

## Sex and Politics

Krzysztof Warlikowski's "Warsaw Cabaret" at Nowy Teatr is a play in two acts. The first is based on the John van Druten drama "I Am a Camera" (which was the basis for Bob Fosse's film "Cabaret"), while the second draws on John Cameron Mitchell's "Shortbus." The first transports us back in time to Weimar Germany; the second – to modern-day New York City. Through such a juxtaposition, the play examines contemporary Warsaw. In interviews before the premiere, Warlikowski compared the era of Weimar Germany to the present and pointed to the growing fascist tendencies we are seeing today. The director's latest production is a springboard for this political thesis. But while one cannot dispute the thesis itself, the way in which it is presented arouses more doubt than enthusiasm.

### The penis and violence

Let's start with enthusiasm. It is an enthusiasm for what "Warsaw Cabaret" uses in support of the affirmation of the body. "Penis," "vagina," "anus" – in no other Polish theatre are these words uttered so often or with such conviction. There is no need to explain that these parts of the anatomy are more than just the sources of hetero- and homosexual pleasure but also parts of the political body. It is enough to recall the latest debate on civil partnerships or the SlutWalk protests to conclude that the words "penis," "vagina" and "anus" generate a panic which often goes hand in hand with violence. To paraphrase a mainstay of the modern political scene, it can be said that in the eyes of a certain portion of society (a huge portion, presumably) the theatre is no place for "whores, harlots or pimps." In this regard, Warlikowski's theatre is very much a political stage.

Comparing the image of a two men copulating in "Warsaw Cabaret" with that of two men pleasuring each other in Warlikowski's "Cleansed" (2002) it is worthwhile to note that although both cases dwell in the political realm of Warlikowski's theatre, the aesthetic register has changed considerably: from transgressive to affirmative. We can say that this is Warlikowski's way – from post-modernism to sublimation. We can also risk hypothesising that this shift reflects the changes in homosexuality's struggle with being marginalised in public debate. In "Warsaw Cabaret" we are faced with not only the homosexual body but the sexual body in general; with how the sexual mingles with the political. On the level of journalism, it is quite clear. Unfortunately on the level of theatre it doesn't fare as well.

### First orgasm

In the first act, the actors dance in military formation and discuss the fascist predilections of Wagner's music. Andrzej Chyra arranges pieces of paper into a swastika and, eventually, the position of Jews in the racial hierarchy is discussed openly. Yet, dominating all of this is the traditional love story. Though Warlikowski addresses the subject of the Holocaust, it remains on the level of mere voluble rhetoric. There is decidedly too little bite and artfulness and too much melodrama. The whole thing gets tasty when the actors, with Magdalena Cielecka centre stage, enthusiastically pour their hearts into their revue musical numbers – yet this cabaret Berlin seems like a mere prologue to the play's second act.

Here, the opposite can be said: ambiguity defines the historical setting. Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik's and Claude Bardouil's half-hour performative commentary on 9/11 grows into an event/emblem of a legible and traumatic nature but the director completely ignores its political equivocality and complex consequences. In the play, 9/11 is seen through the eyes of New Yorkers, or perhaps more broadly, of the Western world. Such a perspective is politically naïve and, in a word, elitist. It is difficult to reconcile it with the play's message of the stage being a place for those on the margins of society (neurotics, artists, the maladjusted).

The Holocaust and 9/11 – Warlikowski weaves his narrative around these two tragedies and although we can say that each was an event that shaped world order, such a symmetry should arouse nothing but reservations. Admittedly, Warlikowski's textual montages are never about simple analogies but always about making the viewer confront his reservations. This time, the exercise is not very satisfying. In a key scene, the actors dance around a coffin sprinkled with glitter, taking turns lying down inside it and "dying." A moment later, Maja Ostaszewska, in a pose à la Marina Abramović, announces her character's first-ever orgasm. The play's creators side with life, vitality and sexuality: this act is cheerful and gloriously indecent. In my opinion, a five-hour-long, two-part epic performance makes an ill-fitted ballast for this simple and striking declaration.

### **The outsiders' mainstream**

Though the story unfolds in an idiomatic space designed by Małgorzata Szczęśniak, new tones are clearly discernible. And I am not referring strictly to the cabaret components. Warlikowski has always liked to make use of his cast's off-stage status and in "Warsaw Cabaret" the actors straddle the line between acting and being themselves more bravely than in any previous production. They do this and still manage to steer clear of coquettishness – not an easy feat for an ensemble made up of celebrities. Asking about "Warsaw Cabaret's" stage language does not yield a simple answer: the play is not always "typical Warlikowski."

Another question we can discuss in the margins is one that comes from on-stage (from the lips of Jacek Poniedziałek) on "good theatre in the city." Immediately following is a jocular threat of "they'll lock us up any time now." Warlikowski's theatre celebrates the status of the reject as usual. But it is enough to look at the long list of "Warsaw Cabaret's" co-producers (from the Avignon Festival to the National Audiovisual Institute) to realise that Nowy Teatr is now the cherry on the mainstream cake. Warlikowski surrounds himself exclusively with the mainstream (In "Warsaw Cabaret" it is Coetzee, Littell, Radiohead and Agamben). The question of how this elitism can be reconciled with the status of a place that celebrates the marginalised and excluded is a political question that Warlikowski's Nowy Teatr should ask itself some time.

Marcin Kościelniak, *Tygodnik Powszechny*