



Feminist and Queer Experiments at Teatr Powszechny: An Interview with Agnieszka Błońska

Bryce Lease & Agnieszka Błońska

To cite this article: Bryce Lease & Agnieszka Błońska (2026) Feminist and Queer Experiments at Teatr Powszechny: An Interview with Agnieszka Błońska, Contemporary Theatre Review, 36:2, 327-340, DOI: [10.1080/10486801.2026.2703526](https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2026.2703526)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2026.2703526>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 01 Oct 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 50



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Feminist and Queer Experiments at Teatr Powszechny: An Interview with Agnieszka Błońska

Bryce Lease and Agnieszka Błońska

Abstract

In this interview with Bryce Lease, director Agnieszka Błońska explores her evolving feminist and queer aesthetics through her six productions at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, culminating in *Orlando. Biografie* (2022). Błońska reflects on how collaborations with activists, NGOs, and community participants have transformed both her methodology and the politics of her work. Beginning with *Rape. Voices* (2015), created with the feminist organisation STER and survivors of sexual violence, she develops a practice grounded in co-authorship, research-based dramaturgy, and intergenerational perspectives on the inheritance of violence. Her subsequent projects address gentrification, censorship under the Law and Justice government, Brexit-era xenophobia, and the Catholic Church's control of women's bodies, while testing the limits of institutional theatre and the law. The interview shows how *Devils* and *Orlando. Biografie* mark a shift toward explicitly queer dramaturgies, experiments with failure and non-linearity, and the integration of professional actors with trans, non-binary, drag, and 'non-trained' performers.

Keywords: Queer; feminist theatre; *Orlando*; Virginia Woolf

It is 2022, and political leaders continue to target those who fail to conform to normative identities: five months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin characterised the teaching of gender fluidity to children as being 'on the verge of a crime against humanity'¹; meanwhile, Hungary introduced legislation banning so-called 'homosexual propaganda', while Poland saw the establishment of LGBT-ideology-free zones. Can similar attempts to marginalise, discriminate against, and penalise queer people succeed? It is against this political background that *Orlando. Biografie* (*Orlando. Biography*) was staged in Teatr Powszechny. Directed by Agnieszka Błońska, the production is based on Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* (1928) and Sally Potter's eponymous film (1992). In a journey through centuries, through the lives and experiences of the cisgender, trans, and non-binary artists invited to join the project, the production asks: Do you really know who you are? Are binary divisions the answer to today's threats? Can a break from heteronormativity offer the promise of fun, revolution, and a new, better world?

Bryce Lease: *Orlando* is the sixth production you have staged in Teatr Powszechny. Could take

1. Amy Cheng, 'Putin Slams "Cancel Culture" and Trans Rights, Calling Teaching Gender Fluidity "Crime Against Humanity"', *Washington Post*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/10/22/putin-valdai-speech-trump-cancel-culture/> (accessed May 6, 2026).

us through some of your previous productions at this theatre?

Agnieszka Błońska: I started collaborating with Teatr Powszechny in 2015, on *Rape. Voices*. This was a co-production with STER, a Foundation for Equality and Emancipation, which was researching the scale of sexual violence in Poland and the situation of women who had experienced abuse and rape. I had already talked with Magda Grabowska, one of the founders of STER, about the necessity of speaking out about violence towards women (remember this was before #MeToo), and she invited me to collaborate with them and create a show in dialogue with their research project, aiming to reach wider audiences. We didn't have a venue yet as there was no cultural organisation attached to the project, and I immediately thought about Teatr Powszechny.

