

## Wyspiański, Schiller, Osterwa – Pillars of Modern Polish Theatre

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### Wyspiański, Schiller, Osterwa – filary nośne nowoczesnego teatru polskiego

**Abstract:** Spośród wielu artystów, którzy zakładali fundamenty, a następnie budowali wielki gmach nowoczesnego teatru polskiego, historia wyróżniła trzy wielkie postaci. Stanisław Wyspiański, związany z modernizmem, przez wielu zwany „ojcem nowoczesnego teatru polskiego”, zbudował fundamenty polskiego teatru, tak jak był on rozumiany i praktykowany w XX w. w dziedzinie dramaturgii i inscenizacji. Tworzył sztuki teatralne nierozdzielnie związane z ich projektami scenicznymi. Były to „dzieła sztuki teatru”, w których materia utkana była ze słów i obrazów, z wizyjnej poezji i dosadnego realizmu. Leon Schiller poszedł śladami Wyspiańskiego. Stał się czołowym twórcą Wielkiej Reformy Teatru w Europie. Uprawiał reżyserię jako wyodrębnioną dziedzinę sztuki; stworzył „polski teatr inscenizacji”; zapoczątkował także nauczanie reżyserii jako dziedziny akademickiej. Jego głównym reżyserskim dokonaniem (obok innych widowisk) były inscenizacje polskich dramatów romantycznych, z których mickiewiczowskie *Dziady* (Lwów 1932, Wilno 1933, Warszawa 1934) były szczytowym osiągnięciem polskiego teatru w XX wieku. Juliusz Osterwa, aktor, reżyser, organizator życia teatralnego oraz reformator teatru, stworzył teatr Reduta, modelowe laboratorium nowego aktorstwa. Rozwinął i ugruntował psychologiczny i realistyczny nurt w polskim aktorstwie. Propagował polską dramaturgię współczesną (m.in. prapremiery sztuk Szaniawskiego, Żeromskiego, Rittnera) i poetycki teatr wspólnoty aktorów i widzów (*Wyzwolenie* jako dialog Konrada z widzami, misteryjny *Księżę niezłomny*, przedstawienia podziemne i projekty z czasu II wojny światowej). Włączył swe prace w specyficzną polską tradycję „teatru służby” – służby narodowi i służby Bogu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** inscenizacja, reżyseria, polski styl inscenizacji albo „polski teatr inscenizacji”, Wielka Reforma Teatru

**Key words:** Mise en scene, Theatre direction (or theatre directing), Polish directorial style, The Great Reform of Theatre

### Introduction

Polish Theatre is an enormous edifice which has been under construction for centuries. It has many levels, each of them with multiple halls, chambers and rooms. Based on the long lasting tradition, the history of

modern Polish theatre can be charted back to around the beginning of the 20th Century. It was shaped by numerous, very different, artists.

History distinguished especially three of them. Stanisław Wyspiański, considered by many to be “the father of modern Polish theatre”, introduced and put in practice the notion of a stage production synonymous with “the work of theatre art”, expressing it in visionary dramas, *mise-en-scènes*, and sets. Leon Schiller, following Wyspiański’s footsteps, created scores of *mise-en-scènes* composed of a huge range of expression in the style of the “monumental theater”; he laid the foundations for teaching directing on the academic level. Juliusz Osterwa, also Wyspiański’s follower, contributed to both the development of modern psychological acting and teaching acting. He grounded his works in the specifically Polish tradition of “theatre of service” – a service to the society, the nation, and to God. These three theatre artists decisively contributed to the laying of the foundations, designing, and building the 20th Century Polish theatre. They were its main pillars.

Wyspiański’s major domain was drama, Schiller’s – directing, Osterwa’s – acting. All of them were deeply rooted in both Polish history and Polish theatre tradition. Wyspiański wrote several historical and contemporary plays in which he explored the political circumstance of Poland’s fate. Schiller, besides his other interests, focused his directorial lens on the Polish Romantic drama. Osterwa, produced, directed, and acted in many Polish plays; he devoted himself to the promotion of contemporary Polish drama. All three were strongly connected with contemporary (for them) European theatre trends. Wyspiański was a part of all-European modernism. Schiller witnessed the birth of the Great Reform of Theatre, and later actively participated in it. He was an apprentice of one of the Reform’s founders, Gordon Craig. Schiller’s productions bore many similarities with those of Max Reinhardt, Vsievolod Meyerhold, and Ervin Piscator. Osterwa, while exiled in Russia, became close with Konstantin Stanisławski and the work of these two artists run at that time in parallel ways. On the other hand, Osterwa’s approach to theatre ethics situated him close to Jacques Copeau.

### **Stanisław Wyspiański: the birth of artistic *Mise-En-Scène***

Precisely at the beginning of the 20th century, the Great Reform of Theatre, already under way in Europe, began in earnest in Poland. Its catalyst was the arrival of a great artist who brought to life breakthrough works. The artist was Stanisław Wyspiański. The works were dramas inseparably combined with *mise-en-scène* projects. The cradle for Wyspiański’s works was Kraków, the former royal capital of Poland.

The city was, at that time, under Austrian rule. It had strong connections with the theatre of the Great Reform, at the time emerging throughout

Europe. When a new, magnificent theatre building opened its doors in Kraków in 1893, Tadeusz Pawlikowski, who had previously worked under Ludwig Chronegk in Meiningen, became its manager and artistic director. He produced new dramas of Ibsen, Maeterlick, Przybyszewski, and Zapolska. He supported Wyspiański's dramaturgical debut in 1898, the poetic drama *The Warsaw Song*. Written in verse, it demonstrated the major characteristic's of his playwriting palette: it integrated action with music and dialogues with songs; it juxtaposed symbolic poetry with rough naturalism, intimate musings with crowd scenes. Pawlikowski's successor, Józef Kotarbiński, also recognized Wyspiański's great talent and produced his masterpiece, *The Wedding*, with the author's design and directorial collaboration, in 1901.

