

## THE RETURN OF *THE FOREFATHERS' EVE* OR TWO THEATRES

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Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*] had returned to the Polish theatre; it is not accidental that its subsequent stagings coincided with a jubilee of great importance for the Polish culture, celebrated in 2015 under the motto '250 years of public theatre'. It is a reflection on the role, organization and endangerment of public venues that prevailed in the anniversary debates; however, we have not forgotten that the date of the premiere of Józef Bielawski's comedy *Natraci* [*Intruders*], held on November 19<sup>th</sup> 1765 in Warsaw's Opera House, is primarily considered as the moment of creation of the National Theatre. Highlighting that fact in the pages of the May issue of the „Teatr” monthly, several theatre historians and critics even took up polemics with the originators of the official celebrations. I do not want to consider either party's arguments here – the jubilee has passed, the discussion is closed, and all polemical texts remain available on the Theatre Institute's website. What I find more important is that, when leading the 'public or national?' anniversary dispute, the polemicists jointly sketched an intellectual project of the contemporary Polish theatre, increasingly widespread in one of its varieties or branches and, as it seems, more and more exclusive in the other one, with outstanding performances corresponding to it becoming rare and exceptional. The new stagings of *Forefathers' Eve* clearly testify to this, which makes them worth taking a closer look, if it were for this reason alone.

### PUBLIC SPHERE AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION

The first branch of the Polish theatre was accurately described by Dariusz Kosiński in the program statement for this year's celebration of the *Rok teatru ważnego* [*Year of Important Theatre*]. Referring to Jürgen Habermas's

well-known concept of the public sphere as a space for free civic debate led in a modern democratic society, he enumerated the most important functions of public theatre:

expanding and strengthening of the public sphere, active participation in public debate not only through speaking out in matters that constitute its subject, but also by introducing new topics and asking new questions, questioning the obvious, undermining the position of hegemony (whoever they are) and, finally, abstracting symptoms, signals, tensions and groups which are still looking for their own language (Kosiński 2015a).

On the other hand, in the text (Kosiński 2015b) he equated the idea of public and critical theatre: 'public theatre is a space of experience and reflection, the core of which is confrontation with the ways of thinking adopted and actualized by the viewers in life'. Public theatre also enters into a dialogue with the past, which is the most interesting to us here, and 'most often refers to the past critically, exposing the hidden presence and power that anachronistic schemes and myths still exercise over today's Poles, or exposing its dark sides'. According to Kosiński, the most general definition of public theatre was: public theatre is one that 'is financed from public funds (...) because of the importance and value it has for social and individual life, as well as for national heritage and culture'. It was at this point that Małgorzata and Marek Piekut (2015) took up a polemic with Kosiński's theses, accusing the author of 'semantic equilibristics'. According to them, Kosiński expanded the meaning of the term 'public' 'to the limit' at the expense of the concept of the 'national', which he subordinated to the former. 'Let us not be afraid of words!' – they called, reminding the cultural and anthropological definition of the nation as Benedict Anderson (2006) formulated it. In relation to us, it would read as follows: 'a voluntary community of Poles and those who consider themselves to be them, limited culturally and linguistically (but not territorially!) and sovereign' (Piekut, Piekut 2015). Anderson (2006) emphasizes the imaginary dimension of the sense of national affiliation, pointing to the fact that its individual members, for the most part, do not know and never get to know one another and yet, together, they 'cultivate in their mind the image of the community', founded primarily on symbols referring to shared experiences. It is the tomb of the unknown soldier – a sign

of sacrifice for homeland, universal in the Western world – that Anderson found to be the most important symbol (ibid.: 9).

The anthropological concept of nations as ‘imagined communities’ was extended by Anderson far beyond the European countries and opposed to deforming nationalism which, in turn, was opposed to racism, based on biological determination and constantly raving about eternal defilement of racial purity (ibid.: 169). Małgorzata and Marek Piekut (2015) also referred to the historical idea of the nation, which they called ‘extended’, reminding us that, in the nineteenth century:

a collective effort of poets and philosophers of the Romanticist era led to the development of a vision of Poland in which everybody, regardless of religion, home language, ethnic or social origin, and therefore all Poles, Ruthenians, i.e. Ukrainians, Jews and Germans, would be vested with citizen rights – in accordance with Joachim Lelewel’s broad programme.

