January-June 2017
Vol. IV, Issue 1
ISSN: 2284-3310

Underground Performance: 20th-Century Theatre Defined by Political Emergency and Marginalization

Jenna Pollack
Salem State University

Abstract: Goal of this paper is the analysis of two contrasting theatre movements from very different political situation: the rise of the Rhapsodic Theatre during WWII in German-controlled Poland, and the postmodern, avant-garde dance pioneers of the 1960s at Manhattan's Judson Memorial Church. As underfunded, marginalized, and even illegal collectives, they used the scarcest of resources available to make profound contributions to theatre and to their countries.

Key words: Rhapsodic Theatre, Poland, Judson Memorial Church, Emergency, Marginalization, USA.

*****

Theatre is a crucial means of preservation and progression of national and cultural identities. As a result, it can be argued that art is inherently political. This has made receiving government support – no matter from the 'West' or 'East' – a challenging, and sometimes dangerous, feat throughout history. It is through a lens of emergency and the underground that I consider two contrasting theatre movements from very different political situations. Specifically in this paper I will look at the rise of the Rhapsodic Theatre during WWII in a German-controlled Poland and after under the influence of the Soviet Union, compared to the postmodern, avant-garde dance pioneers of the 1960s at Manhattan's Judson Memorial Church. Ultimately, I will present how these two movements set the stage for contemporary art today. As underfunded, marginalized, and even illegal collectives, they used the scarcest of resources available to make profound contributions to theatre and to their countries.

1. Emergency

According to the Oxford Dictionary (henceforth *OED*), 'emergency' is defined as "a serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation requiring immediate action". With reference to Poland, the nation entered an undeniable state of emergency when the Third Reich and the Soviet Union divided and conquered it in 1939. The 'immediate action' many citizens felt compelled to undertake was either undercut or prohibited by the totalitarian occupation. George Orwell famously said that the most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history (Orwell 1949), and the regime did just that: cultural genocide began sweeping the country with widespread censorship, suppression, and persecution. Polish theatre, in particular, was explicitly prohibited:

> The theater was treated and utilized by both the Nazis and the Soviets as an important tool for maintaining their grip on their populations; it served political rule, ideological indoctrination and the education of the masses, especially the youth, and generally speaking, was intended to form a new breed of perfect citizen: an obedient subject of the totalitarian state. From the political point of view, theater was for propaganda (Braun, 1997: 300).

This contrasted a very long history of a Polish value system "cultivating values of freedom, independence, individualism, multi-nationality, and tolerance" (1997: 301). Though I will touch on it later as a different contextual container, it should be noted now that these values are distinctly American as well.

Furthermore, any mode of religious theatre in particular was not permitted, as Poland had been declared atheistic by the regime. By law, totalitarian atheistic states were faithless. However, in the name of the communist state, traditional religions were often replaced by a sort of secular religion that had its own codified forms of worship. This was devastating for a historically devout Catholic people, and contrasted yet another long history within the nation of an "elusive but evident" connection between the theatre and the Catholic Church. When the Polish language was first prohibited in public under Russian law in the nineteenth century, the Catholic churches and the theatres were designated as the only exceptions:

> Thus, theater was the only public, lay institution where Polish could still be heard. Church and theater became strongholds of Polish identity and repositories of the national spirit upon which the nation lavished its affection […]. Church and the theater became a primary source of the originality and distinctiveness of the Polish theater. It endowed the theater with an

January-June 2017
Vol. IV, Issue 1
ISSN: 2284-3310

> uncommon dignity and placed on it special responsibilities over and above purely artistic ones, giving it authority to intervene in matters of conscience, morality, spirituality, and national policy (1997: 301).

When both of these institutions and their intersections were banned, a disempowered theatre community fought back. They declared a clandestine boycott of German-controlled propaganda; entertainment they did not recognize nor identify with had replaced their way of life. They developed a large, illegal network of underground theatre in response, encompassing both performances and theatre scholarship. It was in these circumstances that the Rhapsodic Theatre arose.

This leads us to consider the etymology of 'emergency': "[It] comes from Mid-17th century: from medieval Latin *emergentia*, from Latin *emergere* 'arise, bring to light'" (*OED*). 'Light' has a distinctly spiritual connotation, especially in this context, and can therefore be very easily applied to the nature of the Polish opposition. Their faith, in effect, was the 'immediate action' that needed to be taken in the face of 'emergency'.

