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Theatre Takes a Stand:  
Polish Participatory Theatre at the Turn  
of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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## Theatre Takes a Stand: Polish Participatory Theatre at the Turn of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

From today's perspective, the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be seen as a period of intense transformation and reform in institutional theatres in Poland, that has had both positive and negative effects at different levels of Polish theatre. In my opinion, some of these transformations were the result of Poland's move to a new socio-economic system at the beginning of the 1990s, which brought with it a series of problems and phenomena typical of capitalist societies. Polish theatre did not hesitate to address these, in an attempt to maintain contemporary relevance and its own power of social influence.

From the outset, this called for the introduction of new dramatic and scenic conventions which had already been tested on European stages. The necessary theatrical and dramaturgical solutions were mainly provided through texts by British and German Brutalists in the 1990s. Not only were these performed on Polish stages, they also served young Polish dramatists and directors as benchmarks to create home-grown plays, tackling the most burning social and cultural issues. This first wave of transition was mainly concerned with aesthetic approaches and strategies for representation on stage, though even back then theatre practitioners were fully aware that a fundamental transformation of the role of theatre would not be possible without profound changes in the very institution of theatre and the scope of its social role. In lieu of these changes, the mission of Polish theatre reform was limited to creating the right environment to foster the development of young practitioners who had been given the use of small stages in municipal theatres.

But it soon transpired that simple aesthetic changes would not suffice to make the stage into a forum for the exchange of views and a space to allow citizens to make significant interventions in the fabric of social life. A positive change would have entailed greater effectiveness in engaging spectators in a dialogue about issues fundamental to the national or local community but also restoring faith in theatre as an institution of civic life. But this proved impossible without first teaching audiences new habits of reception. This called for more than achieving the desirable effect of emotional engagement, summoned by Brutalist plays and their domestic versions, using a typically naturalistic style to confront spectators with issues they were unwilling to notice in everyday life. Thus it was not surprising that in the first decade of the twenty-first century Polish theatre began to search in earnest for ways to engage spectators that would allow them to interfere in the course of a performance, turning it from a

mere artefact into a social and political event.

I would characterise the past decade in Polish theatre as a time of various attempts to introduce practices originating in fringe theatre<sup>1</sup> or in the increasingly popular medium of performance art. The aims of Polish theatre remained the same: to effectively challenge audiences to take an active part in a theatrical event and to persuade spectators to openly express their reactions, or at least to allow themselves to be made an integral part of the performance. It suffices to recall the production of *H* (2004).<sup>2</sup> by Jan Klata, staged at the Gdańsk Shipyard. It was a loose adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which inscribed itself in the long tradition of staging this play as a political and topical text in Poland. In the case of this production, the premiere of which took place fifteen years after the 1989 political-system change, the protagonist became a representative of the young Polish generation who assess their fathers' actions in the latest national revolution.

In this site-specific performance the audience was guided across the site, laden with memory of recent Polish history. The Gdańsk Shipyard was the place where the Solidarity movement was created. A different strategy was chosen by the creators of the Szybki Teatr Miejski [Fast-Urban Theatre] who, under the auspices of Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk, staged a series of documentary performances in private homes during the 2003/2004 season. Scripts were based on the stories collected by journalists in collaboration with dramaturges. Calls to engage the audience were answered by traditionally conservative artistic institutions including Capella Cracoviensis, a Kraków-based classical music group and choir, which began to produce a series of classical-music concerts directed by Cezary Tomaszewski, staged in *bar mleczny*, the Polish working-class cafeterias (*Bar.okowa uczta* [*Bar.oque Feast*], 2012), and while promenading in the Wolski Woods (*Naturzyści* [*Naturalists*], 2013). These examples show that over the past ten years, theatre-makers have sought the Holy Grail of participation, primarily by leaving traditional theatre spaces for public spaces – despite the experiences of the counter-culture, they began once again to believe that a simple change in spatial relations was capable of enticing spectators to collaborate and co-create theatrical events.

