

Modern Nativity Play (Jasełka-moderne)

Author: Ireneusz Iredyński

First Published: 1962 (staged 1965)

Translations: German (*Krippenspiel modern: Stille Nacht*, 1974; *Modernes Krippenspiel*, 1986); English (*Native Modern*, 1980).

Theatre Adaptations: Forum-Theater, Berlin (1963); Teatr Nowy, Poznań (1965); Teatr Ludowy, Warsaw (1971); Teatr Dramatyczny, Wałbrzych (1972); Teatr im. Stefana Jaracza, Olsztyn (1976), Teatr Polskiego Radia (2009).

About the Author: Ireneusz Iredyński was born in 1939 in Stanisławów (today Ukrainian Ivano-Frankivsk). His mother of Jewish origins left the family in 1942 for fear of discovery. Iredyński left his parental home early and without finishing school in order to avoid his father's influence. In 1959, he published his first poetry collection *Everything Is Near* (Wszystko jest obok). He also published crime novels under the pseudonym Umberto Pesco. Nevertheless, Iredyński became famous especially for his dramas, although critics referred to him as a “doubtful example for the youth” (Müldner-Nieckowski, 2009, p. 297). In German-speaking countries his plays quickly became well-known and enjoyed a high reputation. Two of the best-known, *Farewell, Judas* (written 1965, premiered 1971, Żegnaj, Judaszu) and *The Third Breast* (1973, Trzecia pierś), were premiered in Zurich. *Farewell, Judas* was translated into several languages. His collaboration with Polish Radio also resulted in several radio plays. Additionally, he wrote some scripts for renowned directors of his time (such as Krzysztof Kieślowski). In 1966 he was sentenced to three years in prison for attempted rape. Some argue that this was an attempt to silence the uncomfortable writer. In the 1980s, his dramas were brought to the country's big stages without much delay. Iredyński died in Warsaw in 1985 (Majchrowski, 2014).

Content and Interpretation

At the age of 23, Iredyński caused a sensation with this play, as it mixes historical reality with existentialist aspects of power and powerlessness. The setting is a concentration camp on the eve of its liberation. A group of prisoners tries its hand at rehearsing a modified nativity play, which is constantly interrupted by the camp security guard appearing to choose persons for execution. The theatre director and the guard know each other from their earlier days in cabaret where the latter was often given particularly good roles. After having shot the director, the remaining actors turn to the next new leading figure, the guard. It turns out that he was the originator of the modern nativity play, which now (in view of the approaching liberation army) gives him the powerful feeling of being able to determine his last day himself. After his suicide, only

Herod remains alive. He is actually the only person of the ensemble without a clear conscience since he used to be a procurer and killed a human being in his life before the camp. After the camp guard's death, the Herod actor empowers himself with the guard's helmet and observes his mirror image with satisfaction.

In the world of hierarchy and tyranny depicted by Iredyński, moral principles lose their validity; the distinction between good and evil seems secondary since the cycle of tyranny will prevail and constantly renew itself (Hiemer, 2012, p. 88). Iredyński considered himself as author whose main topic was violence (particularly clear in *Farewell, Judas*, 1971). But Iredyński's protagonists are first and foremost changeable characters which have a dark past or psyche that comes to the surface in the key scene in the third act. In this declamatory speech, the guard explains that a young boy once inspired him to write this script. The boy presented the nativity play as a solo performance right on people's doorsteps with homemade figurines and a child's heart-rending voice. It is remarkable how the guard adopts this naive scenery and concludes:

I understood what it meant to be God [...] if the other [people] are only voices of God, his intonations. It has nothing to do with the notion of power, the notion of materialism, I would say, mechanical, oh, no. To adore power is something completely different, power is the exaltation of one individual among others, an individual equal to them, after all. The concept of divinity, when everything is the voice of God, the unification with the whole world, the absorption of it.... So I shot that former manager of a left-leaning cabaret. One of my tones just disappeared... Please, have a cigarette. (Iredyński, 2014, pp. 171–172)

Instead of building the world, like the boy did, the guard exterminates it. In the view of the narcissistic guard, the notion of evil is not banal, as Hannah Arendt put it, but demonic.

