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Theatre Migrations across the Partitioned Past: Biographical Narratives, Cultural Networks, and Entangled Histories

Introduction

On March 17, 2022, the cover of the magazine *Wprost* featured an illustration by Paweł Kuczyński. It shows a pregnant woman walking through wind, cold, and rain, holding a child by the hand. Where are they going? To kindergarten? To school? Shopping? What at first glance appears to be an ordinary, everyday activity reveals, upon closer inspection, a different—and more existential—form of mobility. On her back, the woman carries a backpack containing all her belongings: her home, uprooted from the ground along with its roots. She and the child are not alone; in the background, other figures move in the same direction, also bearing backpacks. Kuczyński's image was created in response

to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the Spring of 2022. As a result of this attack, thousands of people fled the war in order to save their lives. They emigrated. At railway stations in many European cities, we witnessed people in desperate circumstances—people forced to compress their entire lives into a single suitcase or backpack. The media broadcast dramatic scenes: tears, farewells. Women embraced their husbands for the last time before boarding trains; children kissed their fathers, uncertain whether they would ever meet again.

The case of Ukraine is not exceptional in the context of migration. Across the globe, people move for a wide range of reasons: war, poverty, political or religious persecution, environmental disasters, or the search for work. Almost daily, media outlets report on immigration, displacement, or the challenges of integration. We see people waiting in fear on ships and in boats; others gather at borders or run through forests, hoping to find shelter, safety, and a dignified life. These images underscore the ongoing relevance of migration while simultaneously evoking memories. Memories of our own experiences; memories that form part of our family histories or are preserved in the cultural memory of the countries in which we were born or in which we live. Migration is, in fact, a ubiquitous phenomenon; it shapes our lives, our societies, and our history. How we live and who we are is the result of migration—or, to put it differently, migration is an inherent feature of all societies, permeating their existence and thus their histories. Migration entails diverse forms of border crossing and the search for new spaces of life, stories of hope and disappointment, happiness and despair—stories not only of negotiation and exploitation, but also of entanglement and connection.

Migration processes played a crucial role in shaping Polish culture and national identity. During the period of the partitions, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, a significant wave of political emigration emerged, the most prominent phase of which was the Great Emigration. At that time, thousands of Poles—political activists, artists, and writers—were forced to leave their homeland. Some went to Great Britain, Switzerland, or Belgium; others settled in Turkey, Italy, or overseas. The largest number, however, found refuge in France, with Paris becoming a symbolic centre of Polish independence as well as a hub of political and artistic activity. It is worth noting that it was in exile that some of the most important works of Polish literature of this period were created, as well as the metaphor of the crucified Polish nation, which continues to be invoked in moments of crisis to this day. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Polish emigration gradually shifted from predominantly political to increasingly economic forms of migration. Between 1880 and 1914, approximately 3.6 million inhabitants of the former Polish territories left the country.

Popular destinations included the United States, Germany (particularly the Ruhr region), Brazil, and Argentina.¹ As a result of the partitions, the region, which had already been multicultural and multi-religious, also became a site of immigration, especially for populations from the partitioning powers. Prussian, Russian, and Austrian citizens settled in former Polish lands, leading to numerous intercultural encounters and the emergence of contact zones,² characterised by the simultaneous use and mixing of languages. During this period, migration between the partitioned territories also intensified, as the borders imposed by the partitioning powers—despite control—allowed for remarkable levels of both individual and collective mobility. From today's perspective, these developments illustrate the thesis of Poland's entangled history. This is reflected in the architecture and historical trajectories of cities such as Gdańsk, Łódź, and Wrocław, where multiple nationalities and cultures coexisted.