That was an important reminder, for Romanticism is presented nowadays as an era of formation of dangerous nationalisms, becoming the cause of the twentieth-century mass crimes and the basis of today’s chauvinism and exclusion, of which Dariusz Kosiński accused the defenders of the national theatre. Małgorzata and Marek Piekut dismissed that objection and argued that ‘national’ in relation to theatre does not mean self-absorption, sycophancy or bombast.

On the contrary, it means a dispute, polemic, painful admonition. The care for the preservation of tradition requires constant reinterpretation and critical analysis. Could it have been otherwise if the Polish national theatre was created by Wyspiański, Schiller, Witkacy, Horzyca, Kantor, Wierciński, Dejmek, Hubner, Swinarski, Grotowski, Grzegorzewski... the list should be much longer (ibid.).

On the one hand, we have the critical theatre based on Habermas’s concept, occupying an important place in the public sphere; on the other hand, a modernly perceived national theatre, relying on Anderson’s concept of imagined community; a type of theatre which does not remain uncritical towards the community, either. What is, then, the difference between them? To capture it, it is worthwhile to look at specific artistic manifestations. The recent productions of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve* are perfect

for this as we are dealing here with a drama which has shaped the Poles' national imagination like no other; in the past, its important stagings usually became part of the political debate in historical moments crucial for Poland. We also experienced this recently when, after April 10<sup>th</sup> 2010, in response to the Smolensk plane crash followed by national mourning, Paweł Wodziński produced *Mickiewicz. Dziady. Performance* [*Mickiewicz. Forefathers' Eve. A Performance*] in which the traditional division into collaborators and conspirators was replaced by a completely different antagonism: the establishment *versus* the excluded. It is not insignificant that the latest productions of *Forefathers' Eve* which are of our interest were created by directors adopting an avant-garde or even experimental approach to theatre and representing, moreover, the same generation of artists. I mean here Michał Zadara, who staged the first, second and fourth parts of *Forefathers' Eve* at the Polski Theatre in Wrocław, and then directed the third part (and announcing the last part, i.e. *Ustęp* [*Digression*]), and Paweł Passini, who staged his own adaptation of the entire work of Mickiewicz twice: first at the Puppet and Actor Theatre in Opole, then at the Academic Drama Theatre in Brest, Belarus (it should be added that, in 2014, also Radosław Rychcik staged his 'pop-culture' *Forefathers' Eve*).

I am pointing out the artistic and generational affinity of both directors in order to dismiss, straight away, the assumption that the theatre of the imagined community could today only be a traditional drama theatre, created for audiences seeking prestige and entertainment in it and, therefore, not ready for aesthetic risk. Dariusz Kosiński once called such theatre the 'theatre of a cultural city'; the formula appears in his latest comments on the National Theatre in Warsaw. I consider this judgment not entirely fair; for the sake of clarity, however, I would like to point out that Paweł Passini has never worked at the National Theatre in Warsaw but, in spite of that, he remains the creator of the theatre of the imagined community for me – just as Zadara remains the creator of the critical theatre for me. Of course, it would be the most interesting to compare the works of both artists thoroughly; here, I would focus on interviews given by Zadara and Passini during their work on *Forefathers' Eve* or after its opening. I am interested in young Polish directors' manner of thinking about Mickiewicz's drama, what they say about it, and only in the second place how their concepts materialize on stage.

## ZADARA OR *FOREFATHERS' EVE* IN THE CRITICAL THEATRE

In his statements, Zadara constantly emphasises the textual dimension of *Forefathers' Eve*. For him, the romantic arch-drama is a huge collection of words: dialogues, monologues, but also stage directions, comments, prologues, dedications, mottoes and all paratexts, written and intended for reading: silent, loud, on stage. The words of the drama are signs of an alphabet which have specific meanings and can be spoken or sung. The director is sometimes inclined to read these meanings literally, verbatim, regardless of the metaphor – on the one hand, and of the historical transformations of language – on the other. In his correspondence with Professor Maria Prussak, printed in the program booklet of parts I, II and IV of *Forefathers' Eve*, the artist argues with the researcher that the word 'singer' used by Mickiewicz does not mean a man who creates poems – a poet, but one who performs songs. He defends the concept in the pages of the „Teatr” monthly, enumerating those fragments of *Forefathers' Eve* in which Konrad ('a singer for people') and other heroes of the drama sing (Zadara 2015). If they sing, then the word means a singer, like Bob Marley or Bob Dylan whom Zadara mentions. Therefore, the director is interested in linguistic concreteness and, at the same time, the literality of *Forefathers' Eve*, something that Jolanta Kowalska (2014), in the review of the production, called the 'body of the text'. In the work, this body materializes in the form of a hybrid tapeworm of words, and on the stage in the form of a loud, sharp, sometimes overly expressive speech which often turns into chanting or vocalization, blurring the poetic rhythm of the phrase or the accent. It may also transform into the action of characters whose visions or fantasies are explained on stage in a very explicit way (by the number of bottles of wine emptied by the heroes, for instance).

