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The *Szopka* and Its Strategies of Participation

Gra o Herodzie (A Play on Herod) by
Witold Wandurski

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the work of Witold Wandurski as a form of historical, participatory, and immersive dramatic practice. The main focus is *Gra o Herodzie* (A Play on Herod)—a proletarian carnival—which has been interpreted as a performance actively negotiating with the surrounding socio-cultural environment. The author has explored, using Wandurski's works, how in the interwar period it was possible to create art that reacted to and negotiated with reality, without being strictly interventionist. These reflections have been supplemented with relevant historical contexts regarding the nativity play itself as a performance that has always balanced the tension between the sacred and the profane. The significance of forms such as factomontage, along with other practices relevant to the poetics of Wandurski's works, has also been examined.

In light of these considerations, Wandurski has been presented not only as an active organizer of the first Polish proletarian stage and a writer involved in engaging the workers' milieu, but also as a dramatist who found in dramatic tradition modern tools that shifted attention to the "onlookers," thus making them active participants in the reception process.

Keywords

Witold Wandurski, drama, participatory art, proletarian stage, nativity play

Abstrakt

Szopka i jej strategie partycypacji: *Gra o Herodzie* Witolda Wandurskiego

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie twórczości Witolda Wandurskiego jako formy historycznej, partycypacyjnej i immersyjnej praktyki dramatycznej. Głównym przedmiotem analizy uczyniono *Grę o Herodzie* – proletariacki mięsopust – interpretowany jako performans aktywnie negocjujący z otaczającym go środowiskiem społeczno-kulturowym. Autorka, odwołując się do utworów Wandurskiego, pokazuje, w jaki sposób w dwudziestolecie międzywojennym możliwe było tworzenie sztuki reagującej na rzeczywistość bez jednoczesnego popadania w ścisły interwencjonizm. Rozważania te zostały uzupełnione o istotne konteksty historyczne związane z samą szopką jako formą performatywną, od początku funkcjonującą w napięciu między *sacrum* a *profanum*. Omówiono również znaczenie takich form jak faktomontaż, a także innych praktyk istotnych dla poetyki utworów Wandurskiego. W świetle tych ustaleń Wandurski został ukazany nie tylko jako aktywny organizator pierwszej polskiej sceny proletariackiej i pisarz zaangażowany w pracę ze środowiskiem robotniczym, lecz także jako dramaturg, który w tradycji dramatycznej odnalazł nowoczesne narzędzia przesuujące uwagę ku „patrzącym”, czyniąc ich aktywnymi uczestnikami procesu odbioru.

Słowa kluczowe

Witold Wandurski, dramat, sztuka partycypacyjna, scena proletariacka, szopka

“There is no author without an audience. There is no theatre without an audience. There is no art without an audience,” declared Witold Wandurski in 1924 in the pages of the weekly *Życie Teatru*. At the time, Wandurski was a budding playwright who later established the proletarian theatre in Łódź. Wandurski accused contemporary theatre of neglecting its audience, who were abandoning it in favor of their new love, the cinema. Theatre reminded Wandurski of an old bourgeois impotent and a class impotent at that.¹ Therefore, he argued that playwrights should write for those on the lowest tier, just as Molière and Shakespeare had: “for fishermen, armorers, tailors, and many other hard workers.”²

It was the audience, primarily from a working-class background but also with peasant origins,³ and the enormous potential this audience brought into the theatre, that Wandurski, the editor of *Nowa Scena Robotnicza*, considered as offering an opportunity for the renewal of dramatic art.⁴ Identifying this new audience necessitated a change in artistic production, which, at the time, in his view, was out of keeping with the social situation. What he did not want in return was a theatre that would be intrusively interventionist, simplistic, and society-oriented, even though critics repeatedly accused him of entertaining such beliefs.⁵

Wandurski emphasized that the source of contemporary theatre must be solutions that design the relationship between the stage and the audience in a completely different way, which translate into the social overtones of the play only as the overall consequence. It was his focus on artistic production that took into account the needs and expectations of a new theatre audience that made his work avant-garde as well as politically and socially engaging.⁶ What mattered

¹ Witold Wandurski, “Prawa publiczności,” *Życie Teatru*, no. 46 (1924): 329; reprinted in *Polska awangarda teatralna 1919–1939*, ed. Dorota Fox and Dariusz Kosiński (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2021), 313–14.

² Wandurski, “Prawa publiczności,” 312–13.

³ When juxtaposing the nascent proletarian theatre and the folk theatre, which often functions as a negative reflection for worker artists, one must be aware of their differences, which may be radical. However, this article does not focus on these differences, which are particularly important at the institutional level and relate to the specific nature of the texts produced with these scenes in mind. Therefore, I will only highlight them in instances where they show relevance to the social functioning of the reconstructed texts.

⁴ This is a reference to a collection of socially engaged plays published in 1923 by the communist publishing house Książka, which represented a new aesthetic. In his brief anthology, Witold Wandurski included three texts: “Prologue” to the *Mysterium-Bouffe* by Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Bombardowanie Europy* (The Bombing of Europe) by Mieczysław Braun, and *Wybuch* (The Explosion) by Ivan Goll. These plays were to provide the first repertoire guidelines for the emerging proletarian theatres.

⁵ There are two events from Wandurski’s life that undoubtedly deserve telling. One of them is a story of his arrest in 1933 as a result of political purges in Moscow and his murder in circumstances that remain unclear to this day. The other important episode is his battle against Polish censorship, due to which, after attacks from right-wing critics, his play entitled *Śmierć na gruszy* (Death on a Pear Tree) was removed from the stage.

