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## ACTORS IN THE SOCIAL WORLD OF PUBLIC DRAMA THEATRE IN POLAND DURING THE COMMUNIST PERIOD AND IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

**Abstract.** This article aims to provide a comparative analysis of the social condition of actors during the communist era in Poland and after the political transformation of 1989. The empirical material used by the author includes popular science publications devoted to actors of Polish public drama theatres as well as free-flowing interviews conducted by the author in 2015–2017 with theatre artists representing six Polish theatrical centres.

Actors who remember the period of the People’s Republic of Poland well are nostalgic about the past theatrical life, they remember being on familiar terms within theatre teams, anti-rankism, and the inclusion of technical and administrative staff in the community of artists without emphasising hierarchies. Today, the social, ideological and political divides in theatre teams are more noticeable. Distinguished actors are being challenged by young colleagues, while they were held in high regard in the past. Nowadays, multi-active actors demythologise the profession of an actor and point to the decline of the professional ethos.

**Keywords:** actor, Poland under communism, contemporary theatre.

### Introduction

The focus of this paper is the social condition of actors employed in public drama theatres during two periods: the first one is delineated by the realities of the People’s Republic of Poland, while the second one began during the political transformation of 1989, a turning point which brought many changes also in the sphere of what is known as “theatrical life”.

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This article draws on the following sources:

- 1) desk research: journalistic interviews with theatre artists published in printed press and online, and published books (autobiographies and long interviews devoted to actors from public drama theatres in Poland);
- 2) empirical material: in-depth free-flowing interviews with participants in the social world of theatre (mainly actors, but also directors and theatre managers), representing six theatrical centres. I conducted a total of twenty interviews between 2015 and 2017. My respondents were recruited using the “snowballing” method. The study included artists from the younger and older generation: fourteen men and six women in total.
- 3) relevant literature in the field of sociology of art, sociology, and theatre studies.

In this article, I attempt to answer the following research questions: How do the participants of the social world of theatre perceive their own social status and their role in society? Do they believe that significant changes occurred in this regard after the political transition? How did the working conditions of stage artists change, following the political and economic transformation? Can we talk about the unity or, rather, atomisation of the community? Is the perspective of older actors homologous vis-à-vis the views and attitudes found among young actors, who were socialised after the political transformation?

This text is not historical in nature: I do not seek to present events and factual material or identify any sub-periods during the two temporal time frames. In fact, this has already been done, for example by K. Braun.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I am interested in exploring the memory of the People’s Republic of Poland without making a chronicle of the period. My focus is on the pragmatics of theatrical life rather than on theorising. The reconstruction of actors’ memories from the bygone era reveals their nostalgia for the past and sentimental feelings about the times when they were young. My interlocutors, who worked in the theatre of the “bygone era”, do not focus on the dark pages of that period (the only “dark” aspect they mention is censorship) and, instead, prefer to remember the positive aspects.

The Polish literature on acting and actors can be subdivided into several categories:

- 1) Popular publications and fiction: diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, interviews with actors (published in the press and as books), novels and short stories. Examples include Barciś, Graff 2011; Maciejewski 2015.
- 2) Historical publications on theatrical life (and, indirectly, on the condition of actors) in various historical periods; works on selected Polish theatres contain more or less in-depth knowledge on the social status of actors. Examples include Kosiński 2003; 2010; Krakowska 2011; 2016; Raszewski 1990.

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<sup>1</sup> Kazimierz Braun (2003) distinguished the theatre of “real socialism” (1956–1980), and the subperiod of “small stabilisation” between 1960 and 1980; he described the years 1980–2000 as “the stormy time”, which covered the period of martial law, the “normalised theatre” and the “reconstruction theatre” after the political transformation.

