



Queering Polishness in Polish Theatre Since 2005

Dissenting Bodies

Jonas Vanderschueren

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To Ago, Graška, and Miro.

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Introduction

On the night from July 28 to July 29, 2020, the anarchist collectives *Stop Bzdurcom* (Stop Bullshit), *Gang Samzamęt* (Gang Chaos), and *Poetka* (Poetess) gathered in the city centre of Warsaw to stage a protest. They went around the city and placed rainbow flags on a series of public monuments, such as the famous Copernicus statue on Krakowskie Przedmieście, the Christ Bearing His Cross statue towering over the stairs of the nearby *Bazylika Świętego Krzyża* (Holy Cross Basilique), the famed *Warszawska Syrenka* (Warsaw Mermaid) statue near the Wisła river, and the Józef Piłsudski monument near the Belweder Palace (Ciastoch 2020a). The response of state authorities was swift. The following day, the Secretary of State for Justice, Sebastian Kaleta, took to Twitter to denounce the protest as a “left-wing offensive”¹ that defiled the memory of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, comparing a picture of the activists raising the rainbow flag over the Christ Bearing His Cross statue with a famous photograph of the statue lying amongst the rubble of Warsaw’s Old Town after Nazi Germany destroyed the city. After drawing that lugubrious parallel, he organised a press conference to announce that he referred the activists to the public prosecutor.²

Not much later, Polish police raided the apartment of two members of *Stop Bzdurcom*, Margot and Łania, to arrest both activists. When the news spread on August 7 that Margot would be held in pre-trial custody for two months, hundreds of activists gathered at the Warsaw headquarters

of the NGO *Kampania przeciw homofobii* (Campaign Against Homophobia—KPH), which had offered Margot temporary shelter. Once police officers arrived at the KPH building to arrest Margot, she decided to hand herself over. Surprisingly, the police officers at the scene refused to carry out the arrest. Encouraged by this, Margot and the assembled crowd of supporters decided to march to the famous Krakowskie Przedmieście street, putting up new rainbow flags in the process. The protest was cut short by the arrival of more police officers who finally decided to arrest Margot, a state of affairs which further inflamed the situation. Similar to the protest tactics used in Glasgow to stop deportation vans (Brooks 2021), the assembled crowd tried to surround the arrest van escorting Margot away in an attempt to force her release. The situation escalated rapidly, with the police arresting nearly 50 people, including passers-by who were simply doing their grocery shopping (Mikołajewska 2020; Nowak 2020). The events triggered mass protests throughout the city, leaving many asking whether this was a turning point for the Polish LGBTQ+ community, a “Polish Stonewall” (Rutkiewicz 2020).

This is but one example of the fact that public monuments, and those that are religiously symbolic mainly, are off-limits in terms of protest in contemporary Poland. Only a year earlier, in 2019, three activists were charged with *offending religious feelings* for creating a *Virgin Mary With Rainbow Halo*, more commonly known as the *Rainbow Madonna*. Article 196 of the Polish Criminal Code stipulates that anyone who publicly insults an object of religious worship (and thereby offends the religious feelings of others) can be sentenced to a maximum of two years in prison. The vague wording of the article has made it possible for the activists to suffer harassment at the hands of the authorities while still being acquitted by the courts after nearly three years of judicial proceedings (Jędrzejczyk 2022).

Both protests were focused squarely on reappropriating prominent symbols associated with Polish national identity and its traditional confluence with Roman Catholicism. Not only were they performative in the strict sense by *going through the motions* of protest, but also in the way that the *performance* of these protests signified a refusal to be placed *out of bounds* by state and religious authorities. Both Stop Bzdurom and the Rainbow Madonna tried to reclaim a purported *essential* element of Polishness, Roman Catholicism, without conforming to one of its central tenets, compulsory heterosexuality. This refusal generated friction,

a tension intimately tied up with recent developments in Polish culture and one of its most prominent art forms: Polish theatre.

