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Portraits of War Refugees in Contemporary Polish Drama for Children

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Abstract

From the perspective of the history of literature, war is a fundamental and crucial motif, present in a vast range of texts created by different cultures in different periods. Refugees are one of the brutal, yet usual, consequences of armed conflicts. However, neither the war nor its victims are commonly considered typical themes in dramas for children. Similarly to other so-called “difficult topics,” like death or illness, they used to be perceived as a certain taboo, absent from the art for the youngest audience. This paper aims to present different artistic strategies for portraying refugees and war victims in contemporary Polish drama for children. The analysis was based on practical examples and contains deeper insights into three texts written by the most frequently staged Polish playwrights. Although the article focuses on local dramaturgy, the context of adaptations of foreign literature was also included. The article is meant to fill the gap in the literature involving image of refugees in Polish theatre and drama for children, yet to be investigated.

KEYWORDS: *theatre for children and young adults, new dramaturgy, war, refugees, puppet theatre*

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *teatr dla dzieci i młodzieży, nowa dramaturgia, wojna, uchodźcy, teatr lalek*

Introduction

In present times, due to different circumstances, millions of people have had to change their place of living. Some have been forced to do so by military forces, others by social situations, while some are also motivated by economic factors. This is why migrations are a highly relevant topic and should be analysed not only from just one perspective – political, financial, or cultural – but multidimensionally, using interdisciplinary tools and methodologies.

The ongoing migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border and the Russian invasion of the sovereign territory of Ukraine has provided a powerful, but not the only, motivation to take a closer look at Polish contemporary dramas for children that raise the issue of refugees, war, and its victims. From a local point of view, events such as the wave of immigrants from Poland to the UK, Netherlands, or Germany after EU expansion in 2004, and an inflow of people from the Middle East and North Africa were also essential circumstances for this paper.

Moreover, it should be mentioned that the vast majority of Polish theatres for children have organised at least one performance concerning death in recent years, which might be a surprise regarding the fact that in previous decades the majority of topics that might be considered *difficult* or *sensitive* were simply omitted and almost completely disregarded by authors and directors. The popularity of this type of play with different audiences – children, parents, teachers – and successes at festivals urged its authors to continue that artistic direction and raise issues that had been almost completely absent or silenced in Polish dramaturgy for young people until the early 2000s (Waszkiel 2018). This noticeable change in the repertoires of major Polish stages is worthy of further analysis and research on new and emerging topics that have emerged in recent years. Apart from the aforementioned example of various plays about death which – as a motive – can already be considered as present, visible, and well-recognised (Kaleta 2019), other meaningful issues of social relevance are explored by artists and directors. Contemporary problems grabbing the attention of authors and audiences include topics such as alienation, acceptance, and relationship crises, while also raising public awareness regarding war and its consequences is undoubtedly one of the crucial dimensions of contemporary art.



Methodology

Researching the field of drama and its theoretical analysis has faced conceptual and methodological discrepancies from its very beginning. *The Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Polish: *Słownik terminów literackich*) defines drama as a literary genre, underlining that it is only 'a verbal composition comparable with lyric or prosaic texts' (Głowiński and Sławiński 1976, 78). Therefore, drama as a stage spectacle is a domain of theatre arts. This dichotomy resulted in creating two competing theories in which the first considers drama only as a linguistic creation, as a fully-fledged and independent literary work, while the other perceives drama (alongside scenography, music, or choreography) only as a part of a larger whole – theatrical performance (Kleiner 1948, 1–3).

In this paper, a decisive criterion for choosing one of these perspectives was functionality understood according to Charles S. Peirce's (1997) and William James's (1981) pragmatism where the availability and spread of drama played a key role. That is why describing the specificity of Polish dramaturgy for young audience is indispensable. Since 1992 only one magazine has regularly published contemporary Polish plays for children and young people. Furthermore, it comes out once a year and contains between 5 and 10 dramas previously awarded in the only competition dedicated to authors of dramas for a young audience (organised since 1986). Usually, this *New Plays for Children and Young People* (Polish: *Nowe Sztuki dla Dzieci i Młodzieży*) journal issued by the Children's Art Centre in Poznań is published in approximately 500 copies which makes it largely inaccessible to readers from outside the artistic environment. In 2006 an online catalogue – *Internet Catalogue of Contemporary Theatre Plays for Children and Youth* (Polish: *Internetowy Katalog Współczesnych Sztuk Teatralnych dla Dzieci i Młodzieży*) – was established, which collates information about plays, authors, and performances for children and young audience (New Plays for Children and Young People 2022).

