Murray Edmond

A Saturated Time: Three Festivals in Poland, 2007

What different kinds of festival are to be found on the ever-expanding international circuit? What companies are invited or gatecrash the events? What is the role of festivals and festival-going in a global theatrical economy? In this article Murray Edmond describes three festivals which he attended in Poland in the summer of 2007 – the exemplary Malta Festival, held in Poznan; the Warsaw Festival of Street Performance; and the Brave Festival ('Against Cultural Exile') in Wroclaw – and through an analysis of specific events and productions suggests ways of distinguishing and assessing their aims, success, and role in what Barthes called the 'special time' which festivals have occupied since the Ancient Greeks dedicated such an occasion to Dionysus. Murray Edmond is Associate Professor of Drama at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His recent publications include *Noh Business* (Berkeley: Atelos Press, 2005), a study, via essay, diary, and five short plays, of the influence of Noh theatre on the Western avant-garde, and articles in *Contemporary Theatre Review* (2006), *Australasian Drama Studies* (April 2007), and *Performing Aotearoa: New Zealand Theatre and Drama in an Age of Transition* (2007). He works professionally as a dramaturge, notably for Indian Ink Theatre Company, and has also published ten volumes of poetry, of which the most recent is *Fool Moon* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2004).

WRITING in *New Theatre Quarterly* in 1997, Juliusz Tyszka pointed out that Poland is awash with theatre festivals – 150 of them in 1995. Tyszka sought an explanation in a particular Polish moment that he called the 'period of transition' – transition out of the 'general neurosis we are still suffering from today' as a result of being 'people . . . that were for nearly fifty years part[s] of the Soviet empire'.[1] Tyszka describes these festivals as 'a national therapy', notes the birth of 'new and authentic social bonds', and welcomes the influx of 'the world's alternative culture with all the accumulated baggage of forty years' experiences . . . pouring into our Polish streets'.[2]

No doubt Tyszka's enthusiastic response to the range and depth of festivals at the time was justified, if perhaps idealistic: 'a kind of revolutionary and carnival challenge to the traditional world order'.[3] More than a decade later the flood of festivals flows on in Poland, though few would argue that the Poland of 2007 is the kind of 'integrated society'[4] that Tyszka had hoped might emerge.

Part of the explanation for the on-flowing flood of festivals must lie in the fact that 'modern arts festival culture', even in Poland, is not only a local phenomenon, but part of a global trend which has been expanding (with fluctuations) for most of the twentieth century and shows no sign of contracting in the twenty-first: 'An entire global industry of festivals and events has evolved and developed since the early 1990s. . . . People make life-long careers in this area.'[5] Poland in 1995 might have been catching up or hopping on the bandwagon.

Tyszka connects Poland with the global phenomenon when he alerts us to 'the twenties of our century' and the 'Polish open-air theatre' of Juliusz Osterwa and the 'monumental travelling presentations of *The Constant Prince* by Calderon-Slowacki, *Easter,* also known as *The Passion,* and more than a dozen other productions of the experimental Reduta theatre'.[6] This sits coevally alongside the proto-modern arts festival, the revival of the Salzburg Festival in 1920 by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Richard Strauss, and Max Rein-

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hardt with the outdoor production of the Hofmannsthal play *Jedermann.*

The rise of Nazism created a monstrous interruption in Poland's participation in the modern arts festival; and it eventually even halted the Salzburg Festival, which after the war was revived primarily as an opera festival. The modern arts festival found its new life after the Second World War in the land of the victors with the founding of the Edinburgh Festival in 1947. (Edinburgh, as if to anticipate that the explosion of festivals in Poland in the 1990s was not a purely Polish phenomenon, spawned the independent Edinburgh Fringe in its first year of existence; now there are fifteen separate festivals taking place in Edinburgh in August – and fifteen other 'festivals' during the rest of the year in that city!)

Common Factors and Differences

Edinburgh became a model for many international festivals of the arts: based in a particular city, marketed as global gatherings of innovative and famous names, companies, and productions (with an intermixing of the local), spreading their vision wide across theatre, dance, music, literature, even film and exhibitions, such festivals promise 'something for everyone' of 'the best of the best' gathered in one place for a concentrated time. In my part of the world (Australasia), the Adelaide Festival of the Arts and the New Zealand International Festival of the Arts in Wellington function like this. In Poland the Malta Festival, which was central to Tyszka's discussion, is of this kind.

Malta was one of three festivals I attended in June and July 2007 in Poland with the intention of thinking and writing about them as contrasting kinds of events. The other two were the Warsaw Festival of Street Performance (*Sztuka Ulicy*) and the Brave Festival (the English name was how it was advertised in Poland itself). These two might both be said to have their roots in that 'alternative culture' which Tyszka welcomed in 1997, rather than mainstream Edinburgh-style fare. The Warsaw Street Festival, founded in 1993, two years after Malta, and therefore another product of Tyszka's Period of Transition, represents that kind of festival which showcases a particular form – street performance; its location, Warsaw, is a factor, but it could be held in any other city. In New Zealand, for example, there is an annual World Buskers' Festival in Christchurch, a sub-set of a street theatre festival.

