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# Cracking the Field of Linguistic Recognition

## On the Cultural Mobility of Ukrainian Drama in Poland after 24 February 2022

### **Abstract**

This article undertakes to inscribe considerations on the cultural mobility of Ukrainian drama and theater in Poland after 24 February 2022 into research on theater multilingualism and multiethnicity in the context of contemporary migration. It focuses on the performative strategies of Ukrainian dramatic texts presented in Poland under the extraordinary circumstances resulting from Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine. The author analyzes selected performative readings of dramas translated into Polish, as well as theater projects carried out in Poland by Ukrainian artists, in order to explore the various architectures of intercultural encounter involved in artistic activities and enhancement of the agency of Ukrainian incomers, also

through the empowerment of their language. As the most important element of the architecture of intercultural encounter she identifies various strategies of cracking the field of linguistic recognition, which situates phenomena discussed in the Polish context within the broader framework of research on the performativity of language and its corporeal materiality, as well as the performance of refugeeism.

### Keywords

theatre, performance, architectures of encounter, migration, precarious bodies, multilingualism, multiethnicity

### Abstrakt

**Rozszczelnianie pola językowej uznawalności: O mobilności kulturowej dramatu ukraińskiego w Polsce po 24 lutego 2022**

Artykuł jest próbą włączenia refleksji na temat mobilności kulturowej dramatu i teatru ukraińskiego w Polsce po 24 lutego 2022 w obręb badań nad wielojęzycznością i wieloetnicznością teatru w kontekście współczesnych ruchów migracyjnych. W centrum zainteresowania znajdują się strategie przedstawieniowe ukraińskich dramatów prezentowanych w Polsce w szczególnych okolicznościach wywołanych pełnowymiarową napaścią Rosji na Ukrainę. Autorka analizuje wybrane czytania performatywne dramatów tłumaczonych na język polski oraz projekty teatralne ukraińskich artystów realizowane w Polsce, by zbadać różne architektury międzykulturowego spotkania w ramach działań artystycznych i wzmocnienia podmiotowości przybyszów z Ukrainy, między innymi poprzez równouprawnienie ich języka. Za najistotniejszy element architektury międzykulturowego spotkania uznaje różne strategie rozszczelniania pola językowej uznawalności, które sytuuje omawiane na polskim gruncie zjawiska w obrębie szerszych badań nad performatywnością języka i jego cielesną materialnością oraz performowania uchodźstwa.

### Słowa kluczowe

teatr, performans, architektury spotkania, migracja, prekarne ciała, wielojęzyczność, wieloetniczność

One of the paradoxical, and certainly unintended, effects of Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine has been the increased interest of most of the Western world in contemporary Ukrainian culture, especially in artists—such as Pavlo Arie, Natalia Vorozhbyt, Neda Nezhdana, Olha Masiupa, Olena Apchel, and Roza Sarkisian—who have repeatedly spoken out about Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine since 2014, although they have not been heard outside their country. The absence of new drama and Ukrainian theatre in international theatre studies before 2022 is confirmed by a glance at the titles of papers at what is arguably the most important global conference of theatre, drama, and performance studies, the International Federation for Theatre Research: no researchers from Ukraine appeared, and until the outbreak of full-scale war, no one spoke about contemporary Ukrainian theatre makers.<sup>1</sup>

In Poland, the indifference to the voices coming from Ukraine before 24 February 2022, which resulted in the weakness of the public debate on the war in Donbas, was particularly surprising, as there were many publishing and cultural initiatives that sought to include reflections on the history of contemporary Ukraine within our geopolitical and geo-epistemological interests. Two anthologies of Ukrainian dramas were translated into Polish and published in 2015 and 2018.<sup>2</sup> In 2020 and 2021, Agata Siwiak initiated two festivals “Bliscy Nieznajomi: Ukraina” and “Bliscy Nieznajomi: Wschód” at the Teatr Polski in Poznań, during which several readings and plays based on texts by Ukrainian