⁶ Krystyna Duniec concludes: “Wandurski wanted to create a theatre that was revolutionary, worker-peasant in nature, and proletarian in content, yet he achieved something more. He created a modern theatre and initiated

was authentic contact with the collective audience. Therefore, a prerequisite for change seen in this way was the study of the receiving apparatus (inclusive of its historical course), for, as Wandurski argued, “a change of form depends on changes of audience” and “everything else is the usurpation of writers and literature professors.”⁷

I do not wish to duplicate the valuable contributions of scholars who have reconstructed Wandurski’s inspirations: Old Polish theatre, folk theatre, the tradition of pulp and minstrel theatre, German Expressionism, the political theatre of Piscator, and the history of politically engaged Soviet theatre with the figure of Meyerhold at the forefront, all of which extremely important to Wandurski’s thinking.⁸ First and foremost, I would like to focus on an insufficiently recognized context that the Polish *szopka*, a tradition of puppet Nativity plays, provides for this type of art. Although Hanna Karwacka mentions *szopka* in the introduction to the postwar edition of Wandurski’s *Plakaty sceniczne* (On-Stage Posters), scholars have never studied this aspect of Wandurski’s work. Karwacka herself associates the influence of *szopka* largely with the puppet-like characters appearing in *Gra o Herodzie* (A Play on Herod), *W hotelu „Imperializm”* (At the Imperialism Hotel), and *Giełda Światowa* (World Exchange).

We should not analyze Wandurski’s *szopka* in isolation but against genres such as farce, carnival comedy, or commedia dell’arte—examples of popular entertainment of a subversive nature, often considered folkloric. Wandurski was not the only one whose attention focused on this pulp tradition discovered on home soil and assimilated from other cultures. It seems no coincidence that Wandurski himself, but also Tadeusz Kantor, demonstrated interest in *The Fairground Booth*. Together with Wanda Baczyńska, Kantor embarked on the co-translation of this play.⁹ There were more such translation projects coinciding with the inspirations described above: in 1937, Edward Boyé approached Julian Tuwim with a proposal to translate Tirso de Molina’s *Don Gil of the Green Breeches*,¹⁰ Adam Polewka translated the old French farce *The Farce of Master*

not so much a workers’ theatre as an avant-garde theatre, a form of social practice capable of transforming the world”, Krystyna Duniec, “Śmierć na gruszy, czyli robotnicy”, in *Dwudziestolecie: Przedstawienia* (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2017), 135.

⁷ Witold Wandurski, “Forma istotą twórczości teatralnej”, in *Polska awangarda teatralna 1919–1939*, 62. First published in *Życie Teatru*, no. 50/52 (1925): 382.

⁸ Witold Wandurski, “Meyerhold’s Evolution”, *Życie Teatru*, no. 38–39 (1925): 295–299.

⁹ Katarzyna Osińska, “Kantor – Meyerhold: Paralele”, *Sztuka Europy Wschodniej* 2 (2014): 467–75.

¹⁰ The project would not come to fruition until 1949, with the first performance taking place on January 12, 1950 at Teatr Polski in Szczecin.

Pathelin,¹¹ and Wandurski himself translated the prologue to Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* into Polish.¹²

Not only did Wandurski boldly formulate demands for the use of pulp art for theatre's revival, but he also very clearly justified this direction of change by referring to the horizon of audience expectations in regard to this new art:

To rouse folk theatre from its lethargy, place it on a creative track, and breathe new life into it, it is necessary to tap into the inexhaustible treasury of folk creativity, as has been done so many times over the centuries at critical moments, and to revive the forgotten traditions of the old touring companies and street theatres so beloved by the people. Even today, street performances given on market days are still the most popular form of entertainment among the hard-working people of France, Germany, and Italy.¹³

Wandurski analyzed the practice of building a relationship between the stage and the audience, with particular emphasis on minstrel theatre, commedia dell'arte, Russian and German cabaret, and Meyerhold's *The Fairground Booth*. At the same time, he implemented these postulates in diverse ways in his own dramaturgic and directing practice. *Gra o Herodzie* may seem like a play with a very limited repertoire of tricks to open the stage to the audience. In my opinion, however, this play makes the process of spectacle perception and its underlying imaginative patterns its primary themes.

Spectacles for the Masses

Commentators on Wandurski's work most often cite the context of Soviet theatre. In addition to ideological and aesthetic justifications, such a correlation also finds its validation in his biography: Wandurski spent his youth (1913–1921) in Russia. While studying law, he became acquainted with the proletarian art emerging in Russia and considered Meyerhold and Mayakovsky symbols of this

¹¹ Piotr Pathelin, *Mistrz Piotr Pathelin*, trans. Adam Polewka (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1953).

¹² V. Mayakovsky, *Misterium-buffo: Heroiczny, epicki i satyryczny obraz naszej epoki*, trans. Anatol Stern, prologue trans. Witold Wandurski, text adaptation and staging notes by Lidia Zamkow-Słomczyńska (Warszawa: Centralna Poradnia Amatorskiego Ruchu Artystycznego, 1962).

¹³ Witold Wandurski, "Inscenizacja podań ludowych," *Teatr Ludowy*, no. 2 (1921): 7.

movement.¹⁴ The imaginative and formal community of the art these two artists created with Wandurski's artistic output is difficult to ignore.