What is more, apart from all theoretical debates regarding the 'real' identity of drama, it is essential to underline that this genre as an artistic form requires more experience from the reader; it is more difficult to understand than prose and the youngest recipients may simply not have all the skills required to comprehend and perceive it appropriately.

This leads to the conclusion that the target group and main readers of published dramas are directors, teachers, and others who mediate between the text and young spectators, perceiving it rather as a theatre adaptation. This justifies the interdisciplinary character of the research conducted as the



specificity of the subjects inspires one to go beyond literature studies. Particular staging enables not only the artistic quality of a play to be presented but it may also be adjusted to the requirements of age and expectations of the audience. The function of the performance is not exclusively limited to transmitting the message contained in the text: various tools (scenography, music, acting) help enrich the original meaning of the drama with new senses. That is why research on drama should not omit theatre interpretation and its reception.

Because the vast majority of the analysed examples of performances were staged in puppet theatres, it is essential to describe the specificity of this branch of art on the local ground. In contrast to the Czech tradition, where marionettes are deeply rooted in the national heritage, or to the German model separating *Puppentheater* for children from *Figurentheater* for adults, in Poland, puppetry is commonly associated with younger spectators, which may be observed as a general tendency in art for children in post-Soviet countries (Waszkiel 2012, 43–54). Due to this, puppet theatre and theatre for children have been treated for many decades as subordinate to “real” or “serious” drama, and was underfinanced. This harmful stereotype is consistently debunked by Halina Waszkiel who also indicated its sources:

In English there exist two different words: “a doll” when we talk about a toy and “a puppet” when we refer to an object animated on stage. In Polish (and the same happens in Czech, Slovakian, and Russian) the word *lalka* (*loutka*, *babka*, *kukla*) means both things: a puppet and a toy. [...] Puppet theatre was and is playing for children but neither was it nor is it a theatre only for the young audience. Almost in all Polish puppet theatres, we can find shows for adults (Waszkiel and Olkusz 2014).

Nevertheless, theatre for children and puppetry art remain closely connected as contemporary plays for the young audience barely appear in the repertoires of dramatic theatres while the majority of them are staged in puppet theatres.

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs the emergence of new issues raised by playwrights and the dynamic development of the local art for children make contemporary Polish dramaturgy an interesting field of research, and that is why the performances based on foreign novels were not taken into consideration, although examples of this type of play are briefly mentioned in the final paragraphs of this paper.

In this article, all performances and dramas available for wider reception only in the form of a theatre play were treated and marked in the same way



as scripts which has already been published – the names of the authors of the plays are mentioned using parenthetical citation with the year of the premiere.

International perspective – war and refugees in foreign dramas for children

As previously mentioned regarding the Polish theory of drama for children and young adults, there are very few publications. However, a very recent online report was written by the Centre for Children's Art in Poznań *Theatre for Children and Young Adults – Change of Paradigm?* (2022), which does not refer to the presence of particular topics such as war, death, exile, etc. in contemporary plays. These themes appear in research by Marzenna Wiśniewska (2023), Halina Waszkiel (2013), and Karolina I. Kaleta (2020) but the results of the studies are usually published not in academic journals but rather on the biggest Polish theatre portal – the e-teatr.pl website – or in the artistic quarterly "Teatr Lalek" ("Puppet Theatre"). One of the oldest festivals of theatre for children in south-eastern Europe – the International Children's Theatre Festival in Subotica, Serbia (organised annually since 1994) – attracts not only actors, directors, and performers, but also scholars who contribute to publishing consecutive editions of the "Theatre for Children – Artistic Phenomenon" monograph. Although many of the participants come from war-torn countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, or Iran, this issue (and its potential presence in local playwriting and dramaturgy) has not been problematised in their articles. In Western literature there are not many studies on this topic either, however, *And So This Is What Happened': War Stories in New Plays for Children* by Adrienne Scullion (2005) is definitely worth mentioning although 2 of the 3 plays more widely analysed in this essay refer to the figure and work of Janusz Korczak. Therefore, it is evident that although the dramas described by Scullion are contemporary, they are somewhat burdened with historical heritage because they do not deal with present military conflicts but rather illustrate and explain the past.

