ON GUILT AND GHOSTS

O winie i duchach
Abstract: This paper reviews Grzegorz Niziołek thought-provoking book *The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust* (London: Methuen Drama Press, 2019), and the key questions and issues it addresses. Focusing on Polish perspectives, theatrical representations and performative reactions to the extermination of the Jews during WWII, the book analyzes six decades of theatrical creation. Within this scheme, the victims and perpetrators are casted in the role of actors, while the Polish people are allotted the role of passive spectators, witnesses to the atrocity. This review sheds light on the ethical and aesthetical implications of Niziołek’s study, by attending to the material aspects of the catastrophe, and its theatrical representations. It seeks to recuperate and integrate the Jewish perspective into the theatrical analysis.

Keywords: Polish theater after 1945, Holocaust, Shoah, *Dybbuk*, Szymon An-sky


Słowa kluczowe: teatr polski po 1945, Holokaust, Zagłada, *Dybbuk*, Szymon An-ski

In 1988, Andrzej Wajda staged Szymon An-sky’s (the pen name of Shlomo Zanvil Rappoport (1863–1920) signature play *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds* in Polish, at the Old Theater (Stary Teatr) in Kraków. This was not the first time that the play had been staged in Poland. The Vilna Troupe had premiered *The Dybbuk* in Warsaw on December 1920.¹ Since then, An-sky’s drama has been produced more than any other Jewish play – in different languages and venues across the globe – attracting massive audiences.²

Among the *Dybbuk’s* most famous productions, its Hebrew performance stands out. It was staged by Habima under the Russian Armenian director Yevgeny Vakhtangov, with scenography by Nathan Altman and music by Yoel Engel. This production, which debuted in Moscow on January 13, 1922, was renowned for its theatrical rendering of the traditional East-European Jewish community, its folklore and daily habits: many dramatic scenes featured religious rituals, folk songs, tunes, local stories, and social conventions customary to the Jewish life that – within two decades – would vanish forever from the European cultural and social scene.


The Jewish world depicted in An-sky’s play perished in World War II, but Habima continued to stage *The Dybbuk* until 1965.³ Freddie Rokem accounts for the widespread staging of the play by pointing to the cultural relevance of the figure of the dybbuk—a distressed spirit of a dead person that speaks through the mouth of a living person in terms of the cultural significance of the dybbuk: “After the Shoah,” Rokem explains, “there were six million potential dybbuks haunting the Jewish people, the state of Israel, as well as all of Europe, and maybe other parts of the world, too—constantly speaking through survivors.”⁴ In other words, Habima’s performance, from this point of view, transformed the sounds and images of these departed Jewish communities into a public lamentation on the extermination of European Jewry.

Polish performances of An-sky’s play offer a different interpretation of the staged drama, and of the figure of the dybbuk.⁵ Wajda’s 1988 theatrical adaptation of An-sky’s play featured many Polish allusions, mainly by way of staging visual and dramatic images from Polish art and culture. Some twenty years later, in 2004, *The Dybbuk* was once again staged in Poland, this time by Krzysztof Warlikowski. Like Wajda, Warlikowski’s production also emphasized the Polish loss by showing melancholic images of the perished Jewish world. Centering on the Polish audience and their response to the staged events, these performances drew on a bygone Jewish world in order to reflect upon postwar and post-Shoah sociopolitical transformation processes that Polish society had undergone since WWII. Specifically, as Grzegorz Niziołek argues in his book, these performances are examples of the way “Polish theatre, perhaps more than any other area of artistic creativity, became the space of powerful declarations relating to collective memory.”⁶ Polish theater, according to Niziołek, reflected the profound tension

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between mourning and melancholia; between remembering and forgetting. On the one hand, Niziołek explains, the theater portrays Polish society as one that is profoundly affected by historical experience, always ready to grieve. However, on the other hand, the theater has accused Polish society of suffering from amnesia, depicting the past as an enigma.\(^7\)