The proletarian theatre was born on the streets, under the open sky, and, therefore, it naturally evoked the context of pulp art. At the same time, it was in the Russia of the 1920s, perhaps the only place in Europe, that it was possible to witness theatre playing a historical role. Especially in the first years after the revolution, spectacles for the masses were a powerful machine of mass education, but mostly agitation. This form of creative work assumed a variety of forms, including impromptu scripts, large-scale performances for the masses, propaganda agitations, and "living newspapers."¹⁵

All these theatrical or paratheatrical forms produced a kind of "proletarian morality play."¹⁶ The difference between religious spectacles, which formed the basis of these new shows, and the plays in the vein of Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* resulted from the replacement of the metaphysical struggle between good and evil with the clash of specific sociopolitical orientations,¹⁷ in which the application of the double-scene-stage principle repeatedly emphasized the conflict.¹⁸ The "collective drama,"¹⁹ which Vyacheslav Ivanov postulated and which grew out of the tradition of mystery plays, also Dionysian Mysteries, intended to mobilize the audience, abolish the boundaries between art and life, and unite actors and spectators. Therefore, this concept was based on the same formal foundations as the solutions that Wandurski proposed in 1924 in *Życie Teatru*. Meanwhile, the ideologists of the proletarian theatre, such as Platon Kerzhentsev, first and foremost, wanted non-professional artists who distanced themselves from tradition or those who remained unattached to tradition²⁰ to make art.²¹ Performances, which were a montage of scenes referring to revolution-

¹⁴ Hanna Karwacka, *Witold Wandurski* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, 1968), 37–65.

¹⁵ Although their popularity came a little later as material for cabaret-type shows, an important fact remains that authors mainly wrote them for illiterate people.

¹⁶ Helena Karwacka uses the term in the introduction to Witold Wandurski *Plakaty sceniczne*. See Karwacka, "Wstęp," (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, 1975), 6.

¹⁷ Anatol Łunaczarski, "Teatr i rewolucja," in *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 2, trans. Leszek Turek (Warszawa: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza-Handlowa "Książka i Wiedza", 1964), 134–140.

¹⁸ Katarzyna Osieńska, "Ewolucja widowisk masowych w Związku Radzieckim (od roku 1917 do lat 30)," *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 62, no. 2 (2008): 154–175.

¹⁹ Maria Cymborska-Lebioda, "W kręgu rosyjskiej refleksji teatralnej początku xx wieku: Wiaczesława Iwanowa i Andrieja Biełego koncepcje misterium," *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 34, no. 4 (1986): 21–42.

²⁰ See Antonina Sokolicz, *O kulturze artystycznej proletariatu* (Warszawa: Związek Zawodowy Pracowników Kolejowych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1921); Monika Wąsik and Piotr Olkusz, "Manifesty teatru popularnego," *Dialog*, no. 9 (2016): 25–47.

²¹ However, the matter was much more complicated, as a lot depended on the concept of a particular theatrical studio. Some individuals defended professional theatre and tried to combine proletarian ideas with the

ary events, functioned in a similar manner. After all, these theatricalized forms were largely rooted in the tradition of *tableaux vivants*.²² The first performance was *The Overthrow of Tsarist Autocracy*, performed on March 11, 1919, prepared under the direction of Nikolai Vinogradov, while the most famous was probably *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, directed by Nikolai Evreinov²³ and staged on November 7, 1920.²⁴

The problem, however, was that in the vast majority of these performances, with commendable exceptions, ideological and political objectives prevailed over the artistic concept. *Organizacja masowych widowisk* (Organization of Mass Spectacles), published in 1921 with a list of ready-made performance templates, is a solid confirmation of the above. Admittedly, Nikolai Evreinov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, and Alexander Tairov sought their own creative path inside this spectacular strategy. What we can see here is a crucial tension between two opposing strategies, which, to some extent, might have been co-present in early twentieth-century culture. These are the *reconstruction* of historical continuity and the *montage* that breaks down this continuity. Intuitively, it is easy to agree with Georges Didi-Huberman's view that the trenches of the First World War led to an aesthetic shift, where the chosen method of display became montage and the recomposition of all elements. However, the popularity of numerous historical reconstructions in the early twentieth century calls for caution when considering this thesis.²⁵ Meanwhile, the dominant tendency was to reproduce certain spectacle patterns quite mechanically.

The link between religious and folk art and publicist political theatre is undeniable, and this issue should be considered not only in the context of Russia or, as Wandurski's example will show, Poland but also in the context of Germany and Spain, where *La Barraca*, a democratic project for disseminating art that was initiated by Federico García Lorca, was based on the Spanish tradition of *autos sacramentales* and similar religious arts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

aesthetics of symbolism, often with surprising results, at the very least.

²² These, too, were not free of ideological and political entanglement. See Barbara Markiewicz, *Żywe obrazy: O kształtowaniu pojęć poprzez ich przedstawienie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 1994); Małgorzata Komza, *Żywe obrazy: Między sceną, obrazem i książką* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1995).

²³ See Mateusz Chaberski, *Doświadczenie (syn)estetyczne: Performatywne aspekty przedstawień site-specific* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2015).

²⁴ Sajewska sees this need for reconstruction in the context of "performative repetition of a past event—reembodying history and revising it in the experience of the body," see Dorota Sajewska, *Nekroperformans: Kulturowa rekonstrukcja teatru Wielkiej Wojny* (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2016), 55. I, however, consciously omit the corporal theme from my deliberations.

