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## RECENT POLISH AND UKRAINIAN DRAMATURGY IN THE FACE OF MODERN WORLD CRISES

**Abstract:** Art has always been a kind of a barometer of reality, reacting in various ways to current problems and co-creating various social discourses. However, it is evident that in the era of crises plaguing the modern world (human rights violations, pandemics, the war in Ukraine and the climate crisis), the speed of this response has clearly increased. In the realm of contemporary drama and theater, one cannot help but marvel at how effortlessly these profound matters find their place in the “here and now”, as if they were meant to be captured in the blink of an eye. It is in the meticulous scrutiny and profound contemplation of a handful of recent Polish and Ukrainian dramas that this phenomenon resonates most powerfully.

**Keywords:** Polish dramaturgy, Ukrainian dramaturgy, the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights

The modern world faces many challenges that shape human everyday life and its future. The most serious are certainly armed conflicts, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine. Social inequalities are also a global problem. Exclusion, marginalization and discrimination affect millions of people around the world, which deepens inequalities and leads to the destabilization of societies. The climate crisis, which is largely the result of human activity, is also threatening ecosystems and human life, and its effects are increasingly felt on all continents. The COVID-19 pandemic was also a special experience, revealing the weaknesses of global health and economic systems, but also firmly confirming that human existence is defined primarily by unpredictability and uncertainty.

The theme at hand finds its inspiration in the metaphor of the *parergon*<sup>1</sup>, a concept that embodies both presence and absence, moments of transition, suspension, and the perpetual dance between certainty and uncertainty, between what is outside with what is inside. Drawing from the musings of Jacques Derrida, who alluded to Kant's exploration of the separation of the *parergon* from the *ergon* within the domain of art, we delve into a realm of quasi-separation or a distinct form of absence. This separation positions itself outside while remaining eternally tethered to the *ergon*. Furthermore, Derrida, the author of *The Truth in Painting*, underscores *parergons'* inherent expansiveness; they partition not merely from the *ergon* – the interior they enframe – but also from the expanse beyond<sup>2</sup>. This connection between the *ergon* and the *parergon* is a unique one, as articulated by Paweł Dybel, “for it is rooted in the attachment of the *parergon* to the absence residing within the *ergon* of the work. The *parergon* [...], in essence, fills the void inherent to this *ergon* – just as a bare body <yearns for> clothing, a temple for its columns, and a painting for its frame.”<sup>3</sup>

Hence, the metaphor of the *parergon* extends its reach to articulate reality in terms of this distinctive void – a quasi-separation that adeptly encapsulates the status of the socially excluded marginalized souls, those who exist and yet remain absent from the social tapestry, who are stripped of their rights and voice, cast aside into the abyss of social ostracism. This phenomenon extends its purview to encompass individuals or entire societal factions – women, non-heteronormative individuals, the disabled and political captives, or even entire nations rendered alien due to the ravages of war. The *parergon*, too, emerges as a fitting emblem to depict moments of rupture and transgression – a vantage point encapsulating the current state of affairs, the ongoing narrative interwoven with the seeds of what is yet to come. It is a realm not always readily discernible in the immediate present. In the face of such states and scenarios, how does art respond? Does it manage to keep pace with the evolving world around us? It may be regarded as a truism to assert that art has perennially acted as a barometer of reality, responding in diverse ways to contemporary quandaries, actively participating in societal discourses, at times even shaping them. Today, amidst the crucible of crises, especially in the wake of events like the

<sup>1</sup> The text in its original version was presented as a paper at the conference “The Parergon as a Metaphor of the Modern World. Philosophy, Aesthetics, Art.” organized in Zakopane, May 26-29, 2023, by the Department of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Culture of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Derrida, *Prawda w malarstwie*, transl. M. Kwietniewska, Słowo/Obraz/Terytoria, Gdańsk 2003, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> P. Dybel, *Lektury subwersywne. Filozoficzne eseje o literaturze i sztuce. Kant, Derrida, Lacan, Freud i inni*, Universitas, Kraków 2022, p. 58.

COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, the alacrity of this response has markedly quickened, as is eloquently substantiated by contemporary drama and theater.

