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## “English with a Polish Accent and a Slight Touch of Irish”: Multilingualism in Polish Migrant Theatre

# ABSTRACT

Issues of migration writing (see Kosmalska) and migrant theatre have recently gained prominence, leading to an increase in research focused on analyzing the theatrical works of artists with a migrant background. This phenomenon is part of a broader trend in intercultural and, often, postcolonial studies. Contemporary Polish migrant theatre is a subject that has not been thoroughly explored yet. Among many methods applied in the study of migrant theatre, intercultural studies or the so-called new interculturalism take the lead. These concepts draw on bilingualism or multilingualism practices, which are slowly taking a more significant role in migrant theatre studies. This article analyzes two theatre plays staged by Polish migrants in Ireland and in the United Kingdom in the context of linguistic practices that exemplify and help define the concept of transnational drama.

**Keywords:** bilingualism, multilingualism, migrant theatre, intercultural theatre.

In the introduction to *Dramaturgy of Migration*, editors Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny discuss the role of contemporary drama, including transnational drama, in the construction of “performative encounters” (14). Meerzon and Pewny address two problems in their work. The first issue concerns a shift in the perspective towards the performing arts, in which one can observe an increased focus on the creative process itself: a phenomenon they characterize as “encounters” in contemporary theatre. The second issue, which arises from today’s global context, relates to migration and the identification of a specific form or sub-genre known as “migrant theatre.” Meerzon and Pewny develop their own terms—“performative encounters” and “dramaturgy of migration”—to foreground the specific nature of transnational dramaturgy present in theatre in the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> The authors draw upon research by Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt who have noticed “a shift in dramaturgy as the practice has come to focus increasingly on creating encounters between the performance and its public, between the object *seen* and the subject *seeing*” (qtd. in Meerzon and Pewny 13). Since language, understood as a code necessary for communication, is key in creating a given encounter or performance, it is also an important element of the emerging transnational dramaturgy.

Meerzon and Pewny note that the aim of their work is to “encourage a dialogue on the function of dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg in constructing performative encounters within the conditions of onstage and offstage multilingualism caused by the realities of global movements” (13). Following this approach, one can pose a more precise question about how language, including accent, contributes to the creation of performative encounters. These encounters, understood as both a process and a performance, involve collaboration<sup>2</sup> on several levels. The

<sup>1</sup> Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny conducted a research project titled “Migration and Multilingualism” at the University of Ghent between 2016 and 2018. Initially, their focus was to examine migrant theatres in Europe, and they published their findings in a special issue of *Modern Drama* (vol. 61, no. 3, 2018). Subsequently, they broadened the scope of their research by introducing new concepts, including *performative encounters*, which they found to be a prevalent component in many activities within migrant communities. This concept is not limited to indicating the final product, such as a play or an urban space performance. The term *encounter* in contemporary theatre also encompasses the context—the so-called new interculturalism (see McIvor, “Staging the ‘New Irish’” and “Introduction: New Directions?”). In this framework, the term *encounter* extends beyond the theatrical context to include other social activities.

<sup>2</sup> The creative process in theatre always requires collaboration. Theatre, as an art form is multimodal and employs a variety of communicative tools, ranging from spoken words and music to stage movements and scenery with props. The performance is therefore an outcome of collaboration between a number of different creators. Their collective effort becomes an indispensable driving force that breathes life into a theatrical performance. Another important aspect is the nature of this collaboration: in the case of migrant theatre,

most important is the dramaturgical level, which includes the creation, development and evolution of content into a kind of code. The next level involves presentation/performance, which provides a platform for the signature features of migrant theatre. Examples of such features include a foreign accent in the dialogue of the characters/actors and the absence of linguistic “correctness”—the traits that are distinctive not just to the migrant characters in the play but also to migrant actors. Given that only a handful of academic texts within theatre studies concentrate exclusively on the topic of language employed on stage, this article primarily explores matters concerning language.

The main aim of the article is to identify platforms of collaboration at various levels in two migrant plays to illustrate how transnational dramaturgy and performance come into being. The works selected for analysis are *Bubble Revolution* (2013) and *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve* (2021), adapted by Kasia Lech, a migrant who moved from Poland to Ireland. These works were chosen because they incorporate two aspects of transtextuality that are of particular interest to this paper: language and identity.