²⁵ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

British theatre from the early twentieth century also demonstrated the interweaving of the sacred and the political and its significance for the social overtones of performances. The real explosion of the pageant phenomenon took place in the first two decades of the twentieth century, although pageants were also performed for many years after the war, not only in England but also in Ireland, Canada, and the United States.²⁶ Pageants took the form of processions or performances consisting of a sequence of scenes relating to specific events of importance to society but often devoid of action and dialogue. *The Pageant of Sherborne*, staged by Louis N. Parker in 1905, was crucial to this new tradition.

This striking twentieth-century form, considered one of the first modern implementations of the art of reenactment,²⁷ draws on medieval religious processions, pantomimes with the character of a mystery play, the tradition of Corpus Christi performances that are reminiscent of Calderon's *autos sacramentales*, and the Roman triumph.²⁸ Robert Withington highlighted the similarity of twentieth-century pageants with Elizabethan chronicle plays, as well as the tradition of historical processions. One of the most famous performances of this type is *The Lord Mayor's Show*, whose history of staging dates back to the late Middle Ages. The peak of its popularity was between the second half of the sixteenth century and the early eighteenth century.²⁹ Louis Parker shied away from these inspirations, believing instead that each spectacle should open and close with an appropriately adapted religious service. Pageants not only demonstrated the greatness and integrality of the participants' community but also reinforced the sense of a special celebration in the audience. Scholars have documented attendance at these events ranging from several thousand to as many as 120,000 spectators. Estimates put the number of participants at

²⁶ The introduction to Rebecca Schneider's book highlights the momentousness of this genre. Schneider recalls how she "went to Civil War," or reconstructions of battles, to watch them "in the again of time out of joint", Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 1993). This echo of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seems particularly significant at this point.

²⁷ Daniela Sacco, "Reenactment in Theater: Some Reflections on the Philosophical Status of Restaging," in *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. Cristina Baldacci et al. (Berlin: ic1 Berlin Press, 2022), 131–140.

²⁸ See Lilian Portefaix, "Ancient Ephesus: Processions as Media of Religious and Secular Propaganda," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 15 (1993): 195–210. Poland only has one work dedicated to triumph: Katarzyna Balbuza, *Triumfator: Triumf i ideologia zwycięstwa w starożytnym Rzymie epoki Cesarstwa* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2005).

²⁹ Robert Withington, *English Pageantry: An Historical Outline*, vol. 1–2 (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1963), 141–145, 196–197. Withington, who was the only person to describe pageants during their dynamic development (the first version of the work cited above dates from 1918), regarded their modern version as the result of centuries of tradition intertwined in these twentieth-century pageants.

around ten million³⁰ between 1905 and 1939. However, while pageants intended to be a democratic and unifying spectacle, in practice, it was the aspiring middle class together with the aristocracy³¹ that ran such ventures, while workers often could not even afford an entrance ticket. If we agree with certain scholars stating that the pageant played a role in shaping modern culture, we can clearly see that (in the United Kingdom) imperial, nationalist (with all the awareness of the complexity of this term in the context of the first half of the twentieth century), and Christian performances actively shaped this culture.³² Such influence was, to some extent, in line with the expectations of a large part of the show's participants and audience.³³

The differences between the British and Soviet productions in light of this reconstruction would relate primarily to the different attitudes to the past and religion: the Russian productions focused on the recent past, presenting it as a continuing actuality, while pageants drew the strength of their message from references to previous centuries of history. Both the historical performances organized at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United Kingdom and the Russian reenactments reveal a characteristic feature of processions and mystery plays that has been known since antiquity, which we can consider one of the most effective tools for disseminating messages, such as ideas, or images to crowds of people. Against this background, although genealogically situated both close to the mystery play and often incorporating elements of a procession, szopka is nevertheless a unique form. The primary reason for its singularity is that its inherent mechanism of presentation enables the exploration of two completely diverse orders: that of presentation and that of the audience watching the presentation.

The Polish press issued regular calls for the hosting of spectacles celebrating the past. Teatr Ludowy in Kraków had a ready formula for a Kościuszkowski anniversary;³⁴ Jędrzej Cierniak postulated the celebration of the Feast of Liberty, which would have been honored with the hosting of a national mystery

³⁰ Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Alexander Hutton, and Paul Readman, "Introduction," in *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain*, ed. Angela Bartie et al. (London: UCL Press, 2020), 3. More information: <https://historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/> (March 13, 2024).

³¹ For more information on the political potential of this type of spectacle, see: Michael Woods, "Performing Power: Local Politics and the Taunton Pageant of 1928," *Journal of Historical Geography* 25, no. 1 (1999): 57–74.

³² Michael Dobson, "The Pageant of History: Nostalgia, the Tudors, and the Community Play," *SEDERI Yearbook* 20 (2010): 5–25.

³³ Ayako Yoshino, *Pageant Fever: Local History and Consumerism in Edwardian England* (Tokyo: Waseda Daigaku Shuppanbu, 2011), 57–97.

³⁴ H. O., "Obchody Kościuszkowskie," *Teatr Ludowy*, no. 3 (1922), 37–38.

play,³⁵ Stefan Żarski encouraged Copernicus celebrations, however modest in character,³⁶ while Witold Małkowski formulated instructions concerning commemorations of important anniversaries, emphasizing that “celebrations are organized primarily with the aim of exemplifying the past to deepen national awareness as well as awaken and intensify patriotic, civic, and societal feelings.”³⁷

A patriotic or political szopka fulfilled these demands. Lucjan Rydel’s *Betlejem Polskie* (Polish Bethlehem) provided a ready-made template. After all, the procession of characters on stage is one of the most important scenes in the last part of the play,³⁸ in which the characters pay homage to the Child. Shepherds, artisans, a tailor, a baker, a furrier, a shoemaker, a carpenter, a ropemaker, and a blacksmith successively follow the representatives of individual regions to pay tribute. It is a manifestation of the national and societal community. Political power, on the other hand, finds its representation in the successive rulers of Poland and those who fought during major conflicts.

