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# Everyday Tending

## Forgetting and Remembering Women's Work in Twentieth-Century Polish Theatre

### Abstract

The dominant narrative about Polish theatre privileges male playwrights and directors, confining women's presence to the realm of acting. Throughout the twentieth century women actively participated in the theatre sector, assuming the different roles necessary for play production, and yet they remained excluded from the official narrative. In this article, we ask about the social and cultural mechanisms of the forgetting of women's input into theatre practice in the Polish context. One such mechanism is the hierarchy of commentaries on theatre widely accepted by theatre

historians who opt for manifestos, declarations, and theoretical lectures, while discarding the more ‘intimate’ forms, such as interviews, letters, and diaries, which are preferred by women artists. Hence women’s thinking on theatre remains out of scope, on the margins, and “unmarked” (Phelan 1993). We invoke Paul Connerton’s (2008) type of forgetting, especially what is called “repressive erasure,” focusing on its most encrypted forms that allow the master historical narrative to keep its privileged position without apparent violence. We are interested in how power relations replicate themselves through memory politics, dooming women’s theatre practice to sink into oblivion. We investigate this process by analysing selected cases of the remembering of women’s work in the domains of directing, theory, and drama.

### Keywords

theatre, feminine, theatre history, women, gender discrimination, power

### Abstrakt

#### Krząctwo: Pamięć i niepamięć o twórczyniach polskiego teatru XX wieku

Dominująca narracja o polskim teatrze uprzywilejowuje mężczyzn dramatopisarzy i reżyserów sprowadzając obecność kobiet głównie do sfery aktorstwa. Tymczasem w całym XX wieku kobiety aktywnie uczestniczyły w życiu teatralnym, podejmując rozmaite role niezbędne do powstania przedstawienia. Jednocześnie pozostawały wykluczone z oficjalnych narracji o teatrze. W artykule osadzonym w polskim kontekście pytamy o społeczne i kulturowe mechanizmy zapominania o wkładzie kobiet w praktykę teatralną. Odwołujemy się do typologii zapominania Paula Connertona (2008), szczególnie do tego, co określa mianem „represyjnego wymazywania”, koncentrując się na jego najbardziej zakodowanych formach, które podtrzymują męską hegemonię bez jawnej przemocy. Interesuje nas, w jaki sposób relacje władzy reprodukują się poprzez polityki pamięci, skazując praktykę teatralną kobiet na powolne pogrążanie się w niepamięci. Proces ten badamy, analizując wybrane przypadki upamiętniania kobiecej pracy w obszarach reżyserii, teorii i dramatu.

### Słowa kluczowe

teatr, kobiecość, historia teatru, kobiety, dyskryminacja płciowa, władza

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Maria Maj, born 1948—a theatre and film actress. No headline TV dramas or red carpets for her. Recognition came late—in the 1990s—when she joined the Teatr Rozmaitości in Warsaw (now TR Warszawa), where she has taken on the roles of mothers, housekeepers, frustrated women, all played with a raw honesty.<sup>1</sup> In a 2014 interview with Mike Urbaniak, when asked why she rarely gave interviews, she answered simply: “Because no one ever asks.”<sup>2</sup>

How is the history of Polish theatre written? Who decides which actors, playwrights, directors, critics, and educators are inscribed into the archives and the annals of theatre history and whose presence is erased? These are the questions we are attempting to answer in our work as members of a long-term research project dedicated to the history of women’s theatre practice in twentieth-century Poland: *HyPaTia: A Women’s History of Polish Theatre*.<sup>3</sup> Since 2012, the project research team has focused on collecting and analyzing diverse traces of women’s creative presence in the theatre, extending beyond the traditionally documented field of acting. Our primary objective has been to investigate whether the widely held belief that women’s discursive absence from the history of Polish theatre is due to a literal absence from theatre institutions. However, over the years, we have been discovering, documenting, archiving, and disseminating knowledge about the women who have shaped the history of Polish theatre. It has become clear to us that other factors are at play. This text is precisely about identifying and examining those factors. Moreover, today, when the project has reached a stable and widely acknowledged position within the theatre community, the time has come to reflect on it from a meta-perspective: to articulate the intentions that guided us, to reconstruct the contexts in which the work has been carried out, and to provide a theoretical framework that until now has never been systematically formulated in a single text. The article therefore serves not only as a summary of the team’s work to date, but also as an attempt to situate the project within its original assumptions, its socio-political and historical

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Maj, “Życie to ma się w życiu”, interview by Monika Głuska-Durenkamp, *Pani*, no. 10 (2024): 54. Unless otherwise noted, all translations K.K. and A.Ł.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Maj, “Jestem bachantką”, interview by Mike Urbaniak in *(Nie)świadomość teatru: Wypowiedzi i rozmowy*, ed. Joanna Krakowska (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszeńskiego, 2018), 101.

<sup>3</sup> The first phase of the project—*HyPaTia: The History of Polish Theatre; A Feminist Research Project*—led by Joanna Krakowska, was carried out at the Zbigniew Raszeński Theatre Institute in Warsaw between 2012 and 2017 (National Programme for the Development of the Humanities, project no. 11H 12 0379 81). Since 2022, the second phase of the project—*HyPaTia: A Women’s History of Polish Theatre; Continuation*—has been underway, led by Katarzyna Kułakowska and carried out at the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences (project no. 11H 20 0023 88), within the framework of which this article has been written.

contexts, and its theoretical foundations, offering the first comprehensive reflection on *HyPaTia* as one of the most significant theatre-historical undertakings of recent years.