- 3) Theatrology publications: numerous books about particular actors; studies on acting techniques and publications on aesthetics represent a separate subgroup here. Examples in this category include: Guczalska 2014; 2015; Wilski 1982.
- 4) Psychological publications: several interesting works in this area have been published recently: Kociuba 1996; Mróz 2008; 2015; Mróz, Kociuba, Osterloff 2017.
- 5) Sociological publications: focused on artists representing various fields of art, including actors (e.g. Golka 2012). Among the Polish publications on the sociology of actors, two books from the 1990s deserve special attention, namely Zbigniew Wilski's publication on the condition of actors in Poland in various historical periods (Wilski 1990) and Janina Hera's work on acting in the 19th century (Hera 1993). Among sociological publications worth mentioning are also reports from empirical research, e.g. Szulborska-Łukaszewicz 2015; Kozek, Kubisa 2011; Ilczuk 1990. In 2018, a book on the social world arenas of Polish public drama theatres was published (Zimnica-Kuzioła 2018). However, the foregoing does not change the fact that the sociology of theatre in Poland is a neglected field in Polish academic discourse. There are no recent sociological analyses that adopt a comparative perspective and focus on juxtaposing the situation of actors as a professional group in the second half of the 20th century and after 1989.

## Actors during the transformation period

The political breakthrough experienced by Poles in 1989 is described by sociologists as cultural trauma. It was determined by a rapid, holistic change, embracing the culture of everyday life as well as the societal and symbolic culture. The political and systemic transition, although expected, came as a surprise to many. "Needless to say, it was welcomed with enthusiasm and hope by the majority of people" (Sztompka 2012: 519).

Subsequently, the theatre as an institution was not free from disorganisation: it lost the financial security guaranteed by governmental patronage. The staff of theatres, much like people employed in other institutions, had to go through a stage of cultural confusion, and acquire new skills and competences. Success, risk, empowerment, responsibility for one's fate, the culture of participation, prospective orientation and creativity are the notions from the new system that determined the patterns of behaviour and directions of actions. The free market inspired artists' initiatives (also in terms of encounters with pop culture) and became a catalyst for their activity.

In the social world of theatre, one can frequently come across the opinion that the dividing lines in the community overlap with political and ideological agendas. However, my claim is that what played an important role in the perception of

theatre and its social and aesthetic function was the theatrical socialisation during the communist era and in the post-transition period. Therefore, I believe that clear generational divides exist. I will try to support my claim with arguments provided by the participants of this universe.

Undoubtedly, the abolition of official state censorship can be seen as a positive aspect of the transformations in Polish theatre after 1989. At the same time, artists regret that their ideological freedom in the 21st century is limited in some sense and, for instance, takes the form of economic sanctions.<sup>2</sup> Under the communist system, the ideals of the democratisation and popularisation of culture were important. However, empirical studies conducted at the turn of the 21st century have shown that governmental efforts to implement those ideals did not bear fruit that would endure (cf. Zimnica-Kuzioła 2003: 106). Theatre audiences consist of the intelligentsia, i.e. people who are educated and/or in the process of acquiring their educational qualifications. This audience structure is largely determined by behavioural and perceptual barriers. The former barrier is linked with the absence of “positive snobbery” and the fact that theatre gets excluded from the circle of cultural interests. The latter barrier is associated with difficulties in the reception of theatrical performances that rely on metaphors and surprise viewers with formal innovations (Zimnica-Kuzioła 2003).

After being handed over to the competence of local authorities, theatres lost financial security. Thus, as observed by sociologists, the strategy adopted by theatrical authors after the transition to a market economy consisted of attempts to attract mass audiences with commercialised repertoires. As regards the situation of artists, it should be stressed that actors enjoyed job security and social security in the communist era, and worked in stable ensembles. Theatrical performances were not constrained by economic factors. In the new political and economic system, there is a serious “surplus” of actors, which means that many graduates of public and private acting schools have no prospects of finding permanent employment.

Many actors report sentimental feelings as they recall their professional lives in communist times (except for the Stalinist period), when the government was a generous patron of theatres. At that time, the so-called “positive snobbery” existed among the public and theatre was an important element of cultural life. Despite problems in obtaining passports for international travel, ensembles would go on tours to deliver guest performances abroad. Zofia Kucówna recalls:

[...] we visited all the European capitals and beyond. Despite having business passports, or sometimes even group passports, we were there as Polish actors, representing Polish art rather than private and anonymous men and women. This enhanced our sense of duty and professional responsibility. Also the national responsibility (Lubczyński 2007: 184).