## THEATRE OF POLISH MIGRANTS—A RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

In 1994, after the political transformation in Poland, a monograph edited by Izolda Kiec, Dobrochna Ratajczakowa and Jacek Wachowski entitled *Teatr i dramat polskiej emigracji 1939–1989 (Theatre and Drama of Polish Emigration 1939–1989)* was published. It was one of the last works analyzing the rather homogenous theatre and drama created by Polish artists in exile.<sup>3</sup> Although the challenges these artists faced may be comparable to the experiences of contemporary migrant artists, the reasons for and context of migration were undoubtedly different.<sup>4</sup> In the preface to *Teatr i dramat polskiej emigracji*, Ratajczakowa wrote that “the émigré playwright . . . addressed their works to the émigré stage,

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collaboration often springs from an initial meeting of individuals who transform their encounter into a performative act. Collaboration within such a form is therefore multi-layered. This concept is explored in greater detail later in this article.

<sup>3</sup> One of the most recent major scholarly works on Polish émigré theatre is the publication by Dariusz Kosiński and Emil Orzechowski “Teatr polski poza krajem” (“Polish Theatre Abroad”), edited by Marta Fik, published in *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku* in 2000. Kosiński and Orzechowski discuss the typology of Polish theatre, including different forms of presentation and presence of Polish performances abroad.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1939 and 1989, Polish migrants and their theatre and drama were primarily driven by political factors while the predominant motivator post-1989 has been economic migration.

[they] became a medium of their time, an exponent of the difficult situation of emigrants” (8).<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary migration writing often focuses on issues such as challenges related to the work or the process of settling down in foreign society and culture, which were and still are relevant to migrant communities. However, several aspects concerning the creation and operation of migrant theatres have changed. One of these aspects is the form of migrant theatre that stems from the process of “performative encounter”: it often uses a workshop method employed by a multilingual artistic and production team and is designed to appeal to a diverse, multiethnic audience. Other changes can be observed in cultural policy<sup>6</sup> and in the institutions fostering the growth of migrant theatres, such as the Almeida Theatre in London, the Upstairs Theatre in Dublin or the Ballhaus Naunynstraße in Berlin. These changes reflect a response to societal shifts (e.g., the increase in migrant and refugee populations) and the ongoing development of European society. Theatre has exceeded the framework of literary drama and, as noted by Wolf-Dieter Ernst, it has changed its character from a presentation of results to a shared discussion, exchange of information or an encounter (57). In the context of the trans-, inter- and cross-cultural challenges of contemporary theatre, it can be observed that until 1989 the research on Polish migrant theatre focused primarily on Polish-language theatre created abroad. Nowadays, the category of language is not an exclusionary one. Although contemporary theatre research has yet to develop its own new categories, which take into account transculturalism and multilingualism and can be applied in an analysis of Polish migrant theatre, recent scholarly works have begun to examine linguistic forms in migrant theatre, including the use of multiple languages (see Elwira M. Grossman, “Dwu(wiele) języczny teatr” and “Staging Polish Migration”).

<sup>5</sup> “Emigracyjny dramatopisarz . . . adresował utwory na emigracyjną scenę, stawał się swoistym medium swego czasu, wyrazicielem trudnej sytuacji emigrantów” (Ratajczakowa 8). Translated by the authors.

<sup>6</sup> The changes in cultural policy involve successive introduction of new trends that are not only aimed at the well-established model of democratization of culture, but go further towards cultural democracy. The democratization of culture is a process that renders cultural events accessible to social groups at risk of exclusion. It is the belief that institutionally recognized culture—particularly that which is subsidized by public funds—should be accessible to the broadest possible audience due to its inherent value and potential to positively influence the lives of all recipients. On the other hand, cultural democracy allows social groups themselves (such as migrants, ethnic minorities, LGBT+ communities, and more) to create art and cultural events that reflect their perspectives and realities. This approach includes acknowledging and funding minority cultures and trends that may differ from those traditionally considered most valuable within a given culture (see Hadley; Duelund; *Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe*).

