

1 Introduction: artistic principles and the Polish scene

Andrzej Wajda's position as a film director is firmly established. His films, such as the early *Ashes and Diamonds* and the recent *Man of Iron* and *Danton*, have won international acclaim and major awards at various film festivals. He is widely regarded as the best contemporary Polish film director and belongs to the inner circle of prominent European directors. Less is known about his concurrent work in the theatre. However, like Ingmar Bergman, Wajda has created works for the stage that are as significant as his films. His Polish productions have been seen in international festivals and on foreign tours, and he has directed work in Italy, France, the United States and the Soviet Union, which has laid the foundations for his international reputation and put him on a par with directors such as Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski.

It must, however, be pointed out that Kantor and Grotowski are primarily creators of their own companies, independent theatre groups with which they experiment, developing their own original theories of theatre. As such, their principles and working methods differ from those of Wajda, who works with ordinary professional companies and in a variety of theatres. Instead of following any particular theoretical concept, he uses the entire panoply of dramatic form and repertoire, achieving widely differing results. In this sense, Wajda's creativity should be likened to that of Peter Stein or Giorgio Strehler rather than to such experimenters as Joseph Chaikin, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, or Grotowski and Kantor.

Grotowski's and Kantor's ideas and the works that are based on them are reasonably well known. Jerzy Grotowski first formed the Teatr Laboratorium in 1962 in Opole and later moved to Wrocław where he created his 'Poor Theatre', based on his concept that the actor, armed with extraordinary vocal and physical technique, acquired during special training, should be the only important element and creative component in the theatre. Gradually he broke away from the traditional concept of theatre as entertainment. In its place he explored the possibilities of a psychotherapeutic morality theatre, presenting an 'event', a gathering where inhibitions were cast away revealing true, human nature. Typically one of the techniques on which Grotowski based his method of acting was Indian yoga.

In turn, Tadeusz Kantor, a brilliant painter and scenographer, began his career as a director in the underground theatre during the German occupation of Poland. In 1956 he formed his company in Cracow named 'Cricot-2'.

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Concentrating at first on producing the work of an avant-garde Polish playwright, S.I. Witkiewicz (writing under the pseudonym Witkacy), above all he promoted the theatre's visual aspects, drawing on his painter's imagination. Kantor was the creator of the first 'happening' in Poland. Later, in the sixties, he began to write his own scripts, using existing literary texts merely as an inspiration. His best-known productions are *The Dead Class* (1975) and *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980) which showed a fantastical world of memories, dreams and hallucinations conforming only to their own inner, poetic logic. Kantor's productions seem to be pictures come to life in which the main motif is the mystery of death.

Grotowski's Teatr Laboratorium and Kantor's Cricot-2 theatre are the best-known Polish experimental theatre groups. They possess their own theatrical laws and concepts and function independently of mainstream theatre. But in order to define Wajda's more 'traditional' theatre it is essential to place him in the overall context of modern Polish theatre.

At the end of the Second World War the Polish theatrical scene was dominated by those who had achieved popularity and fame before 1939 and they continued to work in the pre-war style. This was either a theatre based on the classics and conventional acting or a more poetic visionary theatre which found its source in Polish Romanticism. In both cases literature was of primary importance, the content being more important than the form. However in 1947, as the new Communist regime consolidated its position, Socialist Realism was imposed as the exclusive and compulsory form in theatre, as in all the other arts. Only plays that fulfilled the requirements of Socialist Realism were allowed to be performed: that is, plays which were naturalistic in form and topical in content. This meant they had to be devoted mainly to 'productivity' and social problems (the class struggle), and presented according to the official political view. Socialist Realism had disastrous effects on the standards and repertoire of the Polish stage. It excluded many of the world's classics, not to mention contemporary West European drama. Little could be achieved in these conditions and many prominent artists either ceased working voluntarily or were forced to do so.

