

### 3. *“Polish Theatre Ireland Is a Place Where the Two Cultures Meet”*: Interview with Anna Wolf<sup>f</sup>

Anna Wolf (\*1983) was born in Bydgoszcz. After graduating in Theatre Studies in 2007, she moved to Dublin where she started to work in a monitoring services company and signed up for a Public Relations course with the European Institute of Communications. Anna has been fascinated by the theatre since she was a little girl, so a couple of months after her arrival, she embarked on setting up a professional theatre group in Dublin.

*JK: How did the idea of Polish Theatre Ireland come about?*

AW: In February 2008, I met an Irishwoman, Helen McNulty, in the Focus Theatre office where we were supposed to work together. Eventually, I didn't get the job at the theatre, but the meeting brought about the idea of setting up a Polish-Irish theatre group. Helen came up with the name and we wrote the *Mission Statement* together<sup>3</sup>. She took on the responsibilities of the producer and I became the artistic director. Our intent was to create a space where Polish and Irish artists would be able to conceive something original and flourish artistically. We wanted the two cultures to coexist on the stage. It soon became clear that we were actually dealing with two very different cultures. During the rehearsals for our first play in 2010, the Irish, who don't really have any theatre superstitions, laughed at our rituals. They couldn't understand, for example, why we would stomp on a script that had accidentally fallen to the floor or why we would give one another a kick for good luck before the performance. But then they quickly adopted our traditions and secretly trampled on their script pages if they had been dropped.

*JK: When did the other members join the theatre?*

AW: Half a year after my arrival in Dublin, I came across Kasia Lech on Facebook, with whom I currently manage the theatre. With time we found our other members. One of them was Agata Kaputa, a graduate from the prestigious PWST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Kraków, who later recorded and edited the voiceover for our first production. Then everyone would bring their friends. This was how Oscar Menandi, a Polish actor of Congolese origin, joined the crew. When he was five, his parents left their home country

<sup>2</sup> The interview was translated by Aleksandra Kumycz. It forms part of the research project no. DEC-2011/01/B/HS2/05120, which is run at the University of Łódź with financial assistance from the National Science Centre, Poland: <[www.emigracja.uni.lodz.pl](http://www.emigracja.uni.lodz.pl)> (05/2015).

<sup>3</sup> The text of the *Mission Statement* is available online at: <[polishtheatre.wordpress.com/about-us/mission-statement/](http://polishtheatre.wordpress.com/about-us/mission-statement/)> (05/2015).

because of the war and the whole family settled down in Poland. A while later, Alicja Ayres joined in. She was a Polish actress living in Dublin at that time and performing at the Abbey Theatre. Our group grew larger every day. Konrad Kania began to compose music for our productions. In February 2010, we started to cooperate with an Irish actor, John Currivan, and that's how our theatre company was formed.

*JK: Your first production premiered in autumn 2010 – Radosław Paczocha's Scent of Chocolate. The play tells the story of a family disintegration after the mother decides to emigrate. The woman leaves her homeland, seemingly in order to raise money for her son's rehabilitation, but in fact she wants to start a new life. Her daughter is forced to step into the mother's shoes and take care of her handicapped brother and her father, who has chosen to withdraw into 'inner emigration'. Why did you select this particular play?*

AW: I first heard *Scent of Chocolate* on Polish Radio Three during their Christmas broadcast. It was so engrossing that I turned to the Polish Theatre in Poznań with a request for contact details to the author of the script. Then I called Radosław Paczocha to ask for his permission to stage the play and, when he gave me the green light, we got down to work enthusiastically. We settled on two language versions, which we staged in turns. One day the play was performed in Polish and the next day in English. It attracted a lot of people, who were queuing in front of the theatre. Even though we brought in some extra chairs, there still wasn't enough space for everybody. After the opening night, we organised a meeting with Radosław Paczocha, during which a number of migrant viewers said that it was a great pleasure for them to be able to watch a play in Polish. However, it turned out that the English nights were even more popular. Apart from Irish people, who made up about forty percent of the audience, Poles were buying tickets, too, because some of them couldn't come when the Polish version was on. As a result, we received more bookings for the English show from the very beginning. Encouraged by our success, we returned to the stage in December and enjoyed unabated popularity. When we staged the play for the third time as part of a charity event in 2012, the theatre was again filled to the rim. We had two hundred people each night.