Stanisław Wyspiański (January 15, 1869 – November 28, 1907) was a painter, poet, playwright, designer, and director. Born and educated in Kraków, he received an excellent classical education, including Greek and Latin. He was fluent in German and French. He studied painting at the Fine Arts Academy in Kraków's and literature at the Jagiellonian University. He travelled to France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, and Bohemia to further study fine arts and to see theatre. He became familiar with the artistic heritage of Richard Wagner and with Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. He was well read in contemporary drama, both naturalistic and symbolist. In Kraków and abroad, he was an avid theatregoer and cabaret fan. In Paris, he associated with the Nabis, who, besides painting, loved to design sets and costumes for theatre. Thanks to them, he also became acquainted with Japanese art, which they promoted in Europe. Back in Poland, he immersed himself in Polish history and folk art.

He modeled his early plays, *Daniel* (1893), and *Crowned Queen of Poland* (1893), on Wagner's librettos. Then he wrote *The Legend* (1898), a drama based on the mythical stories about the foundation of the city of Kraków. He paid his debts to his professors of classical literature by writing *Meleager* (1899) and *Protesilas and Laodamia* (1899). His two subsequent plays, *The Curse* and *The Judges* (both written in 1899), were contemporary naturalistic tragedies. Nevertheless, Wyspiański's was a strange naturalism – with external features of the style, but internally structured along the lines of classical tragedy and rendered in verse.

Writing his plays in verse, Wyspiański mixed elements of naturalism and symbolism. In *The Wedding* (1901), in *The Deliverance* (1903), *Acropolis* (1904) and *November's Night* (1904) his playwriting exploded, became total and visionary, yet strongly entrenched in Polish history, biography of characters, and precise geography of locations where the action was set. As he continued to write plays, Wyspiański also began to imagine their mise-en-scènes, that is their stage shape, full of rich and complex imagery.

In *The Wedding* (1901), the naturalistically presented action takes place on a farm during a wedding between a village girl and a poet from Kraków. The bride comes into view surrounded by vivid, naturalistically drawn

characters of the peasants; the groom appears in the company of urban intelligentsia. The peasants use country vernacular; the city dwellers speak in sophisticated literary language. The whole play is written in verse. When the live characters confront ghosts – the action shifts from crude naturalism to a level of symbols, dreams, and visions.

*The Deliverance* takes place on the stage of Kraków's City Theatre (where the author himself actually directed this play in 1903). Using the device of theatre-within-theatre similar to *Hamlet*, Wyspiański brings his fictitious hero, Konrad, a poet and an aspiring national leader, to the theatre where he improvises and directs a play about contemporary Poland laboring under foreign oppression and yearning for freedom. The stage is empty, dark, and bare. At Konrad's command, stagehands assemble the sets in full view of the audience, technicians set the lights, and the stage transforms into the interior of the cathedral at the Royal Castle in Kraków. There, Konrad continues to seek ways of deliverance from various forms of bondage: aesthetic, political, and spiritual. He quarrels with representatives of various social groups and with the figure of "Genius," who symbolically represents the past, as well as with his own thoughts and ideas about the present and future Poland; his thoughts are materialized as various "masks". When the sets are dismantled, Konrad returns from his imaginary journey to the stage. He is again trapped by the ossified forms of old theatre and ghosts of the past. Only opening the back stage door and confronting theatre with real life offers a glimmer of hope.

*The Deliverance*, a sophisticated and complex drama, develops simultaneously on three levels: (1) The story of a theatre artist's struggle to escape the strictures of old theatre; (2) The story of Poland's struggle for independence from foreign oppression (Poland at that time was ruled by Russia, Prussia, and Austria); (3) The story of a human spirit battling against the limitations of matter.

*Acropolis*, Wyspiański's next play, is set in Wawel, Kraków's Royal Castle, indoors and outside, but most of all, in the author's own imagination which converts the existing architecture into an enchanted world of figures descending from monuments, sepulchers, and tapestries. The action tells the story of Easter night at the end of which Christ resurrects: a metaphor for a dream about Poland's resurrection from foreign rule.

*November Night* is a dramatic chronicle of the Polish uprising against Russia in 1830-1831. On the realistic level, it features historical figures of aristocrats, both men and women, generals, politicians, army cadets, and actors. These characters mingle with gods descending from the Greek Olympus in scenes containing a symbolic dimension. The play is a mysterious and poetic mix of true events and lyric visions, all rendered in sophisticated verse and stunning imagery.

Wyspiański's works were simultaneously dramas and multi-faceted projects of productions. He conceived them as both literary works and

as projects of highly visual *mise-en-scènes*. He composed dialogues and soliloquies for the actors. He equipped directors and designers with images, visions, and silent actions. These he recorded in the stage directions, also written in verse.

His works possessed artistic richness, demanded diverse means of expression, and combined several overlapping levels of action – a visionary labyrinth created by an artist who was a poet, a painter, and a director. As writer, he used various forms of poetry; he specified the characters' diction, not hesitating to contrast vernaculars, curses, or archaisms with the refined speech of aristocrats, writers, or intellectuals. As a painter, he was closest to the Nabis and the Symbolists, especially Maurice Denis. The author of huge stained-glass windows in Kraków's churches, he grasped the immense power of shapes, contours, and dramatically used colors. As a designer, he was bold and inventive. He situated the action in small interiors or in vast, open exteriors. Years before Copeau or Meyerhold, he also put the action on a real, bare theatre stage or in real spaces, venues, and locations. As a director, he achieved different moods and tempos by alternating between scenes with large crowds and small groups of characters. He mastered lighting, not hesitating to perform the prologue of *The Deliverance* in the semi-darkness of stage work lights and using spots, narrow as sword blades, in the epilogue of the same play.

The situations he invented as playwright and master of the *mise-en-scène* were often sharp, cruel, and dramatic. In *The Return of Odysseus*, the hero beats to death a shepherd. In *November Night*, there are scenes of hanging, shooting, and the trampling of people. Wyspiański always visualized his characters in motion – running, dancing, or flying in the air, as was the case of Greek goddesses descending on Warsaw. He used slow-motion or “froze” the characters in expressive poses, as at the end of *The Wedding* when all guests are immobilized in a lethargy. His plays and production project utilized changing rhythms. In one scene they presented a solitary hero, in the next, a crowd. Realism alternated with symbolism and dreams. Music, songs, and sound effects punctuated the productions abundantly and effectively. Theatre poetry arose out of words, movements, images, and sounds.