This state of affairs only changed after the political re-shuffle of 1955–6, known as 'the thaw', which culminated in the bloody riots on the streets of Poznan in October 1956. The dogmatic rigours of Socialist Realism were relaxed and Polish culture once again rejoined the international mainstream. Modern dramatic forms such as the Theatre of the Absurd or poetic realism could now be seen on the Polish stage. The new atmosphere of 'political freedom' gave rise to the creative intellectual ferment, which found expression in experimental styles.

A new generation of innovators appeared on the theatre scene. In

particular three directors whose influence was to have a profound effect made their debut within a short time of one another: Jerzy Jarocki in 1957, Konrad Swinarski in 1958 and in 1959 Andrzej Wajda, who had already made his mark as a young director in the 'new wave' in Polish cinema. This was the new direction in Polish cinema adopted by Wajda and other young directors in response to the political 'thaw', replacing the dogmatism of Socialist Realism with a romantic impetuosity, especially when portraying Polish history. The most heroic episodes, in particular recent events that had been officially mythologized by the regime – as for example the Second World War – were often depicted with sarcasm and irony, causing much controversy. Wajda's films *Canal* (1956) and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) are typical examples of the 'new wave' films.

Konrad Swinarski (born 1929) served his apprenticeship with Berthold Brecht's Berliner Ensemble and on his return to Poland became the chief representative of monumental theatre, which already had a long tradition in Poland. It evolved in the thirties, influenced by the epic theatre of Brecht and Piscator, though without the latter's political consciousness. For example the works of Leon Schiller, its most eminent representative, veered rather towards a poetic vision filled with fairy-tale fantasy. The visual side of these productions was a vital element; they were composed as a series of huge pictures. It was not merely the text that produced thematic significance and atmosphere but the colours, lighting, movement and often the music. Konrad Swinarski is widely considered to be Schiller's 'artistic heir'. His staging of Polish and European classics was noted for a wealth of theatrical devices, inventive design and above all a penetrating, exploratory and original interpretation. In vividly detailed productions such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *All's Well that Ends Well* the unimpeachable heroes suddenly turned out to be cowards, whereas the villains appeared to have feelings after all. Comic episodes would contain unexpected melancholy and the 'funny side' was brought out in the tragic scenes. Above all the characters would be caught up in an ingenious and startling web of ambiguous, psychosexual relationships which influenced all their actions. Swinarski greatly enjoyed filling the stage with real live animals and odd human figures: in *Forefathers' Eve* the 'extras' were a group of authentic Cracovian street beggars, while the characters of *All's Well that Ends Well* were cast as a troupe of body-builders; in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck, as a faun, 'flew' across the stage, leaping into the air from a hidden trampoline. In *Forefathers' Eve* one of the main characters jumped from an actual window in the auditorium. Swinarski achieved international success with productions such as *Forefathers' Eve* by Adam Mickiewicz, part of the World Theatre Season in London in 1973, or the original 1964 West German production of Peter Weiss' metatheatrical

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Marat/Sade. Konrad Swinarski died tragically in 1975 in an air crash outside Damascus, on his way to a theatre festival in Shiraz, but his work has continued to have a significant influence on contemporary Polish theatre.

While Swinarski's theatre was monumental and poetic, in the tradition of Polish Romanticism, Jerzy Jarocki (born 1929), is the 'intellectual' of the theatre. Interested less in the visual than in plays that are relevant for their intellectual content, which he manages to convey on stage with great consistency and accuracy, his productions are noted for their precision, both in mathematical design and interpretation. Whereas Swinarski concentrated on the classics, Jarocki works mostly with plays by contemporary Polish writers, from S.I. Witkiewicz (Witkacy) and Witold Gombrowicz to Slavomir Mrozek and Tadeusz Rozewicz. His style is best illustrated by productions such as Witkiewicz's *Mother* and *The Shoemakers* and Rozewicz's *An Old Woman Waits*, which were transformed into commentaries on the disintegration of modern civilization, incorporated in hallucinatory images. For example, in *An Old Woman Waits* human bodies protrude from the heaps of garbage that litter the stage. But beneath this visceral symbolism the tone is clinically objective and controlled: Jarocki takes the part of the cool observer who analyses events without ever becoming involved.

