

WĘGAJTY AS A VERB?

landscapes ▪ communities ▪ borderlands



Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw (June, 20-21, 2022)
panel related to landscapes (online)

The Węgałty Theatre, Węgałty (July, 25-26, 2022)
plenary panel (on-site)



Institute of Art
Polish Academy of Sciences

The four decades-long theatrical work in Węgajty, carried out since 1986 in the ‘Węgajty’ Rural Theatre established by Erdmute and Waław Sobaszek, as well as Małgorzata and Wolfgang Niklaus (now the Węgajty Theatre), gives us a strong impetus to reflect on this important Polish ‘Theatre-Culture’ (Barba 2003). Our reflections are inspired primarily by Tim Ingold’s texts, in particular “*To human*” is a verb (Ingold 2014), and by the reflections of Ryszard Nycz, with his key text *Culture as a Verb* (Nycz 2017). The Węgajty Theatre exemplifies the realisation of the verb aspect of understanding culture, which Ryszard Nycz wrote about as:

“c u l t i v a t i o n , i.e. creative activity directed, on the one hand, at stimulating growth, releasing latent possibilities, showing respect for the value of someone or something, and, on the other hand, at planning and controlling the development, nurturing and breeding the desired forms of the developed forms. Activating this functional aspect, which is crucial in the etymology of ‘culture’ (...) makes it clear that culture is first and foremost such a creative activity which stimulates something into existence which, without this external intervention and ‘midwifery’ (...) (somewhat maieutic) (...) care would not have come to its realisation” (2017: 30).

We would like to reflect on the dynamic network of relations created in the processual, multi-layered reality of the Anthropocene; between the theatrical, animation, social and political work of the Węgajty Theatre and the landscapes, communities and in the face of opportunities, problems and challenges that are drawn on cultural, ethnic and social borderlands. We are interested in theatre in a situation where the oppositions between nature and culture, natural and aesthetic, individual and social, sensory and symbolic, human and non-human, physical and historical are crossed.

The axiological perspective allows us to see the ethos pursued by Waław and Erdmute Sobaszek and subsequent generations of their associates as combining life (*modus vivendi*) with creative work (*modus operandi*) and sensitivity (*modus sentiendi*). The value of ‘cordiality’, defined by the Portuguese historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (2000) as a sphere of activities motivated by the heart and feelings, becomes crucial in the artistic and social work of the Sobaszeks. Cordiality implies a denial of impersonal relationships and a

preference for kinship ties and interpersonal relationships over acting in the name of some higher common interest. A 'cordial man' is the one who is incapable of rejecting family values and transfers them to the sphere of public life.

With regard to the work of the Węgajty Theatre it is essential for us to take both analytical, 'monographic' approaches, as well as contextual ones, allowing us to place it in contemporary cultural reality in its glocal dimension and interdisciplinary approach. That is why the invitation is addressed to specialists of various disciplines: teatrologists, cultural studies scholars, ethnologists, anthropologists, philosophers, educators, sociologists.

We are interested in what position the Węgajty Theatre occupies in the landscape, and how it co-creates it. At the same time we ask about the place of the Węgajty Theatre in Polish theatre and in relation to its tradition. We want to look how the space in which the group functions influences its activities, aesthetics, working methods and its goals, but also how the theatre affects its surroundings. In this context it seems important to notice the role of the natural landscape of the forest and swamps as well as the village and to examine their influence on the profiling of the work carried out by the Sobaszek. We want to look at the village both from the contemporary perspective and with the inclusion of historical aspects – the history of multicultural Warmia as an area of forced and volitional migration. We want to investigate the relation between theatre and landscape taking into account the revealed practices, both utopian and dystopian.

We also want to look at the activities of the Węgajty Theatre, which involved communities in different ways. We situate these reflections within the research on social, participatory and community theatre. We are interested in relations with communities and within communities – the villages of Węgajty, Dziadówek and Nowica, the residents of the Nursing Home in Jonkowo, the Theatre Village Festival, or the ensembles of the Other Theatre School. We want to see how these relations are shaped – whether they are partner-like, empowering, and whether they take account of the human being as a whole 'in his/her cultural personality, encompassing not only aspirations and artistic skills, imagination or expressive needs, but also the level of attitudes and life patterns, forms of identity, models of emotionality, etc.' (Godlewski 2002: 65). At the same time, in their performances as well

as in their artistic and social activities, the creators of the Węgajty Theatre take up themes which are important in the public debate, without abandoning their original style of work based on mutual inspiration between actors and students, as well as on improvisation. Therefore, we ask about the effectiveness of the selected themes and working methods. We want to research the reception of performances presented in different places and among different social groups – in the Węgajty Theatre, in small villages and in big cities during theatre festivals, in Poland and abroad.

