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Difficult Encounter: Polish Theatre on the Irish Stage between 2004 and 2015

Kasia Lech

“I love Ireland! I pray for your freedom! I beseech you to pray for the freedom of Poland!” These are the words that Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska), a legendary Polish female actor, supposedly delivered hundred and thirty years ago from her hotel balcony during her tour of Ireland in 1885. Kazimierz Braun explains that Modjeska’s performances, both in the theatre and on the balcony, created much excitement amongst the Irish audiences. In the theatre she received ovations and “a wreath with two sashes” in the colours of the Polish flag that fell at her feet. Modjeska’s speech after the performance alluded to the similarities between the fates of the Irish and the Polish and caused passionate reactions; in response to them the police took Modjeska out of Dublin “to calm down the excited Irish.” Upon her return, says Braun, she gave the balcony “performance” that caused riots brutally suppressed by the police.¹

I refer to Modjeska’s tour as an example of how Polish theatre and actors can excite Irish audiences. There are some obvious similarities between the two countries both in terms of their prolonged fight for independence, the socio-cultural contexts dominated by patriarchy and Catholicism, the important role that theatre has played in developing their national identities, and the constant engagement of both theatres with the wounds of history. And it seems that these similarities would create very favourable conditions for multiple and multi-layered theatrical encounters, in particular those that facilitate a dialogue between “overlapping experiences and a commonality of perceptions,” which Porter and Samovar once defined as

¹ Kazimierz Braun, *A Concise History of Polish Theater from the Eleventh to the Twentieth Centuries* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2003) 103.

“the ideal intercultural encounter.”² In other words, and without getting into a discussion on the problematic overtones that the idea of “the ideal intercultural encounter” carries, Polish and Irish theatrical exchanges and collaborations should be thriving. Of course, for a very long time the Iron Curtain made it difficult, although not impossible for the audiences and the theatres of both countries to interact.³ However, when in 2004 Poland joined the European Union (under the Irish presidency) and Ireland, as one of the first countries, opened the door to Poles, the promise of powerful theatrical exchanges was surely hanging in the air.

2004 seemed like a perfect date. The centenary of the Abbey Theatre overlapped with the eightieth anniversary of the Polish National Theatre being reopened after the Poles regained independence.⁴ 2004 also marked the hundredth anniversary of Jan Kasprowicz’s translation of *The Countess Cathleen* by W.B. Yeats, under the title *Księżniczka Kasia*. The first production to be presented as part of “The Abbey and Europe” season (that celebrated the theatre’s centenary) was *Uroczystość* [Festen] directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna for Polish TR Rozmaitości [Varieties Theatre]. Teatr Ósmego Dnia [Theatre of the Eighth Day] featured at the St Patrick’s Festival in Dublin.⁵ Biuro Podróży Theatre [Travel Agency Theatre] together with cultural organization Samhlaiocht engaged in an interdisciplinary community based project in Knocknagoshel (Kerry) that was showcased at the 2004 Easter Carnival in Tralee and used to promote Kerry.⁶ The start seemed perfect and the stage was set. However, from the perspective of the last decade, how did the Irish-Polish theatrical encounter develop?

² Richard Porter and Larry A. Samovar, “An Introduction to Intercultural Communication,” *Intercultural Communication. A Reader*, eds Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1985) 24.

³ For example, the Juliusz Osterwa Theatre from Lublin performed its production of Tadeusz Różewicz’s *Stara kobieta wysiaduje* [The Old Woman Broods] directed by Kazimierz Braun in Dublin in 1983; Kazimierz Braun, “Productions Directed by Kazimierz Braun,” <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~kaz/> (accessed 19 June 2015).

⁴ The Polish National Theatre was formed in 1765 by King Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last king of Poland. This first ensemble lasted only two years, but the national stage was resurrected in 1774 by the Polish parliament and this time it survived for fifty years, even though Poland lost its independence in 1795, when the Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth’s territories were divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. It was only after the 1830 November Rising that the Polish National Theatre had to be renamed into the Great Theatre.

⁵ Alison Healey, “Weather Deals an Early Blow to Dublin Festival,” *Irish Times*, 15 March 2004.

⁶ Clare Mulvihill, “Knocknagoshel Takes Its Place in Polish Parade,” *Irish Independent*, 26 February 2004.