## INTERCULTURALISM AS A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR PRACTICAL OPERATIONS

Interculturalism is a concept with no single definition. Rather, each scholar who delves into interpreting this phenomenon ties it to their personal life experiences, their geopolitical context or generational perspective. This article employs the concept of interculturalism in theatre with a primary focus on the collaboration of languages or linguistic codes. It relates selected academic approaches to intercultural theatre to support the argument that Polish migrant theatre has an inherent intercultural character and should be analyzed within the paradigm of new interculturalism.

The concept of intercultural theatre emerged in the 1980s to characterize phenomena such as Peter Brook's theatre, and more precisely his 1985 production of *The Mahabharata*. Erika Fischer-Lichte believes that this play initiated an important discussion about the framework and boundaries of intercultural theatre ("Interweaving Performance Cultures"). Fischer-Lichte also discusses other contributors to intercultural theatre, such as Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson or Tadashi Suzuki and Yukio Ninagawa (*ibid.*). These names represent the so-called "Western and other" or "Eastern culture in cooperation with Western culture" framework and point to the gist of the problem of intercultural theatre—what Daphne E. Lei refers to as "hegemonic intercultural theatre [HIT]" (571). Lei notes that HIT "is a specific artistic genre and state of mind that combines First World capital and brainpower with Third World raw material and labour, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance traditions" (571). Similarly, Fischer-Lichte, renowned for her detailed analysis of interculturalism in theatre, articulated in a 2011 discussion with Rustom Bharucha that the term "intercultural" "always indicated a mixture of something Western and non-Western. Not of something within Africa, or between Africa and Latin America, or between different Asian states. No, these relationships had nothing to do with 'intercultural.' 'Intercultural' referred to those theatre forms that positioned the West against the rest" (Fischer-Lichte and Bharucha). Fischer-Lichte proposes an alternative: the German term "Verflechtungen"—the author explains that it carries a similar meaning to "interweaving performance cultures" or the "interweaving of cultures in performance" (Fischer-Lichte and Bharucha). She is not alone in viewing the concept of intercultural theatre as a potential risk of marginalizing many artistic activities of today. Ric Knowles, a Canadian scholar who draws on his experiences in Toronto—"the world's most intercultural city" ("Multicultural Text" 73)—also argues that intercultural theatre is not a satisfactory term. What the researchers have to take into account today is, as Knowles notes, "a new

kind of rhizomatic (multiple, non-hierarchical, horizontal) intercultural performance-from-below . . . that no longer retains a West and the rest binary, that is no longer dominated by charismatic white men or performed before audiences assumed to be monochromatic" (*Theatre* 79). Therefore, it is necessary to consider how such negative experiences stemming from the hegemonic intercultural model might impact the collaborative model. Is the preconceived hierarchical structure of the performance imposed by a white director—a representative of the West—a platform for collaboration or rather a reproduction of imperialist models echoing colonial themes? The answer to this and other questions about intercultural theatre—a term that is challenging to describe and often carries negative implications—can be found in an approach known as “new interculturalism.” This approach not only addresses the challenges associated with interculturalism but also embraces new structures and serves as a foundation for non-hierarchical collaboration. McIvor writes that “new interculturalism’s major point of reference is materialist histories of colonialism, global capital, migration, and conflict, among other factors that undergird each and every instance of intercultural exchange and enunciation shared between individuals and amongst groups” (“Introduction: New Directions?” 6). Research in intercultural theatre carried out in the context of new interculturalism therefore encompasses relationships that dismantle binary divisions, leading to the diminishing prominence of Western theatre as the primary reference point. New interculturalism is an approach that involves examining “intercultural flows/encounters from the perspective of non-Western minority or subaltern stakeholders” (4). It also prioritizes “local rather than distance-based models of intercultural exchange” and is “driven by intersectional feminist approaches which engage the entanglement of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion” (*ibid.*). Hence the framework proposed by McIvor seems to offer an apt context for analysis of phenomena such as the theatre of Polish migrants.