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<sup>1</sup> This prompts the question of Russia's imperial policies, which marginalize the subjectivity of Ukrainian culture, in a global context as well. See Ewa Thompson, *Trubadurzy imperium: Literatura rosyjska i kolonializm*, trans. Anna Sierszulska (Kraków: Universitas, 2000); Viatcheslav Morosov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137409300>; Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonisation: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Iza Chruślińska and Oksana Zabuzko, *Ukraiński palimpsest: Oksana Zabuzko w rozmowie z Izą Chruślińską* (Wrocław: Kolegium Europy Wschodniej im. Jana Nowaka-Jeziorańskiego, 2013); Oksana Zabuzko, *Planeta piotun*, trans. Katarzyna Kotyńska, Anna Łazar, and Joanna Majewska (Warszawa: Agora, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun and Andriej Moskwin, eds., *Nowy dramat ukraiński*, vol. 1, *W oczekiwaniu na Majdan* (Warszawa: Katedra Studiów Interkulturowych Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, Wydział Lingwistyki Stosowanej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2015); Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun, ed. and trans., *Współczesna dramaturgia ukraińska: Od A do Ja* (Warszawa: Agencja Teatru i Dramatu ADIT, 2018).

playwrights were held.<sup>3</sup> At the end of 2021, an excellent exhibition was organized at the International Cultural Centre in Krakow: “Ukraine. Mutual Views,” which ended in mid-February 2022. Although reflection on Ukrainian literature was much stronger and more competent in literary studies, it hardly made inroads into the study of theatre and performance, due to the deepening disciplinary divide. As a result, the Polish theatre and theatre studies community has mostly relied on the competence of a handful of people, such as Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun and Joanna Wichowska (recently deceased, the creator of many successful co-productions with Ukrainian artists).

It was only after 24 February that in Poland, as in most countries of the European Union, performance readings of plays by Ukrainian authors (Natalia Vorozhbyt, Natalka Blok, Pavlo Arie, Neda Nezhdana, Olha Masiupa, and many others) began to be organised *en masse* as a gesture of solidarity with Ukraine, and invitations for Ukrainian artists to arts residencies led to performances at international festivals. This paves the way for an analytical look at the complex issue of the cultural mobility of Ukrainian dramatic texts and theatre artists, and the strategies of presenting them to Polish audiences after the outbreak of full-scale war, in terms of constructing the subjectivity of their authors and performers. I would like to integrate my reflections on this unexpected and sudden mobility of Ukrainian cultural texts into research on the multi-ethnicity and multilingualism of theatre and drama as an effect of contemporary migration movements. I will use the turn to Ukrainian drama and its staging strategies, which I will discuss on the basis of selected examples of performative readings of Ukrainian drama organized after 24 February, as well as performances produced with and by Ukrainian artists, as a starting point for approaching the phenomenon I call cracking of the field of linguistic recognition. This category, which draws from Judith Butler’s concept of the loosening of the grip of norms and the emergence of subjects found in *Notes on the Performative Theory of Assembly*,<sup>4</sup> as well as Cezary Wodziński’s notion of hospitality,<sup>5</sup> and Yana Meerzon’s “dramaturgy of authenticity,”<sup>6</sup> seeks to draw attention to the benefits of hybridising the dominant language in Polish culture. It also draws attention to

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<sup>3</sup> Information on both events can be found on the website of the Polski Theatre in Poznań: <https://teatr-polski.pl/wydarzenia/13448/> and <https://teatr-polski.pl/wydarzenia/xiii-spotkania-teatralne-bliscy-nieznajomi-ukraina-online/>, 6 March 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Zapiski o performatywnej teorii zgromadzeń*, trans. Joanna Bednarek (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2016), 32, 34–36.

<sup>5</sup> Cezary Wodziński, *Odys gość: Esej o gościnności* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Yana Meerzon, “Dramaturgies of Authenticity: Staging Multilingualism in Contemporary Theatre Practices,” *European Journal of Theatre and Performance*, no. 3 (2021): 26–72, <https://journal.eastap.com/eastap-issue-3/>.

the epistemological consequences of the emergence of minority languages which, like the precarious or fragile bodies in Butler's work—vulnerable to starvation, expulsion, and violence<sup>7</sup>—require our special attention and care.

