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Kurbas and Poland

Discovering / Returning

Łeś Kurbas
Pisma teatralne

wybór i opracowanie naukowe Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun
tłumaczenie Bruno Chojak, Marta Kacwin i Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun
(Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2021)

If one had to name the most important figure in Ukrainian theater of the twentieth century, someone whose work undoubtedly deserves international interest and recognition, it would be, of course, Les' Kurbas. He was a theorist and practitioner of theater, a director, an actor, a teacher, a theater organizer, a translator, and the man who created Ukrainian avant-garde theater. He set up a school for directing and acting, influenced the development of Ukrainian drama, criticism, museology, theatrical lexicon, the emergence of the initial studies in the field of the sociology of theater, the psychology of creativity, and other fields.

Moreover, if there is a country outside Ukraine where his name should be heard above of all, it is, of course, Poland. This need was understood by the first researchers to tackle his life and work (and the translators of this peer-reviewed volume) Bruno Chojak,¹ Marta Kacwin-Duman,² and Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun,³ when they published the first few articles about Kurbas in Polish journals. This has been repeatedly discussed at the Les' Kurbas National Center for Theater Arts in Kyiv (headed by Nellie Korniyenko) and at the Department of Theater Studies and Actor's Arts at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (headed by Bohdan Kozak). This was necessitated by the new conditions of intercultural communication of the two neighboring independent states around the turn of the twenty first century. Finally, this was spurred on by historical logic and justice: after all, no other culture (outside his native, Ukrainian one) was as close to Kurbas as Polish culture. He experienced it in his daily life in Galicia (1887–1916), studying at Lviv University (1908–1910), attending the Lviv Opera and Ballet Theater (in particular, watching performances by Tadeusz Pawlikowski),⁴ reading and translating Polish drama (including *Ijola* by Żuławski), and communicating with Juliusz Osterwa⁵ and Stanisława Wysocka.⁶ Let us recall that the birth certificate of Kurbas was written in Polish,⁷ and the godfather of the future reformer was Władysław Kazimierz Płoszewski, a Polish actor who worked professionally with Kurbas' parents on the Ukrainian stage of the Ruska Besida society.

So, finally, thanks to the extraordinary will of Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun (selection, processing, scientific editing, and translation of texts) and with the financial and organizational support of the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, the publication in 2021 of Les' Kurbas's *Pisma teatralne* testified to a great and persistent desire to develop Polish-Ukrainian cultural ties. Undoubtedly, this edition is an event not only for Polish but also for Ukrainian theater studies. For the Polish theatrical reader, this is an opportunity to discover a hitherto unknown or little-known name, one that is part of the Eastern European avant-garde theater.⁸

¹ Bruno Chojak, "Łeś Kurbas," *Konteksty*, nr 3–4 (1996); Chojak, "Łeś Kurbas w Polsce i na Ukrainie," *Krasnogruda*, nr 10 (2000): 175–178.

² Marta Kacwin, "Biomechanika ciała i rozumny arlekin. Cieleśność 'nowego' aktora w świetle teorii Wsiewołoda Meyerholda i Łesia Kurbasza," *Slavica Wratislaviensia*, nr 153 (2011): 573–581.

³ Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun, "Łeś Kurbas, czyli teatr Rozstrzelanego Odrodzenia," *Teatr*, nr 7–8 (2008): 79–84; Wołodymyr Kuczyński, "Rozumny arlekin," rozmawiała Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun, *Teatr*, nr 7–8 (2008): 86–88.

⁴ Iryna Volyts'ka, *Teatralna yunist' Lesya Kurbasza* (Lviv: Instytut narodoznavstva NAN Ukrainy, 1995).

⁵ Bohdan Kozak, "Etyka teatralna Łesia Kurbasza i Juliusza Osterwy (aspekt typologiczny)," in *Porównanie jako dowód: Polsko-ukraińskie relacje kulturalne, literackie, historyczne, 1890–1999*, red. Bogusław Bakuta (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2001), 107–117.

⁶ Rostyslav Pylypchuk, "Teatral'ni reformatory Stanislava Vysots'ka i Les' Kurbas," in *Polacy w Kijowie*, red. Henryk Stroński (Kijów: Stowarzyszenie Uczonych Polskich Ukrainy, 2002): 196–205.