For Zadara, *Forefathers' Eve* is also a text which, apart from Polish language scholars' readings, has never been read thoroughly and thus remains 'a work unknown to Poles' (Cieślak 2014). His concept of staging an 'uncut' *Forefathers' Eve* stems from the conviction that it needs to be presented to Polish audiences with a demonstration of 'what it is really about' (Piekarska 2015). Zadara repeatedly accused Polish culture of being unintellectual, which, in his opinion, manifests itself in the fact – to mention this one only – that we do not know the masterpieces of our literature. We boast that we do but, in fact, instead of reading them by ourselves,

we uncritically accept others people's interpretations of works unknown to us, which makes us live in the sphere of ideological mystifications of literature. Those mystifications have nothing to do with the meaning of our culture's fundamental texts, which is why the director decided to show them to contemporary Poles, staging *Forefathers' Eve* not 'as we imagine it' (Piekarska 2014), but as it was written. In the assumptions of this project, I find a similarity to one of the five principles of Protestantism *sola scriptura* proclaiming that the Scripture is the only source of theological knowledge, rejecting the tradition and authority of the ecclesial exegesis of biblical books in this matter. That principle led to the undermining of certain dogmas of the Catholic Church and the creation of a new current of Christianity. 'In Polish tradition, you do not read. You do not even read the Bible' (ibid.), says the director, wondering like a genuine Protestant how many Polish Catholics have read the Old Testament and know, for example, that there are two versions of the decalogue. Very few, the artist suggests, because we know the Bible from church sermons – and *Forefathers' Eve* from lessons at school.

For the director protesting against the 'traditional Polish unintellectualism', the greatest imposture of *Forefathers' Eve* lies in their martyrological interpretation. The Poles want to read *Forefathers' Eve* as a drama about their historical martyrdom, meanwhile 'it is a drama in which there is not a single word about World War II, concentration and labor camps, Katyn, communism, March 1968 and the Smolensk crash' (Cieślak 2014). I understand this ironic phrase as a provocative critique of known and possible staging and cinematographic allusions, such as those appearing in Tadeusz Konwicki's *Lawa* [*Lava*]. Zadara considers them illegitimate – because they falsify the meaning of the drama – and, in fact, harmful as they consolidate the Poles' irrational convictions about the need to sacrifice for the homeland. 'Someone asked me recently whether I was against what Mickiewicz said in *Forefathers' Eve*: that one must fight and sacrifice themselves for the homeland. The point is that there is nothing like that there. Not even such a question' (Piekarska 2015), the director argues.

This radical judgment serves him to draw equally radical interpretative conclusions. Firstly, he considers the martyrological prison scenes of the third part as a deliberate falsification of history, resulting from the poet's guilty feeling (Mickiewicz 'suffered for show') and, secondly, he excessively reinforces the satirical dimension of the drama. He reads the scene in the Warsaw

parlor in such a way that the criticism is also aimed at the conspirators: 'those who think themselves better than the parlor and see nothing but suffering and conspiracies in Poland' (ibid.). He gives no textual evidence, however, in support of his theses, recalling instead the authority of Witold Gombrowicz and his *Operetka* [*Operetta*] as a total satire: one covering the entirety of the world presented. From this perspective, he concludes that 'Mickiewicz wrote a satire on power, fashion and the form of social behaviors' (ibid.), including the oppositional attitudes which are born, in *Forefathers' Eve*, out of defiance against tsarist repression and genuine compassion for victims of terror. In order to mock the Poles' self-victimization and, broader: to 'attack' some element of the national mentality, the director distorts the meanings of Mickiewicz's work, but does it as if imperceptibly, dressing up the heroes in historical costumes and making them deliver the whole text of the play, which the critics even considered a pietistic approach to the arch-drama. This practice is now a frequent artistic strategy in critical theatre, justified and even recommended in public art as the best tool of subversion, which 'consists in imitating, almost identifying with the subject of criticism, and then subtly shifting meanings. That moment of shifting the meanings is not always perceptible to the spectator. This is not an outright, direct criticism, but a criticism full of ambiguity' (Dziamski 2015).