Nevertheless, it should be underlined that there are various studies on the meaning of theatre and drama as tools facilitating the process of healing children traumatised by war. The usefulness of this branch of art for refugee children has been described by various scholars such as Hakan Uşakli (2015), Julie Dunn (2012), Ana Marie Fantino and Alice Colak (2001). These researchers referred to different approaches including the use of theatre for



searching and (re)constructing identity, social-emotional learning, educational purposes, and alleviating anxiety.

Strategies for portraying refugees in drama for children

The omnipresence of certain problems of the contemporary world such as pandemics, climate change, and wars makes it impossible to eliminate those issues from the minds of the young, so it should not be avoided or silenced in art dedicated to them. Of course, it is necessary to think deeply about how one should talk with children about, for instance, refugees and the consequences of armed conflicts. We would like to demonstrate certain artistic strategies and analyse them based on case studies.

One of the solutions, especially in the case of the early-school audience is the use of well-constructed metaphors and motifs taken from tales and mythology. The replacement of literal images with allegories can facilitate reception and understanding, which does not lead to a simplification of the issue or its over-mitigation at the same time. On the contrary, in many cases, symbols and allegories appear to be more moving for the audience than the direct message. Tomasz Man used such a ploy in his drama *Aya that is Love*, later directed by the author himself in Teatr Baj Pomorski in Toruń (2016).

The title character is a few-year-old girl, living with her loving parents, with whom she likes to play. Aya always tries to remain at the centre of the attention of the people surrounding her. She is joyful but rather stubborn which makes her similar to many other children from all around the world, but contrary to them, Aya and her family live in a war zone. We discover this when, as a result of an explosion, Iblis – a personification of the destructive Fire¹ – enters their home and announces the death of Aya's parents. In a conversation with Itra'il (symbolising Water²), it is revealed to the main character that she still has a chance to save her mother and father, if she reaches the Land of the Dead before dusk. Here starts the first journey of the young refugee and her only companion – a green fluffy elephant called Habibi – who are forced to leave the ruins of their home and head towards

¹ One should notice that the Arabic term *Iblis* which appears, for example, in the Quran is sometimes compared to devil and fallen angels, today there appear also interpretations describing him as jin. It is a negative character, or at least an ambivalent one. Compare in: Welch 2008, 56.

² In Arabic prayers (especially exorcism) it means guardian angel. Compare in: Davidson 1971, 152.



the Nether World. Among the numerous difficulties and adventures they experience, Aya and Habibi meet two angels guarding the gates to the Nether World – Munkar and Nakir – as well as Marid, the ferryman of souls³. The King of the Nether World is moved by Aya's persistence and her love. He notices her yearning, so the girl is allowed to return to the World of the Living together with her parents. However, their house is completely burnt and the family must set off on another journey – no easier than the first – in search of a new safe home.

The use of hypostasis is a key measure for the general meaning of the play: the war is tangible, and its victims do not lose their individual features. Iblis functions not as the main character's antagonist, but rather as *spiritus movens*, who makes her act accordingly. The use of personification for the phenomena described (like war, death, fire) or features (like pride, good, evil) seems quite simple as a dramatic device, while, yet in staging it is more complicated because his/her name does not precede the words spoken by the character as in the written version of the play. In order to avoid such misunderstanding in the staging (caused by the fact that the audience might be unaware of the significance of the characters' names) Iblis makes an auto-presentation in the song and at the same time he gives a definition of war, which he personifies: "War is me / I have a red-yellow punk hairstyle/ war is me" (Man 2016).