Stylistically Andrzej Wajda stands between Swinarski and Jarocki, and the range of his productions had encompassed both the classics and modern drama, switching eclectically between the two. With his painter's eye and tendency to use violent effects, as in *The Possessed*, he approaches Swinarski, whereas the clarity of intellectual intent and disciplined vision illustrated in *The Danton Affair* and *Antigone* are aspects he shares with Jarocki. His works however are never as analytical and cold. On the contrary, high emotional temperature is a trade mark of Wajda's theatre. In particular he differs from Swinarski in his approach to the art of theatre itself. Swinarski searched for a new meaning in Shakespeare's or Mickiewicz's plays in order to interpret them in a theatrically original and personal way. Wajda seeks parallels between the plays he produces and real life. He not only treats his productions as works of art but uses them to make statements on current controversial events, even using the classics to this purpose. Thus historical perspective and social problems are an integral part of his theatre, in which political and moral overtones are often more important than the formal aspects.

Irrespective of their similarities and differences, all three directors achieved their greatest successes in the same theatre, the Stary Teatr (Old Theatre) of Cracow, founded in 1781, which moved to its present building in 1799. Although exceptional in its artistic standards, the Stary Teatr is typical of most theatres in Poland from the structural and institutional point of view. All Polish theatres belong to and are administered by the State, either directly or through a local authority. Their activities are therefore not governed by the

box-office; the Polish theatre is an institution primarily devoted to Art and free from commercial dictates. At the same time it is entirely dependent on its sponsor in respect of the choice of repertoire and the political tone of the plays performed.

The artistic directors of Polish theatres are usually well-known stage directors or, more rarely, actors. Although many of them impress their personality on their company to such a degree that their personal style literally takes over, most companies hold with the principle of maintaining variety not only in repertoire but also in style. The character of the individual productions mounted by any given troupe can therefore change drastically depending on the personality of a particular stage director.

Most Polish stages are repertory theatres. They have resident companies whose members perform varied roles in a number of concurrent productions. The repertoire is usually wide, covering all styles and origins, from Sophocles or Shakespeare to Pinter or Mrozek. Several different plays are performed each week on alternate days, making heavy demands on the actors in terms of adaptability, and also contributing to their education. An actor is engaged for a season, after which he may, if he wishes, join another theatre company. Nevertheless, many actors attach themselves permanently to one theatre and, as a result, some have very stable companies. The Stary Teatr can boast actors who have worked there for ten years or more. These actors have all had the opportunity of working with a variety of different directors, including major figures such as Swinarski, Jarocki and Wajda. The directors enjoy returning to the same companies in which they feel at home, to work with actors whom they have grown to know. It is this which explains the exceptionally high standard of acting achieved at the Stary Teatr.

It is no accident that, paradoxically, none of these three directors has ever had his own company or held the post of artistic director of any theatre, despite their strong ties with the Stary Teatr. By directing different companies on stages throughout the country and dealing with an assortment of actors they have extended their range and established general artistic standards. Wajda has staged major productions in Gdansk and Warsaw as well as in Cracow, and in these places he would come across actors he had worked with in the past who had moved from one company to another in the interim. Since there is no strict division in Poland between film actors and theatre actors, Wajda has made liberal use in his films of those who have appeared in his stage productions. In spite of the fact that he has never had his own company, unlike Grotowski or Kantor, Wajda nevertheless brought together specific groups of actors during various stages in his career, as well as creating, metaphorically, his own 'theatre' through his individuality of style. It is this 'theatre' which is the subject of the present work.

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The theatre plays a role in Polish society which has little to do with mere entertainment. Its prestigious social function is defined by the historical fact that throughout the period when the country was partitioned – from the close of the eighteenth century until 1918 – the theatre was practically the only place in which the Poles could cultivate their national culture. This gave rise to the notion of the theatre's political and moral mission, a notion which continues to determine the direction in which it moves today. As an artist who is particularly sensitive to national traditions, Andrzej Wajda understands perfectly what Polish society expects from the theatre, namely a conscientious voice which can take up historical or ethical issues and discuss the most fundamental human and national problems. For Poles, the theatre is at once a school, a library, a political forum, even a temple, and only secondarily a place of recreation. It is taken seriously by the public and approaches its moral and social obligations with gravity.