The consequence of such practice is Zadara's style of staging of *Forefathers' Eve*, based on theatrical travesty which turns satirical scenes (especially the ones involving Novosiltsev) into a farce (the audience laughs aloud at the count's jokes), while the prison and vision scenes reveal the director's clear distance from the characters and states they experience. Zadara, as an interpreter of *Forefathers' Eve*, rationalizes the mystical experiences of Mickiewicz's characters; this is why he diagnoses them with mental illnesses in his interviews and makes them get drunk and clown around on stage. According to the director: 'the improvisation cannot be read directly, [this scene – J.K.] is only a record of a certain rampage', caused by 'isolation', 'cold', 'dampness' and 'dirt' (Cieślak 2015). In another interview, the director calls Konrad a downright 'schizophrenic paranoid' who 'constantly fears being overheard, has delusions, is unable to find common language with anyone' (Piekarska 2014). He also adds that Mickiewicz 'created a dark, complicated hero, full of inner contradictions, which was later used by Polish paranoids, because they felt similarity with Gustaw and Konrad – in the sense

of not being able to cope with reality either' (Cieślak 2014). And finally: 'It does not come as a surprise that the hero considers himself a representative of the nation: it happens to a lot of schizophrenics' (ibid.) – adds the director, making clear allusions to the opinions on some contemporary politicians. By doing this, he nullifies the sense of Konrad's expression, he does not take his internal drama seriously and, as a consequence, destroys the mystery-play or – broader – metaphysical structure of *Forefathers' Eve*. He makes little of the hero's blasphemy and negates the seriousness of the exorcisms which, after all, determine also the fate of another prisoner, Rollison. Referring to the 'anti-scientific ideology' that the Poles are constantly yielding to (e.g. trusting homeopathy or not trusting the findings of the commission investigating the causes of the Smolensk crash [Piekarska 2015]), he considers the exorcism scene to be comedic and this is precisely how he decides to direct it. In fact, he adopts the attitude of the Old Man from Mickiewicz's poem *Romantyczność* [*Romanticism*] ('Trust my eye and hand glass, / I can see nothing around here'), confusing romantic irony with a critical attitude founded on scientific premises, completely alien to the Romanticists.

Zadara simply imputes Jan Śniadecki's mentality to Mickiewicz. He is, therefore, a 'Protestant' who, after having read the Bible on his own, found its prophets mad, inspired with the word by the Holy Spirit – provided that the latter exists – in such a way that the truth they proclaimed became discredited. Let us imagine the faces of the faithful after hearing this exegesis... And yet it was precisely for them that it was conducted. If Zadara staged his *Forefather's Eve* 'uncut', it was also with contemporary Poles in mind; the Poles who, according to the director's conviction, show great reluctance to think and keep reading the play as if it was the Bible, while Konrad, 'suffering for millions', is treated almost like a Messiah. The problem is that Zadara does not try to nuance the interpretation of this character, as did many interpreters before him – also in theatre; with one radical cut, he deprives it of its mind and charisma, and the Poles – of a national hero. A character which has occupied, for almost two hundred years, a central position in their collective imagination and thanks to which, as Anderson would say, they feel they belong to a community. In Zadara's critical 'reading', Konrad can no longer play such a role. Not only because everything he says is a madman's delirium, but also because he is a misfit, rejected by the community. Zadara adopts a transgressive interpretation of Konrad's character, known from

the works of Maria Janion and her students, if it enables him to achieve the overriding goal he set for himself. It is 'anarchizing' *Forefathers' Eve* which, in its interpretation, turns precisely against the community:

The political aspect of *Forefathers' Eve* lies in its wild anarchy. It is a play about individuals who are unable to find their place in the community. Each character has the same problem: they do not match the expectations the world has set for them. Whether it is Gustav, whose love nobody understands, the Virgin who has no one to speak to, or the Priest who is a hermit – they are lonely people unable to communicate with the world. This is a drama about the maladjusted, weirdos, freaks, and misfits. The form of *Forefathers' Eve* in itself is revolutionary. It does not match any drama category, it is unfinished, and incoherent. This work is anti-fascist to the core: against any kind of uniformity and correctness. And this is precisely the drama which lies in the center of the Polish soul. If *Forefathers' Eve* is meant to define Polishness, it is a wild Polishness, rule-breaking, full of horrors and frenzy, erudite and folk and, above all, nonhomogeneous. This is the Polishness I can accept and even celebrate. But does the play reflect the current state of the Polish soul? No. We are observing a desire to unify, impose the solely legitimate Polish traits on everyone. And there is no such thing as a real Pole, just as there is no 'real' forefathers' eve. The nation is a fiction, invented in the nineteenth century, necessary to carry out a certain libertarian project. But not eternal. Even Mickiewicz believed that you are no longer a Pole in heaven (Piekarska 2014).

