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TEATR WIEJSKI WĘGAJTY: TRAVELLING THEATRE, THE URBAN AND THE RURAL

Abstract: The paper explores notions of “the rural” and “the urban” in modern Poland through examining the work of Teatr Wiejski Węgajty, a small theatre company in northern Poland and how this work highlights and provokes tensions between notions of ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ amongst those who participate and experience the theatre’s performances. The text explores how, by using various aspects of traditional village-based performance techniques the theatre attracts urban participants who seek contact with village culture, and how this contact may contrast sharply with the perceptions and views of rural inhabitants.

Key Words: Poland, Theatre, Identity, Caroling, Urban, Rural.

Introduction

Teatr Wiejski Węgajty (The Village Theatre of Węgajty) (TWW) is a small non-mainstream theatre, based in the village of Węgajty, in the Warmia-Mazury region of northern Poland. The theatre bases some of its work on classic texts, both Polish and non-Polish, whilst also utilizing a wide variety of songs and performance techniques gathered from village culture of Poland and Central and Eastern Europe. The group holds regular performances and workshops for interested parties, as well as organizing seasonal caroling expeditions at specific times of the year, which the workshop participants may take part in. This theatre work, particularly the caroling expeditions illustrate some interesting conflicts between the notions of the rural and the urban in modern Poland, particularly concerning self-identification, tradition and artistic performance. This article will explore a number of observations made during my fieldwork with the company (which involved observing and performing on several caroling expeditions) some of these points of conflict, especially amongst young Poles, and suggest how the work of the theatre is able to highlight these.

Poles Apart? Conflicting Images of the Town and the Village

To understand some of the “conflicts” which I have referred to, it is important to examine views about the village (as well as those of the town by the village and ‘anti-urbanites’) within Poland. During my fieldwork I encountered conversations where the vil-

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lage and the town were expressed as ‘pure’ entities, however when pressed most informants admitted that each contained elements of the other, therefore, as such, a ‘pure village’ (without urban elements) or town was impossible. However, these concepts were still utilised, often as a form of criticism against “the Other” (ruralite or urbanite) or even as a self-critique, as seen previously.

Notions of Town vs Village

The image of the rural is strong within Polish imagination. Artistically and politically, it has been used in conjunction with notions of national identity, having long been a major fixture in Romantic nationalism. This can be traced at least as far back as the early Polish ethnologist/ folklorist, Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski who forwarded the notion of the *pure* Polish peasant (see: Brock 1992: 1-22). We may also note Mickiewicz’s role in forging a Polish identity grounded in an old rural lifestyle (see Gerould 1986 and Mickiewicz 1986) and ideas of *Młoda Polska*, which influenced the *ludomania*, folk-mania, of the late 19th Century (see Cwizewicz 2000, Schama 1996). Even today, the image of Górale Highlanders is used to sell beer, butter etc as a symbol of purity and *traditional* quality and values (see Kroh 1999 for a critique of the continued representations of Górale culture). As Jackson points out, “The peasant has become the repository of all virtues of man throughout the course of history” (1966: 44).

Raymond Williams (1973: 9) considers the image of the countryside to the urbanite is like riding an escalator whilst looking back, trying to find Eden (something I consider fundamental to how the work of the theatre is accepted by some of its audience and collaborators). I suggest that to some urbanites, brought up with an education stressing the rural essence of Poland, the countryside may seem an alien world. This may generate a need to make contact with this world, although often at a safe distance (like a holiday... or perhaps a theatre group). Likewise, those who have been brought up in the city but have had family connections, and perhaps childhood memories of the countryside, may seek to reconnect with these ‘roots’. With this in mind it is perhaps not surprising that there is a continuing history of town-dwellers buying property in villages, often as summer houses (although, as my informants often pointed out, *They run back to Warsaw as soon as winter sets in!*). In some cases, these urban in-comers may be accepted but there is also a certain suspicion of them amongst many villagers. This is partly an apparent fear of their motives and financial power (as I shall examine below). However, other reasons may be the apparent attitude of some urbanites towards their rural counterparts, “These town people come here and buy houses and they think they are better than us. They come into our village and look down on us”². These tensions, related to perceived power, may be further demonstrated in the changing image of the countryside and the apparent degradation of the countryside by the urban.