The first phase of the project led to three publications in 2018: an anthology of women's drama—*Rodzaju żeńskiego: Antologia dramatów* (Of Feminine Gender: An Anthology of Plays); a collection of women's writings on theatre—(*Nie*) *świadomość teatru: Wypowiedzi i rozmowy* ([Un]Consciousness of Theatre: Writings and Conversations); and a statistical report—*Agora: Statystyki* (Agora: Statistics), presenting data on theatre institutions from a gender perspective. Additionally, we created a multimedia digital archive, at [www.hypatia.pl](http://www.hypatia.pl), which includes a library of over 600 digitized plays by women, many of them unpublished, dating as far back as the late nineteenth century. The archive also features programmatic texts, biographical records, a video collection of interviews with women working professionally in theatre (*Notations*),<sup>4</sup> and a comprehensive chronicle of theatre events.

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Ten women. Scholars of theatre and culture. Of different ages. At different points in their lives—personal and professional. Three pregnant, and soon holding babies to their breasts. One on the verge of defending her PhD dissertation, two working towards their university Habilitation degrees. All of them bent over the heavy tomes of the *Almanac of the Polish Stage*, and the even thicker *Theatre in Poland*, to compose a narrative of post-1944 Polish theatre by tracing the footprints of women's contributions, presence, and creative work.<sup>5</sup> Ten women browse, skim, slide their fingers down the lists of productions and theatre management teams, hunting for names of female directors, playwrights, artistic leaders. Some names give no clue as to gender. To be verified. Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine. Fifty-nine shows directed by women out of the 254 staged in Polish repertory theatres during the 1950/51 season. They count, lose track, start over. Again, and again. Pregnancy nausea doesn't help.

<sup>4</sup> All 27 existing recordings are available on the project's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@hypatia3315>. In selecting interviewees, we place particular emphasis on diversity in terms of public recognition, professional achievements, and workplace. In the interviews, we address topics such as family, education, and professional experience, as well as women's roles within theatre institutions. Our main goal is to portray the interviewees within a complex historical, cultural, and political context.

<sup>5</sup> Data for *Agora: Statystyki* and *Agora: Kronika teatru polskiego 1944–2014* were compiled by the team based on 49 volumes of the *Almanach Sceny Polskiej* (Polish Stage Almanac), covering the theatre seasons from 1959/60 to 2007/08, as well as the electronic version of the *Almanach Sceny Polskiej 1944–1959*, and two volumes of *Teatr w Polsce* (Theatre in Poland), which document the 2008/09 and 2009/10 seasons. In a few cases, additional archival research was necessary.

Their murmuring over the 51 volumes hums through ten different workplaces. Their spines ache, curved into arches, stiff necks beg for breaks, massages, release. Best not to stop counting—danger lurks in losing the thread. Out of 564 productions staged during the 2009/10 season, only 58 scripts were authored by women. Can this be true? Once again, to be double-checked. With even sharper focus. With vigilance of the highest order. “All work is based on watchfulness.”<sup>6</sup>

These words belong to Madame Ouspensky, whose real name was Sophie Grigorievna Volochine (1878–1961), a key proponent of the teachings of Gurdjieff, a champion of the Great Doing—a particular state of mind and approach to bearing witness to ideas—a notion to which we shall return. The Great Work of the *HyPaTia* team continues: we comb through archives, digitize, count, gather, and systematize—the everyday mundane and repetitive work, which remains invisible and hardly ever brings joy, and yet inevitably impacts our bodies and drains us of energy. In the Polish language there is an expression that encapsulates this kind of painstaking labor: “mrówcza praca” (ant-like work). The tedious activities of the *HyPaTia* team correspond with the Polish philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina’s understanding of “krzątactwo” (everyday tending), which she explores in her thought-provoking book *Szczeliny istnienia* (Cracks in Existence):

Everyday tending belongs to the primary categories through which presence in the world is grasped. It is a mode of being in everydayness. For birds, humans, insects—without exception. ... We belong to the busy-tending beings—and by that fact, we enter into everydayness. Just like the ant and the dung beetle.<sup>7</sup>

For Brach-Czaina, this kind of labor dominates our lives, although it is rarely discussed or appreciated:

The peculiar form in which most of our existence takes place—everyday life—has paradoxical qualities: brutally concrete and tangible, yet it goes unnoticed. It combines intrusive reality with evanescence. What could it mean that everyday reality reveals itself to us as so insistently present, and at the same time unnoticeable? As if, within it “is” were mixed with “is not”.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Robert S. de Roppe, *Conversations with Madame Ouspensky 1939–40 at Lyne* (San Francisco: Far West Press, 1974), <https://duversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Conversations-with.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo eFKA, 1999), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, 64.

