

## **Magdalena Hueckel**

Part 3. 1989–2024

### INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, memories of performances I have seen come back to me. These can be whole scenes, in all their clarity and precision. Other times, they are vague and oneiric impressions reminiscent of dreams. When this happens, I try to recreate these images as closely as possible. The mood, the atmosphere in the audience, fragments of dialogue, sounds, they all come back... This is usually when distinct images appear. When I remember the play *Siblings*, directed by Krystian Lupa, I see a dark room. Piotr Skiba is sitting on a chair with his eyes turned upwards. Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik is staring into the distance, smoking a cigarette... When I go back to *4.48 Psychosis*, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna, I see Magdalena Cielecka desperately banging against a wall, where blood is splashing more and more... My memory has locked the image in a very narrow frame. I saw each of these scenes in person more than once. I experienced and absorbed them. But I cannot remember from which perspective I saw these scenes, in which part of the auditorium I was sitting, was it in the centre or at the edge? Was I sitting far from the stage or close to it? My memory did not record the images I saw then, but indirect images. I remember these performances through the lenses of Marek Gardulski and Stefan Okołowicz, the authors of the iconic photographs that have been inscribed not only in my memory but also in the memory of Polish theatre.

The period from 1989 to 2024 is a time of dynamic changes. These affect not only the substance of the theatre but also the conventions of photography and the technical revolution, which has led to an explosion of colours, photographic styles, and a diversification of the media that carry the memory of the theatre.

At the turn of the century, the theatre underwent a radical metamorphosis. A new trend emerged that put the audience at the centre. Theatre became socially engaged, bringing taboo subjects to the stage and revealing what had previously been hidden from sight. Today, issues such as gender, sexuality, racism, and otherness are openly discussed. As well as illness, violence and religion. Theatres open their stages to people with disabilities, sexual and racial minorities, and their representatives. The people who speak for these groups may not be professionals, but authenticity speaks in their defence. In this way, the boundary between the created and the private and authentic is blurred, and participatory theatre representing the excluded emerges. High-tech and multimedia enter the scene: micro ports, projections, screens, cameras and VR. Pop culture is expanding. Theatre mixes with other

media such as film, video art, performance, dance, and music videos. Carefully designed costumes are increasingly replaced by everyday clothes from chain stores or second-hand shops. Sets are often created by visual artists, and they resemble installations from contemporary art galleries or, conversely, are replaced by austere interiors of halls, back rooms, basements and corridors. The acting also changes. It is infused with performative elements, dance, and improvisation. The language becomes more colloquial, sometimes vulgar.

At the same time, a technological revolution in photography took place. Colour photography, which initially seemed to reflect reality more faithfully, became widely available. The first experiments were imperfect, and the quality of the results deteriorated. The films were not sensitive enough, resulting in blurred, grainy images with poor white balance. The discoloured images lack detail in the shadows and lose the nobility of their black-and-white predecessors. This applies to both photography and video.

Colour became integral to theatre photography at the start of the twenty-first century. But the digitalisation of the medium brings about a real revolution. Year after year, the technical parameters of colour and black-and-white photography in the theatre of the twenty-first century are changing. Camera specifications are getting better every year. High resolution, wide sensitivity ranges (and the ability to quickly change the ISO), and time-lapse photography (up to twenty frames per second!) fundamentally change the quality of photography. There is no longer any need to add stage lighting or adjust the position of the actors (as was done, for instance, by Wojciech Plewiński and as was still practised in some theatres in the first decade of the twenty-first century). As a result, photographs became more and more reportage-like. Increasingly sophisticated and quiet equipment makes it possible to record performances during dress rehearsals without difficulty. The photographer can become almost invisible. Software is also an essential part of the process of creating theatre images. Tools such as Adobe Photoshop and Lightroom have revolutionised the editing and post-production.

Photography has also become much cheaper in production when it goes digital. As a result, during a dress rehearsal, not a few dozen but a few thousand photographs are taken. Several photographers sometimes document more important and/or better-funded performances at the same time, and the final documentation consists of up to two hundred photographs. Ever larger and faster memory cards are replacing ten or thirty-six frame films. After the performance, the selection of shots and their subsequent editing is done on a

monitor. Consequently, we are faced with an overproduction of images; it is impossible to assimilate them all.