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Cenzura w teatrze* [Censorship in theatre], a discussion panel organised as part of *Festiwal Sztuk Przyjemnych i Nieprzyjemnych* [Festival of Pleasant and Unpleasant Arts], at Teatr Powszechny in Łódź (24th edition) on 18 March 2018. Discussion participants included Krystyna Janda, Maciej Englert, Marcin Górski, and Jan Klata. The meeting was moderated by Katarzyna Janowska.

It is widely held that the occupational situation of actors in the past political system was much better than at present: they enjoyed “decent emoluments” and a higher social status (Lubczyński 2007: 218).

### **“The time of no haste...”**

Actors who remember the period of communist Poland well are nostalgic about the past theatrical life because of the interpersonal relations, mutual assistance and solidarity, all of which were important at that time. The economic pauperisation of society catalysed interest in the non-material sphere, and governmental control extending onto the public sphere generated escapism into the private sphere. Artists recall long conversations in theatre buffets, sometimes until dawn, the “time of no haste”, and intensive personal ties that were also important outside the professional sphere. This situation is described, among others, by Jerzy Trela. In his view, Teatr Stary was a community (but not a commune) at that time, with family-like relations. Artists would become godfathers and godmothers to each other’s children, and helped one another with real-life problems. Below are some typical statements which testify to the integration of the artistic community in those times:

Many of its members simply lived in the theatre [...]. This is where the rehearsal would continue unofficially on many occasions, solving issues that were unresolved during the official rehearsal. There was no clear division between professional and private life, and the two spheres were inseparably intertwined. Another reason why life was focused around the theatre was that there weren’t too many other options. Actors wouldn’t go to shoot TV series, and gave no performances in all kinds of TV programmes. Sometimes people would leave to get to a film set but this wasn’t a common practice (Guczalska 2015: 93–94).

I joined the theatre in 1995, it already felt different, the world of community life had already ended, and people had already started to live in their silos. I know what life used to be like because I heard stories from my colleagues, most of whom have already passed away. People used to help one another. Someone had an acquaintance in a grocery shop, another person knew a good car mechanic so there was mutual assistance. And it was cheaper to go on holidays as a group; couples would go on holiday together for 20 or 30 years (Interview No. 3).

Soft virtues (as explicated by Maria Ossowska) such as brotherhood, friendship and solidarity, translated into “partnership on stage”. Whenever needed, artists supported one another during the performance on stage, masking deficiencies and highlighting other actors’ assets. This is one of the secrets of the spectacular artistic success of theatres. Actors deny that they might idealise or even mythologise the past in retrospect (Guczalska 2015: 95). Many of my interviewees observe that today’s theatrical community ceases to have an ethos: it has become fragmented and divided into groups of influence:

Today, the community of people working in theatre has practically ceased to exist, at least from the sociological perspective, understood as a social group sharing common ideals and values, an ethical and moral code, striving to achieve an intended goal (Orzechowski 2017: 13).

In the 21st century, with its busy everyday life, people's lives have become more extensive while they used to be more reflexive in the past. Observations concerning the weakening ties in the theatre and limited interpersonal contacts are confirmed not only by my interlocutors:

That's what happens in other theatres: people don't talk to one another. They get undressed in the dressing room after the show and rush home (Interview No. 20).

I still remember the times when people would stay after the performance to talk... I remember my colleagues who would sit down, drink a bottle or three beers and talk. There was no pressure to go back home... People had time for one another. Relationships between people have changed for the worse (Interview No. 7).

Everyone's in a hurry. They have to race against others and hurry up. We can't even engage in a meaningful conversation anymore. We just exchange information (Dymna, Szczawiński 2006: 238).

Somehow, today we don't know how to have fun, we don't know how to get closer together the way they did. We rarely meet, we know less and less about one another, we don't integrate, and not just with our own community (Stenka 2018: 233).

Therefore, it is necessary to point out a significant difference between the past and the present: fulfilment of particular goals by atomised individuals is the characteristic feature of the present. One can wonder whether a sense of togetherness and mutual assistance among the participants in the social world of theatre before the transition was perhaps the aftermath of the utopian countercultural dreams of equality and brotherhood among people in the 1960s (Guczalska 2015: 96). Certainly, the pro-social attitudes displayed by the participants in the social world of theatre were influenced primarily by the living conditions and, and to a lesser extent, by the ideology of alternative culture.