Drawing from Brach-Czaina, the *HyPaTia* team defines itself as a “busy-tending” team and poses questions about the meaning of (women’s) existence by engaging in and reflecting on “everyday care”. Since the beginning of the project, the core team has expanded with new members, but the mission and purpose of the work remain unchanged.

The focus on female theatre artists—identified and recognized by society as women on the biological grounds of their body types—requires explanation considering the development in conceptualizations of sex/gender in social and cultural studies initiated by queer artistic practices and the influential work of Judith Butler.<sup>9</sup> While we attempt to retrieve the history of women’s presence in theatre, our understating of sex/gender is not essentialist. To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, women’s art interests us not because it was created by people who “were born women,” but rather who “became women.”<sup>10</sup> Sex/gender is “a social performance,” not an original source of identity, but ceaselessly, day in day out, cited and imitated and so turned into embodied reality. What fascinates us about female involvement in the arts is the way in which women’s artistic practice has been inevitably conditioned by the specific experience of becoming a woman and consequently by the modes of being in the world as a woman. If traces of women’s theatre practice are subjected to implicit mechanisms of erasure and forgetting, which force them out of the archives and the predominant theatre discourse, something more is forfeited than just random examples of theatre art—heterogeneity of life, epistemological and emotional difference, social, political and artistic alternatives, which could refashion our world.

Women’s theatre practice encompasses, but is not synonymous with, feminist theatre practice when the latter is identified according to Lizbeth Goodman’s definition as being theatre that “aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women’s roles and/or to effect social change, and which is informed in this project by broadly feminist ideas.”<sup>11</sup> In the United Kingdom and the USA, for example, feminist theatre emerged as a specific counter-cultural formation motivated by the political and social unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, whereas in Poland there was no second-wave feminism, except for single instances in the visual arts (such as the work of Natalia LL, a Polish intermedia artist and conceptualist).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 283.

<sup>11</sup> Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), 34.

<sup>12</sup> This refers to the work *Consumer Art*, which Natalia LL created in the form of photographic sessions presented in several versions. The most well-known realization of this series consists of 20 juxtaposed photographs depicting a girl with a banana, evoking unmistakable erotic associations. See Izabela Kowalczyk, “Od feministycznych

The early forms of Polish feminist theatre developed in the interwar period were completely forfeited in the decades that followed. Therefore, our project is not exclusively related to the trajectory of theatre directly linked with feminist ideas and activism, but rather our aim is to shed light on the genealogy of gender discrimination in Polish theatre institutions and history.

Our findings demonstrate that women actively participated in the theatre sector throughout the twentieth century, assuming the different roles necessary for play production; however, they were always in the minority. Women's representation in theatre (in jobs other than acting) does not match women's representation in society, and women's presence in theatre history by no means reflects the actual situation. This shows that in order to study women's theatre input we need to pose questions not only about social and cultural mechanisms that hinder women's presence in theatre institutions, but also about social and cultural mechanisms that eliminate even this limited presence from theatre history—which make us forget their names and works. As our research documenting women's prolific and diversified activities in theatre demonstrates, women's discursive absence can no longer be put down to their alleged real absence; rather, it results from the ways in which theatre archives are created and accessed. In Foucauldian terms, in order to retrieve and understand traces of women's presence left in supposedly objective archives, we must ask what becomes part of the archives (what has been accepted or touched by power/knowledge) and also what we want to find in the archives (what is desired by power/knowledge) when writing so-called conventional (traditional) theatre history.<sup>13</sup> Which names, texts, and performances become objects of positive selection, i.e. to be cherished and remembered, and which become objects of negative selection, i.e. to be forgotten and in the end erased? And why?

In his thought-provoking article on types of forgetting, Paul Connerton<sup>14</sup> introduces “repressive erasure,” which appears most clearly in revolutionary and totalitarian regimes. However, Connerton argues that “repressive erasure need not always take malign forms,” meaning that it is not always about pulling statues down and removing names from the records. He claims that “it can be encrypted covertly and without apparent violence,” and yet still just as successfully support and replicate the master narrative. While, in the twentieth century,

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interwencji do postfeminizmu,” in *Matki-Polki, Chłopcy i Cyborgi... Sztuka i feminizm w Polsce* (Poznań: Galeria Miejska “Arsenał,” 2010), 11–20.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, “28 January 1976,” in *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 135.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting,” *Memory Studies* 1, issue 1 (2008): 59–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083889>.

women were not legally forbidden to write or stage dramatic texts, and thus did not suffer “apparent violence,” they undoubtedly experienced more hidden forms of oppression in theatre. Likewise, while it was not legally forbidden to include their works in theatre history, more encrypted mechanisms of repressive erasure guaranteed their almost utter obliteration.

Having gathered numerous accounts of women’s theatre practice, we analyzed them with the purpose of uncovering these “encrypted mechanisms,” which had for decades so effectively sustained and fortified women-free historical discourse in Poland. For the clarity of our argument, we divided women’s theatre input into three domains, although they remain tightly interwoven: the direction, the theory, and the drama. Within each of these domains we identified principal governing rules that undermine women’s achievements and sentence them to oblivion. Those rules are: the status rule, the manifesto rule, and the drama-worth-staging rule.

