

FROM POLAND WITH LOVE

by Andrew Horwitz

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I was about halfway through the exhibit at Poland's [Porta Poznania](#) museum when it hit me, "Poland is only 25 years old!"

In case you think I've lost my mind, let me explain. Porta Posnania is an interactive museum located in the oldest part of the city of Poznan at the intersection of the Warta and the Cybina rivers. It is situated across from Cathedral Island where, in the 10th century, Poland's first ruler, Duke Mieszko I, built the first fortified settlement. This settlement served as the center of authority of the state of Polanie (the ancestral tribe of Poland's first rulers) that would eventually become Poland. It is also the site of the first Polish cathedral - 2016 marks 1050 years of Christianity in Poland.

But over the next 1000 years Poland's territorial integrity shifted countless times, with its internal and external borders being constantly redrawn both through internecine conflict and imperial powers. After hundreds of years of domestic political maneuvering, Poland was invaded and occupied by Sweden from 1655–1660, 1795 – 1918 is called the "Age of Partitions" where the country was divided up between Russia, Prussia and Austria. After a brief period of reconstitution from 1918 – 1939 Poland fell first under Nazi occupation and, after WWII, the Soviet Union and communism.

So in a very real sense, modern Poland only started to re-constitute itself after the fall of Communism, and that is what makes it such a dynamic, fascinating and complicated country. It is a nation that is engaged in profound conversations and transformations; artistically, politically, economically and socially it both confounds and confirms expectations.

As an American it was invigorating to be in a country where fundamental questions about democracy, capitalism and the relationship between the private, public and philanthropic sectors are still being negotiated and there is no real status quo, unlike here. Frankly, we could learn a thing or two by revisiting these questions at home, and looking more closely at how these conversations are unfolding in other countries where "democracy" is relatively new and still being experimented with, where the habits of performing democracy haven't yet calcified.

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As a curator and critic I was excited to experience the vibrant, dynamic state of [Polish culture](#) first hand; to see how central the arts are to the formation of national and cultural identity, how the debates about what is essentially “Polish” in art are in conversation with the construction of a popular narrative, and how “Polish” art is received – or not - by international audiences.

I visited Poland this past December at the invitation of Agata Grenda, Director of the Department of Culture of the Marshal’s Office of the Wielkopolska Region. I first met Agata working on the Spotlight Poland theater program when I was co-curating [PRELUDE](#) and she was at the Polish Cultural Institute. Agata has always been a force of nature and a formidable advocate for the arts (not to mention one of the most fun people on the planet to hang out with!) and she arranged a rich, diverse itinerary that brought me into contact with an incredible range of artistic and cultural movers and shakers in Poznan (with a side trip to Krakow – more on that later!).

After a missed connection in Frankfurt, I finally arrived at Poznan airport where was greeted by the lovely and gracious Jagna Domzalska, a curator and administrator at the [Zamek Culture Centre](#) where, after dinner and orientation with Agata that evening, my visit began in earnest the following morning.

The Zamek Culture Centre is an interdisciplinary arts institution in a historic castle (zamek is the Polish word for castle”) in the heart of Poznan. It has exhibits, performances and artist residencies; in many ways it is the cultural hub of the city. Every time I was there the café area was packed with artists in discussion, the halls were filled with visitors and the place was vibrating with creative energy.

I started the day when my trusty guide and informal translator from Agata’s office, Kasia Zeuschner, picked me up at my hotel to took me to [Rafał Zapala](#)’s experiential interactive sound art installation [Sensorium](#), which was super cool. Set in the high tower of the castle, I was led on a winding journey through twisting staircases and attics where I was seated in a chair in a setting not unlike the torture scene in Brazil. Electrodes were attached to my head and body, pulse monitors clipped onto my fingers, headphones placed firmly over my ears. I was told to relax, as the whole experience depended on my state of mind; I would control the music with my physiological data: EEG, GSR and EKG.

<https://vimeo.com/104276093>

Sensorium reminded me a little of Yehuda Duenyas's [The Ascent](#) and Eric Joris/CREW's [U_raging standstill](#) that I experienced at [Noordezon](#) in 2006. It combined mind-state interactivity with mixed/unstable reality and added in a generative component in that your mind-state activity prompted different types of musical/sonic responses. The music was programmed in such a way that one might experience dramatic sweeping arcs of sound and discord as likely as you would experience silence, depending on how you were thinking. I really enjoyed it and the setting in the castle was perfect. I'm sure the piece could travel, but you'd have to find an equally dramatic environment to house it.