Over the past decade-and-a-half, there has been a lot of protest through performance and against performance. In 2014, for example, the international theatre festival Malta, based in Wrocław, cancelled Rodrigo Garcia's *Golgota Picnic* after months-long protests by conservative groups who claimed the performance was anti-Catholic (Rzonca 2015). This cancellation sparked a series of counter-protests, where artists, activists, writers, and performers throughout the country staged performative readings of the supposedly blasphemous text (Kosiński 2014). Only several months earlier, a different controversy had hit the *Stary Teatr* (Old Theatre) in Kraków when its artistic director, Jan Klata, made the last-minute decision to cancel a staging of Żygmunt Krasiński's classic *Nie-Boska Komedia* (*The Un-Divine Comedy*) by the Croatian maker Oliver Frlić. This came after substantial criticism and protest from both inside and outside the theatre about Frlić's decision to thematise the antisemitism of the famed Polish director Konrad Swinarski (Frlić 2013; "Nie-Boska Komedia"? Zawieszona!"). Three years later, in 2017, there was another incident involving Frlić when he was invited to stage a performance based on the classic text of Stanisław Wyspiański, *Klątwa* (*The Curse*), at Warsaw's *Teatr Powszechny* (Common Theatre). While this time, Frlić had the backing of Powszechny's artistic directors, Paweł Łysak and Paweł Sztarbowski, and the majority of the performers working at the theatre, it again elicited sustained protest outside the theatre because of its controversial imagery, such as a performer performing oral sex on a statue of former Pope Jan Paweł II (John Paul II; Lease 2018). Far-right organisations such as *Ruch Narodowy* (National Movement) and *Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny* (National Radical Camp—ONR) invaded the theatre and set off smoke bombs in an attempt to intimidate theatre goers. And while this triggered counterdemonstrations in defence of free speech, the reaction of the Polish authorities was revealing, as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński went on to denounce the performance as a "political or ideological activity" that had "nothing in common with the work of Wyspiański" ("Nie ma to nic wspólnego z Wyspiańskim". Ministerstwo Kultury zainterweniuje ws. 'Klątwy?"). Just as in the Stop Bzdurom and Rainbow Madonna cases, the public prosecutor (this time in Warsaw's Praga district) opened an investigation into whether the aforementioned article 196 had been violated (Kunert 2019). While Polish state authorities did not express overt support for the actions

of these far-right groups, their refusal to contempt these attempts at intimidation had the effect of legitimising the far-right's political goals. In all these cases, there is a telling conflict between makers in Poland and the authorities. When makers try to think through the canon of Polish culture to critically examine contemporary issues, it triggers a swift response from the authorities, who end up using the police and the judicial system to enforce a narrow moral code based on Polish nationalism and Catholicism. If, at first sight, these conflicts seem coincidental, each involving its own set of circumstances, that appearance is deceiving, as they are all linked through the rapid repression of deviance from the norm.

This book argues that contemporary Polish theatre has been marked by this struggle between those building performances and state authorities that see those creations as a threat to their authority. It will try to argue that this struggle has led to the twin processes of theatre makers in Poland *resisting* political pressure while simultaneously *reflecting on* and *thinking through* their historical role in facilitating the narratives that have enabled the emergence of a more militant form of Polish nationalism that has legitimised itself through a conservative reappropriation of the discourse of Polish Romanticism. It will argue that it is a productive approach to trace these twin processes of *resisting* and *reflecting* to 2005, the year in which the right-wing conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party won that year's presidential and parliamentary elections and formed its first government. This puts the Polish theatre field in an interesting position: after a period in which it had been moving away from the imagery, narratives, canon, and traditions of Polish Romanticism, the latter regained a lot of its political relevance. Even as Polish makers have moved away from notions of martyrdom and the suffering of the nation, the broken pieces of the mirror of Polish Romanticism are still refracting light throughout contemporary Polish theatre. As a result, this book will not focus on canonical Polish theatre but instead reorient itself towards the dissenting bodies that deviate from the norms of Polish nationalism and heteronormativity, or, as I term it, *Polish normativity*.

