

THEATRE ON THE WATER. THE AQUATIC ELEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH THEATRE

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The introduction of water to the stage is certainly not a frequently used theatrical procedure. This is hardly surprising, because the use of this means of theatrical expression significantly increases the production costs of a performance. A few years ago, when the premiere of Richard Wagner's famous 'marine' opera *The Flying Dutchman* (*Latający Holender*)¹, directed by Mariusz Treliński was being prepared at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw, it became necessary to build a huge 26 by 20 meter tank. It was intended to hold the water (the set designer mentioned as many as 70 thousand liters of water) (see: Dębowska 2012) which poured down on the stage during the performance. The problem was both the size of the tank and its effective insulation. Apparently, the company which offered the lowest bid in the tender valued the performance of this service at 900 000 PLN. Eventually, the tank was built much cheaper, with the help of the theatre workshops (see: Dębowska 2014)

The technical team of the Dramatic Theatre in Warsaw faced a similar task earlier in the performance of Krystian Lupa's *Unfinished Work for an Actor* (*Niedokończony utwór na aktora*)². In order for the lake planned by the director to appear on stage, it was necessary to commission an expert opinion assessing the strength of the floor. The deepest part of the tank (up to 1.5 meters) had to be supported by six metal pillars. The actor, who was to immerse himself completely in the water in one of the scenes, talked about his experiences during rehearsals:

¹ The premiere of *The Flying Dutchman* took place in 2012.

² The performance had its premiere in 2004.

When I'm in the middle of the show, I forget that it's an artificial water reservoir. I have the impression that it's a pleasant summer evening and I'm bathing in a warm lake. (...) The director wants Jakub's [the character from the play – M.K.R.] bathing in the lake not only to illustrate the text, but also to say something more. To show the beauty of theatre, its magic and at the same time its imperfection. We can conjure up a lake in the theatre, and yet it will never be a real lake, at the most, it will be a flooded theatre (quoted after: Wyżyńska 2004).

I quoted this somewhat perverse statement because it reflects well the ambivalent nature of water as an element of the theatrical spectacle. Water is a very special stage material. It seems to identify the very essence of theatricality to a greater degree than others, which consists in the constant oscillation between illusion and reality. The physicality of the water introduced to the stage does not allow us to forget about the dichotomy of artificial stage creation and material literality of the materials. Of course, all forms of water elements – sea, rain, storm – can be effectively articulated with the use of the whole palette of equivalents, i.e. light, color or sound. Such means were used by Robert Wilson in his phenomenal, poetic spectacle *The Lady from the Sea (Kobieta z morza)*³. This lyrical story, derived from Scandinavian legends, was inscribed by the director into a sublime, ascetic space filled with sea noises, light effects and colors flooding the stage.

Yet the effect of water, not the metaphorical, but the real one – so limited by technical constraints (as has already been mentioned), and in consequence always artificial to some extent – has one decisive advantage over the mentioned equivalents. This advantage is the spectacular potential, which is difficult to substitute. One can find out about it by observing the performances of theatres staged exclusively in/on the water, for which water is not only a stage medium, but above all the determinant of the genre, a consciously applied convention. The traditional Vietnamese puppet theatre on the water, which is actually one of Hanoi's main tourist attractions, is one of the companies that uses it (fig. 1-4). The uniqueness of these spectacles is illustrated by the description of Đạm Vân Anh (2010):

³ The performance premiered at the Dramatic Theatre in Warsaw in 2005.

Already more than a thousand years ago, the inhabitants of the Mekong Delta, cultivating the ever-present rice, saw the potential of the water element not only as a basis for cultivation, but also as a stage on which folk tales and legends could be recreated. (...) The water hid the arms that moved the puppets and enabled the creation of additional, exciting effects such as rough waves and jets of water shooting upwards. (...) The stage for the performances of water theatre is currently a construction in the form of a swimming pool with an area of about 4 square meters. Behind a bamboo model reflecting the front of a typical Vietnamese temple there are up to eight actors who, by moving special rods, bring to life the puppets attached to them. (...) The puppets appear on the water stage, sliding out from both sides of the model hiding the actors or, to the delight of the audience, greeting them, emerging unexpectedly from the water.