*JK: Did your next project, Chesssugh Mewash, gain as much popularity as Scent of Chocolate?*

AW: Like with *Scent of Chocolate*, we had the premiere of our second production in September, but a year later, in 2011. The title, *Chesssugh Mewash*, is a phonetic spelling of the name of the famous Polish poet, Czesław Miłosz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1980. The play is based on his poems from the 1960s when he was an emigrant in Paris. The project received

three very different reviews: one bad, one average and one good. I think that it wasn't fully understood. Perhaps, it's because we used a wide spectrum of languages. We intertwined poems in Polish and English with their translations in Lithuanian, French, Slovak, and even Irish. We wanted to prove that Miłosz's poems embody universal truths, even though reality has changed over the last fifty years. Our world has become multicultural and obsessed with online communication, but our search for identity is not much different from the poet's errands. We came up with a story of six characters and turned Miłosz's poems into dialogues. Interwoven motifs, nationalities, and languages symbolise the difficulties we presently face when looking for our own 'self'. We staged the play at the Dublin Fringe Festival.

*JK: What followed after Chesslugh Mewash?*

*AW: After Chesslugh Mewash, we organised staged readings of plays by Polish and Lithuanian contemporary playwrights. The project was called Freedom LTD and we worked on it in cooperation with the local amateur Lithuanian theatre, Alternayva Alternatyvai. We selected four dramas: two Lithuanian plays – The Girl Who Feared God by Gintaras Grajauskas and The Interpreter by Laima Vince – and two Polish works – Radosław Paczocha's Be Like Kazimierz Deyna and Foreign Bodies by Julia Holewińska, for which the author received the Gdynia Playwright Award in 2010. We chose the plays because of the topics they tackled. We wanted to capture Poland and Lithuania in their fight for freedom and then ask whether we actually live up to and make full use of our liberation. Do we exercise the right to be free or do we put shackles on our minds? Foreign Bodies tries to answer these questions. The play takes place both at the times of communism and at present. It tells the story of a man, called Adam, who was an active member of the Solidarity movement under communist rule in Poland. As he has always wanted to be a woman, he decides to have sex reassignment surgery after the country regains its independence in 1989 and changes his name to Eve. His decision makes everybody turn away from him. The play is based on an article Julia Holewińska read in a Polish daily, Gazeta Wyborcza. The character's sexual transformation is a metaphor for the changes Poland has undergone. We've regained political freedom, but can we enjoy social freedom? The same question is posed in Radosław Paczocha's play, Be Like Kazimierz Deyna. The drama depicts the Polish road to independence from the perspective of a national football team fan. The father of the protagonist, who is obsessed with the successful footballer, Kazimierz Deyna, wants to turn his son into a top scorer at all costs. But despite the boy's best efforts, neither his dad nor a professional football coach succeed in turning him into Deyna's 'successor'. As a result, the boy embarks on a quest to find his own idea for life. John Currian, enthralled by the humour of the play, tried to talk me into staging it in Dublin and passing him the baton of the director.*

But coming back to *Freedom LTD*, we flew the playwrights over to Ireland and organised a two-day festival in the Submarine Bar in Crumlin, on the outskirts of Dublin. The plays were read by Irish and Polish actors. After each reading, we held a discussion. They were chaired, first by Gavin Kostick, the Literary Officer of Fishamble, one of the most important Irish contemporary theatre companies, and then by Willie White, the Chief Executive of the Dublin Theatre Festival. I was proud that we managed to organise such a significant and interesting meeting.

*JK: Then you decided to stage Delta Phase. The play tells a story of three friends, or rather hooligans, chavs, who decide to have some fun on a Saturday evening. Drunk and doped, they lose touch with reality and end up committing a brutal murder. When did you start preparing for the production?*

AW: I started the preparations in August 2012 with booking the theatre and translating Radosław Paczocha's text into English, actually into Irish English, in order to illustrate that the play was originally written in slang. As a result, *Delta Phase* turned out to be a mixture of strong Polish, Dublin, North-Dublin and Mullingar accents. It took me two and a half months to render the whole text. I wanted to tease as much Polishness out of it as I could. I didn't want the audience to have any doubts that they were dealing with Polish, not Irish or English, hooligans. Unfortunately, we didn't manage to prepare a bilingual project, as we had done with *Scent of Chocolate*, because the Polish actors were snowed under with work at their drama schools and couldn't find the time for rehearsing. That's why we staged *Delta Phase* solely in English, which pleased the scriptwriter, but in my opinion deterred a lot of our Polish audience. There were evenings when we had an entirely Irish audience.