The trip was off to a great start and I headed back downstairs to meet with Jagna who showed me around a little bit and told me about the numerous activities housed at the center, I met with several interesting artists and curators including the directors of the [Off Cinema Festival](#), which is evolving from a focus on documentary film to a more expansive exploration of "documentary" as a framework across media.

I hung out with Rafał Zapala for a while and he showed my around the Music Academy, where he's a professor, went a guided tour of Zamek to discover more fascinating, complex and sometimes contradictory narratives of Polish national identity that are literally constructed by the architecture of the building, after which I sat with Agata to learn more about the [Wielkopolska Revolutions](#) project.

[Wielkopolska Revolutions](#), an artistically and socially ambitious multi-year initiative of socially engaged art, is almost itself a performance of the "reconstruction" of the Polish national narrative. It is a country with strong rural traditions and constellations of villages, wide swaths of farmland and forest dotted by big cities, each one have a unique character derived from its proximity to different countries and world powers such as Germany or Russia. How does art relate to culture and how can it serve to knit communities together?

Curator Agata Siwiak told me that her strategy for the project was strongly influenced by the writing of Claire Bishop. One of her central concerns was that the various art projects have both social impact and aesthetic rigor. While the projects in [Wielkopolska Revolutions](#) share affinities with the work of American artists such as Rick Lowe, Theaster Gates, Aaron Landsman or Sojourn Theater, they represent a strategy more suited to the Polish context: bringing contemporary experimental artists from urban centers into meaningful engagement with rural village populations.

Siwiak says, “We want aesthetic quality to go hand-in-hand with social change. This is why I have invited experimental artists to take part, first-rate figures in Polish cultural life. It is important for us to treat art as an instrument for social change in this adventure. It is not only that artists change something in the life of the society they work with, but also these meetings change the artists themselves, because working in a living social organism can be a profound experience.” She offers, “We are trying to create an alternate map of Wielkopolska culture, in which the villages and the small towns have a chance to become centres of art. “

While these names may be unfamiliar outside of Poland, artists such as choreographer Mikołaj Mikołajczyk, theater duo Jolanta Janiczak and Wiktor Rubin, performance artist and choreographer Cezary Tomaszewski, lighting designer and photographer Jacqueline Sobiszewski, Wojtek Ziemilski, Roman Pawłowski, Weronika Szczawińska and many others are among the most esteemed and recognized creative voices in the country. Imagine a comprehensive national project in the United States bringing the rock stars of contemporary art to co-create performances and installations with rural communities – and make an ongoing multi-year commitment to keep those projects going!

Unfortunately my visit did not coincide with any performances from [Wielkopolska Revolutions](#) but I had the opportunity to meet Agata Siwiak at the [Zamek Cultural Center](#), an incredible arts institution located in a historic castle. She gave me a tour of the multimedia exhibit *They and We*, a project created by children under the mentorship of Jacqueline Sobiszewski, and a companion exhibit called *We, The Children of the Earth* which was created through media workshops for young people conducted by the HAT Prusimia Center. I was impressed by both the technical accomplishment of these young people and the profundity of their perspectives.

2014 marked the third edition of Wielkopolska Revolutions and my understanding is that the project will continue, or at least individual projects initiated over the past three years will continue, some of them on their own steam.

While I didn't get to see any specific performances, I did take a day trip to the town of Kalisz where the Wojciech Boguslawski state theater was premiering a new children's show – [Diabelek Pawelek](#) - that had been choreographed by [Mikołaj Mikołajczyk](#), one of the artists from the *Revolutions* project. It was one of

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the more bizarre and surreal children's shows I had ever seen, possibly because it was in Polish with no subtitles, but also because it was really weird.

One of the unintended outcomes of the *Revolutions* project is the relationships that developed with the artists and the communities with whom they worked. The choreographer Mikołajczyk is a big personality, a funny, flamboyant openly gay artist who developed two performances with The Wrzos Song Ensemble of Zakrzewo. Not only have they continued to work together but the senior citizens that comprise the choir have become something of a fan club, following Mikołajczyk wherever he goes. I had the opportunity to meet some of them in Kalisz and really got a sense of how being engaged as generative artists by a professional artist had changed both the seniors and Mikołajczyk.

