

# Dialogues Behind the Scenes

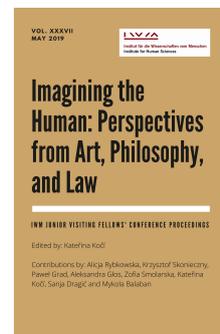
## Ethical Moments in Making Theatre

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### Zofia Smolarska

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Since 2014 I have conducted over 100 interviews with craftspeople in Polish public theatres – drama, puppet and musical theatres – among them there were opera houses with over a thousand employees as well as small town puppet theatres. This group comprised metalworkers, carpenters, modelers, painters, costume makers, puppet makers, shoemakers, upholsterers, make-up artists, wig makers, as well as sound and light technicians, dressers, stage assemblers and prop masters. I have been investigating the ways in which craftspeople, positioned at the lowest level in the social hierarchy in theatres, perceive the changes in the management methods, production process and social relations in their institutions, due to the political and economic transformation in 1989.

Why is it so important to make research on theatre craftspeople? And why now? The reasons are, firstly, that they work at a crossroad, where the economic, material, aesthetic and organizational aspects of theatre production meet or rather collide. These collisions are due to many factors, among which are: the neoliberal shape of the economic transformation in Poland, cognitive capitalism, globalised markets, precarisation of (art) workers, new aesthetic trends. Craftsmen have an embedded knowledge about the processes that shape our whole society.

Secondly, in the longer run, these collisions lead to the extinction of handicraft in theatre, at least in its current institutionalised form. Obviously there is less and less work for craftsmen: painted horizons are replaced by 3D print, tailored suits by H&M clothes, hand-made props by mass-produced items from China. Also, there is very little interest among young people in these poorly paid, not respected jobs. Therefore, if we want to get to know craftsmen's perspective we have to be quick.

In the same time, not wanting to walk down the old path of secondary victimisation of the working class people who are gradually being replaced by machines, I was looking for some more sensitive methodological or interpretative lenses, which could help to see a

theatre institution not as a stable system with repeatable patterns of power distribution, but as a dynamic space where individual decisions and attitudes interact with the systemic order.

Relational turn in organisational studies that has been begun around the year 2000 responds well to such need. As Mustafa F. Özbilgin, professor of Organisational Behaviour at Brunel University, UK, wrote, relational analysis “compares, situates and examines individual and organizational phenomena in a state of interplay” because it assumes “interdependence, intersubjectivity and relationality of individual and organizational phenomena” (Özbilgin 2006, 250). Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist and philosopher, is recognized as a key contributor to relational analysis, but historically speaking, relationality in social science has been inspired by many philosophers for whom relationality played a key role: Marx, Weber, Heidegger, but also Buber with his philosophy of dialogue based on the claim that “no isolated I exists apart from relationship to an other”.

This thread leads us to Józef Tischner, who continued the work of Martin Buber in his “Philosophy of Drama”. The dialogical approach permeates also his philosophy of work and his involvement in working class movement in 1980’s. Tischner, a Catholic priest and engaged thinker, founding president of the IWM, was one of chief ideologists of “Solidarność” movement and one of the leading authors of the discourse that grew up around “Solidarność”. His “Spirit of Solidarity” which was first published in 1981, and which English edition came out in 1984 with an afterword by Lech Wałęsa, is a collection of sermons addressed the union’s members and its supporters. There, he placed much emphasis on the “moral exploitation” and the dignity of workers.

What also made me choose Tischner’s philosophy for an interpretative tool is that the values and expectations expressed by my respondents often share a similar tone to Tischner’s. Theatre craftsmen, although they are very critical about the top-bottom approach of their managers, do not demand “transparency” or “openness,” values that are crucial to liberal democracy, but they do wish that their employers would acknowledge their “dignity” by initiating “a dialogue.” No matter if they were part of the social movement that emerged around “Solidarność” in the 1980’s, the words they use to express their disappointment with the current situation in their working places are reminiscent of the language surrounding the work ethic in “Solidarność”.

Tischner’s approach to work is dialogical in the sense that for him an exploitation “is not only a disorder happening inside of an individual personality”, oppressed by the system, but most importantly it is “a disorder in relations between one human and another”, as he wrote in the “Polish Shape of Dialogue” (Tischner 1981, 67). Probably inspired by Paul Ricoeur and his “Travail et parole” (1955), Tischner perceived work as “a particular form of a person-to-person conversation. The product of human work grows from an agreement and serves this agreement. The fruit of work is like the word journeying through time and space.” (Tischner 1984, p. 16).