The above question frames the discussion in the present article that seeks to document the encounter of Polish theatre with Irish audiences between 2004 and 2015. Choosing the most contrasting cases and taking into consideration quantitative and qualitative data, including reviews, awards, and funding, this essay argues that the encounter between Polish theatre and Irish stages, although multilayered, has not explored the depth of its potential so far. The discussion also points out possible avenues for future projects and creative explorations. While an explicit definition of Polish theatre, especially in the intercultural context, is inevitably limiting and problematic, for the purpose of my investigation, I will look at the theatre productions that were created or co-created by Polish artists and were branded as Polish or partly-Polish theatre by the artists that created them. I will focus on professional productions (that remunerated artists involved, at least on a profit-share basis) rather than community-based theatre; however, the last section of my essay highlights some key contributions to acknowledge the importance of community projects for future theatrical collaborations.

Figures 1 and 2 provide details of productions presented by Polish artists in Ireland in the last decade, including language of performances. Looking at the numbers, it seems that Polish theatre has been a very welcome addition to Irish stages. Since 2004, Ireland hosted at least twenty-three professional productions by Polish theatre artists; out of these twenty-three, ten productions were invited from Poland, while thirteen were created by Polish artists living in Ireland, often collaborating with Irish and international artists. If one counts all the second runs and tours separately, the number increases from twenty-three to thirty-three, three productions per year on average, approximately one hundred and sixty live performances, sixteen performances per year on average. On the one hand it seems a lot; Polish theatre certainly features on Irish stages more than any other non-English-language theatre. However, if we

consider that Poles are the largest minority in Ireland and, according to the 2011 census,⁷ they make 2.7 percent of the population and we think about all theatrical productions happening in Ireland, thirty-three productions and one hundred and sixty live performances in a decade is a very small number. As a case in point, the 2015 Tiger Dublin Fringe hosted eighty productions,⁸ 2.7 percent of that is 2.2; the Abbey Theatre between 2009 and 2011 gave approximately 440 performances a year (excluding tours),⁹ 2.7 percent of that is 11.9. In other words, the quantitative presence of Polish theatre in Ireland corresponds with the 2.7 percent of a work presented by a large, but single, organization rather than with the 2.7 of work presented on Irish stages. And while it would be perhaps unreasonable to look for a perfectly matching conversion from the population statistics to the theatre repertoire, the enormous difference here justifies an argument that Poles are significantly underrepresented on Irish stages.

Figure 1

The table provides details of theatre productions created by Polish artists and presented in Ireland between 2004 and 2015. Productions invited from Poland are indicated by grey cells. The titles indicate the language of performance. When a Polish title is followed by an English title in square brackets, it means that a Polish language performance was accompanied by English surtitles; if a Polish title is followed by a forward slash and an English title, it means that the production was performed in Polish and English on alternate nights; a standing alone English title indicates that English was the main language of the performance. Productions performed outside of County Dublin are highlighted in bold.

2004	<i>Uroczystość</i> [Festen]. By Thomas Vinterberg and Mogens Rukov. Adapt. Bo hr. Hansen. Dir. Grzegorz Jarzyna (. H7). TR Warszawa. The Abbey and Europe. The Abbey Theatre. Dublin. 28-31 January 2004.
	The Ark. By Teatr Ósmego Dnia. St Patrick’s Festival. Dublin. Smithfield Square. 17 March 2004.
2007	<i>Więcej światła/More Light</i> . By Natalia Kostrzewa and Jerzy Lach. Dir. Jerzy Lach. Smock Alley Theatre. Dublin. 12-14 April 2007 and 30 November – 2 December 2007.
	The Ark. By Teatr Ósmego Dnia. Kilkenny Arts Festival. Cillin Hill Centre. Kilkenny. 12 August 2007.
	<i>Mała Syrenka</i> [The Little Mermaid]. By Hans Christian Andersen. Adapt. Waldemar Wolański. Dir. Waldemar Wolański. Teatr Arlekin Łódź. International Puppet Festival Ireland. The Pavilion Theatre. Dun Laoghaire. 14-15 September 2007.

⁷ Central Statistics Office, *This Is Ireland: Highlights from Census 2011, Part 1* (Cork: Central Statistics Office, 2012) 33.

⁸ “Tiger Dublin Fringe Launches 21st Edition Festival Programme!,” 29 July 2015, <http://www.fringefest.com/news/article/tiger-dublin-fringe-launches-21st-edition-festival-programme> (accessed 15 September 2015).

⁹ Abbey Theatre, *Three Year Review 2009-2011* (Dublin: Abbey Theatre, 2012) 10, <http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/abbey-theatre/> (accessed 15 September 2015).