In the twenty-first century, the memory of the theatre has been democratised. The development of technology has made it possible to record reality using smartphones and even watches. Professional and expensive equipment is no longer essential, and the creation of images has become easy and very cheap. We can document almost anything at any time and without limitations. As a result, photography has become less formal, less artistic, and less technological. This, in turn, means that photographs are no longer produced by professionals alone, nor are they published under the supervision of institutions. These opportunities shift much of the photographer's attention from the stage to the backstage. The path to the public is shortened, and a new intermediary appears: social media. Anyone can upload a photo to the web at any time. This makes it possible to observe intimate and everyday situations, often almost in real-time. As I write this, I am watching a screening of *Elizabeth Costello* at the Avignon Festival to see Małgorzata Szczęśniak's set design (and decipher who is drinking wine with whom after the premiere).

On the other hand, heightened awareness of publicity rights, the provisions of the GDPR, and stricter copyright laws mean that professionally taken photographs increasingly have to go through multiple censorship filters: approvals from the publicity department, management, actors and directors are all required. As a result, the process of approving photos for distribution is becoming longer. There are also requests for retouching, such as removing cellulite, wrinkles, or slimming the stomach (sic!). There are even requests for composite photos. The quest for perfection and the pressure to look perfect sometimes pushes theatre photography towards a lifestyle magazine aesthetic. The increasingly daring scenes are becoming more and more censored by social media. Showing women's breasts can result in a theatre's page being suspended for months or its reach being radically reduced. Fine-tuned agreements on the distribution of images are leading to growing concerns about copyright. Only twenty years ago, photographers' names were replaced by the term 'press material' or 'rehearsal photographs'; we all had the same 'name'.

With the demise of analogue photography, the author's imprint is disappearing. Today, theatre photographs, sometimes presented as prints, appear in album publications and the press, but above all, they exist in virtual space. They are displayed on computers, tablets, plasma TVs and smartphones. This necessitates a change in how post-production is handled, but above all, it leads to the complete atrophy of the original. Today, the original is a RAW file, a set of ones and zeros. The digitisation of archives also seems to be an interesting

phenomenon. Old negatives, scanned by modern machines, appear in a new light: the process reveals details that were once lost in the shadows and lights. Contrast is refined. The image becomes perfect and its very character is different from the original. In a sense, it is falsified.

## SPACE

Marek Gardulski's photographs show the stage and auditorium of the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Kraków. Precise, symmetrical shots taken with a medium-format camera reveal the richness and splendour of the interior. The curtain (designed by Stanisław Wyspiański), lowered in the first frame, rises in the second to reveal an empty stage. It invites us to cross to the other side of the mirror, into an unknown, mysterious world. Marble, stucco, velvet and crystal are just the tip of the theatrical iceberg. We leave the stately, familiar and, truth be told, tiny part of the theatre. Through the photographs, we can enter the depths of the labyrinth, where the theatre's material, intellectual, and emotional reality comes to life. We can take a peek 'behind the scenes' at the storerooms, studios, prop rooms, and other spaces inaccessible to regular theatregoers daily. All the interiors are empty of any human presence. The main characters in the photographs are objects, costumes, set pieces, and complex theatrical machinery, an inanimate matter that magically comes to life on stage. Removed from their stage context, the objects create a strange, surreal, sometimes disturbing landscape.