Another area of reflection is the activities of the Węgajty Theatre that explore broadly defined borderlands. We want to investigate where borders, understood as ‘a peculiar critical point, beyond which a different, incomprehensible, dangerous, disordered world begins’ (Kowalski 1998: 148), are revealed in the activities of the group and how they are crossed. We are interested not only in crossing boundaries in art by means of interdisciplinary activities, but also in social life – that is why we want to look at the social boundaries explored by the Węgajty Theatre, study the activities undertaken with marginalised groups, e.g. in nursing homes, shelters for the homeless, or prisons. It is also important for us to cross borders in our expeditions to ethnically and culturally diverse areas, not only in Poland and Europe, but also outside (Taiwan). We want to observe these activities in both artistic and research contexts, seeing them as an area of ‘ethno-artistic research’ (Pawelczyk 2003: 44).

Proposed thematic fields of the presentations:

1. Theatre in the landscape. Critical vs. empathic view of the presence of theatre activities in the landscape, taking into account the existing disturbances and conflicts. Recognising spaces for negotiating attitudes and values. Evolution of landscape under the influence of artistic and social changes and emergence of new subjects.
2. Relations between locality and performativity in the practices of the Węgajty Theatre. Theatre as a framework and pretext for theatre's collaboration with local communities. Relations between members of the community and artists of the Węgajty Theatre. Degree of participation of the community members in the collaboration with the group. The role of improvisation and the meaning of conflicts.

3. Borderline richness in artistic and social work of the Węgajty Theatre. Threats, disturbances and opportunities in activities carried out in borderland areas. Art against borders – circumstances favouring the artists of the Węgajty Theatre in crossing the borders and situations of their impassability.
4. Axiological perspective in the theatrical and animation work carried out by the Węgajty Theatre with communities and on cultural, ethnic and social borderlines.
5. The Węgajty Theatre in the era of anthropocene. The role of aesthetic choices and working methods, curatorial solutions, animation activities undertaken by artists and theatre educators in the face of climate crisis, social and political crises (wars, migrations, disasters). Pragmatics of action and the use of art in the 21st century. Practicing concrescence, or ‘the capacity of living things continually to surpass themselves’ (Whitehead 1929: 410). The artist as a sensitive resonator of the underground pulse of the world, listening to yet unexposed or subtly present information. The artist as a co-creator of relations, responsible for coexistence.
6. The Węgajty Theatre as a space for innovation, education, direct experience and experiment, thanks to which it is possible to create new knowledge. Art as a practice of developing cognition in action, penetrating the world and building only what slowly emerges (Rakowski 2019: 444).

The conference will consist of two complementary parts:

- a panel, taking place online, in English, whose themes will revolve around the Węgajty Theatre in the context of landscapes,
- the plenary, bilingual (in Polish and English), organised in Węgajty, during which the papers will concern three thematic areas: landscapes, communities and borderlands.

A permanent effect of the conference will be the publication of selected articles in the scientific quarterly ‘Pamiętnik Teatralny’ (first half of 2023).

Conference applications (announcement of a 20-minute speech) not exceeding 300 words, together with a short biography (150 words), affiliation, telephone number and e-mail address, should be submitted via the application form

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd3Hdn8FtbY5OejkS28_OlGhFwmaghhtULtF4dRdRwXp2uRpg/viewform by 31 March 2022.

The list of accepted participants will be announced by **10 April 2022**.

For applicants:

The organisers do not provide accommodation or reimburse travel expenses for participants

For guests:

The organisers provide accommodation and food.

Conditions for conference participation:

payment of the conference fee that is 300 PLN (PhD students 200 PLN) by **31 May 2022**

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Title: konferencja Węgajty, name of the participant

sending an abstract of the speech containing 2 pages of standard typewritten text (3600 characters) by 31 May 2022.

The conference is organized within the research *The Węgajty Theatre – 35 years of anthropological theatre and social-cultural exploration* (Sonata Bis No. 2017/26/E/HS2/00357 National Science Centre).
<http://www.ispan.pl/en/research-activities/department-of-the-history-and-theory-of-theatre/grants>