	Smycz [The Leash]. By Bartosz Porczyk and Natalia Korczakowska. Dir. Natalia Korczakowska. Teatr Polski Wrocław. Dublin Fringe Festival. Axis Arts Centre. Dublin. 20-22 September 2007. Smycz [The Leash]. By Bartosz Porczyk and Natalia Korczakowska. Dir. Natalia Korczakowska. Teatr Polski Wrocław. Axis Arts Centre. Dublin. 23-26 April 2008.
2008	<i>Ucho, gardło, nóż</i> [An Ear, a Throat, a Knife]. By Vedrana Rudan. Adapt. Krystyna Janda. Dir. Krystyna Janda. Teatr Polonia. The Tivoli Theatre. Dublin. 20 April 2008 (two performances).
	Human Herd. Devised. Dir. Anka Wysota. The New Theatre. 3-7 June 2008.
	Bajka o szewczyku [The Tale of a Little Shoemaker]. By Agnieszka Falkowska. Dir. Krzysztof Falkowski. Teatr Groteska Kraków. Festival of World Cultures. Dun Laoghaire Shopping Centre. 23 August 2008.
	Peter Pans. Choreog. by Anna Gąciarz. 50% Male Experimental Theatre. D-light Studio. Dublin. 19-22 November 2009.
2009	Emigrants. By Stanisław Mrożek. Dir. Romuald Wicza-Pokojski. Teatr Wiczy. Absolut Fringe Festival. George's Dock. Dublin. 5-11 September 2009.
2010	T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T. [T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T.]. By Pier Paolo Pasolini. Adapt. Grzegorz Jarzyna. Dir. Grzegorz Jarzyna. TR Warszawa. Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival. O'Reilly Theatre. 1-4 October 2010.
	Factory 2 [Factory 2]. By Krystian Lupa. Dir. Krystian Lupa. Narodowy Stary Teatr im. Heleny Modrzejewskiej Kraków. Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival. O'Reilly Theatre. 9-10 October 2010.
	Sprawa Dantona [The Danton Case]. By Stanisława Przybyszewska. Dir. Jan Klata. Teatr Polski Wrocław. Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival. Project Arts Centre. 13-16 October 2010.
	Zapach Czekolady/The Scent of Chocolate. By Radosław Paczocha. Dir. Anna Wolf. Polish Theatre Ireland. The Focus Theatre. Dublin. 27 September – 2 October 2010 and 29 November – 4 December 2010. Zapach Czekolady/The Scent of Chocolate. By Radosław Paczocha. Dir. Anna Wolf. Polish Theatre Ireland. Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity. D-light Studio. Dublin. 7 January 2011 (two performances).
2011	Peter Pans. Choreog. by Anna Gąciarz. 50% Male Experimental Theatre. Project Arts Centre. Dublin. 21 April 2011.
	Seekers. Choreog. by Anna Gąciarz. 50% Male Experimental Theatre. Absolut Fringe Festival. The Back Loft. Dublin. 12-13 and 15-17 September 2011.
	Chesslaugh Mewash. Devised. Dir. Anna Wolf. Polish Theatre Ireland. Absolut Fringe Festival. The Lir Studio. Dublin 20-24 September 2011.
	Chemistry. Choreog. by Anna Gąciarz. 50% Male Experimental Theatre. Absolut Fringe Festival. The Lir Studio. Dublin. 19-22 September 2012.
2012	Delta Phase. By Radosław Paczocha. Dir. Lianne O'Shea and John Currivan. Polish Theatre Ireland. Theatre Upstairs. Dublin. 19-24 November 2012. Delta Phase. By Radosław Paczocha. Dir. Lianne O'Shea and John Currivan. Polish Theatre Ireland. Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity. Sweeneys Underbelly Theatre. Dublin. 12 January 2013.
2013	Foreign Bodies. By Julia Holewińska. Dir. Lianne O'Shea. Polish Theatre Ireland. Project Arts Centre. Dublin. 22 July – 3 August 2013.
	Figure It Out. Choreog. by Anna Gąciarz. 50% Male Experimental Theatre. Dublin Fringe Festival D-light Studio. Dublin. 9-14 September 2013.
	Rewolucja Balonowa/Bubble Revolution. By Julia Holewińska. Dir. John Currivan. Polish Theatre Ireland. Theatre Upstairs. Dublin. 10-21 September 2013.
	Rewolucja Balonowa [Bubble Revolution]. By Julia Holewińska. Dir. John Currivan. Polish Theatre Ireland. The Hawk's Well Theatre. Sligo. 20 June 2014.
2014	Foreign Bodies. By Julia Holewińska. Dir. Lianne O'Shea. Polish Theatre Ireland. The Watergate Theatre. Kilkenny. 12 July 2014. Foreign Bodies. By Julia Holewińska. Dir. Lianne O'Shea. Polish Theatre Ireland. Cavan Theatre Festival. Touchline Theatre, Cavan Rugby Club. 18 July 2014.
	The Madman and The Nun. By Stanisław Ignacy Mickiewicz. Dir. Karolina Szemerda and Serina Griffin. Enigma Theatre. 9-13 June 2014.
	The Passengers. By Anna Wolf and Rory O'Sullivan. Dir. Emilia Sadowska. Polish Theatre Ireland. The New Theatre. Dublin. 6-18 April 2015.
2015	