Contemporary research on Polish migrant theatre in Europe must, therefore, take into account the complexity of values included in the term “intercultural theatre.” Current research indicates that an increasing number of boundaries and divisions both in cultural policy and scientific approach to trans- and interculturalism are being questioned or redefined. The concept of intercultural theatre was introduced through the studies of Western scholars which focused on mainstream theatre research, like Erika Fischer-Lichte and Patrice Pavis. However, academics such as Ric Knowles and Charlotte McIvor, observing the development of the societies in which they operate (Toronto and Ireland respectively), highlight the inadequacy of the term “interculturalism” in theatre and performance studies and the need for a research framework based on new interculturalism. As

McIvor notes, new interculturalism “is driven by minority and subaltern voices, whether gathered in diverse, contemporary urban locations or excavated from the recesses of colonial archives shaped by the ‘ambiguities and performative accretions that characterize the historical record’” (“Introduction: New Directions?” 1). Contemporary Polish migrant theatre serves as a platform for amplifying the voices of a community that, until now, has remained largely unheard. It also offers a space of expression for women who are actively protesting against the populist regime in Poland. Notably, the creators of *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve* draw inspiration from Adam Mickiewicz’s *Dziady*—a 19<sup>th</sup>-century text that explores the liberation of the Polish nation from the yoke of partitions. In contemporary discourse, the enduring dependence of the Polish nation on occupying powers—Prussia, Austria and Russia—is often compared to colonialism (Conrad; Kołodziejczyk; Borkowska; Thompson).

This article therefore argues that the selected plays, *Bubble Revolution* and *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve*, are exponents of theatre forms within the new interculturalism framework. The practices of Polish Theatre Ireland (*Bubble Revolution*) and the Almeida Theatre (*Dziady/Forefather’s Eve*), examined in this article, address the issue of providing a platform for expression for Polish minority theatre. This niche theatre originates from Poland, which despite being part of Europe, has often been viewed, according to different theorists, as a colonized country (during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) or a dependent country (during the 20<sup>th</sup> century under USSR dominance) (Thompson; Koczanowicz; Kołodziejczyk; Borkowska), and therefore its theatre is not considered part of Western production. However, due to the increasing popularity of new interculturalism and the substantial presence of Polish migrants actively engaging in various artistic activities, the performances created by Polish artists in Ireland and the UK are gaining visibility and significance among intercultural audiences, and should therefore be analyzed as examples of new interculturalism.

The performances selected for analysis highlight different models of collaboration that are typical of new interculturalism. For example, after each performance of *Bubble Revolution*, the actress Kasia Lech gathered feedback from the audience and adjusted the next performance according to their suggestions—this is an illustration of the collaboration between the actress and the local, multicultural audience. *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve*, in turn, exemplifies intercultural collaboration between a group of actresses who come from different ethnic backgrounds. Their distinctive accents permeate one another on stage, producing a unique multicultural performance. What is characteristic of these models of collaboration is that they are non-hierarchical: there is no powerful figure of a director who has full control over the performance but instead the whole multicultural team

works together, sharing a variety of artistic, technical and organizational responsibilities, to put on a play. It is also typical that this team organizes a series of artistic workshops, during which all participants contribute to the creation of a unified concept for the performance.

### *BUBBLE REVOLUTION AS AN EXAMPLE OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL COLLABORATION*

Polish Theatre Ireland was founded in Dublin in 2008 in response to a growing need for a theatre that would represent the Polish diaspora in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Instead of being limited to artists of Polish origin, the group sought collaboration with local artists in order to create intercultural theatre, which would be performed both in Polish and English. The repertoire of PTI included a few shows performed in Polish and twice as many in English. The group staged contemporary Polish drama, with an aim to show “Irish audiences how Polish mentality and national Polish identity face contemporary Polish reality and how much it is rooted in the communism past” (*Polish Theatre Ireland*). *Bubble Revolution* marked the final production in the history of this group. The choice of this play by Polish Theatre Ireland was motivated not only by the former success of *Foreign Bodies*, performed by the same actress, but also by the narrative applied in this production—a narrative of a generation witnessing a political transformation in their childhood, a generation of individuals with raised hopes, who were painfully disappointed in their adulthood by the effects of social and political changes. The representatives of this generation, as the group notes, emigrated to Ireland (and other countries) after Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004. Disillusionment with the lives they led in Poland became a driving force for the members of Polish Theatre Ireland to explore intercultural theatre in Dublin. This venture became both a necessity and a challenge in a cosmopolitan city.