The affinity of this historical procession with British pageants has ties to processional architectonics of the pageants that serve specific purposes. Events such as triumphs and processions are some of the earliest examples of the use of drama and spectacle as civic, societal, and religious “formatting” tools. The theatrical avant-garde, on the other hand, incorporates szopkas and processions to take advantage of these societal messages’ potential. In doing so, it demonstrates the incongruity between the contemporary world and the ideas typically present in such processions, triumphs, and pageants. Plays such as *Śmierć na gruszy* (Death on a Pear Tree) or *Gra o Herodzie* not only expose the genuine potential consequences of adhering to military, political, and national ideas (the processions of war invalids, the homeless, and the unemployed, in particular, resonate very strongly with this image) but also highlight the artificiality of the sociopolitical images that serve to organize the imagination of the audience of such plays. Therefore, we cannot limit Wandurski’s work to art that merely participates in the immediate, current sociopolitical discussion. Today, we can understand Wandurski’s art as thematizing assumed and concealed cognitive processes and forms that orchestrate societal imagination. It problematizes the process of perceiving reality and the dependency of this

³⁵ Jędrzej Cierniak, “Myśl o narodowym misterium w nowoczesnej Polsce,” *Teatr Ludowy*, no. 1 (1923): 3–4

³⁶ Stefan Żarski, “Obchód Kopernikowski,” *Teatr Ludowy*, no. 2 (1923): 26.

³⁷ Witold Małkowski, “Instrukcja w sprawie obchodów,” *Teatr Ludowy*, no. 3 (1925): 41–43

³⁸ Lucjan Rydel, “Betlejem polskie,” in *Wybór dramatów*, ed. Lesław Tatarowski (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1983), 344.

perception on certain mechanisms of power that organize the imagination of the masses.

Wandurski's Two Szopkas

The commonly expressed idea that Wandurski sought to develop avant-garde theatre as a form of social practice, viewed as both a space for action and an effective means of communication with the audience,³⁹ requires analysis on two separate levels. We should understand this idea not only as the playwright's participation in important and current political discussions but also as the creation of new stage architectures that bring certain communicative practices into public view.

Szopka, as a spectacle, gave Wandurski the opportunity to act simultaneously on two different planes. Understood as a cabaret form in the vein of *Qui Pro Quo*, as he himself mentioned,⁴⁰ the series of grotesque, ironic, and certainly caricature images, whose reference to reality was, for a suitably prepared viewer, easy to establish, made it possible to achieve an entertainment effect combined with the formulation of cutting, often community-related, and political retorts, which guaranteed audience involvement. Seen as a mechanism of presentation which existed both in religious and in satirical and political shows, *szopka* allowed for an exploration of the viewer's position in relation to a broadly understood center of power, both sacred and secular, and of the relationship between the observer and what the stage revealed. I would describe the first of these *szopkas* as topical and founded primarily by reference to a context that is contemporary to the author and his audience. The second *szopka* is historical because it draws its strength from a fundamental presentation mechanism that is centuries old. The first *szopka* would fulfill propaganda and entertainment purposes⁴¹ and would be closer to impromptu Soviet art, a narrowly understood political revue. The second would serve educational purposes by exposing the mechanisms of power, both religious and secular, concealed in projects close to

³⁹ Dariusz Kosiński, "Dekoracji żadnych nie trzeba," in *Od dekoracji do konstrukcji*, ed. Dorota Buchwald and Dariusz Kosiński (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2020); Lilianna Dorak-Wojakowska, "Dramaturg jako archiwista: O stylu montażu dokumentalnego Witolda Wandurskiego i sceny robotniczej," *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis: Studia de Cultura* 11 (2019): 20–35; Duniec, *Dwudziestolecie*.

⁴⁰ "Lyk is bored with drama—he prefers cabaret: here—like in the Persian Eye or *Qui Pro Quo* Theatre—the form encourages and entertains him still, *diverting him*. And concentration—he doesn't need it at all. . . . An older organism requires only excitement," Wandurski, "Forma istotą twórczości teatralnej," 63.

⁴¹ See Tomasz Stępień, "Zabawa i polityka w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym," in *Zabawa – poetyka – polityka* (Katowice: Śląsk, 2002).

the pageant tradition. In *Gra o Herodzie*, both these szopkas coexist in the space of the text, and it is their amalgamation that determines its unique character.

Gra o Herodzie shows an affinity with impromptu proletarian art and the poster style and political caricatures of the Blue Blouse theatre collective. Herod is wearing a suit jacket and top hat, over which he will later wear a crown and a royal purple cloak. He introduces himself using a new name—Capital. We can easily associate Herod with the heroes of the Soviet proletarian mystery plays mentioned above. The figurative nature of the characters in his entourage, such as the Banker, the Factory Owner, the Heir, or the Clergyman, only serves to reinforce this impression, although it is puzzling to see the balancing of these characters between the caricature protagonist of today and the allegorical character referencing at least the Spanish *autos sacramentales*. The play has no shortage of statements that clearly refer to a specific social and political context: the “dollar voucher” symbolizes the existence of state monopolies and foreign currency fraud, the Angel of Peace makes a clear reference to the League of Nations and its debatable European policy, while Aunt France’s portrayal is very critical. Most prominent, however, are Herod’s Lackey’s—Wściubik and Czubik—characters who refer to the National Workers’ Party, namely a right-wing workers’ party formed in 1920 as a result of the unification of the National Workers’ Union and the National Workers’ Alliance, as well as the Polish Socialist Party, which in 1926 (when Wandurski was writing *Gra o Herodzie*) would primarily evoke the right-wing faction of the party associated until 1926 with the policy pursued by Józef Piłsudski at the time. The two protagonists, who are supposed to represent the populace at Herod’s court, function as schemers who are subservient to the power of Capital and show a propensity to bribery.