The original type of the Vietnamese puppet theatre on water originates from the local folk tradition dating back to the 11th century. An example of a contemporary model of a show performed in water are the performances of the French group Ilotopie. The artists themselves declare that, in their practices, ‘water is a new field of contemporary theatre experience’⁴, an experiment that uses a specific ‘energy’ of the element. Polish audiences had an opportunity to see spectacular performances of the company. In 2001, the performance of *Narcisse quette* from the Ilotopie repertoire was included in the program of the 11th International Malta Theatre Festival in Poznań. Dominique Noël explained the ‘water’ concept of the show that referred to the mythological history of Narcissus: ‘Water was the first mirror of humanity, and that’s why we want to present our performance about the myth of Narcissus on water. It will be a game of illusion and mirror reflections’ (cited after: Wprost 2011). During the 15th edition of the FETA International Street and Open-Air Theatres Festival in Gdańsk in 2011, the group presented the performance *Water Fools (Fous de Bassin)* (fig. 5-8). The spectacle, prepared with great scope, was one of the most expensive ever presented at the festival. It began with a scene with a car passing through the water, followed by a cyclist, a ‘sailing’ bed, a cleaner with a broom and a garbage bin, as well as a woman with a baby stroller. The unusual scenery

⁴ <http://ilotopie.com/spectacles/?lang=fr> [accessed: 23.08.2019].



Fig. 1-4. Vietnamese puppet theatre on water (photo: Alicja Rapsiewicz, LosWiaheros.pl)

extracted a new, metaphorical sense from the sequences of ordinary, everyday actions. As one could read in the description of the performance, water played the role of ‘a factor revealing the fragility of the human condition’ (see: Institut Français, 2011).

An unquestionable attribute of great open-air performances is the possibility of including a real reservoir in the show. However, they represent a separate, self-ruled species. In a classical repertoire theatre, located in a building without such a possibility, water appears in different, but equally interesting scenographic variants and configurations. If the strictly technical categories of quantity and type of water source were to be used, the three most frequently used varieties would have to be classified. The first is to use a relatively limited amount of water poured out of a tap, hose or vessel. The second option is to place smaller and larger containers or whole tanks on stage. The last model introduces the effect of water falling from above and flooding the stage.

In the case of the first variant, which uses water as a single theatrical sign, the symbolism of such a sign turns out to be particularly dense precisely because it concerns only a small component of the stage action. Therefore, it is difficult to deny it a semiotic ‘equipment’ essential for the meanings of the performance. However, the principle conventionally described by the formula of ‘theatre on water’ does not apply to this type of treatment. Since a single aquatic element is not the dominant motif, it cannot be treated as a strategy – scenographically and semantically – that identifies the whole of the stage message. But, what is worth noting, this type of theatrical sign is certainly a special sign in the sense that its artificiality seems to be relatively least ‘artificial’. In the audience’s perception, the illusion of ‘real’ water, for example, poured out of a mug on stage – in contrast to water poured out in the form of rain, for example – remains, of course, a full illusion. It is not disturbed by the impression (described in the statement by an actor from Lupa’s performance quoted above) of communing with the ‘fabricated’ effect, which is a strictly theatrical creation.

I will mention only two such scenes on the basis of illustration, seemingly similar, and yet absolutely opposite in their significance. The first example is Father Peter’s monologue from Paweł Wodziński’s *Mickiewicz*.