## The Materiality and Subjectivity of Languages and Bodies in Theatre and Migration Studies

Research on the changes in theatre brought about by voluntary or forced migration is developing rapidly in the countries of the Global North, whose cultural and social realities have been shaped by migrants for most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Particularly noteworthy research has been initiated by, among others, Yana Meerzon in Canada and Emma Cox in the American cultural context, which have led to several collective and individual monographs with conceptual approaches and case studies from almost all over the world.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, inquiry into drama, theatre, or emigration literature continued to develop in the Polish humanities, though its focus was usually on Polish citizens leaving for “Western” countries. Meanwhile, we have relatively recently become a destination for the global flow of migration and a place for newcomers from other countries to settle, which affects social relations between majority and minority cultures, between hosts and newcomers (we have suddenly turned from a country of migrants to be a country of hosts). As such, theatre should serve a diagnostic function and construct a cognitive framework or design new architectures for intercultural encounters. I am borrowing this term, in a somewhat subversive fashion, from the discipline of management, where it defines the substantive, organizational, and spatial aspects of designing all encounters for learning, networking, and motivating participants.<sup>9</sup> I am placing it in the context of the humanities because I want to draw attention to the conscious pedagogical, epistemological, and social function of the performing arts. Indeed, Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny argue that migration prompts questions about

<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Zapiski o performatywnej teorii zgromadzeń*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Yana Meerzon, *Performing Exile, Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012); Emma Cox, *Theatre and Migration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny, eds., *Dramaturgy of Migration: Staging Multilingual Encounters in Contemporary Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2019); Yana Meerzon, David Dean, and Daniel McNeil, eds., *Migration and Stereotypes in Performance and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Emma Cox, ed., *Performance and Migration* (London: Routledge, 2022); Yana Meerzon and S. E. Wilmer, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. for example Maarten Vanneste, *Meeting Architecture: A Manifesto*, Event Roi Institute conference, May 4, 2009, <https://eventroi.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/themeetingarchitecturemanifesto.pdf>, 8.

the function of drama and theatre and the role of the playwright in constructing performative encounters of onstage and offstage multilingualism caused by the realities of the global flow of populations.<sup>10</sup> Thus conceived, specially designed “architectures of encounter” in the performing arts would affect the way we learn about the world, think, and relate to newcomers.

Two strands of thought are particularly noteworthy in the studies cited above: the first concerns the function of the mother tongue and the autoethnographic approach of migrant artists who present their experiences within the dominant cognitive frame of the destination country; the second concerns the materiality of the actors’ language on stage in relation to the materiality of migrant bodies. Both strands need to be considered in the context of the paradigm shifts brought about by the broader decolonial turn. Indeed, the construct of migrant subjectivity in multilingual theatre involves questioning Western European epistemology. Communities confronting the negative effects of the colonial power structure are rejecting the Western European cognitive framework within which their bodies, languages and cultural heritage have been situated, and are seeking to develop models of representation and strategies of performance that promote their own local epistemologies. Fighting against the so-called *epistemicide*,<sup>11</sup> in other words, the annihilation of their subjectivity within the framework of imposed, dominant models of cognition, they propose their own indigenous epistemologies, based on local models of representation, languages, and systems of symbolic reference. In these strategies, the performers’ bodies take on a particular significance, becoming a living medium of a repertoire of cultural practices. The body and its action (performance), embedded in experiences and languages other than those dominant in Western culture, becomes, in this view, an epistemic and political subject. For example, in the Americas today, it is difficult to imagine members of indigenous or non-European immigrant communities being played by white actors of European descent. This is especially true in urban centers such as Toronto, where English is the first language of less than half the population, and the number of languages spoken by the rest reflects the scale of global migration.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny, “Dramaturgies of Self: Language, Authorship, Migration,” in Meerzon and Pewny, *Dramaturgy of Migration*, sec. 2.

<sup>11</sup> See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of The South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London: Routledge, 2014); *The End of The Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). I proposed a Polish version of the term epistemicide (“wiedzobójstwo”) in Ewa Bał, “From Servitude to Cognitive Sovereignty: Research Perspectives on Contemporary Knowledge-Creative Practices of Local Cultures,” in “English issue: Choreography for Families, Herstory, Research-Artistic Practices,” *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna* (2022): 133–159, <https://didaskalia.pl/article/servitude-cognitive-sovereignty>.

<sup>12</sup> This belief was expressed by Yana Meerzon in an interview with the author.

