

The only (why?) woman included, Marzanna Kielar (b. 1963) teaches philosophy at the Department of Education of Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw, and is the author of five volumes of poetry for which she received numerous prizes (Kościelskis 1993) and critical accolades. On the Polish culture portal she is credited with acceptance of existence, tenderness toward the world, and love for those worthy of love. In the garden of one of her untitled poems here *you can see smoke, Father bustling around / rake in hand*. At last, love and eros—both rather absent from poems by her somber male colleagues. Why? Must the personal be so depressed? Has the native soil been depleted of its more wholesome nutrients by the poets who plowed it before? Does memory suffice as a default source of inspiration? Must *mud* fall?

Michael Mikoś's translations are, rake in practised hand, a labor of love, a valiant effort to inform regarding what is happening in Polish poetry today; to help readers in both languages to have their own selection that they can reflect on and—although with melancholy—treasure.

## Loose Screws

### Nine New Plays from Poland

**Edited by Dominika Laster.** London: Seagull Books ([www.seagullbooks.org](http://www.seagullbooks.org)), distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 2015. In Performance series edited by Carol Martin. xxxiv + 426 pages. ISBN 978-0-85742-1777. Paperback. \$40.00.

### Felicia Hardison Londré

**S**ix different translators deliver nine recent Polish plays to English-language readers, along with a few production photos and an excellent introduction by editor Dominika Laster. For readers, the value of cultural awareness transmitted by these plays is incalculable. What do most Americans know of life in the post-Soviet Eastern Bloc nations? How does Poland simultaneously grapple with its defining history of foreign oppression and with the culture shock of Western influences on its still-new independent nationhood? What is

and has been the role of theater in sustaining or interrogating Polish identity? Given the hoary maxim that all Polish plays are about Poland, readers of these translations may fruitfully ponder what these plays might say to audiences in Poland. However, plays are written to be staged, and that raises a different set of considerations.

The number of productions on American professional theater stages of foreign plays in translation has declined precipitously over the last few decades. We still see Molière, Ibsen, Feydeau, and Chekhov, but only rarely does a new play from abroad find a substantial American theater audience. For those who are open to new plays, the market is flooded by the work of young American playwrights being developed in regional theater workshops or produced by companies devoted to emerging writers. With notable exceptions such as Manhattan's La MaMa and New York Theatre Workshop, there are few professional outlets for contemporary plays of foreign origin. Often it is the enterprising translator, who loved the play enough to wrestle with the text while expecting little return on the effort, who peddles the play to a small independent company or an academic theater. It is heartening that this anthology and a companion volume from Seagull Books, *(A)pollonia: Twenty-first Century Polish Drama and Texts for the Stage*, stimulated a 2013 festival of readings of new Polish plays at New York Theatre Workshop. Moreover, three of these translations had been tested in production at a 2008 festival of post-2000 Polish plays presented by the Polish Cultural Institute at 59E59 Theaters in Manhattan.

The nine plays are grouped into three categories: Past Revisited and Revised, Rehearsing Domesticity, and Unmaking Poland. Most powerfully reexamining the past is a documentary drama collectively created by Teatr Osmego Dnia (Theater of the Eighth Day), *The Files* (2007), with a performance text excerpted from secret police reports on the Poznań company members' activities. Those files from the 1970s became available in 1998, and the now-mature performers intersperse them with snippets from their own youthful letters and quotations from writers like Solzhenitsyn,

Dostoevsky, and Stanisław Brzozowski. The files reveal that the idealistic student theater group was infiltrated by an informer, and that certain actors were targeted for harassment: an apartment searched and books confiscated, an actor's movie-employment opportunity withdrawn; and planted evidence of "criminal offenses or violations of ethical and/or moral standards" (31). Five actors on tour with a production were beaten by police, detained for thirty hours, and then accused of having assaulted the police. The docudrama ends in 1980, a year before the imposition of martial law, having already shown the limits of human endurance and yet somehow finding the capacity for "inner freedom" (35). Bill Johnston's fluent translation hits the right stylistic note for each of the various sources.

Taking an entirely different approach to the past, *Eat the Heart of Your Enemy* by Michał Bajer, translated by Benjamin Paloff (who also translated three other plays in the volume), is a grotesque fantasia set in Frédéric Chopin's Paris apartment in 1849, where the composer's corpse is laid out so that, apparently according to his wishes, his heart can be extracted and sent back to Poland. Into this scene come some historical and some fictional figures, often spouting anachronisms, each with his or her own agenda, springing surprises that make it difficult to know who is an infiltrator and who might be authentic. Chopin certainly represents Poland while everyone else is out to exploit the remains or the legacy. The third exploration of the past, *Helver's Night* (1999) by Ingmar Villqist, translated by Philip Boehm, may be variously interpreted. The 1930s elements in the kitchen setting—while sounds of violence are heard in the street and later in the stairwell—certainly call to mind the fateful year of 1939 with its successive brutalities perpetrated by Nazis and Soviets. Only late in the play does it become clear that Helver is retarded, and this perhaps evokes Poland's retarded cultural development in the wake of the partitions that the country endured. His caretaker Karla embodies elements of the motherland, the Church, Poland's supposed allies in Europe, the arts—even incorporating allusions to her wedding, which

conjures associations with Wyspiański's 1901 allegorical drama *Wesele* (*Wedding*).