Fig. 5-8. Water Fouls, *Compagnie Ilotopie* (photo: Tomasz Tarnowski)

*Forefathers' Eve. Performance (Mickiewicz. Dziady. Performance)*⁵. Amidst scenery resembling a dormitory rather than a prison of Polish patriots, the splash of water (poured straight from a metal cup) on a face underscored the visionary story of the judgment and torture of Christ, i.e. Poland – so it had a messianic, purifying sense. On the other hand, in the legendary staging of Grzegorz Jarzyna's *2007: Macbeth*⁶, staged in post-industrial interiors of the no longer existing Waryński Works in the Wola district of Warsaw, a strong accent was the scene of Lady Macbeth spraying a blood-stained floor with water from a hose. In Jarzyna's work, the water juxtaposed with the blood was not – as in Wodziński's play – resuscitative or purifying, it was inscribed in the circle of crime, intrigue, war and death.

The first category – let's call it a 'minimalistic variant' – means therefore the creation of quite expressive (if not predictable) stage signs. However, in the context of my subject matter, the most important productions seem to be those whose creators decided on 'bulky' solutions and introduced a lot of water to the stage, organizing with this procedure an acting space most frequently (and 'out of necessity') for the entire performance.

I will start with an unusual example in the sense that the tank did not have to be built on stage, because the director used an existing space had such an object at his disposal. In Jan Klata's *H.*⁷, because that is the performance discussed here, a strategy appropriate to the already mentioned genre of the open-air show was applied. The performance, like Jarzyna's *Macbeth*, was staged in post-industrial surroundings (see: Kostaszuk-Romanowska 2012). Such a 'natural' plain-air was the area of the ruined Gdańsk Shipyard. The scene of Ophelia's suicide (or rather the scene of her body being recovered from the water), which was added to the Shakespeare play, took place in the harbor pool. Of course, in the theatre, it matters whether the viewers learn about the death of Ophelia – as in Shakespeare's words – from the words of the Queen, or whether they can themselves enter the role of curious onlookers who gather at the edge of the pool and, although they

⁵ The premiere of the performance took place in the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz in 2011.

⁶ Performance staged by TR Warszawa in 2005.

⁷ A performance based on William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, prepared by the Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk in 2004.

stand behind police tape, they follow the action of the body being fished out and then put into a black plastic body bag. An action, it should be said, taken as if live from the crime chronicles. It was this style that brutally deconstructed possible references to the paintings of Eugène Delacroix or John Everett Millais, though, for a moment, the pose of the dead Ophelia, lying still in the water, clearly evoked associations with the latter's work.

The figure of Ophelia – a drowned woman who 'gave her young life to water', certainly inspired the authors of another performance – *Riverbank* (*Przyrzeczce*), staged at the Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz⁸. The musical monodrama is based on excerpts from Virginia Woolf's diary⁹, who, let us recall, committed suicide by jumping into a river. Although the performance was performed 'traditionally', it proposed definitely 'non-traditional' scenographic solutions (fig. 9-11). In the Bydgoszcz staging, there was a large aquarium with a multifunctional, as it turned out, use:

The great idea for a stage design – a cuboid filled with water is extremely attractive for the main character in many respects. At times, it is a source of sounds, referring to the power of nature so close to the woman, while at other times it becomes a space [she] is afraid to enter, standing on the edge, looking at it with fear and interest, evoking associations with a suicide attempt. Sometimes it is also a place of infantile games, highlighting the beauty of human development from a joyful child to a sensual woman (Blanca 2012).

'Playing' with scenographic elements belongs to the basic repertoire of acting means. In the case of *Riverbank*, a rather special object placed on the set was at the same time an instrument used by the actress – an instrument, let us add, also in the literal sense of the word. 'Water tempts and makes one take risks', wrote Szymon Spichalski (2012). The protagonist experimented with the matter of water – she touched it, jumped into it, immersed herself. The sounds emitted by the water during

⁸ The premiere took place in 2012. The authors of the concept were Agata Skwarczyńska, Aneta Jankowska and Karolina Adamczyk, who appeared in the performance.