Other festivals that showcase particular forms, which I did not see on this visit to Poland, include the Festival of Mime and Physical Theatre held in Warsaw in August 2007 and the Festival of Student Theatre Schools which took place in Warsaw in June 2007 (a biennial event). The Brave Festival – subtitled *Zatopione Piesni* ('Drowned Songs') with the by-line of 'Against Cultural Exile' – is a new festival, in just its third year. Brave has been created round a concept which might place it in opposition to many festivals: namely, that there is a kind of art whose aim is not 'success and a career' but 'to protect one's own humanity, identity, and sensitivity' and that such art is 'in danger of being forgotten'.[7] Other examples of festivals in the same category as the Brave are harder to find, but I recall, from my theatrical beginnings, the 'Serenity Festival' held in Wanganui, New Zealand, in 1973, which gathered alternative and experimental performers under the umbrella of an ideal connected to the commune Jerusalem (Hiruharama) founded by the poet James K. Baxter.

There are festivals which are not based in a particular place or form or concept. Often these are seasonal festivals with arts attached (Greek tragedy in ancient Athens was staged during such a festival, the Festival of Dionysus). But the modern arts festival, though mounted in relation to both the seasonal and commercial year (including an example like Woodstock), is an invention of industrialized and post-industrialized urban global culture. These festivals exist by and for the arts.

Edinburgh was founded after the Second World War 'to provide a platform for the flowering of the human spirit'[8] and to do this chose to bring together 'world class' performers and performances to 'enliven and enrich . . . cultural life' by assembling 'people and artists . . . from around the world'.[9] Such

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aims could be ascribed in broad terms to Malta, to the Warsaw Street Theatre Festival, and to the Brave festivals I saw in Poland in 2007.

Modern arts festivals are a primary and secondary means of commodifying theatre culture, of packaging, marketing, and sustaining productions and companies – for festivals commission entirely new and original productions while also sponsoring enduring productions with cultural cachet (the Living Theatre from the US staged such a production which was 43 years old at Malta in 2007!) Their expansive growth has made them an integral part of global culture. But, as the quotations above suggest, festivals are driven by more than crassly commercial interests. Huge amounts of written argument go into the justification and consideration of the value of modern arts festivals; for instance, Manchester City Council's cultural strategy aims 'to maximize the direct and indirect benefits of the City's cultural economy, its contribution to Manchester's distinctive identity and to innovation in business and education'.[10]

Such festivals usually require considerable underwriting from public funds and from sponsorship. Brave, which is a small festival, had sponsorship from the City of Wroclaw and the National Ministry of Culture, and from five commercial sponsors, including the old national Polish Bank, plus material support from a further eight commercial organizations in Wroclaw and official support from over twenty media outlets, television stations, radio stations, newspapers, magazines, websites, cinemas, and bookshop chains. We might ask, if modern arts festivals stopped tomorrow would the world be a significantly different place? All justifications for arts festivals would answer yes to that question. And Edinburgh was born in hope of making the world a different (and better) place.

Festivals as 'Filling Time'

Festivals are intended to be 'special times' – occasions when time is made special. As Roland Barthes comments with reference to the Festival of Dionysus: 'the theatre installed another time, a time of myth and of consciousness, which could be experienced not as leisure but as another life. For this suspended time, by its very duration, became a saturated time.'[11] My youthful experiences of festival are partly the reason that I am now writing about Polish theatre: I took part in the Theatre Laboratory's participatory University of Explorations at the Festival of Nations in Wroclaw in 1975. At the end of that year I returned to New Zealand and performed at the second South Pacific Festival of the Arts, in March 1976 in Rotorua. Both these festival attendances had a profound effect on my future work in theatre. My attendance at the three Polish festivals in 2007 was undertaken with a more objective eye, attempting to read and understand and assess the aim and impact of these festivals *qua* festivals. And hopefully to open up our thinking about this ubiquitous but largely unquestioned phenomenon of modern performance culture.

Barthes has noted how time was '*filled*'[12] (his italics) at the festival of Dionysus, and modern arts festivals do the same thing. The experience of being at a festival begins in anxiety about what to choose to see, how to find the venue, how to get there, and how to get from there to the next venue. With a festival like Malta, there is no hope of seeing everything. On the other hand, the Warsaw Street Festival had only a few overlaps and Brave, apart from its film showings, was structured in a way that, if you could get tickets, you could see almost every different performance.