*Rewolucja Balonowa/Bubble Revolution* was written by Julia Holewińska in 2011 and premiered on stage at Zygmunt Hübner Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw in the same year. The Dublin premiere was held at the Theatre Upstairs, a lively theatre venue for diverse intercultural creativity. *Bubble Revolution* is a monodrama performed by Kasia Lech and directed by John Currivan. The script was adapted from the play by Julia Holewińska and translated into English by Artur Zapałowski, although the final text was, in fact, developed by Lech, who also played the main role. As Lech notes, the performance of *Bubble Revolution* is “an act of multi-

<sup>7</sup> Information obtained during consultations with Kasia Lech.



layered translation that is both linguistic and contextual, both textual and performative, and both domesticating and foreignising” (Lech 45).

The main character in *Bubble Revolution*, Wiktoria, later Vica, is a “transformational orphan”<sup>8</sup> (Świąder-Puchowska), a member of a generation disappointed and alienated by the outcomes of political transformation in Poland. This narrative illustrates a common strategy in the dramaturgy of migrants—the “dramaturgy of the self” which “[reflects] the everyday alienation experienced by both migrant theatre makers and their audiences” (Meerzon and Pewny, “Introduction. Dramaturgy of Self” 14). It should be acknowledged, however, that this model of narrative chosen and adapted by the creators of Polish Theatre Ireland is revealed only on stage in the text adapted by Kasia Lech (a little differently each time). Thus the strategy “of the self” observed here is applied at the level of narration in the play script. As Elwira M. Grossman notes, the migrant-transcultural dramaturgy exists in “a space between languages, cultures and traditions” which she labelled “the space of transcultural idioms” (“Staging Polish Migration” 24). Thus each performance entails a direct narrative of the creators-migrants addressing the society they live in and tackling identity issues (i.e. *Bubble Revolution* by Holewińska). The actress playing Vica, Kasia Lech, writes:

As Vica and I renegotiate our identity (and the text of the translation) in response to the cultural contexts we have encountered (partly through the audience), spectators may open themselves to a similar process. By facilitating the spectators’ search for new ways to respond to my foreignness, I work to strengthen the political potential arising from the translational context. I start the English-language play in Polish: “Wszystko zaczęło się od gumy do żucia” (Holewińska, *Rewolucja* 1), which I immediately translate: “It all started with bubble gum” (Holewińska, *Bubble Revolution* 1). The Polish line is a spontaneous reaction to discovering childhood treasures; the English one recognises the presence of the audience and that they might not have understood what I said. (48)

This practice also initiates a certain level of cooperation with the audience. They are encouraged to embrace the idea that they might not or even must not understand every single word of the performance, and that they might feel uncomfortable, because they are taking part in a performance that engages both the senses and emotions as it seeks to become a performative encounter. *Bubble Revolution* premiered in Dublin in 2013 and then was staged over fifty times in Ireland and the UK by Polish Theatre Ireland. Only a few of those performances were played entirely in Polish for

<sup>8</sup> “Transformacyjna sierota” (translated by the authors).

Polish migrants living abroad; the rest were performed in English—or more precisely in the English and Polish bilingual weave—for the local, multicultural audiences. Kasia Lech was born and educated in Poland, although at the time of co-creating and performing the play, she had lived intermittently in Poland, Ireland and the United Kingdom. The main character, Vica, and Lech have age, nationality and native language in common. Consequently, Lech's identity as an actor becomes entwined with her portrayal of the character in the play. As Lech states, the key element in her creative process was “a dialogic empathy”—“an emotional connection based on a ‘constant and open-ended engagement’ between the actor and the audience” (47) as a way of facilitating communication with the audience of a multilingual production.

