

Acting art of Wieslaw Michnikowski

The subject of my dissertation is the acting art of acclaimed Polish actor Wieslaw Michnikowski (1922-2017), whose career spanned over the sixty years.

The dissertation is divided into thirteen chapters, some of which follow the chronology of life and performances of Michnikowski, and some of which are grouped according to the types of roles and the type of repertoire in which the actor performed.

The dissertation opens with information on Michnikowski's background – a description of the environment and the place where the actor was born in and raised. The pre-war tenement house at 100 Pańska Street in Warsaw still stands. Wieslaw Michnikowski was born there on June 3, 1922. Most of his life was associated with the city. He graduated from high school in Warsaw - the school sent its students to Warsaw theaters, and this is where Michnikowski first encountered art and the great personas of the Polish stage - Kazimierz Junosza-Stępowski, Antoni Fertner, Jozef Orwid. All of them would influence his acting in the future. The most important of them was Fertner - a comedian who tended to exaggerate the chosen effects. Michnikowski's choice was quite different - his expression of comicality was always restrained.

The outbreak of World War II - a tragic experience of his generation - changed Michnikowski's life. He survived the Warsaw Uprising, was deported to a camp in Pruszkow, from where he managed escape. The escape saving him from being deported to work in Germany.

In 1945, he went to Lublin, with the intention to enroll at the Technical University in Lublin. While there he was mobilized and began performing in the military theater. He graduated from the Drama School in Lublin and made his official debut at the Teatr Domu Żołnierza in 1946. He worked in Lublin until 1951 (excluding one year at the Teatr Klasyczny in Warsaw) and played over twenty roles. His talent was quickly noticed. The repertoire of that time consisted mainly of pre-war comedies and farces, and later - socialist realistic plays. While the comedies and farces were a training in technique for the young actor, the social realistic plays did not contribute to his development.

In 1951 Michnikowski returned to Warsaw and played in the theaters of the capital for the rest of his career. His breakthrough came when he was engaged by the Teatr Współczesny in 1958, where he performed for more than forty years, working with prominent directors Erwin Axer, Jerzy Kreczmar, and Maciej Englert. The 1960s were the best period in Wieslaw Michnikowski's career. On the one hand, he became famous for his roles in contemporary

European absurdist drama - roles in plays by Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, and in Polish plays by Slawomir Mrozek (he played seven important roles). His neurotic acting personality and his comicality, which consisted of a reduction of expression, perfectly fit into this type of repertoire, and secured his place in the history of theater. On the other hand - Michnikowski made a name for himself in classical comedies - Polish, by Alexander Fredro, and English, by William Shakespeare, where he discreetly changed the tradition of playing certain roles.

Theater was not the only form of creative work for Michnikowski, his cabaret creations – most notably in Kabaret Dudek at the Nowy Świat café, and Kabaret Starszych Panów on Polish Television brought him great popularity. In Kabaret Dudek he took part in the sketch "Sęk" – which referred to pre-war Jewish humor, and in Kabaret Starszych Panów he created the character of "Nieduży" - a sad, lost, shy, funny man. Popular cabaret roles overshadowed his theater achievements. As a result Michnikowski's image suffered greatly, alas he was no longer able to free himself from this trap. He performed in dramatic roles, but to the public he remained an actor of cabaret and comedy.

His great comedic talent was practically not taken advantage of by the polish film industry. The exception is the role of a clerk in "Gangsters and Philanthropists", directed by Jerzy Hoffman. I wrote about his movies and the roles played in the Teatr Telewizji as well.

I attempt to name the kind of original comicality that Michnikowski presented, referring to the tradition of Polish acting and the great comedians of world cinema - Charles Chaplin ("sad comicality") and Buster Keaton (face - mask, reduction of comical expression).

Finally - I look for traces of World War II trauma and complex of masculinity in the roles he played - Michnikowski wasn't tall, he played slackers, losers. His physis projected the type of roles he was cast in. Was his private life a contributing factor in the choices?

I use extensive sources in my work - reviews and interviews, conversations with witnesses, readings of dramas in which the actor appeared. I examine photos and recordings. I ask questions, because in many cases there is no certainty, no evidence. The art of acting is ephemeral, it is difficult to describe, one can attempt to talk about it through the contexts. I try to do that.

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