The dissemination of fringe-theatre and paratheatre strategies in publicly funded theatres was, in my opinion, the result of an increasingly popular belief that the mobilization of the audience is valuable not only for its own sake but as a barometer of the effectiveness of the work of theatre practitioners. An unshakeable faith in the value of participation soon became an accepted assumption, a kind of axiom of contemporary Polish theatre, which continues to aspire to at least the same status as social institutions promoting the ideal of the democratic civic society. In any case, if we broaden our outlook to include contemporary social processes, such as wide-spread democratization of Western societies and globalization it becomes clear that not only Polish theatre has succumbed to the irresistible charms of participation. Other art forms have also failed

1 *Teatr offowy* [off theatre] is a term to denote performative practices which remain outside official theatre institutions in Poland. In Anglophone cultures there are several equivalents: 'fringe theatre' and 'Off-West End theatre' in British English, and off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway in American English.

2 <http://ninateka.pl/film/h-spektakl-teatr>.

to resist these charm: pursuit of participation dictates the form and running of contemporary-art exhibitions and classical-music concerts.

Key here is that the myth of participation as a remedy for social maladies has become widespread in other areas of public life, in the opinion of Markus Miessen, a contemporary theorist of art and architecture who looks critically at phenomena of what he calls 'participatory democracy', referring to a 'nightmare of participation' afflicting Western societies.<sup>3</sup> Participation has become the expected attitude of citizens in democratic societies yet has also transformed into a burden, one which is becoming increasingly difficult to bear.

According to Miessen, obligatory, active participation in social life is a primary means of exerting social pressure and promoting the ideology of neoliberal democracy today. He argues convincingly that it is difficult to find a public gathering where participants can exercise equal rights to exchange opinions as partners in a discussion, in line with basic democratic principles. A trained architect, Miessen shows how contemporary designs for urban spaces plan areas for participation, submitting them at the same time to electronic monitoring tethered to cyber networks. Similarly, all interventions in public debate are subject to monitoring and restrictions even as they continue to be presented as every citizen's inalienable right. Miessen proposes that, in an atmosphere of such evident compulsion to participate in social life, we should take a critical stance towards forms of participation, including those being widely prescribed and promoted as foundations of democratic order. He takes an understanding of principles and aims of participation in certain public initiatives to be fundamental in a critical political awareness. Polish theatre projects invite similar reflections on conditions of participation, with persistent efforts to elude the institutional framework of Polish theatre and engage the public in social action.

I don't want to examine here the latest projects of Polish theatre by considering whether and to what extent these propagated a normative vision of democratic participation. I am not at all convinced that Miessen's work encourages such radical assessments of socio-artistic projects. Yet it persuades us to take distance from a uniformly positive evaluation of the phenomenon of participation, and to closely examine its cultural specificity and its various forms and functions. In the context of Polish institutional theatre over the past decade, it is clear that it has adopted a preference for a form of participation directly involving spectators in the performance 'here and now'. This is a form of participation through which actors and spectators affect one other, turning the theatre each evening into a unique one-off event: a participation allowing for communication between stage and audience without the slightest involvement of dramatic fiction. I am mainly interested in the question of the extent to which this ideal of participation, transplanted to Poland in large degree together with notions of postdramatic theatre, can be implemented within the institutions of Polish theatre with its unique historical character and political functions attributable to it.

I can attempt to answer this question only under one condition, namely by examining the delayed reception in Poland of the work of Bertolt Brecht, both his literary and theoretical works, which took place at the end of the twenty century. Brecht's methodology made its way to the Polish stage through the impact of productions by directors

3 Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

Grażyna Kania, Wojtek Klemm and Michał Zadara, as a set of strategies guaranteeing political engagement of the audience. It would be hard to say this radically changed the face of Polish theatre or influenced its institutional conditions. Adoption of Brecht's methodology was rather selective, renewing aesthetic dimensions of existing theatrical convention without encroaching on fundamental principles of theatre's social function as an institution. It can be said confidently that the transplantation of the engaged or engaging model of German theatre to Poland served paradoxically to support an old model of political theatre inherited from a previous political system while bolstering that theatre's place within traditionally defined civic society.