## The God-Director: The Status Rule

In Poland, it was the theatre that became the primary stage for the #MeToo movement, initiated by women from the Teatr Bagatela in Kraków who, in 2019, succeeded in having the manager removed after accusing him of sexual violence.<sup>15</sup> By breaking their silence, the women of Bagatela sparked a broad public debate about sexual abuse, mechanisms of violence, and theatre’s entanglement in patriarchal structures, and also about production conditions and labor rights. This conversation was further fueled by subsequent revelations of power abuses and violations within the Polish theatre sector, with ongoing discussions of these critical issues continuing into the COVID-19 pandemic era. It was during the lockdown that “what had been silenced within the theatre community gained resonance . . . as if the closed stages opened a space for revising the dominant narrative that had long shaped the history of Polish theatre.”<sup>16</sup>

“Is violence concealed behind the grand, narcissistic egos of artists whose actions are carefully shielded by an outdated system? Or do actors simply want someone to push them to their limits using brutal methods?”<sup>17</sup>—Thus asks Iga

<sup>15</sup> See Monika Kwaśniewska, “Dlaczego przestały milczeć? Dlaczego zostały wysłuchane? Afektywna analiza #metoo w Teatrze Bagatela”, *Didaskalia*, no. 159 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.34762/8zix-gg53>.

<sup>16</sup> Katarzyna Kalinowska and Katarzyna Kułakowska “«Zmiana—teraz?» Zakończenie”, in *Teatr w pandemii*, ed. Katarzyna Kułakowska and Katarzyna Kalinowska (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2021), 225.

<sup>17</sup> Iga Dzieciuchowicz, *Teatr: Rodzina patologiczna* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Agora, 2025), 358.



Dzieciuchowicz in her harrowing reportage book *Teatr: Rodzina patologiczna* (Theatre: A Dysfunctional Family), which offers further testimony of the abuse of power and position by legends of Polish theatre: charismatic leaders, primarily men (so-called masters such as Krystian Lupa, Jerzy Jarocki, Jerzy Grotowski, Mikołaj Grabowski, Włodzimierz Staniewski), although she does not spare women—either (including Maja Kleczewska and Monika Strzępka). Theatre scholar Monika Kwaśniewska poses the same questions,<sup>18</sup> and suggests that the answers lie deep in the past. She turns to Konstantin Stanislavski's 1908 essay,<sup>19</sup> which, in her view, continues to exert significant influence on work ethics in theatre and legitimizes abuses towards actors.<sup>20</sup> The scholar explicitly refers to Stanislavski's text as a “manual of exploitation and self-exploitation,”<sup>21</sup> rightly identifying within it the roots of enduring beliefs about both the status of the director and the obligation of the acting ensemble to submit to “his” vision. (“All are directed by one, that is, the director.”<sup>22</sup>) These ideas sustain a broader conception of theatre as a sanctified realm—“a temple of art,”<sup>23</sup> or even “a paradise on earth.”<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely the modernist concept of the director as a godlike figure—understood as an unquestionable authority, even an authoritarian source of power, invention, and intellect—that constitutes the most conspicuous manifestation of the status rule policing the memory and history of theatre directing. This model is embedded in a gendered logic: the director is traditionally male, and the actor, by contrast, feminized—subordinate, pliable, and destined to serve.

This modernist figure has posed a major challenge for women working as theatre directors (for instance, the well-known director Lidia Zamkow<sup>25</sup> recalled that at the beginning of her career male actors used to brazenly read newspapers during rehearsals), but it also casts a strong shadow over the memory of female

<sup>18</sup> See Monika Kwaśniewska, “Odpowiedzialnie usytuowana krytyka afirmatywna: #MeToo w badaniach teatralnych,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 72, issue 3 (2023): 169–196, <https://doi.org/10.36744/pt.1383>.

<sup>19</sup> See Konstanty Stanisławski, *Etyka*, trans. Jadwiga Żmijewska (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Monika Kwaśniewska, “Jaka etyka?”, in *Nowe wrażliwości w sztukach performatywnych, teatrze i filmie: Skrzynka z teoriami*, ed. Agata Adamiecka et al. (Warszawa: Akademia Teatralna im. Aleksandra Zelwerowicza, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Kwaśniewska, “Jaka etyka?”, 242.

<sup>22</sup> Stanisławski, *Etyka*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Stanisławski, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Stanisławski, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Lidia Zamkow (1918–1982)—Polish actress, theatre director, artistic director, and educator. She studied acting at the Państwowy Instytut Sztuki Teatralnej (State Institute of Theatre Arts) in Warsaw before World War II. After the war, she worked in major theatres across Poland, including the Teatr Słowackiego and the Stary Teatr in Kraków, the Teatr Wybrzeże in Gdańsk, and the Teatr Dramatyczny and Teatr Studio in Warsaw. She also taught at the Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna (State Higher School of Theatre) in Kraków.

directors and turns them into freaks for whom, by definition, there is no place in the master narrative, except in the footnotes.