Among the many emigrants and immigrants of this period were also theatre practitioners. Although migration has long been a subject of interest in literary studies, and historians and sociologists have examined various professional groups from this perspective, the phenomenon of migration in the long nineteenth century remains insufficiently explored in theatre studies. Closely related to this is the observation that it was precisely mobile theatre practitioners who often slipped through the gaps of national theatre historiographies. While figures such as Adam Mickiewicz and Helena Modrzejewska are firmly embedded in Polish cultural memory, the biographies of other migrant artists are known only to a small circle of specialists or have been entirely forgotten. Theatre scholarship continues to focus primarily on (master)works; as a result, productions and plays remain at the centre of attention, while the biographies of practitioners—especially those who were cosmopolitan, highly mobile, or of indeterminate national affiliation—are often relegated to the background or considered only in relation to their artistic output.³ This is hardly surprising, as reconstructing transnational life histories is often a laborious undertaking: it requires archival research in multiple countries and across continents, proficiency in several languages, and engagement with the complex and shifting territorial realities of the nineteenth century. Was Bogumił Dawison—born in

¹ See Cecylia Leszczyńska, "Polish Emigration Abroad: Regional Structure and Streams of Emigration in the Years 1870–1914 and 1918–1939," *Przeszłość Demograficzna Polski* 41 (2019): 181, <https://doi.org/10.18276/pdp.2019.41-07>.

² Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33–40.

³ See Berenika Szymanski-Düll, "Transnationale Theatergeschichte(n): Der biographische Ansatz," in *Methoden der Theaterwissenschaft*, ed. Christopher Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2020), 81–97.

Warsaw on May 15, 1818 and highly successful on German-speaking stages—Polish, German, or German-Polish? Was Heinrich Conried—born on September 3, 1855 in present-day Bielsko-Biała—Polish, Austrian, or perhaps American? After all, he spent much of his career as a theatre director in New York and even acquired American citizenship. But are such questions not, ultimately, redundant? The analysis of transnational biographies opens the door to new and more productive avenues of inquiry than those centred on national affiliation. It compels us to redirect our attention to other areas of research, broadens our perspective, and reveals theatrical mechanisms and practices that have hitherto been overlooked or marginalised.

Analysing the biographies of migrants requires us to approach theatre history from the perspective of mobility. Although theatre today is primarily associated with buildings and fixed stages, the history of professional theatre is equally a history of diverse forms of mobility. Since antiquity, theatre practitioners have been on the move, travelling from place to place and presenting their work in public squares or at the courts of rulers. Even the establishment of permanent stages did not bring this mobility to an end; on the contrary, the invention and development of modern means of transport—above all railways and steamships—enabled a significant expansion of theatrical activity. It was therefore not uncommon that, by the late nineteenth century, artists performed on stages in Russia, captivated audiences in India, or crossed the Atlantic to perform in the Americas, or even to settle there permanently. But are all mobile theatre practitioners migrants? A closer look at their biographies reveals a diverse and at times surprising forms of mobility. While some artists were engaged in itinerant theatre, others undertook guest performances, and still others emigrated either by choice or under duress, attempting to continue—or indeed to establish—their careers abroad. These practitioners, as analyses of their mobility show, rarely moved from country A to country B in order to remain there permanently; rather, they often continued to lead mobile lives. Some moved from place to place, occasionally returning to their homeland or to other countries in which they had previously lived, resembling nomads in constant motion. Others travelled back and forth between their country of origin and their country of migration, or, despite having left their homeland, maintained strong ties to it.⁴ At the same time, we observe how theatre migrants connected the societies from which they came with those that received them, generating

⁴ See Sidney Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates: Movements and States in Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 185.

significant dynamics of entanglement and transfer.⁵ The nineteenth century was thus a period in which theatre—despite processes of nation-building—became a transnational and even global medium, acquiring the characteristics of a mass medium.⁶ Research on transnational biographies allows us to move beyond local and national frameworks, to observe networks of collaboration that extend across geographical and cultural boundaries, and to examine the emergence of hybrid artistic forms, translation practices, and multilingualism. What, then, were the personal experiences, and what the professional and artistic consequences, of leaving one's own culture and entering a new one? How and why were decisions made to leave the homeland? In most cases, the migration of theatre practitioners was closely linked to work—engagements at different theatres necessitated frequent relocations, but other factors also played a role, such as education, family circumstances, and political or religious persecution. As biographical research has shown, such migrations were rarely driven by a single factor; rather, they were multi-faceted.⁷

These considerations are taken up in the thematic section published in this issue of *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, which was inspired by a workshop held on November 24–26, 2022 as part of the ERC project *T-MIGRANTS*⁸ at the Museum of the City of Kraków (Rydlówka) in Bronowice. The aim of this meeting was to rethink Polish theatre history from the period of the partitions, with particular emphasis on the period from the Great Emigration to 1918, from the perspective of migration. The workshop was followed by a second meeting in May 2023 at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and the outcomes of both gatherings informed the subsequent articles in this volume.