Brecht's work reached Poland in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries thanks to touring productions by German theatres. The enthusiastic reception in Poland, outside of their domestic context, focused mainly on their staging innovations and enabled young directors to grasp the basic rules for creating Brecht's V-effect [*Verfremdungseffekt*]. Unfortunately, Polish artists largely failed to grasp the institutional aspect of the functioning of German theatres, which is different from Polish theatre tradition and enables German theatre to work without needing to stage productions based on texts that have been more or less deconstructed. At the time Brecht formulated his concept of epic theatre, he was clearly referring to the notion of the 'moral institution' [*eine moralische Anstalt*] within German tradition, which served as a form of education for citizens. Brecht made his own interpretation of the Enlightenment formula, adapting it even before the Second World War to the conditions of capitalist society. The theatre stage, in his conception, was to forge a certain type of civic consciousness. Its primary goal was to school the audience in principles of dialectical thinking derived from Marxism, and in an analysis of current social conditions compatible with Marxist ideology. Brecht's concept of theatre – contrary to the interpretation widely accepted today – did not intend to dictate to the audience a specific political programme in the form of a clearly expounded message. His point was rather to create the right conditions for a group exercise in the critique of standpoints. In this sense, epic theatre was never national theatre as it never served to consolidate people around an idea of national identity. Admittedly, Brecht assumed that theatre work is a communal activity, but in his basic assumptions it was meant to shape individual attitudes which could be effectively applied in everyday life. The situation is even more complicated when we take into account that theatre tackling topical social problems has always been considered in Poland, by definition, to have been a national theatre, with founding concepts dating back to the Romantic era. As we might expect, little links Brecht to Enlightenment-era theatre of Denis Diderot and Gotthold. E. Lessing, which had been unsuccessfully promoted in Poland by King Stanisław August Poniatowski and his followers. It has since proved even more problematic, after 1989, to transplant German theatre tradition to the Polish stage.

Brecht-influenced theatre activities as described above remain at the fringes of Polish theatre and almost entirely absent from mainstream artistic activities. That's not because there is a shortage of examples of this type of work staged by institutional theatres. In the early 1990s, Jerzy Fedorowicz directed a performance at Ludowy Theatre in Kraków based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as part of the project 'Therapy

through Art', with the participation of members of rival skinhead and punk subcultures from the city's Nowa Huta industrial district. Today, the theatre Łaźnia Nowa in Nowa Huta regularly stages projects of this type, fulfilling the company's mission of integrating itself with the local community, for example, through their socio-therapeutic project involving wards of the 'Ocalić Szansę'<sup>4</sup> [Protecting Opportunities] Foundation, to give one example, which involves mainly children from low-income families. These are only examples from Kraków. Theatre artists, critics and spectators treat these activities as only a form of social therapy, however, where the theatre functions only as an instrument of social change, abandoning the majority of its artistic ambitions.

These examples show the difference between the type of participatory initiative on the Polish stage and similar socio-therapeutic projects being produced over Poland's border to the west. Volker Lössch, one of the preeminent German directors working today, stages projects similar to those of Fedorowicz and Łaźnia Nowa as if they were completely normal repertory productions, while theatre critics regard them with the same respect as other mainstream theatre. This was the case with *Medea* (2007) which Lössch staged in Stuttgart with the participation of Turkish women from orthodox Muslim families. Two years later, he staged a production of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (2009) at the Schaubühne in Berlin with a group of former inmates, as an artistic and rehabilitation project.

The difference in the status of this type of work, located at the border of art and community life, is difficult to explain based solely on artistic values and their reception by theatre critics. These productions represent an integral part of the work of public theatres in Poland, as they do across its western border. When compared, it seems to me that they highlight some significant differences in the way theatre is perceived as an institution: an institution which should not only serve a specific social function but also be capable of implementing strictly civic initiatives. That is why I would like to focus on one representative example in examining what determines participation in Polish theatre: which of its forms are experiencing growth within the Polish theatre system, becoming integral to it, and which have failed to gain a foothold, for various reasons.

A barometer for this chance of crossing the boundary between art and civic life then engaging Poles in a discussion about significant topical issues was one of the most notorious productions of 2011, the play *Tęczowa Trybuna 2012* [*Rainbow Stand 2012*], directed by Monika Strzępka and based on Paweł Demirski's text. Polish critics did not immediately recognise the characteristics of a civic initiative in this project, supported and implemented by theatre. At the time of its premiere, *Rainbow Stand 2012* was seen as a classic example of a direct social action prepared and carried out by theatre, a function which Polish audiences did not expect institutional, state-funded stages to fulfil. Theatre critics, writing in a cross section of Polish publications, emphasized that Strzępka and Demirski had been very quick in reacting to current events and burning social issues, in a way that is unusual in theatre. As a result, the critics focused most of all on relating the context of the production, sidestepping its artistic values.

In early 2011, news circulated in the Polish media about a civic initiative proposed by the previously unknown First Gay Fan Club of the

4 <http://ocalicszansse.org/>.