This relationship with the theatre is upheld by the dramatic literature to which it has given rise. The Polish theatre takes its repertoire from the universal classics and from the Polish dramatic tradition born of the Romantic Movement. The plays of the nineteenth-century Romantic poets, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Slowacki and Zygmunt Krasinski, revered as the 'bards of the Polish nation', and of their successor, Stanislaw Wyspianski, still form the basic repertoire of Polish theatres, providing the point of departure from which all other endeavours are undertaken. As a result, the vital trend in Polish theatre, as in Polish culture in general, remains the Romantic tradition, which combines nationalism, mysticism, messianism and religion expressed in a lofty yet gloomy poesy. The surviving dominance of this tradition means that every Polish artist today must make a radical choice between conformism or defiance of it.

Andrzej Wajda is one of the most original heirs to the Romantic tradition. In keeping with this tradition, he is an impulsive and inconsistent artist, relying on intuition rather than on preconceived theories. He is a restless director continually staking out new horizons for his own creativity.

His varied creative activities do not facilitate the task of studying his work. Each element of his artistic biography must be viewed in the light of others. These are often highly disparate in content and style, so the thread must be followed through an assortment of material, much of it belonging to separate areas of artistic experience. Yet it would be a great mistake to survey Andrzej Wajda's theatrical work on its own, apart from the rest of his ever-expanding creative output. It is essential to follow, even if only in general terms, the whole of his artistic biography in the context of what interests us here, namely his theatre work.

Born in Suwalki on 6 March 1926, Wajda studied painting at the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts, and later film-making at the Lodz Film School, from which he graduated in 1953. In the course of these studies he shot one brief feature film, *The Wicked Boy*, based on a short story by Chekhov, as well as two documentaries, *The Ilza Ceramics* and *While You Sleep*. On completing his studies he followed the accepted course of gaining experience as an assistant director, and although he did not work for long in this capacity, it is worth noting that his apprenticeship in 1954 was spent at the side of Aleksander Ford, known for his films depicting the tragic fate of Polish Jews during the war. In the following year Wajda made his own debut as a film-maker with *A Generation*, which had an immediate impact and provided the foundations for the nascent 'Polish School' in cinema.

At that point Wajda had little respect for the stage, since the traditional style of presentation that characterized pre-1956 Polish theatre seemed irrelevant to current political and social problems:

When I began my studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow in 1946, the theatre belonged to the actors . . . I did not think of becoming a director, I believed in painting . . . On the whole, the theatre of the day did not arouse any enthusiasm in me. The actors were entrancing, but all the other aspects were unmemorable. I then moved to Lodz, but the theatre there did little more to kindle my interest . . . My dissatisfaction was confirmed by the arrival of productions from abroad. Primarily, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Servant of Two Masters* by Goldoni under the directorship of Strehler, and Brecht's *Mother Courage*. These convinced me that an alternative form of theatre exists out there in the world and that it is capable of being much more intense. Looking back now I think that my views were provoked by the concept of theatre existing at that time, and which we suffer under to this day: that theatre is a place of high ideals, a sort of salon where gestures are more precise, voices more melodious, and where people behave more elegantly than in real life (nothing could have been more false and less interesting for me at that time). I think that maybe I was so opposed to that convention of propriety, elegance and good taste because my films seemed to portray the very opposite.¹

Wajda made his debut in the theatre in 1959 in Gdansk with *A Hatful of Rain* by Michael Gazzo, a realistic, psychological American drama about drug addiction, premiered in New York in 1955. He had already made his famous films *Canal* and *Ashes and Diamonds*, and from then on the paths of his creative work in both theatre and film interweave. What is more, specific parallels can be observed in the development of his work in both areas, despite the very different demands of each art form.

