

GREATER GLOBAL DIALOGUE:

playwrights share current tya trends in poland

By Jenny Anne Koppera

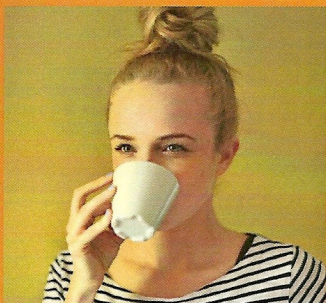


Nusia i Wilki directed by Robert Jarosz.
Photo by Dominika Pałęcka.

Today, perhaps more than ever before, there is a greater global dialogue influencing the work of Theatre for Young Audiences around the world. This dialogue of artists, educators, and practitioners has the potential to lead the field in new and intriguing directions. Controversial topics and taboos seem to be in retreat around the globe; the creative sectors of dance, puppetry, music, and media find more and more cross-over into theatre; and language itself grounds artists in cultural identity while, at the same time, leading them towards the universal. With this diversified and amplified playing field in TYA, there is a welling up of possibility, and oftentimes playwrights find themselves to be at the very core of these crucial developments and changes for the future.

We invited four Polish playwrights to reflect upon current shifts, trends, and influences in Theatre for Young Audiences in their home country to give a glimpse of the creative theatrical climate in which they create their work.

The Playwrights



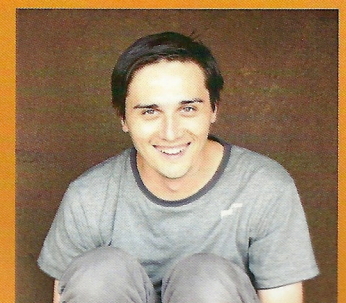
Malina Prześluga, playwright, writer, songwriter, and winner of the Medal of Young Art, has won many awards from The Theatre Plays Competition for Children and Young People organized by Children's Art Center in Poznań. She is also an author of two books for children: *Ziuzia* and *Bajka i Majka*.



Maciej Wojtyszko, director, writer, playwright, professor of theatre, and vice president of the Polish Center of ASSITEJ, has written many works including his plays and books for children, *Bromba* and *Bambuko*. His work has been translated into Italian, Hebrew, French, Russian, and English. He has also directed many TV Theatre productions, including *Ferdydurke* by Gombrowicz and *Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov, as well as fable films and other theatrical performances.



Izabela Degórska, playwright, TV journalist, lyricist, author of books, film, and sitcoms, fables for children, and sci-fi stories, has won many awards from The Theatre Plays Competition for Children and Young People organized by Children's Art Center in Poznań for drama, comedy, and plays for children. Her texts have had 15 premieres in Poland, Italy, and Bulgaria, and her works have been translated into Croatian and English.



Robert Jarosz, playwright, director, graduate of the Białystok Puppetry Department, and student of the Krakow Scriptwriting School and Postgraduate Programme for Culture Managers, has won numerous prestigious awards for dramas, original performances, and plays for young audiences. Most of his works have been printed in *New Plays for Children and Young People*.

1 In your opinion, what is the biggest revolution or change happening in Polish TYA Theatre?

Jarosz For many many years, theatre intended for young audiences mainly took the form of puppet theatre. In recent years, I have noticed that theatre for children and young people has increasingly crossed into many other fields of theatre and performance such as drama, dance, musical theatre, etc. The fact that more and more creative sectors view children and young people as a potential target audience is a kind of revolution in itself.

Degórska Performances for babies. It's really quite extraordinary and something that has to be seen to be believed. In my city of Szczecin, the award for the best play of 2011 went to the excellent *African Adventure* by Mariola Fajak-Słomińska.

Prześluga Many things have changed, but from my perspective the biggest break is that theatres for young audiences are more and more interested in contemporary dramaturgy. A few years ago, the amount of new plays was much smaller compared to nowadays. Now managers and directors are braver than ten years ago. Contact between theatres and educators is also getting stronger. That's the most important thing - to understand one another's needs and fears and to cooperate. Also major publications for Polish drama include plays for children more often than before. So playwrights have better opportunities to be seen and staged.