Polish national football team. As part of the 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' project, this non-governmental organization proposed that during the Euro 2012 football championship, held in Poland and Ukraine, special sectors for gay fans should be set up at every participating stadium. These sectors would permit gay fans to safely support their national teams. News of this initiative was presented and discussed as a novelty news item in general, while existing LGBT organizations did not really take a position on the issue, declining to give it even symbolic support. But the proposal ultimately met with a response from a completely different, quite unexpected place: the announcement that rehearsals were under way at Polski Theatre in Wrocław on a new Demirski and Strzępka play, taking the initiative from 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' and staging a production of the same name.

Reviewers and critics who were aware of Demirski and Strzępka's earlier work could easily identify what the writer-director team might find interesting in the 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' project. In their previous work, they had deconstructed the Polish Romantic myth in 2007 with *Dziady. Ekshumacja* [*Forefathers' Eve: An Exhumation*] and the national myth in 2010 with *Niech żyje wojna!* [*Long Live the War!!!*]. This time, they set their sights on the myth of civil liberty as offered by the new neoliberal political and economic order. While their play portrayed a fictional gay football fan club, their aim was not just to stand in defence of a particular minority, but to analyse this specific incident in order to present a much broader social diagnosis. This was clearly signalled by their framing device, in the form of a newsreel. A screen suspended above the stage was used to project images of gay-pride marches intercut with images of rioting football fans, well-known politicians – mainly from Poland's current ruling coalition – and images of areas destroyed by flooding, as evident effects of government action or indeed inaction. In Demirski and Strzępka's theatrical interpretation, the events surrounding the civic initiative 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' were treated as a crowning example of functions of the myth of the democratic state, where the community is in fact founded on the exclusion of minorities, ignoring their right to partake actively in public life.

That the failure of the gay football fans' civic initiative is portrayed as economic and political in Demirski and Strzępka's play, rather than as purely cultural, is made convincing by their choice of characters and by the presentation of arguments in on-stage discussion. The initiators of 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' movement are portrayed by Demirski and Strzępka as ordinary citizens who work in ordinary jobs or are unemployed, the underprivileged, condemned to the hell of social nonexistence. They also represent a social class whose experience had yet to find a place on stage, because they were outside of the purview of their potential spokesman, the director Krzysztof Warlikowski, who creates theatre for a cultural and economic elite. At least that was the suggestion of the creators of *Rainbow Stand 2012*. This is made evident by a parody of Warlikowski's infamous staging of *Cleansed* by Sarah Kane, and by the character of the director, who appears on stage to give a rather incoherent interview, declaring his willingness to support minorities in their struggle for their rights. The real antagonist of the civic initiative in *Tęczowa Trybuna 2012*, however, was the mayor of Warsaw, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, of the ruling party, Citizen's Platform (PO) party, styled as the Queen of Hearts from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. She

is used to represent the apparatus of power and conservative policies of the elites, which strive to avoid friction and social conflict in order to maintain a comfortable status quo while preserving their right to govern. *Rainbow Stand 2012* took the visible form of a parable of Brechtian provenance, although instead of songs which interrupt and comment on the action, actors performed songs as part of a fictional karaoke, singing in English. Song content therefore seemed less important than the emotional expression of singing actors, their facial expression and gestures indicative of the growing frustration of the characters they played. Treating the emancipation of minority sexual preferences as a symptom of the current political situation in a penetrating diagnosis of the state of society undoubtedly played a big part in the success of the production, which received prizes including the award for best production at Boska Komedia, the annual showcase of new productions and one of Poland's most important theatre festivals, in December 2011.

I have intentionally related the history and form of *Rainbow Stand 2012* chronologically because a special issue of the journal *Notatnik Teatralny*, published at the end of 2011 and entirely devoted to the work of Strzępka and Demirski, gives quite a different account of the production's genesis and history. The creators had in fact revealed the real version of the birth of *Rainbow Stand 2012* somewhat earlier, in an interview for *Duży Format*, supplement of newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, discussing their body of work. *Notatnik Teatralny* repeated that story with additional background from Igor Stokfiszewski<sup>5</sup> and Ewa Siwek<sup>6</sup>, who were directly involved in the production. According to this account, the 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' civic initiative was conceived in autumn 2010, instigated by Strzępka and Demirski and their collaborators at Polski Theatre in Wrocław. They wanted to create a provocative awareness campaign or a kind of sociological experiment. In the hope that their fictional civic initiative would quickly become real, seized upon and developed by interested citizens, they began its life as a bogus website. Its membership of gay supporters consisted of bots controlled by the initiative's organizers. Siwek explained their usernames in a special table included in the *Notatnik Teatralny* text.