The topic at hand delves into the realm of the most recent Polish and Ukrainian drama, a poignant testament to this phenomenon. Perhaps more than ever before, it seizes upon the most pressing quandaries, capturing their dynamics and ever-shifting nature, encapsulating them within the realm of both spoken word and vivid imagery. The dramatic form emerges as an exquisitely delicate instrument for exploring the multifaceted reality that envelops us in its different dimensions, offering a form of commentary on the human experience in the modern age. It empowers playwrights to scrutinize the world from myriad angles, to cast it in a light that lays bare the most contemporary matters – those that traverse the realms of individual and collective existence, as well as the intricate tapestry of human relationships.

Ukrainian dramaturgy in the realm of Polish theater remains a relatively obscure treasure, one deserving of earnest exploration. A few years ago, Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun and Andrei Moskvina embarked on the endeavor of chronicling the nascent dramas of their time within the anthology *Nowy dramat ukraiński. W oczekiwaniu na Majdan* [New Ukrainian Drama: In Anticipation of the Maidan Uprising] (2015). The compilation unveiled works that, at their core, grappled with universal quandaries – those of family dynamics or, more broadly, through a reference to a novel or a parabola – the tragedies of contemporary existence. Some ventures into the Soviet legacy were also discerned, with topics ranging from Chernobyl to the Afghan conflict. Curiously, there were no direct references to plays depicting the unfolding events of the time, such as the tumultuous Euromaidan protests, the annexation of Crimea, or the eastern Ukrainian conflict. However, a subsequent volume emerged, three years later, titled *Współczesna dramaturgia ukraińska. Od A do JA* [Contemporary Ukrainian Drama: From A to JA], revealing that the specter of war persisted as a pervasive theme. Even when positioned in the backdrop, the armed conflict in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea cast a lingering shadow over the narratives. Yet, within these pages, there were texts of profound importance, as Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun aptly noted in her forward to the anthology, that forged the discourse on modern Ukraine<sup>4</sup>. Within the scope of this text, we shall inevitably traverse only a limited selection of Ukrainian and Polish dramatic works composed in recent years, each bearing the weight of exceedingly contemporary concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> A. Korzeniowska-Bihun, *Ukraińska dramaturgia dla polskich scen* [in:] *Współczesna dramaturgia ukraińska. Od A do JA*, Selection, translation and introduction by Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun, Agencja Dramatu i Teatru ADiT, Warszawa 2018.

In the monodrama *Przez skórę* [Through the Skin] penned by Natalia Błok in 2017, the specter of war emerges as a central theme, woven intricately into the fabric of the narrative. At its core, the story revolves around an ordinary woman who, along with her children, escapes the besieged region of Donbas. However, her plight takes a peculiar and unsettling turn as she succumbs to a mysterious ailment known as the KCS syndrome, an acronym denoting “Kha-ki Color Skin”. This affliction, it is revealed, is a psychosomatic manifestation of war’s trauma. Gradually, an epidemic of the KCS syndrome unfurls, spreading its ominous cloak over a growing multitude. For our protagonist, the ordeal commences rather innocuously as an inconspicuous bruise on her leg, dismissed at first glance. Yet, with the inexorable passage of months, patches resembling a military uniform multiply relentlessly, gradually consuming the entirety of her left side, even encroaching upon her countenance. She rationalizes that the war is an affair of distant lands, a matter divorced from her newfound haven of safety. Alas, her perception proves bitterly erroneous, as even seemingly innocuous posts on her Facebook feed evoke eerie echoes of war’s ceaseless reverberations. In her desperate bid to stave off the encroaching dread, she initiates a self-imposed embargo on all forms of media, meticulously scrubbing her Facebook account, silencing the television and severing ties with her phone. Paradoxically, her attempts to excise the war from her consciousness merely amplify its haunting presence. The more she endeavors to shroud the conflict in ignorance, the more insidiously the virus of war infiltrates her very being. She remains defenseless against its relentless onslaught. The diagnosis from her doctor attributes the affliction to persistent stress wrought by the ongoing war. In utter disbelief, she queries, “What war? We fled the war three years ago; since then, there’s been no war. The war resides in Donbas, distant and removed. What could possibly fuel my distress?”<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, however, she realizes that if the disease indeed stems from the specter of war, then the remedy lies in the war’s eradication. Her son’s suggestion to oust Putin is met with the realization that the Russian leader may harbor numerous doppelgängers, or perhaps he has long since met his demise. As her daughter proffers a more hopeful solution, advocating the cure of war with peace, the harsh truth dawns upon them all. These solutions, they discover, are regrettably grounded in the realm of the unattainable. Putin remains an enigmatic figure and the tale elucidated within the monodrama serves as an unsettling parable – the disease of war itself, it seems, cannot be entirely purged. Instead, it lingers, dormant but ever watchful, poised to reemerge at the slightest whisper of the past or present war, just like the mysterious KCS disease. The ominous stains it leaves,