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The history of the Teatr Ateneum in Warsaw did not begin in the autumn of 1930 when Stefan Jaracz took over as the artistic director but two seasons earlier when Jadwiga Górka and Mieczysław Szpakiewicz, together with their company, *Placówka Żywego Słowa* [The Living Word Ensemble], took charge of the theatre. They were followed by the one-year term of Maria Strońska during the 1929/1930 season.<sup>26</sup>

Thus writes Barbara Michalczyk-Zwolińska, a researcher from the *HyPaTia* team, when asking why these two female artistic directors disappeared from collective memory if it was not Jaracz but Strońska, with her vision of a theatre for workers, who created and cultivated a loyal audience for Ateneum—a community that became its backbone.

This is not the only erasure of women's artistic leadership during the interwar period. The same happened to the Scena i Lutnia Robotnicza, led by Antonina Sokolicz (1919–1921), the Teatr Rybałt of Stanisława Wysocka (1925/26), the aforementioned *Placówka Żywego Słowa*, co-directed by Janina Górka (1927–1929),<sup>27</sup> and the Teatr/Studio im. Żeromskiego of Irena Solska (1932–1933).<sup>28</sup> Two names, Juliusz Osterwa and Leon Schiller, dominated overwhelmingly in the theatre history of the interwar years. But how and why did the memory of Stanisława Wysocka disappear in their shadows?

A theatre educator, director, and leader of her own theatres in Warsaw (Teatr w Pomarańczarni and Teatr Rybałt), with her vision of a “theatre of the future”<sup>29</sup> Stanisława Wysocka charted an undeniably reformist course. Her modern and holistic approach to actor training, her keen awareness of the symbiotic relationship between artistic and organizational-technical dimensions of stage work, and her sensitivity to the needs of a new, democratizing audience—these

<sup>26</sup> See Barbara Michalczyk, “Ateneum Marii Strońskiej, sezon 1929/1930”, *Didaskalia*, no. 169/170 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.34762/vn78-Q927>.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Michalczyk, “Teatr dla robotników a utwory romantyczne—Placówka Żywego Słowa (1927–1929)”, *Performer*, June 13, 2022, <https://grotowski.net/performer/performer-23/teatr-dla-robotnikow>.

<sup>28</sup> See Barbara Michalczyk, *Od edukacji do eksperymentu: Warszawskie teatry dla robotników prowadzone przez kobiety w dwudziestolecie międzywojennym* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2025).

<sup>29</sup> See Stanisława Wysocka, *Teatr przyszłości*, ed. Zbigniew Wilecki (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1973).

innovative contributions have become anything but minor footnotes in the story of Polish theatre.<sup>30</sup>

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Another example: There is sufficient evidence to claim that “women played a key role in the emergence and development of collective creation,”<sup>31</sup> and yet, as Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit point out, this involvement has been glaringly overlooked in historiography. This is due to the workings of the status rule, in this case operating within the seemingly neutral framework of copyright law—a framework that, upon closer inspection, proves to be deeply gendered. The gender bias of copyright law becomes particularly evident when we examine the experiences of women in the first Polish devised theatre ensembles—those emerging from post-Grotowski and post-Gardzienice traditions.<sup>32</sup>

History has preserved the names of the male leaders of these groups while erasing their female co-founders and collaborators who not only co-created the performances, but also shaped the methods of work and the understanding of theatre as a site of social transformation.<sup>33</sup> In devising theatre, authorship cannot be reduced to legal rights over the final product, for what is collectively created extends far beyond the performance itself. The method—the shared, value-driven process that defines the ensemble’s work—is equally a collective creation, one whose ownership is often disrespected or outright appropriated.

Moreover, copyright frameworks fail to recognize the invisible, yet essential work that women so often perform, involving emotional, logistical, and organizational functions: maintaining the cohesion of the group, securing a safe working environment, building the ensemble’s ethos, and co-developing its artistic methodologies.

As Ian Watson, British theatre scholar and performance theorist, observes, in such communities “there is no separation between personal and professional life, because how theatre is made takes precedence over what is made.”<sup>34</sup> The law does not accommodate this holistic mode of creation. Instead, it privileges

<sup>30</sup> See Barbara Michalczyk, “Warszawskie teatry Stanisławy Wysockiej”, *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 70, no. 1 (2021): 155–176, <https://doi.org/10.36744/pt.427>.

<sup>31</sup> Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit, eds., *Women, Collective Creation, and Devised Performance: The Rise of Women Theatre Artists in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

<sup>32</sup> See Katarzyna Kułakowska, Katarzyna Kalinowska, Katarzyna Skrzypek, and Aleksandra Wiśniewska, “What is Mine in This Polyphony? Female Authority and Authorship in Polish Devised Theatre, Seen from a Perspective of Feminist Theory and Cultural Economics” [submitted].

<sup>33</sup> See Aldona Jawłowska, *Więcej niż teatr* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Ian Watson, *Towards a Third Theatre: Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret* (London: Routledge, 1993), 21.

a model of authorship that aligns with the figure of the solitary male genius—leaving the perspectives and needs of women creators not only unacknowledged, but systematically excluded.

And with that exclusion comes erasure from theatre history itself. The creative and reproductive work of women such as Kamila Klamut (Teatr ZAR), Anna Zubrzycki (Teatr Pieśni Kozła), Zofia Bartoszewicz (Teatr Węgajty), Joanna Holcgreber (Centrum Praktyk Teatralnych Gardzienice), Dorota Porowska (Stowarzyszenie Teatralne Chorea), and many, many others, remains largely unrecognized.<sup>35</sup> Their absence from the legal structures of recognition ensures their absence from the historical memory of Polish theatre.