Part of what made this radical experiment in socially engaged art possible is the extensive state support of the arts – not just nationally but regionally. I was amazed to discover, upon meeting with the Andrzej Hamerski and Katerzyna Migdalowska of Poznan's Teatr Nowy, that they employ 36 actors full time!! At the same time, the Polish artists I met were astonished to discover how poorly compensated – if at all – American theatre and dance makers and artists are supported. Sometimes I felt a bit like I was a walking, talking cautionary tale: "No matter how bad you think it is to be an artist in a state-sponsored theatre in Poland, at least you're not in America!"

The system has some challenges, of course, many of which reflect the fact that Poland is still a country in transition, still discovering itself. Theater companies that employ 36 actors have to keep those actors working and the repertory model – theaters have many shows in their repertory and perform some of them for many seasons – means that change sometimes comes slowly. Institutions anywhere tend to be resistant to change and there are many stakeholders to consider and often they need to be swayed to move in a new direction.

But at theaters like Teatr Nowy in Poznan and Wojciech Boguslawski in Kalisz a new generation of artistic leadership is finding ways to innovate and revitalize these organizations to adjust to a changing society. They are also platforms for artists to participate in the ongoing conversation about what is "The New Poland" (That is my term, not one that is used there).

The first play I saw was Teatre Nowy's production *Imperium*, which I saw later on the same day that I experienced [Rafał Zapala's *Sensorium*](#). It is a darkly comic, widely impressionistic play riffing on the 1993 book of the same name by

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Polish journalist [Ryszard Kapuściński](#). The book is a reflection on the author's travels in, and relationship to, the Soviet Union.

The production, written and directed by Ceziego Studniak, was designed to operate like a *matryoshka* – the iconic Russian nesting doll – layer after layer unfurling, one scene leading into another, many of them woven together by song. The show was performed almost entirely by two actors, a man and a woman, who played out a variety of surreal scenarios including a scene between father and son dung beetles, a scene where the woman was a dog, one in an outhouse, another a sort of one-night-stand that got weird.

Even with subtitles it was hard to follow and at first I had trouble understanding the tone as well. Agata had explained the background and context to me, but even still the language barrier – both in understanding her explanation and understanding the show itself – presented formidable challenges. When it finally clicked that this was a dark, surreal satire of Russia from the Polish perspective, I began to see the show more clearly, it became legible in a new way.

This was the first of many revelations. Not only did I become acutely aware of what seems very obvious – that language can be a formidable barrier, that understanding someone's meaning is nearly impossible when you speak the same language, much less different languages – but that the cues offered by the visual, musical and aesthetic vocabulary are context-dependent. There were set pieces, costume choices, song choices, all of which had enormous meaning to the Polish audience and for which I had no point of reference.

It took me a while to realize that the over-the-top tone of the show was not a sincere expression of Grand Eastern European Existential World Weariness but rather a biting satire of the self-aggrandizing idea of “The Russian Soul” and Russia's current society of excess and poverty.

I saw *Imperium* in early December when Russia's actions towards Ukraine and threats to the region at large were on everyone's mind. The show included some rather extensive scenes performed in Russian, particularly a song sequence. This highlighted a fascinating generational divide. Most people in the audience who came of age under Communism spoke Russian because they had been taught it in school and spoken it regularly in other contexts. But the new generation born and raised after 1989 – which is a pretty big swath of the population now – doesn't necessarily know Russian. But they do have many popular stereotypes of the new Russia and Russians, few of them flattering.

How fascinating it was, then, to return the following evening to see Teatr Nowy's production of *The Cherry Orchard* directed by the esteemed director [Izabella Cywińska](#). *The Cherry Orchard* was a more traditional theatrical presentation to be sure, but it was beautifully designed and impeccably acted. The advantage of having a company of actors is that they can play many roles. It was astonishing to see the actor and actress from *Imperium* return in *The Cherry Orchard* playing roles that were completely opposite in tone, character, style and deportment than the previous night and to play these completely opposite parts with equal excellence.

Fortunately I'm familiar enough with the play that even without the English translation I could follow the plot. Even more so because the directing and performances were so precise and well integrated that every intention was clear from moment to moment. What's more the scenography supported the director's vision – small touches in the set, lighting, props and costumes served to magnify small moments, drawing our attention to the tragicomedy of everyday life. As far as productions of *The Cherry Orchard* go, this was top notch.