After conversations with Zofia Nawrocka, the author of *Gwałt – Głos kobiet wobec społecznego tabu* (Rape – Women's Voice Against Social Taboo, 2013), I decided to collaborate with women who were aware of the complexity of the topic – women who had experienced sexual abuse themselves as well as women working with victims of sexual abuse. No casting, nothing formal – just an open invitation to join us in the rehearsal process. It was important to me and Sylwia Chutnik, the writer, to work with three generations of women (a daughter, a mother, and a grandmother) to explore the inheritance of violence. The dramaturgy of the work was based on both the initial research interviews, which Sylwia weaved beautifully into a series of mono- and duologues, and the material generated in rehearsal. This show was eye-opening to me in terms of process and collaboration. I often look back and think that nothing has been the same since. I learned so much about my own preconceptions and assumptions. These women truly revolutionised my world – and the world of our collaborators.

After the premiere, artistic directors Paweł Łysak and Paweł Sztarbowsky invited me to create a small stage show with the local community for their upcoming Festival Happy City. This was the first time I had collaborated with dramaturg Joanna Wichowska, a dear friend of mine who sadly died in February 2022. Beginning with the name of the festival [Happy City], we started questioning the role of artists in shaping narratives around a local community, in dictating its new directions. It quickly became apparent that instead of working with the community, we should explore subjects of

gentrification and investigate our *own* activity as artists and cultural institutions. We invited three actors from Teatr Powszechny and a guest actress who had previously collaborated with me on *Rape. Voices*. Joanna and I wanted to explore sci-fi as inspiration for the form and dramaturgy of the show: artists as aliens, landing in a new place, setting new values and norms, taking it over. *Praskie Si-Fi (Praga Sci-Fi)* ended with the audience leaving the auditorium with the cast. Together, they looked through the window in the foyer at Praga, the local district, sharing one minute of silence.

Soon after both directors started talking to me about further collaborations. Joanna proposed *Mephisto*, a book by Klaus Mann and a film directed by István Szabó in 1981, as an inspiration. This was not long after PiS [the Law and Justice Party] had got into power and had begun to control cultural production. Censorship – direct or economic – became very real; public television had been taken over by the government. Artists and cultural organisations were scrutinised, and they were often forced to make difficult decisions based on what was allowed or preferred by the government. So *Mephisto* felt like a perfect choice: the story of an actor who has to decide whether to leave Germany as Hitler gets into power. Hendrik not only decides to stay, rationalizing this choice at first by the necessity of working in his mother tongue, but he slowly gets swallowed by the regime and its values; in the end, he realizes that he has begun to work for the system itself.

The story can be read in a very theatrical way and although we didn't want to follow its narrative directly, it felt right to challenge ourselves and work on a large stage to explore all theatrical mechanisms of the space. We invited eight actors and actresses from Teatr Powszechny to work with us and share their perspectives. Despite the larger scale and professional cast, I carried out the same methodology as in both *Rape. Voices* and *Praga Sci-Fi*. We explored chosen themes and parts from the text, deconstructing it and adding our own material created in collaboration with the cast. Joanna wrote parts of the script inspired by the actors' improvisations and our conversations. The work was deeply rooted in an understanding that the actors involved in the show were political beings, carrying certain narratives and working in a particular context.

Mephisto was created on the same stage as – and not long after – the premiere of *Kłątwa [The Curse, 2017]* and, due to aggressive political pressure, our work strongly related to it. At the time

of the rehearsals, a court case against *Kłątwa* had already begun and some of our actors as well as Joanna, who had been one of three dramaturgs for Oliver Frlić's production, were involved in the investigation. *Mephisto*, in some way, protested against it. It was our response to the situation of actors and artists working in this particular institution as a metaphor of artists' reality in Poland at that time.

Mephisto, as my first show on that scale, was an important step both personally and artistically, I believe that it changed a perception of me as a director in Poland, which I admit with some sadness. It's obvious but also somehow depressing that one has to hit a larger stage to become more visible.

The same year, I worked on *Polish Vermin*, a show created in response to Brexit. Originally, I was thinking about making it a solo piece. I was feeling really devastated and desperate at that time and thought that solo performance would express that well. I'm sure you remember the 'Polish vermin go home' notes posted through Polish people's doors or tucked behind windscreen wipers. The burned sheds in Polish people's gardens.

BL: And they knocked people's phones out of their hands if they were speaking Polish on the street.