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Furthermore, the statistics we have collated demonstrate that women more often work in peripheral (either geographically or institutionally) and thus less prestigious theatres, while historical narrative privileges well-established institutions in central locations, such as Warsaw or Kraków. For example, in the random seasons of 1978/79, 1988/89, and 1998/99, all productions on the main stages of the most prestigious Polish theatres—the National Theatre in Warsaw and the Sławy Teatr in Kraków—were directed by men, whereas women directors only had access to more intimate, experimental spaces. On the other hand, theatre history is silent about tremendous post-war initiatives undertaken by women to bring theatre into small towns, where potential audiences generally had less formal education and little familiarity with the stage. In this case, the status rule works against women through the value attributed to differing theatre spaces. To make matters worse, female directors tend to engage in puppet theatre and children's theatre, which is also marginalized in favor of the dramatic theatre dominated by male artists. The percentage of plays directed by women in dramatic and puppet theatres, respectively, for the aforementioned seasons were: 12% and 25%, 12% and 23%, and 11% and 22%.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, it is important to note the other ways of acquiring status as a director that have remained relatively inaccessible for women. Firstly, the master narrative privileges acclaimed, renowned artists who have won prestigious awards. The problem is that women rarely sit on relevant juries and other award-giving

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<sup>35</sup> See Kara W. Swanson, "Intellectual Property and Gender: Reflections on Accomplishments and Methodology", *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law*, no. 24 (2016): 175–198, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2720354>.

<sup>36</sup> Joanna Krakowska, ed., *Agora: Statystyki* (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2018), 14–15.

bodies, so perhaps it should not come as a surprise that they rarely pick up any prizes. On average, women have constituted 20% of jury members for various theatre awards and festivals.<sup>37</sup> The annual Konrad Swinarski Award established in 1976, which is the most prestigious prize for a theatre director in Poland, was first granted to a woman as late as in 2017.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, a theatre director has to campaign for his or her status by constant self-presentation, underlining his or her own artistic ideas, originality, and importance, preferably through the form of the manifesto. And this brings us to the second domain—theory.

## The Constant Uncertainty: The Manifesto Rule

The principle that muffles female voices in a theory of theatre is the manifesto rule, which governs metatheatrical discourse. This rule appreciates authoritative, categorizing, “closed” texts, most often written in the form of artistic manifestos, programs, creeds, utopias, and theories, i.e., all genres of expression most frequently used by men. Therefore, the image of contemporary theatrical reflection is consolidated as the domain of men—modernist artists, intellectuals, charismatic thinkers, or demiurges.

Female metatheatrical reflection has had different attributes. Firstly, theatre women rarely spoke unasked, articulating their views in conversations or when invited to comment on specific topics. They preferred intimate forms of expression such as diaries, memoirs, letters, or interviews. Secondly, women artists tend to use their own practice as a starting point from which to propose any wider theories, and not the other way around. Usually, their statements can be seen as a testimony of their holistic experience, i.e., they are memories—more or less problematized. As a result, feminine texts are often non-linear, their cause-and-effect relationships are broken, they are filled with emotions, and they demonstrate different feminine sensitivities determined by the experience of living as a “woman.”

A collection of women’s texts on theatre, published as part of our project, is an attempt to illustrate the specificity of female presence/absence in metatheatrical discourse. These female voices are varied, not subject to conventions

<sup>37</sup> We considered the eight theatre awards and festivals that we believe to be the most significant. Among them, the oldest (the Festiwal Teatrów Północy in Toruń) was first held in 1960, while the most recent one (the R@Port Festival of Polish Contemporary Plays in Gdynia) was launched in 2006. See: “Jury wybranych festiwali teatralnych,” in *Agora: Statystyki*, 238–268.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Augustynowicz won in 2016/17 for *The Marriage* by Gombrowicz. Maja Kleczewska won in 2017/18 for *Under Pressure*.

of program statements or a drive to categorism, and, finally: they grow out of personal experience.

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Zofia Solarzowa (1902–1988) was an activist in the Polish folk movement, an organizer of folk universities, and a theatre educator. She was also a pioneer of devising theatre, which she called theatre “from the head.”<sup>39</sup> Alongside her artistic work in local communities during the interwar and early postwar periods in Poland, she felt a strong need to write—and she wrote a lot: essays, memoirs, and diaries. None of her texts take the form of manifestos or methodological treatises. Instead, they are records of specific theatrical and song-based projects, rooted in the everyday life of real communities. Through action, they bring to life the values, ideals, needs, and dreams of those communities.