In contemporary theatre, there is no room for too much familiarity. Artists' schedules are filled with intensive work, for reasons such as the need to repay bank loans. Actors' time is also filled with the new media, the Internet, and social networking sites. In the social world of theatre, much like everywhere else, social contacts have moved into the virtual sphere, but these relations are weak and fragile, so they are less satisfactory (according to M. Castells, online friendships have a high mortality rate since there is no commitment, and no moral bond here (2008)).

## “Masters used to be respected...”

Nowadays, philosophers and sociologists describe the phenomenon of the degradation of traditional authorities, caused by social and cultural transformations (cf. Mikołajko 1991; Wagner 2005). According to my interviewees, young actors nowadays challenge the existing figures of authority, whereas in the past eminent actors were surrounded by reverence:

I once asked a colleague about it, he was an outstanding actor, a fellow student of mine. We looked at eminent actors with admiration, and we asked ourselves whether people of our age group would respect us to the same extent after many years. I think the world has become impoverished; the world of theatre used to have more importance in the past (at that time, theatre was a mystery and one of the few possibilities to get closer to art and culture because television did not fulfil this role). An outstanding actor was a master. I remember that when I had the pleasure of standing next to an actor whom I considered to be a master, I found it extremely difficult to say something unpleasant to him even though it was part of my role. These relations have now changed... (Interview No. 6).

I had great respect for older actors; they would stay in the theatre after hours, have fun, they were a kind of artistic bohemia... Piotr Krukowski, Bronek Wrocławski... They were making theatrical life, creating family-like relationships. And the younger generation had the opportunity to learn from the doyens, in a natural way (Interview No. 7).

I felt total respect for them (Interview No. 3).

When recalling the time of her debut in Teatr Stary, Anna Dymna also talks about respect for tradition and reverence towards older actors. Theatre was built on a hierarchy, and the continuity of the profession was a completely natural process: “what happened among us resembled passing a baton in a relay race”, she recalls (Dymna, Szczawiński 2006: 204). Dymna appreciates friendships with her older colleagues and claims that they helped her to avoid many mistakes. Actors who starred in the main roles, acclaimed actors of the older generation, whose names were printed in a larger font on posters, enjoyed esteem among their younger colleagues. Today, young actors often contest the established hierarchy and do not want to take advantage of the experience accumulated by the doyens. During their time at the theatre school, they wish for more partner-like relations and more independence, which would certainly make it easier for them to start a career in acting.

## Anti-rankism versus social divisions

Older stage performers recall not only the family-like relations in the teams, but also the decisive anti-rankism,<sup>3</sup> the inclusion of technical and administrative staff into the community of artists, without emphasising any hierarchies.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of “rankism” was introduced by Robert W. Fuller to define the attitude of superiority and emphasis on one’s superior status in the structure of an organisation. By playing down others,

In the history of theatre there have been a variety of relationships between actors and supporting technical staff. Before the systemic transition, those relationships were more likely to be warm and without distance. Actors generally know the value of good professionals who are dedicated to their work, and appreciate their involvement in the production of theatrical performances.

One of my (female) interviewees declared:

I'm on first-name terms with most of those people. It's been like that for years. When I was leaving the theatre, I got lots of kind greetings, and people said they regretted that I was leaving. Lots of kind words from the technical team. I still have it, written somewhere on greeting cards. It all depends on people. But there are lots of those who look down on others, they even look down on their peers (Interview No. 18).

Nowadays, anti-rankism does not exist, especially in large theatres. Actors do not know the names of technical staff (incidentally, there is frequent staff rotation in technical sections due to unsatisfactory earnings in theatres).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, some signs of professional solidarity can be found, sometimes even attempts to defend the interests of technical staff. To exemplify this issue, we can invoke a letter by actress Joanna Szczepkowska, published online and addressed to her colleagues from Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw:

When the technical workers started protesting about the abuses of their working time, they heard in response that they don't understand contemporary theatre, which is about "making dreams come true", and that theatrical dreams might force them to get up at two o'clock at night because the director just decided to paint everything blue. I won't forget the technicians, feeling uneasy about that argument and about the suspicion that they might really not understand. Maybe they also don't understand that they have the right to dream about their work being treated with respect, and in keeping with the law (Szczepkowska, online sources).<sup>5</sup>

Nowadays, social divides in theatrical ensembles are more noticeable. They are aggravated by disputes over world views: the relative homogeneity of attitudes which prevailed in the past has been replaced by a visible differentiation of ideological and political positions.