Figure 2

The table represents theatre productions created by Polish artists and presented in Ireland between 2004 and 2015 in relation to years. Second runs of each production are indicated by white cells and placed at the end of each year-row. Production invited from Poland are underlined. The titles indicate the language of performance. When a Polish title is followed by an English title in square brackets, it means that a Polish language performance was accompanied by English surtitles; if a Polish title is followed by a forward slash and an English title, it means that the production was performed in Polish and English on alternate nights; a standing alone English title indicates that English was the main language of the performance. For details of each production see Figure 1.

2004	<u>Uroczystość [Festen].</u>	<u>The Ark</u>		
2005				
2006				
2007	<i>Więcej światła / More Light</i>	<u>Smycz [The Leash].</u>	<u>Mala Syrenka [The Little Mermaid].</u>	<u>The Ark</u>
2008	<u>Ucho, gardło, nóż [An Ear, a Throat, a Knife].</u>	Human Herd	<u>Bajka o szewczyku [The Tale of a Little Shoemaker].</u>	<u>Smycz [The Leash].</u>
2009	Peter Pans	<u>Emigrants</u>		
2010	T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T. [T.E.O.R.E.M.A.T.]	Factory 2 [Factory 2]	Sprawa Dantona [The Danton Case]	Zapach Czekolady/ The Scent of Chocolate.
2011	Seekers	Chesslaugh Mewash	Peter Pans	Zapach Czekolady/ The Scent of Chocolate.
2012	Chemistry	Delta Phase		
2013	Foreign Bodies	Figure it Out	Rewolucja Balonowa/ Bubble Revolution	Delta Phase
2014	The Madman and The Nun	Foreign Bodies	Rewolucja Balonowa [Bubble Revolution]	
2015	The Passengers			

Looking at both tables, it is very clear that the majority of all productions (twelve) happened between 2007 and 2010; during that time Irish stages hosted three Polish productions a year on average. After 2007, there were nine productions, between one and two a year on average. Over time, the ratio of productions invited from Poland to the Irish-made productions decreases from 2:0 in 2004 to 0:2 in 2012 and 0:3 in 2013. While the numbers suggest that Irish-based Polish artists gradually have found their space in the Irish theatrical context, Figure 1 also shows that their presence is practically limited to Dublin's fringe and experimental spaces. And although the Project Arts Centre, Smock Alley, or the Axis Arts Centre are all very prestigious spaces, they are also strongly connected with the Dublin fringe scene and known for supporting new work and developing artists. This is not to undermine the fringe

scene of Dublin, on the contrary, it is to acknowledge its key role in facilitating Polish theatre in Ireland. The numbers highlight, however, that the key mainstream theatre houses of Ireland, like the Gate, the Gaiety, and the Abbey (except in the production of *Shibari*),¹⁰ failed to embrace the ‘new Irish.’

The 2010 Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival is a rare example of Polish theatre moving into the centre stage of Irish theatres. The three Polish productions were brought by Loughlin Deegan to, in his own words, “react to the significant demographic changes” happening “in Dublin [sic].”¹¹ All three productions came from large, mainstream Polish companies located in Warsaw, Cracow, and Wrocław; all of them were directed by male directors: Grzegorz Jarzyna, Krystian Lupa, and Jan Klata. Interestingly, the majority of Polish artists actively creating theatre in Ireland are female: Alicja Ayres, Anka Wysota, Anna Gąciarz, Anna Wolf, Joanna Derkaczew-Crawley, Karolina Szemerda, Natalia Kostrzewa, and Kasia Lech. This gendered division between the Polish mainstream and the fringe scene of Polish-Irish encounter is perhaps an interesting ‘testimony’ to the patriarchal overtones in both theatrical traditions.