As the performer notes, the line in Polish at the beginning of the play was an impromptu response to a childhood memory, while its English translation demonstrated the actress's awareness of her English-speaking audience and the possibility of not being understood (Lech 48). This act of translation places Lech-as-Vica in the role of a translator which Lech maintains throughout the play (48). To exemplify this, when Vica has a phone conversation in Polish, it is promptly explained in English; when Vica sings the Polish anthem, the line “z ziemi włoskiej do Polski” (“to Poland from the Italian land”) is translated into English as a reference to the character's affair with an Italian man; when Vica teaches the audience a Polish word for Granny (Babcia)—she translates it into English only twice to show her emotional connection with this word and this person; when Vica sings, the songs are translated into English and performed over Polish-language recordings (48–49). As Lech states, her real-time translation of the songs is also linked with Vica's narrative. To illustrate this, Lech recalls performing a song by a Polish band, Republika, titled “Telefony” (“Telephones”). It is performed both in English and Polish in order to demonstrate Vica's struggles—fear of responsibilities and obligations. In the last stanza, Polish and English mix and compete, creating a “tension between the source and the translation” which “is meant to add more layers to Vica's struggles and illustrate that Vica's story is a complex translation both in language and in meaning” (49). This process of interweaving languages and translation not only facilitates the abovementioned “dialogic empathy,” but also enables the performer to “[claim her] ownership of English as a non-native speaker” (50). Lech, both as Vica and a performer, communicates and performs in a language that is not her mother tongue, hence the role of a translator “encompasses [her] identities as an actor and as a character” (51). The act of translating in real-time introduces another layer of dramatical dimension to the performance; it transforms it into a manifesto of a generation grappling with issues of identity (52).

As regards the issue of collaboration in the development of the script, it is essential to note that this is much more than a mere cooperation between the author-translator and the director of the play. The author of the adaptation, playwright Kasia Lech, contributes a layer of meta-narrative to the text—she puts her character, Vica, in the role of a co-creator of the performance on stage. As Lech states, this type of translation can “present [Vica] as a dramaturg: someone who can control and manipulate the narrative” (50). The author further notes that this process is “in line with Vica’s attempts to ‘translate’ her history into a fairy tale and hide her anxiety” (50). Vica in the role of a dramaturg “attempts to take ownership of her story and its staging” (50).

The intertwining between the creators and the stage characters at the level of presentation can be challenging to describe in simple terms. It fundamentally concerns the manner in which the multimedia message, the acting, as well as the accent and pronunciation presented on stage reach the audience. Elwira M. Grossman explored the role of accent in British representations of Polish migrants in her article on multilingualism in Polish migrant theatre in Great Britain. The researcher believes that the accent “colours the performative dimension of the whole performance” (“Staging Polish Migration” 25). The “imperfect” pronunciation, which characterizes both the actor and the stage character, contributes to the intercultural nature of the performance. Grossman further notes that accent in British culture is a marker of both one’s origin and identity (32). Therefore, exploring both elements of a performance—*what* is being said on stage and *how* it is being said—establish the intercultural character of theatre. Furthermore, the collaboration of individuals from different cultural backgrounds in the production of a theatre performance increases the likelihood of the message being understood by the audience. As Lech noted, the linguistic process in *Bubble Revolution* was a matter of renegotiation of identity—the audience encountered an actress who offered a culturally-challenging message, altered by non-native pronunciation. While performing, Lech attributed the accent to Vica, although she did not distance herself from her own linguistic imperfections:

Vica is trying to “correct” her Irish sounds with failed attempts at standard British pronunciation. She complains about her life saying, “Our bloody Polish bad luck” (Holewińska, *Bubble Revolution* 5); I pronounce “bloody” and “luck” with the Dublin Irish [ʊ] instead of /ʌ/, whilst at the same time stating that Vica and I are Polish. Another word I play on is “bubble,” pronounced whenever Vica feels in control as [bʌbl] and, in moments when Vica’s mask starts stripping off, as [bɒbl]. To take it further, English-language posters inform the audience that the play is “performed in English with a Polish accent and a slight touch of Irish.” (Lech 50)

Lech's statement is not only an important point in the analysis of the effect of accent in performance, but it also signifies a departure from the seemingly binary system of Polish language vs. English language and Polish theatre vs. Irish theatre. Consequently, it highlights the validity of adopting the concept of new interculturalism, where the inclusion of a multilingual layer not only serves as a foundation for collaboration between artists but also between the members of a non-homogenous audience.