The following night I was supposed to see *La Boheme*, but I wasn't really in the mood for grand opera, so I asked Jagna if there was anything going on outside of the big theaters. The evening before I had dined with a recent university graduate named [Szymon Adamczak](#) who is part of [Kolektyw 1a](#), a collective of young artists working across disciplines who have a space in Poznan. It sounded like they were doing really interesting stuff and I wanted to know what else was going on. Where do the young folks hang out? Where's the independent scene?

After some discussion Jagna texted [Martą Romaszkan](#) and [Gaja Karolczak](#), two young dancer/choreographers making things happen in areas as diverse as contact improvisation and movement, neuroscience and disability. They met us at Zamek and we wandered the streets – well, it felt like wandering to me! – until we came to an archway that led to a courtyard that led to a stairway that led to a door that opened into a bar/café with a DJ playing vinyl records. Books, chapbooks and 'zines lined the shelves and young people were scattered around tables drinking, talking and working on laptops. Home away from home! We got a few local beers – Poznan has a strong craft brewing scene – and sat down to talk about dance, performance, Poland, Europe, criticism and the whole shebang. We had a great time and it felt like Brooklyn – or Portland, or Austin – in the best possible sense.

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Every city has its unique concerns, challenges and opportunities but it also has its “[third places](#)” – especially spaces where the artsy kids hang out, each successive wave imagining that they’re the first and, sometimes, actually being the first to discover some new idea, new aesthetic, new gesture, new insight. As important as it is to see how a city performs itself publically, it is even more necessary to just hang out, ask around and wander from introduction to introduction, moment to moment, seeking out the places where the other stories are being told and sitting down to listen.

After a few hours of talking Jagna, Marta and Gaia all had to head home and I had to go back to my hotel to get some rest, so we exchanged emails and parted ways “until next time.”

What made this trip so amazing and revelatory – and in many ways different than other cultural visits I’ve taken – was the opportunity to just spend time with artists in their natural habitats (studios) and even at home. The following night Agata had arranged for me to meet [Ewa](#) and [Zbigniew Lowzyl](#) at their home for dinner. Ewa is [a talented photographer](#), Zbigniew an accomplished musician, and together they have organized [KontenerART](#), an art festival built out of cargo containers along the Warta River in Poznan, since 2008.

Accompanied by [Marcin Turski](#) who not only translated for me but offered me invaluable insights, commentaries and explanations, I enjoyed a wonderful evening of traditional, home cooked Polish food vivacious company and animated conversation. Their flat is filled with photographs, paintings, sculpture and musical bric-a-brac; it is bohemian, warm and welcoming as are the Lowzyls.

Ewa and Zbigniew live in a working class neighborhood that is becoming gentrified – more artists are moving in, things are slowly changing – but they have been there for many years, and I find myself having the same conversation I’ve had with so many artists in so many cities over so many years. What do you do when you become successful and when your neighborhood starts to change?

KontenerART has grown from being a renegade anti-establishment event to a hugely popular success, its spirit of openness, inclusion and radical creativity is increasingly difficult to maintain at its current size. The neighborhood they pioneered is becoming more popular too, which has its upsides and downsides.

I had a similar conversation when meeting with the curatorial and production team of the [Malta Festival](#), but from a slightly different angle. The International

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Theatre Festival Malta started in 1991 and was very much an outgrowth of the sociopolitical landscape post-1989. It was about building a free society from the ground up, about change, freedom of expression, democracy and liberation. The program was mostly street performances and radically inclusive. It was a platform for independent, alternative companies like Theater of the Eighth Day.

Over time it grew beyond theater to include all disciplines, it grew beyond the main square where it was originally held, it grew beyond its local rootedness to include a global perspective. It grew to include major marquee name concerts on festival-size stages; its original character shifted as times and conditions changed.

The organizers introduced new curatorial strategies including a themed, contemporary, global platform called Idiom, which [this year will be curated by Tim Etchells](#), and a track known as [Generator Malta](#), which explores issues of urban design, ecology, sustainability and more.

Just as in other cities around the world, we can look at the evolution of festivals running parallel to more complicated conversations on public space and the built environment, the role of “arts and culture” in support of civic culture, as a platform for “performing publics”. But the issues of gentrification, of public vs. private, of government subsidy versus corporate sponsorship, take on a very different tone here.

The difference in Poznan – and all of Poland, one imagines - is that for many artists of this generation, and several earlier generations, the “before” was Communism. It is amazing to have conversations with so many artists, curators, educators and administrators, everyone above a certain age, really, who all experienced living under Communism.