What all these incidents and protests have in common is that they are about *bodies taking up space*. Some bodies are desired, some bodies are deemed acceptable, some are tolerated, whereas others are seen as in need of repression or, in the worst case, expunction. It is in this context that *odmieńczość*, a Polish appropriation of queer theory, becomes important. In this book, I will argue that *odmieńczość* is a highly productive way to think through the artistic and political strategies that have been developed

in contemporary Polish theatre in the continuing struggle over which bodies can take up which spaces. An extreme example of the ways in which certain bodies are more legitimate than others can be found in the immediate aftermath of the 2020 Presidential Election when the relevant authorities did nothing to stop homophobes from issuing death threats and throwing trash at an openly gay man in the Polish countryside—despite its widespread mediatisation (Ciastoch 2020b). The same can be said about the incidents occurring during the initial staging of *Klatwa* in 2017: some bodies have more legitimacy in the eyes of state authorities and Polish elites, as long as those bodies (in this case, members of far-right organisations) represent their interests. There seems to be a hierarchy in who is allowed to *take up space* (in the sense of Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*) and who is not. In this book, I reject the binary logic that underpins such a spatial hierarchy. Instead of replacing a nationalistic and heteronormative norm with another *queer* norm, I understand *odmienność* as a way to deregulate and think beyond normativity itself. In this book, I want to argue that this hierarchy is not determined by Polish nationalism alone, nor that it suffices to investigate these dynamics solely through the lens of heteronormativity. Instead, I want to propose a term that combines the two, *Polish normativity*, as both terms are too intertwined to be neatly separated. In the simplest of terms, deviating from the norm is punished, whereas adhering to it is rewarded.

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

In this book, I will take the view that in response to the political pressure to comply with an increasingly assertive right-wing conservative political agenda, which reflects a broader right-wing conservative shift in the public sphere which aims to defend and strengthen Polish normativity, that the years since 2005 have seen the emergence of a series of artistic and political strategies used by Polish theatre makers that I think of as queer. Throughout this research, I will use a broad definition of queerness/*odmienność*, which goes beyond a strict focus on gender and sexuality and instead includes other identity categories that find themselves deviating (and therefore in conflict) from the hegemonic notion of Polish normativity. The focus will be on performances that challenge the latter’s conception of Polishness as a mono-ethnic, mono-linguistic, and mono-cultural identity.

To be clear: I am not going to argue that all performances made in Poland since 2005 are queer, nor that a queer analytical framework is the *only* possible approach. I am also not claiming to write a comprehensive history of contemporary Polish theatre in the first two decades of the twenty-first century; instead, my approach has been to trace developments and tendencies through the close analysis of a selected corpus of performances. While assembling this corpus, the decision was made to avoid the most famous directors and the most canonical works that have been created in the chosen periodisation. There will be no discussion of the works of Krzysztof Warlikowski, Krystian Lupa, Krzysztof Garbaczewski, or Jan Klata in this book. This does not mean that I do not consider their work influential, but I think that other researchers have already done the most important investigative work regarding those theatre makers. Instead, the attention will go to younger makers, such as Magda Szpecht, Ania Nowak, Paweł Sakowicz, Michał Borczuch, and Anna Smolar, whose work has received less attention outside of Poland. The most famous canonical theatre director that I do feature in this research is Monika Strzępka, who (controversially) served as the artistic director of the Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw between 2022 and 2023. The reason that she does feature despite her already well-established presence in the English-language literature on Polish theatre is because I think that the existing literature has been too preoccupied with the *Big Three* of Warlikowski-Lupa-Klata, in the process relegating the work that Strzępka has produced together with Paweł Demirski to an implicit secondary status. This work tries to centre female and queer voices as a counterweight of sorts.

A final note on the choice to stick to the periodisation starting in 2005: not only does art not necessarily develop in a linear fashion, making any periodisation fundamentally arbitrary, but it often takes time for developments that started years ago to fully come into their own and to become visible to those involved. Of course, this does not mean that the choice for 2005 as a starting point is random. Instead, I highlight its argumentative character to make clear that I do not subscribe to a mechanistic/teleological understanding of history, where the incessant march of progress will inevitably lead Poland into the realm of Western liberal democracy with constitutionally guaranteed LGBTQ+ rights. History did not end in 1989, nor did it restart in 2005.