⁷ Bohdan Kozak, "Tserkovnyy zapys pro khreshchennya Oleksandra Kurbasza," *Proscenium*, no. 3 (2004): 37–39.

⁸ Translating and funding this book took place as part of the "Odzyskana awangarda" project, under the direction of Małgorzata Leyko and carried out at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute.

For Ukrainian theater critics, it is an opportunity to look at their preeminent “cultural hero” “from the outside,” through the eyes of another language, culture, and science.

The first thing that comes to mind is the new structure proposed by the compiler for presenting the texts. A simpler, chronological approach was used in the first, most complete, Ukrainian printed collection of Les' Kurbas's texts entitled *Philosophy of Theater* (compiler Mykola Labins'kyi, editor Mykhaylo Moskalenko, 2001), from which the texts were selected for translation into Polish. There were more than enough reasons for this at the time: for the first time ever, all available texts by Kurbas were collected under one cover, including manuscripts of his lectures and fragments of his diary, and the compilers of this huge, 918-page volume sought to reconstruct the history of Kurbas's texts as accurately as possible. That is why the texts in *Philosophy of Theater* are arranged chronologically: from the saved first diary entries of 1916—to the last lines recorded tragically in Solovetsky prison in 1937 (when the lives of Kurbas and thousands of other Ukrainian intellectuals were taken by НКВД bullets in Karelia's Sandormokh forest). This approach allowed Ukrainian researchers of Kurbas's legacy to systematize it according to sources and the history of their appearance / printing.

Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun, faced with the task of selecting and creating Polish translations, chose a different, thematic-cum-problematic principle, dividing the legacy of Kurbas into sections: *Theaters, Ideas, Performances, The Art of the Director, Smart Harlequin*, and *National Europeanness*. This approach highlighted the conceptually important principles of Les' Kurbas's theatrical theory, allowed her to cover his practical achievements and key performances, showing his worldview and the philosophical, creative, aesthetic, pedagogical, and organizational features of his legacy. The editor of the Ukrainian *Philosophy of Theater*, Mykhaylo Moskalenko, once wrote about such an appeal to the essential features of Kurbas's work:

Masters of the theater of the future will turn to Kurbas not in search of ideological values. They will look for the secrets of his directing skills, and dig into the great mystery of the theater's creative beginnings, which is still more enduring than ideology, politics, social utopias, and insane social bacchanalia, paid in the twentieth century by the blood of many millions, including Kurbas.⁹

The translated texts are preceded by a voluminous introduction. Its author, Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun, sets herself the goal of acquainting the Polish reader with the life and creative path of Les' Kurbas, as reading his theoretical works

⁹ Mykhaylo Moskalenko, “Trahediya Lesya Kurbasa,” in Les' Kurbas, *Filosofiya teatru* (Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo Solomiyi Pavlychko “Osnovy”, 2001), 850.

without understanding the historical, cultural, and socio-political circumstances surrounding Kurbas and Ukrainian theater is impossible. Korzeniowska-Bihun extremely precisely, concisely, and consistently outlines the key problems faced by Ukrainian theater in the first third of the twentieth century and the place of Les Kurbas in their solution. This ranges from Kurbas as “the first Ukrainian director to directly encounter theatrical Europe” in Vienna (1907–1908) to Kurbas-the-reformer, whose life and work “physically shared the tragic fate of Ukrainization, yet intellectually and artistically created products worthy of the most outstanding achievements of the Great theatrical reform”(42).¹⁰