When one comes as a foreigner with language problems, basic difficulties such as finding venues can be enhanced in a way which is out of proportion to the problem. The programme becomes a Bible, much thumbed and scrutinized. The Warsaw Street Theatre Festival programme, printed in A3 format, was a work of design art in itself. These programmes were available at the outdoor festival venues and crowds of people pushed forward to grab a copy. The Brave Festival emphasized the inter-connectedness of all the performances at the festival by

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having the same two announcers introduce every performance in Polish and in English. When this was done, all the performances and venues for the rest of the day were also announced, which made you feel you were part of a single, integrated event. These two announcers carried out their task in comic interaction with each other and with the audience, and became a small highlight of the whole festival occasion.

An Exemplary Modern Arts Festival: the Malta Festival, Poznan, 2007

The company Generik Vapeur has been to Malta before; Tyszka mentions their presence in 1995. In 2007, their performance, *En Campagne*, in the Old Town Square opened the festival. As (mercifully brief) official speeches were made, members of Generik Vapeur placed themselves in the balconies of the town hall building. Their entry as 'politicians' undertaking an electoral campaign, which is the action of *En Campagne*, emerged right out of the actual festival launch, merging the performance and its framing occasion. Other company members engaged us in the crowd with campaign ties to wear – and when an explosion from Generik Vapeur's 'armoured car' spread fake money over the crowd and the square, the theatre was happening all round us and, as audience, we were truly lost in the centre of the action.

This was exciting festival fare. And just before this official opening, another French company, Artonik, had turned a portion of the Old Town Square into a space covered in astroturf, where the audience could sit as picnickers while a series of small scenes visited them. Camping out on the street – and politics: perhaps a strange combination, but one which was vitally present that week in Poland as the Malta Festival began. In Warsaw nurses striking for a pay rise had set up camps in the streets and parks. Prime Minister Kaczynski was refusing to meet them, accusing them of being manipulated by 'communists'.

Generik Vapeur's and Artonik's work is street (or 'square') theatre, successfully transforming the conventional activity of the public space. But neither company was capable of making actual political comment. Their performances had long been prepared and will be used elsewhere in other festivals (Artonik appeared with the same show, *La rue est dans le pre . . .* in Warsaw's Street Theatre Festival). A question which arises, in relation to festival fare and the culture of festivals, is how acceptable it would be for a visiting 'guest' company in a modern arts festival to engage in direct political comment – for example, to pitch their performance so the picnickers donned nurses' uniforms or the politicians campaigned for the elimination of subversive communist elements – and at the same time prayed for rain? ('Last summer the Sejm [parliamentary] speaker called the members of parliament to go to the chapel to attend a prayer for rain . . . probably the only such case in the history of European Parliamentary systems.')[13]

My wider question is, what kind of inbuilt limitations does the modern arts festival impose on its performers? The proliferation of festivals means that companies such as Artonik and Generik Vapeur can contemplate sustaining their existences through the hard work of being invited to and performing at as many festivals as possible. This means, then, that companies will try to make work which has as long a life and as generalized an application as possible. Both Generik Vapeur and Artonik worked without spoken language. The effect of this in *En Campagne* was to empty the political campaign of any specificity and therefore to render the satirizing of the posturings and briberies of politicians quite banal and clichéd. There was some fabulous performance energy in the street, but the show tended towards condescending to us as audience for being such idiots as to watch such fools as these politicians.

One has to ask how far festival culture, beneficial as it might be for the lives of performers and groups, participates in the recuperation of oppositional theatre. In being honoured by being invited to launch the festival, oppositional theatre is placed upon a pedestal, which is always an inhibiting place to be stuck. Festival contains (in both senses) the oppositional. There was, in fact,

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'A space covered in astroturf, where the audience could sit as picknickers while a series of small scenes visited them': Artonik performing *La rue est dans le pre . . .* at the Malta Festival in the Old Town Square, Poznan, June 2007. Photo: Joanna Forsberg.

'Company members engaged us in the crowd with campaign ties to wear': Generik Vapeur performing *En Campagne* at the Malta Festival in the Old Town Square, Poznan, June 2007. Photo: Joanna Forsberg.



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some insight in the philistine response of two drinkers on the Square that evening, two men sitting drinking their beer behind me: 'They're just improvising,' said one, and the other replied, 'We've had enough of this.' Street theatre is entitled to interrupt their precious private pleasure, but the fact that they commented on the *form* (improvising) rather than anything the performance was saying does point to the fact that we were watching actors perform an exemplary piece of festival fare rather than anything which might speak to us. Festival culture can become part of a self-fulfilling cultural circle: to show those who are presumed to be culturally ignorant of what exactly theatre is.

Excavation and Innovation

A company at Malta which did seek to intervene in local politics was the American Living Theatre (Tyszka notes their visit to Malta in 1996). In a big bare hall (1960s brutalist), in front of an audience of initially sceptical, then derisive, and finally delighted young Polish people (predominantly under twenty-five), the Living conjured a theatrical archaeology, staging *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*. For most of these young Polish people the way the Living's 1964 'performance' is structured, so that the audience is compelled to listen to themselves, was quite startling and strange; so old, it felt briefly new again.