Everyone has a story – one learned Russian because that was the way to get ahead and get a good job; one’s mother would send her to the store with cutout vouchers to get loaves of bread and she would run around the block and get back in line again and again to see how many loaves of bread – or quarts of milk, or shoes, or whatever - she could get. To her, as a child, it was a game. One remembers the first time getting real chocolate, the other an orange. These are stories I heard growing up in America, “Be thankful you live here, in the Soviet Union they don’t have jeans! Or Freedom!” But these stories were always abstract, barely believable, at best merely scary tales to keep me in line.

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I met with Marcin Keszycycki from [Theater of the Eighth Day](#), a radical experimental theater founded in Poznan in 1964. As he gave me a tour of their rehearsal space, played videos and showed me pictures from their archives his eyes were still alight with revolutionary fervor. He told me stories about the secret police, being arrested, trying to tour outside the Iron Curtain; touring within the Iron Curtain to festivals of dissident theater. As he talked I sensed that it was indeed a great day when Communism fell, but, like the title of the Richard Foreman play, for him and many others, "[Now That Communism is Dead, My Life Feels Empty](#)".

One of the fascinating things about being in Poland is that at the same time that there are people with lived experience of Communism – and a smaller number of people who lived under the Nazi Occupation - there is a whole generation of young people like [Szymon Adamczak](#) who were born after Communism and for whom these stories are just stories; who are eager to inhabit the world as it is, or as they imagine it to be elsewhere. I suspect that it is this generation, raised with the Internet and globally connected from adolescence, who will be radically redefining the world in ways older people can hardly imagine.

The ideological legacy of the Soviet era looms large in Polish culture and there is a palpable tension between the entrepreneurial, capitalist impulse for economic development and a deeply rooted sense of social connectedness and interdependence that predates Communism itself. At the same time, despite the territorial shifts over the years, Poland is very culturally and ethnically homogeneous. In a country that is so predominantly Catholic, social issues not directly addressed by the State may well be taken up by the Church. As a result, secular, civic philanthropy is rare and charitable donations are not tax deductible.

As an American it was invigorating to be in a country where fundamental questions about democracy, capitalism and the relationship between the private, public and philanthropic sectors are still being negotiated and there is no real status quo, unlike here. This has led to some interesting projects that are currently almost unimaginable in the United States, but point in possibly interesting directions. One is the [Stary Browar](#) (or Old Brewery) in Poznan.

Founded by "The Polish millionaire, savvy investor and art [lover Grazyna Kulczyk](#)", Stary Browar is basically a huge mall that is dedicated 50% to art and 50% to commerce. A significant difference – compared, say, to [ArtsBrookfield](#)'s global program – is that Kulczyk is an avid and adventurous collector, known for her connoisseurship as well as for being a tireless advocate for Polish artists.

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The collection on display at Stary Browar is large and eclectic, with work by Spencer Tunick and Vanessa Beecroft juxtaposed with the whimsical work of Mariko Mori and work by contemporary Polish artists such as [Piotr Uklanski](#).

When I visited the Stary Browar Gallery in December I was met by Director of the Art Stations Foundation, Justyna Busko, who gave me a tour of the “[DE. FI. CIEN. CY](#)” exhibit curated by Ulrich Loock. Consistent with Kulczyk’s strategy of juxtaposing Polish artists with foreign artists, “DE. FI. CIEN. CY” presented the work of Andrzej Wróblewski, considered by many to be the most important Polish artist of the Post WWII period, next to that of René Daniels and Luc Tuymans.

This strategic juxtaposition is not merely a manifestation of ambition but a convincing gesture of historical restoration. I found it enlightening to walk through the exhibit and see the aesthetic conversations between the works on display. Though separated by geography and generation, the artists clearly have related concerns: trauma, the deficiency of representation, hallucinatory renderings of everyday subject matter to indicate intangible ideas.

When viewed together, we are invited to reflect on how these works are in conversation with each other, with the contemporary art world and with a larger series of questions about culture, context and the construction of historical narratives in art.