Therefore, the director's new theatrical reinterpretation of *Forefathers' Eve* is intended to change the definition of Polishness or even Polishness itself. Zadara believes in the existence of the Poles' collective imagination – after all, he speaks about the 'center of the Polish soul' – yet he would like to reorganize it so that the Poles cease to be an imagined community ('the nation is a fiction'), understood as one which defines itself on the basis of what unites it, in order to become a community of a different kind. Namely, one which is defined on the basis of what makes it different: 'different', 'individual', 'heterogeneous', 'inconsistent', 'rule-breaking' – and rational at the same time. What emerges from his speech is a supranational and modernization-oriented, but difficult to grasp (as, in fact, paradoxical) project of rebuilding the concept of community. Zadara speaks quite vaguely and ironically about some 'solely legitimate Polish traits'; he does not criticize Polish mentality or

Polish national defects in his production, though. He does something far more serious: he tackles the dramatic matrix of the Poles' Romanticist spirituality with Konrad at its center and shatters it while constantly emphasizing fidelity to the text. 'Directing means here: activating the spaces suggested by the text' (ibid.), he explains. However, this suggestion applies only to the surface of the text, which is why Zadara's productions drag into infinity, falling apart into separate episodes directed in various conventions. The director constantly exposes the incoherence of the play built up from fragments, fighting shy of merging it into a ritual or excavating a community foundation myth in his production. It is also characteristic that, speaking about the 'political aspect' of *Forefathers' Eve*, he firmly rejects its timeliness in connection with the threat posed by contemporary Russia. He does not take up the theme of the war in Ukraine suggested to him by the interviewer, comparing instead the victims of the tsarist repression to Guantanamo prisoners, and there is a visible consequence in it. He is namely interested in an example of suffering which causes Poles to feel rather guilty (Polish CIA prisons) than harmed. It is also an attempt to build Poles' 'global' consciousness; this goal is served by numerous references to mass culture: Konrad himself is a drunken hippie performing a musical 'show' on imaginary voice synthesizers. The journalist wittily calls the Great Improvisation a 'madman's show'; the director takes it up and the audience rewards it with laughter. Laughter always builds a distance towards the hero and that was precisely the effect Zadara wanted – laughter and boredom – because witchcraft, prayers, visions, or even great poetic improvisations do not work anymore.

### **PASSINI OR FOREFATHERS' EVE IN THE THEATRE OF THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY**

The case is different for Passini, who declared from the very beginning: 'We take *Forefathers' Eve* seriously' (Legierska 2015) and directed relatively short, condensed productions with a ritual structure, a very strong climax, and a well-marked catharsis effect. The topic of reading the drama also returns, which the director called 'precipitous and idiosyncratic' returns also in Passini's pre-opening interviews (Świerczyński 2015). It is precipitous because, due to the archaic rituals presented in *Forefathers' Eve*, 'the text is difficult to understand for a contemporary recipient'; idiosyncratic, because 'Mickiewicz's work holds an immense power' which is not even diminished

by the fact of being a compulsory reading for schools. Passini emphasizes that the text of *Forefathers' Eve* 'becomes engraved in memory' and remains there for a long time. 'There are moments when – even if you have not read the text for some time – the content comes to mind by itself', he explains, highlighting the unique status of the text of *Forefathers' Eve* among other dramas. 'During the work on the play, I felt that I did not know it at all' – he confesses, confirming in a certain way Zadara's opinion on the Poles not knowing their arch-drama... Characteristically, however, he does admit it – pointing, in fact, to the semantic complexity of Mickiewicz's work, which seemed to be clear, even obvious to Zadara. Nevertheless, the next minute he adds: 'At the same time, I still feel as if I was born already knowing this text'. This surprising confession – probably completely unacceptable for the director of the 'uncut' *Forefathers' Eve* – turns out to be crucial for Passini's interpretation.