The broad historical background of Les' Kurbas's activities, outlined by Korzeniowska-Bihun, will allow the Polish reader, unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the history of Ukrainian theater, to understand the key sociocultural contexts in which Kurbas created his theater: the colonial context (Ukrainian theater in Austro-Hungarian lands and under the Russian monarchy until 1917–1918), the national liberation context (1917–1919), the Soviet-Ukrainization context (1920–1930), and finally the totalitarian one (from the late 1920s). Thanks to the accuracy of the mentioned historical dates, characteristics of various socio-political, cultural, and artistic phenomena, and ideological and artistic explorations, we can call Korzeniowska-Bihun's introduction—without fear of exaggeration—a short textbook on the history of Ukrainian theater for the Polish reader within the historical dates of Kurbas's activities. The academic quality of this introduction is achieved by studying the main works of Ukrainian researchers—such as those of Hanna Veselovs'ka, Iryna Volyts'ka, Nataliya Kuzyakina, Nelli Korniyenko, Les' Tanyuk, Mykola Labyns'kyi, Nataliya Yermakova, and Mykhaylo Moskalenko, as well as Polish ones such as the already-mentioned Bruno Chojak, Marta Kacwin-Duman, and Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun herself, whose publications about Kurbas and Ukrainian theater, together with translations of Ukrainian drama in Polish, are already today a separate work. It should be emphasized that in the elaboration and authorial structuring of this edition, Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun worked not only as a translator and editor but also as a theater critic, which set the stage for such a deep and high-quality presentation of the Ukrainian artist's work.

Together with this description of his life, Korzeniowska-Bihun explains in the introduction the genesis and content of the categories, concepts, and approaches she employs. They are presented below in the translated texts (“transformation,” “smart harlequin,” etc.), and compare the balance of desired and real, intentions and real results. The latter is very important so as not to turn the main figure into a myth, a monument, but to leave the reader critical of Kurbas and, at the same time, to retain a sense of the “interrupted flight” of his fate: “The Ukrainian reformer, as Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun underlines, wanted to create a new actor

¹⁰ Here and further in parentheses we quote from the reviewed book.

and a new audience. In practice, only a handful on both sides of the theater ramp met his expectations” (39).

It is also important that the Polish reader not miss the final lines of the introduction, where Korzeniowska-Bihun explains the dramatic fate of Kurbas’s texts, their stages of “return” and how the manuscripts were found, including the sometimes dubious, mostly unauthorized nature of these records made not by Kurbas himself but by his students during his lectures. They were, therefore, not always conscious, accurate, and sometimes even comprehensible—explaining in turn the preparation of the publication, which Korzeniowska-Bihun deemed “extremely difficult” (45). Therefore, what the translators (in particular, Korzeniowska-Bihun) did can be called a professional feat without exaggeration, because work on Kurbas’s texts required extremely meticulous work not only in the field of translation but also interpretation, commenting and research.

And now let us speak about the very texts themselves. In the section *Theaters* the reader will become acquainted with various texts related to the activities of Kurbas in two groups created by him: Young Theater and Berezil. This section includes manifestos written by the young Kurbas, proclaimed in the turmoil of 1916–1919, and during his more mature period, created in the 1920s; program texts and articles related to the founding of these groups, publications of various genres and documents (protests, charters, proclamations), as well as appeals to the audience and fellow actors on stage.

The *Ideas* section is the most representative of Les’ Kurbas’s theoretical legacy. The translated texts deal with issues to which Kurbas paid great attention: the artist’s worldview and his influence on creativity; aesthetic principles of modern theater, where he was concerned about the danger of realism as a “flat” copy of life; theoretical and practical issues of the concept / method of “transformation” as the main, end-to-end method of transforming real experience into a work of art; purely Kurbasian categories such as a “Theater of Accentuated Influence” and a “Theater of Accentuated Manifestation” (which in their own way interpret the philosophy and technology of two different types of theater: illusory and critical); as well as the issues of space, time and rhythm in the theater (of these, he gave a particularly prominent place to rhythm).

The section titled *Performances* acquaints the Polish reader with Kurbas’s prefaces, extracts from director’s explanations, notes, “thoughts aloud” about such performances as *Dance of Life* by Oleksandr Oles, *Christmas Vertep*, and *Haidamaky* by Taras Shevchenko, *Golden Guts* by Fernand Crommelynck, *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner, *People’s Malachiy* by Mykola Kulish, *Dictatorship* by Ivan Mykytenko and others. Of course, the choice of these performances does not exhaust the list of Kurbas’s most famous works but is merely determined by the presence of texts related to a particular performance. The first of the presented texts—*Prologue with a clown*—uttered by Kurbas himself in a Harlequin costume before the premiere of *Dance of Life* at the Young Theater—has become today in Ukrainian theater

a kind of symbol of Kurbas's work: "Beautiful ladies! Elegant gentlemen! . . ."—with these words the International Theater Festival in Ternopil opened for many years in a row, named after the first theater created by Kurbas in that city, namely Ternopil Theater Evenings.