At this moment an important aspect of the theatrical staging of the text is disclosed. The director himself called it a "multi-culti musical" (Man, Cieślak 2016). The musical background, linking a few music genres, was supposed to correspond with diverse cultural backgrounds and numerous sources of inspiration, also illustrating the multi-ethnic dimensions and roots of contemporary Syrian culture: "One should remember that Syria is a place, where the East meets the West. There are strong Greek and Christian influences and of course the culture of Islam. They all meet on one street" (Man, Cieślak 2016). The richness and originality of mythological characters stand in stark contrast to the image of the soldiers devoid of any symbolic meaning – they personify the mass and anonymous dimension of war, devoid of individuality. They hide their faces under identical masks, whose grimace is drawn with a simple, sharp line. The stage design, similarly to masks, is two-dimensional and made of cardboard, resembling comic drawings. It makes an impression

³ In Islam, the name is associated with the element of water, a dangerous power, a demon. Compare in: Wehr 1976, 903.



as if the cardboard were fragile, unstable, and prone to destruction in the flames of Iblis.

The plot describing the journey to the Nether World to rescue the parents is also quite ambiguous. Such a construction emphasises the mythological structures used in the drama, which – similarly to music and visual motives – are syncretic and link Greek, Islamic, and Arabic motifs, and at the same time underline the differences between them: “Aya meets there [in the Nether World – author] among others, the Soul Ferryman, who appears in many cultures of the East and the West. Interestingly, what many people think and imagine, even in very distant cultures, is alike. Isn’t that intriguing?” (Man, Cieślak 2016). However, from the perspective of logic and probability, the return of the dead parents to the world of the living is not possible, and such a turn of events can lead to a false interpretation of death by children, who may perceive it as something reversible. The liberation of Aya’s mum and dad by the King of the Nether World introduces the message of the whole play – the refugee crisis. The final sequence ends in a moment when the next phase of the whole family’s life begins. They set off on a new journey – perhaps equally dangerous as the one to the Nether World – in search of a new place to live. Thanks to the use of an open ending, Man’s text is devoid of a straightforward tagline or specific message, which leaves the spectator with a wide spectrum of own thoughts and reflections. At the same time the refugees – like war victims – cease to be an anonymous group from a distant region, and become real people with individual identities.

In terms of the choice of theme and use of metaphors, one may notice similarities between the text *Aya Means Love* and the drama *Yemaya – Queen of the Seas* written by Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, which was staged twice in theatres: in Wrocławski Teatr Lalek and the Opera Wroclawska. The context of its emergence can explain a lot about this drama – the famous photograph taken by Nilüfer Demir (2015) served as an inspiration for the author. It depicts the body of a Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, thrown ashore by the sea. Nevertheless, Sikorska-Miszczuk avoids emphasising brutality and violence through the use of numerous metaphors. Still, the theme and the message are described clearly and directly.

The main character of the drama is a five-year-old named Omar, an extremely sensitive boy, capable of noticing the soul in everything and all the creatures around him (like the Balcony or Flower Pot). One day, his life undergoes a complete change: “I look and I do not believe my eyes: all the houses in my town begin to lie down. One after another, they fall down on



the side. Some of them are so sleepy that they collapse straight to the ground. The windows and doors fall off. The satellite dishes fall to the ground. The balconies come off. They fall like cut trees. What is happening?" (Sikorska-Miszczuk 2016).

The destruction of the town makes Omar and his father set off with many other people on a journey through the Sea of Worries in search of a new home. When a storm begins, the boy is thrown overboard, falls deep into the sea, and touches the ground, where he enters the enchanting Kingdom of Yemaya. Omar feels wonderful in Yemaya's court and does not wish to return. Only when Omar's dad changes his attitude towards the boy and begins to understand his son's sensitivity and ceases to perceive it as a flaw, are his words transferred in an air bubble through the water, convincing the boy to come back. Yemaya allows him to go and Omar flies away with his father on a Balcony in search of a new land, that will welcome them.