Nagengast points out how the urbanite’s image of the countryside in Poland has shifted throughout history, according to how it suits them to see it (1991: 8). At certain times, particularly under socialism, the farmer/peasant might be seen as the embodiment

² This comment was made by a village man at a presentation-meeting about Wyspianski’s play *The Wedding* and contemporary village/town relationships.

of freedom and resistance because of perceived independence from state control. Owning private land could be seen as symbolically possessing Polish earth and keeping it from Soviet control. Farmers could be seen as the guardians of Polish soil. Citing Raymond Williams, Nagengast suggests etic notions of the rural shift between positive and negative. In times of stress, the rural becomes the essential core to notions of *traditional* (8). However in easier times steadfastness and traditional may be seen as stubbornness, and 'old-fashioned-ness'. The bastion of tradition can be seen as a bastion of ignorance and backwardness. This image is presumably reinforced by the lack of education in many areas of rural Poland. Stadtmuller (2000: 28) notes that by the late 1990's only one-third of the nation's population over the age of 15 had completed full basic education and only 7 per cent had undertaken higher education. This reflects Hann's findings in his fieldwork in Bieszczady where few of the villagers had completed full education and nobody had gone to university (personal communication)³.

It is possible to consider Dunn's dichotomies (based on Ladislav Holy) between capitalism and socialism (1999: 128) as applicable to those of the rural village and the urban town (table 1).

| <i>Village</i> | <i>Town</i> |
|--|---|
| Backwardness | Modernity, Civilisation |
| Stasis | Dynamism, movement |
| Inadaptability | Flexibility |
| Age | Youth |
| Drabness | Colourfulness |
| Deprivation | Satisfaction of wants |
| Obedience | Critical self-reflection |
| Collectivism | Individualism |
| Gifts | Sales |
| Personalization relationships based on 'connections' | Impersonal relations based on rational calculations |

My personal research shows that both ruralites and urbanites may hold such notions. Often young people in villages spoke of their desire to embrace what they saw as a more *modern* lifestyle, including CDs and Internet, which they saw as being synonymous with the town. However, such viewpoints may also have alternative interpretations. What might be seen as *collectivism* may be reinterpreted as *community* as opposed to the selfishness and isolation of the *individualism* of the town. Likewise, the colorfulness of the town may be seen as superficiality whereas the drabness may be seen as a form of simplicity and honesty. The duality of these labels may also be demonstrated in a way that critiques notions of modernity. Dunn illustrates what is often considered as old-fashioned and inflexible is actually more suitable to the perceived methods of modernity. The works of Dunn and of Creed (1999) demonstrate how villagers and factory workers may both address modernity through seemingly modern applications

³ I found these findings interesting as I was often told by informants that it was easier for the children of villagers to gain entry into university during the 1970's than it was for a more well-off town family to send their children to university.

of old fashioned (traditional?) practices (such as voting communist in elections). Thus they may be seen to be critiquing notions of modernity and tradition as being total polarities and also demonstrating a resistance to their own degradation at the hands of the *Moderns*.

It is apparent that outsiders impose certain negative views of the rural (which are sometimes adopted by members of the emic populace, often the young). Such notions and labels may also be negative while appearing positive. Just as Romanticism imposes over-simplistic views of positive rural attributes, Modernist views of the rural may also reflect a similar simplistic misreading. This may be illustrated in the neo-liberal economists seriously mis-calculating Polish farmers' reactions to shock-therapy economics in the post-1989 reforms (Zbierski-Salameh 1999). Their notion of the uncomplaining, hard-working and enduring farmer who would willingly suffer the hardships of the supposed transition appears to have been as misguided as that of the romantic ideals cited by Jackson above (although it is interesting how the 'traditional' farmer was used to spearhead the 'modern' economic programme).

Urban 'appropriation' of the Village

As previously noted, reactions to urbanites moving into the village can vary. The initial reaction to TWW in Węgajty village was one of suspicion. The practice of urbanites buying holiday homes is by no means new and can be traced back at least as far as the late 19th century and the *ludomania* (or *chłopomania*) which the artist Wyspiański observed in South Eastern Poland (Cwizewicz 2000). This interest in the rural by the urbanite poses interesting questions which are relevant to notions of identity and the work of TWW. We might consider that the urban has a long 'tradition' of exploiting the rural (or an image of the rural) for its own needs (as Nagengast suggests). This may include the urban using the rural as a positive aspect of their own identity or turning the rural into a form of "the Other" in either a positive or negative way (as it suits them). Such practices may be seen in the activities of tourists wanting an exotic holiday amongst the Górale (listening to Highland music played by 'traditionally' clad musicians), anthropologists and ethnologists (perhaps wishing to find themselves a niche in the discipline) and even theatre companies.