The club, still a simulation at the beginning of 2011, began to fight for media exposure and the support of LGBT organizations such as the 'Campaign against Homophobia', as well as fan clubs of major football teams in Poland and abroad. A significant majority of those institutions distanced themselves radically from the project. Siwek's account also revealed attitudes among fan clubs of competing teams, who treated the initiative's appearance as a pretext for continued hostility on their team's behalf. One anonymous supporter, for example, purporting to represent the Tylko Cracovia fan club, sent a declaration of support for the initiative. When this information appeared on the 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' website, the Tylko Cracovia club threatened to take legal action for infringement of personal rights. This is just one example of many cited by Siwek to demonstrate social unrest provoked by Strzępka and Demirski's initiative, although it is hard to see it as anything other than a storm in

5 Igor Stokfiszewski, 'W stronę akcji bezpośredniej', *Notatnik Teatralny*, 64–65, 2011, pp. 100–111.

6 Ewa Siwek, 'Klub Tęcza', *Notatnik Teatralny*, 64–65, 2011, pp. 112–149.



the proverbial teacup.

It is hardly surprising therefore that Stokfiszewski, one of the project's insiders, in his article '*W stronę akcji bezpośredniej*' ['Towards Direct Action'], asserted unequivocally that even as the Strzępka and Demirski production achieved a significant level of artistic success, it failed completely in its intention to push the limits of political theatre towards direct action. This was not only because the fictional fan club did not succeed in having separate sectors assigned to gay fans at football stadiums. The play's creators, more importantly, did not manage to alter the workings of the institution of public theatre, where the administrative and financial infrastructure did not allow this seemingly grass-roots initiative to be carried out on a larger scale. For example, there was not enough money for a planned match between gay players and politicians, which had promised to give the initiative much greater public visibility. Stokfiszewski had no doubt that the failure he perceived should be seen as a result of Polish theatre being unready as an institution to cross the boundary between art and politics. At the same time, he saw the success of the project in the fact that it brought to light failures in the workings of mechanisms of both the institution of theatre and of democracy in Poland. Therefore the project would seem at least partly worth it.

The story of the project and critical and archival materials gathered by *Notatnik Teatralny* surely make interesting materials for an analysis of the state of social awareness in Polish society at the threshold of the twenty-first century. But Stokfiszewski has completely failed to account for the fact that these materials appeared in a public forum several months after the premiere of *Rainbow Stand 2012*, which enjoyed success not as the planned social campaign of his analysis but as a traditional theatre production which garnered awards at festivals, and a typical staging of a dramatic text. Even if it touched the conscience and feelings of the audience, it did not move outside of the strict framework of artistic production. From this perspective it is difficult to treat the archive materials published at the end of 2011, which reached only a small group of interested readers of theatre publications, as proof of the wide reach of social campaigning. At best, these materials represent a collection of documentary evidence and are of interest principally because they were the basis on which Strzępka and Demirski developed a well-known, award-winning play. This is incontrovertible proof that the dramatization of the collected materials according to an established epic model, and the creation of an emblematic storyline, were essential conditions for bringing the subject matter chosen by the play's creators to the stage and thus into the sphere of public debate. If things had gone differently, in line with the plans of the creators of *Rainbow Stand 2012*, these results would doubtlessly have remained beyond its reach.

It is not my intention to follow the example of Stokfiszewski in creating a more detailed balance of losses and gains attained during the implementation of Strzępka and Demirski's project, or to question the point of an initiative whose success could have only culminated in ghettoization and stigmatization of gay football fans. It is perhaps difficult not to agree with Stokfiszewski's analysis that institutional conditions within Polish theatre negatively impacted the fate of the project, and that the 'quiet' failure of the social campaign was used to build a 'resounding' theatre production of significant artistic merit. But it would appear that Stokfiszewski, in emphasizing only economic and administrative

aspects of theatre as an institution in the context of both the *Rainbow Stand 2012* awareness campaign and the play, has omitted a much more important issue.