Some craftsmen could contribute to this metaphor with many examples of how fruit of their work passes from hands to hands, through all theatre departments, because producing nearly every element of the set needs several different skills and a close co-operation. For example, a marionette in a puppet theatre needs to be first carved in wood by a constructor according to the instructions delivered beforehand by a set designer. Then it might go on stage to be rehearsed by an actor, then comes back to the carver's workshop for further developing and corrections, then goes to the costume department, where tailors sew a piece of clothing while modelers paint its face and attach the eyeballs. Sometimes modelers have to dye the textile before costume makers start sewing, then a consultation about the possible interaction between the paint and the textile is needed. Sometimes modelers have to produce a puppet's head made of papier-mâché, which a constructor attaches then to a wooden corp. In this case they need to discuss the mechanism in the neck that enables a head to turn, as it determines its shape. Afterwards, a puppet goes to stage again and if during a rehearsal or a performance it gets broken, it comes back to workshops to get repaired, re-painted etc.

On each stage of production a conversation is necessary to instruct each other, give each other feedback, discuss the materials, measures etc. The aesthetic form of a performance is thus a result of intense negotiations among all participants of the process. Moreover, it is a dialogue in both literal and metaphorical sense. As Tischner wrote, we do not necessarily have to speak to each other or see one another to be able to participate in a dialogue. My respondents give very many examples of situations when the literal communication breaks, but the metaphorical dialogue goes on bearing the consequences of the initial rapture. One of my respondents said:

A set designer says: "this is black", while the craftsmen say: "this IS black, but it SHOULD be grey". "No, no, no, it should be black". Then craftsmen become meek: "we don't know anything, we don't understand anything, ok – black". Then this "black" leaves workshop, where was being done without giving it this God's sparkle, without putting one's heart into it, just a job well-done in a cold way and it goes on stage, where it meets another wall – the actors. I don't know, how it works, but they, the actors, perfectly feel, if a thing comes from the heart or not, because they approach their work exactly the same way as we do. And then it gets really tough. [...] Once we made a costume from wood, which weighted around 30 kilos and meant to be worn by very delicate and petite women. Beforehand we had told the set designer that it would be much too heavy for her and we could easily use a different material, which would give a perfect illusion of wood. But he insisted. Then the actress, when she put it on and couldn't move properly in her character, got really furious and smashed the costume against the wall. I understood her. She had the right to do it.

If we translate this situation into Tischner's organicist metaphors, we can say that without respectful conversation at the root of the production process, where craftwork is involved, the seed get rotten and the fruit that grows out of it intoxicates the next stages of production leading to a cycle of violence.

Craftsmen give many other examples of such disastrous or even life-threatening consequences of such lack of a true dialogue. Thanks to Tischner we can be more sensitive to the signs of erosion in the culture of dialogue. For example, in many theatres some dialogical “routines” have been abandoned as counter-productive and time-consuming. Many elderly respondents who experienced this change regret that there are no more discussions during which representatives of all craft workshops were present in order to see all the projects of the set design and learn about the whole idea of a performance. Such general meetings used to be compulsory in the past. Current theatres tend to hire one or a few production managers who are responsible for allocating the tasks to particular workers with apparently no need for them to meet and talk.

We can easily prove that such changes have a systemic character. Polish theatres, while trying to deal with debts after communism and reductions of budgets due to neoliberal reforms, started to use backward strategies from the industrial era, like the Taylor’s “scientific management” theory implemented in factories during and after First World War. The aim of such changes is to have better control over the production process and use craftsmen’s time more efficiently, treating them like machines. But Tischner was not interested in finding systemic reasons for dialogical crisis. According to him, it is the crisis of communication that is to be at source of the crisis of work culture. Exploitation starts when true dialogue stops. And to enable a true dialogue “it is necessary to overcome fear, to remove prejudice, but it is also necessary to find a language that means the same for both parties. It cannot be the language of a particular group, much less a language of insinuations, of slander, and it surely cannot be a language of accusation” (Tischner 1984, 10).

One of my respondents complained that he is perceived by the managerial staff through his lower status: “If I say that I will not work with some toxic products, because it ruins my health, then they think immediately that I am putting on airs, that I am playing a star – there is no talk about the merits. There is always some politics involved”. I asked him if he was part of a trade union, he nodded, as according to him, no union has much to say these days. And above all, he tries to stay away from politics. So what is the solution, what shall change?– I asked. “My idea is kindness and not seeking bad intentions in everything, not seeking conspiracies. Just a normal, honest talk about our work. This is it. In my opinion, you don’t need anything else”.