The thematic focus of this book on the emergence of queer artistic and political strategies in the contemporary Polish theatre field places it in a

small but growing field of English-language Polish Theatre and Performance Studies. One of the most prominent recent works in this regard is Bryce Lease's monograph *After'89*, which provides a good overview of the developments in the Polish theatre field after the end of Communism until the mid-2010s. In this study, published in 2016, Lease dedicated an entire chapter to the emergence of (gay and) queer counterpublics in Polish society after the transformation, while studying the work of prominent theatre directors such as Krzysztof Warlikowski and Krystian Lupa, in the process underlining the relevance of a queer interpretation of recent Polish theatre history. More recently, Lease co-edited *A History of Polish Theatre* with the prominent theatre scholars Katarzyna Fazan and Michał Kobiąłka, which unlocked a veritable treasure trove of knowledge on the history of Polish theatre that had previously been difficult to access for an English-reading public. This has made it quintessential reading for anyone interesting in Polish theatre. In addition to this work, there is also the expansive study *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918*, edited by Tamara Trojanowska, Joanna Niżyńska, and Przemysław Czapliński, which as the title suggests, interrogates the history of Polish literature and culture since the country regained its independence in 1918.

In addition to these publications, there have also been more structural efforts to increase the amount of academic writing on the Polish theatre field. Two of the most prominent of these attempts have been the founding of *Polish Theatre Journal*, a collaboration between the *Akademia Teatralna im. Aleksandra Zelwerowicza* in Warsaw (The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art) and the *Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego* (The Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute), and the introduction of an English-language edition of the Polish theatre journal *Didaskalia*, which is published annually by the *Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego* (Jerzy Grotowski Institute) in collaboration with the *Uniwersytet Jagielloński* (Jagiellonian University) in Kraków. While the latter has had extensive attention for issues as diverse as the #metoo movement, feminism, and climate change, the former has even dedicated an entire issue to the emergence of queer as an artistic and political strategy in contemporary Polish theatre, once again underlining the validity of this avenue of inquiry.

However, this research is not exclusively concerned with the English-language research field but instead seeks to build a bridge between the former and Polish-language Theatre and Performance Studies. For this

reason, I also quote extensively from recent Polish-language research concerned with *odmieńczość* and gender, theatre, history, and culture, such as the aforementioned works of Joanna Krakowska, or scholars such as Piotr Morawski, Andrzej Leder, Przemysław Czapliński, Tomasz Plata, Agnieszka Graff, Ewa Majewska, and Adam Leszczyński, to name but a few. In my personal opinion, the recent developments in the Polish-language Humanities have been some of the most interesting and intellectually stimulating that I have encountered in my young research career, and I hope that some of their thinking can shine through in this book.

From this approach, it follows that I have not restricted myself to English-language magazines, despite their obvious merit, but also made extensive use of Polish-language reviews, interviews, newspaper articles, and essays, in publications as diverse as the theatre journal *Dialog*, the cultural magazine *Dwutygodnik*, the Polish edition of the aforementioned *Didaskalia*, magazines such as *Polityka*, but also newspapers like *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the investigative journalist platform *OKO.press*.

This book has an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. In the first chapter, I will define the concepts used, such as Polish normativity and *odmieńczość*, and substantiate why 2005 is a crucial year in the history of contemporary Poland. This will be followed by a short chapter exploring the Polish theatre field, its structure, and the role of precarity in its modes of production. The third chapter will take a closer look at normative Polishness and how contemporary theatre performances have sought to think beyond its confines, which will be done through a critical analysis of *Niech żyje wojna !!! (Long Live The War !!!)*—Strzępka and Demirski 2009), *Solidarność. Nowy projekt (Solidarity. New project)*—Wodziński 2017), and *Have A Good Cry* (Szpecht 2021). The artistic strategies deployed will lead into the fourth chapter, which will look at attempts to move away from the (neo-)avant-garde concept of the dictatorial theatre director, and how these challenges to the *Artistic Genius* take shape in the following performances: *Mikro-Dziady (Micro Forefather's Eve)*—Smolar 2016), *Bez tytułu (Untitled)*—Nowak 2016) and *KLUB* (students at Akademia Teatralna and Szczawińska 2021). The final chapter focuses on issues of race and empire in Polish theatre, more specifically cultural appropriation, anti-Black racism, and the violent imposition of the gender binary, by looking at *Masakra* (Sakowicz 2018), *Henrietta Lacks* (Smolar 2016–17), and *Bez tytułu (Znowu razem) (Untitled (Together Again))*—Borzuch 2018). This book concludes with a short

chapter discussing various issues that did not feature in this book but are nevertheless important, such as antisemitism and climate change.