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<sup>5</sup> N. Błok, *Przez skórę* [in:] *Współczesna dramaturgia ukraińska. Od A do JA...*, p. 69.

too, endure indefinitely, for “once war infiltrates a soul, it finds eternal abode therein.”<sup>6</sup>

In the realm of Natalia Błok's creation, the virus of war assumes a profound symbolic significance – a stark embodiment of existence relentlessly plagued by ceaseless anxiety, a pervasive specter of danger lurking around every corner and the ever-present specter of uncertainty, cruelty, suffering and death. One might be inclined to regard this dramatic portrayal as somewhat hyperbolic. Yet, in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine on that fateful day of February 24, 2022, it transcends the realm of fiction to become a chillingly prophetic reality. This work, while ostensibly rooted in the turmoil of the Donbas conflict, goes beyond the confines of a singular war. Instead, it emerges as a narrative that transcends the boundaries of time, a testament to the indomitable and timeless connection between humanity and the specter of war.

Nina Zahozhenko's play, *Ja, wojna i plastikowy granat* [Me, War and a Plastic Grenade], nestled within the pages of the anthology *AURORA. Nagroda Dramaturgiczna Miasta Bydgoszczy. Sztuki finałowe 2022* [AURORA. The Drama Award of the City of Bydgoszcz. Final plays 2022]<sup>7</sup>, carries the weight of Ukraine's war-torn narrative. It emerged from the depths of creativity as the turbulent events of Ukraine's invasion unfurled in February 2022. It consists of eight miniature stories with different protagonists: a young married couple wondering what decisions to make almost at the outbreak of war; four teenagers writing to each other on an instant messenger; two non-heteronormative soldier-partners; an aged dentist who instructs a patient over the phone on how to remove an abscess on his gum on his own; sisters, one of whom decides never to leave a shelter again; a group of neighbors discussing war and politics in a shelter; a man who talks to his slain wife. The drama's essence lies in its portrayal of war as a nascent entity, taking form before our eyes and etching its indelible mark upon those it touches. The heroine of one of the stories says: “Today war broke out in my country. It came to us at five in the morning with the howling of sirens and the bombing of airports. From all sides, columns of tanks many kilometers long crawled into my country, biting into its flesh like a bloodthirsty caterpillar”<sup>8</sup>. Though cognizant of the looming peril, the heroine

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> N. Zahozhenko, *Ja, wojna i plastikowy granat* [Me, War, and a Plastic Grenade], transl. A. Korzeniowska-Bihun, [in:] *AURORA. Nagroda Dramaturgiczna Miasta Bydgoszczy. Sztuki finałowe 2022* [AURORA. The Drama Award of the City of Bydgoszcz. Final Plays 2022], Miejskie Centrum Kultury w Bydgoszczy, Bydgoszcz 2022. The work was included in the final of the AURORA. THE DRAMA AWARD OF THE CITY OF BYDGOSZCZ in 2022. (It is worth noting that there was another Ukrainian work in the final five, *Pięć pieśni Polesia* [Five Songs of Polesie] by Luda Tymoshenko).

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 107.

perceives her western city as a fleeting haven, a sanctuary spared – at least for now. She yearns to take her children to the park. Yet, her heart is heavy with trepidation, for the harbingers of war loom large – endless queues of vehicles snaking towards the border, clamor at gas stations, interminable lines at ATMs. She is torn. She rejects the possibility of leaving to maintain a semblance of normalcy. She prefers, she says, “to vegetate in this hole. Without light, water or food. Without money or prospects. In fear and danger”<sup>9</sup>. She wishes at all costs that today was still yesterday.

In another tale within the narrative tapestry, a character named Tonia finds herself ensconced within the depths of a Kharkov metro station, where the advent of war manifests as a cruel violation – an assault on the very fabric of time itself. To her, it feels as though time has been abducted, ravaged by the relentless onslaught of bombs. She articulates this profound sense of time’s dissolution, its vanishing act, as though temporal existence had perished. In Tonia’s world, the cherished dream of an impending spring remains unattainable. For her, the ceaseless and merciless February endures without respite. It is a realm devoid of pathways, both backward and forward. She laments: “There is an endless winter now”<sup>10</sup>.