In short, the above paragraphs highlight that Polish theatre in Ireland, although present, is underrepresented and exists on the fringe of Irish theatrical life; it remains a foreign body. This links with the casting policies of the key Irish theatres and theatre companies that, in general, consider Polish actors only for the parts that are inherently foreign, although not necessarily Eastern European, rather than engaging with Polishness and Polish accents as a part of the landscape and soundscape of Ireland.¹² It is also curious that Polish directors have not been invited to work with Irish theatres and no Polish texts have been staged by main Irish

¹⁰ *Shibari* focused on people living in a contemporary multicultural Dublin and featured multicultural characters and cast. *Shibari*, by Gary Duggan, dir. Tom Creed, The Abbey Theatre, Peacock Stage, Dublin, 4 October – 3 November 2012.

¹¹ Loughlin Deegan qtd. in Peter Crawley, “Children of the Revolution,” *Irish Times*, 30 September 2010.

¹² This issue has been addressed by academics, theatre practitioners, and journalists; therefore I will not discuss it further. For more details, see Charlotte McIvor and Matthew Spangler, *Staging Intercultural Ireland: New Plays and Practitioner Perspectives* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014); Eithne Shortall, “Please Don’t Cast Me as a Prostitute – Again,” *Sunday Times*, 18 November 2012.

theatres. The Irish semi-professional scene, it seems, has overtaken the mainstream theatres with UCD Dramsoc staging Dorota Masłowska's *A Couple of Poor Polish Speaking Romanians* in 2009, directed by Lisa Carroll. It speaks volumes when we realise that one hundred and five years after he formed the Independent Dramatic Company, Casimir Markiewicz remains the most featured Polish theatre artist on Ireland's main stages.¹³

This absence of Polish artists on Irish key stages and their scarce presence outside of Dublin also suggest that Polish theatre operates in Ireland as a form of novelty or curiosity, which would explain the gradual decrease in the Polish productions after the 'abundance' of 2007-2011 and the momentary increase in productions in 2013 (see Figure 1). The decrease and Dublin-centred activity, however, must be first of all linked with funding. *Human Herd* directed by Anka Wysota in 2008, a devised work of physical theatre, remains the only piece of Polish theatre created in Ireland that was directly supported by the Arts Council of Ireland. While spaces like the Project Arts Centre, Smock Alley, Focus Theatre, or Theatre Upstairs have been very generous in terms of supporting Polish productions by offering a box-office split and additional rehearsal space, the only Irish public organizations that offered significant monetary funding to Polish theatre were Dublin City Council and The Community Foundation for Ireland, and the Fishamble Theatre Company. The main funding bodies for Polish theatre produced in Ireland are the Polish Embassy and the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Warsaw, who may provide limited funding for production and promotion costs, but not for the wage bill of the artists involved.

Insufficient funding has been a serious issue across the industry, especially for the fringe companies; however, it seems that Polish theatre artists are in a particularly difficult situation, being 'locked out' of the better funded stages. Out of the female artists mentioned before, four

¹³ Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel, *Productions of the Irish Theatre Movement, 1899-1916: A Checklist* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001) 39-72.

left Ireland in the last two years: Anka Wysota, Anna Wolf, Natalia Kostrzewa, and Kasia Lech. The four were responsible for creating eight out of thirteen Polish theatre productions made in Ireland. And while some of them are still creatively connected with Ireland, there is a danger that the possibilities of Polish-Irish theatre encounters will be diminished or even gone before the full potential is explored.

In an attempt to understand the phenomenon of Polish theatre in Ireland in more depth and to map out some potential directions that the future encounters could take, I will now look at the reception of Polish theatre in Ireland as documented by the theatrical reviews and audiences' reactions. The immediate complication arises from the low number of reviews. While Irish Theatre Magazine regularly reviewed Polish productions, Peter Crawley wrote several articles about Polish theatre produced in Poland, and Eithne Shortall promoted Irish-made Polish performances and Polish performers (calling Irish theatres to acknowledge the demographic change)¹⁴ many Irish reviewers engaged only with productions brought from Poland for the Dublin and Fringe Festivals. While the difficulty to obtain reviews is an industry-wide issue, strongly linked with the fringe scene, it is very surprising that, for example, Krystyna Janda's solo performance *Ucho, gardło, nóż* [An ear, a throat, a knife] was not reviewed by any Irish newspapers. Janda is one of the most renowned Polish actors. The two puppetry productions, *Mala Syrenka* [The Little Mermaid] from the Arlekin Theatre in Łódź and *Bajka o szewczyku* [The Tale of a Little Shoemaker] from the Groteska Theatre in Cracow also received either scarce or no attention from the reviewers. However, the existing Irish reviews of Polish theatre also highlight positives and possibilities of the Irish-Polish theatrical encounter. Therefore, moving on from the difficulties, the next section will engage with the qualities of Polish theatre that appeal to Irish audiences.

¹⁴ Shortall.