The aesthetic photographs by Nicolas Groszpiere and Paulina Dadas-Zyśk capture the monumentality of the theatre sets. The spacious paint shop of the Wielki Theatre, with the statue of David in the centre, visualises the dynamism and scale of the production of the largest stage in Poland. The orderly battens in Groszpiere's image contrast with Bartek Warzecha's close-up, which reveals the chaos and ugliness of the theatre's equipment. It is hard to imagine that such a tangle of cables, pipes, wires, and lamps could create a magical world, and the illusion of a starry sky is shown in the following photograph. In the pictures of Bartek Warzecha and Tomek Tyndyk, the raw and flat light of the flash strips the objects of their theatrical illusion and brings to the fore the defects of matter, its shortcomings, ugliness, carnage and makeshift solutions. Insignificant and trivial details (the stain of a spilt liquid, a shabby couch) are interspersed with theatrical objects (ghostly masks, mannequins, a curtain). Objects familiar from the plays are placed in a different light and space, abstracted from their context. Sometimes, it is difficult to define the world we are looking at. Karolina Józwiak, on the other hand, elevates the costumes to the status of autonomous objects—independent works of art or installations. This journey through the nooks and crannies of theatre buildings allows us to observe the change in the aesthetics of representation and the ever-shifting

boundaries of making visible what was previously invisible and could not be shown. The theatre's interiors are also the axis of the film *Stary* [The Old One], directed by Magdalena Hueckel and Tomasz Śliwiński. A selected shot shows a journey through the corridors, warehouses, and prop rooms. The spaces are filled to the brim with strange and incongruous objects that have a life of their own, storing the memory and energy of past performances.

## PEOPLE

The curiosity about what goes on behind the scenes is not just about space. Over the past decade, there has been a growing desire to capture what goes on behind the scenes, revealing the human side of theatre production. The images provide an intimate and candid look at the people who are involved in the process of making a production.

A moving metaphor for the invisible people of theatre is provided by Karolina Józwiak's sophisticated and spare photography. The image shows an anonymous man whose identity is hidden behind a monumental set. The man is almost invisible, but the effects of his work are clearly in evidence. *(Wy)twórcy* [(Co)Creators]—a project by Łódź-based photographer Aneta Wawrzola—focuses on people engaged in crafts. The artistry of the details depends on them<sup>1</sup>, and they are often the authors of the technical solutions. They are often artists and masters of their craft, but in their everyday lives, they tend to remain in the shadows. They work in the shadows, in carpentry workshops, modelling workshops, tailoring workshops, and places far from the spotlight's glare.

Dozens of hands sewing, ripping seams, hemming, glueing, assembling, painting, welding... Photographers are increasingly turning their cameras on them to pay them the respect and attention they deserve. Klaudyna Schubert portrays the employees of the Ludowy Theatre of Kraków in the spaces where they conduct their daily work. In this series, space and people complement each other and add to the story.

Initiatives of this kind are on the rise, including Bartek Warzecha's portraits for the Nowy Teatr in Warsaw. This theme dovetails with the #MeToo movement, which has sparked discussion about the need to push for the democratisation of institutions, the flattening of hierarchies and the development of tools for non-violent communication and comfortable working conditions. By showcasing the invisible day-to-day workers, the

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<sup>1</sup> There is a risk that these professions will soon disappear altogether. Due to the development of technology, AI, 3D printers, this may be the last generation working in theatre studios.

photographers aim to recognise their hard work and enormous contribution to theatre production. Without their dedication, no performance would be possible.

Depicting the informal aspect of theatre is a prevailing trend in contemporary photography. This often involves unposed portraits of performers being photographed. Actresses and actors are portrayed in moments of suspension between their private lives and their roles, in moments dominated by stage fright before a performance, or while having fun in the nooks and crannies of the theatre building. This narrative completely changes the optics, shortening the distance between those portrayed and the viewer. The artists pictured this way seem more ordinary, human, and closer. The photographs offer the audience an extraordinary opportunity to gain an insight into what is happening on the other side of the stage while they are sitting in the audience and watching the performance (Stolarska, Gardulski, Hueckel). A close observer of backstage life is the actor and photographer in one Tomek Tyndyk. Thanks to his unique position, he knows the theatre inside out and is not an outsider, not a foreign body, so to speak. He has been taking subjective, dark pictures during rehearsals and performances at the TR Warszawa Theatre for years. He creatively portrays his colleagues in theatre costumes. Another photographer, Wojciech Sobolewski, consistently produces an extraordinary gallery that can be followed on his Instagram page. He photographs theatre makers during rehearsals in which he participates as a stage manager. He creates an archive of people, situations, lifestyles, and fashion. On the other hand, Warzecha draws on a nineteenth-century tradition of portraying actors in costume against a neutral background, as if in a photographic studio.

