowa address the development of the theatre under Poniatowski and its lasting effects on the stage. Both authors take on the mythology of the Poniatowski era, questioning the actual effects of the Enlightenment project, while simultaneously reinforcing the myths resonances. Włodzimierz Szturc and Zbigniew Majchrowski examine the Romantics, with Majchrowski dedicating his article to Mickiewicz and his influence entirely. Both authors undermine the grand Messianic myths of the Romantic era dramatists, while broadening their set of influences and influence. All six of these authors have emphasized not only the development of Polish theatre in Polish and in Poland but also the international element to these eras. Old Poland was not a monolithically Polish space, and due treatment is given to other European texts. Both Olkusz and Ratajczakowa deal with the German and French influence on the development of the Polish stage. For Szturc,

Juliusz Słowacki, Zygmunt Krasiński and Cyprian Kamil Norwid's Romantic dramas were in fact an interpretation of dialectical thought, which grew out of an encounter with long-gone cultures (ancient Rome, Sparta, Mycenae, Argos, Egypt) or those consumed, in the 1830s, by the erosion of lofty, though utopian visions of modern civilization (Paris, London). (101)

Majchrowski, on the other hand, connects Mickiewicz to the distinctly multicultural Polish past, incorporating old Lithuanian and Byelorussian themes. The Romantics, then, instead of embodying a purely Polish culture, were always already multicultural, even if they are not taken as such.

The book changes tactics to look at Jewish theatre, Polish theatre in Vilnius, German Theatre, and Shakespeare in Poland in two chapters titled "Mapping Theatre" I and II. Alyssa Quint and Michael Steinlauf delicately weave the story of Jewish theatre in Poland with the broader story of Polish theatre, showing the intersections and independent movements. There is always a danger of subsuming Jewish theatre into the story of Polish theatre when Jewish theatre is discussed in the context of Polish theatre, but Quint and Steinlauf deftly avoid this pitfall. Martynas Petrikas challenges the narratives of theatre in both the Lithuanian and Polish tradition about Vilnius, and his article, a theoretical standout in this text, imagines Polish theatre in a place of multiplicities and interactions. Małgorzata Leyko provides a history of German theatre in Poland, with its beginnings in the late medieval era, moving to contemporary partnerships between Poland and Germany, thus indicating a long-standing interaction between the two traditions. Aleksandra Sakowska understands Shakespeare not only as an English author, but also as a member of the global canon of the theatre, allowing her to contextualize Polish theatre in a global context. All four articles tell a microhistory of Polish theatre and its interactions with other traditions, emphasizing the ties that bind.

The second half of the text returns to a more periodical structure with three chapters dedicated to modernism, the avant-garde, and the Second World War. Katarzyna Fazan examines the birth of modernism in Poland as a sociological and intellectual revolution with lasting reverberations to the present moment, while Dorota Jarząbek-Wasył points to the new methods in theatre production, direction, acting, and participation. Both articles set the stage for a second half of the book, with modernism forming something of a break between the two sections of the text. Agnieszka Jelewska and Anna R. Burzyńska pick up from the previous chapters and read the influence of the avant-garde on Polish theatre to the contemporary moment. Jelewska points to the engaged political theatre that begins with the early avant-garde projects and charts its movements beyond the scope of the theatrical space and into the world, where the separations between theatrical act, performance art, and real life blur and merge. Burzyńska focuses on the development of sound both in the theatre and beyond as a source of inspiration for performances, deconstructing the *logos* of the theatre in the process. Justyna Biernat and Karolina Czerska show the connections between the wartime and the post-war theatre, instead of conceptualizing the era as a breakage. Each

of these articles provides what may be understood as a breaking point, a rupture in the Polish tradition, but instead of seeing them as such, in this new style of historical investigation, they become another part of the constellation.

The book then turns to a set of thematic chapters, on political and ritual theatre. Although these chapters focus primarily on work since Poland regained independence after World War I, they still reference a longer history of the subject matter. Joanna Krakowska examines the actual political effects of certain performances, paying attention to how the theatre affects the world outside its walls. Grzegorz Niziołek takes a varying approach by focusing on how theatre performances engaged, or rather *not* engaged, with politics, creating what he calls “anti-political rather than political” theatre (282). Kris Salata turns to ritual theatre as established by Juliusz Osterwa with Reduta and then further developed by Jerzy Grotowski and Teatr Laboratorium. Tadeusz Kornaś continues Salata’s article by looking at the lasting influence of the ritual theatre, particularly after Grotowski.

Changing focus to the different contributors to the stage, the next two chapters turn to performers, writers, and dramaturges. Beth Holmgren traces the development of the actor as a persona, acknowledging the tensions between acting talent and the developing stardom of actors in the nineteenth century. Beata Guźalska builds on Holmgren’s article and discusses the development of acting methods, schools, and organizations from the interwar period to the present day. Marek Waszkiel opens the discourse of actor to include puppetry and its history in the Polish lands. Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska traces the most important writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, giving substantial space to women and more contemporary writers. Marcin Kościelniak decenters the director to examine the tensions between the playwright and actors in contemporary Polish theatre through a provocative reading of Paweł Demirski’s 2007 manifesto. In separating out various elements of the theatre, these sections build an alternative method of examining the history of Polish theatre.

The final section, Ontologies, opens the text to the transgressive, non-hierarchical, and feminist potential of the theatre. Krystyna Duniec draws connections between the contemporary avant-garde theatre and the interwar period, showing how transgressive performances repeat instead of progress. She reveals how not only the productions themselves iterate earlier ones, but that the responses mirror each other too. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek traces the male-domination of the theatre up until the turn of the last century, where she finds some hope in the last two decades. Before that point, the few exceptional successes were still so often relegated to marginal or tokenized performances.

A History of Polish Theatre is a remarkable achievement, particularly for developing a coherent set of articles dedicated to a wide range of topics. As a new source in English, it will be immensely valuable, both for students and for those interested in finding out more about specific themes in Polish theatre. I am already thinking about how I can incorporate certain sections into my own teaching, since excerpting articles from this book will be particularly useful. The scholarship is fresh, and the articles demonstrate connections of the past to the present, emphasizing the importance of each era, not in service to the narrative of progress but rather in Benjamin's constellation metaphor.

However, the text will not serve as a complete replacement for other, more traditional histories, because the text assumes some knowledge of Polish theatre, Polish culture, and Polish history from the beginning. Uninitiated readers may find themselves lost in the constellations of the work, losing track of the thread as they read. I suspect the editors themselves know this, since they make no claims to offer *the* history of Polish theatre, but merely *a* history. I doubt it is out of humility that they did so, given the ambitious scope of the text as it is, but out of a genuine realization of the need for a reimagining of how to tell this story. In that task, they have certainly succeeded.



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DANIEL W. PRATT

Assistant Professor of Slavic Culture (Languages, Literatures, and Cultures) at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. He also serves as editor in *Pamiętnik Teatralny*. Working on Central and Eastern European culture, specifically Czech, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, and Austrian, he is broadly interested in the intersection of literature, history, and philosophy.