This topicality and the associated readability of the play for its audience of the time, combined with a rather schematic plot based on a scenario straight out of commedia dell’arte, in which there is an affair between the aging and ailing Herod and a younger, attractive Miss Kryzis, makes Wandurski’s title, like those on his other on-stage posters, *Giełda światowa* and *W hotelu „Imperializm,”* susceptible to be classified as a committed and impromptu piece, which is strongly politically profiled and leaving little room for interpretation. However, when we read this play while considering the on-stage organization, the play reveals a different face to the contemporary audience, presenting mechanisms founding a certain worldview, not necessarily limited to a specific historical actuality. Therefore, an analysis of the play on stage gives us an opportunity to notice an alternative way in which they function and also delineates a wider perceptual field comprising all the references discussed above. This research perspective does not intend to artificially separate one form of szopka from another but rather to suggest

that reconstructing spontaneous discussions should first involve analyzing the organizational principles of the space that shape these discussions.

Comparing Russian and British spectacles with Polish theatrical productions highlights the inherently political nature of Polish avant-garde texts. Their primary goal was not just to criticize specific societal figures but to expose the constructive potential of discourse, its underlying epistemological viewpoint, and, most importantly, the ideological and economic assumptions embedded within this discourse. Therefore, the rhetorical nature of these texts is geared towards revealing a “residuum of indeterminacy” that escapes the system, whose disclosure can serve to educate a new viewer and a more informed citizen.

Wandurski plays this game by using the tradition of szopka, procession, and carnival.⁴² All these spectacular forms are associated with a particular kind of manifestation of power in admittedly different ways. A procession is usually a moving display of images whose combination intends to present a particular perspective on an issue, the history of a nation, or a ruler. A carnival is most often a festive celebration involving a reversal of order, although according to Bakhtin, such a reversal confirms the order despite the power making itself the object of the audience’s gaze.⁴³ After all, szopka means presenting in front of a religiously or secularly understood center.

In *Gra o Herodzie*, the author exploits the potential of juxtaposing place, which is stage-related and identifiable with *locus*, with space, which is theatrical and which we can understand even more broadly than *platea* as including all the spatial relations that fund theatre. Before the actual play begins, the Polish court jester Stańczyk appears on stage during workers’ festivities and orders that workers set up screens, a throne for the king, and seats for his entourage.⁴⁴

The throne is a clear symbol of *locus* understood as a place of power and a center interacting with the macrocosm connecting the stage with the audience. The reference to the nativity scene, which Wandurski uses explicitly in the later parts of the play, allows the audience to assume that this Herodian throne operates in the profane sphere in exactly the same way as Jesus’ manger as a sign of the *sacrum* that the Three Kings face.

In *Gra o Herodzie*, Wandurski combines two seemingly opposing strategies in an exceptionally interesting way. He combines the setting and stabilizing of

⁴² See Dariusz Kosiński, “Awangarda szopką podszyta,” in *Dramaturgia szopki i jej obecność w historii teatru polskiego*, ed. Karina Janik (Kraków: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, 2022), 167–171.

⁴³ Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73–82.

⁴⁴ I took all quotes from: Witold Wandurski, “Gra o Herodzie,” in: *Plakaty sceniczne*, ed. Hanna Karwacka (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, 1970), 58. I provide the page number in parentheses.

the scene for the play with its immediate sabotage. It is not just the Herodian throne that is at stake here, after all. The gesture of its setting as the central space of the action has been frequently used in folk art since at least the Middle Ages.⁴⁵ Such important artists as Shakespeare later used this solution, exploiting the possibilities of playing with two-stage spaces—*locus* and *platea*.⁴⁶

If we assume that references to *szopka* and *farce* set in motion a mechanism encoding stage reality and conditioning the modes of its reception, we must see *Gra o Herodzie* as an event that presents the production and maintenance of a secular *locus* and the consequences of this arrangement. The centrally positioned *locus* is essentially *arche* and *telos* in one. It is a source organizing reality that few will have a chance to face.

Stage design serves to delineate the area where the play will take place but simultaneously moves the audience away from this area. The screens cut off the stage from the backstage area while emphasizing its exclusion from the audience's space. If we regard Herod's throne as a sacral and secular center, we will have to recognize that only the king's entourage has access to the throne. Such a set design allows Wandurski to emphasize in a visually attractive way the absence of power from the fabric of everyday life despite its significant influence on that fabric. The fact that the entire play occurs at a workers' party makes this impression even more acute. In this sense, Wandurski's play clearly focuses on the mechanics of the center and the transfer of knowledge-power. It is not without reason that we only observe the procession of power, that of Herod and his entourage.

The Press playing the character introducing the main protagonist is the first clear signal of the play's subject matter. There is no doubt that this is the embodiment of what we would today call the tabloid press, a press that, by feeding on sensationalism, has the power to influence the masses. The image is highly expressive: "the damsel" is wearing newspapers and bourgeois magazines, and her state of undress points the audience's attention to vaudeville and cabaret shows so fashionable in Poland at that time.⁴⁷ The satirical or even caricatured portrayal of the Press does not mean that this character has no causative power.