In addition to the collection on display throughout the mall and then thoughtfully curated exhibitions in the gallery, Stary Browar is home to [a robust contemporary dance program](#). During my visit I met with [Joanna Leśnierowska](#), the founding artistic director of Stary Browar Nowy Taniec (Old Brewery New Dance). Leśnierowska, a dramaturg and critic as well a curator, administrator and educator (sound familiar?!) has created a space for choreographic research and creative development of new work that has become the epicenter of Poznan’s nascent contemporary dance community. She and I had a great conversation about her work and the state of contemporary dance in Poland, performance-makers developing parallel practices in dramaturgy and the promise of the new generation of dance makers now emerging onto the scene.

Another interesting model I encountered was the [Concordia Design Center](#). Founded by entrepreneur [Piotr Voelkel](#), Concordia would not seem out of place in San Francisco. It is an event space and restaurant, business incubator, design center and educational institution. Voelkel, frustrated by the lack of good design in Poznan – an economically vibrant city known for, among other things,

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manufacturing transit vehicles – decided to build a place that would attract new talent while developing the local talent base.

While Sary Browar and Concordia have different approaches and ideas about supporting art and artists, they share the characteristic of being projects conceived of, and driven by, charismatic, committed and knowledgeable individuals from the private sector. And both Kulczyk and Voelkel have recounted difficulties working with the public sector on their initiatives.

As fraught and contentious as the idea of public/private partnerships can be in the United States, they present a different but equally problematic situation in Poland. Where the U.S. is experiencing the relentless privatization of public space and a concomitant diminution of support for civic and social infrastructure, Poland still has considerable state-supported infrastructure as a legacy of Communism and is more aligned with current European models. It is difficult to assess, given the language barrier, the cultural difference and my own considerable knowledge gap, what differentiates Kulczyk and Voelkel from their American counterparts, and it is considerably outside the bounds of my expertise to comment, but it feels important to examine more deeply.

Because of my schedule I was unable to see Teatr Nowy's production of Radosław Rychcik's massive spectacle [Dziady](#), or *The Forefather's Eve*, as it is called in English. It had been garnering a lot of attention and notoriety so after nearly a week in Poznan Agata and I travelled to Krakow to see it as part of [The Divine Comedy International Theater Festival](#).

This was probably the most difficult and puzzling work I saw, one that was at once nearly impenetrable to a foreigner yet, somehow, powerfully illuminating of this cultural moment in Poland.

Dziady is basically the Polish *Hamlet*. Written by [Adam Mickiewicz](#) who is considered to be Poland's greatest poet, the play is a masterwork of dramatic literature, singularly emblematic of Polish Romanticism. More than once I was told that Mickiewicz was just as great, if not greater, than the German Romantic poet [Schiller](#), but this is the lot of Poland, to be always overshadowed by its historical occupiers, overlooked by history.

So imagine when bad-boy direction Rychcik decides to rip the classic play apart and re-set it in a disjointed, fractured dystopian landscape populated with the flotsam and jetsam of American popular culture. As an American it was amazing,

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enlightening and disturbing to see our culture refracted through this lens, to see how a Polish director imagines America. It was viscerally disorienting to see the familiar iconic representations of American mass media decontextualized, mashed-up and repurposed, referencing their origin points of meaning yet aggressively directed at the Polish canon to reveal new meanings in an intentional act of semiotic dismemberment.

Heath Ledger's *Joker* is our guide through a nightmare landscape set in a high school gym somewhere in the Midwest. Marilyn Monroe, the weird twins from *The Shining*, Elvis, JFK, Martin Luther King all appear in surreal vignettes, made all the more weird by speaking poetic Polish. Rychcik's epic brings American icons together with cheerleaders, basketball players and, most jarringly, *negroes*.

Somehow Rychcik managed to find the 10 or so actual black people living in Poland and convinced them to be in the play. He is correlating the epic Romantic struggle of *Dziady's* hero, a baldly nationalistic narrative of Polish resistance to occupation and oppression in search of the "Polish Soul", to the race and class struggles of African-Americans in the United States. We are told he is "tak[ing] the well-known lines and uproot[ing] them from the stiff, national discourse... radically freshen[ing] them up", but "freshening them up" in a way that was at once brilliant, fascinating and wildly problematic.

I'm still trying to unpack it, and honestly I'm not sure I'm up to the task. On one level, yes, we can propose some symmetry between the Polish people's struggle to maintain - and now reconstitute - an integrated, authentic national culture and identity, and yes that history contains great swaths of horrible brutality at the hands of foreign powers. At the same time, that history doesn't really align with the history of African-Americans, the key difference very clearly being slavery. Not to mention that one would be hard-pressed to find a country more completely homogenous than Poland. And perhaps, as problematic as it was to me, it was the fact of Rychcik putting black bodies on stage that made the show truly radical. It was jarring and fraught and risky because it was a gesture that could fail in so many ways.