### *DZIADY/FOREFATHER'S EVE AS AN EXAMPLE OF BILINGUALISM ON THE STAGE*

Another performance that demonstrates strategies of multilingualism/bilingualism and transtextuality is *Dziady/Forefather's Eve*. The play was performed live and recorded on 28 May 2021, at the Almeida Theatre in London. It was part of the broader initiative named "Six Artists in Search of a Play" that aimed to place the Almeida Theatre in a more intercultural setting. The play-script was adapted by Kasia Lech from the translation of Adam Mickiewicz's drama *Dziady*, while the *spiritus movens* behind the project was Nastazja Domaradzka, also a migrant of Polish origin. It should be noted that Mickiewicz's *Dziady* was written in exile and many fragments of this drama express the poet's longing for his homeland, which resonates with the themes present in contemporary migrant theatre.

The artists, Lech and Domaradzka, transfer the male narrative into the modern world of women—a chorus of women who fight in political demonstrations—and more precisely, to the Polish Women's Strike which occurred in Poland during 2020–21. The fragments adapted in the play come from Parts II and III of *Dziady (Forefather's Eve)* by Mickiewicz and include, for instance, "The Vision of Father Peter," "Warsaw Salon" and "The Great Improvisation." The performance in the form of a performative reading begins with a song by Taco Hemingway, "Polskie Tango" ("Polish Tango"). The role of the song is to familiarize the audience with the economic, political and social situation in Poland in the 1990s and the lyrics are also partially in English. The song is followed by an introduction that is meant to provide the audience of diverse cultural background with an insight into the play's origin and the political views of the creators:

Kudzanayi: *Dziady's* main character is Romantic lover Gustaw who transforms himself into the national hero Konrad. He is an icon of Polish patriotic arts.

Michelle: Women in *Dziady* are limited to an innocent girl, a lover, and a Polish Mother, raising her sons for Poland and watching them die for it, similarly to Mary raising Jesus, so he can be sacrificed for the sinners of the world.

Edyta: Last time I stood on this stage, I played a Polish cleaner.  
(Domaradzka)

During the performance, the audience witnesses women from different ethnic backgrounds united by a common stance—to resist the male-dominated narration and the stereotypical portrayal of women (for example, the depiction of Polish migrant women as either cleaners or prostitutes). With this performance, Domaradzka and Lech partake in the activities of intercultural theatre as described by Daphne P. Lei, who states that “intercultural theatre has diversified and multiplied as the discourse has been enriched and complicated by other pressing issues like gender, diaspora, ethnicity, and globalization” (qtd. in McIvor, “Introduction: New Directions?” 6). Domaradzka and Lech present a contrast between the stereotypical representation of a patriotic hero and that of a cleaner, a stereotype frequently portrayed in the media and explored in migrant literature. This comparison shows characteristics of new interculturalism, which emphasizes the “reconstitution of individual and community identities and subject positions” (Lei qtd. in McIvor, “Introduction: New Directions?” 10). The only unresolved matter concerns the outcome of the process of stereotype renegotiation. The use of transtextuality as a strategy, incorporating elements such as Taco Hemingway’s music, widely recognized Polish lullabies and social slogans, highlights problems encountered by migrant women of different backgrounds. Their collective voices urge the audience to reconsider and reconstruct ingrained stereotypical beliefs.

The script of Domaradzka’s play was primarily adapted from the most recent and complete translation of Mickiewicz’s drama by Charles S. Kraszewski (2016), although one fragment, “The Revenge Song,” is based on the translation by Dorothea Prall Radin (1925). The language form of this performance can be described as bilingual, as the play involves both consecutive and simultaneous translation from Polish to English (which is sometimes whispered from the stage). According to the playwright Kasia Lech, her intention was to create a kind of collage by playing with language and exploiting the opportunities presented by the bilingual structure of the play.<sup>9</sup> The result was that several parts of the

<sup>9</sup> Information obtained during consultations with Kasia Lech.