Let us note that, when talking about the reception of *Forefathers' Eve*, Passini does not assess the state of Poles' mentality or the nature of Polish culture. He does not air general judgments, distancing himself from the subject of criticism; instead, he rather observes himself as a reader and expresses his own thoughts, especially feelings. He says: 'Mickiewicz's work holds an enormous power' and it is not an empty statement, because he has experienced this power himself. He also believes that, as an artist, he will be able to understand where the sense of the primary knowledge of *Forefathers' Eve* (since his birth) comes from and that he can refer to that sensation in the play. He also harbors the belief that, thanks to his artistic practice, the subjective turns to be common as long as he, the director, creates the right conditions for the audience to meet the work – as opposed to confronting it.

*Forefathers' Eve* is, as a story, very difficult to tell in a linear way. This is the way the text is, by nature. However, in my opinion, Mickiewicz designed certain events to be taking place simultaneously, overlapping one another. Hence the necessity of drawing the viewer into the vortex of the story, burying them, so to speak, in its reality. The puppets – about four hundred of them have been made for the production – are a great medium for this. I do not want to reveal too much but, for the purposes of the show, we also eliminated the division into the stage and the audience. All this to make the viewer feel the text and immerse themselves in it (ibid.).

What is striking is the imagery used by Passini who, as early as at the level of commenting, projects the reception of *Forefathers' Eve* as an entrance to the interior of the text, immersion in it, submission to its weight. The words in the play materialize in the form of conventional homunculus puppets which surround the viewers, are put into their hands by the actors, flounder under their feet, and fly over their heads. 'Paweł Passini's *Forefathers' Eve* resembles the biblical journey in the belly of a whale. The viewers get swallowed by theatre for two hours', wrote Jolanta Kowalska (2015) in a review of the production. The director symbolically eliminates the division between the stage and the audience, establishing a community of actors and spectators in the theatre, and condensing time in the theatrical 'belly of the whale', building the effect of simultaneous events, as if he wanted to bring all the heroes of the drama closer to him (and us!). Their spatial and temporal keystone is a ceremony, addressed in the theatre in accordance with its archaic structure and function, but in a modern way: by initiating it, Passini plays electric instruments, even sings at times, but never drowns out Mickiewicz's phrase. Like a real singer, the director extracts musicality out of the fragmentary text; musicality which unifies it in both the literal and the philosophical sense. His *Forefathers' Eve* does not stretch like a line of incoherent story, rising instead into a myth through the theatrical ritual.

The audience in Passini's play becomes part of the theatrical rite which is 'performed' here according to the rule of anamnesis, or reminding, understood in the antiquity as a journey to the sources: of memory, knowledge, power, sanctity, even of speech. In this respect, Passini remains faithful to Mickiewicz: he follows Guślarz (the Sorcerer), not the Priest, who points rather to the goal – salvation – not the divine source. The director is also aware that, for contemporary audience, *Forefathers' Eve* itself is a thing of the past, it has been forgotten and must be rediscovered. In the production, 'the world told by Mickiewicz has already happened, we watch it from the perspective of a ghost séance' – explains Kowalska (2015). The most important ghost is of course Konrad who, in Passini's staging, remains an old artist (the part is played by Bogusław Kierc, actor and poet, once Konrad in the independent, oppositional company NST), trying to awaken with his focused speech – still strong and aware of the textual meanings – the powers of a wizard and demiurge. During the *Great Improvisation*, he stands in front of a huge puppet symbolizing the paralyzed God and speaks on our behalf:

It is on this line that Konrad's metaphysical wrestling in the *Great Improvisation* and Father Piotr's struggle in the exorcism scene will be played out. Such a polarized space proves to be a concise interpretation of the main theme of the play: the conflict between the real (unrecognized) and the false (mummified) sacrum. It is between its poles that a murderous confrontation of wild, magical spirituality, promising access to the deepest mysteries of being, and its mystified counterpart, settling for appearances, will take place. This journey to the original sources of sanctity is already announced by the title of the play, containing the phonetic transcript of the word 'forefathers'. That gesture separated sound from meaning, *melos* from *opsis*, the sensual experience of speech from the act of communication. The production is meant to work in a similar way. Its director would like to suspend the reality of the text and let his whale swim against the flow of time and the history of culture, all the way to a place where life and death, spirit and matter were still a great, cosmic oneness (ibid.).