I know that earning trust is no easy matter, and that it is especially difficult in an environment like this one—filled with strong-willed souls, exuberant individualities, and restless temperaments that make up the Białodunajew team as a whole. But I also realize that only persistent, painstaking work, only becoming truly close to these people, getting to know their most secret thoughts, can help bring about the changes that are already beginning to be observed in them. I deeply wish that these changes, becoming more and more visible, would reinforce my faith in the effectiveness and value of my educational efforts, so that I could one day say with complete calm and confidence: I trust them—they are my friends. The whole difficulty of our work lies precisely in this constant uncertainty—whether what exists today will still be there tomorrow, whether the smile someone gives you is sincere, and whether, out of jealousy or wounded pride, someone might not sabotage the work.<sup>40</sup>

The quote comes from her book *Skalni ludzie* (People of the Rocks), which contains memories from the time she spent working in the community of Białą Dunajec, where she led a folk performance group for over a decade (1953–1969). Gaining the trust of the Polish Highlander community required her full immersion in its social culture. This is implicitly evidenced in her writings, which reveal a creative approach of being *with the people* through theatre—an anti-colonial practice embracing the peasant community’s perspective. At the same time, she

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<sup>39</sup> Zofia Solarzowa, “Teatr «z głowy»”, *Prosto z Mostu*, no. 35 (1935): 2.

<sup>40</sup> Zofia Solarzowa, *Skalni ludzie* (Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1967), 52–53.

maintained a conscious artistic autonomy—accepting difference without losing her own identity as an artist and facilitator. According to the anthropologist Roch Sulima, Zofia Solarzowa's writings “are a unique record of what was done, not of what was meant to be done.”<sup>41</sup>

The way women tended to theorize theatrical practice resembles the method adopted by Brach-Czaina in her philosophical work; she writes: “when, in resignation, we admit that our everyday tending amounts to nothing, we begin to see that it holds everything.”<sup>42</sup> Here “everyday tending,” humble busyness that most often goes unnoticed, becomes the point of entry to grasp the meaning of existence itself. It is not through abstract categories and grand quantifiers that the mode and sense of being in the world can be described and understood, but rather by everyday, ordinary practices, which remain overlooked and disregarded.

The aforementioned Madame Ouspensky wrote of two distinct planes of existence, which cannot be traversed simultaneously: “However far you go on the one you will not reach the other.”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps this very notion helps to illuminate the specificity of female metatheatrical reflection—markedly different from the dominant male tradition. Women more often engage in work rooted in the relational, the unpredictable, the embodied, and the processual—thus inherently imperfect and unresolved. Like Peggy Phelan, an American performance theorist, they value what is ephemeral and unnamed, resisting the imperative of visibility in favor of affirming the ungraspable.<sup>44</sup> They are immersed in the Great Doing. Rather than fixating on outcomes, they prioritize the process; instead of seeking recognition within institutional hierarchies, they construct theatre as a space of human relation. Ultimately, they pursue what matters to them in experience—even if society is not prepared for it, and labels them, dismissively, as a “madwoman in the attic.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Roch Sulima, “Jedność sztuki i życia”, in Zofia Solarzowa, *Życie spełnione: Pisma literackie i społeczne*, ed. Wojciech Solarz (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Promni, 2015), 7.

<sup>42</sup> Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, 80.

<sup>43</sup> Robert S. de Roppe, *Conversations with Madame Ouspensky*.

<sup>44</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 5.

<sup>45</sup> The title of the now-classic work of feminist literary criticism published in 1979. Written by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the book explores the literary output and biographies of English-language—primarily Victorian—women writers such as George Eliot, Mary Shelley, the Brontë sisters, Emily Dickinson, and Jane Austen. The authors argue that in a patriarchal culture—especially in past centuries—women who engaged in creative work were often perceived as pathological, their artistic agency inherently threatening to the social order. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

## The Madwoman in the Attic: The Drama-Worth-Staging Rule

The manifesto rule resembles the drama-worth-staging rule that undermines women's achievements in the field of dramaturgy. This rule sentences female playwrights to oblivion because it values texts that meet the criteria established over a centuries-long process by male theatre artists. If female playwrights undertake denigrated topics or experiment with forms of expression, thus reflecting and manifesting their gendered lived experience, then in an androcentric culture such artistic attempts are deemed peripheral.

For a long time, drama has been considered a "male" form of art: men wrote, directed and reviewed; women acted. Kerry Powell argues that the gender of the playwright significantly influenced the popularity and reception of a drama in Victorian society. It was assumed that for "natural" reasons women were "unfit for playwriting" because by their very essence they lacked an "analytical mind," "technical male intelligence" or "deep humour."<sup>46</sup> This assumption seems disturbingly widespread in European theatre history. Comments by interwar theatre critics aimed at Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska provide a telling example. After the premier of her play *Typ A* (Type A), an influential intellectualist, Antoni Słonimski, slammed the women artists behind the production:

A woman wrote it, a woman directed it [Zofia Modrzewska], a women made the set design [Teresa Roszkowska]. Everything is of female gender. . . . Only there is no meaning, because meaning is of male gender, there is no wit, because it is also male, but there is boredom of female gender.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, when Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, another leading voice of the interwar intelligentsia in Poland, wanted to express his appreciation for another play by Morozowicz-Szczepkowska, *Walący się dom* (A House that's Falling apart), he noted that it was written "with talent and passion," and that it "surprises with a masculine touch upon the subject."<sup>48</sup>

Between 1924 and 1939, the National Theatre in Warsaw staged only 11 plays written by female playwrights, representing merely 5% of its repertoire. Meanwhile, the substantial body of work by Morozowicz-Szczepkowska alone refutes

<sup>46</sup> Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 77–94.