Seeing Rychcik use racism in America as a lens on Polish society and "pierce through the façade of modern times that are only outwardly governed by rules of tolerance and racial equality," was as compelling as it was cognitively dissonant. That being said, if I could bring any of the productions I saw in Poland to America, it would be this one.

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Not surprisingly, the winner of “Best Production” at the Divine Comedy Festival was Polski Theatre in Wrocław’s production of [Woodcutters Holzfällen](#), adapted from Austrian writer [Thomas Bernhard](#)’s novel of the same name, designed and directed by Krystian Lupa.

Bernhard’s widely acclaimed 1984 novel is an acerbic account of an “artistic dinner” attended by sophisticated Viennese artists. Hosted by a husband and his wife, respectively a singer and avant-garde composer, the guest of honor is an acclaimed actor and the narrator of the novel hasn’t seen any of them in twenty years. Looming over the dinner and conversation is Joana, the woman who originally connected them all and later committed suicide. The narrator reflects on the past twenty years as the evening progresses and skewers the pretentiousness and intellectual fraudulence of his milieu.

In Lupa’s production all the tropes of contemporary European theater are in place. The lighting is moody, dour and atmospheric; the actors perform for cameras behind a screen upon which their images are projected, edited into a movie in real time. They mumble into their microphones, they are angst-y and inarticulate, fumbling to find meaning and consistently failing.

Since I don’t speak Polish or German I can’t address the quality of the translation or of Lupa’s adaptation of the original text, but from the perspective of presentational aesthetics I found it sleek, professional, cosmopolitan and entirely too familiar – an afterimage of Frank Castorf, Ivo van Hove and The Wooster Group, to name a few.

One can well understand why the judges would select it as “Best Production”. Situated as it is among the milieu of sophisticated, cosmopolitan aesthetes it undoubtedly resonates with anyone who inhabits or regularly interacts with a similar social scene in their country.

The play deploys Bernhard’s novel to stake out a critical position on the hypocrisy and vacuity of the cosmopolitan artistic elite, yet it is that selfsame audience upon which it relies for approbation. So even as it points a finger at hypocrisy, it uses the same strategies and vocabularies as the milieu it purports to critique.

It is a neat trick, in a way. By performing self-criticality the play proposes self-awareness and worldliness while affirming the fundamentally provincial values of its origin point. One could imagine that the play is meta-critical, that by staging

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the novel within the milieu it is questioning, and earning approbation from that milieu, it is an implication of the audience, because this is not a work for a general audience, it is mostly legible only to those who are well-versed in these tropes.

More likely is that this is not the case, that the play is merely an extremely well made play aesthetically consistent with its counterparts in the post-dramatic theatrical landscape. It is technically excellent but experimentally deficient. It is the sort of work one might well see – and probably will see or have already seen – in Berlin, Vienna, London, New York, Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, etc.

Rychcik's *Dziady* was in many ways a spectacular disaster but it was audacious, incredibly risky and offered an authentic glimpse into Poland's troubled soul. Personally, I'll take a risky, spectacular disaster over a safe, technically excellent "success" any day.

Speaking of success, over drinks late into my last night at Boska Komedia in Krakow, one well-respected Polish artist said to me, "The Polish people have trouble with success. We always put ourselves in the position of being losers because, for many years before, you could only be successful if you were collaborating with an occupier! So now, we don't know how to be successful, even when we are!"

I have no idea whether this is true or just booze-fueled philosophy, but somehow the contradiction seemed apt. This was my first trip to a formerly Communist country and now, more than 25 years since the Berlin Wall came down, we'd like to think that everything has resolved, but it hasn't. History doesn't work like that. And though we in America are blessed (afflicted?) with affluence and amnesia, we'd be well served to look more closely at their experience and to look at ourselves in the mirror of the new Old World.

Poland is a mass of contradictions, a 25 year-old country with a 1,000-year history, a cultural vibrant 21st century nation still wrestling with the legacy of a brutal, bloody and destructive 20th century, a growing, modern, entrepreneurial economy that coexists with a large system of State support. Strategically located between East and West, poised at the cusp between past and future, it will be fascinating to see what happens next. I look forward to finding out.