⁹ In addition to Virginia Woolf's diaries, the authors were inspired by the lyrics of the British singer PJ Harvey.

these activities were conveyed by a microphone placed inside the aquarium. The ‘penetration’ of water, spectacular in itself, actually became – which was emphasized in the aforementioned review – a metaphor for the mental state of the protagonist. Among the many senses of this metaphor, one seemed particularly dark. It expressed – one may say – the heroine’s gradual locking herself away in the neurotic world of her own psyche. In it, like under water, all of life – existing above the surface of water – is invalidated. The visually altered figure, which the viewers could observe through the walls of the aquarium, at times actually resembled a drowned corpse. At the same time, the multidimensionally exploited element of water ultimately remained an element that was not fully understood, giving the possibility of various, contradictory, but also complementary readings. As Agnieszka Serlikowska (2012) noted:

The authors of the project mentioned in their announcements the allegorical motif of the drowned Ophelia, the attempt to investigate the mystery of the woman’s drowning. In my opinion, the river does not have to be associated with death in all the stories presented in the performance. It can also be a symbol of women’s liberation, knowledge of the world or existential peace.

Riverbank was an interesting example of theatrical exploration of water – discovering its material texture, giving it sound, stimulating its multi-sensory potential. This effect occurs when water appears as the actor’s stage partner in the performance. This is, of course, only one of the possible applications of the aquatic motif, which works especially in focused, intimate performances, trying to face the mystery of the human psyche.

Placing water objects on the stage is always a proxemic endeavor, which was also shown in the spectacle *Riverbank*. The water surfaces, of course, build up the set, equip the stage space with an additional dimension. They also become quasi-natural screens – they absorb light and colors, reflect the silhouettes of characters. They structure and at the same time valorize the visual composition of the stage. This type of effect was used in the staging of Shakespeare’s drama *Antony and Cleopatra* (*Antoniusz i Kleopatra*) by

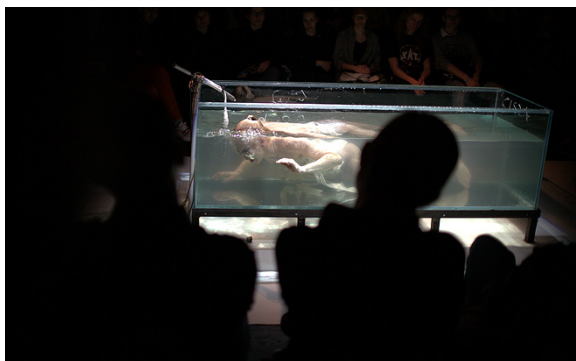


Fig. 9-II. Riverbank, H. Konieczko Polish Theatre in Bydgoszcz, concept: Agata Skwarczyńska, Aneta Jankowska, Karolina Adamczyk (photo: Paulina Stranz)

Wojciech Faruga¹⁰ – a rather brutal spectacle with an interesting, minimalist set design. One of the reviewers, Piotr Olkusz (2016), described it as follows:

Visually, it is a very nice spectacle. A large ramp of wavy hills slopes gently towards the audience, passing by a large water tank. We are looking at black Africa beyond the sea. Literally black, because instead of sparkling with gold, the sand looks as if an attempt was made to cover it with tar.

The water element used by the artists actually seemed to contrast with the moon landscape of the land. But both motifs did not build a simple opposition. The life-giving element of water did not oppose the deadness of the earth. Water on stage evoked associations with the sea, but also with the Nile. However, it did not seem to be a river – as Anna Tomaszewicz (2016) rightly pointed out – ‘which rebels against its own shores in order to give a seed of a new life’. The water element – in the form of a long canal, crowning the front of the stage – emphasized rather than denied the impression of deadness inscribed in the whole scenographic vision. It suggested, as the reviewer argued, that ‘the Hellenistic kingdom is a barren land’ (ibid.). In some sense this symbolic ‘Nile’ became a river of death. One of the scenes depicting a metaphorical image of the Battle of Actium was a particular indication of this. It used an interesting solution consisting in combining two elements, water and fire – small, paper ships set on fire with an oxygen torch moving on the water, burning picturesquely.