AB: Exactly. A lot of prejudice, on many levels. People I knew were explaining to me 'it's not about you; you are different, you can speak English, you contribute, you work here'. That infuriated me, that segregation of migrants into the ones who have a right to be here and those who don't. So, I thought, if you're going to call some Poles 'Polish vermin' then you're calling us all that. I'm vermin too. I'm going to own it.

In the end I decided to collaborate with my friends, Polish artists who were feeling as devastated and hopeless as I was. I invited Patrycja Kujawska, a Polish actress and musician who had previously collaborated with companies like Vincent Dance Theatre and Kneehigh, and Michał Iwanowski, a photographer working primarily in Wales. At that time, Michał was developing a project called *Go Home Polish*, named after some graffiti he had seen in his native Cardiff. In response to it, he decided to walk from one home to another, Cardiff to Mokrzeszów in Poland. Michał walked for three months, documenting his journey and talking with people he met on the way about the meaning of home. He joined our project as a visual artist. Benji Bower, a British composer, created a soundscape.

During rehearsals for *Polish Vermin*, we explored the current situation of Poles in the UK, mechanisms of propaganda and misinformation, and the procedure of becoming a British citizen. Michał already held dual nationality, I was in the process of applying for it, and Patrycja wasn't interested in it at all. These varied experiences and choices informed the dramaturgy of the performance.

We performed an R&D solo version of the work at Ferment in the Bristol Old Vic and Newlyn Gallery in Cornwall – nearly a year later, we showed a more developed version of it at Teatr Powszechny during *Atlas of Transitions Festival*. This time I joined Patrycja on stage and Michał connected with us via Skype as he was passing through Germany on his way to Mokrzeszów. *Polish Vermin* at Powszechny felt truly special connecting my work in the UK and Poland.

At the same time, Joanna and I had an idea of creating a 'diabolical trilogy' as an extension of *Mephisto*. And that's how *Devils* came about, a diabolical theatrical sequel, a continuation of the artist's protest against the current Polish government. I often begin a creative process from a theme, not necessarily from existing literature or cultural texts. This time we decided to focus on women and the impact of the Catholic Church on their existence, bodies, and sexuality.

BL: Did you still feel at that point, although time had passed, the presence or impact of *Kłątwa*?

AB: Not in the same way. We started working on *Devils* in 2019, two years after *Mephisto* and two and a half years after *Kłątwa*. Powszechny, although still affected by that performance, had moved on. The political situation in Poland, however, had not, and making this work felt urgent. We decided to base *Devils* on Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's story 'Matka Joanna od Aniołów' [Mother Joan of the Angels, 1946], whose narrative is similar to a film by Ken Russell from 1971. It's basically a story about nuns possessed by devils who are supposed to be saved and healed by a priest, an exorcist. Like with *Mephisto*, we began with an existing text's premise that we then deconstructed, focusing on chosen topics. For us, the most essential theme was the Catholic Church's portrayal of the female body as a place of sin and evil, as a place that needs taming and controlling by men. We wanted to question thousands of years of colonisation of female bodies and sexuality.

BL: How did you cast *Devils*?

AB: We wanted to work mainly with women and, as it was a continuation of *Mephisto*, I invited the all-female cast from that show as well as two additional actresses: Natalia Lagiewczyk and Oxana Czerkaszyńska. Originally, I had also invited two men, but in the end we worked with just one, Arek Brykalski (see [Images 1 and 2](#)).

BL: Did you feel in the show that you developed any new artistic strategies, or did you take some of your existing strategies and move them in a new direction?

AB: What was new was an in-depth analysis of feminist art, its history, and various strategies. A lot of our research involved American feminist art as, unfortunately, this is a very colonised subject, but we tried to reach out to a less anglicised territory. The work of such artists and activists as Femen, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Katarzyna Kozyra, and Natalia LL among others were a huge inspiration. This might sound banal, but diving into this world was a true eye-opener; a hugely deep, physical, almost spiritual realisation that we are not the first, that none of what we do is new, that many incredible women before and alongside us have carved a path in the bravest way. And that we cannot step backwards.