This traditional convention, combined with contemporary costumes and modern technology, creates an extremely light-hearted and entertaining effect. Martin Martiq's documentary reveals the fascinating process of visual transformation that takes place in a theatre make-up room. The artist documents the physical transformation of the actors—applying make-up, fixing facial hair, painting the face—all these activities seem to be a substantial intervention in the body. The physicality of the situation is emphasised excellently by the very close-up and expressive black-and-white images. A critical social statement is the photograph by Dawid Stube, winner of the 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the Theatre Photography Competition, entitled *Mama*. The artist photographed actress Zuzanna Czerniejewska-Stube in her dressing room, wearing a dressing gown with paper curls on her head and a sandwich in her hand, pumping breast milk. It is a moving portrait of a contemporary woman juggling work and motherhood.

In the photographs by Monika Stolarska, Przemysław Jendroski, and Magdalena Hueckel, we see actors just moments before they enter the stage. They are concentrated, suspended between their roles and their private lives. They are dressed in their costumes, smoking cigarettes in concentration and preparing to go on stage. They are captured in an extraordinary moment of transformation, one of the most beautiful moments in theatrical creation. This section concludes with Maurycy Stankiewicz's photograph, *Daily Life A.D. 2022*, from the Nowy Teatr in Warsaw. The picture was taken after a performance of *Three Episodes from the Life of a Family*, directed by Swedish director Markus Öhrn. The play depicts the inferno of life in a patriarchal family marked by rape, violence, and manipulation. In the finale, the sterile room is splattered with blood. Stankiewicz's photograph shows a situation immediately after the performance: Mrs Liubov, who is from Ukraine, wipes the blood from the floor and walls, cleaning up the mess made by the men. The war just over the Polish border adds another dimension to the image...

There is also a long tradition of photographing members of theatre ensembles. Almost every institution has a regularly updated gallery of portraits of actors, actresses and other staff. Sometimes, these photographs are taken in the studio, sometimes in the various parts of the theatre building. Occasionally, external photographers not generally associated with the theatre, such as Jacek Poremba or Rafał Milach, are hired for the shoot. However, this vast subject deserves a separate, dedicated discussion.

## PERFORMANCES

The essence of theatre is its transience. A transience that, on the one hand, makes every moment of a performance unique and inimitable and, on the other hand, provokes sadness. Sadness at not being able to share this unique experience, preserve it somehow, and return to it later, as can be done with music, the visual arts, literature, and film. Attempts to preserve the theatre have been made since antiquity (paintings of scenes from plays on vases, etchings, drawings, watercolours, etc.), so it is not surprising that when photography arrived on the scene, it was immediately associated with the theatre, becoming the most perfect and credible method of recording theatrical emotions.

Modern technology now allows us to realise this eternal dream, namely to capture the theatrical moment as it is, without staging, without extra lighting, and without interrupting the performers on stage with the loud snap of the camera's mirror. Since the 1990s, the way theatre is photographed has changed. Photographers no longer have to play the scenographer or creator but can take on the role of careful reporter. The turning point, however, came with

the advent of digital photography, followed by video recording technology, which freed photography from the obligation to accurately document every scene of a performance, offering more creative freedom. Photography in the theatre has thus become more auteurist. The profession of theatre photographer has also become more critical in recent years. They act as a kind of mediator in the theatre. Often, it is not the actual scenes of the play that audiences remember but the pictures taken by the photographers who give immortality to the performances. The images are not only attractive in terms of composition, capturing a situation on stage, but they are primarily carriers of a specific energy, of the ambience of the play, a recording of meanings, an attempt to get to the essence of the artistic message conveyed. Photographing theatre is more than just observing; it is mostly about feeling. To my great delight, the tradition of special media-only rehearsals, where actors perform one or two scenes for a dozen random photographers who are not professionally involved in theatre photography, is becoming a thing of the past.