Wyspiański's attitude towards theatre was ambiguous and paradoxical. He treated theatre as a mysterious temple of art, a center of the universe, while at the same time he demystified theatre by disclosing its mechanisms and the bare stage boards. Not only did he use existing theatre buildings, but he also wanted to build a new venue: at the foot the Royal Castle hill in Kraków, he proposed to erect a theatre modeled on Greco-Roman structures, with a large orchestra pit for performers and an amphitheater for the public.

Many of his projects, proposals, and ideas never materialized during his lifetime. He was only able to design and direct three of his plays: *Bolesław the Bold*, *The Legend* (second version), and *The Deliverance*. He also

directed *Forefathers' Eve* by Adam Mickiewicz and made significant contributions to the production of *The Wedding*. For other productions of his plays, he would sometimes draw a costume or a prop.

Wyspiański was a theatre reformer because of his experience as a playwright and visionary director. Equally important were his new ways of thinking about theatre. He deployed various means of expression to create rich and complex productions. In this way, he introduced a new type of stage production, previously unknown, but later embraced across Europe: a multilayered performance in which the text, acting, imagery, movement, and music mesh into a single work of theatre art.

Here, we come to an important point. In the 1880s, Wagner articulated his ideal of the *Gesamkunstwerk*. He developed it as a composer, author of librettos, producer, and theatre builder. The *Gesamkunstwerk* sought to blend all layers of a production into an integrated work of art. Music, however, remained the dominant aspect of Wagnerian operas, still performed within traditional, painted sets.

Wyspiański's theatre of the early 1900s initiated a radically different approach. There is no single, short, and precise English term for the kind of stage production he introduced. The French *mise-en-scène* adopted in English, as well as the German *Inszenierung* and Polish *inscenizacja*, are close to it, but narrower and more technical. They do not clearly denote the author's active role in shaping the production. For in creating this kind of a production the author can serve at the same time as the director, designer, and composer. The word "total" was eventually attached to this kind of *mise-en-scène*: *total mise-en-scène* and its variant *total theatre*. In 20th-century theatre, Bertolt Brecht and later Robert Wilson created *total mise-en-scènes* such as those introduced by Wyspiański.

Indeed, it was Wyspiański who first achieved this kind of theatre production in *The Deliverance* in 1903. Max Reihardt began to develop shows of this kind with his production of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1904. Edward Craig wrote about them in *On The Art of the Theatre* (1904) and supplied a model of such a production with his *Hamlet* (1911). Later, Vsievobod Meyerhold, Evgieny Vakhtangov, Les Kurbas, Erwin Piscator, Leon Schiller, Gaston Baty, Emil Burian, Wilam Horzyca and others embraced the challenge of the total *mise-en-scène*. The total *mise-en-scène* became a touchstone of the Great Reform and gained popularity during the Second Reform in the works of such directors as Peter Brook, Giorgio Strehler, or Peter Stein.

In an original and innovative way, Wyspiański took advantage of naturalism and symbolism, and drew inspiration from the European avant-garde of the early 20th century. He looked to modern philosophical and intellectual currents and mixed old styles and traditions. He invoked Polish folk customs and Greek myths. He drew from Christian traditions and iconography. He joined the century-long Polish endeavor to restore the country's

independence lost at the end of the 18th century. The pursuit of radical changes in art was for him inseparable from equally radical political change. His attempt to outmaneuver Austrian censorship (Austria ruled the region of Poland where Wyspiański lived) forced him to camouflage his political message in layered metaphors and symbols. As a result, political debates in his works were inextricably bound up with their artistic expression.

The basic conflict in all of his plays/mise-en-scènes occurred between life and death; on one side of the equation were forces of vitality, action, willpower, and dynamism. On the other, weakness, lethargy, passivity, and inaction. Characters in his plays enacted this conflict under many figurative guises. The essence of Wyspiański's work was profoundly tragic: conflict between characters, their attitudes, views, and values inevitably lead to a catastrophe. However, there was always hope for a new life, renewal, resurrection – metaphorically, the resurrection of Poland.

It is historically clear why the volcanic, Promethean works of Wyspiański erupted in Poland, a millennium-old bastion of Western culture, then bound by foreign rule and hampered in its civilizational progress. A mortal illness accelerated the violent speed with which Wyspiański created his works. He lived with death breathing down his neck. He died at the age of 39.

#### **WYSPIAŃSKI'S TOTAL MISE-EN-SCÈNES**

<i>The Wedding</i>	1901
<i>The Deliverance</i>	1903
<i>Acropolis</i>	1904
<i>November's Night</i>	1904

### **Leon Schiller's poetic and monumental Mise-En-Scène**

Leon Schiller (really: Leon de Schildenfeld Schiller, April 14, 1887 – March 25, 1954) was an apprentice of Gordon Craig in Paris in 1909, published in Craig's magazine *The Mask*, and stayed in touch with the master for years. The association with Craig gave Schiller direct access to the core of the Great Reform of Theatre. At the same time, it was Schiller who told Craig about Stanisław Wyspiański. The insights and works of the Polish genius greatly impressed Craig.

As a director, Schiller made the most of ideas he had learned from Craig, but also remained aware of other theatre developments in the east and west of Poland. He knew the works of Meyerhold, Tairov, Reinhardt, Piscator, and other reformers of theatre. Throughout his career, he remained the major exponent of the Reform in Poland.

Born in an affluent family in Kraków, Schiller studied, somewhat sporadically, literature in Kraków and Paris, as well as music composition in

Vienna. He traveled extensively in Europe, taking particular interest in French and German theatre. He read widely in theatre history and dramatic literature. He began to write criticism and organized expositions of modern stage design. Gifted with a melodious voice and skillfully playing piano, he sang in cabarets. Eventually, he took the job of a literary director at Teatr Polski in Warsaw, all the while setting his eyes on directing.

He made his directorial debut in 1917, staging *Princess Lelijka* (*Królowna Lelijka*) by Tadeusz Konczyński with the assistance of the experienced director, Konstatny Tatarkiewicz. He went on to direct frequently and consistently throughout Poland and on two occasions abroad, in Sofia and Paris. He not only learned the art of directing, but became a highly respected educator and authority on theatre. In 1933, he established and became dean of the Directing Department at the State Institute of Theatre Arts in Warsaw, the first university-level directing program in the world.

After the German and Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, Schiller, like all prominent citizens, faced mortal danger. Arrested on March 7, 1941, he was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp, where he was branded with prisoner number 13,581. Fortunately, about two months later, he was released, probably thanks to his international connections in addition to a heavy ransom. He returned to Warsaw and joined the underground theatre movement.