The central figures in each narrative are besieged by unfamiliar feelings, compelled to navigate uncharted emotional territories. They grapple with decisions of unprecedented gravity, thrust into the crucible where their destinies and those of their loved ones hang in the balance. In an instant, they must redraw the contours of their lives, confronting the monumental choice of whether to remain within their homeland’s embattled borders, or to embark on a perilous exodus. From this seemingly haphazard chorus of voices emerges a poignant tableau depicting the reactions of ordinary individuals who confront the relentless tide of war. Their responses span a wide spectrum: astonishment, dread, helplessness, resignation and, on the converse, mobilization and resolute readiness to confront the enemy.

In the closing act (which, according to the playwright’s instructions, can be removed or replaced with a personal monologue by the actress or actor), thirty-two-year-old Nina seizes the stage, recounting her personal odyssey. She reflects: “I shut my eyes, and before me unfurl the sun-kissed streets of Aleppo. Faces so near, yet once strangers. How could I have been so oblivious to these souls? What did I truly comprehend of their lives? Merely, the unrelenting specter of war. The arid embrace of the desert. Their devout adherence to Islam. The veils concealing their faces. Their compatriots languishing in Turkish

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 135.

refugee camps. Their perilous voyages on frail rafts, often to find a watery grave in the Mediterranean depths. But why, I wonder, did they embark upon those frail vessels? Were they not privy to the perils of such a treacherous voyage? What was I doing in the year 2016? Birthing my daughter, orchestrating household renovations, embarking upon a career shift. In those days, the war lay a world away. Yet now, it stands upon our very doorstep, an inexorable relay race. I am left to ponder, who shall be the next torchbearer?"<sup>11</sup> – Nina's inquiry reverberates through her final monologue.

Amidst the realm of dramas, where the theme of war commands attention, there also exists a domain where contemplation of enduring societal tribulations takes center stage. A prime illustration of such a narrative can be found in Dima Levytskyi's *Studnia* [The Well], a creation conceived in 2015. Within its framework, one encounters keen societal reproach and an unflinching critique of a power structure that wields oppression with a callous disregard for the individual. Furthermore, the play bears an unmistakable political dimension, as signposted by the author's prefatory remarks that pave the way for the ensuing drama: "The author forbids the staging of the play or any other use of it on the territory of the Russian Federation. Exceptions are made for those Russian theaters and art groups that publicly oppose the policies of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin"<sup>12</sup>.

The protagonists of this drama are twins, Yakub and Savva, who meet years later under tragic circumstances. Savva's 13-year-old daughter was raped and murdered, and her body thrown into a well. The brothers have been at odds for a long time, for in the past Jacob had tricked his father into bequeathing him an apartment by pretending to be his brother and remaining in collusion with his mother. Years later, he returns to obtain forgiveness, but fate takes cruel revenge on him. Too cruel, one might say, as the punishment here seems inadequate for the guilt he is accused of, which has not been proven against him. Jacob is accused of the murder of his niece, which sets off a wave of unfortunate incidents in the city. The scope of the accusations is soon expanded by investigators to include a charge of murdering another girl, named Parija, and of driving his brother and his wife Ada to suicide. The situation becomes increasingly absurd. Jacob becomes a victim of an oppressive system in which no one believes his assertions of innocence. He is subjected to brutal interrogations, forced to sign a statement of guilt, but has nowhere to appeal, finds no support in anyone.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> D. Levytskyi, *Studnia* [in:] *Współczesna dramaturgia ukraińska. Od A do JA...*, p. 164.

The narrative culminates in a grotesque “sacrifice” scene, wherein Jacob, encouraged by the very interrogators who once probed him, or perhaps whom he simply saw in his dreams, offers himself up on an “altar.” This “altar” takes the form of a lavishly set table, surrounded by laughter from an assembly of individuals. Notably, these individuals bear an uncanny resemblance, as indicated by the stage directions, to characters that have traversed the tumultuous narrative landscape before, including those who have left the realm of the living. Thus, the lines demarcating tragedy and comedy blur into an enigmatic realm, where the boundary between reality and the protagonist's elusive reverie dissipates. Certainty becomes elusive. It is a world crafted upon the precipice of absurdity, an exploration of the discord between humanity and an elusive reality, an individual and their familial and local community, as well as a solitary soul and an oppressive system that leaves them forsaken. Paradoxically, the more Jacob strives to vindicate his innocence to others, the deeper he incriminates himself, bereft of any avenue for recourse. He becomes an outcast, ostracized by both his family and the community which channels its collective aggression towards him, eternally marking him as an indelible pariah. It is a narrative of entrapment, entanglement and helplessness, resounding with the spirit of Kafka.