Alongside the decolonial turn in the Americas, Western European theatre underwent a transformation that Marco de Marinis once called the “performatisation of theatre.”<sup>13</sup> This term encompassed changes in performance and reception strategies that Hans-Thies Lehmann has described as post-dramatic<sup>14</sup> and Erika Fischer-Lichte as a new aesthetics of performativity.<sup>15</sup> Like decolonial thinking, the performatisation of theatre restored the importance of bodies because it implied undermining the fictional status of the reality on stage (and the rules of theatrical staging) in favor of communalizing the experience of bodies, time, and space between audience and stage. In other words, the semiotic order of the world presented on stage was replaced by the phenomenal order of the encounter/event itself. Spectators did not so much watch actors playing characters as they experienced the materiality of the bodies and objects that made up the performances, including the possibility of actors and spectators swapping roles. The aim of the experience of spectators and performers, which was mostly affective, was thus to commune with the bodies, voices, and corporeality of people in specially arranged circumstances. When meaning-making occurred in this architecture of the encounter, it was usually as a result of the circulation of energy (as opposed to the preconceived semiotic order typical of meaning-making in Western culture). The performative and decolonial turn thus changed the actor’s mode of being on stage, they became a performer acting in their own name, for whom body and cultural background—including language—are the primary tools for constructing subjectivity. The linguistic aspect of this situation is highlighted by Yana Meerzon:

In this scenario of multilingualism, the linguistic identity of the performer acquires the same degree of iconicity or “truth” as this performer’s physical or ethnic identity. In this scheme, the voices of the performers serve as the containers, the keepers, and the conveyers of their personal experiences, as well as the guarantors of the so-called historical truth.<sup>16</sup>

Referring to Loredana Polezzi, Meerzon concludes:

<sup>13</sup> Marco De Marinis, “Performans i teatr: Od aktora do performer a i z powrotem?,” trans. Ewa Bal, in *Performans, performatywność, performer: Próby definicji i analizy krytyczne*, ed. Ewa Bal and Wanda Świątkowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013), 19–40.

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Teatr postdramatyczny*, trans. Dorota Sajewska and Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Estetyka performatywności*, trans. Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Meerzon, “Dramaturgies of Authenticity,” 37.

Theatrical multilingualism subscribes to the idea that, in a world characterised by global movement, presenting the multilingual citizens of today's world as interlocutors of their own stories and as self-translators envisions them in the dynamic shift "from [the] objects of translation to [its] active subjects."<sup>17</sup>

This is why the autoethnographic dimension of performances and the autoethnographic approach of the scholars themselves play a very important role in reflections on multilingualism in theatre. These researchers also often use the tools of art in the framework of recognition through performance as a research method.<sup>18</sup> In their artistic and scientific projects, they explore the complex architecture of the multilingual encounter, of which their own migratory experience is a part: being in a linguistic niche, having to decipher the cultural context in which one currently finds oneself, facing the consequences of using a majority language.

In this methodological context, I would like to look at some examples of post-24 February readings of Ukrainian dramas and performance projects by Ukrainian artists in Poland to reflect on the architectures of intercultural encounter they propose. I am particularly interested in how, in a foreign cultural context, the subjective desire to be understood and heard can be reconciled with the necessity imposed by cultural institutions to question one's own subjectivity by abandoning one's mother tongue.

## The Problem of Unconditional Hospitality

One of the first institutions to organize readings of Ukrainian plays in Poland after 24 February was the Drama Laboratory at the Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw. From March to May, recorded productions were performed on stage and streamed online: Natalia Vorozhbyt's *Bad Roads, Through the Skin* by Natalia Blok, and Olha Matsiupa's *The Ball Flies to the Eastern Shore*. These dramas were written before full-scale war broke out, and were set against the backdrop of Russia's armed annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the seizure of the Donetsk

<sup>17</sup> Meerzon, 67, quoting Loredana Polezzi, "Translation and Migration," *Translation Studies* 5, no. 3 (2012), 348.

<sup>18</sup> See articles from the above-cited *Dramaturgy of Migration: Staging Multilingual Encounters in Contemporary Theatre*: Dragan Todorovic, "We Are Who We Are Not: Language, Exile and Nostalgia for the Self," chap. 2; Ana Candida Carneiro, "Playing and Writing across Languages and Cultures," chap. 4; Kasia Lech, "Acting as the Act of Translation: Domesticating and Foreignising Strategies as Part of the Actor's Performance in the Irish-Polish Production of *Bubble Revolution*," chap. 5. See also Kasia Lech, „Wielojęzyczny teatr europejski: Próba zarysu," *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, no. 173 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.34762/y6j0-zh55>.

Basin and parts of Luhansk by Russian-backed separatists. This was a war that had devastated Ukraine and its people on many levels for eight years, and had been ignored, to say the least, by Western countries.