NOTES

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The Transformative Power of Dissensus: Polish Normativity and Queer Dissensus in Contemporary Polish Theatre

Most studies of contemporary Polish culture and theatre take 1989 as its starting point. There are many good reasons to do this, and it also fits in neatly with the dominant narrative that sees 1989 as a crucial turning point in European and world history. However, this approach also comes with significant pitfalls, as it conceptualises the past four decades in Polish theatre solely from the vantage point of a teleological narrative in which a monolithic Polish theatre field becomes ever more diverse at the same time as a free-market economy and multi-party democracy develop. From today's point of view, it is clear that there has been a communication breakdown in a Polish society that has become heavily polarised as one of the many results of the rapidly widening social inequality that the post-transformation era wrought. The enormous impact of the changes of the 1990s led to a new phenomenon emerging in Polish theatre, namely the importance of not merely the symbolic, but also the material realm (Krakowska 2021, 271).

It is difficult to understand the 2015 election victories of PiS without taking into account how fractured society had become in the post-transformation era. At the same time, the scale of change post-2015 has been such, that a different perspective can function as an important act of reorientation, which this book seeks to provide. Of course, this does not mean that I think that 1989 is not a crucial year in Polish cultural history, but I do think that enough time has passed for an alternative

approach that does not depart from the symbolic point of 1989. I would like to argue instead that it can be useful to examine recent developments in Polish culture from multiple vantage points, with 2005 offering an alternative departure point.

This path of inquiry has already led to interesting results in the realm of Polish Literary Studies, as the work of the Polish literary scholar Przemysław Czapliński attests to. As he points out, it is also possible to trace the changing conceptions of collective identity in Polish culture to the final half-decade of the People's Republic:

The mid-1980s is therefore not the birth of *odmieńców* in Polish history, but the emergence of favorable conditions for redefining collective identity – conditions suggested by both sides. (2009, 295)

From this perspective, the period of openness that started in the mid-1980s would accelerate with the transformation in 1989 and come to an end half a decade later, around 1996 (2009, 253). If there was broad agreement at the beginning of the decade that the transformation towards a free market required a pluralist democratic system combined with a strong patriotic identity, that consensus came under increased pressure as Westernising neoliberals came to dominate the public sphere and found a strong collective identity to be an obstacle to their modernisation plans (Czapliński 2009, 246). With the post-communist Social Democrats firmly in the camp of modernisation, this meant that the primary opposition to the modernisation narrative came from the conservative Right. From the second half of the 1990s onwards, the public sphere would become less tolerant of *odmieńcy*, which in this context denoted those who deviated from either camp, as everyone engaging in public debate was forced to choose between modernisers and traditionalists (2009, 246). Czapliński considered this process as symbolically completed with the death and burial of the celebrated, but polarising Polish writer Czesław Miłosz in 2004, the same year that the country entered the EU. But as unemployment remained stubbornly high around 20% (International Labour Organization 2022), this point in time would also become symbolic of the failures of the post-socialist transformation. Even after entering the EU and NATO, the millenarian ambitions of the post-communist political project had not been achieved.

It is in this context that PiS' 2005 election victory should be understood. Whereas the period between 1980 and 2005 was dominated by the

struggle between (post-) *Solidarność* (Solidarity) and (post-) Communist political forces, the collapse of the post-communist Social Democrats (SLD) in 2005 as the result of a variety of corruption scandals fundamentally changed the political landscape of the country. From that point onwards, the political struggle would be fought between the liberal-conservative *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform—PO) and the right-wing conservative *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice—PiS). The latter party won both the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections promising “moral renewal” through the foundation of a “Fourth Polish Republic”, which they contrasted with the “decadence” of the post-1989 Third Republic, whose state apparatus was seen as irredeemably corrupt and infiltrated by post-communists (Jaskiernia 2017, 231).