Clearly both the unsuccessful campaign and the successful play reveal working principles of a certain model of relations between theatre and its audience as citizens aware of their roles within democratic society. What is crucial in the context of the role of the dramaturge within the theatre of engagement is that the story of *Rainbow Stand 2012* shows the extent to which the very institution of theatre allows the possibility of audience participation only when that audience takes part in a traditional performance presenting a fictional and traditional dramatic plot. Based on the reconstructed story of the creation of the play, we are justified in presenting the theory that it was the institution of theatre, demanding the production of plays, which forced the creators to produce a typically epic drama in the style of Brecht. The story of the fictional gay football fan club – presented as a parable of contemporary social relations aimed at the current political leaders – is nothing more than that, after all. And it turns out that in this case, the fact that the production was not based on an existing text was of little importance. It came about as the end result of a rehearsal process that defined the form of the production as well as its status as an artefact within the framework of theatre as institution.

There is only one moral to this story: it is misleading to assume that the mere rejection of a text or its deep modification by a dramaturge can suffice in effectively addressing the audience and drawing it into direct interaction. Both the expectations of audiences and the theatre's appointed place within the confines of other public institutions (strictly linked to the issue of culture funding) dictate the form of a production and impose a typically dramatic character. At the same time, it is the institutional conditions of theatre that dictate the scope for creating participatory events within its framework. Instead of participating in a social campaign, this production used other, typically metatheatrical forms to engage its audience. They were able, for instance, to express their opinions about issues raised by the production through completing a questionnaire distributed during the performance – although they could not be sure that this was not merely part of the fiction. Likewise, some of those who arrived late for the second half of the performance were 'punitively' brought on stage to join the actors in the 'downward facing dog' pose (because yoga is apparently a favourite form of recreation in the gay community). These metatheatrical interventions contained an evident element of parody and did not give the audience an opportunity to discuss current social issues. At best, they exposed that aspect of theatre as institution which the participatory experiments of the past decade have persistently tried to neutralize. This is because they showed that there are still hierarchal relations on the Polish stage, reducing the audience to the role of consumers without the right to speak or the chance to collaborate.

The main differences between the Polish and German theatre models are easily demonstrated by comparing *Rainbow Stand 2012* to one of the initiatives created by Christoph Schlingensiefel in collaboration with the

Volksbühne in 1998.<sup>7</sup> Schlingensief's project *Chance 2000* had little in common with traditional theatre productions, even those which provide a straightforward commentary on current events. It was much closer to 'direct action' as proposed by Erwin Piscator, who wanted theatre to go out in the street and intervene in the living tissue of society. Unlike Strzépka and Demirski, Schlingensief never concealed the fact that he was consciously placing his project within the institutional framework of the theatre which approved and financed successive phases in its implementation. In the context of the ongoing German federal elections at the time, Schlingensief set up and officially registered a political party, *Chance 2000 – Partei der Letzten Chance* [Chance 2000 – The Last Chance Party]. Its aim was to create a space in public discourse for marginalized people, including the mentally ill, the disabled and the unemployed. His initiative, divided into a number of phases, began during a performance *Wahlkampfzirkus'98* [*Election Campaign Circus '98*]. This performance, staged inside a circus tent in the Prater Garten in Berlin, involved professional acrobats and actors of the Volksbühne. After the official proclamations of the party and its aims, Schlingensief set off on a tour around Germany, organizing election speeches and collecting signatures necessary to register his party's campaign. At an election-night event at the Volksbühne on 27 September 1998, it transpired that the Chance 2000 party had received 28,500 votes. Although the party officially renounced its right to a place in the ruling coalition, in autumn 1998 Schlingensief set up an independent nation named Chance in Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt, having already set up embassies in Sarajevo, Johannesburg and Windhoek, Namibia.

Schlingensief never concealed that it was not his intention to use 'the Chance 2000 party' to instigate sweeping social change or government reform. Instead, his aim was provocation. It was to force the representatives of public institutions and the media to take a position, to formulate a public response and, within a context defined by him, to reveal mechanisms of social exclusion at work, for example, when the authorities prohibited his proposal for six million unemployed people to bathe at the same time in Lake Wolfgangsee near St Gilen, Austria. In justifying its decision, the authorities claimed in all seriousness that the permit was denied because of fears that this form of bathing could raise the lake's water level dangerously and flood the villa of former German chancellor Helmut Kohl. Solveig Gade reported that in response, Schlingensief bathed alone symbolically, in the name of Germany's unemployed. He did not have to wait long for the effects of the media witch-hunt he anticipated. The Austrian tabloid *Kronen Zeitung* soon declared Schlingensief's party to be left-wing extremists and the mayor of Salzburg, Josef Dechant, did not allow the artist to be invited to the annual Salzburg Festival, threatening to withdraw a grant of a half million euros. Planned and foreseen as well as the unforeseen and surprising reactions from different sides represented an integral part of Schlingensief's project. As mentioned above, however, he had pointed