The subject of these texts was the impending war, whose meaning was questioned and the Ukrainian citizens' patriotism for it was doubted. An important theme was the hardship of internal and external migration: the hardships of eastern Ukrainian citizens' adaptation to life in other parts of the country and the problems involved in crossing the border into Poland. After 24 February, the internal conflicts in Ukraine ceased, and some of these works lost their relevance. The playwrights sometimes decided to end the performance of the plays or make significant changes to them.<sup>19</sup> The Russian invasion, however, created a worldwide need to establish a direct links with the Ukrainian people, including through theatre. This is probably why the organizers of the readings at the Drama Laboratory opted for ready-made plays, translated into Polish by Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun. I interpret this as an expression of good will and solidarity with the victims of the Russian onslaught. However, referring to Butler, Meerzon stresses that good intentions:

often initiate problematic representational tactics, especially if its subject matter is the victimized or the suffering. . . . The ethics of representation . . . need to recognize the ambiguity of a good intention and the tension between giving the Other a voice and the potential for his/her (de)humanization through representation.<sup>20</sup>

According to Meerzon, this problem applies to many political performance productions that have emerged in the wake of the migration crisis. In these works, she believes, empathy often intersects with voyeurism, particularly in relation to the “excessiveness of representation” Butler analyzed, which is not based on strategies of acknowledging subjectivity, but capitalizes on the work of the compassionate gaze.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For example, Olena Apchel, author and director of the autobiographical play *Więzi* (*Bonds*, prem. 2019) at the Wyrbrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk, narrated the cultural differences between eastern and western Ukraine and her own experiences as a displaced person from eastern Ukraine, first to Lviv, and then to Warsaw. The author clearly idealized her home region, Donetsk and the Volnovaha area, while making a grotesque portrait of the patriotism of the inhabitants of western Ukraine, especially Lvivians, who treated the inhabitants of the east with a certain amount of contempt, especially those from Russian-speaking families. After the outbreak of full-scale war, the author found it counterproductive to undermine the national unity of Ukrainians in the face of the military threat, and removed these critical scenes from her play.

<sup>20</sup> Yana Meerzon, “Precarious Bodies in Performance: Activism and Theatres of Migration,” in *Migration and Stereotypes in Performance and Culture*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Meerzon, “Precarious Bodies in Performance,” 22–24. Meerzon also refers to Emma Cox and Marilena Zaroulia, “Mare Nostrum, or On Water Matters,” *Performance Research* 21, no. 2 (2016): 141–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2016.1175724>.

Meerzon has aptly captured the problematic nature of the “good intentions” that manifest themselves in presenting precarious subjects on stage at a time when, behind the need to give them a voice is, perhaps pivotally, the need to affirm one’s own empathy. The embodied presence of war migrants on stage is, in turn, intertwined with the issue of their language. In the performances in question, Ukrainian is the language of the subjects in the position of war refugees.

The stage reading of the Polish translation of *Through the Skin* by Natalka Blok<sup>22</sup> was performed on 4 April 2022 by two Polish actors and Oksana Cherkashyna, an actor from eastern Ukraine currently working at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw. Blok’s drama is a relatively short monologue by a woman (a mother), sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, which signals the mental breakdown of the main character, who begins to feel uncomfortable in her own body. The monologue deals with a somatic experience of war, manifested by bluish spots on the skin, which doctors call SKK, Skin of Khaki Colour, although the etiology of this condition remains unknown. Blok highlights the difficulty of discursively expressing the war experience of many of her fellow citizens. Although they are apparently used to the constant, disturbing news of more Ukrainian servicemen and servicewomen killed and more separatist attacks in Donbas, they cannot cope. The war disrupts many people’s private lives, ruins families, leads to addiction, and forces people into exile, but it is impossible to work through these experiences because, as this short play shows, no one in the country has implemented systemic “anti-war” treatment.

A recording of the reading and subsequent discussion was broadcast on Facebook with Ukrainian subtitles. This made me wonder whose perspective on the war the organizers of the event wanted to privilege. It is clear from the footage that Oksana Cherkashyna was facing a major and completely unnecessary communication barrier. As a woman from eastern Ukraine, which has been particularly affected by the war since 2014, she had to read her compatriot’s play in Polish in a highly stressful situation. Reading in a foreign language, even if one has mastered Polish, as Cherkashyna has (and even when it comes to relatively similar languages like Polish and Ukrainian), is always less comfortable than speaking in one’s own language. And even more so when one has to use a foreign language to talk about personal suffering or the suffering of loved ones. If Cherkashyna was asked to take part in the reading, to testify with her presence and her body to the state of her homeland and her fellow citizens,

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<sup>22</sup> Natalia Blok, “Przez skórę (Крізь шкіру)” trans. Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun, in *Współczesna dramaturgia ukraińska*, 63–74.

then her subjectivity and the materiality of her language should have come first. She could have spoken in Ukrainian, accompanied by Polish subtitles. Here, unfortunately, the Polish audience, the requirements of the Polish language and the principle of semantic intelligibility of the text came first.