<sup>47</sup> Antoni Słonimski, "Typ A", in *Gwałt na Melpomenie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1982), 283–284.

<sup>48</sup> Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, "Kiedyż się zawali?", in *Murzyn zrobił... Wrażeń teatralnych seria siedemnasta* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze "Rój", 1939), 240.



the claim that women did not write dramas. During this period, numerous women were actively engaged in writing for the stage, including Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska (the only one whose plays achieved real popularity), Maria Gerson-Dąbrowska, Marcelina Grabowska, Aniela Kallas, Zofia Nałkowska, Stanisława Przybyszewska, Magdalena Samozwaniec, Antonina Sokolicz, Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina, Maria Jehanne Wielopolska, and Anna Zahorska. Our research into women's participation in Polish theatre life in the twentieth century shows that, while the number of plays authored by women fluctuated on Polish stages, it remained consistently and strikingly low. For instance, throughout the transition period—from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s—across all types of theatres, the total number of plays by women playwrights that were staged did not exceed 50 per season. In dramatic theatres specifically, they accounted for no more than 10% of the total repertoire, mirroring the similarly low proportion of productions directed by women. Quantitative analysis thus clearly exposes the systemic marginalization of women within the field of playwriting.

From the *HyPaTia* collection of dramatic texts written by women between the end of the nineteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century, some well-known and some not, we selected a dozen that were eventually published in an anthology, under the title *Rodzaju żeńskiego*—a direct reference to Słonimski's damning critique of Morozowicz-Szczepkowska's play. Choosing the plays to be included was not an easy process. In the introduction Agata Chałupnik asks: "Not all of the texts we discussed were good. . . . But what, in fact, does 'good' mean?" She further explains the criteria we adopted in selecting the dramas for publication: "We considered each of them important for one reason or another. Because they resonated with us, in one way or another, and with the world we live in."<sup>49</sup> Rather than follow a disciplining and supposedly objective "dramaworth-staging rule" we prioritized our own emotions stirred up by the texts we read. We focused on the plays that engaged us in honest, empathetic, but often most difficult discussions about issues we considered meaningful for the lived experience of being a "woman," for example: emancipation, revolution, marriage, silence, and female revisions and utopias. While working on and editing the collection, we did not attempt to mask our ideological positions and personal interests; instead, we owned them and upon them we built "our" history of women's playwriting. This methodological perspective implies conscious rejection of numerous texts written by women who firmly supported the dominant social hierarchy and perpetuated harming racial, class, or gender stereotypes:

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<sup>49</sup> Agata Chałupnik, "Rodzaju żeńskiego: Wstęp," in *Rodzaju żeńskiego: Antologia dramatów*, ed. Agata Chałupnik and Agata Łuksza (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2018), 14–15.

for example, in missionary dramas that promoted the unconditional superiority of the white race and European Christian culture, or in children's plays that forced restrictive gender norms on their young audience.

The research and methodological assumptions underpinning our study impart the qualities of an “unconventional history” to the history of women in Polish theatre that we propose. This concept was initially introduced in a December 2002 thematic issue of *History and Theory*, under this exact title, as a way of practicing history—or narrating the past—that deliberately challenges and departs from the foundational principles of so-called traditional historiography.<sup>50</sup> These principles include the cult of fact, the requirement of objectivity, the cause-effect rule, and the pursuit of the truth. In a Polish reflection on historiography, Ewa Domańska, historian and theorist specializing in historiography, has further explored the differences and interdependencies between academic and unconventional histories. Domańska points out that an unconventional history “readily engages with emotion, empathy, and sincerity, which are employed not only as methodological tools but also serve to indicate the narrator’s positionality—often one who treats historical writing as a site of ideological struggle against various forms of oppression.”<sup>51</sup> We argue that recovering women’s theatre history requires a shift from the category of “truth” and other well-established, allegedly objective, rules in theatre historiography, such as the drama worth-staging rule, to an unashamedly subjective value of sincerity. Furthermore, we imagine this endeavor as a form of political intervention into the existing gender order and a critique of naturalized gender inequalities, which can facilitate socio-political voices. The aim is both to restore lost female voices in theatre history and to influence social awareness of women’s role in theatre. By shedding light on forgotten or never-printed women’s texts, for example, *Rodzaju żeńskiego* can lead to radical expansion in the field of Polish drama and draw attention to the variety of themes and the gravity of problems raised in women’s playwriting.

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Unmasking the mechanisms that have historically consigned women’s creative contributions to oblivion enables the recovery of the female voice in Polish theatre and the identification of its distinctive characteristics. In this way, it is possible to bring to the center what has been displaced from academic history,

<sup>50</sup> Brian Fay, “Unconventional History”, *History and Theory* 41, issue 4 (2002): 1–6.

<sup>51</sup> Ewa Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne: Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2006), 54–55.

and one of many conceivable unconventional histories of Polish theatre can be produced. This type of historical work challenges the stability of existing artistic and academic hierarchies and calls into question the current paradigms according to which theatrical events are documented, described, and ordered. From this perspective, *HyPaTia*'s "great doing" or "everyday tending" becomes a political act rooted in a broader fight for justice in the field of memory.



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