It is important to realize that in October 1939, Germans and Russians banned theatre productions in the occupied Poland. They either closed theatre buildings or turned them over to German, Ukrainian, Russian, or Lithuanian companies. All Polish Theatre companies were disbanded. Exiled from public stages, Polish theatre artists managed to put on countless underground theatre productions in private homes, monasteries, or mountain asylums, as well as in POW camps and even concentration camps. For instance, there are records of the great actor, Stefan Jaracz (Auschwitz prisoner number 13,580), reciting poetry for fellow inmates. Clandestine activities included actual productions, poetry recitals, acting classes, and playwriting competitions. Two theatre companies came into existence in 1941 – Tadeusz Kantor’s *Cricot 2*, and Mieczysław Kotlarczyk’s *Rhapsodic Theatre* (Teatr Rapsodyczny) – both of which successfully functioned after the war.

In 1944, Schiller became a Benedictine oblate. During the Warsaw Uprising (August-September 1944), he gave concerts for the Home Army soldiers, playing the piano and singing, often to the accompaniment of heavy shelling and bombardments. After the Uprising, he was interned in an officers’ camp in Murnau, Germany, where he directed productions with co-prisoners. Liberated by the Americans in 1945, he created an acting company that performed for Polish troops stationed in the western part of Germany.

In December 1945, he returned to Poland and joined the Communist Party. Appointments, accolades, and honors followed. Schiller ran theatre



schools, managed theatres, and received official prizes. The tables turned abruptly, however, when in a new wave of persecutions Schiller was relieved of all his duties because of his “bourgeois past.” He was relegated to the National Arts Institute as head of its theatre division and given the job of an editor at the theatre quarterly *Pamiętnik Teatralny*. Between 1950 and 1953, he directed occasionally in Warsaw and Berlin. He died in Warsaw on 25 March 1954.

He never acted on the stage. He composed the blocking, including movement and interpretation of the lines, visually and musically, leaving to the actors to find the internal motivation for their actions; he was not interested in acting methods, although he knew Stanislavsky’s works. He actually met Stanislavsky in Moscow in 1928, while a guest at the MAT 30s anniversary, and he saw several MAT’s productions.

As several other directors of his time, he associated with avant-garde artists and valued the aesthetic expression of a production. Like Piscator, he infused some shows with left-wing, if not Communist, ideas. Reinhardt, on the other hand, impressed him by his eclecticism and wide range of his directorial palette.

Between 1917 and 1953 Schiller directed about 150 theatre productions. For some of them, he relied on the help of assistant directors. In the early phase of his career (1917–1924) he mostly directed his own scenarios based on Medieval and Renaissance Christmas and Easter plays, as well as his own medelies based on popular songs. In the most creative phase of his career (1924–1939), he directed Polish Romantic and neo-Romantic repertoire, Shakespeare, and some contemporary Polish and foreign dramas.

Productions of plays of the great Polish poets of the 19th century constituted the core of Schiller’s directorial output: *The Un-divine Comedy* by Zygmunt Krasiński (Warsaw, 1926 and Łódź, 1938), *Kordian* by Juliusz Słowacki (Lwów, 1930; Warsaw, 1935; Łódź, 1939), and *Forefathers’ Eve* by Adam Mickiewicz (Lwów, 1932; Wilno, 1933; Warsaw, 1934, and Sofia, Bulgaria, 1937). *Forefathers’ Eve* was considered his best production and possibly the most remarkable Polish production of the inter-war period in Poland.

*Forefathers’ Eve* (written between 1822–1832, with some scenes discovered posthumously) is a Romantic play in five parts (about 8,000 verses). It depicts the struggle of the human spirit with matter, battles between the forces of good and evil, and human wrestling with God over the rule of world. It is partly a tragic love-story and partly a factual account on the trial of a group of students in Wilno, who conspired against Russian rule in Poland – Mickiewicz himself was one of them. In the long, complex, and multi-parts drama-poem, humans encounter angels and devils; fictitious characters interact with historical figures. The action takes place on earth and in heaven, in real prison and in a prisoner’s imagination. The author builds a metaphor that compares the sufferings of Poland under foreign oppression to Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection.

During the period of the partitions foreign censorship had banned *Forefathers' Eve*. Following a relaxation of these policies by the Austrians, Stanisław Wyspiański was able to prepare the very first staging of the play in Kraków in 1901. Schiller took on the challenge in 1932. He condensed Mickiewicz's poetic text into a workable scenario. Together with Andrzej Pronaszko, a wonderfully imaginative designer, he came up with scenography based on the major structural metaphor of the drama: the comparison between the passion of Poland and passion of Jesus Christ. Consequently, the production unfolded on a huge platform representing a hill accessible by means of ramps and low stairs. On the hill stood three crosses, a visual representation of Golgotha. Individual scenes took place within designated areas of the platform, where simple pieces of scenery temporarily suggested different venues, such a prison with a tall iron bar, a garden with a broken column, or a palace hall with one door mantel. At other moments, the entire open platform accommodated either rhythmically choreographed crowds or solitary protagonists illuminated by expressionistic spotlights, with clouds projected behind them on the horizon. The production was the greatest feat of a total theatre in the spirit of the Reform.

Besides the romantic plays, mentioned above, Schiller also directed masterpiece of the Polish modernist repertoire: *Prince Potemkin* by Tadeusz Miciński (1925), *Achilles* by Stanisław Wyspiański (1925), *The Rose* based on the novel by Stefan Żeromski (1926), and others. He successfully directed Shakespeare: *The Winter's Tale* (1924), *As You Like It* (1925), *Julius Caesar* (1928), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear* (1935), *Coriolanus* (1936), and *The Tempest* (1947). Another strand in Schiller's directing embraced contemporary, political, and social plays by Bertolt Brecht (Schiller mounted the Polish premiere of *The Threepenny Opera* (1929), Friedrich Wolf, and Arnold Zweg, as well as his own adaptation of *The Good Soldier Švejk* by Jaroslav Hašek (1929, 1930) following Piscator's discovery of this novel as material for theatre.

After the Second World War, the Communist authorities banned Schiller's favorite romantic repertoire. He revived some of his old scripts and directed only a few major theatre productions and operas.