⁴⁵ Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation," 73–82. Agamben references a particular tradition of enthronement also present in Slavic culture. See Piotr Boroń, "Pstrokaty konie i kamienne trony: Obrzędy intryzacyjne u Słowian," in *Obrzęd, teatr, ceremoniał w dawnych kulturach*, ed. Justyna Olko (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2008), 187–216; Aleksander Gieysztor, "Spektakl i liturgia – polska koronacja królewska," in *Kultura elitarna a kultura masowa w Polsce późnego średniowiecza*, ed. Bronisław Geremek (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1978).

⁴⁶ See Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁴⁷ Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, "Ludzkie maszyny i uliczne mięso," in: *Robotnik: Performance pamięci*, ed. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek et al. (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2017).

Even though people call her, just as Herod does, a “vile wench,” “harlot,” or “floozy,” she retains her ability to influence society. The utterances of the Banker or Herod, but also of the Press herself, make it clear that it is ultimately the Press that “molds the streets” (60–61). Importantly, the criticism emanating from *Gra o Herodzie* aims not only at those who wield power but also at those who are subjected to it, those who are more interested in entertainment and sensationalism than in accessing reliable information.

However, the Press is not the only medium of power in the piece. Next to her stands the Clergyman, which may be surprising considering the arrangement of the procession. His utterance (61) signals the harnessing of the *sacrum* to benefit the interests of the *profanum* or simply the use of the institution of the church for a particular political game. The character of the Clergyman is part of a tradition of highly politicized preaching and of church representatives abandoning theological themes in favor of societal themes in their addresses to “the people” and writing sermons with specific groups and communities in mind.⁴⁸

Herod’s procession, which includes the Banker, the Factory Owner, the Heir, and the Clergyman, is yet another signal of the merging of two orders: the new, capitalist order, which the first two characters represent, and the old, prewar order, entrenched in tradition. They all walk together but in twos. This connection, but also separation within Herod’s entourage is significant. Characters signal with only a small gesture, such as by interlocking an arm with another character, who is there with whom, and, therefore, potentially where they are heading. The placing of the Banker and Factory Owner “on the left” and of the Heir and the Clergyman “on the right” is anything but accidental.

For the significance of Herod’s Lackeys, Wściubik and Czubik, their placement in space seems to be of much greater importance than the ability to refer to their real-life prototypes and assign them with specific political hues. After all, when introduced into art, such hues assume a certain sign-like meaning. For it is they who have the potential to be negotiators establishing the relations between the interior and the exterior, the authorities, and the people. However, this opportunity seems to have been completely missed. Contrary to appearances, it is Wściubik and Czubik that Wandurski seems to accuse of the tragic situation of the working people more than Herod himself. Accordingly, it is they, admittedly at the express order of Stańczyk, who construct the space for the play in the scene preceding the king’s entrance (56). These characters alone

⁴⁸ See Agnieszka Lissowska, “Czy kaznodzieja był aktorem? Z badań nad średniowiecznym kaznodziejstwem obserwantów włoskich,” in *Obrzęd, teatr, ceremoniał w dawnych kulturach*, ed. Justyna Olko (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2008), 275–284.

build a stage that fortifies the power with which the Herod-Capital can influence citizens. Therefore, they act against the environment from which they originate.

Wściubik and Czubik are the only characters from Herod's entourage who appear on stage before the play begins. To a large degree, they belong to the world of the audience and the workers for whom Wandurski wrote the play. This means that they participate in the carnival celebrations. Moreover, the two characters belong to *locus*, which their status of lackeys-to-power serves to emphasize. Wściubik and Czubik, who, from their unique position, could observe and undermine that power, ultimately relinquish this opportunity in favor of vested interests. These two protagonists seem oblivious to the fact that they are on the stage and can, therefore, change the stage. To all intents and purposes, this is what the Heir, the Factory Owner, and the Banker worry about, with the Banker saying: "It will not hurt to be on guard because everyone is already whispering about freedom" (64).

How Does Power Work?

Wandurski not only creates a political revue but also uses its hidden presentation potential to expose mechanisms governing politics. The utterances of the Banker, the Heir, and the Factory Owner generate an unexpected chorus of languages that are essentially about the same thing: how to retain power. In the end, however, the characters ask directly: "does the King believe in himself?" (64). The center of power proves to be empty, filled with meaningless *lazzi*. The arrangement of the three characters—Herod dying of "budget malaise," the "ungarbed cabaret diva in a pink mask" that is Miss Kryzis, and Mister Dollar "tapping his feet like in a gigue," "holding a pipe in his teeth and wearing American glasses"—is reminiscent of the trio consisting of Harlequin, Columbine, and Pierrot, only with a modern twist.⁴⁹

The merriment becomes a tool of profanation,⁵⁰ and Wandurski's theatre, toying with folk-revue showmanship, reveals the backstage of politics, lifting the curtain and providing the audience with a view of what the screen built with press releases, photographs, and religious rhetoric is trying to hide. This

⁴⁹ When we look at stage directions introducing these characters on stage: "Music. The Devil pulls out a violin, Death a saxophone, and the Press stands. Left with the drum. This jazz-band plays the shimmy-foxtrot" (67), we find it hard not to shy away from the conclusion that we are dealing with an update that demonstrates the process of modernizing a perfectly recognized tradition.