Fittingly, the Rhapsodic Theatre was established in a private apartment in Krakow in 1941 by director and actor Mieczysław Kotlarczyk. Joined by a small group of followers, including playwright and later Pope John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła, the group "was committed to a theatrical style that emphasized the text, spoken aloud with dignity and clarity, and contained a minimum of stage movements or spectacle" (Matson 2013: online). The focus for the actors was not to embody characters, but instead to speak *about* them in the third person – in this way, they held a sense of higher power over the drama. This approach amplified the religious subject matter and themes in their plays, very often not written for the stage. Any elements other than the spoken word were included only to complement it, and thus were of significant spiritual magnitude – music, dance and design were very stylized and no naturalistic, further contrasting the power of the rhapsody against humanlike proportions.

Wojtyła famously differentiated the function of the word in theatre from daily life in 1958 in an essay devoted entirely to the Rhapsodic Theatre:

> Does not the word constitute an essential, primary element of any theater? Undoubtedly it does. Nonetheless the position of the word in a theater is not always the same. As in life, the word can appear as an integral part of action, movement, and gesture, inseparable from all human practical activity; or it can appear as 'song' – separate, independent, intended only to contain and express thought, to embrace and transmit a vision of the mind. In the latter aspect, or position, the word becomes 'rhapsodic,' and a theater based on such a concept of

> the word becomes a rhapsodic theater. And so without entering into deliberations on the primacy of word of movement in the arts of the theater, we can safely assume that according to the rhapsodic principle, the word is a pre-element of the theater (Wojtyła 1987: 371).

The religious connotations of the word rhapsody hold important significance here. In the same essay Wojtyła goes on to declare that "rhapsodic performances have an ideological rather than a narrative character" (1987: 371) and that "the supremacy of word over gesture indirectly restores the supremacy of thought over movement and impulse in man" (1987: 372). This intellectual approach looks at theatre in an almost sermon-like dimension. Its reflective and streamlined tone – in contrast to typical drama driven by narrative – elicits a sort of subconscious reconstruction in its audience: "In all this too is the catharsis, the psychological purification, that the theater can bring about" (1987: 372). In essence, the Rhapsodic Theatre identified itself as an explicit 'light' for the Polish people. Wojtyla stated:

> The impact of the performance is caused not by events, transferred in a literary manner from life to the stage, but by the problem itself . . . [it] acts, rouses interest, disturbs, evokes the audience's participation, demands understanding and a solution […] Theater discovers, theater unmasks, and he derives from it his concepts and even his strength" (1987: 373).

He was convinced that this fusion of the stage and the church was important not only to entertain the nation in hard times or to reconnect it to its past, but to provide spiritual guidance moving forward.

The theater company managed to put on six small productions in private apartments, basement buildings, and other bare spaces before it was put on hold temporarily in March 1943. After the war it received its own modest theatre, and while it had moderate success it was ultimately disbanded after a 25 tumultuous years. After a decade-long softening, the totalitarian regime's hostility towards the church and all manifestations of religious theatre grew fierce once again. But the final nail in the coffin was a request from Kotlarczyk to then-Archbishop Wojtyła to publicly celebrate the theatre's anniversary. It infuriated the authorities, and both the performance scheduled for mass and the organization were shut down permanently in 1967.

An important distinction here between Kotlarczyk and, say, fellow Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's 'poor theatre' of the 1960s and 1970s is that Grotowski's lacked the urgent and deeply embedded sense of 'emergency'. It is not enough to compare the two movements using a broad brush of minimalism or spirituality; one must recognize the important political

January-June 2017
Vol. IV, Issue 1
ISSN: 2284-3310

implications, the clandestine underpinnings, of every meeting, rehearsal and performance that the Rhapsodic Theatre conducted. It is with this sense of scarcity and urgency that we cross the Atlantic Ocean.

2. Underground

The idea of an underground movement has long been identified with the counterculture. But 'underground' as a word has two distinct definitions that are important for our analysis. The first one is "relating to or denoting the secret activities of people working to subvert an established order" (*OED*). This can easily be applied to the Rhapsodic Theatre with a severity of 'established order' in the occupation, and the clandestine nature of the 'secret activities'.

The second definition, "relating to or denoting a group or movement seeking to explore alternative forms of lifestyle or artistic expression; radical and experimental" (*OED*), is a more contemporary usage, and indicative of a context far less grave. Recalling the aforementioned long history of a Polish value system: "cultivating […] freedom, independence, individualism, multi-nationality, and tolerance", we can also see this as a very American mentality in which 'underground' holds a very different weight. While progressive Western movements do not have as dangerous of underpinnings as totalitarian rule, there are common threads of scarcity, marginalization, and anti-establishment progressivism.