Schiller left a mark as one of the most creative forces in Polish theatre. Inspired by the Romantic poets (Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasiński) and spurred on by their successor, Wyspiański, Schiller forged a style of a poetic *monumental theatre*. His monumental productions were rich and spectacular. He deployed modern, anti-illusionistic means of expression and often worked together with avant-garde painters and designers. Rhythm was a key element in Schiller's productions. He achieved it through choreographed movement, dramatic interactions between protagonists and crowds, and lighting which relied heavily on spotlights. Music featured prominently and abundantly in his shows. His stage visions were indeed monumental.

While rooted in Romanticism, Schiller kept abreast of contemporary artistic currents and explored burning political and social problems. His views tended toward Marxism and Communism. He followed the German Zeittheater (“theatre of the moment”), directing some of the plays by German leftist writers, as well as other authors concerned with revolutionary movements and the relationships between the individual and society.

Interested in traditional Polish songs, Schiller developed the idea of *singing theatre* in which texts were taken from songs, poetry, as well as ancient mystery and morality plays. While the director devised the action, old songs, hymns, or Schiller’s own compositions supplied the music. This form of *singing theatre* was oriented towards refined entertainment and enjoyment of the public.

No less than his directorial works, Schiller’s contributions to theatre education left a rich legacy. In his work with directing students, he stressed the necessity of deep liberal education, competence in all the major areas of theatre (script writing, acting, designing, music), and treating theatre as an art. His efforts to raise true theatre artists made him a master and mentor of at least three generations of Polish directors. He contributed significantly to the emergence of a typically *Polish directorial style*, which combines stage poetry and stylization with realism.

Artistically, Schiller was a Renaissance man, whose diverse areas of expertise allowed him to shape creatively the entire process of theatre production. Personally, he was full of sharp contradictions: an intellectual from the upper class, he associated himself with Communism. In his youth, he was an acolyte of the avant-garde and champion of the Great Reform, but in older age accepted socialist realism after World War II. During the war, he opposed the Nazis, but willingly became a member of the Communist party after 1945, and served another totalitarian regime by assisting the Soviets in infiltrating and controlling the artistic milieu of Poland. He oscillated between mysticism and materialism. In some periods of his life, he was a faithful Roman-Catholic; at other times, he declared himself an atheist. He was an artist with the temperament of an activist. He remained one of the greatest Polish theatre artists and one of the best directors of the Reform.

#### SCHILLER’S FOREFATHER’S EVE SERIES

Wilno	1931
Lwów	1932
Warsaw	1934
Sophia, Bulgaria	1938

### **Juliusz Osterwa: reforming The Soul of Theatre**

Juliusz Osterwa (April 23, 1885 – May 10, 1947) was an actor, director, pedagogue, theatre manager, and theatre reformer.

Osterwa was born into a very poor family in Kraków, Poland. He did not complete high school; instead, he joined a semi-amateur theatre (Teatr Ludowy, Kraków), where he made his acting debut in 1904. He soon embarked on a fast and glamorous acting career, supported by self-directed study in drama and theatre. He was handsome, had a melodious voice, and great personal charm; he possessed the ability to inhabit different roles, from farce, comedy, and cabaret where he was a skilful impersonator, to heroes in dramas and tragedies. He passed through the stages of Kraków, Poznań, and Wilno. In 1907–1909, he traveled extensively in Western Europe, watching productions, learning from great actors, and studying new trends in theatre. In 1912, he signed a contract with the National Theatre in Warsaw,<sup>1</sup> where he soon became the principal actor and, in 1915, he was poised to become its Artistic Director.

World War I interrupted this brilliant career. At the outbreak of the war, Osterwa, who was formally a citizen of Austria, but resided in Russian-ruled Warsaw, was arrested and interned in Russia. Along with other Polish actors and directors who shared his plight, he organized Polish-language theatre companies and gave performances in Samara, Kiev, and Moscow. There, he met Stanislavsky, who saw him in a Polish production, recognized him as great actor, and asked him to join the MAT. They spent hours discussing the need for theatre reform. Osterwa declined Stanislavsky's offer. He organized instead a Polish experimental company in Kiev, where he explored some of Stanislavsky's ideas along with his own innovations. The company tried to practice a strict ethical approach to theater, grounded in the notion of service – service to theatre, to the country, and to fellow-citizens. Their work had a communal character. All members shared living quarters, performed daily chores, rehearsed, built sets and costumes, and performed together. The actors and spectators alike were refugees, internees, and displaced people. They understood each other well, and their interactions bore a strong sense of community.

After the Great War, Osterwa returned to Poland, which regained its independence after 123 years of foreign rule. In 1919, he created a theatre-studio, called Reduta, which translates into English as “redoubt,” but also connotes “stronghold” or “strongly defended fortification.” Indeed, Osterwa wanted his theatre to be a bastion of new Polish theatre as well as a sanctuary of spiritual life for both actors and spectators.

Reduta was at first a studio at the National Theatre in Warsaw, but soon became an independent stage, after the fire of the main National's stage. “Reduta” was a laboratory of new drama, new acting, and new theatre ethics. It put on mainly contemporary domestic repertoire, with the addition

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<sup>1</sup> At that time, the National Theatre operated under the name of “Teatr Rozmaitości” (“The Variety Theatre”), imposed by the Russian authorities who, from 1795 to 1918, ruled this part of Poland.

of a few national classics. By commissioning new plays and encouraging playwrights, Osterwa sought to rejuvenate Polish drama. He supported plays that celebrated Polish traditions and, at the same time, debated contemporary problems. Jerzy Szaniawski and Stefan Żeromski were among his favorite authors. He also cherished Juliusz Słowacki from among the classics, and prized Stanisław Wyspiański, a “contemporary classic” whose work inspired and influenced him enormously.

Osterwa insisted on truth in acting, which he understood to hold both artistic and moral aspects. His performance practices, styles, and means of expression included naturalism (plays by Jerzy Szaniawski and Stefan Żeromski), expressionism (*Strange Street* by Kazimierz Czyżowski), stylization (*Barber in Love* by Zygmunt Kawecki), and poetry (*The Deliverance* by Wyspiański, *Constant Prince* by Słowacki).