Main Topics and Problems

According to Kowzan, the text is based on the notions of divinity in great world theatre, as could be seen in Hofmannsthal, Shakespeare, Calderón and Panizza (Kowzan, 2000, p. 57). In fact, the text itself often refers to historic theatre conventions but the most obvious parallel can be seen in the topics Iredyński prefers to depict. Like Panizza, Iredyński's characters doubt moralistic world views by contrasting them with the evil that finally conquers the good. Evil is produced by profanation of the biblical story since the relation between Mary and Joseph gets partially an erotic but also an ordinary character (Mary: "Do want me to tell that I will have children with you, that I will prepare lunches for you, and you will read newspapers in the armchair, or what?", p. 149). Additionally, the newborn Jesus – acted in this case by a 16-year-old boy – is treated like an annoying teenager in order to underline the "modern" conception of the Nativity. First and foremost, the piece is an observation of psychosocial behaviour between devotees and rulers, frustration, disappointment and complexes that turn into a source of violence and are regarded as the threat of our times. Iredyński's

attitude towards politics at the time was also marked by deep mistrust. So it is not surprising that the play itself contains some references to the lack of content and arbitrariness of socialist cultural politics: “[t]he Sing-Sing Award for an outstanding prose debut. The four-year-old prize-winner demonstrates her point of view about the Brahmin and the control of the Amazon” (p. 161). At the same time, we find ironic references to commonplaces of Polish identity like the Catechism of Polish Children: “‘Who are you?’ ‘A little servant’” (p. 164), instead of “‘Who are you?’ ‘A little Pole’” as in the original. Although, the piece is set in the realities of a concentration camp, the reader does not get any information about the background of the characters, so their past, religion or reason for being arrested do not seem relevant. The title *Modern Nativity Play* bears witness to the cynical twisting of original Christian motifs: the existence of Christ is made impossible by Herod’s survival; the repressive outside world of the concentration camp stands in contrast to the salvific intention of the Christmas story. The Jewish topics are set very subtly: the *New Testament* reference to the Massacre of the Innocents when Herod ordered to kill every boy under the age of two is a legend which is abused as an anti-Jewish argument in religious confrontations up until today. By confirming it in the play, Iredyński deconstructs the myth of Herod paradoxically. The action is situated against the backdrop of the organised murder of Jews in camps which became a crucial moment for Christian identity and self-representation after World War II. The play doubts the existence of moral constants and reveals them as an illusionary worldview to humankind – a humankind of staffage while the bad continues ruling the world (Jarzębowski, 2002, pp. 28–29).

Cited Works

Hiemer, E.-M. (2012). Zum Umgang mit der Kriegserfahrung im polnischen Drama der 1950er und 1960er Jahre dargestellt an Leon Kruckowskis *Niemcy* (1948) und *Pierwszy dzień wolności* (1959) sowie Ireneusz Iredyńskis *Jasełka-Moderne* (1962). In: J. Holý, ed., *The Representation of the Shoah in Literature, Theatre and Film in Central Europe: 1950s and 1960s*. Praha: Akropolis, pp. 79–91. Iredyński, I. (2014). *Jasełka moderne*. In: Z. Majchrowski, ed., *Ireneusz Iredyński. Kreacja. Dramaty*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, pp. 119–181. Jarzębowski, Z. (2002). *Dramaturgia Ireneusza Iredyńskiego*. Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego. Kowzan, T. (2000). Théâtre de l’enfermement. In: E. Ibsch et al., eds., *The Conscience of Humankind*. Amsterdam: Brill, Rodopi, pp. 55–62. Majchrowski, Z. (2014). Biogram. In: Z. Majchrowski, ed., *Ireneusz Iredyński. Kreacja. Dramaty*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, pp. 806–808. Müldner-Nieckowski, P. (2013). Pośłowie In: P. Sieniuc, J. Majdecki, eds., *Ireneusz Iredyński, Dzieła zebrane, tom I*. Warszawa: Warszawska Firma Wydawnicza, pp. 297–320. Robinson, M. (1989). Ireneusz Iredyński’s Drama of Exposure. In: *Modern Drama*, 32(3), pp. 356–373.

Further References

Czerwinski, E. (1968). Three Lesser Known Polish Dramatists of the Absurd: Grochowiak, Iredyński, and Drozdowski. *Polish Review*, 13(1), pp. 58–65. Fischer, Ch., Steltner, U. (2011). *Polnische Dramen in Deutschland. Übersetzungen und Aufführungen als deutsch-deutsche Rezeptionsgeschichte 1945–1995*. Köln: Böhlau. Polskie Radio (1980). *Ireneusz Iredyński o swoim pisarstwie w archiwalnej audycji „Zwierzenia wieczorne“*. Interview available at: <https://www.polskieradio.pl/39/156/Artykul/1143063,Ireneusz-Iredyński-Jestem-pisarzem-przemocy> [Accessed 03.11.2019]. Vogel, Ch. (1974). *Macht und Freiheit im modernen polnischen Drama*. Berlin: Hennsel. Windle, K. (2014). *Ireneusz Iredyński: Selected One-Act Plays for Radio*. London: Routledge.

EMH