The 2005 election victories of PiS were the culmination of a decade of reorganisation and radicalisation on the Polish Right in response to the dominance of Polish liberals, but also represented a marked shift in Polish cultural politics. In their election campaigns and political statements, PiS frequently referred to the canon of Polish Romanticism and its Messianic martyrdom cult, portraying themselves as true patriots fighting against the corruption of the nation by foreign elements (Graff 2009, 137). In a country where the education system makes students learn the classics of Polish Romanticism by heart, these references to the struggles of the past could not be misunderstood. It also clearly signified that the moral renewal promised by PiS would not restrict itself to ousting corrupt bureaucrats and tackling the institutional remnants of the post-1989 post-communist state; instead, moral renewal would also entail a cultural offensive against *unpatriotic* influences, predominantly from the West (Brier 2009, 64). The Polish scholar Agnieszka Graff has described these developments as the emergence of a “gendered nationalism”, where there is:

[...] a striking overlap between ideologies of gender and nationalism: On one hand, ideas about gender roles, sexuality, and reproduction are an important part of exclusionary discourses concerning nationhood and national pride and identity; on the other hand, the very idea of nation is often gendered and sexualised. (2009, 133)

As she points out, nationalists tend to allegorically represent the nation as a female figure, while women themselves are reduced to the “reproducers

of the nation” and as such serve as “markers of collective boundaries and differences” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1994, 314–315, cited in Graff 2009, 134). In this nationalist imaginary, the feminised nation is defenceless and under threat by a masculine, aggressive “attacker” who is motivated by “a desire to harm Poland’s children (in the first case, by killing them, in the second by leading them astray, into homosexuality and sex change)” (Graff 2009, 135). It is in this context that the fierce backlash against the Rainbow Madonna should be understood: while those spreading the symbol saw it as a patriotic expression of solidarity with the Polish LGBTQ+ community through the reappropriation of a national symbol, nationalists saw it as a violation of the Polish nation by supposedly foreign *LGBT ideology*. While the 2000s and the 2010s saw the emergence of liberal and reformist LGBTQ+ rights organisations such as the aforementioned KPH, it also saw the rise to prominence of conservative NGOs like *Fundacja Pro* and *Ordo Iuris*.

While PiS lost power to the centre-right PO at the October 2007 parliamentary elections, it managed to become the dominant force on the political Right as several smaller right-wing parties failed to return to the Sejm. This newly vacated space on the Right allowed PiS to radicalise and continue its fight for *moral renewal* against *foreign subversion*, without losing its appeal as a mainstream political party. This stance was enhanced in the aftermath of the 2010 Smoleńsk tragedy when conspiracy theories started to emerge which implied that the Donald Tusk-led PO government was covering up as-of-yet unproven Russian involvement. It was an atmosphere of conspiracy and corruption that helped bring down the 2001–2005 Social Democratic governments, and in the early 2010s something similar was happening with Tusk’s PO government, as first the 2012 Amber Gold scandal hit, in which thousands of Poles lost their life savings (“Prison sentences for couple behind Amber Gold pyramid scheme”), and then from 2014 onwards, newspapers started publishing secret recordings of government ministers such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski, exposing the hypocrisy of the government (Lyman). In this context, the anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQ+ and Eurosceptic stances of PiS became an asset, not a liability, as they seemed to prove the moral fortitude of the party and its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński. It allowed the Polish Right to transfer its earlier arguments against the post-communist Social Democrats to the centre-right PO and Polish liberals more broadly, painting them as beholden to the West, and so continue its calls for *moral renewal* through the establishment of a Fourth Republic.