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people elevate their own uncertain ego. And, conversely, anti-rankism involves respect for people who play a subordinate role in an organisation. See Robert W. Fuller: *Overcoming Rankism and Creating a Culture of Dignity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gd7gLAD6axQ> (accessed: 23.04.2019).

<sup>4</sup> It is symptomatic that in the TV series *Artyści* [*Artists*], directed by Paweł Demirski and Monika Strzępka, a relationship between an actress and a technical worker is shown as a *mésalliance*; the young couple hide this fact in order to avoid criticism in the professional community. In another scene, an actor who shows prima donna-like behaviour asks a question during an important meeting about the future of the theatre: "And what's this techie doing here?". The series consists of eight episodes. In 2017, it was nominated for *Orły* [*Eagles*], the Polish Film Award in the *Best Film Series* category and for *Prix Europa* in the "TV feature" category.

<sup>5</sup> *List do kolegów z Teatru Dramatycznego*, <http://www.encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/88987/warszawa-list-joanny-szczepkowskiej-do-kolegow-z-teatru-dramatycznego> (accessed 22.04.2016).



## The mission of the profession under communism

In the past, actors enjoyed much greater social prestige and were believed to represent the nation. Nowadays, they no longer have to act as guardians of national values. As a result, they lack a sense of the mission or uniqueness of their profession (for more on this, see Zimnica-Kuzioła 2017: 120–121; Baniewicz 2012: 260). In their discourses, my interviewees repeatedly mentioned the motif of uncompromising, united stance among the actors' community during the martial law in Poland (boycott of the mass media). This collective and – it is believed – spontaneous act of solidarity with the opposition activists who were persecuted at that time became a source of pride for those pursuing the acting profession (Roman, Sabat 1989).

The artists talk about the collapse of the acting ethos nowadays (to exemplify this, they invoke the fact that performances are more likely to get cancelled, which used to be unthinkable). In the past, actors were ready to work regardless of the circumstances, which stemmed from their sense of responsibility for the effect of joint effort. Nowadays, individualistic attitudes are becoming more widespread, and the artist's own interest is becoming more important than the common good.

Today, actors themselves demythologise their profession and distance themselves from their mission and duty to society (Zimnica-Kuzioła 2017: 115–129). One of the Polish theatre practitioners puts it as follows:

I still remember the times when theatre was alongside and for society, or at least for a large part of the society. At that time, artists weren't free, but theatre was a real shelter and a tribune of freedom. These were the times of communism, followed by martial law and the period shortly afterwards. As people of the theatre, we felt important and needed. We fulfilled an important mission, not only political, but also a civic and educational one (Orzechowski 2017: 18).

The statements made by my interviewees represent the line of thinking that prevails nowadays:

I am not interested in theatre as a “temple” because I don't feel like I'm a priest or something. I might have some visions, but I only bring them to see if they are true. Theatre is a unique place: a place of freedom, a democratic place where you can do things you cannot do elsewhere, and bear no consequences (Interview No. 15).

I don't use the word “mission”, I see this profession as a craft. Some artists talk as if they were “possessed”. I can say this because I feel safe: I'm going to be anonymous... (Interview No. 7).

Older actors still refer to the theatre as the “temple of art” and reflect on the actor's obligations towards society. However, they perceive the uniqueness of stage performances differently than during the communist times in Poland. In their opinion, theatre has the mission of “humanising” the audience, breaking social taboos, and expressing collective anxieties.

## Polyactivity as *signum temporis*

In the social world of theatre in the 21st century, the union between theatre and pop culture has become legitimised. In the past, opinion leaders in the theatre community were reluctant about actors getting involved in commercials or TV series but these attitudes have now been replaced by cautious or unconditional approval. Actors are multiactive: even if they have a permanent position in a theatre, they simultaneously work in television or the radio, in film dubbing, etc. Sometimes they also engage in activities outside the artistic sphere. Consequently, given the diversification of activities, the material status of actors is varied.