In the three domestic dramas and in the three treatments of floundering for a footing in the new society since 2000, a number of themes and tropes recur: family friction including loveless marriage, generational differences (recalling Witkiewicz's *The Water Hen* or Mrożek's *Tango*), abortion, inattentiveness to children, mindless television, dehumanizing architecture from the Soviet era, foreign pop culture and consumer products, Polish poetry, food, alcoholic drink, drugs, money, sex. Two plays include sequences of vomiting, two show a character hanged, and three have scenes that occur in cars on the road. The experimentation with form in several plays produces a disorienting effect, as if the boundaries between reality, fantasy, memory, and dream are blurred. Their episodic construction and numerous locales cry out for inventive staging, or perhaps a radio-drama approach, and indeed the photographs indicate minimalist presentations. In *Let's Talk About Life and Death* (2001) by Krzysztof Bizio, the father, mother, and son communicate almost exclusively by telephone; this play benefits from the collection's most readable and most playable translation, the work of Mira Rosenthal. Other plays categorized under Rehearsing Domesticity and Unmaking Poland are *Daily Soup* (2007) by Amanita Muskaria, *First Time* (2005) by Michał Walczak, *A Couple of Poor Polish-Speaking Romanians* (2006) by Dorota Masłowska, and *Loose Screws* (2006) by Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk.

The surprise gem of the anthology is a play that reads like an impossible-to-stage screenplay: *Made in Poland* (2004) by Przemysław Wojcieszek, translated by Dominika Laster. The nineteen-year-old disaffected youth and would-be revolutionary Boguś expresses the alienation he feels by having "FUCK OFF" tattooed on his forehead. He smashes cars, repudiates the priest he has assisted as altar boy for five years, finds no respite in drugs or television or drink, visits and insults his alcoholic former teacher, recruits a wheelchair-bound parking attendant to his revolution, and runs afoul of some thuggish gangsters seeking payment for a smashed car.

Somehow, out of all this comes a plausible redemption. Despite vulgarity, the play brims with vitality and heart. Apparently Polish audiences have warmed to the play, since both a 2011 film version and a 2005 staging can be seen on YouTube.

*Loose Screws: Nine New Plays from Poland* is a beautifully produced book on good quality paper, with wide margins for note taking. I detected only one typo in the 460 pages: Ingmar Berman for Ingmar Bergman (xix). While the introduction incorporates biographical information about the playwrights, some background on the translators would also be welcome. Whether or not these plays win stage productions, their availability on the page is a major contribution to our understanding of contemporary Polish theater and life.

## Echoes of Tattered Tongues Memory Unfolded

By **John Z. Guzowski**. Foreword by Charles Adès Fishman. Los Angeles, CA: Aquila Polonica ([www.AquilaPolonica.com](http://www.AquilaPolonica.com)), 2015. xx + 155 pages. Photographs. ISBN 978-1-60772-021-8 (cloth). \$21.95.

### Sally Boss

As soon as I started reading Guzowski's book, I knew it would be hard reading. It is, hands down, a most accurate presentation of war and its aftermath. The aftermath is important because, as the author notes, war does not end on a particular date, nor does the aftermath consist of crowds of people kissing each other and throwing flowers at maimed soldiers. As the author's mother (quoted in an epigraph) said: "When the war started, we did not know what war meant." By comparison to Guzowski's book, many other survivors' narcissistic narratives look like grimaces in front of a mirror. The only writer who has succeeded in showing similar gloom and doom is Gulag survivor Varlaam Shalamov, but even in Shalamov one occasionally finds an "iota of hope." Not in Guzowski. This is the book's greatest fault, and also its greatest claim to originality.

Guzowski's book consists of poems interspersed with short prose pieces detailing biographies not fully outlined in the poems. The villains in Guzowski's book are Germans, not Soviets as in Shalamov's. German soldiers who came to the village in which the nineteen-year-old future Tekla Guzowski lived, raped her and her sister, killed her sister and grandmother, and kicked the sister's baby to death. Then came years of slave labor in a camp in Germany where, as Guzowski's mother told him, even more terrible things were taking place. We are spared the details of something so terrible that Tekla refused to verbalize it in front of her son. This "something" happened just before the camp's liberation—days before Americans came. In Tekla's words, what the guards did to young girls in the camp was so horrible it had to remain unsaid.

The author's parents met in a DP camp in Germany. The father's fate was likewise etched in by the gods of cruelty: he emerged out of the slave camp in Germany one eyed. They started at the very bottom after they emigrated to America. Guzowski was born in a DP camp in Germany.

The free-verse poems recount fates that seem too ghastly to be real. Surely, a reader might tell herself, this did not happen. It is impossible that one family should go through so much horror. Then comes a protest: I do not want to know this story, there should be a respite from it, where is the ray of hope? Family photographs indicate that the author's parents reached peace, we see them smiling, their faces free of the tension that must have accompanied them in their youth. Yet the author assures us that this was make-believe, that they carried within indelible traces of the terror, humiliation, hunger, and pain imposed on them for more than a thousand days of their lives. Again, revolt: "I do not want to read about this, I do not want to know that these things happened, please take this cup away from me." The cup, in the form of a book, remains and eyes continue to move from page to page. Is there a closure?

Yes, there is a kind of closure: a childlike poem about heaven. But does the author believe in his childlike vision of a happy reunion? "Did you