Wojtyszko An important change, though it's not a revolution, is the emergence of a large group of young talented playwrights who do not use any forceful didacticism.

2 How is the identity of your country or culture being used in either your TYA work or the TYA work of your country?

Wojtyszko In my opinion, the trauma of WWII still remains present and requires some reworking with Poland's neighbors, mainly Germany and Russia, as well as with the Jews. A lot of the issues are connected with the work of Janusz Korczak.

Prześluga I take inspiration from the environment I directly observe, but my characters are more often from the world of the absurd. They could exist in many different spaces and places, so I'm not strongly attached to a specific culture or country. What is important is the language. I love Polish language for being so rich and complex. I can create so many personalities by using specific words, slang, or manner of speaking, but the topics and problems that I usually speak about are quite universal and could be told in a variety of cultures or lifestyles.

Degórska This influence can mainly be seen in plays that have been commissioned by theatres. They are generally connected to local legends or places and are performed for a short while and in one theatre only.

Jarosz In my work, I aim to create universal planes of communication with the audience, which only indirectly impact my country's culture. This is achieved mainly through the language, which I use both to build relations between the characters and to construct metaphor.

Janusz Korczak



Janusz Korczak, known as The Champion of Children, was born to a Jewish-Polish family in 1878. Originally named Hersz Goldszmit, Korczak is known for his children's books and his academic writings about children. Aware of the vulnerable from his youth, he studied pediatric medicine. Korczak also gave lectures and published several essays on children's rights.

After organizing a summer camp for destitute children, Korczak became determined to found a school and orphanage guided by principles of justice and respect. In 1911, he convinced a Jewish organization to fund his dream. Dom Sierot (House of the Orphans) gave Korczak the opportunity to put his beliefs into practice.

Korczak's commitment to his ideals created a republic as well as a sanctuary. He implemented a court run by the children and encouraged them to write for an internal newspaper. It was also during this time that Korczak refined his theory on respecting the rights of children and wrote three of his best known works: *How to Love a Child* (1920), *King Matt the First* (1923), and *The Child's Right to Respect* (1929).



Chodź na słówko by Malina Prześluga.
Photo by Dominika Pałętka.

While respect and justice flourished within Dom Sierot, the world outside grew increasingly violent and discriminatory. On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. Throughout the occupation, Korczak maintained peace and calm inside the walls of Dom Sierot to keep his children from being afraid.

His unwavering commitment to his charges and resolve in the face of

Nazi tyranny brought Korczak to the attention of several non-Jewish Poles. After the orphanage was moved into the Jewish ghetto, offers came to help him escape. The offers were rejected in favor of protecting the children.

On August 5, 1942, inhabitants of the ghetto were ordered to board the train to the Treblinka extermination camp.

One witness describes the orphans leaving the ghetto:

“In contrast to the mass of humanity being driven like animals to slaughter, there appeared a group of children marching together in formation. They were the orphanage children walking four abreast in a line behind Korczak ... Even the military personnel stood still and saluted.”

Although Korczak and all of the orphans perished at Treblinka, they are remembered through Korczak’s revolutionary writings. Janusz Korczak’s lifelong commitment to the rights of children and his contributions to children’s literature and children’s rights made him a legendary figure throughout the world, especially in Poland – the most important festival of theatre for young audiences is named after him.

3 How has working with artists from other countries and traditions helped your work? If you've not had the opportunity, how do you think it would help your work?

Prześluga I haven't had the occasion to work outside of Poland yet, but every chance I have to travel expands my horizons and helps to enrich my knowledge, which is so important in our profession. I'm very curious about how different theatre systems work. For example, I would like to know more about what it is to be a playwright in Germany or Great Britain, where the connection between playwright and the stage is closer. I'm also convinced that after some time spent in other countries with people from different cultures, I would be better at writing about my own culture. This kind of experience helps to get healthy distance from our own lives and work.

Jarosz The opportunity to collaborate with artists from other countries and cultural traditions is extremely valuable. Such contact enables me to better understand what is specific to my country and what is truly universal.