Actors of the young generation, who have not experienced any reality other than the free market, quite naturally embrace the need to undertake multiple activities. They do not settle for a single role. Instead, they prepare monodramas, write scripts and engage in directing. This market strategy forces them to pursue continuous personal growth: a multiactive actor must acquire new skills, far beyond those that are needed to act in the classic theatre. If an actress produces theatrical performances, this new activity means that she must have proficiency in financial accounting for projects, and know how to maintain financial discipline. My interviewees also talked about their work outside permanent employment:

With a bunch of friends, we set up an improvisation group. I write texts, we make a series of films on YouTube. I run a foundation, I'm doing a PhD (Interview No. 10).

I act in a TV series (...) I play monodramas, I am well-known around Poland, I am well-known abroad. I also do some work for the community, I get invited to sit on various contest committees. And there are many other activities. But I really want that, I have the will to do that. I take part in various projects, like I prepare performances as a form of social rehabilitation for prisoners. Under another project, I visited towns in our municipality, a different town every day, holding classes with people aged 50+. The idea was to make people active through theatre. After six months, I couldn't tell which town I was in... (Interview No. 18).

I would very much like to make my living only in the theatre but that's impossible under the present circumstances (Interview No. 7).

We rush like hell to the film set, then quickly get in the car because we have a stage performance in the evening... And on top of that I record stories on the radio, then I rush to school to have classes with students. And then rehearsals in the theatre... (Interview No. 3)

One important term related to the lives of actors in the realities of the free market economy is self-promotion (some artists turn out to be masters in impression management). Young people are “radars” – according to the explication of this term by D. Riesman (1996) – and individualists, and their current vocabulary includes terms such as “career management”, “long-term goals” and “short-term goals”.

Middle-aged actors (40–60 years old) live, in a way, between the old patterns and new demands: some of them have adapted to the new situation. One example

is Artur Barciś, who is largely polyactive. He performs in a theatre, acts in a TV series and works as a director. He prepared a recital for the Stage Songs Review in Wrocław, then recorded a CD from that recital. Barciś paints pictures, writes fairy tales and short stories, teaches singing at a music school, writes a blog and texts for a local newspaper, and has a column in the Polish edition of *Newsweek*.

Artists from the older age group (aged 60) are usually not expansive, especially those who have achieved a good professional position and can afford to work at a slower pace and be selective about the proposals they receive. They no longer have to fight for their professional presence, and do not need to prove their worth. They rarely go to casting sessions (for them, this is a major logistical and emotional challenge). They find it difficult to compete for roles and sometimes feel that individual efforts undertaken by other participants in the social world of theatre are an imposition and require behaviour that goes against their sense of dignity. These attitudes are reflected, among others, in statements such as these:

I have the impression I could fight for it if it were someone else, but it's hard to fight for myself (Interview No. 4).

I thought if someone notices me, then all well and good... Then I'd love to (Interview No. 6).

I'll never make a phone call myself, it's really not me. I've never done it and I never will (Interview No. 10).

## Disputes about theatre policy

Disputes in the social world of theatre concern many issues. People who represent existing organisations such as ZASP (the Union of Stage Artists in Poland), the Union of Polish Theatres, or the Association of Managers of Polish Theatres, have divergent opinions about the essential issue, i.e. how theatre in Poland should be organised. One of my interlocutors remarked:

There is no law on theatre because employers cannot come to an agreement with employees (and this is also "thanks to" ZASP). We have been trying to fight for this law for many years. We, as the Union of Polish Theatres or the Association of Managers of Polish Theatres, cannot agree on the provisions to be included in that law. When it comes to legal provisions and the vision of theatre in general, the theatre community is strongly divided, and not just politically, but also structurally (Interview No. 17).

One can venture to say that the differences in the perception of rules which organise the life of Polish theatre stem from generational differences. Actors who represent the younger generation are more likely to propose changes in theatre policy, while the older ones would more likely prefer to maintain the status quo.