Craftsmen seem to share Tischner’s idea of a non-conflicting, totally inclusive and apolitical community that is possible to achieve without changing the system. One of the main ontological differences and points of dispute among scholars using relational analysis is the extent to which the positions that individuals may take are structured by macro-influences. Obviously for Tischner it was never a purely ontological question. It was a question of survival under the Communism. He devoted his book “The Polish Shape of Dialogue” (1981) to the polemics with Marxist definition of work. Relationality for Tischner was, as for Marx, a tool of empowerment, but not for the working class only – he was trying to prove that on a spiritual level we – as a society, as a nation, as people – are interconnected and these bonds are stronger than any social and economic structures. Later he wrote in “Spirit of solidarity”: “What does it mean to be in solidarity? It means to

carry the burden of another person. No one is an island all alone. We are bound to each other even if we do not know it. The landscape binds us, flesh and blood bind us, work and speech bind us. [...] Solidarity [...] does not an enemy or opponent to strengthen itself and to grow. It turns toward all and not against anyone” (Tischner 1984, p. 3).

At that time, in 1980's, this anti-political discourse had been very effective in politically mobilizing millions despite their differences. It helped to change the social perception of the political reality and exclude systemic factors from the dialogical space, in order to arm people against fatalism, a feeling produced by the ruling system, which seemed all-encompassing.

Also, this opened the door to broad social acceptance for the subsequent negotiations between “Solidarność” representatives and the communists who took their place at the Round Table Talks in 1989. Tischner tried to prove that a dialogue should be a space where the superior meets the inferior and where the oppressor meets the oppressed. What helped to build such an inclusive community was his opposition to “political thinking,” as he perceived all politics as inevitably polarizing a “them” and an “us”. He did not distinguish “antagonism” from “agon” – we needed Chantal Mouffe to do it some years later. Yet, paradoxically, in the new democratic era it resulted in falsely antagonistic relations between practicing politics and social solidarity.

It really strikes me that many respondents were able to point out the key consequences of the systemic change from the Fordist to post-Fordist mode of production in their institutions, such as marked disparities in working conditions and decline of the importance of trade unions, but in the same time they put those changes into an a-political, a-systemic, yet relational frame. One of the respondents answering a question about what has changed in his theatre over the last forty years, said:

It used to be a different story. There was a technical director here and he would bring the best specialists from all over Poland. It was a man who supposedly did not belong to the [communist] party, but he was close with all the secretaries. If there was no glue anymore, he rang, and the glue was here. He took care of details. If the chairs were dusty – he asked the tailors to sew a cloth to cover the seats after each performance. He was a landlord [gospodarz]! And there was a technical manager back then, everybody worked for him: dressers, technicians, craftsmen. And now? Five managers of production, around seven girls in the PR department, and once there was one lady, a coordinator of artistic work and everything else. Because she knew the theater. And now? There are no people here who live and breathe theater, real theater-lovers.

A panacea for all problems is to have a boss that loves theatre and knows it like a landlord knows everything about “his” land and “his” people. What is more, he is well connected with authorities but apparently politically neutral. This ideal is not rare among craftsmen, although it resembles soft tyranny and is deeply rooted in the master-slave mentality. But also it seems a caricature version of Tischner's concept of a homesteader (*gospodarz*), whom Tischner defined as a person who, while managing the farm and being the head of the family, does the community service from the heart (Tischner 1984 p. 60-65).

In Polish theatre, there are quite many examples of directors who use the argument of love for theatre, as if it was their own farm, as a justification for exploitation and precarisation of workers, especially artists and craftsmen. Piotr Tomaszuk, who is well-known for his bold reforms in public theatres after the fall of communism through downsizing (reducing numbers of job positions) in one of the interviews said: “What really connects people in theater is the idea and love for art. Not an attachment to a job position. Theater is a crime – a crime committed on personal and family life. As in the life of every real theater person theatre is yet another home, another family” (Kopeć 2016).

When I interviewed craftsmen who worked with Tomaszuk they admitted that, despite his frequent out-bursts of anger towards craftsmen for any slight delay and despite being over-worked and under-paid, they were happy to work for him as they felt that they participated in “something big” which united all the staff above all differences. That is why, when Tomaszuk was abusing his power, everybody would hold their tongues, as they told me. Ironically, Tomaszuk offered them an idea of community, in which, in Tischner’s words, the superior meets the inferior and where the oppressor meets the oppressed. Many craftsmen, who experienced a tyranny in theatre, would later look back to it with nostalgia. They would happily agree to be owned as slaves again if it only saves them from being left behind, replaced, fired. It seems that the currently growing inequalities only fuel this dependency on the feeling of belonging.