It should be clear that the collapse of the post-communist/post-Solidarność political divide in 2005 had far-reaching consequences that stretched into the cultural realm. But how did it impact the Polish theatre field? Broadly speaking, the early 1990s were a period of crisis for the theatre field: public subsidies were cut, and attempts were made to privatise prominent theatre institutions, such as the Warsaw *Teatr Dramatyczny* (Dramatic Theatre; Krakowska 2019, 63). It is in this period that Krystian Lupa rose to prominence with his slow, contemplative, and inward-looking theatre which moved away from the Romantic tradition and eschewed political involvement (Lease 2016, 9). Towards the end of the decade, however, a new form of theatre emerged: Polish Brutalism. The early optimism of the transformation period had given way to disillusionment and anger (Krakowska 2019, 157; Węgrzyniak 1999), which was reflected in productions such as Krzysztof Warlikowski's *Oczyszczeni* (*Cleansed*—2001), an adaptation of the eponymous play by Sarah Kane which featured a ground-breaking representation of homosexuality (Lease 2016, 125; Krakowska 2019, 167). But by the mid-2000s, Polish audiences had already grown used to the shock tactics of Polish Brutalism (Wąchocka 2010, 233). The resurgence of Polish nationalist rhetoric and its frequent adoption of imagery from the Polish Romantic tradition, culminating in PiS' electoral victory in 2005, signify an important turning point for the resurgence of critical and political theatre in Poland. This is exemplified by makers such as Warlikowski starting to make more political performances, including his 2007 production *Anioły w Ameryce* (*Angels in America*—an adaptation of Tony Kushner's play), which tackled homophobia, political hypocrisy and AIDS; and the 2009 production *(A)pollonia*, which dealt with the moral complicity of Poles in the Holocaust. Around the same time, a new generation of theatre makers gained prominence, such as Jan Klata, Monika Strzępka, Maja Kleczewska, and Weronika Szczawińska, to name but a few.

According to the Polish theatre scholar Tomasz Plata it is no coincidence that the Polish theatre field emerged as an important space for critical thinking and left-wing politics: as the Polish Left struggled to deal with the experiences of dictatorial state communism and the transformation to a late capitalist market economy in the 1990s, its emancipatory tradition found refuge amongst young intellectuals, artists, and theatre makers (Plata 2017, 102). Given the historical role of Polish theatre institutions in reproducing the canon of Polish Romanticism that has legitimised the narratives and rhetoric of the Polish conservative Right,

and the performative character of politics and protest, it becomes less surprising that Polish theatre would eventually emerge as a battleground in the contemporary Polish culture wars.

ODMIENIĆZOSĆ, OR POLISH QUEER THEORY

In this research, I take the view that *odmienność*, a broad interpretation of queer theory in the Polish context, is a highly productive method through which to understand some of the artistic and political strategies that are used in contemporary critical Polish theatre to generate friction. This is because it provides the analytical tools to analyse the discursive field through which bodies can emerge, and its recognition that “[p]ower and knowledge express themselves through discourse” (Rodemeyer 2018, 46). This does not mean that bodies are *exclusively* discursive, however, as “embodied, lived experience” is crucial for a proper understanding of the relationality of the body (2018, 189). I will return to the complex relationship between embodied experience and the discursive further down below, but at this point, it suffices to recognise that the analytical tools that queer theory provide undermine essentialising and naturalising claims about the body and gender, which can also be applied to critique the idea of *essential* and *organic* national identities. It is possible to make a double thought movement here: on the one hand, the notion of gender as performative opens the door to an understanding of queer as a relationality, which in turn makes it possible to tease out the contradictions between and within contemporary performances; on the other hand, the very notion of queer bodies *existing* and *being legitimate on their own terms*, challenges several presuppositions within Polish normativity, such as the *essential* character of identity and the existence of a naturalised, homogenous national community shaped around that essential identity that *reproduces itself through heteronormative relationships*, which are instead seen as reified.

To the uninitiated, *odmienność* is perhaps best explained as the adaptation and application of transnational queer theory to the Polish cultural space, rooting it in Polish socio-cultural history. It would be incorrect to describe it as a *nationalisation* of queer theory in a similar vein to Jasbir Puar’s concept of “homonationalism” (Miller and Lemmey 2022, 647; Leksikov and Rachok 2020, 28). *Odmienność*, at least in the way that I understand it, is not a denial of the transnational character of queer theory, but instead an attempt by Polish-speaking theorists, activists, and