Perhaps the most important thing that Kurbas managed to do for Ukrainian theater in the twentieth century was to educate a new generation of directors and actors who, not even being able to say his name aloud for fear of being dubbed "enemies of Soviet power," had no right to practice what they had learned under his leadership. Nevertheless, they in turn were able to educate their successors—directors and actors who today continue to educate their own students, which allows us to talk about Ukrainian theater's genetically-inherited "avant-garde code" of Kurbas. Therefore, the texts combined in the section "The Art of the Director" are reflections and instructions not only for themselves but also for students. They are separate lectures on directing, read for students of the director's laboratory taught at the Berezil Art Association. The examples included of these texts clearly show Kurbas's systematic thinking, being as he was a teacher and theorist of theater, with an ability to apply scientific methods (induction and deduction), terms, and concepts from the most unexpected areas of human activity, such as astrology (aspect). The Polish reader can see Kurbas's invariably broad comparative approaches when he analyzes and compares works from European and Asian cultures, music and literature, and spatial and temporal arts. It is not difficult to notice the principles of the "hermeneutic circle" borrowed from hermeneutics, through which Kurbas explains to young directors the structural relationships of the whole and the part (317). The two texts devoted to *Aspects and Theatrical Genres* in this section are perhaps the most difficult, not only in terms of translation but also when it comes to general understanding—even in the language of the original. However, the compiler and translator did not simplify her tasks, trying to convey the most complex ideas as transparently and accurately as possible. It seems that Kurbas's text only benefited from this because, at the time of translation, it underwent a complex—actually hermeneutic—procedure of explanation and interpretation.

The *Smart Harlequin* section is devoted to Kurbas's texts on the art of the actor. In ten publications from different periods of Kurbas's activities, it is possible to trace the evolution and transformation of his views on acting, the crystallization of the concept of the "smart harlequin" as a combination of game and intellectual principles in the work of the actor. Some texts are recordings of training sessions with students and methodological remarks made by Kurbas on the themes of voice, breathing, stage speech, and mime. Kurbas's thesis about the actor as director of their own role remains important and relevant to this day, which demonstrates how important the active, independent place Kurbas assigned to the actor was in the processes of his self-development and creation of the play.

The final section, *National Europeanness* proposed by Korzeniowska-Bihun, is unique and innovative in its own way. Not because Kurbas's ideas of nation-building and nation-centrism are unknown to Ukrainian theater studies. They seem to be well-known, but for some reason, they have not yet become the subject of separate consideration, of systematic understanding. It has been "inconvenient" for so long to voice and emphasize Kurbas's anti-Russian slogans so that only now, when life in Ukraine itself has unambiguous political accents, are we ready to accept and hear Kurbas's anti-colonial, anti-chauvinist discourse. But this work for us, Ukrainian theater critics, is already being done boldly and decisively by Korzeniowska-Bihun, combining in the final chapter several early articles by Kurbas from the period of national liberation, articles in which he openly declares an urgent need to break away from Russian theater and the Russian language in Ukrainian theater (*For reasons and projects, Troubled slogans*). Speaking about the program of a forthcoming congress and a theatrical repertoire, Les Kurbas announced proposals to clean

our repertoire of the Russian language. . . . The nation removes the shackles of another's domination, the nation wants to wash its face of Khokhol's make-up, wants to nationalize all life on its land. A nation that respects itself, that feels self-respect and honor, will try to sweep away the traces of inglorious, shameful slavery under the yoke of another's culture (439–440).