So, in terms of strategy, I think this recognition pushed me deeper into thinking about self-

censorship and the various ways of making certain artistic choices. It also made me realise how conservative theatre actually is and how challenging it can be to question it. Maybe it's obvious but it was an extremely important reflection for me at that time. Seeing work from the 1960s, 70s, 80s etc. made me recognise how safe theatre has become. My approach, in terms of methodology, was much the same as before – a combination of deconstructing existing texts, of improvisation, explorations of our experiences and perceptions, and an investigation of a nonlinear narrative, overseen so beautifully by Joanna. In terms of strategy, though, that journey into a feminist art history caused a huge shift. The last scene of *Devils*, where we projected a vagina and a demonstration from the website OMGYES, used to teach an audience how to pleasure a woman, could not have happened without that research and reflection.

BL: The night I saw the performance, the audience had a very enthusiastic response to this; they really embraced this moment. And there was also a group of what looked to me like middle-class theatre-goers born in the 1940s or 50s who were talking about it enthusiastically after the show, so people really embraced this gesture.



Image 1. *Devils* (2019) directed by Agnieszka Błomska. Teatr Powszechny. Photograph by Magda Hueckel.



Image 2. *Devils* (2019) directed by Agnieszka Błońska. Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw. Photograph by Magda Hueckel.

AB: The response was so reassuring. When an 80-year-old woman thanked me after the premiere, saying how pleased she was that someone was finally speaking about women's sexual pleasure in a theatre, I knew the choice of normalising it was the right one. In some way, *Mephisto* was the beginning of that process, of learning how far one can push boundaries in theatre and what it can mean.

BL: And how to bring the audience with you?

AB: Or not. Some might oppose your choices, but there is value in that too. It's interesting what an audience remembers after a show. Apparently, people remember about 30% of what they see, so the imagery is extremely important. Since *Devils* I always ask myself what image I would like to stay in the audience's minds after a show.

BL: Were you worried about the law in Poland concerning offending religious feelings?

AB: In Poland, according to Article 196 of the Penal Code, 'whoever offends the religious feelings of other persons by publicly insulting an object of religious worship, or a place designated for public religious ceremonies, is liable to pay a fine, have their liberty limited, or be deprived of their liberty

for a period of up to two years'. It's an extremely subjective law often used by ultraconservative groups such as Ordo Iuris, an ultra-conservative Polish Catholic legal organization and think tank, to block the activity of particular cultural institutions or artists. On this basis there was a lawsuit against *Devils* that, in the end, was dismissed.

BL: And *Orlando* was the next project?

AB: Yes. Soon after the premiere of *Devils* the pandemic unfortunately broke out and all our work stopped. Just before the theatres closed, *Devils* was nominated in the category 'Event of the Year' for the Wdechy 2020 award ('for the strong voice of women in theatre', as a 'humorous show with elements of political manifesto, reckless feminist cabaret and fierce activist performance'). Despite this, the show has been much less frequently performed than I'd hoped.

During lockdown, Joanna and I started discussing a possible next show in our diabolical trilogy and decided to work on *Orlando*. In *Devils*, we explored patriarchy, female identity, lesbian identity, feminism, inclusivity within the feminist movement and its solidarity with LGBTQ+. We started playing with language and gendered language, as in Polish we use feminine and masculine

forms. The actors were swapping these forms and redefining their genders. We also made a point of welcoming everyone in the audience regardless of their sexuality and gender. So, *Orlando* seemed a natural continuation of our desire to go further in exploring subjects of patriarchy, binary divisions, and power distribution.

Joanna proposed to explore Virginia Woolf's novel and a film by Sally Potter as our points of reference, and I suggested we invite artists from the trans and queer communities to work with us as performers and on the creative team, some for the first time. The question of representation was very important to us – and indeed problematic. Should I, as a straight cis woman, direct a show about gender nonconformity? Without the approval of my trans and queer friends and the presence of a non-binary cast and creative team, I doubt I would have even started rehearsals.