The figure of the dybbuk, as Zuzanna Dziuban avers, conveys the relational encounter of contemporary Poles with Jews, construed in their absence.\(^8\) Rather than hypostatize the memory of Jewish life and victims, Dziuban argues, the figure of the dybbuk in contemporary Polish culture epitomizes how the past haunts the Polish present. Polish performances of *The Dybbuk* thus demonstrate how theatrical representations of the past do not only refer to the ways in which we perceive bygone worlds, but also cast light on the present: on the ways we give voice to, and conceive of, events that shape our immediate presence. Through the creativity of theater and the fictionalization of history, the past is connected to the present.

Grzegorz Niziołek’s *The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust* (translated by Ursula Phillips) focuses on Polish perspectives, theatrical representations and performative reactions to the extermination of the Jews during WWII. In its focus on the Polish viewpoint, this book raises an intriguing, critical question fraught with ethical repercussions: Is it possible to reflect upon Polish society and culture after WWII without centering on its various victims? Can we discuss events and images related to the extermination of the Jews from the standpoint of the observers and witnesses – and, by extension, of the theater audience – without tackling patterns of passive participation in the atrocities, as well as the suffering and agony they caused?

Niziołek’s book addresses these questions through a rigorous study of six decades of theatrical responses to the Holocaust in Polish theater. The first part of the book examines how Polish theater portrayed the Holocaust, explicitly or implicitly. The second part surveys a range of theatrical performances by prominent Polish directors, including Leon Schiller, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Warlikowski and Ondrej Spišák. In this section of the book, Nizioledek describes the ways in which these directors confronted the experience of bearing witness, as well as the theatrical shaping of Polish history during WWII and in face of the extermination of European Jewry.

The Introduction to the book discusses what Niziołek identifies as one of the typical, perhaps “banal,” incidents of the Shoah: the reaction of Polish passers-by to a

\(^7\) Niziołek, *The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust*, 143.

Jew who unexpectedly appeared on a Warsaw street, having been driven by fear from his hideout. Although the example comes from Kazimierz Brandys’s novel *Samson*, Niziołek does not treat it as fictional, thus anticipating his strategy of “treating theatre as a space for bearing witness and not for creating performances.” Throughout the first part of the book, this example is repeatedly discussed in order to understand the experience of the passers-by who positioned themselves as passive and powerless spectators, cast the disorientated Jew into the role of protagonist, the victim of a tragic spectacle, and fatalistically recognized the invisible perpetrators as a ruthless inevitability.

Niziołek argues that:

They therefore turned the incident, in which they participated, into theatre, with roles appropriate to it as well as uncrossable dividing lines between stage and auditorium, thereby endowing the situation with a false transcendence.10

Particular attention is thus paid to analyzing the public cultural sphere through the metaphor of the theater. Within this schematic, the victims and perpetrators are cast in the role of actors, while the Polish people are allotted the role of passive spectators, witnesses to the atrocity. However, the metaphor of the theater, as the author critically explains, is misleading because it defines Polish society as a society of bystanders. Before images of the Shoah made their way onto the stage, the theater provided a conceptual framework for defining the relationship between the victim, the victimizer and the bystander.11 Theater thus afforded ways for representing various modes of watching atrocities. In the book, Niziołek discusses various types of visual spectatorship through the effect of “wrong seeing” enacted in the theatre, and its affective reception: shock, heightened empathy or, conversely, indifference. The theatrical paradigm serves Niziołek in order to tackle some of the fundamentals of Polish reactions to the extermination of the Jews, namely—the ethics of the gaze, the struggle with guilt and the denial of agency.

