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SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA* BY KRZYSZTOF WARLIKOWSKI:
TRANSGRESSION OF THE HERO

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Talking about *Electra* – the performance made by Krzysztof Warlikowski in 1997 – is a matter of reconstruction, because it is not played any more and the video recording does not exist. The performance opens the perspective on two personalities of Polish theatre, who – inspired by ancient drama and by the character of Electra in this particular case – were able to talk about the contemporaneity in transition, about the absurd of living with the silent Gods, about the old rituals – full and empty in the same time, and, last but not least, about the post-catholic future of Poland...

The first of those personalities is Krzysztof Warlikowski (born in 1962) – nowadays one of the most interesting, world-known and successful Polish directors of the dramatic theatre (for example in 2008 he received the *New Theatrical Reality Award*). He is known for staging the non-Polish dramas and he is very often staging the classics like Shakespeare. In his early career he was learning from and working with Peter Stein, Peter Brook, Ingmar Bergman, Giorgio Strehler and some of the great Polish directors like Krzysztof Lupa or Jerzy Grzegorzewski. From the very beginning he was also staging abroad, mainly in Germany.

Electra was his seventh performance. It was his first staging of the ancient tragedy. Critics found it full of

quotations from his masters (like a male chorus dressed in suits and hats in the prologue of the performance, a quotation from Peter Stein's *Oresteia*) and kept repeating that it looked like the German theatre full of blood, cruelty and cold distance¹. But one of the critics, Maciej Nowak – nowadays the director of Theatre Institute in Poland – saw the première of *Electra* as a very special event. At the exact day of the première another performance of the other young director took place – Grzegorz Jarzyna was staging the *Tropical Madness*, a play by Witkacy, the avant-garde Polish artist and writer. Nowak saw that day as the dawn of the new theatre in Poland – he called his article *We, the new theatre!* And concerning *Electra*, he wrote that Polish theater had started a dialogue with the Western theatre².

In the career of Warlikowski *Electra* is a kind of transgressive performance, because just after *Electra* his performances started to be critically acclaimed as masterpieces and the artistic phenomenon of Warlikowski had begun. The phenomenon based on transgressions of the body, sexuality, catholic rituals (like marriage – Warlikowski's favorite one) as empty and de-sacrificed ones... The period after *Electra* was called *Extra Ecclesiam* by Grzegorz Niziołek, the author of a monograph about Warlikowski³. *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* is a Latin phrase which means: *Outside the Church there is No Salvation*. To conclude, with

¹ Węgrzyniak, R. 1997, Wakar, J. 1997, Gruszczyński, P. 1997, Drewniak, Ł. 2007.

² Nowak, M. 2005.

³ Niziołek, G. 2008.

Electra we are just approaching this period. And Electra as a heroine is the perfect example for describing the favorite characters of Warlikowski. The play itself shows spectrum of Warlikowski's themes. The other critic, Jacek Wakar, many years after the première of *Electra* said that if *Electra* had been staged later, it would have been the same success in the eyes of Warlikowski's admirers as the productions that came afterwards⁴.

The second personality mentioned at the beginning is Jan Kott, the critic and theorician of the theatre, known especially for his interpretations of Shakespeare. Kott and his book about the ancient tragedy⁵ was the most significant inspiration for reading Sophocles by Warlikowski. In the leaflet from the Warsaw performance two main inspirations for *Electra* are mentioned – Jan Kott and the Balkan war.

Warlikowski said that he did *Electra* because of the war in former Yugoslavia; he did it as a reaction, but for Polish society it was a dead subject at that time – critics wrote only about “the war we can always see in TV” or about the Balkan folklore, used by the director to make his performance more attractive for the audience⁶. It was a complete misunderstanding and Warlikowski never made such a clear connection between reality and his performance again.

In *Electra* the female chorus looks just like the women from the documentary photo in the leaflet

⁴ Wakar, J. 2008.

⁵ Kott 1973.

⁶ Kowalczyk, J. R. 1997, Wyżyńska, D. 1997, Gruszczyński, P. 1997, Goźliński, P. 1997, Jasiński, J. 1997.

from the Warsaw performance, the photo from the funeral of 28 years old Haxhi Osmanaj, the emigrant from Offenbach killed by Serbians. We can read there: “As a dead man he came back to his house in Kosovo, where, according to the Islamic ritual, he had been wept for hours by the women”, by the women with white headscarves on their heads, dressed in simple black dresses with long sleeves. Kott in his book wrote that the chorus in *Electra* behaves like scared village women. And this is the photo of scared village women praying for their men involved in war. In the leaflet there are few direct quotations from the Kott’s book – for example the one saying that *Electra* of Sophocles is the cruelest of the ancient tragedies.

Electra as a heroine of the performance is a transgressive heroine – she is not a character with psychological meaning, she is a figure in the situation. Kott at the beginning of his book says that the time of this tragedy is *praesens*. The characters are described by the past tense, which defines them, and there is a future ahead of them, the future which is already defined. This means that the situation is important, not the character itself. The performance of Warlikowski starts with the scene where *Electra* is standing on a bed in front of the audience, saying words quoting Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, describing the story of her family in her monologue. Towards the back of the stage, the doors are opening again and again and we can see three murderers standing behind them – it is the past tense which describes *Electra*. The last murderer is Clytemnestra dressed

in red, stabbing a white bathtub with a knife. Kott is describing Electra as a stubborn memory. The constant presence of the past and the presage of the revenge – the revenge is the future, which is already defined.