When an actor called out slogans which referred directly to Poland, such as 'No F16!' (Poland's intention to buy F16 fighters) and, 'No more twins!' (referring to the Kaczynski twins, then holding respectively the presidency and the premiership), the audience responded with loud cheering and clapping. In the unforgiving performance space, across a divide of time which made the onstage actions objects of historical curiosity for anyone with knowledge of theatre's course over the past forty years, this moment of response, of togetherness of audience and performers, stood out as an exceptional accomplishment within the festival format.

The Living could be unkindly labelled as 'the festival relic' within the range of Malta offerings in 2007. Festivals can provide a continuing after-life for companies whose glory days were in another world. There was a hint of 1960s archaeology about Malta 2007: films of Mnouchkine's more recent work (*Le Dernier caravanserail* and *Les Tambeurs sur la digue*) were shown, but also the classic from the Living era, *1789*; Yvonne Rainer was present in person showing films of her Judson Dance Theatre work; and Ludwik Flaszen, dramaturge at Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory came to speak on a panel. When the Living 'performed' Artaud's 'Plague' as the climax of *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*, the necromancy of the sixties felt complete. In some way, over that mysterious line which separates audience and performer, and which you could argue has always been the very subject of the Living's work, something had happened since the lone figure arrived at the beginning of the show and stood there unmoving for twenty minutes.

If modern arts festivals have relics as features, then they also need something new which is 'shocking', some kind of artistic 'freak show' which functions as the Living once functioned, for audiences to gasp, exclaim, or shake their heads over. Some might say that since Baudrillard's declaration that we now exist in 'the Xerox degree of culture' in which 'everything marvellously co-exists in a total indifference'[14] the possibility of shocking anyone has become tougher to fulfil. Indeed, Baudrillard's argument could signal why modern arts festivals have become successful, since it might be argued that they participate in that general levelling effect of postmodern culture, whereby Rembrandt and Posh Spice are indistinguishably commodified.

At Malta in 2007, Pippo Delbono's *Urlo* was intended to play the 'shocking' role. The very tall, very thin man, covered in black mud, naked and streaked with red, who emerged from the darkness at the rear of the outdoor stage with Poznan Castle for backdrop, epitomized this avant-garde freak-show. But, regrettably, this was Fellini without the joy, love, comedy, and magic – or Kantor without modesty and without the vision. Kantor was immediately evoked because the Director was onstage throughout, but his self-important

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presence tended to upstage his own show. In one of his monologues to the audience, Pippo said, 'You must have bad priests and bad parents so you can be a rebel and liberate yourself,' but in the end he dedicated the show to his mama in a strange act of self-recuperation.

Festivals fit well with modern marketing. They are places where the latest and hottest product can burst on the market. It has been said that 'it would be difficult to induce and sustain the same sense of occasion and excitement if such an event was to be held more frequently'.[15] Around the world it has become increasingly difficult to sustain such cultural institutions as national theatres and high-culture repertory theatres, let alone ongoing houses of off-, off-off-, or off-off-off theatrical enterprise. Temple Hauptfleisch, writing of festivals in South Africa, notes their negative impact – 'the diminution of the metropolitan theatre culture'.[16]

An editorial in *The Guardian* in relation to the 2007 Edinburgh Festivals season noted that 'Edinburgh's vibrancy (and that of other British festivals from Aldeburgh to Buxton) stands in contrast to difficulties in more established venues', and asks the question, 'Why are festivals doing so much better?' The editorial offers one suggestion: that festivals are 'the beneficiaries of a prosperous society, looking to mix a little light intellectual entertainment with . . . leisure time', but goes on to come down firmly on the side of artistic quality and excitement: 'The principal attraction is artistic.'[17] Festivals tend to eat up the exciting work, leaving those running continuous programmes in possession of the worthily humdrum. One goes looking for something new and exciting at a Malta kind of festival. 'What stood out for you at Malta?' is a question you will be expected to answer.

My answer for Malta must be the group Karbido, from Wroclaw, a group who mix theatre and music in performance. The show they presented was called *Stolik* (*Little Table*) and featured a small wooden domestic dining table built for creating and amplifying sound. Four young men dressed in black – Marek Otwinowski, Igor Gawlikowski, Michal Litwiniec, and Pawel Czepulkowski – sit round the table, while we, the audience, sit in a square round them. The music they make on the table is full of interactive gesture and theatrical flourish, performed with humour, lightness, madness, and feeling. After an hour of making music ranging from heavy rock to ethereal electronic soundscapes, a candle was lit and the theatre lighting, which had been strikingly beautiful, was cut. Slowly, one by one, each player exited, but left their sound playing on, on some loop in the mixer. The last to go pushed a small origami-style paper boat into the centre of the table.