The theme of human rights violations and tyrannical oppression of power structures, now extending not just to individuals but encompassing entire social groups, finds poignant resonance in Łukasz Wójcicki's *Carpaccio w stylu wschodnim* [Eastern Style Carpaccio] (2022). This work delves into the harrowing brutality of authorities' grip on political prisoners in Belarus, revealing two stark and unsettling realities that, when juxtaposed, evoke profound disquiet. On the one hand, the author lays bare the torment endured by political detainees apprehended in the wake of recent presidential elections in Belarus. On the other hand, he paints vivid vignettes of the agony borne by animals led inexorably toward their slaughter.

Former prisoners offer chilling accounts of torture and inhumane treatment, recounting distressing absence of any consideration for detainees' rights. One among them, Zhenya, confesses: “For the initial two days, we were denied sustenance. Hungry cries filled the air (...). They tossed a single loaf of bread, a mere morsel for every hundred and twenty souls. I received none. Access to water was only possible via the toilet and we had but two bottles for us all. Besides, they seldom granted us permission for restroom use”<sup>13</sup>.

In parallel, a narrative bearing eerie similarities unfolds, as animal characters reveal their own ordeal. A horse stating: “For eighty creatures like us,

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<sup>13</sup> Ł. Wójcicki, *Carpaccio w stylu wschodnim*, “Dialog” 2022, No. 10, p. 13.



they supplied mere two liters of water every four hours. Many were denied even a sip”<sup>14</sup>. The Pig, Cow and Hen share their stories of torment at the hands of slaughterhouse workers, their wretched living conditions and the relentless infliction of pain and cruelty.

The playwright directly confronts these two stark domains – the realm of political prisoners and the reality of animals awaiting their gruesome fate. He bluntly states: “The same ways of inflicting pain. The same torture and the same terror. Monstrosity”<sup>15</sup>. In this eerie convergence, detention centres and slaughterhouses interweave their narratives. Trivial advice from YouTube – ranging from five-minute Burrito recipes to tips on alleviating back pain, promoting healthy living or teeth whitening – intersperses the unfolding stories. The Stand-Up Rapper, with her seemingly cheerful routines, discusses beatings as if crafting “carpaccio out of your ass”. Yet, her attempt to extract humour from cruelty, framing it within witty anecdotes, only accentuates the overarching horror and fear. Wójcicki's drama serves as a poignant reflection on cruelty and suffering, exposing the violations of human and animal rights, the oppressive spectre of violence and, ultimately, a profound sense of powerlessness. The playwright concedes that beyond artistic expressions addressing the Belarusian regime's oppression little can be accomplished. Echoing the slogan from Poland's Black Protests, “You won't lock us all up,” he highlights its obsolescence in Belarus. In the wake of the protests in August 2020, all dissenters were indeed incarcerated and subjected to torture<sup>16</sup>. Little or no information has surfaced regarding the fate of many among them.

Beyond the grand challenges that encompass entire societies or nations, contemporary drama also holds a mirror to issues that, while perhaps not looming as large in the face of those previously delineated, still prove to be deeply vexing in the daily life of communities. A prime example is the scrutiny of healthcare systems, their deficiencies and the pervasive underfunding – themes that resonate within both Ukrainian and Polish dramatic narratives.

<sup>14</sup> Ł. Wójcicki, *Carpaccio w stylu wschodnim*, “Dialog” 2022, No. 10, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Cierpienie mięsa* [TheSufferingofMeat]. Justyna Jaworska in conversation with ŁukaszWójcicki, “Dialog” 2022, No. 10, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Cierpienie mięsa*. Justyna Jaworska in conversation with ŁukaszWójcicki, “Dialog” 2022, No. 10, p. 23. In the context of the topic taken up by Wójcicki, it is also worth mentioning the theatrical project 1.8 M, which is a co-production of WEDA project/Creative Space Art Foundation and Nowy Teatr in Warsaw. Created using the verbatim method, the performance was constructed from speeches by Belarusian actors based on authentic court testimonies of Lukashenko's dictatorship victims and letters written to their relatives. Individual speeches were delivered in Russian and Belarusian. Directed by Ivan Vyrypavey, translated by Agnieszka Sowińska, Joanna Bernatowicz, premiered December 28, 2021. (Cf. Agata Tomaszewicz, Głośniej, “Teatr” 2022, No. 3).