⁵⁰ Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation," 73–82.

is perfectly evident at the outbreak of the revolution, when the other characters protecting the king are, to a large extent, primarily protecting themselves (75). The act of encircling Herod and its protection reinforce the conviction that those at the center will do everything to prevent the others from seeing what is inside and how disappointing the content of the *locus* is. The action of the play ends with the death of Herod but not with the abolition of the order he symbolized. In this way, Wandurski plays not only with the scenic arrangement itself, but also with the conventions that sustain it, conventions which activate specific cultural, historical, and political codes through which social imagination is structured and regulated. This meta-level game is, after all, already announced by the very title of the play.

The avant-garde recognizes and problematizes that public drama and civic ceremony play a significant role in the construction and reproduction of the discursive framework within which local power structures operate.⁵¹ In this respect, *Gra o Herodzie* fulfills two purposes: it reveals the media of power and the way it is funded; and it highlights the resulting lack of the audience's access to the true context, thus making a social impact. As a consequence, today's readers of *Gra o Herodzie* could treat it as an engaging play rather than a play that is engaged. This play does not expect its viewers to identify themselves with it and assimilate its content. Instead, it intends to provoke and encourage reflection alongside independent action.

In this context, the reference to carnival primarily informs the frame of the performance rather than determining its content. Despite the clear reference to carnival traditions, other aspects worthy of the readers' attention include references to the Feast of Fools, primarily held during Christmas.⁵² However, instead of demonstrating the inverted order, the play exposes its founding principles. Wandurski seems to reveal the hidden rooms of power, which in a theatricalized social everyday life remain consistently concealed from the public eye. We can see a direct reference to the above in the Clergyman's utterance when

⁵¹ The collective monograph: *Theatrum ceremoniale na dworze książąt i król polskich*, ed. Mariusz Makiewicz and Ryszard Skowron (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 1999) comprises an excellent reconstruction of this very broad context.

⁵² Jacques Heers, *Fêtes des fous et carnivals* (Paris: Fayard, 1983). Holding these types of celebrations within this special time may also have another justification apart from those linked to ancient cults. Agamben suggests that it was Christianity, with its supreme figure of Christ as God and man, and the associated messianic tendencies that blurred the distinction between *sacrum* and *profanum* by allowing humans to cross the boundary separating these two spheres and accessing the divine territory, see Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation," 101. Girard arrives at a similar conclusion, albeit from a different point of view. In the ritual of the goat, he sees a transition from *sacrum* to *profanum*, see René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). These conclusions demonstrate that this problem is relevant to seeing history and the anthropology of culture. I merely signal this aspect without going into detail.

he asks about the necessity of gassing the masses when they can hold carnival celebrations instead.

Wandurski's play reveals the political and economic entrenchment and the anchoring of performances, which, on the surface, would only refer to tradition, great history, and the image of a strong nation. Furthermore, the play demonstrates that such spectacles conceal the empty center, making it impossible for the audience to observe it directly. In *Gra o Herodzie*, only Stańczyk permits such an observation to take place in the course of the workers' celebrations, as he explicitly informs us (55–56).

Avant-garde artists were perfectly aware of the complex web of the knowledge-power relations that entangled folk art or art considered to be folk art. And it was this entanglement, propaganda activities, and the generation of world images that constituted their primary point of reference. By adopting these forms, they led to their demystification, only seemingly replicating them. When using folk forms, Wandurski simultaneously transformed them into a tool for self-commentary. Stańczyk's utterance in the role of Epilogus, who points to the unmasking potential of art (89), is a clear demonstration of the above. Therefore, the play is not about Herod but about the audience. Thanks to this play, the audience members may recognize the role that the mechanisms of maintaining and sustaining power assign to them. In this respect, one may agree with Dariusz Kosiński, who reads *Gra o Herodzie* as a path toward the "perversion" of bourgeois theatre.⁵³ Yet it seems that the play was intended to fulfill an even more fundamental, preliminary function: to render visible the mechanisms through which power operates and knowledge is distributed, and thereby to make the proletarian spectator aware of the forms of social formatting to which they are subjected.

Wandurski's Herod, like Pilate in Giandomenico Tiepolo's *Divertimento per li Ragazzi* cycle,⁵⁴ a fat man "wearing a redingote, a top hat on his head, and with a mustache painted in charcoal,"⁵⁵ receives judgment not as a particular historical figure but as the law itself, which "shows its comic mask, turning the trial into a parody," for it is "always concerned with what is incidental in regard to the court's judgment." Ludic theatre rejects or parodies ancient and biblical characters who fail in times of crisis. Instead, it draws strength from an improvisational but, in Wandurski's case, also hyperpolitical *lazzi*, revealing the artificiality of the

⁵³ Kosiński, "Awangarda szopką podszyta," 170.

⁵⁴ This is a series of more than one hundred drawings, which the artist created not only in the last years of his life but also at the time of the fall of Venice and its submission to the French rule.

⁵⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Pulcinella, or Entertainment for Children*, trans. Kevin Attell (London: Seagull Books, 2019).

opposition between empirical and noumenal character, which originates from Kant's thought. Freedom treated as inherent to the latter is a source of oppression. It is only by challenging this opposition that the viewer discovers the gravity necessary to be an active participant in life. The actual stage in *Gra o Herodzie* is a metadramatic space that allows the audience of proletarian theatre in Łódź to look at the mechanisms of the distribution of the sensible. This is how Wandurski implements his educational project. This, in turn, allows me to consider the space of *Gra o Herodzie* as a metonymy for Wandurski's proletarian theatre project and its accompanying project of audience education. Ultimately, this is a game on the stage, for the stage, and for the right to be on that stage.



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