In 1922, Osterwa opened an acting school at the Reduta, calling it Instytut Reduty (“The Reduta Institute”). Student-apprentices followed a demanding program of training – acting, movement, voice, theatre history, drama, and ethics. They appeared in minor roles in Reduta’s productions. The students lived as a community, shared the same lodgings, ate together, and even shared finances. Osterwa believed that actors must train constantly. Although he emphasized psychology, his institute also stressed physical training. To this end, the movement classes not only included gymnastics, expression of the body, rhythmical movement, but also fencing and horseback riding.

In 1923, Osterwa, while fully occupied in Reduta, assumed the post of Artistic Director and General Manager of the National Theater in Warsaw. This was the crowning moment of his career. He was at that time one of the best actors and one of the most innovative directors in Poland. Well-liked by fellow actors, acclaimed by the critics, and applauded by the public, he rose to stardom. During his tenure at the National, Osterwa directed and performed the lead in a memorable production *My Little Quail Has Gone*, a new play by Stefan Żeromski. He appeared in a few other roles. But he stunned the theatre milieu in 1925, when he resigned his position at the National Theatre and transferred Reduta to Wilno. There he regularly performed at the Teatr na Pohulance, but in summers toured with Reduta all over Poland.

His most frequently performed production was *The Constant Prince* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. (Written around 1629, and adapted by Juliusz Słowacki in 1843). Osterwa made further revisions of the text and directed the play for the first time in Kiev (1918), then in Warsaw (1919). In 1926, he staged it once more with Reduta in Wilno as a large scale, open-air production. He then travelled with it to cities and small towns all over Poland, always performing it outdoors against the back drop of some old architecture. Each show drew thousands, including farmers, workers, students, and soldiers.

While heading Reduta and touring with it, Osterwa still made guest appearance throughout Poland, playing roles in the Polish classical repertoire such as Don Fernand in *The Constant Prince*, Kordian and Fantazy (leads in plays by Słowacki), Father Peter in *Forefather's Eve* by Mickiewicz, or Konrad in *The Deliverance* by Wyspiański. He also performed in contemporary dramas.

In 1931, he moved Reduta from Wilno back to Warsaw, this time not as a theatre, but as an "Institute". He set for it a threefold mission: to function as a permanent, public theatre in Warsaw; to tour the country as a travelling company; and to train actors as an acting school. Between 1932 and 1935, Osterwa also assumed the management of Teatr Słowackiego in Kraków.

Osterwa's apartment and his Reduta Institute in Warsaw were bombed at the beginning of the Second World War in September 1939.

During the war, Osterwa lived in Kraków and taught acting in underground studios. At the same time, he made plans to create a religious order for theatre artists, a plan that grew out of his experiences and experiments in Reduta, enriched by new ideas.

After the war, Osterwa embraced again a very work heavy work-load, acting in Kraków, Łódź and Warsaw. The Communist regime, established in Poland by the Soviets, never trusted him, but could not ignore his enormous popularity. Thus, Osterwa was appointed manager of all theatres in Krakow and became rector of the School of Drama in that city (1946). Exhausted, overworked, and suffering the effects of malnutrition he had experienced during the war, he died of cancer in 1947.

Osterwa's foremost objective in acting was truth. He sought to connect the truth of the actor as a person with that of the character. He asked actors to explore and embody in their roles their own personal, hidden, conscious and unconscious memories and experiences. All the reasons for the character's actions, utterances, gestures, and reactions had to derive from the actor's own motivations. The actor's circumstances became those of the character he/she performed. The truth, recovered from the deepest layers of one's ego, is very personal, but oftentimes unexpected, surprising, and revealing. Generally, for Osterwa, acting was a process of unveiling and discovering the truth of a human being. The process of revealing someone's own truth should be individual and spontaneous, but also edited, so to speak, or stylized to filter out what is obvious and commonplace on the surface. It should eventually reach for the profoundly individual, internal truth of the actor. As a result, Osterwa's own acting, and the style and techniques he taught his actors and students, was deeply psychological, and extremely personal. It was realistically motivated and realistic in the details, but outwardly structured and stylized.

In order to enable actors to reach the hidden layers of their interiority and to express their truth visibly, Osterwa developed special methods of teaching and directing. He conducted rehearsals in several phases, dividing

them into analytical rehearsals, contact rehearsals, blocking, structural and dress rehearsals.

Analytical rehearsals were long and scrupulous, lasting for weeks or months. Frequently, Osterwa entrusted this process to his colleague Bolesław Limanowski, a scholar and a philosopher. Limanowski not only subjected the play to close and detailed scrutiny, but he also discussed its broader artistic, historical, cultural, social, moral, and psychological contexts. He examined each character from all possible points of view.

Contact rehearsals – equally long and meticulous – were Osterwa's innovation. Initially seated at a table, and then working in rehearsal rooms, on the stage, in a meadow or park, or in actual architectural environments, actors established close, intimate, personal, and robust ties and interactions, especially in those scenes where they played opposite each other, but also as an ensemble. Dialogue, which they had by then committed to memory, came to life in a variety of ways: as intimate, whispered conversations, as loud arguments, or improvised exchanges of sung operatic arias. During the rehearsals actors performed the same scene with and without words, sometimes using realistic gesture, sometimes experimenting with the grotesque. During contact rehearsals, actors developed confidence and trust in each other's support and response. Shedding natural reserve and fear, they could open up and discover themselves. They cemented firm communal foundations for the production.

Blocking rehearsals took place at the actual venue of the proposed production. They built on analytical and contact rehearsals and aimed to find the best external expression of the internal processes determined during previous phases of the work. These rehearsals fixed blocking and physical interactions among the actors, shaping the rhythm of actions, movement and speech.

Structural and dress rehearsals pulled together all the elements of the production. Like the rest of the process, they were very detailed, stretching the entire course of mounting a production over several months.

Osterwa directed actors individually. He would whisper to one in the corner of the stage. He would partner with another in a scene. He mesmerized the actors. He obviously possessed a keen sense of empathy that permitted him to live through his actors' emotions, fears, and obstacles. His personal sensitivity and acting experience enabled him to understand others. Actors admired his strong personality, warmth, and charisma.