The following section opens with another image taken by Marek Gadulski, a long-time collaborator of Krystian Lupa, who documented the director's performances. Gadulski's work shows the leap analogue photography made when it switched from black and white to colour film. In the 1990s, theatres predominantly requested black-and-white photographs, only asking for a few colour prints for marketing purposes. The popular image from Lupa's *Siblings* is paired here with a little-known colour print. This duo reveals the imperfections of early attempts to photograph theatre in colour. These were, of course, due to the technological limitations of the materials used, not to the lack of skill of excellent photographers.

The true pioneer of colour theatre photography in Poland is Stefan Okołowicz. In his vibrant oeuvre we can find documentation of a breakthrough period in Polish theatre history, namely the performances of the so-called 'younger and more talented'<sup>2</sup> theatre-makers, i.e. Grzegorz Jarzyna and Krzysztof Warlikowski, who revolutionised Polish theatre by creating a new approach to staging and interpreting drama. Okołowicz's highly expressive photographs are an incredible testament to the spirit of the times and the latest performances of the day. They are characterised by intense colours, unusual framing, prolonged exposure times, and close-ups showing the actors' emotions. Some of the photographs, brutal and

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<sup>2</sup> The original Polish term *młodszy zdolniejszy* was coined by Piotr Gruszczyński in the book *Ojcobójcy. Młodszy zdolniejszy w teatrze polskim* [Patricide. The Younger and More Talented in the Polish Theatre], Warsaw 2003.



blurred, are reminiscent of Francis Bacon's paintings. The artist's aesthetic of error is ideally suited to the new language of the theatre.

The early twenty-first century saw the birth and rise of digital photography. As is usually the case, the new technology did not fare well in harsh conditions. Theatre is full of highly demanding conditions such as high contrast, dim lighting and movement. This period saw several unsuccessful experiments with image post-processing. Some photographers succumbed to the temptation to use automatic filters with excessive contrast and saturation. The result was either a grotesquely textured and sharp or artificially blurred image. The over-processed photographs look unnatural and reek of photographic kitsch. Theatre photographers tend to adopt different strategies in their work. Magdalena Hueckel, Bartek Warzecha, and Maurycy Stankiewicz opt to follow the theatre makers and try to convey the atmosphere of the performances. They do not impose their interpretation of what they see.

Personally, it has always been vital to diversify my aesthetics depending on the subject I photograph. I am particularly interested in extreme states of the body, wide shots of the stage, and capturing the decisive moment. I am always looking for shots that convey the performance's spirit and meaning.

Bartek Warzecha also believes that documentary photography plays a subservient role in the theatrical performance; it aims to fulfil a specific task, which is to document the work of the theatre makers. "I always try to remember that I'm photographing someone else's creative work and that neither I nor my ideas are in the spotlight"<sup>3</sup>, said Warzecha in an interview with Paweł Płoski. You can see the photographer's peculiar variety in his work; he portrays each performance and each artist slightly differently. Warzecha also photographs the theatre backstage and does various arranged photo shoots, and it is in these assignments that he shows his creative side.

Some photographers tend to interpret the shows they photograph in a unique, inimitable way. Natalia Kabanow is an artist with a very distinctive style. Her images are instantly recognisable - rich in colour, with intense post-production work, high sharpness and an advertising flair. Kabanow also designs theatre posters and works as a graphic designer on other projects. This creative activity is clearly reflected in her photographic work. Her meticulous, stylised images work well on social media and attract the audience's attention. In an interview for *Dwutygodnik* weekly, the photographer said: "For me, a photograph that

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<sup>3</sup> Bartek Warzecha: *To nie ja jestem na pierwszym planie* [Bartek Warzecha: I am not in the spotlight], interviewed by Paweł Płoski, *Culture.pl*, 11.01.2022, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/bartek-warzecha-to-nie-ja-jestem-na-pierwszym-planie-wywiad>

talks about a performance is a photograph that depicts its idea and the relationships and emotions embedded in it. It does not necessarily have to reproduce the performance itself<sup>4</sup>. Krzysztof Bieliński, who is strongly inspired by abstract art, is an example of a photographer who likes to use his original means of expression when photographing theatrical performances. He claims that “a photographer must appropriate the space of the theatre and treat it as his or her vision, which is transferred onto the photographs”<sup>5</sup>.