And, last but not least, it is worth recalling the aesthetic disputes which divide the theatre community. Actors agree that the work process itself was more

comfortable in the past and each premiere was preceded by long periods of rehearsals. Nowadays, the pace of work has accelerated.<sup>6</sup> Actors with extensive experience of working in the theatre point out that many contemporary directors have a different working style: “We used to believe that the essence of our work was to dwell on the role, on the performance, on the utterance, to dig deep into words, into our bodies” (Interview No. 13). Nowadays, there is no time and no money for this, as one of my interviewees observes. The economy is the factor that determines the shape of contemporary theatre, enforcing cost-cutting and artistic compromises. As regards matters of aesthetics, older actors are more likely to be “priests of orthodoxy” (P. Bourdieu): they do not want the avantgarde trend to dominate in the Polish drama theatre. Younger actors are more open to experiments on stage and to ideas that break with the conventions that have hitherto prevailed in the theatre.

Finally, it is worth noting that the divisions in Polish theatre go beyond the young-old dichotomy. And it is not the case that the young always prefer innovation while the older ones are more conservative and prefer traditional theatre. Aesthetic disputes are understandable because contradiction is the rudimentary principle in artistic creation.<sup>7</sup> It should be strongly emphasised that conflicts of interest within the same age groups are sometimes more important than aesthetic disputes (cf. Zimnica-Kuzioła 2018; Orzechowski 2017: 14).

## Conclusion

The analysis of artists’ statements about theatrical life in two eras reveals a kind of dissonance between sentimental narratives about the communist era in Poland and the historical narrative (cf. Gontarz 2017). On the one hand, the past tends to be idealised but, in fact, actors in drama theatres were a privileged professional

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<sup>6</sup> Based on many years of observing theatrical life in Poland, I put forward the thesis on the McDonaldization of contemporary theatre, which manifests itself, among other things, in various theatres offering a similar repertoire, mostly based on comedy (e.g. Ray Cooney’s *Run For Your Wife* staged, among other places, in Łódź, Kraków, Wrocław, Opole, Częstochowa, or Paul Pörtner’s *Shear Madness*, attracting large audiences in Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Rzeszów, and Białystok), and in detailed set designs being replaced with multimedia screens and ready-made stage elements. The liquidation of technical studios means that stage costumes have become random. For instance, beautiful costumes that were once prepared by passionate tailors are being replaced with clothes from second-hand shops. Also, the educational process undergone by actors-to-be is worth noting (nowadays, less importance is attached to the poetic word because somatic aspects have become more important than the verbal elements of the performance); the new generation of stage artists is criticised by senior representatives of the acting profession for shortcomings in their acting skills, especially for poor diction.

<sup>7</sup> Groys writes: “When some artists insisted on the autonomy of art, others practiced political engagement [...] When some artists started to make abstract art, other artists began to be ultra-realistic [...] The field of modern art is not a pluralistic field but a field strictly structured according to the logic of contradiction” (Groys 2013: 1–2).

group. On the other hand, the society still has a memory of the activity of the secret services, denunciations, restricted freedom of expression, the imposition of social realism as a model in arts etc.<sup>8</sup> Actors' reminiscences omit elements that are part of the "dark chapter" of the bygone era: the enslavement of the nation, political and economic dependence on the USSR, repressions introduced by the authorities, widespread surveillance, the rationing of consumer goods and foodstuffs, as well as many other manifestations of the "gloomy communist times". Sentimental feelings about the past and the times of one's youth seem to erase the weaknesses of the communist times from memory. One can get the impression that the collective nostalgia for the bygone times is based on selective memory of the past. Another fact of significance is that not all actors are beneficiaries of the political and economic transformation, and not all of them have adapted to the new circumstances: they are exactly the ones who are willing to forget about the difficult realities of life under communism. Much in line with common observations, psychological research also reveals an asymmetry between negative and positive memories: the latter strongly prevail in individual biographies. Positive memories belong to the period of youth on the individual timeline. Moreover, "negative affectivity" has decreased over time while events that trigger "positive affectivity" are more likely to be reproduced in memory (Rybak 2012: 29–30).