The book opens with the following declaration: “The most important thing is to realize that everything was visible, that it really did take place and that everyone saw at least a fraction of what was going on.” This opening premise serves for Niziołek as a point of departure to address the denial of Polish participation in the Shoah, and to rule out widespread claims by Polish individuals that “they did not see or know” about the atrocities that were taking place on their very land. The need of the author to explicitly validate the fact that the mass, planned extermination of the Jews, and the scenes of their persecution, humiliation, exclusion and killing, were visible and public, attests to the presence and prevailing reliance on these false claims.

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10 Niziołek, 31.
The focus on the dynamics of knowing, seeing and participating in the Polish public sphere, as discussed in the book, lacks informative details: out of the eleven million human beings killed during the Shoah, six million were Polish citizens. Three million were Polish Jews; another three million were Christians. Most of the remaining victims were from other European countries, including Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Russia, Holland, France and even Germany. During the years spanning 1939–1945, the majority of the Jewish population that lived in Poland was exterminated. On the eve of the German occupation of Poland in 1939, 3.3 million Jews lived there, amounting to ten percent of the country’s population. At the end of the war – in 1945 – approximately 380,000 Polish Jews remained alive – the rest had been murdered in the ghettos and the six death camps: Chełmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau. However, between 130,000 and 200,000 Jews were killed by Polish citizens.12

The sheer numbers involved in this genocide are almost incomprehensible; they suggest a daily routine whereby people either were grabbed from their homes and families or publicly murdered. Cattle-train wagons stuffed with thousands of men, women and children traversed Poland, taking Jewish victims to the death camps. Furthermore, houses were burnt, Jewish property was looted or sold, and entire villages were emptied. The atrocities committed against Jews did not cease with the end of the war. According to estimations made by Andrzej Żbikowski, in the years following the end of the war, at least 750 Jews were killed by Polish citizens.13 These numbers and events speak for themselves: no one could have avoided the sights and smells, the daily atmosphere of fear and violence that enabled the overwhelming presence of the fatal mechanism which had operated in front of the eyes of Polish inhabitants for years.14 The extermination of the Jews, as Niziołek explains, “did not come as a moral shock to Polish society” nor did it


arouse sympathy – at the most, it triggered merely “feeble reactions of condem-
nation emanating from a feeling of imposed duty.”\textsuperscript{15} In other words, knowledge, 
sight or the lack thereof, are not to be found at the core of the issue.

Polish theater, as the book shows, did not deny the existence of the Shoah, 
but instead it deformed its memory, misrepresenting the role of Polish men and 
women in the extermination of the Jews, eschewing the fact that antisemitism was 
prevalent amongst the Polish masses, and that many of them endorsed the blood 
libel and anti-Semitic stereotypes. This outlook does not bring forth the voices 
of the victims of the Shoah. It does not center on the daily humiliation, traumatic 
pain, enduring suffering of Polish Jews, nor on the devastating consequences of 
the Shoah on Polish society. Rather, this point of view emphasizes the need to 
face one’s guilt and accept blame in the aftermath of the calamity that befell the 
country.

Niziołek’s choice of nomenclature vis-à-vis the naming of the events which 
marked the massive, planned extermination of the Jews during the Second World 
War is intriguing, revealing a glaring gap between the Polish original and its Eng-
lish translation. Niziołek opts to use the Polish word “Zagłada,” which means 
“extermination.” In the English version, however, Niziołek resorts to the estab-
lished term the “Holocaust,” loosely meaning “a sacrifice,” and, more specifically, 
“a burnt offering.” The term “holocaust” – as Giorgio Agamben explains – is 
euphemistic insofar as it means the “supreme sacrifice in the sphere of a complete 
devotion to sacred and superior motives.”\textsuperscript{16} From this perspective, this denomina-
tion forges a linkage between death in the gas chambers and the idea of a sacrifice.\textsuperscript{17} 
The term “holocaust,” according to Agamben, contains a “heredity that is from its 
inception anti-semitic.”\textsuperscript{18} Mostly, the term “holocaust” does not denote the notion 
of catastrophe, unlike the Hebrew term “Shoah,” designating the destruction of 
over a thousand years of Jewish Polish life and culture.\textsuperscript{19}