play were presented in English, while others were exclusively delivered in Polish; certain parts were translated by the chorus or individual chorus characters, while others were performed by Gustaw/Konrad in Polish, and the chorus performed them (at times in a whisper) in English. The first scene of the play, in which the main character and one of chorus characters recite a fragment of a widely recognized Polish poem,<sup>10</sup> exemplifies Lech's objective:

Patrycja: Kto Ty jesteś?  
 Chorus: Who are you?  
 Edyta: Chłopiec mały, Polak mały, Konrad mały.  
 Patrycja: A little boy, a little Pole, little Konrad.  
 Naomi: Jaki znak Twój?  
 Chorus: What's your emblem?  
 Edyta: Orzeł Biały. (Domaradzka)

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This linguistic collage produced by the main character Edyta/Konrad, two other characters, Patrycja and Naomi, and the chorus, includes not only Polish-to-English translation or shifting between these two languages, but also foreign-accented Polish speech (Naomi). This linguistic collage is used throughout the entire play. A fragment of "The Great Improvisation" from Part III is recited by Gustaw/Konrad in Polish and simultaneously whispered in English by the chorus in the background; "The Revenge Song," which is repeated throughout the play several times, is performed in English by Gustaw/Konrad and repeated by the chorus in English. As Elwira M. Grossman aptly put it, "in certain scenes, Polish is but an echo, in others the same is true of English" ("Staging Polish Migration" 38).

One purpose of this bilingual weave is to reflect the conflicted personality of the protagonist. The adversities experienced by Gustaw/Konrad, the protagonist of Mickiewicz's drama, are mirrored in the tribulations faced by contemporary Polish migrants, particularly with regard to the function and significance of the Polish language in the public space in the migratory context. In Mickiewicz's drama, Gustaw is portrayed as a romantic lover, while Konrad is depicted as a nonconformist poet who rejects societal norms. Domaradzka's play features a female character caught between two cultures and languages. The bilingual strategy applied in the play entails processes of inclusiveness. Since the creators of *Dziady/Forefather's Eve* wish to be acknowledged and recognized on the intercultural stage, they address a wider audience, although its members may not always share their experiences or "the transcultural space created and presented on

<sup>10</sup> "Wyznanie Wiary Dziecięcia Polskiego" ("Polish Child's Proclamation of Faith") by Władysław Brejza (1900).

stage” (Grossman, “Staging Polish Migration” 26). The resounding voice and the performance of the chorus of women fighting for their rights is audible and the play continues to generate discussions (e.g., reactions and comments to the recording of the play on YouTube). The linguistic value of the performance attests to the fact that it is a group of migrant women who receive recognition. By speaking in their native language they are offered a chance to express themselves and explore their identity.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to identify various platforms of collaboration present in the selected plays. As has been illustrated, these collaborations occur at different levels, from creating the script through negotiating the language of performance to selecting the actor’s accent. The important features of these collaborations are their non-hierarchical nature and the inclusion of different ethnic groups in the production process. This is a significant change from the traditional intercultural theatre of Western mainstream directors, as described in the introduction to *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (Pavis).

The plays *Bubble Revolution* (2013) and *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve* (2021) provide examples of this new non-hierarchical and multicultural collaboration among artists. In these plays, the performance itself becomes a performative encounter and the choice of language as a medium of artistic expression becomes a theatrical device. Another important aspect is translation that adds yet another dimension to collaboration. The theatre group works together to translate the script (often into a few different languages), then they translate aspects that may remain incomprehensible due to the language barrier into gestures, movement and props, and finally, after the performance, the actors collaborate with the audience to find out whether the message of their performance was understood. This complex process of translation was employed both in *Dziady* and in *Bubble Revolution*. The latter play—as Lech writes in her article—is “performed in English with a Polish accent and a slight touch of Irish” (50). The process of developing a performance collaboratively with the emphasis on multilingualism places the productions of migrant theatres within the framework of transnational drama practices.

*This article was developed as part of a project financed from the state budget under the program of the Minister of Education and Science under the name “Science for Society” project number NdS/538415/2021/2022, total project value PLN 370 990,00.*

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