What draws attention in J. Kowalska's comment is the surprising and, at the same time, crucial sentence about Passini's artistic activities: 'Its director would like to suspend the reality of the text'. It means the exact opposite to what Zadara had in mind, as he was interested in the texture of *Forefathers' Eve*, the material weave of words, artistic arrangement of signs with a specific meaning which should be questioned. For Passini, the text of *Forefathers' Eve* is something like a sorcerer's spell, a composition of words equipped with a unique power of recalling, awakening, activating what is forgotten, dormant, transfixed in contemporary people's consciousness or imagination. He is interested in the spiritual and causative dimension of the text, whose author is Mickiewicz, but it is a deity or, precisely, a national community, that seems to be its original sender. Let us recall the theory of actants acting in the drama according to Anne Ubersfeld's (1999) theory and ask, following the author of *Reading Theatre*, who 'dictates' all the words to the dramatic characters in *Forefathers' Eve*, who is the sender of the drama? In the Opole interpretation of *Forefathers' Eve*, it is an unmoving holiness, symbolized by a huge puppet, that becomes such superior, metaphysical instance through which and to which the whole rite is performed. Angels and devils in *Forefathers' Eve* are not just a theatrical quote, as Zadara wants; they are rather a convention signaling the real dimension of the events and experiences of the heroes of the drama. Passini recognizes it brilliantly, but he is one of those artists who, like Mickiewicz,

take the crisis of the rationalized Western European spirituality very seriously and look for adequate ways of reviving it in theatre. Mickiewicz appealed to the pagan forefathers rite, which was still practiced by the people during his life, using it in the third part to revive the power of the Christian Day of the Dead and play out the whole drama within the scheme of a mystery. Passini, almost two hundred years later, uses the theatre itself to initiate the sacred anamnesis, which he learned from his masters: Artaud, Kantor and Grotowski, although its author's own spirituality is not without influence on the form of this staging either. In his journey towards the sources, Passini chooses *Forefathers' Eve*, perfectly sensing its unique, archetypal dimension. He does not move towards the text like Zadara's rationalist 'Protestant' who decided to sober up the Polish mentality by getting the romantic heroes drunk. Rather, like an imaginary 'cabbalist', he takes as his starting point the unknown but strangely known text, constituting for him a code of access to the transcendent reality summoning him, into which he would like to introduce the viewers. With a word, a gesture, a synchronous movement of the figures surrounding the viewers, he makes reality 'vibrate' but, at the same time, he is aware that Mickiewicz's Romanticist 'spells' do not work on everybody. 'An American or a German does not understand that because they do not have such rites' – explains the director referring, consciously or not, to ideas seen in Zadara, who directed the second part of *Forefathers' Eve* as a pastiche of the American horror film *Blair Witch Project*. 'It is much easier to communicate in this matter with Belarusians who treat *Forefathers' Eve* as their own text, not as a Polish classic' (Świerczyński 2015). A few months later, Passini staged *Forefathers' Eve* in Brest, reaching the very source of the common Polish-Belarusian-Lithuanian imagination.

'We take *Forefathers' Eve* seriously. The spells sound in Belarusian exactly as (...) Mickiewicz heard them' (Legierska 2015), said the director in an interview, confirming his previous intuition. Passini's 'seriously' refers, in the first place, to the dramatic speech, and immediately after that, to the spiritual mystery contained in the drama. In his comment, he consciously adopts the point of view of Karusia from *Romanticism*: 'it often happens in our theatre: we have either Mickiewicz in a folklore version or folk rituals mixed with American pop culture. Meanwhile, questions about soothsayers, whisperers, healing and cleansing rituals are taken seriously in Belarus'. Passini, like once Mickiewicz, discovered that reality and built

his own ritual upon it; in Brest, it gained the form of a painful séance of collective memory. In his second staging, it is the Belarusians themselves as a community ('cluster') of people whose traumatic, collective experiences are still waiting to be articulated, who became the primary, metaphysical sender of *Forefathers' Eve*. Passini and his dramaturge Patrycja Dołowy included in *Forefathers' Eve* fragments of memories of the local population, which revolve around World War II with its horrible symbol: the Brest fortress. He did so as early as during the rehearsals for the production, guided by inner intuition of the artist who knows how to listen:

Passini: At the beginning of my work on the production, I asked myself what is really going on during the ceremony. After all, we all know these passages perfectly: the ghosts of children, the virgin and the ghost of an evil master appear successively in the chapel, but what is it about? I look at it with my experience, spiritual path and doubts...

Legierska: And what are the conclusions?

Passini: That somebody's unworked-through, unreleased, illegitimate memory uses us, our bodies, our scripts, our lives to articulate itself. And Mickiewicz says: you have to hear them all, especially those you do not want to hear!