His films can be, broadly speaking, segregated into several 'periods' which are marked not only by changes in characteristic details of style and by particular moods, but also by, as it were, a vacillation of artistic intent, which resulted in an uneven standard. Thus the First Period at the end of the fifties embraces on one hand his brilliant debut, and on the other his fourth film *Lotna* (1959). The title being the name of a horse whose experiences in battles

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between the Polish cavalry and the Germans in 1939 provides the story-line, this work contrasted with the blunt realism of his better-known war films from this early period. Where they were in black and white, giving a harsh documentary tone, *Lotna* was the first Polish film in colour, a technical choice that underlined its philosophical symbolism. During the sixties he made films that were not only very different in style and subject, but uneven in quality. Next to the celebrated *Ashes* (1965), a Napoleonic saga based on the popular yet controversial Polish novel by S. Zeromski written in 1904, we have two treatments of classical material, *Lady Macbeth of the Provinces* and *Samson* (both 1961), neither of which was altogether successful. These comprise his 'Second Period' which lasted until he began the film *Hunting Flies*. Stylistically and thematically this marked the transition to his next phase, and *Everything for Sale*, a film shown in the same year, 1969, definitely belongs to the 'Third Period', which is marked by such exceptional works as *Birchwood* (1970), *Landscape after a Battle* (1970), *Pilate and Others* (1971), *The Wedding* (1972), *The Promised Land* (1974), *Man of Marble* (1976), *Without Anaesthetic* (1978), *The Young Ladies of Wilko* (1979), *Man of Iron* (1981) and, most recently, *Danton* (1982).

So there was in Wajda's development a period of 'Sturm und Drang' giving rise to films that were a reckoning with his own youth and that of his generation. Their form was dictated by clearly defined political thoughts and emotional intensity. Then came a second period of vacillation and indecision apparent in the story-line as well as in form. In the 'Third Period' of full creative maturity his style crystallizes, while the film's subject ceases to offer resistance to its author. Form and story-line are fully integrated to serve Wajda's artistic ideas.

The same pattern can be observed in Wajda's theatrical work. His involvement with the stage only occurs towards the end of his first film phase, with the hit *A Hatful of Rain*, then *Hamlet* in Gdansk and *Two for the Seesaw* in Warsaw, both in 1960. These productions mark a period of training, of stylistic exploration. The 'Second Period' contains one flawed production of *The Wedding* in Cracow, and an abortive one of John Whiting's *The Devils* (both 1963) which caused Wajda to leave the theatre altogether. However, with his third film phase, he returns to produce his most famous and significant works in the theatre: *The Possessed* (1971), *November Night* (1974), *The Danton Affair* (1975), *Nastasya Filippovna* (1977), *Antigone* (1984), and *Crime and Punishment* (also 1984).

If we treat Wajda's abundant creative output as a whole, not separating his plays from his films, we notice that the dominant characteristics make up a rich and varied mosaic – its diversity and variety are its strength. Wajda is fascinated by the themes of great Polish literature (two versions of Wyspianski's *The Wedding*, Zeromski's *Ashes* and Wyspianski's *November*

Night), by international works encompassing universal problems of humanity (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, and Sophocles' *Antigone*) and by religious myths (Whiting's *The Devils*, *Pilate*). He focusses on individuals in extreme situations faced with a range of difficult choices (*A Generation*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, *Landscape after a Battle* and *Crime and Punishment*), but also deals with the psychological problems of ordinary people in everyday and trivial situations (*Two for the Seesaw*, *Birchwood*, *The Emigrants*, *Everything for Sale* and other contemporary films). There are enough issues here to absorb the creative energies of several different artists.