Thus, within the anthology *Współczesna dramaturgia ukraińska. Od A do JA* [Contemporary Ukrainian Drama: From A to JA], Tetiana Kycenko's play *Białofartusznosc* [White-Aproness], which premiered in 2015, unfolds as a dark comedy that exposes the grim underbelly of the healthcare system. A recurring leitmotif echoes through the narrative as the medical practitioners' chant: "we will revive," while an ensemble of patients, akin to a chorus in an ancient tragedy, offer commentary on the increasingly grotesque scenarios that unfold. Patients, even when facing life-threatening conditions, gain admission to hospital only after making a "voluntary" contribution to charity. Ensuring that the patient has funds takes precedence over initiating urgent medical interventions to save those in a critical condition. The play also casts a critical eye on the lack of accountability for medical errors, the prevalence of alcohol consumption among healthcare workers, with one ward nurse affirming: "Guys, don't worry: even when he's drunk, he has golden hands"<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, the play delves into dire conditions where medical staff often need to finance basic hygiene supplies or office materials, while grappling with low wages and a chronic shortage of personnel. In this context, faint echoes of war reverberate within the narrative, encapsulated in hushed phrases like "Wounded soldiers were brought in yesterday"<sup>18</sup> and the confession of one nurse: "They operated on a soldier, and I'm all covered in blood like some kind of devil"<sup>19</sup>.

Kycenko's play subtly invokes the conventions of a *reality show*, where Dima, the son of one of the doctors, perpetually roams with a camera, capturing the manifold absurdities that unfold until he, too, becomes a subject on the operating table. The narrative of the play skillfully contrasts the expectations of patients with the motivations of hospital staff. Patients anticipate professionalism, empathy and dedication from the medical team, while the doctors, nurses and ward nurses find themselves bound by constraints imposed by the underfunded and distorted healthcare system. This, in turn, fosters a culture of callousness, indifference and professional burnout, and ultimately perpetuates a disheartening cycle. The prevailing sense of helplessness and the absence of hope for any meaningful change eventually drive three doctor-surgeon brothers to make significant decisions. One, grappling with alcoholism, resolves to quit drinking; another vows to quit smoking, and the third one, devoid of any addictions, declares his resignation from the field of medicine. The certainty of these resolutions remains questionable, however, as the one giving up alcohol clandestinely pours himself a drink, the one forsaking cigarettes conjures intricate

<sup>17</sup> T. Kycenko, *Białofartusznosc* [in:] *Współczesna dramaturgia ukraińska. Od A do JA...*, p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 160.

shapes from smoke, and the one relinquishing medicine paradoxically declares: "We will revive"<sup>20</sup>.

Karolina Fortuna's drama, *Oczy motyla* [Butterfly Eyes], offers a unique perspective on the healthcare system, albeit with distinct emphases, particularly in the context of a pandemic. This futuristic grotesque unfolds during the sixth or seventh wave of COVID-19, where a woman in labor, Anna Sekunda, finds herself at the Holy Ambulance Hospital, facing overwhelming bureaucracy and absurd security protocols. Prior to gaining admission to the ward, she is compelled to repeatedly complete copious paperwork which is then fed into the system. Unbeknownst to her, her entire hospital stay is broadcast, as she unwittingly consents to this intrusion within the mountain of paperwork. In this manner, the play, akin to Kycenko's work, resembles a sort of a *reality show*. The ward nurse, one of the characters, boasts: "We have outperformed Netflix in terms of viewership. No surprise: real cases, some horror, some comedy, scandal and blood"<sup>21</sup>. While contact with loved ones is understandably mediated online during the pandemic, nearly all medical procedures are executed by various devices, machines, scanners and apps, thereby diminishing the human element of interaction.

Despite its subtitle designating it as a *Hospital Covidian Tale*, the play delves into more than just pandemic anxieties. Fortuna addresses issues such as the marginalization of women's rights, abortion discourse, climate concerns and a contemplation of technology, primarily revolving around subjective experiences within the hospital. The birth is delayed and the protagonist grows impatient, yearning to return to her professional life. Then, an apparition resembling Sunshine from Maria Konopnicka's poem, *Co słońeczko widziało* [What the Sunshine Has Seen], informs Anna that she has already given birth, a fact unbeknownst to her. Subsequently, a ward nurse delivers a baby's body to Anna while simultaneously persuading her that the baby is alive. To ensure consistency in the statistics, the ward nurse administers more morphine to the patient. The protagonist's ordeal unfolds in a realm between reality and drug-induced dreams, hovering on the border between the tangible and the surreal. Moreover, the theme of a child's death shortly after birth serves as a poignant allusion to the tightening of anti-abortion legislation, as noted by Karolina Fortuna herself in an interview. She further adds: "Even if the world were to conquer all its major adversities – whether a virus, an ecological catastrophe, or unfavourable legislation – a woman, after experiencing the loss of a child, will forever carry an unspoken cry within her. A cry and a mystery. For not everything can be articulated"<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 161.