On this violence of language—unintentional, I believe, in the case described above—Cezary Wodziński wrote the following:

Our world . . . has turned out to be extremely—exterminationally—inhabitable. At the core of “our world” is the experience of the extermination of the Other. . . . In welcoming the visitor as . . .—infinitely Other—. . . I should dispense with the use of my language altogether. . . . The use of my language presupposes a certain commonality of understanding and agreement. It introduces conditions. If I assume unconditionality, I welcome the visitor in silence. That is, I renounce the violence that my language brings into the encounter.<sup>23</sup>

That the Polish language can contain a charge of violence in an encounter with Ukrainian actors had already been mentioned in an earlier performance by Katarzyna Szyngiera, *Lwów nie oddamy* (Lviv, We Shall Not Give It Back), at the Wanda Siemaszkowa Theatre in Rzeszów.<sup>24</sup> Szyngiera’s performance exposed the paternalistic attitude of Poles towards Ukrainians who come here in search of work, and also drew attention to a kind of colonial nostalgia for the “eastern borderlands,” found mainly in Polish right-wing discourse. The performance opens with a Ukrainian actor (Cherkashyna) trying to join a group of somewhat bored Polish actors spread out on a stage meant to be a Polish border clearing. She tries to cross a platform crossing it, marking the Polish-Ukrainian border. Dressed in a flamboyant colored peasant scarf and equipped with several packs of Ukrainian cigarettes, she thanks the Polish director, the theatre as an institution and the audience for the opportunity to perform in front of a Polish audience. She apologizes for her linguistic mistakes and asks the lighting engineer to switch on the Polish subtitles, but promises that her Polish pronunciation will soon improve. She begins by ridiculing stereotypical Polish perceptions of an Eastern migrant, including those concerning her language. She even tries to use her ability to play up and display her foreignness when she initially agrees to take the role of a “typical Ukrainian woman” written in the script. However, she quickly rebels against the script and counters the stereotype with her own

<sup>23</sup> Wodziński, *Odys gość*, 6–7.

<sup>24</sup> *Lwów nie oddamy* by Szyngiera, Napiórkowski, and Wlekły, dir. Katarzyna Szyngiera, prem. August 26, 2018, Wanda Siemaszkowa Theatre, Rzeszów.

biography of an actor from Kharkiv. Szyngiera was primarily concerned with dismantling the cognitive framework Polish audiences reflexively activate in their encounters with newcomers from the East, and with showing Polish as an awkward, if not oppressive, frame within which a foreign arrival must operate. Four years before the outbreak of full-scale war, Szyngiera's performance opened a discussion on the Polish language as a near-insurmountable obstacle in intercultural communication, especially in theatre.

Welcoming a guest requires the users of the dominant culture to recognize and acknowledge otherness. Wodziński's reflection on the polyvalent meaning of hospitality is useful in the mental process which can occur through art. When hyphenated, the Polish word for hospitality (*gość-inność*, lit. *guest-otherness*) triggers the ambiguity of the concept. It consists of two words, "guest" and "otherness," i.e. the tension between opening up to a guest and closing up within oneself. Hidden in this combination is the enigma of the guest as an empowered Other, whose right to stay is neither denied nor questioned.<sup>25</sup> If we are to recognize someone's subjectivity in language, understood in a very material way, like the phenomenal body in Erika Fischer-Lichte's work,<sup>26</sup> stage conditions must be set for this language to resound in the first person. This is what Yana Meerzon called for when she spoke of "dramaturgies of authenticity": dramatic characters who speak German, for example, should be played by German actors, precisely so that they can bring to the stage all their baggage of life experiences, biographies, and cultural references embedded in their bodies.<sup>27</sup> At the Warsaw reading of *Through the Skin*, on the other hand, the translation imposed rules of communication on the Ukrainian visitors and forced the victims of war to speak of their suffering through a foreign language. The online viewers, probably mainly Polish (although there may have been Ukrainians among them), had the opportunity to follow the subtitles in Ukrainian, only most of them could not even imagine how it sounded, as knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet and Ukrainian pronunciation is rare in Poland. The organizers' good intentions therefore set in motion representational strategies that turned the precarious subjects into objects of strange voyeuristic observation. Is it possible to avoid such unintentional reinforcement of the oppression of the dominant culture and to allow the actors (bodies of migrants, bodies of war victims) to be comprehensible to the audience, while preserving the subjectivity of the precarious bodies?