Similarly as in the case of Man's text, the drama of Sikorska-Miszczuk is characterised by its syncretism. Although Omar, his father, and their companions from the boat can be perceived as Syrian refugees traveling through the Mediterranean Sea, any specific location or name allowing for precise identification will not be found in the text. Yemaya is, on the other hand, a figure appearing in the religious traditions of the Western-African tribe Joruba, Afro-Cuban *santería* or Brazilian *candomblé*, and is connected with the element of water (de la Torre 2004, 72–74). It defines war: "War is when the living goes through the path of the dead" (Sikorska-Miszczuk 2016). The elements of a fairy tale are introduced, which additionally sanction the lack of realism in the story. This double reference allows the plot to be understood in both a literal way (fragments of building reach the sea as a result of huge explosions and bombings) and a metaphorical way (objects accompany Omar in his journey thanks to their friendly relations). Such a device, like in Man's drama, makes it possible for people to return from "the other side" and the aim of such construction is not only to lead the whole story to a happy ending, but it also makes the receivers use their critical thinking towards the world on the shore, which – in comparison with the underwater lands – seems even more hostile and repulsive.

The act of observing those global problems through the prism of individual cases is an important feature of that text and also touches upon the ecological sphere in the second part of the drama, and directly presents the consequences of the described action (military interventions, overexploitation, destruction of the environment).



In contrast with two previously analysed plays, *Our Home is Here Now*, written by Tomasz Kaczorowski and inspired by Barbara Gawryluk's picture book (2016), does not include rich metaphors or take from fairy tales or myths. The text proves that dramaturgy for children can explore problems connected with armed conflicts with the use of the poetics of realism. This exploration of the theme is for a slightly older age group.

The main character of the drama, Romek, is also a first-person narrator. His monologues depict a portrait of a lonely child, one who – despite numerous difficulties and longing for home, friends, and fatherland – tries to find himself in a new country. Although events and the way they are described in the drama are presented realistically and are not replaced by any mythological or fairy schemes, the play itself is not devoid of metaphors, though they are visible mostly in the layer of scenography and costumes in theatre adaptation. “It is difficult to forget especially suggestive visual scenes: for instance the one, in which we observe birds in the sky in a subdued light, in which they unexpectedly turn into bomber planes” (Każmierczak 2017). The habitable space is made of cardboard boxes, which on the one hand resemble communist housing blocks, and on the other emphasise the fragility of such constructions and proneness to destruction. The mobility of the individual elements filling the stage allows for quick changes of action, corresponding with imposed mobility of people moving in search of new homes. Similarly to Man's drama, in Kaczorowski's play the characters of soldiers are identical too. They are puppets, whose corpses resemble heavy-weight bullets, are therefore a weapon in the hands of the chiefs – manipulators and animators. And Romek's grandparents, who did not leave their homeland, are presented as puppets, linking the features of a human and a tree that is so old that it cannot be replanted.

Summary

The presented dramas, having been awarded at different festivals, may be considered the most significant Polish plays to raise the topic of refugees and victims of armed conflict. Surprisingly, there are very few other texts touching on the problem of so-called Euro-orphans, even though this phenomenon is very common in Poland. It was marginally mentioned in *Just Fall Asleep to Wake Up* by Joanna Grabowiecka and Dagna Ślepowrońska (2015) as a reason for the loneliness of Luna, a girl raised only by her elderly grandma, who has to fight her nightmares with the help a talking cat. The



play brings portraits of abandoned children for whom new toys cannot compensate for the absence of their parents and whose reactions to the difficult situation might be very different: from silent withdrawal from society to violence and outbursts of anger.