<sup>21</sup> K. Fortuna, *Oczy Motyla*, "Dialog" 2021, No. 10, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> *O bierności*. Justyna Jaworska in conversation with Karolina Fortuna, "Dialog" 2021, No. 10, p. 48.

The myriad situations presented within the narrative, whether humorous, absurd, or tragic, all interweave to deliver a sharp critique of the healthcare system. Yet, beyond this, they chiefly spotlight the issue of passivity and the sense of helplessness when confronting and resisting the harsh realities of the hospital environment. This is a realm where, regardless of the pandemic, an inhumane system holds sway. As it is aptly said, “just because someone doesn't see the system, doesn't mean it doesn't exist”<sup>23</sup>. The imperative to adhere to recommendations, directives, formalities and sundry protocols often takes precedence over the well-being of the patient. What truly matters is that everything aligns harmoniously within the realm of statistics.

The theme of pandemics is also ingeniously explored by Michał Walczak in his play *Rok metalowego szczura* [The Year of the Metal Rat]. This work strikes peculiar balance between a pandemic comedy and, perhaps more fittingly, a pandemic thriller. The narrative centres on a married couple, Joanna and Piotr, confined within the walls of their apartment during the pandemic. Piotr manages to work remotely, but Joanna, compelled to shut her beauty salon down, grapples with an overwhelming sense of boredom and frustration. She laments: “I'm going feral. Maybe I've already gone feral. I've stopped cleaning. Making myself up. I gobble. I excrete. I drink. I'm ending up in the gutter. I've tried yoga, Pilates, boxing, modern dance, aerobics, karate, Kama Sutra, Spanish, Italian, white singing, flamenco, but the online culture doesn't work, what kind of culture is it when someone tells me to look at myself, but they can't look at me?”<sup>24</sup> These words encapsulate the core of the play. They underscore that participation in culture and the profound experience of art hinge upon the dynamic interplay and connections between creators and their audience. Yet, the pandemic's grip constricts or entirely obstructs these vital interactions.

The protagonists find solace in TV shows and erotic games: the spouses become actors in their home theatre. Furthermore, an actual actor, who has temporarily embraced the role of a courier due to the pandemic's constraints, arrives at their doorstep. However, he candidly admits to losing faith in the theatre because of the pandemic, asserting that actors have become superfluous in this age. He champions the idea that only live theatre truly matters, declaring that “acting is off-line”<sup>25</sup>. Conversely, Piotr, a marketing specialist, persuades him that an actor is, in essence, a product like any other. They must possess the ability to promote and market themselves. In Piotr's eyes, those who fail to do so are doomed. He goes so far as to label artists as freeloaders and parasites,

<sup>23</sup> K. Fortuna, *Oczy Motyla*, “Dialog” 2021, No. 10, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> M. Walczak, *Rok metalowego szczura*, “Dialog” 2020, No. 9, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> M. Walczak, *Rok metalowego szczura*, “Dialog” 2020, No. 9, p. 75.

posing a poignant question: “What is art if it cannot adapt to the changing times?”<sup>26</sup> Piotr’s sharp criticism serves as a catalyst for Krystian, compelling him to take action. Krystian resolves to establish his own private home theatre, since traditional audiences cannot attend. Alongside a metal rat, he embarks on a journey to bring the theatre to them. He comes back to Piotr and Joanna’s home. A perverse and erotic game ensues between Krystian, Piotr and Joanna, redirecting the toxic emotions of the marriage into collaborative creation of art. The metal rat expresses a profound belief that “Theatre can still move and sow positive confusion even in the midst of a pandemic”<sup>27</sup>. Consequently, the pandemic emerges as a cleansing ritual of sorts. In essence, Walczak’s drama serves as a discourse on art, probing its capacity to flourish amid pandemic conditions – times marked by upheaval, danger, unpredictability and pervasive uncertainty. It explores uncharted territories where artistic expression may find renewed purpose.