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<sup>25</sup> Wodziński, *Odys gość*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *Estetyka performatywności*, 139, 142.

<sup>27</sup> Meerzon, "Dramaturgies of Authenticity," 31.

A different relationship between the actors' stage language and the translation in the subtitles was proposed in another staging of *Through the Skin*. A few months after the Ukrainian readings at the Drama Laboratory, a staging of the same text from the Oko Theatre of the ON/OFF Association in Lviv, directed by Agata Dyczko and performed by Halyna Ryba, was shown at the Supernova theatre in Kraków in January 2023. This time, however, the Ukrainian actor performed in Ukrainian, with Polish subtitles based on Korzeniowska-Bihun's translation. A fully directed performance is usually more elaborate than an impromptu reading. However, in the Kraków one-off performance, organized to raise funds for the Ukrainian army relief, there were quite a few distractions (lighting problems, subtitles that were a few seconds late, audience opening the doors every now and then). None of this diminished the impact of the materiality of its language, however. The performance at the Supernova theatre began with a scene in which a naked, huddled woman, brought out from the surrounding darkness by a faint spotlight, slowly recited the first words of the play, about her son bringing a questionnaire home from school, in which he had to state whether he and his mother were suffering from a strange skin disease of unknown origin. The protagonist then recounted her wartime experience of fleeing the separatist-occupied areas of Donbas, of living in a foreign city, of the strange disease that was eating away at her body and many others'. The audience could thus experience the materiality of the Ukrainian language on stage, supported by subtly projected subtitles in Polish. This simple act restored the causality of the words spoken by the Ukrainian actor, who gained the kind of authenticity Meerzon wrote about, as authentic (or perhaps rather phenomenal) as the bodies in the performances of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, Marina Abramović, or Angélica Liddell seem. Here, on a par with the body, speech undermines the theatricality of the encounter and becomes a tool to construct relations of an performative and emergent nature. The point is not to follow the words spoken on stage, but to confront the spectators with a new and unfamiliar experience. The performer, a newcomer from a war-torn country, forces the audience to suspend its cognitive habits and recognize an epistemological impasse: not everything I see and hear can be fully understood. In this way, the audience can experience what immigrants face when they end up in a country that is foreign to them.

It seems equally important that listening to the actor's Ukrainian enabled the audience to examine their own language from a distance, as it were, from the standpoint of another language's "sound," its different accent, differently pronounced phonemes, rhythm, prosody. Ukrainian, so far rarely present in the Polish linguistic landscape and especially in theatre, appears on stage to detonate cognitive comfort and crack the field of the linguistic landscape. This

allows one's own dominant language to seem alien, to be seen in a new context. Although listening to Polish pronounced with a foreign accent can also be an effective strategy for shattering the field of linguistic recognition, it is only hearing a foreign language, which leads to semantic exclusion, that completes the process.<sup>28</sup>

### “My Strenght—My Home, My Art, My Body”

Other linguistic strategies are deployed in the *History of Ukraine* performance by Dariia Bohdan, Vasylyna Martseniuk, and Sofiia Onishchenko, Ukrainian students at the Academy of Theatre Arts in Wrocław, who arrived in Poland in March immediately after the outbreak of full-scale war. Their performance is a work in progress, a performance by a newcomer who both thematizes and presents her experience of displacement in front of the audience.

The young actors, two eighteen-year-olds and one twenty-year-old, accepted the invitation of the Polish school because they could not continue their work in theatre and their studies at the Kharkiv theatre school. Together, they created a performance that helped them find their way around the new Polish reality by establishing a connection with the audience. The title, *History of Ukraine*, which sounds a bit, as they say, “dry,” belies a work that demonstrates their current attitude, prevailing emotional states, experiences of the first days of war, separation from loved ones, and finally, their political involvement, understood as acting in the field of culture to show their heritage. The performance alternates between four languages: Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, and English, with additional Polish and English subtitles. They declare they are not fluent in Polish, as they knew only the Polish word for “love” (*ljubov*) when they arrived, but they wanted their voices to reach the largest possible audience in order to build strong support for their homeland.