In the 1960s, counterculture in America was becoming increasingly mainstream. In New York City in particular, economic decay and social upheaval were especially prevalent. The city was a national hub for protest movements of anti-war sentiment, civil rights, as well as the rise of feminist and gay movements. Immigration was steadily increasing, and the city's white population began a mass migration to the northern and New Jersey suburbs. Post-war prosperity was waning with huge factories, and in effect their respective industries, shutting down.

Compounding on this national stress, the beginning of 1960s was a difficult time for the arts in New York City, as the National Endowment for the Arts would not be established until 1965. Their official internal history notes that the American dance field was artistically rich but lacked the resources to expand basic activities, such as increasing the number of performances, the number of dancers on contract, and their weeks of rehearsal and performance time (Bauerlein, Grantham 2009). This noted scarcity of resources for the dance community, in particular, in the mid-twentieth century draws a parallel with the Rhapsodic Theatre – both fields

January-June 2017
Vol. IV, Issue 1
ISSN: 2284-3310

lacked major support from the government and were, in effect, undervalued. This relegation to the periphery of society makes both 'alternative lifestyles', thus deeming them 'underground' with respect to our established definition.

During this time the Judson Memorial Church, built in 1890 with a Baptist denomination, was going through its own period of revitalization amidst a decline in membership. It aimed to "redefine what a church could and should be […] [as] a faith-based institution that responds to the societal issues of its time and place by working and advocating for progressive change – with special attention to the needs of people that many mainstream churches tend to overlook or find undeserving" (http://wwww.judson.org/history). It began sponsoring an interracial, international residence for university students, opened the first drug-treatment clinic in the neighborhood, and operated abortion counseling and family planning services – hotly contested issues of the time. Churches have assumed many altruistic roles in modern history, but Judson took it to an impressively progressive scale. They were helping alleviate the 'emergencies' of its constituents and its neighborhood. The establishment of a resident Judson Dance Theater in 1962 was thus very much line with this institutional ethos. As a platform it gave local up-and-coming artists unprecedented institutional resources, including free rehearsal and performance space. Through 1964 the collective presented works and research of then-unknown visionaries such as Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, and Meredith Monk.

The choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater, and their collaborators, were radical in their destruction of convention, form, and theory within the field. They were methodical in their processes of performance, weekly workshops, and classes open to the public – to dancers and non-dancers alike. Aesthetics, space, and even the requisites for a 'dance piece' were all challenged, and ontology and phenomenology were incorporated into the creative processes:

> It was a vital gathering place for artists in various fields who exchanged ideas and methods, seeking explicitly to explore, propose, and refute definitions of dance as an art form. The issues that concerned the group ranged from training and technique to choreographic process, music, performance style, and materials. There was no single prevailing aesthetic in the group; rather, an effort was made to preserve an ambiance of diversity and freedom. This attitude gave rise to certain themes and styles: an attention to choreographic process and the use of methods that metaphorically stood for democracy; the use of language as an integral part of the dance; the use of "natural", or ordinary, movements; dances about dance (Banes 1981a: 167-168).

The Judson artists were highly political and functioned at the grassroots level with the Judson Church as their platform. They are a classic case study of an underground American movement. They pushed the boundaries of artistic conventions with the barest of resources, as their Judson residency filled only a few of countless holes in the field's basic operational framework. They were marginalized with no affirmation or fiscal support from society at large, and then succeeded with flying colors in changing the broader landscape of performance. As a result, the Judson artists have a permanent place in dance history, both nationally and internationally. And though the collective lasted only two years, it provided a crucial infrastructure for other institutions to sprout in the city (Movement Research, Dance Theater Workshop, among others). Additionally, the work it produced has come to define an entire generation of dance and visual art pioneers:

> The influence of Judson continues to this day, for the Judson choreographers were not merely colorful eccentrics, but esthetic adventurers who made sometimes gleeful, sometimes messy, but always fundamentally serious investigations into the nature and structure of dance movement. Yvonne Rainer has said, "There was new ground to be broken and we were standing on it." Indeed, the Judson choreographers must have seemed to be shaking the very foundations of dance, for they tended to reject both the psychologically motivated dance-dramas associated with modern dance at the time and the musically based abstractions of neo-classic ballet (Anderson 1982).