Nowadays, the acting profession is elitist: it requires both innate predispositions and specialised education. Only selected candidates get admitted to public acting schools, the study programme is difficult and requires total commitment. In the 21st century, actors in Poland belong to the new middle class, with lifestyle and the dominant future orientation as its main determinants (including ambitious career development plans). Members of the acting profession do not feel like representatives of the nation: they demythologise their uniqueness and status as "the chosen ones". In contrast, they had a special mission during the communist era: to guard endangered values. However, the social functions of theatre have changed. Yet, at the same time, an actor in Poland is a public figure and therefore their ethical stance or political views are not without significance for society. Before the political transformation, actors spoke for people and on people's behalf, in the language of the Romantic poets together with Mickiewicz's Konrad. They assumed the role of spiritual leaders, fought for freedom, and "felt the suffering of the whole nation" (cf. Janda [in:] Roman, Sabat 1989: 119). The transformations after 1989 became a catalyst for activity: adaptive strategies developing under the free market economy helped theatrical artists to become self-dependent and easily manoeuvre

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth adding that according to the 2014 CBOS survey, 71% of Poles expressed satisfaction with the change of the political system, 12% negatively assessed the overall outcome of the transformation, while the remaining respondents had no opinion on the matter (p. 19). Among the positive effects of the transformation, the respondents mentioned freedom and its various aspects, democratisation, better access to goods and services, positive changes in the economy, development of the country, modernisation, increased wealth in society and opening to the West. Cf. Badora 2014.

through “adhocracy”, i.e. spontaneous actions adapted to specific situations in the “liquid” social environment.<sup>9</sup>

The differences between the situation of actors in the Polish People’s Republic and in the 21st-century Poland, as discussed in this article, are summarised in the table prepared by the author of this paper:

**Table 1.** Actors in communist Poland and present-day Poland

<b>Before the political transformation</b>	<b>After the transformation</b>
high prestige/actors as representatives of the nation	less prestige/actors are not on a mission to cultivate national values
a sense of mission, of uniqueness	no sense of mission or uniqueness
important ethos of an actor, readiness to work despite the circumstances	decline of the ethos, more common cancellations of performances
aversion to advertising and pop culture	legitimised “marriage” with pop culture
long rehearsal periods, comfort of working	fast pace of work
importance of diction, poetic texts	somatic aspects more important than verbal elements
great respect for the masters	figures of authority being challenged
familiar relations in the team, dehierarchisation	weaker interpersonal ties, hierarchisation, social divisions
job security, sense of social security	lower sense of social security
actors’ mono-activity dominant	actors’ multi-activity
economic status of actors undifferentiated	high differentiation of earnings due to diversification of activities
greater homogeneity of attitudes	radical ideological and political divisions

Source: Author’s own study.

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<sup>9</sup> A total of 1610 actors are currently employed in public theatres (of all types), of which 748 are women. The most numerous artistic group in Poland is the one of the National Theatre (Teatr Narodowy) with 59 actors. It is worth adding that there are currently 71 drama theatres in Poland (171 stages), which were visited by 4.5 million theatre-goers (GUS Statistics Poland data for 2015). There are 63 public drama theatres, subsidised by the central government and (professional) self-governments (*Teatr w Polsce 2016: documentation of the 2014/2015*, season: 34, 49).

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### AKTORZY W SPOŁECZNYM ŚWIECIE PUBLICZNEGO TEATRU DRAMATYCZNEGO W POLSCE W OKRESIE PRL I W XXI WIEKU ANALIZA PORÓWNAWCZA

**Abstrakt.** Celem artykułu jest analiza porównawcza kondycji społecznej aktorów w okresie PRL-u i po transformacji ustrojowej 1989 roku. Materiałem empirycznym, jaki wykorzystuje Autorka, są publikacje popularnonaukowe poświęcone aktorom polskich publicznych teatrów dramatycznych i przeprowadzone przez nią – w latach 2015–2017 – wywiady swobodne z twórcami teatralnymi, reprezentującymi sześć polskich ośrodków teatralnych.

Aktorzy, którzy dobrze pamiętają okres PRL-u, z nostalgią wspominają miniony czas w życiu teatralnym, pamiętają rodzinne stosunki w zespołach, antyrankizm, włączanie pracowników technicznych i administracyjnych do wspólnoty twórców, bez podkreślania jakiegokolwiek hierarchii. Współcześnie podziały społeczne, ideologiczne i polityczne w zespołach są bardziej widoczne. Młodzi aktorzy częściej kwestionują autorytety, w minionej epoce zasłużeni aktorzy darzeni byli wielkim szacunkiem. Współcześnie multiaktywni aktorzy demitologizują profesję aktorską, zwracają uwagę na upadek zawodowego etosu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** aktor, okres PRL, teatr współczesny.