The performance becomes an encounter with the audience through the artists' personal, autoethnographic involvement. The actors emphasize that their power lies in their awareness of their origins (“my strength—my home”), their artistic skills and means of expression (“my strength—my art”) and their memory and bodily expression (“my strength—my body”). In the performance,

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<sup>28</sup> I have in mind, for example, the performative reading of Olha Matsiupa and Yevhen Koshyna's film script *Liudyna* (Людина), inspired by the emigration of the protagonists of Olha Kobylanska's novel of the same title (<https://www.facebook.com/events/587806739736325/?ref=newsfeedCzytanie>, accessed October 6, 2023), organized at the Institute of Literature in Kraków, which attracted mainly Ukrainian residents of Kraków, although Polish performance studies students also came to the event as part of my university classes.

they repeatedly recall these aspects of their subjectivity. In doing so, they do not allow the audience to look at them sympathetically, as this would turn them into victims of war or refugees, with precarious, weak, and defenseless bodies. Speaking at the International Federation for Theatre Research conference in Reykjavik in a panel on Ukrainian theatre, Vasylyna Martseniuk said: “(Our) strength lies in the fact that in the performance we do not call ourselves victims, but warriors and creators.”<sup>29</sup>

Bohdan, Martseniuk, and Onishchenko consciously use performative techniques when they encourage the audience to show emotional support (“when you feel our issues concern you, snap your fingers”), when they ask about how the performance should proceed (“And what now?,” “What will happen next?”), emphasizing the dynamic, event-driven nature of their actions on stage. They use documentary theatre techniques, showing slides of personal and cultural Ukrainian archives: photographs of family members, short films shot in the basement of the home where they took shelter with their families during bombing raids. Finally, they rely on non-verbal expression, dance improvisations (emotional states remembered in the body that accompanied their flight from their country) to the punk music of Dakh Daughters. They turn to Ukrainian and Russian to share conversations they had with members of their family, friends and relatives who stayed in Ukraine. They address the audience in Polish or in English for better direct communication. They thus demonstrate to the audience they are here and now in the play and on stage, but also in Poland, away from their relatives and home. The spectator has the impression that they are not dealing with a made-up and rehearsed script, but—however strange it sounds—with a sincere desire on the actors’ part to convey the experiences of a young generation of Ukrainian women and men, whose formerly happy lives have suddenly been interrupted. The point of an intercultural encounter designed in this way, based on co-presence in the here and now, is not to build symbolic meanings and messages or to break down linguistic barriers. It is more about the experience of closeness, despite linguistic and cultural differences.

It seems, therefore, that one of the most effective ways of shattering the field of linguistic recognition in Poland could be to create wide access to the stage for artists from different cultural backgrounds, for people residing in Poland by their own choice or out of forced necessity. Theatre would fulfil its social mission by arranging different architectures of intercultural, multilingual, and multiethnic encounters, responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse

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<sup>29</sup> Dasza Bogdan, Wasylyna Marceniuk, and Sofija Oniszczenko, “O Historii Ukrainy,” *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, no. 171 (2022), <https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artykul/o-historii-ukrainy>.

society and communities living in Poland. The first initiatives to start this mission have appeared recently: the newly established Ukrainian Stage at the Jerzy Grotowski Theatre Institute in Wrocław, founded by the creators of the performance *History of Ukraine*,<sup>30</sup> or the arts residency program for artists from Ukraine and Belarus run by the Theatre Institute in Warsaw.<sup>31</sup> Similar premises of intercultural cooperation have long been adopted by some other European theatres, such as the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin or by NTGent in Ghent. In the *Ghent Manifesto*, Milo Rau argued that a multiethnic ensemble allows one to look at oneself, one's own cultural background, language, and established cognitive habits from the point of view of the Other.<sup>32</sup> This notion of hospitality, also in the theatre, would serve less a moralistic and boastful exaltation of the host as “mercifully” welcoming those in need, but would be fruitful to Polish culture and allow us to build more equal and subjective cooperation.



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<sup>30</sup> <https://grotowski-institute.pl/projekty/scena-ukrainska/>, accessed November 17, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.institut-teatralny.pl/dzialalnosc/projekty-i-programy/rezydencje-artystyczne-institut-teatralnego-edycja-iii/>, accessed November 17, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.ntgent.be/en/wie-zijn-we/the-ghent-manifesto---mission/manifest-missie>, accessed November 17, 2023.

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