7 See Solveig Gade, 'Próba sfery publicznej: o społecznościach i 'kontr-społecznościach', in: *Chance 2000*, trans. by Anna Reichel, in: *Christoph Schlingensief: Art without Limits*, eds. Tara Forrest, Anna Teresa Scheer (Kraków: Fundacja Malta / Korporacja Ha!art, 2011), pp.125-145.

out on many occasions that his aim was not to achieve a specific goal or to further a political agenda. Throughout his performative work, he has attempted to test public opinion and to expose alienating mechanisms that underpin democratic procedures of society.

The comparison of *Rainbow Stand 2012* and *Chance 2000* reveals basic – and, I think, essential – differences in functioning of two types of theatre institutions, and a difference in their relations with the public. Strzępka and Demirski's project appeared as a marginal initiative during the theatre season which was not officially sanctioned by Polski Theatre in Wrocław, the producers of their finished play. This absence of institutional affiliation has meant that today both Stokfiszewski and Siwek write about 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' as a fictional organization, a typical theatrical simulation which was merely and intentionally an impersonation of a real civic initiative. Clearly this initiative, although conceived within the theatre, impinged in no way on the theatre's primary function, the production of plays to be utilised in its permanent repertoire and exported to festivals. Nor did it in any way alter the function of theatre as an institution appointed to produce artefacts using taxpayers' money, and thus taking part in the education of society as part of Friedrich Schiller's utopian project of aesthetic education. The *Chance 2000* project, meanwhile, received nationwide attention and received broad support precisely because, with complete responsibility, it made use of the capital of the theatre and the trust of the public in the Volksbühne as an institution, under whose auspices it was created. Thus it was able to dispense with using fictional texts and even publishing materials created during rehearsals as testimony to its artistic activity. In this case, it was the theatre which brought together the public as part of the campaign, which represented a legally sanctioned initiative, openly creating a community of citizens around its own project.

From this point of view, *Rainbow Stand 2012* showed that perhaps Polish theatre and its discourse were too quick to equate participation and a lack of dramatic fiction. As Rebecca Schneider recently showed in her book *Performing Remains* (2011),<sup>8</sup> the fiction of the represented world, even when ostentatiously exposed, can engage the audience and fulfil a political or ideological function with equal power. As proof, Schneider cited cultural performances in the U.S. such as the annual re-enactment of the battle of Gettysburg and projects such as the Wooster Group's *Hamlet*, a reconstruction of the performance film starring Richard Burton. Both present themselves openly as fictions and theatrical simulations, but it is thanks to this that they force the audience to act as active viewers and participants in the event.

That is why I would not wish to judge the entirety of the *Rainbow Stand 2012* project as a failure and an incontrovertible proof that civic participation in Polish theatre is impossible. The history of Strzępka and Demirski's initiative and their play illustrates which model of participation has been sanctioned in Polish theatre, with its unique genealogy and current institutional conditions. Perhaps the creators of the 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' social initiative did not manage to create a community of citizens on internet forums. But, contrary to their intentions, their project ultimately took on a different form when its documentation was

8 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

published in the pages of Polish newspapers and specialist journals. In this way, it started to take on the appearance of participation projects which take place among a select group of participants, with only documentation or recordings made available to the wider public.<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that social impact does not take place. In the case of the 'Tęczowa Trybuna 2012' initiative, it was the published documentation, attesting to the reactions of various organization and individuals to the initiative, which proved to be valuable material, giving a diagnosis of the state of social awareness in Polish society and societal attitudes to sexual minorities and their rights, and to all forms of grass-roots civic initiatives. Therefore Strzępka and Demirski's play is perhaps ultimately a testimony to the fact that participation in Polish theatre cannot take place without a fictional element, which on the one hand guarantees the artistic character of the work and on the other provides a means to provoke the audience and entice them into collaboration.

*Translated by Aleksandra Sakowska*

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<sup>9</sup> See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 256–257.