Karbido were on their way to Edinburgh where *Stolik* received enthusiastic reviews: 'This "piece for four men and a table" is really an inspired DIY concert. Superb,' *The Independent* commented, while *The Scotsman* made enigmatic reference to the paper boat: 'Perhaps now we know what happened to the crew of the Mary Celeste.'[18] Karbido had found their leg up into the modern arts festival circuit.

A Festival in Search of Itself: Sztuka Ulicy/Street Theatre Festival, Warsaw

Jan Cohen-Cruz lists five kinds of 'street performance' in the 'General Introduction' to the collection of essays *Radical Street Performance: an International Anthology*: Agit-prop, Witness, the Integrated, the Utopian, and the Traditional.[19] Not all of these could always qualify as 'radical', and together they cover a wide range of street performance. Strangely few of these categories were present at the Warsaw Festival of Street Performance.

Strefa Ciszy's disappointing *Nauka Latania* (*Flying Lessons*), which had also played Malta, had the beginnings of a 'dystopian' environmental experience for the audience, but this never eventuated as the level of control exercised by the performers was such that audience participation was strangled: it felt as if the performers were afraid of the audience. Some local Polish companies tried to evoke the 'traditional' mythology of street performance by dressing up in quasi-medieval costumes, juggling, fire-eating, and singing old songs, while making rather half-hearted

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gestures towards mime and bawdy. No one seemed to have a political or propaganda point to agitate. No one used a site or image to bear witness to an event or an idea.

The instance of festival shifts one's mind, so that one sees space and time differently – and for street performance, an audience member looks at the street with fresh eyes. For instance, at the portaloo provided for the audiences in the New Town Square in Warsaw, I found myself standing in line behind a priest, and asking myself, is that a real priest or just a nervous actor waiting to go on?

Another instance: after seeing the Russian and Czech company, Novogo Fronta, in Park Swietokrzyska, I encountered a Critical Mass rally of bikes and skateboards turning into Emilia Platter Street in the summer evening light, skateboarders leading, cyclists behind, and it occurred to me how much better *this* street theatre was than the lugubrious performance about pollution I had just left. Or again: Saturday afternoon on Nowy Swiat, the street closed to traffic and occupied by a rather top-end 'farmers' market' and some ponderous medievalist street theatre, I caught sight of a man wearing a short dress (though otherwise there was no attempt to carry out cross-dressing as disguise) and offering his virtually bare bottom to be smacked with a paddle by another man who was with him – or by anyone in Nowy Swiat. A big man with a girl on his arm approached and asked for *his* bottom to be smacked! Was this staged? It was certainly not in the Street Theatre Festival programme.

Everything around tends to take on the quality of theatre when you are alert to its possibility in the street. So one of the first things any street theatre must decide is how it alerts its audience to its presence. How does it tell its audience they are audience? This is part of the show in street performance. Judith Malina, co-founder of the Living Theatre, pointing out that 'street theatre is not inside theatre work done on an outside platform', said that 'the aesthetic of street theatre is based on trying to understand the language of the people on that street'.[20]

Almost all the performances in the Festival could have been performed in indoor venues (Theatre of the Eighth Day's *Czas Matek*, 'The Time of the Mothers', and the Austrian company Irrwisch's *Wegenstreits Gäste*, 'Inconvenient/Embarrassing Guests', were notable exceptions). In the sense Jan Cohen-Cruz intends in her five categories, there was almost no 'street theatre' in this festival. And surprisingly few of the performances I saw took place in the *street*. Everything was located outdoors, but at one or two removes from an actual street. Parks and squares were the spaces used, free of traffic, and in places like Park Agrykola and Pole Mokotowskie, well removed from the nearest street. Which is not to say some of the outdoor work was not of high quality – the Russian company Mr Pejo's Wandering Dolls from St Petersburg were delightful entertainment for children and adults, and the French acrobatic trio Les P'tits Bras mixed clowning and trapeze with gusto, skill, and audience interaction.

The Paradox of 'Official' Street Theatre

Perhaps a city-sponsored festival of street performance with a beautifully printed programme is a contradiction in terms. In this regard, an interesting confrontation occured at the performance by the Swiss/German jugglers known as Tr'espace on a terrace area beside the monumental Palace of Art and Culture. Tr'espace's juggling consisted of spinning and manipulating objects at ground level, so that sightlines quickly became difficult for the crowd which gathered. The Festival organisers had roped out an area for the audience like two sides of a thrust stage. On the third side there was a bed of flowers and a small precious area of grass. There was evidently an order to 'Keep off the grass!' because this side was guarded by two officials, a man in an official Festival T-shirt with a cellphone round his neck and a woman with an official identification card round her neck.

Nevertheless, anyone could see this place offered the best view. In ones and twos and threes the crowd crept round beyond the grass and flowers from where they could get an excellent if somewhat more distant view. The audience now installed behind them, the guards rushed back to cut off the growing

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line of people. But this opened the closer area in front of the grass and flowers. Here the first to break the forbidden line were a woman and a child who sat down by (but not *on*) the grass. A security guard hired for the occasion chewed gum and looked nervously at the two for a while before deciding this was not his job and he did not have to do anything. Seeing what had happened, the Festival officials charged forward again and the woman and child were pushed back, but not completely. Now, the line behind grew again as a man and his dog boldly advanced closer in the officials' absence . . . once again, the officials rushed back . . .