What is more, it should be mentioned that despite the underlined lack of Polish plays referring to the migration crisis and ongoing wars, theatres also stage adaptations of prosaic texts devoted to that themes, such as *The War that Changed Rondo* by Romana Romanyshyn and Andriy Lesiv (2016) directly touching upon the conflict in Ukraine, or two other performances based on a picture book *The Enemy* by Serge Bloch (2014). Other examples include non-fiction shows inspired by biographical stories like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Rutka's Memory* (2017), based on the notes of the so-called *Anne Frank from Będzin* that is Rutka Laskier. The very young female protagonist also appears in a fact-based story by Elżbieta Chowaniec *Malala. A Girl with a Bullet in Her Head* (2018), although the play is also directed at young adults rather than children, despite the main character being only 11 years of age.

It is worth mentioning that each of the previously analysed texts contains its own, direct definition of war which is a reason for setting off in search of a new home. The precise description of that phenomenon does not only serve as an explanation of what armed conflicts are, how they look like, and what their causes are; nor are they directed solely towards a younger audience. The specific ways of perceiving war are closely connected to the content of those dramas and their metaphorical meaning. Despite appearances, such order in terms of perception is also important from the perspective of adult spectators, because it introduces them to the presented world. It is not a surprise that the destruction of the city and all the houses is a regularly repeating motif – both in terms of the text and stage design. Also, the loneliness of the child in wartime is strongly exposed. Separation from the parents does not have to have a physical dimension, which is visible in Kaczorowski's text, where Romek loses emotional contact with his parents, overloaded by duties and worries connected with taming the new place of residence. The feeling of alienation, longing, and despair accompanied also Omar's father, and the portrait made by Sikorska-Miszczuk is extremely meaningful as it makes the adult receivers feel that the drama is also directed towards them and it allows the children to gain a new perspective while observing their own parents, to notice how they care for children and their future, which turns out to be a universal value, irrespective of geographical or cultural context.



The focus of the authors on the fate of refugees, the ordinary people, whose appearance is a direct consequence of war is also not accidental. And from that perspective, as if through their eyes we observe the armed conflicts and dangerous journey for a safe place to live.

Moreover, in none of the texts was a specific place or time mentioned. Even geographic regions are not indicated. The sole reference points are anonymous seas, mountains, and rivers. Of course, due to cultural context, older spectators will place Aya and Omar in the Middle East without any problems, and associate Romek with immigrants from Ukraine, but actually, there is no direct confirmation of those assumptions in the texts. Open endings are also important features – the audience is not given an answer to questions about whether the characters will be able to return sometime to their homelands, whether they will find themselves in a new reality, and how their life will look. A delicate suggestion arises that the fate of such people as Aya, Omar, and Romek depends also on our decisions, but in any case, one cannot consider it as an intrusive exhortation to act in this way and not another. The parting words from Sikorska-Miszczyk's drama, referring to Omar and his father playing on the Balcony, can be the best example of such attitude: "If you see them flying over your heads, wave at them or invite them to your place if you have some and it is not too heavy for your own land" (Sikorska-Miszczyk, 2016).

Concluding remarks and updated perspectives

The specificity of the organisation of work in public theatres in Poland (the vast majority of plays for children and young adults are staged in city or state theatres) makes it very difficult to spontaneously create an artistic reaction on most current events happening in the world. The repertoires and new premieres – together with the resources earmarked for their financing – are usually planned a season or two in advance. Therefore, at this moment, there are very few performances featuring the current situation in Ukraine as their main topic, signs of solidarity expressed rather in charity work or spontaneous one-off projects (like happenings based on improvisation), and artistic cooperations with Ukrainian actors and directors (for example: "Direction Ukraine" in Teatr Dramatyczny in Białystok, artistic residencies offered by Theatre Institute for authors-refugees from Ukraine and Belarus). What is more, the role, especially of the theatre for children, can be important in providing entertainment and comfort to thousands of young refugees who arrived in



Poland in the past year – performances with simultaneous translation were staged in various theatres such as Teatr Baj in Warsaw, Ateneum Theatre in Katowice, Groteska Theatre in Kraków, while the Arlekin Theatre in Łódź and Silesian Theatre in Katowice organised cycles of theatre workshops for children. Nevertheless, it is worth following the further development and artistic exploration of the topic of war in Polish contemporary drama for children.

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