In his 2010 article on Polish theatre, Peter Crawley stated: “Few countries have ever understood so keenly that the theatre must always be urgent and responsive, bold and accountable, with the audience on its mind and revolution in its soul.”¹⁵ The political engagement of Polish theatre is certainly a quality that Polish theatre artists brought into Ireland. In 2008 the Tivoli Theatre hosted Krystyna Janda’s *Ucho, gardło, nóż* based on the novel *Uho, grlo, nož* [An ear, a throat, a knife] by Croatian journalist Vedrana Rudan; the production was both directed and performed by Janda and gave a voice to Tonka Babić, a woman in her fifties, and her experiences of the Yugoslav war and of contemporary Croatia. Janda’s visit to Ireland had also another political dimension with the actor, together with Polish director Krzysztof Zanussi, meeting with Irish audiences to speak about, amongst others, artists’ experience of communism and its censorship.¹⁶

Polish communist and post-communist past also became a frame for an Irish reading of Jan Klata’s *Sprawa Dantona* [The Danton Case], the staging of Stanisława Przybyszewska’s play about a short period of the French Revolution preceding Danton’s death. Fíona Ní Chinnéide complimented the production for its engagement with the failure of revolution that “falls into dystopic chaos and despair” as the “retaining power becomes more important than anything;” Ní Chinnéide remarked how that must have had resonated with the landscape of post-communist Poland.¹⁷ The political lining of *Smycz* [The Leash], directed by Natalia Korczakowska and performed by Bartosz Porczyk, seemed to have resonated more closely with the reviewers. The play, a collage of various texts including Samuel Beckett’s works, explored the individual in the context of “globalisation and ravenous capitalism” and in the context of

¹⁵ Crawley, “Children of the Revolution.”

¹⁶ Fundacja Centrum Twórczości Narodowej, “Janda i Zanussi v Dublinie” [Janda and Zanussi in Dublin], May 2008, <http://www.ctn.org.pl/15.html> (accessed 19 June 2015).

¹⁷ Fíona Ní Chinnéide, “The Danton Case,” *Irish Theatre Magazine*, 14 October 2010, <http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Reviews/Ulster-Bank-Dublin-Theatre-Festival--10/The-Danton-Case> (accessed 19 June 2015).

contemporary Poland and its “suffocating religious conservatism,” which appealed to both Peter Crawley and Helen Meany and had obvious relevance in the context of Irish society.¹⁸

Polish artists creating theatre in Ireland have also been politically engaged. Polish Theatre Ireland is a good example of that. The company, responsible for half of the Polish productions made in Ireland, was co-founded in 2008 by Helen McNulty, Anna Wolf, and Kasia Lech; the intention was to merge “the qualities of the Irish theatrical tradition with the nature of Polish drama to create a new voice in the Irish cultural scene.”¹⁹ In 2013 PTI was rehearsing Julia Holewińska’s *Foreign Bodies*, directed by Lianne O’Shea and performed in the Project Arts Centre. The play was inspired by Ewa Hołuszko, a former activist in the Solidarity Movement, who had undergone gender reassignment. The theatre partnered up with the National Lesbian and Gay Federation and Transgender Equality Network Ireland to use the production as a platform for conversation about gender, identity, equality, and diversity. To further the audience engagement, the performances were accompanied by post-show discussions with invited guests, including Broden Giambrone from TENI and Ewa Hołuszko. Earlier that year PTI accompanied Anna Grodzka, the first European transsexual MP, on her visit to Dáil Éireann; members of the company also interpreted Grodzka’s speech at the Dublin Pride. Grodzka’s visit was an important step in raising awareness around transgender equality, which in turn played a part in the Irish Government passing the Gender Recognition Act in 2015. In the same year, PTI together with Dialogue & Diversity officially supported a Yes vote in the Marriage Equality referendum by presenting a letter of support to Senator Averil Power and Aodhán Ó Ríordáin TD, Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality and Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. By actively getting engaged in key changes in Ireland, PTI was also strengthening the presence of theatre artists on the Irish political stage.

¹⁸ Peter Crawley, “Smycz,” *Irish Theatre Magazine*, September 2007, reviewer’s private collection; Helen Meany, “Smycz,” *Irish Times*, 22 September 2007.

¹⁹ Polish Theatre Ireland, “Mission Statement” (2008), <https://polishtheatre.wordpress.com/about-us/mission-statement/> (accessed 15 September 2015).