Movement (of the water and in the water) – a natural attribute of the element – becomes in the theatre an obvious means of expression that dynamizes spatial composition. Modeling the stage plan using water motifs is, therefore – as Jerzy Limon (2006: 181) puts it – ‘chronotypic’ in nature. With this concept, the scholar describes one of the variants of shaping space in the performance. The action is superimposed on the set design, and with it the stage movement and gestures made by the characters. The changeability that characterizes the dramaturgy of the story told in the performance is not only a development in time – it can also concern the spatial dimension. It is not about the obvious procedure of changing the decoration, but about the dynamism written into it, strongly connected with the action. This

¹⁰ The performance was staged at the Stefan Jaracz Theatre in Łódź in 2016.

dynamic scenery is defined by Limon's own (or more precisely: transferred from literary studies) term, 'chronography':

Therefore, I will consider as a chronography those stage works in which the changeability of the scenographic composition (also the one built with light) is not only a background, but an important element of the action and takes place within one scene (i.e. not only as a change of decoration between scenes or acts). The changes in the scenery (now: chronography) shown in front of the audience are connected with the events on the stage, or they create the events themselves. In other words, it is a special case when the set design also 'acts' in the sense of movement (ibid.: 256).

It seems that the use of an aquatic motif in the staging not only allows, but also guarantees the above-mentioned effect. Water as an element implies movement, changeability, dynamics proper to its nature. The water accumulated on the stage – of course, in a sufficiently large amount – by its very nature has the potential for movement and changeability. Offering the possibility of creating – with the use of color and light – more and more new visual (but also audio) qualities, it creates its own course of events. At the same time, it stimulates the proper stage action. 'Acting', it takes on the role of a special over-actor, and also provokes, or even forces the actions of 'living' actors.

This is where the problem arises – the motif, which may be an asset of the staging, may also turn out to be its weakness. The director, deciding to use water in a performance, does not always have a good idea of what and why the actor should do with this water (and more often: in the water). In the Łódź performance, for example, water was the obvious context of erotic scenes. But not all 'water actions' seemed to be equally convincingly motivated. This is indicated by the statement of one of the reviewers: 'This element of the set design would have been a really good idea had it not been for the fact that most of the episodes using it are based on pointless and unjustified jumping into the water' (Herłazińska 2016). Olkusz (2016), on the other hand, concluded his description of the set design with the following reflection: 'It is a pretty picture. I suppose, however, that Wojciech Faruga did not direct *Antony and Cleopatra* so that the first thing that will come to the viewer's mind about this performance was visual art'.



Fig. 12-13. *Flying Dutchman*, Grand Theatre – National Opera in Warsaw, dir. Mariusz Treliński (photo: Krzysztof Bieliński)

The performance I mentioned at the beginning also did not avoid similar accusations. The creators of *The Flying Dutchman* (*Latający Holender*) quite precisely explained the concept of staging. Boris Kudlička, the set designer, explained: ‘I wanted to create the impression of a black abyss, a depth’ (quoted after: Dębowska 2012). Authentic cataclysms – tsunamis and floods were the inspiration. Wagner himself, as we know, wrote his opera under the influence of a dramatic experience – a storm in the North Sea. In fact, on the stage of the Grand Theatre, a vision of an infinite ocean, a true *mare*

tenebrarum, was conjured up, although it seemed almost impossible¹¹. It was amplified by multiple, overlapping images of water. Spectators could observe the intersecting surfaces of rain, splashed sheets of water and hazy fog. The dark scenery expressed the symbolism of loneliness, suffering and death.