The contributions collected here shed light on the migratory biographies of forgotten or little-known theatre practitioners, reconstruct transnational networks, propose new readings of dramaturgy from the perspective of migration, and examine processes of cultural exchange and entanglement that arose

⁵ See Berenika Szymanski-Düll, "Vom Reisen, Einreisen und Ausreisen: Zum Mobilitätsverhalten von Theater-migrant*innen im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Leave, left, left: Migrationsphänomene in den Künsten in aktueller und historischer Perspektive*, ed. Burcu Dogramaci et al. (Berlin: Neofelis, 2020), 63–77.

⁶ See Christopher Balme, "Die Bühne des 19. Jahrhunderts: Zur Entstehung eines Massenmediums," in *Amusement und Schrecken: Studien zum Drama und Theater des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Franz Norbert Menne-meier and Bernhardt Reitz (Tübingen: Francke, 2006), 11–27.

⁷ See Berenika Szymanski-Düll, "Defining the Theatre Migrant: A Concept Developed Through the Lens of Nineteenth-Century Theatre Practices," in *European Theatre Migrants in the Age of Empire. Personal Experiences, Transnational Trajectories, and Socio-Political Impacts*, ed. Berenika Szymanski-Düll and Lisa Skwirblies (Cham: Palgrave, 2025), 15–34.

⁸ This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 850742). Further information is available at: www.t-migrants.com.

from migration and shaped theatre history during the period of the partitions. Dorota Jarząbek-Wasyl recalls the figure of the actor and theatre director Andrzej Mielewski (1867–1916). Using his case as an example, she traces the question of the multiple and complex identities experienced during the period of the partitions, when Poles were de facto Russian, Prussian, or—like Mielewski—Austrian subjects, and analyses this situation in the context of the artist's theatrical career. Karolina Prykowska-Michalak, in turn, takes us to Łódź in the first half of the nineteenth century. Through her analysis of Wiktor Dłużewski's drama *Wyprowa do Ameryki* (Journey to America), she highlights the important process of Łódź's urbanisation through the influx of migrants. Jorit Hopp focuses on Theodore Lob's employment practices during his directorship of the theatres in Wrocław. Drawing on network analysis, he examines labour migration, presenting mobility in the theatre of this period and the personnel decisions associated with it. Mariola Szydłowska considers the careers of the opera singers Marcelina Sembrich and Lola Beeth. She describes how migration shaped their lives and how, despite settling permanently abroad, both artists maintained ties to their homeland. Dorota Fox examines the phenomenon of cabaret at the turn of the twentieth century through the examples of Maria Kryszka and Mika Mickun. She demonstrates that short artistic forms fostered encounters between different nationalities, enabling emigrants to seek adequate forms of artistic expression. Agata Łuksza, meanwhile, analyses fan cultures in Warsaw from the perspective of theatrical migration, showing how transcultural influences transformed the city's theatrical scene.

The contributions gathered in this issue broaden the scope of research on Polish theatre history and its contexts. They present migration as a dynamic force that shapes and drives aesthetic, social, and cultural processes. By revealing diverse transnational biographies and networks, they challenge traditional national narratives of theatre historiography and build bridges to more global historical perspectives. We hope that this volume will encourage further reflection on migration as an integral element of Polish theatre history and contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interrelations between art, culture, and mobility in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all participants of our workshops for their inspiring discussions, newly formed friendships, and research ideas that extend beyond geographical boundaries. I would like to extend my special thanks to Karolina Prykowska-Michalak for her unwavering support and commitment to the realisation of this project.



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