His objective as a director and teacher of acting was to lead actors to deeper self-knowledge and growth in their own individuality and originality. Osterwa emphasized that physical activities on the stage must reveal an inner truth. By bringing that inner truth to consciousness, the actor established deliberate motivation for each physical gesture and engaged his will in its performance. Osterwa seldom gave line readings or showed actors how to perform. He preferred to guide and explain. The objective

was to set actors free to speak and act from within their own sense of truth and motivations – rather than to imitate the director. Characters remained deeply embedded in the actors, even as actors retained their individuality while incarnating the characters. Eventually, the actor's personality would radiate even more intensely on the stage.

The first performance would take place before the entire ensemble, staff, and students of the Reduta. Only then would Osterwa invite friends and special guests. They discussed the production and sometimes corrected it.

The evening performance was at the center of Reduta's work. Actors and crew observed several rules. Actors' call was one and a half hours before curtain. An hour before curtain, complete silence reigned in the theatre: no talking, no gossip in the dressing rooms, no music, only concentration and preparation for the encounter with the public.

The director and his assistants oversaw the shows. If necessary, they added rehearsals to correct the performance. If a show enjoyed a long run – a common occurrence in the Reduta – Osterwa deliberately introduced changes, restaged blocking, or even modified the cast to keep the production alive and fresh. Of course, life often imposed compromises, especially during long tours. These, however, were treated as deplorable exceptions.

Along with the extremely personal and striking performances of individual actors, Reduta radiated a communal spirit. Osterwa emphasized the collective character of theatre work, as well as the social, national, political, and spiritual context and goals of his company. He treated acting as a public service. Reduta became one of the leading artistic theatres of Polish theatre. It grounded its program in an ethical attitude toward theatre and it highlighted cultural and social theatre's purposes.

Osterwa exercised fourfold influence in his lifetime. (1) He was a star. Critics and spectators eagerly discussed his roles; his interviews, lectures, writings, and pedagogy generated tremendous interest. (2) He was a director who guided and influenced scores of actors and fellow-directors. (3) He was a master teacher who, in the course of nearly 20 years, molded dozens of students and apprentices. (4) He was a reformer, preacher, and prophet of new theatre, constantly searching for innovative solutions and methods. He integrated acting, directing, teaching, and prophetic vision within his charismatic personality – not by chance was the Constant Prince, a martyr, a leader, a noble soul, his most famous role. He directed as a teacher. He taught as a director. He preached with the force of a visionary.

His attitude toward theatre led him to approach the public in an innovative way. He endeavored to break down the barriers between actors and spectators and, if possible, to inspire audience participation in the performance. This participation, he thought, could be spiritual, mental, sensory, and emotional; it can be also physical, which is the easiest to observe, but is also least profound.

In the Reduta's first venue in Warsaw, Osterwa situated the performing area just on the floor of a hall within the annex of the National Theatre.



There was no proscenium stage, no proscenium frame or any kind of raised platform. He did not install footlights, which at the time set a clear line of demarcation between the stage and the auditorium. In his open-air production of *The Constant Prince* and during his tours, Osterwa used to invite people from local communities to perform as extras and to play music for the show. They rehearsed with Osterwa's assistants, while local volunteers also assembled the stage, helped with transportation, and completed other tasks.

Osterwa loved using real, natural spaces for his productions. Many times, he situated the action against the backdrop of actual buildings, such as Krakow's Royal Castle main courtyard. To light outdoor performances, he liked to use open fire: torches, barrels of burning oil, and big bonfires.

Osterwa's experiments with audience participation were highly original. For instance, while directing (with Richard Ordyński's assistance) Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound* in 1932, whose action takes place on an ocean liner, he staged the play on a real river-boat on the Vistula River near Warsaw. About seventy spectators embarked in the evening on a journey. Initially, the actors mingled with the passengers. Then, they performed scenes in real spaces throughout the boat, asking the spectators to move from the deck to a cabin, from the bar to the lounge, and so on.

Always eager to transgress the boundaries of traditional, familiar theatre, Osterwa occasionally created shows that oscillated toward multimedia. He staged a tribute to Stanisław Wyspiański inside a medieval Franciscan church in Kraków November 25, 1932. The show began at night in a dark church. Suddenly the lights outside the building illuminated the huge stained glass windows, bringing to life the monumental figures created by Wyspiański. Two choirs sang, and Osterwa, using only the light of candles, gave an inspired speech about Wyspiański, then he performed a monologue from Wyspiański's play *The Deliverance*. In this show, Osterwa himself played the role of a priest-celebrant of theatre and national tradition, while the public formed a congregation of spectators-believers. It was a theatre-ritual, theatre-celebration, and theatre-mystery.

Generally, Osterwa viewed theatre as an interhuman process not only limited to the performance, but also extending beyond it. Theatre, for him, encompassed long preparation, performance, and its aftermath. For this reason, Osterwa used to invite specialists from different areas to advise him during analytical rehearsals. He liked to invite school and university students to blocking rehearsals. He regularly asked friends and consultants to watch general rehearsals. He kept them for long discussions. He often spoke with the public before and after the shows. In this way the entire process of mounting a play acquired a social character and penetrated into the cultural life of many people – a multifaceted interhuman interaction.

Osterwa work hinged on ethics. He consistently addressed the values that guided the actors' attitudes towards their work, their colleagues, and spectators. He stressed taking responsibility for other people involved in

the preparation and execution of a show. From the beginning of his work as a director and leader of a company, he endeavored to articulate a set of ethical guidelines for theatre practitioners, including actors and spectators.

As early as 1922, Osterwa published *An Outline of Reduta's Program*.<sup>2</sup> In it, he formulated what became his creed for years to come. The document was Osterwa's message to actors, students, followers, collaborators, and spectators. It remained a guideline for the whole Osterwa's work in the theatre. Its principle points were:

(1) Truth is the main objective of theatre work. Truth has a theatrical aspect, but even more importantly, it has a moral dimension. The actor's ethical stance and the influence he/she exerts on the public are vitally significant. All aspects of theatre work possess moral, social, and aesthetic dimensions.

(2) Actors must find truth within themselves. The actor's internal disposition undergirds the ethical impact of every performance, shapes the acting company to which he/she belongs, and affects the ability of theatre to fulfill its mission in society. Thus, moral values lie at the core of theatre creation.

(3) The actor does more than perform. Actors perform a redemptive sacrifice for the spectators. Theatre is not merely a performance for the public, but a priestly sacrifice for a congregation. Action executed on the stage is not only artistic act, but sacred.