It is of utmost importance to underscore that these referenced dramatic works, in their essence and substance, bring forth vital and highly relevant discourses that resonate vigorously within the social realm. They not only cast revealing light upon these discourses but also undergo a metamorphosis within their very midst, at times even becoming subjects to their influence. In the process of shaping both individual and collective identities, as well as illuminating our comprehension of the world and the intricacies of social interactions, these works form an integral part of the current artistic landscape – a landscape that can be aptly described as critical<sup>28</sup>. These pieces of art offer a distinctive perspective on the world, a perspective that exerts a palpable influence upon the consciousness of its audience. To echo the sentiments of Beata Popczyk-Szczęśna, it is imperative to acknowledge that the reception of a text, whether it takes the form of a dramatic composition or a theatrical rendition, transcends mere interpretation; it entails the meticulous construction of a message from the ground up. It stands as a “testament to the subjective experience of navigating a world characterized by genuine social tensions”<sup>29</sup>. It is worth emphasizing that, regardless of the original intentions harboured by the authors, this reception holds the power to rouse the audience to adopt a particular standpoint, to embark upon a specific course of action, even if, in the words of Łukasz Wójcicki, that action remains rooted, simply or ultimately, in the realm of artistry.

<sup>26</sup> M. Walczak, *Rok metalowego szczura*, “Dialog” 2020, No. 9, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> M. Walczak, *Rok metalowego szczura*, “Dialog” 2020, No. 9, p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> On critical drama, see P. Dobrowolski, *Polski dramat krytyczny jako współczesny fantazmatgatunkowy* [in:] *Gatunki dramatyczne. Rekonfiguracje*, ed. E. Wąchocka, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2020.

<sup>29</sup> B. Popczyk-Szczęśna, *Tekst jako bohater. Szkice o polskiej dramaturgii teatralnej*, “Śląsk” Sp. Z o.o. Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Katowice 2019, p. 14.

These aforementioned works encompass a diverse array of dramatic forms and stylistic approaches, and what they have in common is primarily the theme of human fears, uncertainty of the times in which we live, ineptitude of the systems that organize our social and individual lives. In the eloquent words of Jacek Kopciński, “the realm encapsulated by contemporary playwrights, materialized through the art of dialogued characters existing in the perpetual <here and now>, is an intricate tapestry that weaves together the dynamic fabric of human life understood broadly as the experience of one's own existence, the presence and consciousness of other people, family and interpersonal relationships, value systems, social mechanisms, place and time, history and memory, faith, dreams and imagination, God and nothingness, the meaning and absurdity of human existence”<sup>30</sup>. The referenced dramas portray, in an interesting, sometimes amusing and sometimes frightening way, characters who experience human, often systemic violence, a sense of powerlessness and helplessness, who are caught up in a variety of cultural, moral, social, historical and political contexts and in the recurring mechanisms of history. However, especially importantly, these works capture *in statu nascendi* individual human experiences of uncertainty, pain, fear and rejection. They show the existence of the modern human as always torn, suspended in a state of “in-between” – between plans, hopes, dreams and expectations, and their failure to come true.

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<sup>30</sup> J. Kopciński, *Nota od redaktora* [in:] *Świat (w) polskiej dramaturgii najnowszej. Part One: W lekturze i na scenie*, ed. J. Kopciński, IBL, Warszawa 2016.

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## **NAJNOWSZA DRAMATURGIA POLSKA I UKRAIŃSKA WOBEC KRYZYSÓW WSPÓŁCZESNEGO ŚWIATA (streszczenie)**

Sztuka zawsze była swoistym barometrem rzeczywistości, w rozmaity sposób reagowała na aktualne problemy, współtworzyła różnorodne społeczne dyskursy. Jednak wydaje się, że w dobie trapiących współczesny świat kryzysów (łamanie praw człowieka, pandemia, wojna na Ukrainie, kryzys klimatyczny) szybkość tej reakcji wyraźnie się zwiększyła. Zwłaszcza współczesny dramat i teatr potwierdzają, że wszelkie te kwestie można rejestrować niemal na bieżąco, chwytając „tu i teraz”. Poddane analizie i interpretacji wybrane najnowsze dramaty polskie i ukraińskie dobitnie tego dowodzą.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dramaturgia polska, dramaturgia ukraińska, wojna na Ukrainie, pandemia – covid 19, prawa człowieka

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