To belong to the theatre family means, as one of my respondents said, to know when to keep quiet when a supervisor talks to you. She gave me an example of a situation when she intentionally stopped arguing with a woman set designer about the shoes she designed, but which looked unstable and thus unsafe for an inexperienced actress. After the actress broke her leg stepping up the stage stairs, the set designer came back to the respondent and apologized for not taking the advice. From this moment on, she always asked for an opinion. According to my respondent, the message of the story is simple: if we cannot beat them with words, we will beat them with silence.

This strategy to use silence as a weapon resembles Tischner’s metaphor of “Solidarity” union members as trees in a forest. A forest doesn’t have to speak up, because it just is, “exists, last”, this “the reality of the forest cannot be disregarded” (Tischner 1984, 80). “How does the forest fight its enemies?” – ask Tischner and answers: “by growing and becoming an even larger forest. Solidarity of conscience fights its opponents by becoming more of a conscience and more of a solidarity. Everything else is but secondary” (ibidem).

It is also worth noting that in his dialogical philosophy of work, Tischner, despite being a huge enthusiast of the union’s strikes in 1980, treated a strike like silence. Because he thought a fruit of work stems only from productive activity, thus a refusal of work must mean a suspension of dialogue. The reason for such understanding is, as Enrico Sperfeld wisely pointed out, that Tischner perceived strike through phenomenological lenses. “Through epoché– refraining from all theoretical assumptions and constructs – phenomenology tries to achieve freedom in knowing the truth. Through strike – refraining from contributing to the given social or economic system – workers want to get an insight in the real structures of the sense of work” (Sperfeld 2013, 244). In my view,

Tischner tried to avoid at all costs describing a strike in the language of conflict and so he idealized it as a time off work which serves meditating and re-discovering the deep meaning of work.

“The Spirit of Solidary” is a highly ambiguous heritage, as it is a fertile soil on which resentment and opportunism grow. In my view, the ethos of “Solidarity”, while shaping the horizon of values of the working class, helped later the capitalism in further depoliticisation of work, which in a longer run led to the feeling of social isolation and the addiction of being noticed, “included”, of belonging, no matter of the cost. It makes one feel free from systemic determinism by favoring interpersonal relations, but does it for a very high cost of being vulnerable to manipulation done by the state, the corporations and by individuals who wrap call for productivity into moral and relational values. On the contrary, as an interpretative tool, it can help us understand better the contemporary apolitical position of many representatives of the working class in Poland.

All in all, I agree with Sperfeld, who wrote in his book “Arbeit als Gespräch. Józef Tischners Ethik der Solidarność” that in Tischner’s thought there is a significant lack of the systemic perspective and the production aspects of work that are hard to reconcile with the metaphorical assumptions of the philosophy of dialogue (Sperfeld 2012, 264-273). However, I suspect that Tischner became at some point aware of this lack, as in 1987, in a text later published in his book “The Polish Mill” stated for the first time that vertical relations are as important as the horizontal ones. He posed questions: “Who really has the power over the work? Who controls the work? Who rules it? [...] What is the relation between the political order of a country and the level of work, existing in this country?” (Tischner 1991, 83).

I also have to make a reservation that many of Tischner’s ideas have been distorted or omitted in the public discourse around “Solidarność”. Although it is hard for me to agree with Tischner when he says that the Marxistic distinction between the exploited and the exploiters is totally illusionary (Tischner 1984, 26), it is easier to accept his notion of exploitation as contiguous. Tischner claimed that the victims might become perpetrators, if they lose trust and start cheating. It is true in case of craftspeople, which are not only victims of – but also contribute to – some severe organisational and relational dysfunctions. For example, I witnessed a situation where male craftsmen mobbed a young woman set designer, which was obviously a displacement of aggression that could have not been unloaded in a direct confrontation with the manager. If we read Tischner more carefully, our systemic reflections might be subtler and we may pay more attention to different directions in which the vectors of power can go, sometimes counter-intuitively.

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Note:

This article contains excerpts from my article: *Theatres: Romantic Fortresses or Models for Civic Society?*, in: *IWMpost*, No. 123 – Spring / Summer 2019.

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