The phenomenal images created by Kudlička were recognized by critics who appreciated their aesthetic mastery, expressive power and consistently built, metaphorical message. 'It is the darkness, light and water' – emphasized Olgierd Pisarenko (2012):

that perfectly organize the space of the drama through opalescent, cool colors and moving textures, built of fog, water vapor, rain drops and streams, splashes and reflections on the wavy, black surface of the water. The world of straits and fjords of the North, created on the stage of the National Opera, seems uncomfortable, cold and abstract, yet, these images have at the same time a fascinating, nostalgic beauty and something of the atmosphere of black-and-white expressionist films of the 1920s.

The very idea of introducing hectoliters of water to the stage in the case of this particular work did not raise any doubts. However, there were statements questioning not so much the legitimacy of the use of 'maritime' scenery, as its role in building the drama of the performance. Creators were accused of over-submission to 'water logistics' (Hawryluk 2012), which, as some wrote, 'stole the show' (Raś 2012). It dominated the staging, subordinated it to itself, but it did not bear all its meanings. Jacek Hawryluk (2012) even spoke about the 'drowning' of the concept, adding that 'none of the elements of the set design enter into a dialogue with the water, and even if it tries, it rather 'disturbs' it'. Other commentators (who, like Hawryluk, generally appreciated the aesthetic qualities of the performance) probably had similar impressions. Just titles of the reviews said plenty – *Wet Work* (*Mokra robota*), *Watery Thinking* (*Wodochciejstwo*) or *Aquapark on Stage* (*Aquapark na scenie*).

Treliński's staging showed that the element of water is an extremely attractive, but also extremely difficult material in theatre. Moreover, it is its attractiveness that determines its problematic nature. It carries the risk

¹¹ Kudlička admitted: 'During the implementation of this idea, I was moving on the verge of technical possibilities' (quoted after: Dębowska 2012).

of making the motif autonomous, which, as Hawryluk rightly pointed out, must 'cooperate' with other elements of the stage universe. The 'spatial proximity' of these elements established in the spectacle – stresses Limon (2001: 154) – 'causes mutual permeation and change of value'. The process of semiotization – giving meaning to everything that will be on the set of the game – characteristic of a theatrical work makes it necessary to agree on many signs which are mobile by their scenic nature.

The conclusion seems obvious. Water in the theatre undoubtedly gives an opportunity to create extremely spectacular, almost glamorous images, but at the same time it forces scenographic asceticism. The immanent spectacularity, offering a whole set of almost 'ready' effects, requires enormous staging discipline and great dramatic precision in constructing the whole of the stage vision. After all, to put it metaphorically, in the theatre – just like in nature – the water element can easily slip out of control.

This principle applies not only to the aesthetic, but also to the semantic values of the initial material. The creators of productions using aquatic motifs – especially in the 'rich' versions – have to make a difficult choice every time, and then an equally difficult stage translation of the cultural connotations of water into signs and symbols of a specific performance. The repertoire of such connotations is – as the aforementioned performances prove – exceptionally large, but it is also marked by insurmountable ambivalence. The cultural tropes of water – stretched between the polar opposites of a life-giving, purifying, liberating force and a dangerous, difficult to control, deadly element, material finiteness and metaphysical, unguessed infinity – make it a truly 'high risk' stage material.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning one more reflection. Water in theatre, this time in contrast to water in nature, of which theatre creators are probably aware, in spite of everything it can simply fend for itself.

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Summary

In view of theatrical performances, water is not only an important cultural trajectory, but also an attractive, though very particular, stage material. The author draws attention to the ambivalent character of water as an element of the spectacle. Water identifies the very essence of theatricality, which consists of the constant oscillation between illusion and reality. The effect of real water – limited by technical restrictions and in effect artificial to some extent – has an unquestionable value in the spectacle. The author recalls selected performances whose creators chose large-scale solutions and introduced a large amount of water to the stage. In this way, she shows how they create the symbolic value of aquatic motives, how they use their semantic and sensual potential in the process of translating the cultural connotations of water into signs and meanings of a particular show.

Keywords: water, theatre, spectacle, stage material