The content of Kurbas's national slogans was organically connected with his attention to the theatrical West, with his passion for theatrical work and drama, in particular in Germany (*New German Drama*). He was confused by the lack of connections between Ukrainian theater and the world: "Abroad, they really know nothing about our artistic achievements and about our artistic life in general. I came to the conclusion that we must pay more attention to mutually acquainting ourselves with our achievements," he wrote in 1927 (469). This article, entitled *Theatrical Life Abroad*, concludes the Polish edition. And it seems to be an answer to Kurbas— after almost a hundred years his ideas and theater will now be known in detail in Poland. I want to believe that this is just the beginning of a return to Europe of the name and legacy of Kurbas, and with it—Ukrainian theater, an integral part of the European theater space. We hope that this translation will arouse the interest of others. Written after returning from Germany, where together with other figures of Soviet theater Les Kurbas had the opportunity to study the theatrical life of Western Europe at that time, it did not contain any mention of Poland. But fatefully it was Poland that became the scene of Kurbas's last directorial effort, a play called *Maklena Grasa* by Mykola Kulish (1933).

After reading *Pisma teatralne* I wanted to analyze a few statistics: in the *Life and work of Les' Kurbas*, published in 2012 by the Department of Theater Studies and Actor's Arts of Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (to celebrate the occasion

of the 125th birthday of Les' Kurbas), where it was collected and developed over the previous few decades of researching Kurbas, new articles and materials, the word "Polish" (with its various deviations) is repeated more than 100 times . . . That is why I wish to say that Kurbas—today almost unknown in Poland—actually returned to this culture and language with which he was related, and with which he lived a significant part of his life. Therefore, the topic of "Kurbas and Poland," some aspects of which have already been studied by theater historians, with the publication of this book acquiring a new dimension and perspectives, requires a systematic, comprehensive approach.

Like any serious publication, the translation of Kurbas's works opens up new horizons for research and discussion—obviously amongst a much wider combined circle of Polish and Ukrainian researchers and fans of Kurbas, to whom the book is addressed and whom it may inspire to work and enter into a dialogue.



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Abstract

Kurbas and Poland: Discovering / Returning

This article reviews Polish edition of Les' Kurbas theatrical texts (Łeś Kurbas, *Pisma teatralne*, Warszawa 2021) focusing on the editor's, Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun, thematic-cum-problematic principle of organizing Kurbas's legacy, as well as the merits of her well-researched introduction to the volume. The editor's approach highlighted the conceptually

important principles of Kurbas's theatrical theory and allowed her to cover his practical achievements and key performances, showing his worldview and the philosophical, creative, aesthetic, pedagogical, and organizational features of his legacy. The reviewer underlines the editor's precision and consistency in outlining the key problems faced by Ukrainian theater in the first third of the twentieth century and the place of Les Kurbas in their solution. The edition opens up new horizons for research and discussion not only on Kurbas as a creator of Ukrainian avant-garde theater, but also on Polish-Ukrainians cultural ties.

Keywords

Les' Kurbas, Ukrainian avant-garde theater, national theater, Polish-Ukrainian theatrical relations

Abstrakt

Kurbas i Polska: Odkrywanie / przywracanie

Autorka omawia polskie wydanie tekstów teatralnych Łesia Kurbasa (*Łeś Kurbas, Pisma teatralne*, Warszawa 2021), skupiając się na zaletach edytorskiej strategii tematyczno-problemowego uporządkowania dziedzictwa Kurbasa oraz merytorycznej wartości gruntownie opracowanego wstępu do wydania, przygotowanego przez Annę Korzeniowską-Bihun. Strategia redaktorki uwydatniła istotne zasady teorii teatralnych Kurbasa, pomogła objąć refleksją jego praktyczne osiągnięcia i najważniejsze przedstawienia, a także ukazać jego światopogląd oraz filozoficzne, artystyczne, estetyczne, pedagogiczne i organizacyjne cechy jego dorobku. Recenzentka podkreśla precyzję i konsekwencję, z jaką redaktorka tomu szkicuje kluczowe problemy ukraińskiego teatru w trzech pierwszych dekadach XX wieku oraz rolę Kurbasa w rozwiązywaniu tych problemów. Edycja otwiera nowe horyzonty badań i dyskusji nie tylko nad Kurbasem jako twórcą ukraińskiego teatru awangardowego, lecz także nad polsko-ukraińskimi więziami kulturalnymi.

Słowa kluczowe

Łeś Kurbas, ukraiński teatr awangardowy, teatr narodowy, polsko-ukraińskie relacje teatralne

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