(4) Theatre is a profoundly human art that involves equal participation of actors and spectators. Indeed, it is not just an art but an artistic communion between actors-priests and spectators-witnesses.

Such were the essential principles of Osterwa's program and practice. They supply the key to understanding his work and impact on future generations of theatre artists. Members testified that the Reduta took very seriously the question of the actor's moral stance and spiritual life in the course of its daily work. The rigors of personal and professional discipline in the company resembled those of a monastic community. Their ideal was that of the actor-saint.

During World War II, unemployed and starving, but still dreaming about theatre, Osterwa recorded a rule for a religious order of artists. No longer a mere theatre company guided by spiritual values, this was going to be a religious order that blended artistic work with prayer. The goal of such an order would be religious and only secondly theatrical. In Osterwa's war writings, we find his reflections about the parallels between theatre and church, between actor and monk, and between an acting ensemble and a religious order.<sup>3</sup> In the same vein, Osterwa eventually wrote down the

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<sup>2</sup> In: Szczublewski Józef, *Pierwsza Reduta Osterwy*. Warszawa: PIW, 1965, pp. 140-146. Also: Szczublewski Józef, *Żywot Osterwy*. Warszawa: PIW, 1971, p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> Compare on these topics: Guszpit Ireneusz, *Przez teatr poza teatr*. Wydawnictwo Els, Wrocław 1989. Osterwa Juliusz, *Z zapisków*. Wybór i opracowanie, Guszpit Ireneusz. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Wiedza o Kulturze, 1991.

rule for an association he called “Dal” (“Far Away”) and for a semi-religious “Fraternity of Saint Genesis”, named after an early Christian martyr, who was allegedly an actor.

For years, the Reduta, and especially its Institute, had worked as a community, although it remained simply a theatre group. In describing “Dal” and the “Fraternity of St. Genesis”, Osterwa formulated goals that reached beyond theatre to the realms of morality and religion. The organizations he proposed would aim to develop individual virtues of the actors-monks/nuns through common religious practices and common physical and artistic work on theatre productions. They were to become, first of all, training grounds for actor-saints. Secondly, the organizations would serve society and the nation on social, spiritual, and artistic levels. The group of actors-monks/nuns would seek to deepen the moral consciousness of society.

The visions Osterwa formulated in the 1940s remained in the realm of utopia. History, however including the history of theatre, has proved many times that only utopias, impossible tasks, and extreme demands can inspire and uplift human imagination and creativity.

After the war, Osterwa, like all Poles, faced the socio-political reality of the Communist, atheistic regime installed in Poland by the Soviets. Ostracized as an idealist and a Catholic, Osterwa could not realize his wartime projects and dreams. He devoted his waning energy to the reconstruction of Polish theatre devastated by the war. His projects remain recorded in his writings.

Osterwa developed several practical methods of doing theatre. His approach to acting, directing, and teaching revolved around the search for deep connections between the actor’s personality and the character he/she performed. The actor’s grasp of his inner truth invested the character with truth. The same applied to directing: the director personal ethos should motivate the rehearsals, emanate from the production, and meet the spectator. Osterwa treated the entire production, beginning with preparations and rehearsals, to performances and their impact on the public, as a sustained social and spiritual process. The communities of the Reduta and its Institute connected life and art. While working with actors and students, Osterwa sought to help them grow personally, artistically, and morally. Working for the audiences, he wanted to nourish them both artistically and spiritually. For him, the spiritual dimension of theatre remained paramount. By endeavoring to integrate spiritual values with theatre work, he placed extremely high demands on theatre, its goals, practice, impact on the public, and place in society. His ideal actor was a priest and a saint; his ideal spectator – a witness to the holy act of the sacrifice of the actor.

Osterwa exercised tremendous influence in Poland during his lifetime. After his death, official press and mainstream theatre conveniently forgot him. But since the late 1950s, when the fiercest grip of Stalinism was loos-

ened, Osterwa's name reappeared in many studies and books. He again inspired many directors, actors, and pedagogues. Through them, he went on to influence world theatre.

### STAGES OF OSTERWA'S WORK

Ascending road to stardom	1904–1915
Communal works of an artist-exile	1915–1918
Creation of the Reduta Theatre	1919
Creation of Reduta School	1922
Leadership of the National Theatre	1923–1925
Reduta's travels	1926–1931
Institute of Reduta	1931–1939
Underground works and meditations	1940–1945
“Dal” Project	ca. 1940
Fraternity of Saint Genesis	ca. 1943
Attempts to rebuilt Polish theatre	1945–1947

### Conclusion

The foundations and cornerstones of modern Polish theater were laid in the first part of the 20th century. Based on them, three main pillars of the great building of theatre in Poland were erected in areas of playwriting, directing, and acting. Among many different works, programs, ideas, and visions history identified especially those of three artists: Stanisław Wyspiański, Leon Schiller, and Juliusz Osterwa.

Wyspiański introduced the notion and he worked out a new kind of a “work of theatre art”: a play inseparably connected with the project of its mise-en-scene. Both the play and its envisioned stage shape were poetic. The fabric of such work included words, images, movements, and sounds. The term “teatr inscenizacji” has been used in Poland to describe this kind of theatre work.

Schiller, as director, materialized such works, based on great, most frequently poetic, Romantic dramas, as well as on his adaptations of poetry, songs, and prose. He used to call this kind of a production “monumental theatre” (“teatr ogromny”) – borrowing this term from Wyspiański who wrote: “Teatr mój widzę ogromny”. Schiller's major, and indeed model stage work, was Mickiewicz's *The Forefather's Eve*.

Osterwa, great actor and acting teacher, worked out and taught an acting style utterly personal and, at the same time, elevating characters on the level of artistic archetypes. Additionally, his theatre works had always a communal aspect. Osterwa practiced, taught, and popularized theatre understood and viewed as a service – a service to a community, to the nation, and to God. Similarly, his acting and the acting he taught, was

seen and practiced by him, as well as by his students and members of his companies, as a service, an offering, and a gift from actors to spectators.

Several playwrights, directors, actors, and educators continued the works and teachings of Wyspiański, Schiller, and Osterwa in the second part of the 20th century, after World War II, in a country subjected to the unwanted communist rule. But this was a new chapter of the history of Polish theatre. I focus here on the first one: building the foundations of modern theatre in Poland and erecting its first levels.

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