Wojtyszko For me personally, the cooperation has been minimal - apart from working with the translators of my plays. However, the situation is different for the younger generation. Programs such as ERASMUS, the work of INTERPLAY, and the exchanges within the EU allow the international collaborations to be frequent and fruitful.

Degórska Irena Marečková, a Czech scenographer, used masks in my play. They were exceptional, with shiny metallic eyes. I had never seen anything like it before. Such collaborations reveal cultural differences. I was also surprised by the fact that in Bulgaria, death does not appear in stage plays for children. Elżbieta Eysymont, who directed my *Tale of Happiness*, went to a lot of trouble to "keep" my Grim Reaper.

4 In your country, are there real life topics that are taboo for young audiences? Can you work around those taboos? If so, how?

Degórska I find attempts to "deal with taboo issues" in children's theatre (abuse, domestic violence, marital betrayal), concerning in relation to a young audience. These are difficult subjects that require a sensitive approach. Polish authors handle illness, even death, quite well. This is a new trend in Polish theatre for younger audiences.

Prześluga In Poland, breaking taboos is now kind of a catchy topic. I always envy the Scandinavian approach to children and their openness with difficult subjects, but I can see progress here in Poland. We are starting to talk about these difficult subjects. Then we write about them, and step by step, we stage them. I have written a play about death, and it already has had two premieres, even though this wasn't simple to talk about with young audiences. I can't say that I like to work around taboos, because breaking the taboo shouldn't be the only aim of writing. Rather some subject must hit you - you, the writer - and pester you for some time. If you decide that this particular problem might be important also for children, then you find a good way to write about it. It takes finding a specific language, some dose of humor, tenderness, and honesty with yourself and young people. It's an obligation of the arts to tame difficult subjects and assist parents in dealing with them, but not at all costs, not only because it's trendy now.

Wojtyszko Death, illness, and otherness aren't taboos anymore and appear in children's theatre more often now. However, the dogmas of the Catholic Church remain taboo even in adult theatre.

Jarosz In Poland, I often come across the opinion that theatre for a young audience is an educational tool. However, I believe that theatre is to be experienced. That's why I also feel that a Polish taboo is treating a young person as someone whose desires and problems can be the same as that of an adult. In my opinion, the only difference is in the scale and circumstances.

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MACIEJ WOJTYSZKO

5 Why do you think it is important, in today's world, to continue to do live performances for children and young people?

Jarosz Because the young audience is just as important as the adult audience, and children's interest in and desire to discover the surrounding world is probably even greater.

Degórska I'm for children's theatre - this is where the most faithful audiences originate.

Prześluga To maintain contact with other people. Nowadays children and youth like to close up in a sterile space of television, Internet, and video games. This doesn't lead to real contact, real conversation. Theatre is a live and interactive field, where different ways of thinking, different aesthetics, and different emotions can meet and deepen one another.

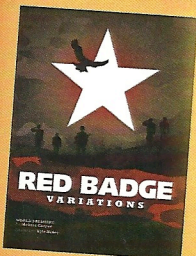
Wojtyzsko Nothing will replace live theatre and its role in our lives. Theatre created WITH children is an important element of education and socialization. ■

Jenny Anne Koppera currently teaches at Eastern Michigan University where she initiated the ongoing Global Play Project. She was recently selected as the 2013 TYA/USA representative to the International Directors' Seminar sponsored by ASSITEJ Germany. Her upcoming projects include starting a TYA company in Ann Arbor, MI focused on international TYA and collaborations as well as coordinating the compilation of a database of international plays available for US students and producers.

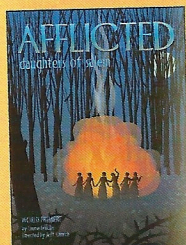


Nusia i Wilki directed by Robert Jarosz. Photo by Dominika Pałeczka.

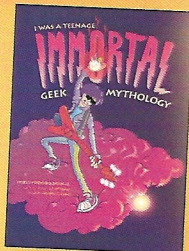
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