Considering Nagengast's theory, it is important to consider how some urbanites might choose to see the village. As well as the negative elements listed above, it is possible to see the village as an escape from the town, a cleaner and healthier place to live and a freer, more relaxed pace of life. It can be a place where one might be able to pursue dreams and business opportunities. It can also be a cheaper house than in the city. Of course it might also be the place where some people choose to work, like ecologists, agricultural students from the town etc⁴. This is not to suggest that it is necessarily a negative process. In many cases, particularly around Olsztyn, such incomers had brought

⁴ In Węgajty I knew of one ecologist working from her house in the village and one farmer who moved into the village from a sea-side resort.

new ideas, such as ecological farming techniques, sensitive Eco-tourism and organisation skills which could promote local cottage industries. As we shall see with TWW, a revised identity and potential financial income (at least for some villagers) was brought to the village.

Possibly some urbanites accept the idea of the polarities because it creates a drive to make connections with the village; it is their escape, it is also possible for some to exploit the desire of other urbanites to escape the town by opening holiday camps and adventure holiday centers. However, the introduction of new ideas may be seen as a form of pollution or hybridisation of that which they seek. It may also be seen as a form of appropriation (in some cases) whereby having gained a part of the countryside they then choose to craft it in their own image. An example, noted by a colleague in Warmia, was when urbanites bought the classic red-brick Warmian house and then decorated in a 'rural style' using such embellishments as Górale wood carving (from the Tatra mountains) and centrally heated bathrooms. Arguably, by making the village house fit the sanitised (urban) image of the countryside makes it a more sanitised place for urbanites to live.

The Theatre and its work

Teatr Wiejski Węgajty (TWW) was formed in the late 1980's by Waclaw Sobaszek and his wife Erdmute. Based on the outskirts of the village of Węgajty, around 25 km from the city of Olsztyn, the company is housed in an old farm building, with the theatre being a converted barn. The house and theatre are surrounded almost entirely by forest. The theatre was heavily influenced by the work of the Polish theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski and the Gardzienice Theatre (founded by former actors of Grotowski's theatre laboratory), with whom the Sobaszek's had previously worked (see Allain 1997, Barba 1979: 91, Grotowski 1968, 1987). Grotowski's later work in Poland, and that of Gardzienice, both explored techniques found in different traditional performance styles both international and within Poland. Gardzienice particularly explored singing techniques and music from religious and ethnic minorities within Poland at a time (late 1980's) when there was limited focus on them by ethnologists. Both groups organized "field expeditions" to remote villages, to learn about songs, music and traditions. Elements of the collected data would be used in the theatrical technique of the performers. TWW continued this practice upon their formation, travelling to such areas as Suwałki (northern Poland) and the Polish Carpathians to learn from Hutsul and Łemko villagers. They also discovered aspects of caroling traditions in their own region of Warmia-Mazury, in particular in their own village, Węgajty, where the caroling tradition had taken place until the 1970's (and the villagers uncovered an original "szemel" hobby horse which the theatre now use). As with Grotowski and Gardzienice, the performance and dance techniques learned from villagers formed the basis of the actors' craft within the group.

As well as theatrical work in the main building, other performance-based work includes house-to-house caroling expeditions into remote (and often poor) villages in ethnically mixed areas, such as the Carpathian Mountains (New year and Orthodox Christmas) and the village of Działówek in Suwałki (Catholic Easter), where the group began to perform traditional caroling rituals connected with the specific villages (having learned

songs and practices from local tradition bearers). These have been regularly carried out for over 20 years. Performances have also made in the local village.

This form of theatre involves moving around a village, often entering the houses and performing specific songs and routines, using traditional instruments and large puppets and masks, based on traditional figures, (such as a stork with a moveable beak and an aggressive goat). The caroling can be a very strenuous and arduous form of performance, particularly in the winter, when the company may be going from house to house for several hours in extreme conditions. On one particular occasion I recall the temperature dropping over 12 degrees to -25c and a blizzard raging. We were out for over 4 hours, drinking large amounts of vodka in each house. Eventually we managed to get back to our base with the help of a van. During the caroling expeditions, performers are often rewarded with food (cakes, sandwiches etc and drink, often alcohol).