An interesting phenomenon in recent years has been a specific shift in photographers' attention. The first theatre images focused on the actors. Nowadays, this is gradually changing, and often, the faces of the actors remain hidden, becoming impossible to identify, obscured by masks or objects or partially removed from the frame. Sometimes, the subject of the photograph becomes a gesture, a fragment of the body (Warzecha, Stube, Stankiewicz, Hueckel). At other times, it is a bare set, a prop or projections that dominate the stage space (Kabanow, Hueckel, Stube)<sup>6</sup>.

Virtual reality has also found its way into the theatre in the last decade. The director, Krzysztof Garbaczewski, and the collective he founded, [Dream Adoption Society](#), have been experimenting with VR. The audience can follow avatars and admire surreal landscapes. Sometimes, they put on the glasses themselves and set off on their journey. This is a world to which photographers have not yet had access.

## LANGUAGE

The language used to describe live theatre responds to the changes it is undergoing. New means of expression, aesthetic styles, and metaphors are constantly being explored. Stefan Okołowicz's photographs of Zofia de Ines' imaginative costumes tell a beautiful story about theatre. Removed from their theatrical context, they enter into a dialogue with the surrounding landscape, becoming works of art in their own right. Jan Klata and Sebastian Majewski, who ran the Stry Theatre in Kraków, attempted radical experiments in the field of theatre documentation. For a period of seven months, they did not order any photographs of the performances and instead commissioned Mariusz Tarkawian to make drawings (2013). After this trial period, they returned to photography. Another interesting experiment was using a thermal imaging camera to photograph the theatre (Jerzy Grotowski Institute).

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<sup>4</sup> *Dźwięk migawki* [The Sound of the Shutter], Interview by Katarzyna Niedurny with Natalia Kabanow, *Dwutygodnik* 2016, no. 177, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/6370-dzwiek-migawki.html>

<sup>5</sup> Krzysztof Bieliński, *Fotografika* [Photography] *Teatr* 2020, no. 9, <https://teatr-pismo.pl/7852-fotografika/>

<sup>6</sup> The projections pose major technical challenges that not everyone can cope with. Choosing the right photographic parameters is crucial in this case. Discoloured images, completely different from reality, are circulating on the web.

It should be noted that theatre photographs are not only made for documentary purposes. They are also intended to promote the theatre and its performances and attract the invaluable attention of the audience; this is what is being competed for on social media, in the press, and on the street. A well-photographed show increases its exposure, gets more media coverage, and attracts audiences and critics alike. Today, the battle for attention begins long before the premiere. Visual artists are invited to participate in publicity sessions, using images to interpret the text developed during rehearsals. The results are often separate narratives, visually distant from what will happen on stage in a few months. Once the goal of being able to photograph the most poorly lit performances as they unfolded had been achieved, the photographers and their clients turned their attention to other areas. Photography left the stage and paved the way for documentarians to become creators. We had come full circle. Examples include the graphic design-inspired shoots of Filip Preis and Warzecha, in which the artists use the graphic symbol characteristic of the language of posters.

Also interesting are the disturbing group portraits by the duo Tyndyk-Lach and Marek Zakrzewski. Both photographs are conventional portraits of non-normative people. In Zakrzewski's case, queer themes are explored, while Tyndyk and Lach created a family portrait with people with Trisomy 21. *On the other hand, Lancer's Fantasies* is the result of an action by the Czarne Szmaty collective, photographed by Pat Mic. The images attempt to break stereotypes and enter into dialogue with the patriotic imagination of Poles. Trailers, teasers, and music videos—short and carefully staged forms that aim to summarise the performance, convey its character or arouse the audience's curiosity—have also become a popular way of presenting theatre. Again, some are recordings of selected scenes, others are independent entities, and some are free interpretations.

## SOCIETY

### SOLIDARITY / PROTESTS / DREAMS

The last section is devoted to photographs that transcend the boundaries of theatre. The pictures represent the moment when theatre becomes more than a performance, more than the recitation of a dramatic text from the stage, more than acting and performing. The emotions and actions extend beyond the walls of the theatre buildings and become social and political events, drawing the audience into their turbulent core. Theatre becomes a spark for debate, a platform for the struggle for artistic independence and individual freedom. No other medium seems to provoke the same emotions as theatre.