*JK: After Radosław Paczocha, you turned to Julia Holewińska's plays.*

AW: Yes, the production of *Foreign Bodies* by Julia Holewińska turned out to be our great media and artistic success. We got a chance to stage it in the Project Arts Centre, the largest theatre centre in Dublin. As the play refers to the events from the past and combines them with current affairs, the Irish audience received a dose of knowledge about the fall of the communist regime and the rise of capitalism in Poland. The next play we worked on, *Bubble Revolution*, was especially dear to us because it told the story of our generation. The generation of people who are now in their thirties. A lot of them decided to emigrate to the British Isles after 2004. Not unlike the main character, we have only a vague memory of communism. This time, the play was staged both in Ireland and Great Britain.

*JK: What audiences have you been aiming your plays at?*

AW: Our initial idea was to start a theatre that would bring Irish and Polish audiences together, but of course, we don't aim our projects at any specific nationalities. I'd say we perform for Dubliners. Our audiences comprise a multicultural mix of actors, artistic directors, critics, and people from the streets who, at least for the time being, are usually Polish or Irish. One of our goals is to promote contemporary Polish culture among the locals; therefore, I've subscribed to *Dialog*, a Polish monthly which publishes brand-new dramatic texts, to be up to date with our modern playwriting. I always do my best to choose texts that somehow relate to the Irish context. Even though I usually go for drama, I'm also open to prose and poetic texts that could be adapted for the stage. On the other hand, our aim is also to familiarise Polish immigrants with the local theatre, its language, actors, and critics. Polish Theatre Ireland is a place where the two cultures meet.

*JK: Since we touched upon the topic of nationalities, what do you think of Irish people?*

AW: I think they are friendly, optimistic, and helpful. I remember when I first went to Kilkenny. Lost in thought, I stood in the street, and suddenly an Irishwoman approached me and offered to help me find a job. She led me to a nearby supermarket, gave me an application form and went on to explain how to fill it in. Nobody would approach me like that in Poland! I also think that the Irish live on a day-to-day basis. They don't worry about tomorrow and they don't make far-reaching plans. In Poland, it's the other way round. We live on our dreams and we plan everything in hope of a better future. That's why here, in Ireland, people have their apartments made over only every now and then; whereas every time I visit Poland, I hear the noise of drilling, because of someone redoing their flat. It's partly due to our financial situation, but it's also a consequence of our mentality. Unlike us, the Irish are more relaxed. They don't look for problems where there aren't any. It was one of the reasons why I came here. In Poland, I felt under constant pressure to get married, to start a family, to take out a bank loan for a flat. I don't feel that here. And from the perspective of a person running a theatre company, I admire the Irish people's interest in the theatre. During the Dublin Theatre Festival, all tickets were sold out even though they were quite expensive.

*JK: And what do Irish people think of Poles?*

AW: They regard us as a very hardworking nation and they feel that we're similar to them. We became quite popular here during the Euro Championship in 2012. Irish football fans, who visited Poland, kept repeating on the radio and TV that they were impressed by how well things were organised and by the atmosphere of the whole event. To make the most of these enthusiastic attitudes, the authorities of the city of Poznań set up a photo exhibition in Dublin that displayed photographs of Irish football fans in Polish stadiums.

*JK: What differences can you see between the ways theatres are run in Poland and in Ireland?*

AW: The Polish and Irish systems are very different. In Poland, the play is run as long as it is popular, sometimes even for ten years. Most actors work full time and are paid a monthly salary. In Ireland, they rarely have a permanent job, and only celebrities can make a living from acting. The other actors work on a contract basis, so they have to have regular day jobs. The audience is perceived as customers and the play as a product. The show is run for three weeks straight, and then it's taken down. The memory of it fades away and the only sign that it had taken place remains in the archives. Not without reason, they call a show here a theatre 'production'. In Poland, there is greater artistic freedom, more time for brainstorming and rehearsing. Here, you have to follow a strict timeframe, imposed on you by the market. The rehearsals have to be covered out of the play's budget so they can't last longer than a month or two. After that, you run out of money.