As will be clear, all my concentration was distracted from the delicate ballet of juggling to this drama of authority versus those who wanted to get a better view of what this authority was supposed to be showing them yet was actually preventing them seeing. If this was not a little street theatre, what was? In the interests of not disrupting the jugglers, the officials were forced to abandon their policing and the tide of the audience carried the day. But there was a denouement. After the jugglers, and as we waited for the Polish company Teatr Formy to begin, a group of children left their parents' sides and started to improvise for the impatient crowd – and there was the man in the T-shirt again, stopping those naughty children. This was a street theatre festival – no theatre here, please!

The organizing authorities and the performing companies both struggled to come to terms with the nature of their festival. Two tendencies seemed to be at play here. One was a romantic notion of the past when actors performed in some mythical medieval market place; this nostalgic revival of the past has been a significant part of the history of theatrical modernism, from Copeau's rediscovery of *commedia dell'arte* to Bergman's simulation in *The Seventh Seal.* But the modern street is not a place where this can happen – noise, the internal combustion engine, and modern consciousness shunt such performance to the leisure corners of modern cities, parks, and squares. The other tendency has been to mount a performance which was prepared for outdoors but not for the urban street: as mentioned, Strefa Ciszy's did not work, while Theatre of the Eighth Day's successfully filled a large area in a park with amplified sound, multiple staging and stage hydraulics, and a moving cart. Yet both tendencies retreated from the street *qua* street.

Street Theatre on Stilts

Only the Austrian company Irrwisch was equipped to perform in the modern, everyday street. Their performance, *Wegenstreits Gäste,* was assigned to the New Town Square, a paved, open public space with trees and different levels and only two or three cafés, and no traffic; it is much quieter than the Old Town Square (just five minutes walk away), which is always crowded with tourists and full of restaurants and cafés. The New Town Square was used for eleven different performances during the Street Theatre Festival. When I spoke with Irrwisch after their show, they said the location was difficult because there simply was not enough happening there – not enough interruption. Normally, they said, they would prefer walls, less space, and cars and people and cafés and confinement and noise.

Three 'guests' on stilts perform *Wegenstreits Gäste* – one pompous and fastidious, one foolish and passionate (he wants to kiss everyone), and one, the *ingénue*, young, lively, and jumpy. They are the audience's guests. Not only are they in role, but we in the audience are also in role. They arrive in our world and find it astonishing.

As audience in the New Town Square, some of us had grown blasé about performances over the week of the Festival, and we stood around in the usual place wondering when the performers were going to turn up. Then I spotted the three guests, discreetly sheltering under a tree. Suddenly, with a single impulse, they strode out on their stilts, dressed as good guests should be in dinner jackets, to meet us. At first they just looked. They let us know about their astonishment at us. And let us love their astonishment.

Initial contact was made with one couple – a hook into the audience; like good Lecoq clowns they began to float on their audience.

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Irrwisch perform *Wegenstreits Gäste* at the Warsaw Festival of Street Performance in the New Town Square, July 2007. Above: 'Other things were loaded into the boot . . . even a bike.' Below: 'They grabbed the policeman's hat.' Photos: Joanna Forsberg.

Then they realized their height advantage – they could sit on us! And they did. In the audience, we realized that there was not going to be any single focus such as a stage, and that we were *their* observational target rather than the other way round, as is normally the case for theatre. The audience shuffled, retreated, circled, re-formed nervously. The guests realized they could take people's hats – and glasses. Many hats were removed and all placed on one spectator's head in a growing pile.

Then a police car cruised slowly into the square. This was too much for the guests, who moved to the car with an anticipatory audience following. They grabbed the policeman's hat through the car window. The crowd cheered. The doors and the hatchback of the car were opened. The three guests picked up a woman from the crowd and carried her to the boot of the car and put her in. Other things were loaded into the boot – the clothes and hats, even a bike. We in the audience realized it was fatal to retreat from



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Wegenstreits Gäste. Above: 'A lot of kisses were delivered – especially to the delicious bald heads in the audience.' Below: 'The guests and the children were on the same level.' Photos: Joanna Forsberg.

these guests, as it only encouraged them – they pursued you, as one well-dressed and indignant man found out (they moved fast on their stilts) as they picked him up.

People's ice creams were stolen and eaten. But if anyone made a hostile gesture the guests scurried away in fright. They were not aggressive, but they were sneaky and persistent. Cameras were filched and the audience photographed. The crowd became a group in constant motion, swirling in attraction, swerving in retreat. A lot of kisses were delivered, especially to the delicious bald heads in the audience.