The chorus, called by critics the Weepers, is singing in ancient Greek (which was completely obscure for Polish audience) and it moves with a complicated, ceremonial choreography, making gestures connected by critics with sacrificial rituals⁷ – the religious context comes to the mind. This is the logical context for Electra, who is the deeply involved in the religious order.

Kott, writing about the myth, is building a parallel between Electra and Hamlet – they are both in the same situation – when their fathers were killed by the new lovers of their mothers and were taking the place in the king's bedroom and on the throne, all in their own house, in front of their eyes. The situation alienates them from the society and their sexuality. They both preoccupy their minds with death, spending their time speaking. Both are devoted to the father, closed in their hatred.

Kott's parallel between the myth and Shakespeare's drama is a bit more complicated, mainly because of the gender transgression – Electra is Ophelia at the same time or Ophelia is Electra, who chooses a suicide... In her *praesens* Electra has only two possibilities, two choices to keep the moral (religious) order of the world and her own honor: one is to say no to the world, say

⁷ Pawłowski, R. 1997, Jasiński, J. 1997, Węgrzyński, R. 1997, Schiller, A. 1997.

that it is absurd to live in a changed order, which leads her to committing suicide, and the other is to try to bring the order back – which means a murder in this case. Women, according to Kott, are in the tragedies of Sophocles the incarnation of *sacrum* (Antigone is also a perfect example) – they are devoted to the dead, loyal to and fascinated by them.

Electra in order not to commit suicide needs Orestes, the male. And Orestes, in Kott's parallel, is also Hamlet (one critic of Warlikowski's performance mentioned that the actor playing Orestes, Mariusz Bonaszewski, was portraying Hamlet in his previous play and that his style of acting is very much the same as in the Shakespearean performance⁸). As Kott wrote, Electra is a psychological motivation of Orestes, and she is inciting him against the mother. Together they can rectify the world by the gesture – murder of the mother and her lover. In Kott's interpretation of Sophocles, if life is a failure the last gesture bears the only importance which can give any sense at all to that failure. The gesture can break the *praesens*. Orestes is a sword, Electra is a need – the humiliated one, howling with humiliation. The woman, according to Kott's way of understanding the ancient tragedy, is dealing with sexuality and is not able to kill while the man is the one who is killing.

Kott also says that even if Sophocles was always perceived by philologists as the embodiment of the theatre made of marble (a metaphor for the classical values), the theatre of the dignity and devotion, the real

⁸ Jasiński, J. 1997.

Sophocles on stage shows the theatre of humanity where the characters are yelling, howling and screaming... Some reactions to Warlikowski's performance mentioned that the screams of Danuta Stenka, the actress playing Electra, were too loud, unbearable and nearly unintelligible⁹.

Kott said much about the specific relation between Electra and Orestes, the divine siblings evoking the incest taboo. They are a couple both as siblings and as lovers. Their last gesture is for them also the way to unite, to "marry" in a way, "marry" by the bloodshed. Blood connote killing, but also sexuality. Electra is much more than mother for Orestes, she is much more than caregiver and sister. Killing the mother and her lover is the substitute for sexual intercourse between the siblings.

The end of the tragedy, Kott says, forms the situation of emptiness – just after the chorus says the average moral instruction and leaves the stage, the brother and the sister stay alone with the two dead bodies – with no punishment and no praise from Gods, with no reaction. The revenge in the end was just the next murder in a row. Gods are silent and what comes after the last gesture is absurd. They are aliens, strangers – *deinotaton* – in a city and for each other. They were deceived by Gods and by the people; with the revenge they lost their sense of living, they are mute. The dead are eating the living ones in Kott's interpretation of the ancient tragedy and in the Balkan war, which 'we can see on TV'. The siblings after the murder are mute, like in

⁹ Grabowska, D. 1997, Wakar, J. 1997.

Kott's interpretation, but the difference is that Orestes in Warlikowski's performance leaves the stage with the olive-branch in his hand.

Electra, according to all these interpretations, opens the main themes and pictures of Warlikowski's theatre: a marriage which is not a marriage; heroes who are losers and outsiders; social ties which are dysfunctional; the sexual behavior of characters which is not obvious. Grzegorz Niziołek who called this period *Extra Ecclesiam* used to define Warlikowski's theatre as a theatre of melancholy, theatre which deals with the overwork of guilt and of being a stranger, the overwork of mourning.

The dead are eating the living – it is the situation portrayed by the ancient tragedy and the Balkan war. The parallel of the revenge is obvious. Maybe it was too obvious for the audience, so that it forgot about it after the first moment it was expressed, enjoying nice oriental music (clarinet, flute and percussion), nice choreography, nice black, red and white colors of costumes, simple “ancient-like” stage design and the new translation done specially for this show.

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