In his focus on the Polish theater of the Shoah, the author misrepresents the 
thousand-year history of Polish Jewish culture, including the prolific Jewish theat-
er scene that existed before the war. What had been the largest Jewish community 
in the world became, by 1945, the smallest, and Poland – one of the most ethnically

\textsuperscript{15} Niziołek, \textit{The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust}, 374.
\textsuperscript{16} Giorgio Agamben, \textit{Remnants of Auschwitz:  the Witness and the Archive}, trans. Daniel Heller-
\textsuperscript{17} Agamben, 30.
\textsuperscript{18} Agamben, 31.
\textsuperscript{19} On the etymology and meaning embedded in the term “holocaust,” see: Heather Blurton, “‘The 
History of an Incorrect Term’: Agamben, Etymology and the Medieval History of the Holocaust,” \textit{Post-
Word Holocaust: Scholarly Myths, History, and 20th Century Meanings,” \textit{Journal of Genocide Re-
diverse countries in Europe – became the most homogeneous. Niziolek, nevertheless, underscores the part played by theater in buttressing the state of denial vis-à-vis the passive participation or even active role of Polish citizens in the atrocities perpetrated in Polish territory. Theater, as Niziolek points out, became an arena of repetition, where the very fact of denial has been produced and reproduced.\(^\text{20}\)

Marvin Carlson’s concept of theater as a “memory machine”\(^\text{21}\) is overtly and covertly mobilized throughout the book in order to examine “replicated and culturally stabilized creative and perceptual procedures based on mechanisms of memory and repetition.”\(^\text{22}\) According to Niziolek, theater is a powerful cultural instrument geared at restricting one’s field of visibility, distributing roles, and propagating cultural regimes.\(^\text{23}\) After the Shoah, Niziolek explains, the universal social experience of both witnessing and denying suffering, led to a deep transformation in the theater.\(^\text{24}\)

How did this transformation materialize on stage? Repetition, as Carlson explains, fosters an active, embodied remembering that comes into being and transpires through laborious work and its performance. The making of theater – by actors or spectators – shapes the repetition and reproduction of visual and aural images, social ideas and practices, as a force maneuvered by agents and actors. Images from the war, and from the Shoah, are thus worked into the theater not only through its images and representational practices, but also through the identity of the actors, directors and scenographers, as well as through the very participation of audiences; those putting on the performances are not only representing a historical event, and the spectators are not only viewing it. The theatrical event itself is a form of agency, enabling active participation.

The Shoah, as Dori Laub argued, is an “event without witnesses.”\(^\text{25}\) That is, at the time when it was taking place, it made occupying the position of witness impossible.\(^\text{26}\) In other words, everyone participated in this event, be it as a passive observer, a victim or a perpetrator. This insight can also be projected onto the theatrical event: there are no passive spectators or actors in the theater – everyone involved assumes some degree of agency. Addressing the making of theater only through the standpoint of the director, Niziolek avoids the material aspects


\(^{22}\) Niziolek, *The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust*, 33.

\(^{23}\) Niziolek, 33

\(^{24}\) Niziolek, 34


of theater-making, which are a lacuna in the book: who were the actors, scenographers and stage workers who participated and reproduced the images? Where they the same people that fostered the notion of denial? What sort of ideology and beliefs did they hold? And what did they do during the war and following it? A deep glance into the collaborative work of theater might enhance the ways in which we conceive the deep-seated connections between art and society, between social performances and political processes.

Written in lucid prose, and accompanied by dense theoretical explanations, Niziołek’s book prompts its readers to profoundly question and engage with the issue of agency, from an ethical as well as a theatrical standpoint – to think of the mechanisms of representation, the emptied signifiers, distorted, denied and unspoken facets in contemporary Polish culture. This book provides a rich and highly thought-provoking reading experience.