In 2016, Cezary Morawski was appointed director of the Polski Theatre in Wrocław. The decision was met with mass protests from the artistic community and audiences, as the appointment was political and part of a broader trend to subordinate cultural institutions to the conservative values promoted by the government of the day. Open letters, marches and demonstrations were organised to express opposition. The conflict, which lasted several years, became a symbol of the wider debate about artistic freedom in Poland and was symbolised by the gesture of a mouth sealed with black tape. This sign referred to censorship and the problems associated with restricting artistic freedom. It was repeated many times, recycled in visuals, and transferred to the stage. The protests in Wrocław were photographed, among others, by Natalia Kabanow, a frequent collaborator of the Polski Theatre.

A wave of protests was also triggered by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, Piotr Gliński's decision not to renew the contract of Jan Klata, the director of the Słaby Theatre (2017) in Kraków. In this case, the visual manifestation of the protest was a photograph taken by Przemek Krzakiewicz. The image shows the company performing in *The Wedding*, directed by Klata. The performers are photographed from an unusual perspective; the photographer took the shot from inside, positioning himself in the depths of the stage. After the performance, during the applause, the actors turned their backs on the audience for a moment. As a result, the image shows the actors and actresses and the audience standing behind them, supporting them. The suspension of the director of the Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw, Monika Strzępka (2023), also caused a stir. The governor of Mazowiecki, Konstanty Radziwiłł, cited her 'radical feminism' as the reason for his decision. The theatre responded by publishing a humorous photo on social media. The photograph, taken by Monika Stolarska, shows the director physically suspended from the theatre's ceiling. A smiling Strzępka floats above the stage like a hovering witch, her gold dress juxtaposed against the red seats of the audience, evoking truly royal associations.

Photographs of people holding banners have become an integral part of the landscape of Polish theatre photography. Hundreds of pictures documenting gestures of solidarity and support for endangered cultural institutions and artistic and social groups have been taken over the past decades. The documentation of the nationwide "Children campaign" is particularly moving. In 2022, the inscription 'Дети' was written on a theatre building in Mariupol, where the city's inhabitants had taken refuge. Despite the warning, the building became the target of a Russian attack. Hundreds of civilians, including women and children, were killed. The repetition of the inscription on Polish theatres was a form of protest against

the atrocities of war and an expression of solidarity with Ukraine in the face of the brutal operations of the Russian army.

Protests from communities with orthodox Catholic and nationalist views have also marked the history of Polish theatre. Various groups protested against productions that they felt were blasphemous, demoralising, offended religious feelings or desecrated religious symbols. Among the most controversial events were *Klątwa* (*The Curse*), directed by Oliver Frljić (Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, 2017), *Golgota Picnic*, directed by Rodrigo García (Malta Festival in Poznań, 2014), *Śmierć i dziewczyna* (*Death and the Maiden*), directed by Ewelina Marciniak (Teatr Polski in Wrocław, 2015) and *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), directed by Maja Kleczewska (Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Kraków, 2022). In defence of traditional values, activists organised numerous demonstrations demanding that the performances be stopped. They prayed in front of theatres, recited the rosary together, picketed and organised attempts to block access to audiences. Growing tensions between the artistic community and the conservative part of society have been a hallmark of recent years - sparking an ongoing debate about the role of art, freedom of expression and the influence of religious values on public space in Poland. Images of the ongoing ideological battle in Poland include photographs of the protest outside the Powszechny Theatre. Raised battle flags, dark smoke, and clenched fists of demonstrators are reminiscent of a real war.

Despite the ongoing ideological conflict in Poland, artists are fighting to ensure the stage remains a zone of freedom. In this space, dreams come true, where people can express themselves or give a voice to those who are deprived of it daily. Essential work is carried out by Theatre 21, which comprises actors with Down's syndrome. For twenty years, Justyna Sobczyk has been giving them a stage to express themselves, talk about their lives, and simultaneously allow the audience to confront their problems. The play *Rewolucja, której nie było* [*The Revolution That Wasn't There*] refers to the forty-day occupation of the Lower House of Parliament held in the spring of 2018, where people with disabilities and their carers protested and advocated their rights. Providing a commentary on the events, the performance uses archive material from the protest, banners, letters, and postcards. A poignant photograph by Grzegorz Press shows actress Magdalena Świątkowska in a wedding veil.