Without these pivotal voices, it is hard to know where the dance world might be today. They not only contributed an incomparable body of work, but many of compositional devices and methods are still used and are being expounded upon. Steve Paxton's *contact improvisation* has spread worldwide and is incorporated into many prestigious conservatory curricula. Yvonne Rainer's *No Manifesto* sparked a whole swath of movement generation and scoring techniques. Trisha Brown's institutional and visual artist partners set the stage, and the collaborative tone, for many high-profile acts to follow.

Even though the Judson artists functioned on a different scale of emergency than the Rhapsodic Theatre actors, operating on scarcity and as an underground movement still had important implications. They provided the major undercurrents for much of contemporary performance art in the West, even though they were seen as a fringe movement in their time. Only in the history books, for example, are many great geniuses recognized for their contributions to society – working against the system, even if only philosophically, is an uphill battle not often rewarded in the moment. However, being marginalized from the mainstream has its advantages. Especially for progressive artists, having the freedom to push the boundaries of

our chosen mediums is a dream, and that is rarely possible in an institutional setting. Even the constraint of being devoid of resources, often times, can be a hidden blessing: a streamlined set of tools and money is sometimes the most conducive way to getting to the seed of an idea, devoid of gimmicks and workarounds. The Judson Dance Theater is an exemplary manifestation of this potential.

This was definitely the case for the Rhapsodic Theatre as well, as they were able to make profound contributions on a tiny, illegal platform. The circumstances in that moment in time were horrid, and it is difficult to imagine functioning, and producing, in a similar context. However, their accomplishments are an important piece of theatre history and have paved the way for many underground movements, Judson included, to take shape. In consideration of my own work, I look to both of these collectives for inspiration and guidance. An established performer and artmaker of ten years, an immigrant, in tens of thousands of dollars in debt, and with a President teetering on fascism, I function in my own state of emergency (though, of course, with crucial differences). But these examples guide me forward, pursuing progress in the face of hardship and marginalization. My case is only a metaphor for an entire generation of millennial artmakers, and we are all looking for our own 'light' and 'alternative lifestyles' to forward our crafts and national identities.

Bibliography

ANDERSON, Jack (1982), "How the Judson Theater changed American dance", *The New York Times*, 31 January, online: http://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/31/arts/how-the-judson-theater-changed-american-dance.html?pagewanted=all [Accessed 20 Feb. 2017].

BANES, Sally (1981a), "The birth of the Judson dance theatre: *A concert of dance* at Judson church, July 6, 1962", *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 5, n. 2, pp.167-212.

BANES, Sally (1981b), "Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater and its Legacy", *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 5, n. 2, pp. 98-107.

BANES, Sally (1993), *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, Durham, Duke University Press.

BAUERLEIN, Mark, GRANTHAM, Ellen (2009), *National Endowment for the Arts: A History from 1965-2008*, Washington D.C., National Endowment for the Arts.

BRAUN, Kazimierz (1997), "Religious Theater in Poland under Totalitarianism", *The Polish Review*, vol. 42, n. 3, pp. 297-315.

JACKSON, George (2012), "Judson Church: Dance", *Dance Heritage Coalition*, online: http://www.danceheritage.org/treasures/judsonchurch_essay_jackson.pdf [Accessed 20 Feb. 2017].

MATSON, Cole (2013), "The Rhapsodic Theatre: A Theatre of the Word", *Transpositions. Theology, Imagination and the Arts*, 4 October, online: http://www.transpositions.co.uk/the-rhapsodic-theatre-a-theatre-of-the-word/ [Accessed 31 Jan. 2017].

MOKRZYCKA-POKORA, Monika (2006), "Mieczysław Kotlarczyk" *Culture.pl,* online: http://www.culture.pl/pl/tworca/mieczyslaw-kotlarczyk [Accessed 31 Jan. 2017].

ORWELL, George (1949), *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 1st ed. London, Secker & Warburg.

TRANZILLO, Jeffrey (2013), *John Paul II on the vulnerable*, Washington D.C., Catholic University of America Press.

WOJTYŁA, Karol, (1987). *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, edited by Bolesław Taborski, Berkeley, University of California Press.

ŻUROWSKI, Andrzej (2011), "The Pope as Playwright: Karol Wojtyla", *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques*, Issue 4, June, online: http://www.critical-stages.org/4/the-pope-as-playwright-karol-wojtyla/ [Accessed 31 Jan. 2017].

Website

http://www.judson.org/history [Accessed 20 Feb. 2017].