And then there were the children on their parents' shoulders. The guests and the children were on the same level! They picked up children and carried them from one parent's shoulders to another. One child loved it, waving to her dad from some stranger's



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Wegenstreits Gäste.

Left: 'One pompous and fastidious, one foolish and passionate . . . and one . . . young, lively, and jumpy'.



Below: 'He threw down a watering can.'

Photos: Joanna Forsberg.

shoulders, the other child howled and the guests fled. They plonked themselves on top of a couple of lovers, they stole a beer from a café. Then they noticed the people watching from their windows. The guests waved to them. Ah, could they get up there? Despite the stilts – and because of the stilts – the *ingénue* managed to haul himself up to a first-floor balcony. He threw down a watering can, a pair of shoes, and a flowerbox. He delivered the flowerbox to the diners in a café.

These guests were robbers, thieves, clowns, innocents. They redistributed the theatrical relationship just as they redistributed the possessions of the audience and the environment. Irrwisch write about themselves that their work is 'more about what is in between – between Irrwisch and the public – between the lines'. This is where their performance took place – in the area which usually divides performer and audience. They go on to say about a further street piece designed for night performance using fire: 'Fire kindles, fire fascinates, fire is dangerous and beautiful. . . . It's not only burning on the surface but deep inside.'[21]

A Festival with Intention: Brave

Artistic director Grzegorz Bral – also artistic director of the company of Piesn Kozla (Goat Song Theatre) – and administrative director Anna Lewanowicz wrote the following of the Brave Festival:



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Our intention is to acknowledge that old traditions, songs, customs, and rituals, that is, the old spiritual energies, are 'drowned' and pushed out by the so-called progress.[22]

Grotowski wanted to discover not something new, but 'so old that all distinctions between aesthetic genres are no longer of use'.[23] Piesn Kozla, as instigators of the Brave Festival, are linked to the Grotowski tradition – Grzegorz Bral and Anna Zubrzycka were members of Gardzienice, whose founder Wlodzimierz Staniewski was previously a member of the Theatre Laboratory. Piesn Kozla were 'taken in by the Grotowski Centre in Wroclaw, where in November 1997 they had presented their first premiere with *Song of the Goat – a Dithyramb* based on the *Bacchae* of Euripides, inspired by traditional songs and dances from Greek Epiros, Albania, and Romania.'[24]

Piesn Kozla were performing their shows, *Kroniki,* in which they made use of 'old songs', and *Lacrimosa*, at the Brave Festival: 'In the Northern Epirus, on the border of Greece and Albania, Teatr Piesn Kozla discovered the existing tradition of singing laments and polyphonic songs.'[25] They also went to old poetry, to the epic of *Gilgamesh,* perhaps the oldest poetry preserved in writing anywhere, to construct the intense 45 minutes of *Kroniki.*

There are valid questions to be asked about the intentions of the Brave Festival. How *old* are the old songs? How traditional is tradition? Can one justify having an idea of a culture as something 'constant', which needs to be 'preserved' or is this attitude, despite its good intentions, a kind of kiss of death? Why should the marginal culture suffer 'preservation' and the dominant culture be allowed to grow and flourish in its random wilful way? These are important questions with which to confront the whole of romanticism (in whose shadow modernism and postmodernism have grown up) which began to 'preserve' the old songs back in the late eighteenth century, when collections of folk music were initiated in harmony with the generals aims of the Gothic and its unearthing of the past as a model for the romantic present and the creation of a new future.

These very intentions, questionable as they are, made the Brave Festival a noble and energizing audience experience. What was on offer was somewhat random and eclectic: Berber songs from Morocco, 'Marsh' songs from the Ukraine, polyphonic singing from the Caucasus, mystical songs from Sardinia, 'shoulder dances' by dark-skinned Jews from Ethiopia, Aboriginal dance from from north-east Australia, song and dance from the Bunun tribe of Taiwan, as well as two Polish Theatre companies, Piesn Kozla (as mentioned) and Teatr Osmego Dnia, performing *Czas Matek.*

This mixture was unified by excellent marketing (every performance I saw, except one, was packed out) and benefited from being held in Wroclaw, whose good local government and money put into the town after the devastating floods of 1997 have made it the most vibrant city in Poland today. Perhaps my memories of the Theatre of Nations from 1975, when Jean-Louis Barrault, Joseph Chaikin, Andre Gregory, and Peter Brook were in town and the Theatre Laboratory was playing *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* and holding its paratheatrical workshops and meetings, enhanced my feeling of connection to the place. The Brave Festival participants and much of the audience would have been at home in that 1975 gathering. Here I was again, same place but a totally transformed city – though Gierek's borrowing, at its height in 1975, might bear some resemblance to the boom time which now seemed to be buoying up Poland, while a regime of equivalent embarrassing stupidity ruled the country.