Even such a brief overview indicates that in some of their thematic areas Wajda's films and stage productions are complementary, that he uses his plays to tie up loose ends left in his films – and vice versa. The shift from one form of expression to another allows him to define his subjects more clearly and in greater depth. Examples that spring to mind are *The Wedding* or *The Danton Affair*, both of which Wajda attempted twice, first in a stage version and subsequently in a film adaptation. The thoughts he had accumulated on these themes in working through the stage productions could only be explored further by turning to a different medium. This variation in subject and form is an essential ingredient of Wajda's work. Although it explains why his films and plays have been criticized for their eclecticism, it is often forgotten that being 'true to oneself' purely in respect of form is easier than retaining the same truth in dealing fully with complex problems and issues. It is these issues that have marked out the points of intersection in the main themes of his films and plays from *A Generation* to *A Man of Iron* and from *A Hatful of Rain* to *Nastasya Filippovna* and *Antigone*.

Even though he can reach a wider audience through the screen, there are specific creative reasons that continually draw Wajda back to the stage. Theatrical production is a longer experience and the results are more profound. Filming, by its very nature, is technically complex, requiring the orchestration of large numbers of people, and it is expensive – all of which creates a pressure for quick artistic decisions. In the theatre there is time for discussion and a scene may be repeated, even re-shaped several times. Finally, there are opportunities for meditation, and its importance in Wajda's search for self-expression can be illustrated by an incident which occurred at the start of rehearsals for *The Idiot* at the Teatr Maly (Little Theatre) in Warsaw. We entered the theatre's superbly soundproofed rehearsal room. There was complete silence; Wajda listened for a moment, then said: 'Wouldn't it be good to isolate oneself completely, and just slowly work away here in this silence.' As he has repeatedly emphasized: 'What does the theatre have to offer me? – an intimacy, an immediate contact with my actors. Daily, we may confront each other, isolated, behind closed doors. The silence obtained in the seclusion of the rehearsal room is unique.'² However Wajda is more inter-

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ested in conveying his message than in presentation. Since the idea is more important than the means chosen to express it, it follows that his choice of medium is secondary.

Wajda was trained as a painter, and his love of painting is evident, not only in his own intermittent scenography for the theatre and his art direction in his films, but also in the picturesque visuality of his work in general. Had Wajda continued as a painter he would probably be constantly changing his materials, shifting from oils to clay, from graphics to collage. The subject or theme dictates the choice of material and the form, while Wajda's recurrent concerns produce a basic link even though the materials differ and the style varies. Thus it is of secondary importance whether the work is sculptured in clay or marble, or performed on stage or screen. As the art theoretician Stefan Morawski states:

Wajda's artistic imagination is inborn and covers all aspects of art, and is also the basis for his ideas that do not pertain to art. His cinematic and visual conceptualization can be seen in his staging of *November Night*; while his theatrical and plastic visualization is apparent in his film *Pilate and Others*. *The Danton Affair* was an austere production, a courtroom drama with the accent placed on dramatic rhetoric. *The Promised Land* is full of motion, vivid and visually vibrating. This variety in his means of expression reflects both the range of Wajda's talent and the extensive use to which he puts his imagination.³

At the same time Wajda has focussed increasingly on a single art form. In the summer of 1972 he announced that he was leaving the film industry to devote himself entirely to work in the theatre, maybe even forming his own company. The reasons given were that he had exhausted the possibilities of cinema, and desired to exchange the mechanical way of portraying human relations on the screen for the more improvisational, fluid medium of live theatre. Subsequently he has put his cinematic talent to the service of the stage as in his 1977 documentary on Tadeusz Kantor's production of *The Dead Class* in the Cricot-2 Theatre. But it was politics that effectively enforced his withdrawal from film.

On 13 December 1981 martial law was declared in Poland. Wajda had sympathized with and been deeply involved in the Trade Union Movement, Solidarity. His film *Man of Iron* was an account of that movement, and he had participated in many of the cultural events associated with it. While martial law lasted he was not only attacked by the government and the official press. He was also forced to resign as president of the Polish Film Union and lost the directorship of the 'film unit' he led, which had not only been the vehicle for creating many of his own films but had launched numerous young directors. (The Polish film industry is divided into a number of separate units responsible for their own films under the leadership of eminent film directors.)

Since then it has been impossible for Wajda to work in Polish cinema, although *Danton*, a French film, was cast partly with Polish actors and