The performance addresses the issue of full participation in public and professional life and is an attempt to break stereotypes. The work of the theatre is a critical voice in the debate on freedom, equality, and human rights. The theme of marriage also appears in the final scene of the play *Spartakus. Miłość w czasach zarazy* [*Spartacus. Love in Times of*

*Plague*] (Współczesny Theatre in Szczecin, 2022), directed by Jakub Skrzywanek. The play explores issues of oppression and social exclusion, with one of the main themes being discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community. In the finale, the artist returns the stage to the audience: he invites non-heteronormative guests to a symbolic wedding, thus creating a space where they can make their dreams come true. The ceremony was attended by politicians Robert Biedroń and Krzysztof Śmiszek, as well as writer Agnieszka Graff and her partner, activist Magdalena Staroszczyk. Both the performance and the photograph show love as a universal value that has the right to exist despite adversity, social norms and political restrictions.

## FINAL REMARKS

The evolution of Polish theatre photography owes a great deal to the annual Theatre Photography Competition organised by the Theatre Institute. The finals of the first edition were held in 2015 as part of the celebrations of 250 years of public theatre in Poland. The organiser aimed to support the development and presentation of theatre photography, not only as a form of documentation and promotion of the process of theatre work, but also as a tool for co-creating meanings and ways of perceiving work and creative activity<sup>7</sup>. Publications<sup>7</sup>, exhibitions<sup>8</sup>, and educational<sup>9</sup> activities have accompanied the many editions held over the years.

The competition has also removed theatre photography's 'opacity', it demonstrated the diversity of photographers' attitudes to theatre, and significantly influenced artists' awareness. This year marked the tenth edition of the competition. Theatre photography is a reflection of theatre, which is a reflection of reality. By looking at it, we can draw many conclusions and follow events and trends in aesthetics, thought, technology, and society. An attentive and sensitive observer will discover various layers of hidden meanings in it.

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<sup>7</sup> In 2015, a monographic album of works by the writer of these words, Hueckel/Teatr [Hueckel/Theatre], was published. The following albums were also published: *Tomek Tyndyk/Teatr* [Tomek Tyndyk/Theatre], *Bartek Warzecha/Przedstawienia* [Bartek Warzecha/Performances] and, published jointly with the Museum of Photographic History, *Plewiński. Na scenie* [Plewiński. On Stage]. All of them, although different in character and assumptions, with obligatory critical commentaries written by philosophers, curators, theoreticians, researchers, and—what is worth emphasising—with first successes and good reception at national and international photography festivals (Photomonth in Kraków, TIFF Festival in Wrocław or the Greek Athens Photo Festival).

<sup>8</sup> All editions of the Theatre Photography Competition were accompanied by exhibitions of the finalists' works. The photographs were presented in the gallery of the Theatre Institute in Warsaw, as well as in Opole, Jelenia Góra, Toruń, and Kraków (at exhibitions in galleries and in the open air). The authors of photo albums published by the Theatre Institute (Magdalena Hueckel, Tomek Tyndyk, Bartek Warzecha) presented their projects on theatre photography in the form of exhibitions. The final event of the workshop on theatre photography led by Krzysztof Bieliński was the exhibition *Beyond Reality, Photographing Theatre* held at the ZPAF Old Gallery in Warsaw (2020).

<sup>9</sup> Lectures (Magdalena Raszewska, Jakub Certowicz); discussion panels, workshops (led by Dorota Buchwald and Monika Krawul, Magdalena Hueckel, Bartek Warzecha, Krzysztof Bieliński, among others).

Its language is constantly in flux, migrating, annexing new territories, leaving others behind, only to return to them in a moment, in a different form. It is alive and prosperous. Is theatre photography art? Everyone will answer this question differently. My answer is: Sometimes it is.