The expeditions are carried out by both regular members of the theatre and guests. These may be friends and fellow performers, or participants of the workshops held before each trip, to teach songs and routines to interested parties. A significant point about these workshops is the kind of people who attend. Much is made amongst those who know of the group about their being in “the village” and yet the workshop participants are, generally, not villagers. They are more often young theatre practitioners and university students interested in theatre, music or ethnology.

Here we can observe one of the conflicts; “village culture”, seemingly of greater interest to the urbanite than the villager; the different views of village culture between the participants and the villagers.

Different worlds, different dreams

Something that must be stressed is that any romanticism a TWW participant may have about “the village” often receives a hard knock when undertaking a caroling expedition. TWW and their colleagues are fiercely opposed to the “fakelore” of such “communist approved folklore” (personal communication) groups as Masowsze, who flourished in the post-war Poland. The groups are not about nice, fancy costumes. Caroling is tough and dirty. Some of the villages suffer extreme poverty and social exclusion, as well as such social problems as alcoholism, unemployment, health problems and hard living conditions. Many younger villagers dream of leaving the village entirely (and since Poland joined EU, many have).

Such concerns were heightened amongst some older villagers because of the lack of interest by many young villagers towards a life in the village. Several old villagers felt that the young people were destined to leave the village and the old way of life would go forever. However, some felt that the young people did not realise the importance of traditional values in life,

The young people do not want to stay here. There is nothing for them. But, they do not realise about having to work. They do not want to work. They see people on the television with cars and money and they do not realise that they have to work for them. They are only interested in these things. They do not care about the village anymore. They don't care about the country [nation]. But, without my country, what am I?

Considering the background which many of the village youth grow up in, it is perhaps not surprising that they are often puzzled by the interest of the theatre, especially those young participants who have left the “Meccas” of Poznan, Warsaw and Kraków to come to a remote village with no facilities. However, reactions to the visiting theatre company, performing old songs in villagers’ houses provoked different responses from some young villagers.

Amongst the villagers, reactions to the carolling (and occasional performances in village venues) ranged from excitement to puzzlement. Occasionally the reception was influenced by *generational* tastes. Some villagers in their twenties and thirties commented to me that they did not personally like the type of music played, with some young people complaining that, “You don’t play folk music, you play music our grand-parents like!” Some teenagers liked the carolling. Two village girls (about 14 years old), wearing fashionable clothes and heavy metal t-shirts, said that they thought the kolęda was *very beautiful*. In another village where TWW performed kolęda two years running, one mother insisted that I should persuade the group to take her boys carolling the following year. The boys liked the idea⁵.

However, there were also differing responses. Some young villagers were surprised and puzzled that people from the town should wish to embrace a kind of village culture they themselves wished to either ignore or reject. One Olsztyn-based musician who had carried out similar projects pointed out to me that,

Sometimes they think we are crazy. They are from the village and have no interest in such things. We are from the town and want to learn this music to know who we are. They are from the village and know who they are. They know what it means to be from the village. It means poverty. They do not want to be reminded of such things. It has a different meaning to them than it does to us.

This suggests not only do many young people adhere to some of the negative notions of rurality certain towns-people may hold but they also seek to identify themselves in opposition to their village identity. If young people are really rejecting traditional values (as suggested above) it may be because they see little reward in the old ways. This also highlights that it is not possible (if it ever was) to talk of a total polarity between village culture and town culture. Not only do urbanites apparently want to embrace a village identity, but many ruralites desire a lifestyle more aligned with a perceived town identity. As such more aspects of culture which might normally be seen as town-culture are increasingly entering into village culture. Speaking to me of the young villagers’ desire for computers, video games and pop music, one village musician laughed, “There is no village music now. Disco-Pola [Polish pop-music] is village music now!”

Yet, many of the caroling-participants have a desire to not only learn about rural songs and traditions, but to practice them. In some cases they find their connection through groups like TWW, in other cases they do it themselves. The above-mentioned town musician had, with some friends, taken an interest in traditional music and had

⁵ Children and teenagers involved in several workshops and carolling expeditions also liked the work and experience (not least getting sweets and cakes for free). Sometimes these expeditions were several hours long and in very cold conditions.

found old records with village musicians on. They used the sleeve notes to trace some of these players and to ask them to teach them.

So, why would these young (and not so young) urbanites wish to embrace that which young villagers wished to reject? Perhaps one answer may be found in the words of the musician about “knowing who they are”.