Another element of Polish theatre that seems to be very appealing to Irish reviewers are Polish actors, in particular their skills, temper, and charisma. As a case in point, Bartosz Porczyk was chosen the best performer of the 2007 Dublin Fringe Festival for *Smycz* (the only Polish production to have received an award in Ireland so far). Porczyk's performance as the prostitute Margaret was described by Peter Crawley as "astonishingly convincing" and Porczyk himself as "one of those triple-threat performers from Eastern Europe that you hear so much about;"²⁰ Helen Meany commented on Porczyk's "highly impressive" technique.²¹ Similar epithets were used in reference to other Polish actors. The performances in *Sprawa Dantona* were described by Fíona Ní Chinnéide as "intense, energetic, and disciplined;" she stressed that "Marcin Czarnik and Wiesław Cichy, as Robespierre and Danton respectively, make for charismatic orators."²² Helen Cusack described Kasia Lech's performance in *Rewolucja Balonowa/Bubble Revolution* as "skilled and charismatic."²³ Chris O'Rourke found Alicja Ayres's performance in the Abbey's *Shibari* as "captivating;" Ayres "lit up the stage."²⁴

The reviews seem to point towards political and performer-focused theatre as a direction that Polish theatre in Ireland should explore. However, they also mark an important issue that, potentially, underlines the difficulties with the crossover of Polish theatre between the fringe and mainstream stages of Ireland: the scale of a production and entertainment value. Helen Meany in her review of *Uroczystość* [Festen] complimented it for "frenzied choreography," "heightened gesture," and "superb set." However she also admitted that the production needed "a bigger stage" as the scenes and set seem cramped at some points.²⁵ Rachel Andrews

²⁰ Crawley, "Smycz."

²¹ Meany, "Smycz."

²² Ní Chinnéide.

²³ Helen Cusack, "Bubble Revolution," *Irish Theatre Magazine*, 12 September 2013, <http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Reviews/Current/Bubble-Revolution> (accessed 19 June 2015).

²⁴ Chris O'Rourke, "A Beautiful Shibari Makes for a Near Perfect Arrangement," *Examiner.com*, 14 October 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/review/festival-connect-a-beautiful-shibari-makes-for-a-near-perfect-arrangement> (accessed 19 June 2015).

²⁵ Helen Meany, "Festen," *Irish Times*, 30 January 2004.

commented that “Even in Polish the scale of the performance was obvious.”²⁶ In Poland *Uroczystość* also received strong reviews. However, the reviewers praised the production’s asceticism and simplicity.²⁷ It might be a red herring, but the case of *Festen* would suggest that some Polish productions may be perceived in Ireland as overly theatrical and too large in scale. Peter Crawley’s joking mention of the “artificial snow imported from Germany” for the Polski Theatre in Wrocław that staff members were “still sweeping” a day after the performance, seems to confirm such a conclusion.²⁸

The different perspective of the production scale links with different ideas about the entertainment value in Poland and Ireland. The 2006 International Theatre Festival KONTAKT in Toruń and the 2010 Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival provide a striking case point. The Toruń festival hosted *Improbable Frequency*, Rough Magic’s musical that explored Ireland and its neutrality during World War II. The show in Ireland was awarded three Irish Times Theatre Awards (including Best Production); in Poland it was described as the “ineffectual and partly embarrassing comic musical *Improbable Frequency* by Rough Magic discussing the Nazi roots of the IRA” (Olga Katafiasz) and a “vulgar farce” (Joanna Derkaczew).²⁹ These reviews may seem harsh, but the extremely different frames of understanding what topics cannot be used for entertainment in Poland and Ireland (as well as different experiences of World War II) underlie this harshness, which is further exemplified by Sara Keating’s reviews of *Klata*’s and *Lupa*’s productions at the Dublin Festival. Keating described *Lupa*’s *Factory 2* as a “deliberately indulgent and maddening performance” that was “not shocking but boring;”

²⁶ Rachel Andrews, “One Hundred Years Old and Looking Every Year,” *Sunday Tribune*, 26 December 2004.

²⁷ Łukasz Drewniak, “Ojacobójstwo” [Patricide], *Przekrój*, 28 (15 July 2001), <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/137188.html> (accessed 19 June 2015); Roman Pawłowski, “Christian, książę Danii” [Christian, the prince of Denmark], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 7 June 2001.

²⁸ Peter Crawley “Migration Moves to the Next Stage,” *Irish Times*, 17 September 2007.