*JK: Since you mention money, where does your theatre get funding from?*

AW: We're sponsored mainly by the Polish Embassy and the Consulate in Dublin. Additionally, we raise some money over the Internet and during special donation events. The Polish Social and Cultural Association provides us with a room for rehearsals free-of-charge. Every year, we also apply for subsidies from the Arts Council and the Irish Ministry for Culture, with no success so far. But we'll keep trying until they notice us.

*JK: How do you promote your projects?*

AW: We use a whole spectrum of channels. From the very beginning, I've done a lot of campaigning via social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. What's interesting, they seem to spread the word more efficiently than our website (<<https://polishtheatre.wordpress.com>>). We also use traditional methods, such as flyers and posters that are distributed throughout the city. Additionally, I spend a lot of time promoting the theatre in Polish and Irish media. Articles about Polish Theatre Ireland have been published in *Polska Gazeta* – a Polish weekly published in Dublin – and *The Irish Times*, among others. Our members, Kasia Lech and Alicja Ayres, were interviewed for a lengthy feature entitled "Please Don't Cast Me as a Prostitute – Again", which was published in the largest-selling weekly, *The Sunday Times*. In the interview, they argue that they are fed up with being offered the roles of cleaners, builders, and prostitutes all the time. Even though this stereotype doesn't come out of nowhere – on arrival, most migrant women from Poland found employment in hotels and men on building sites – they claim that being cast in the same roles over and over again only reiterates prejudices regarding foreigners that no longer hold true. The actors don't mind taking the part of a cleaner, but they'd rather impersonate an Irish or, let's say, a German character, not always a Polish one. They conclude that Irish producers should acknowledge that Ireland has turned into a multicultural country with a myriad of languages. From all green, it has changed into a multi-coloured island.

*JK: Do you have plans to return to Poland?*

AW: Poland will always be my homeland, the place where I was born. Even though I left, I consider myself a patriot. We don't have to fight any regime at present, so our patriotism manifests itself rather in our affection for culture. That's why I promote Polish culture among the Irish and among migrants. In Ireland, I met people who inspired me to start a theatre company and they constantly support me in my endeavours. Although I miss my family, whom I left behind in Poland, I can't imagine going back. Currently, I live in Rome, from where I manage Polish Theatre Ireland, and I'm working on a new play, *The Passengers*, which I'm co-writing with an Irish playwright, Rory O'Sullivan. The play explores various dimensions of (e)migration and depicts it from different perspectives. It has been inspired by real life stories and presents the journey of three characters, including an Irishman and a Pole, who are trying to find their place in the ever-changing world of today<sup>4</sup>.

#### *Works Cited*

- Grajauskas Gintaras (2012), *The Girl Who Feared God*, trans. by Laima Vince, dir. Vincent O'Reilly, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland and Alternayva Alternatyvai.
- Holewińska Julia (2012), *Foreign Bodies*, trans. by Arthur Zapałowski, dir. Kasia Lech, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland and Alternayva Alternatyvai.
- (2013), *Bubble Revolution*, trans. by Arthur Zapałowski, dir. John Currivan, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland.
- Paczocho Radosław (2011), *Scent of Chocolate*, trans., adapted and dir. by Anna Wolf, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland.
- (2012), *Be Like Kazimierz Deyna*, trans. by Anna Wolf, dir. John Currivan, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland and Alternayva Alternatyvai.
- (2012), *Delta Phase*, trans. by Anna Wolf and John Currivan, dir. Lianne O'Shea and John Currivan, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland.
- Shortall Eithne (2012), "Please Don't Cast Me as a Prostitute – Again", *The Sunday Times*, 18 November, <<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/ireland/article1164193.ece>> (02/2015).
- Vince Laima (2012), *The Interpreter*, dir. Laima Prokofjevienė, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland and Alternayva Alternatyvai.
- Wolf Anna (2010), *Chesssugh Mewash* (2010), dir. Anna Wolf and John Currivan, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland.
- (2012), *Freedom LTD*, dir. Kasia Lech, Laima Prokofjevienė, John Currivan, Vincent O'Reilly, Dublin, Polish Theatre Ireland and Alternayva Alternatyvai.

<sup>4</sup> *The Passengers* premiered in April 2015 at the New Theatre in Dublin and directed by Emilia Sadowska.