Finding ones-self in the Village Theatre

As well as an interest in theatre performance and music, many of the participants and collaborators of TWW share a number of interests, many of which may be seen to define the type of people who are attracted to the place. These interests often overlap, so an interest in village culture may also be connected with an interest in environmental issues (especially as the theatre is in a forest). Likewise, a number of people have interests in ethnology and musicology. Some of the guests and participants on the caroling have included academics and ethnologists (including one from Skopje, Macedonia). However, there are other factors which attract some people; perhaps a search for a self-identity.

When questioned about their interest in the work of TWW, a number of the workshop participants and actors commented about a desire to find some part of their own culture which they felt estranged from. In particular, those urban-based participants who had little or no connection with the village, seemed to feel that as much of their national identity seemed rooted in images of the rural, they were somehow lacking in this aspect of their culture.

One permanent member of the company, Marika, joined TWW from Ukraine, where she had been involved with a Kiev-based theatre company. During the late 1980's and early 1990's she had learned Ukrainian (being a first-language Russian speaker) as a way of embracing her Ukrainian identity. Her own expeditions into villages to discover songs and music were also borne partly out of a desire to know more about 'her' Ukrainian culture. This interest in Slavic village performance practices was what eventually brought her to Węgajty. Marika is philosophical in her thoughts about tradition and her use of the songs and music in her work.

I know I am not a real Kolędnik [caroler] ... I know as well that some of the songs we do, that I sing would not have been done the way we do them, or sung by women. But I think, what is better, a girl sings them or they die out? At least if I sing them then the songs still live.

The notion of working with traditional forms was often seen to be useful in helping a person connect with some aspect of identity which they may have otherwise been unable to make contact with. Several young students who worked on the Projekt Terenowy expeditions spoke of how taking part in the carolling expeditions helped *put me in touch with being Polish*. It was notable that many of those who spoke this way had been brought up in towns and cities. However some also spoke of their own relationship with *the village*.

I was born in a village and lived there for the early years of my life. We moved to Warszawa when I was very small. I had forgotten about some of these things like Kolęda. It felt strange when we started doing this work with the theatre. I felt kind of uncomfortable... it is hard to say but this

work was like getting back in touch with part of me which I had forgotten about... it brought me back to the village.

Using the Theatre to Create an Identity

So far, I have focused on how members of the theatre company and their collaborators use images of the village to help find or create an identity for themselves. However, the villages in which TWW work also use the theatre to enhance their own identity.

The work of TWW, whilst not mainstream, does attract a certain amount of media attention, both locally and nationally. The Polish edition of National Geographic ran an article about the company in 2001 (Koziara 2001) and there have been several documentaries and TV news made. This has led to several of the villages connected to TWW becoming publicized through their work. The importance of this became apparent to me when I once had occasion to take a urine sample to a doctor's laboratory and the lab assistant became rather excited upon seeing my address on the specimen bottle. She told me how she had seen the theatre on TV.

Such attention (as well as making urine samples exciting), increases the prestige of some of the villages, especially in their own eyes. In villages where there is poverty and unemployment, the locals spoke of how proud they were to be associated with the theatre, not least because of the other villages being able to see them on TV. As such, whether or not the villagers care for the performances (although many say they do), everybody appreciates the prestige that the theatre's visits bring to their village. In at least two places they refer to the theatre as "Our Theatre". In Węgajty village itself, many of the locals do not visit the theatre itself, but do attend the regular dances (held in the local fire-brigade garage). However, almost all spoke of their pride at being a centre of attention, visited by many people from across Poland and abroad. Some of the villagers also have some financial interest in supplying food and accommodation to participants and visitors.

Conclusion

By basing their work within and upon aspects of village culture, TWW have created a focus point for those interested in certain styles of performance and culture. As a focus point they subsequently attract interested parties who, for whatever reason, wish to have some, if only passing, contact with village culture. By creating this meeting point between urban and rural Poland, the group can be seen to create or highlight certain tensions within wider Polish culture, concerning differing desires and ambitions amongst rural and (some) urban members of society, as well as functioning as a focal point in identity building of individuals and groups.

I suggest that it is the *ambiguity* of the theatre itself, which allows much of this to happen. The *strangeness* of a theatre company which not only bases itself in a village, but also travels to different villages, performing where, in many cases, nobody else does, allows access to areas which may not usually be accessed by outsiders. In doing this, it also allows villagers access to aspects of the wider world, such as international visitors, songs and performances, which they may not normally have a chance to connect with.

This may act, not only as a bridging point between the rural and the urban (both physical and psychological), but also creates tension points which may highlight or provoke discussion and reaction.

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