The Question of Authenticity

Brave was self-consciously political in concept, but its content remained in a romantic transcendentalist tradition. All ticket sales from the Festival were donated to Ropak, a charity for Tibetan schooling and cultural preservation; and the charitable spirit of the Brave Festival sometimes spilled over into audience reaction to performances: incredible sentiment for the four Ukrainian women singing their songs with their unaccompanied 'white voice' style. The leader of the group, Domynika Chekun, sang in an extra-

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ordinary voice, standing on stage with a ramrod straight back belting her lungs out with a look of ferocious approbation on her face.

Not one of these four women could have been less than seventy. They were given a rousing ovation by the Ukrainians and Poles in the audience. A lot of people were moved from what was Poland and is now Ukraine to Wroclaw (as Germans in Wroclaw were moved west) after the end of the Second World War, so perhaps there was a special connection here. Accordion playing and dancing went on in the foyer for twenty minutes after the show had finished. For a few moments it could have been an American folk dance hootenanny.

The one show I attended which was not full was a company of professional Russian singers cum musicologists – collectors of songs in the scholarly romantic tradition – called Narodnyj Prazdnik, with their programme *Piesn ziemi* (*Song of the Earth*). These women were all fine singers, but the reception they received was lukewarm and I found I was able to buy a CD of their work whereas the Ukrainians' CD had sold out.

Perhaps a more important issue here is the question of authenticity, which haunted the whole Brave Festival. The old Ukrainian women, with their gold teeth sparkling in the stage lighting, were judged to be authentic; whereas the Russian singers acknowledged themselves to be musicologists who had learned from traditional singers. Their aims were in line with the Brave Festival – to preserve the traditional songs and styles of singing – but any audience knew they were watching something at one remove from 'authenticity'.

The antiquarian urge to collect, to preserve, and then to revive in the area of song can be traced back to the second half of the eighteenth century. Thomas Percy's collection *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) was deeply influential, being 'credited, in part, with changing the prevailing art movement of the eighteenth century, neoclassicism, into romanticism'.[26] Percy's collection was not notable for its authenticity, for he 'improved' many of the ballads he had found in manuscript.

In fact, the antiquarian urge in the eighteenth century shared some common ground with the production of 'fakes' such as James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland*, published in 1760, and his more famous comprehensive follow-up, *The Works of Ossian*, in 1765, the same year as Percy's *Reliques*. Percy himself published *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, 'translations' from the Icelandic in 1763, in which he attempted to join the Ossian craze for the 'old songs'. Whatever the authenticity of these partially collected and partially authored works, they had a profound influence on romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, Robert Burns, and Walter Scott, and in Germany on Goethe, on the more scholarly collectors of songs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Child, Campbell, Sharp), often carried out directly from singers rather than manuscripts, and on romantic nationalism generally.

Romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century had no richer nursery than in non-existent Poland. It was fascinating to note the persistence of this search for the ancient, authentic, and authenticizing, and the acts of practical scholarship and collection which were evident in the Brave Festival, in the decade of Piesn Kozla's work, and in the tradition which reaches back into Grotowski's search for 'ancient song' (still continuing in the work of Thomas Richards).

The Brave Festival raised the old romantic conundrum of how to reconcile the tension between 'common humanness' and 'cultural difference'. In explaining his statement that he wanted something 'so old that all distinctions between aesthetic genres are no longer of use', Grotowski stated his position as: 'Man precedes difference.'[27] In other words, there is an *a priori* common humanness that remains accessible, despite cultural difference. Unfashionable in an era of cultural theory, such a position might become more central again if evolutionary biology gains an upper hand in the study of culture.

The tension between common humanness and cultural difference is played out in the very structure of festivals – it is to see and experience cultural difference that we go as

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audience to modern arts festivals, but unless our common humanness gives us access in some way to understanding this, then the whole audience experience will be meaningless. The Brave Festival, more than most, self-consciously articulated this structural tension in its intentions. Psien Kozla's choice of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, probably the 'oldest' poem on earth, as the drama for their *Kroniki* production, reinforces this, affirming that whatever has been lost in cultural knowledge from more than three thousand years ago, there remains in that poem something we can now, on a twenty-first-century afternoon in Wroclaw, in an idiom derived directly from modernist theatre practice, eschewing narrative for fragmentation and collage, and using modern European languages, watch in a performance which will move us and speak to us.

Conclusion: a Complex of Occasions

The modern arts festival is, then, a complex of occasions. Three examples from one country over a month are not enough to generalize successfully. What I saw in Poland in June and July 2007 is being repeated in country after country, season by season. The modern festival is a multivalent form; many needs and desires can attach to it. As the three examples I have discussed illustrate, it is a form which makes its own mould when poured. Festivals are also fruitful sources of contradiction. In one way they can be read as successful capitalist marketing devices and thus represent the capitulation of oppositional theatre to a globalized capitalism. In another way, festivals can be seen as idealistic ways in which the arts can create small havens in a globalized capitalist world economy, and as such sometimes demonstrate characteristics which even reach back into revolutionary romanticism.

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