²⁹ Olga Katafiasz, “Węgierska ofensywa” [Hungarian Attack], *Didaskalia*, 73-74 (2006), [e-teatr.pl](http://www.e-teatr.pl) (accessed 25 April 2012); Joanna Derkaczew, “Krach na teatralnej giełdzie” [Theatrical Market Crash], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 3 June 2006.

she referred to her own ovations at the end as an expression of relief.³⁰ For Keating, Klata's production lacked clarity, was too long, and so boring that one of the spectators left earlier.³¹

These clear differences in understanding what type of theatre offers entertainment value may be the key for the presence (or the lack thereof) of Polish theatre on Irish mainstream stages. Lizbeth Goodman in her exploration of why mainstream repertory avoids feminist theatre points out that for mainstream theatres, the sales figures are often a primary consideration when selecting productions; therefore "the lowest common denominator of 'entertainment value'" takes priority. As a result, she continues, the audiences of these theatres encounter limited types of theatre and, consequently, when a rare opportunity arises, they may have not developed receptive strategies to encounter a production that is different from what they have been used to; they become more critical and negative towards it.³² This, obviously, decreases chances for another innovative production to be presented and the circle is closed. The examples discussed so far would suggest that Goodman's points are well applicable to the situation of Polish theatre in Ireland. Consequently, it would seem that the mainstream theatres have a great opportunity and, in the context of the Abbey as a national stage, responsibility to play a key part in the processes of cultural integration between the 'old' and the 'new' Irish.

One starting point, perhaps, could be theatre for young audiences as this is the area where the different ideas about entertainment within Irish and Polish theatre seem to come together. Waldemar Wolański's *Mala Syrenka* [Little Mermaid], performed by long-string marionettes, was invited to the 2007 International Puppet Festival Ireland; Gerry Colgan in his very brief review called it "the jewel in the crown" of the festival.³³ In a sense, Little Mermaid points out one of the greatest missed opportunities of the Irish-Polish theatrical encounter so far. In

³⁰ Sara Keating, "Factory 2," Irish Times, 11 October 2010.

³¹ Sara Keating, "The Danton Case," Irish Times, 15 October 2010.

³² Lizbeth Goodman, "Feminisms and Theatres: Canon Fodder and Cultural Change," *Analysing Performance: Issues and Interpretations*, ed. Patrick Campbell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) 34-35.

³³ Gerry Colgan, "The Little Mermaid," Irish Times, 18 September 2007.

contrast to English-language stages, theatre for young audiences has a rich history and is highly regarded in Poland. As a case in point, in 2014 *Sam, czyli przygotowanie do życia w rodzinie* [Sam, or Preparation For Family Life] written by Maria Wojtyszko and directed by Jakub Krofta for the Wrocław Puppet Theatre [Wrocławski Teatr Lalek] received a prestigious award for the best production in the 20th National Competition for Staging Contemporary Polish Plays; the jury chose Sam over productions of theatres like Helena Modjeska's National Old Theatre from Cracow. Taking into account the level of commitment that the Dublin Theatre Festival shows to its family programme, it is disappointing that the award-winning production of Sam failed to be invited to the festival, and indeed that Polish theatre for young audiences is yet to appear at the festival. This is particularly disappointing given that the encounter between Irish and Polish theatres should have a very special urgency in the context of young audiences.

For that reason, it is also very important to acknowledge at least some applied theatre activities that happened in Ireland and were facilitated or co-facilitated by Polish theatre practitioners. Between 2008 and 2015 public libraries (Dublin City Libraries, Bunclody Library, Meath Library Service, and Drogheda Library, amongst others) and arts festivals (for example the 2009 Three Rivers Storytelling Festival in the Midlands) enabled Polish storytellers to travel across Irish schools and libraries and engage children and young adults with Polish culture. In 2008 the Poppintree Youth Project, Ballymun Intercultural Club, and Axis Arts Centre supported the project "Polish-Irish Christmas," in which a group of Irish and Polish teenagers devised a bilingual production based on a Polish tale about King Popiel. In addition, the key Dublin drama schools the Gaiety School of Acting and Flying Turtle Productions together with Natalia Kostrzewa and Kasia Lech tried to set up Polish-language drama classes for children and teens. The applied theatre activities, although not the main focus of the current essay, may prove vital for the future of Polish theatre in Ireland.

The idea of Polish-Irish or Irish-Polish future, the appeal of Polish performers, and the political engagement of Polish theatre brings us back to Helena Modjewska and her excitable performances in Dublin. Perhaps that is what is missing from Irish-Polish theatrical encounters so far: an artistry of the highest order. Maybe Irish-Polish theatrical encounters need a collaboration of the same calibre as that of the two late poets, Seamus Heaney and Stanisław Barańczak. It seemed that the projected but unrealised collaboration between Samuel Beckett and Tadeusz Kantor could have been the one... However, while we are waiting for another Beckett and Kantor to be born, I beseech you, artists of Ireland and Poland, to keep trying!