Dołowy: We follow this lead and use the tools that Mickiewicz gives us. Theatre is a rite. What is important and what unites people in Belarus is the awareness of the common land. Different languages and cultures still exist there side by side. We are digging in this play like in the Belarusian soil. Passini: Soil that suffers, bleeds, carries that whole story of having been through an ordeal. This is an important matter for the Belarusians, because it is only now that they are building their identity, constructing awareness of Belarusian literature and poetry, asking themselves what it really means to be a Belarusian? It is amazing that Mickiewicz is important in this process (ibid.).

What Passini experienced in Brest could be called a vivisection of the Belarusians national imagination, carried out on their symbolic grave ('we are digging in the Belarusian soil'), full of collective phantasms. In many respects, it resembles the Poles' national imagination, shaped in the times of Mickiewicz, or rather it constitutes its contemporary variant, not penetrated with a poet's word yet. Thanks to *Forefathers' Eve*, the director entered the very center of a collective identity, constituted on sacrifice, on the sense of having been harmed, but also the feeling of guilt and a great desire

for freedom. An identity which is suppressed, insecure, seeking expression and finding it in poetic drama and theatrical ritual. Passini took the martyrdom of the Belarusians fully seriously, believing that theatre remains a place where historical wounds can be healed and inner consolation achieved. Jarosław Cymerman (2016) writes about the Belarusian *Forefathers' Eve* from Brest:

The forefathers celebration, permitting to confess sins and redeem guilt, encloses the play, the phantoms step out from among the participants of the rite, they are among and perhaps also inside them. The cluster dressed in linen rural costumes with sewn-up red ribbons, the clerical collar and hands with a book hung around the priest's neck, a sailor's coat and black dress, the rhythm of incantations and spells – all that brings to mind productions by Grotowski, Kantor, Gardzienice, as well as Passini's earlier works (mainly *Odpozywanie* [*Requiem*], *Kukła* [*Puppet*] and *Kryjówka* [*The Hideout*]). All this theatrical machinery was set in motion (...) to remind that the formula proposed by Mickiewicz to deal with the experience of evil, suffering and death has not been exhausted at all, and the Phantom haunting the Cluster and the Sorcerer is still there, despite the blessed candle burning, spells and ordination.

Compassion leads to catharsis, but evil does not disappear.

## THE HAND GLASS AND THE SOUL

Zadara's *Forefathers' Eve* and Passini's *Forefathers' Eve* are like two branches of Polish contemporary theatre of the avant-garde origin. The former fully actualizes the project of critical theatre, which was identified with the Polish public stage in the jubilee year 2015 by virtue of important program statements. The latter is what I call the theatre of imagined community, represented today far more seldom and – let us emphasize that again – with nothing to do with theatrical traditionalism. They differ in virtually everything: the approach to Mickiewicz's poetic text, the concept and style of the presentation of the heroes, the approach and understanding of their drama, the artistic attitude (Zadara says 'they', Passini says 'me' or 'us') but, above all, in the attitude towards the community itself. Zadara would like to radically redefine its identity, and even re-establish it in opposition to the old one, by marking quite new landmarks on the map of our collective imagination. Moreover, by constantly emphasizing his rational approach to literature and the world (and criticizing the Polish unintellectualism),

the young director would probably like to turn the imagination itself into a sober, critical judgment of reality: to remove the Romanticist spell from the Polish soul. When it comes to Passini, he follows the footsteps of Grotowski and Kantor, precisely by activating the figures of our collective imagination – first in himself, then in the audience – his intention being to reach the sources of the community's identity. He did that by probing its secrets, setting free its fears, working through collective traumas on the one hand and, on the other, reviving its spiritual layers, treating the code of national symbolism, common to us and the Belarusians, as a code of access to transcendence. I do not conceal that I find the latter of the two theatrical projects much more appealing.

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## Summary

The topic of the essay are two productions of Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) in the contemporary Polish theatre. The author compares the productions by two leading directors of the younger generation of avant-garde origin: Michał Zadara and Paweł Passini. He analyses and compares both creators' statements accompanying the opening in order to reconstruct their artistic consciousness. This reconstruction leads to a presentation of two interpretative strategies which correspond to two different directions of development of the Polish contemporary theatre. The author situates Michał Zadara's production in the currently prevailing critical theatre stream while reading Paweł Passini's stagings as an alternative proposal, which he calls the theatre of the imagined community. The author sets his considerations within the context of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of both the National Theatre and the public theatre in Poland.

**Keywords:** critical theatre, national theatre, romanticism, imagined community, subversion, theatre ritual