BL: Your exploration of text and film explores history in a particular way. Does your *Orlando* challenge normative or linear ideas of history as a kind of masculine concept of progression?

AB: I hope so. The notion of *Orlando's* continuous presence in human history is a very important one, especially now in the context of rising right-wing movements using anti LGBTQ+ propaganda in attempts to gain power. *Orlando's* presence examines that sense of progression you mention and questions it, despite *Orlando's* story being linear. It reflects the complexity of the world, proving that a masculine concept of progression is actually a regressive one. Our rehearsals started just after Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the war was very much present in our conversations. We questioned the sense of our work in this context, yet Orlando with their constant presence reassured us. We were making this show for all the Orlandos of the world against all the Putins. Because, in the future, even if a nuclear bomb wipes us all out, Orlando will survive in some form or another (see [Image 3](#)).

During the rehearsal process, we discovered that the spectrum of genders is endless: some talk about 12 genders, some about 72, others about an infinite number. It can be difficult to comprehend that. I have no doubt that binary thinking was introduced



Image 3. *Orlando. Biografie* (2022) directed by Agnieszka Błońska. Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw. Photograph by Magda Hueckel.

for purely political reasons, as an attempt to control us. And in that sense, Woolf's story is visionary. It predicted the future, a future in which fantasy can become a reality. It's possible now to change gender, something unthinkable before. The process obviously is not as easy as in Woolf's novel, where Orlando falls asleep as a man and wakes up as a woman, but that vision is revolutionary. More so, it introduces the notion of non-binarism, because Orlando, from the moment they wake up, carries both male and female experiences. It was very important to us in our understanding of this text.

Talking about history, we wanted to celebrate Polish queerstory, not only domineering Western queer narratives. In our *Orlando. Biographies*, all actors play Orlando, but the presence of Lulla La Polaca (Andrzej Szwan), an 83-year-old Polish drag queen, one of the oldest drag queens in Europe, allowed us to truly dive into the past. Lulla embodies Polish queerstory (see Image 4). She lived through various political systems, remembers the Warsaw Uprising, the political turmoil after World War II, the end of communism, and the beginnings of new democracy. She witnessed different social behaviours and changes in

understanding of normativity. Her life story creates an axis for our show which runs in parallel with the chosen fragments from *Orlando*. Other cast members' stories and ideas are woven between those two dramaturgical lines.

BL: Does Lula's history offer you a framework in the structure?

AB: Very much so, but in dialogue with the chosen fragments from *Orlando*. And that's new to me. There is more literature in this show than in my previous ones, apart from *The Waves*, which I directed in 2013. Maybe this change was connected to Joanna's death just before our rehearsals. Perhaps I was looking for new ways, even subconsciously. Working with a new dramaturg, Olga Byrska, with assistant Krysia Bednarek, and with the whole cast influenced that too. It's still far from a full adaptation; nevertheless, it's a change.

There are five scenes from *Orlando* in the show. The first one looks at gender socialisation. We watch young Orlando dreaming about becoming a man. I'm not sure if you remember that moment in the book, when Orlando fights with a skull imagining he's like his father and grandfather. He has an ambition to become a real man and protect his own



Image 4. *Orlando. Biografie* (2022) directed by Agnieszka Błońska. Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw. Photograph by Magda Hueckel.

country and honour the memory of his ancestors – a very patriarchal vision of masculinity and power. In a second scene, Orlando falls in love. His world is transformed by Sasha, who soon betrays him, leaving him devastated and heartbroken. He escapes from people into literature and writing, realizing that love, women, and art aren't worth anything. In a pinnacle scene, we witness a moment of transition, when Orlando becomes a woman. This scene has no spoken words in our show, only a couple of projected sentences. A fourth scene focuses on Orlando facing society as a woman while remembering previous masculine experiences. We watch them losing all their privileges and being controlled in various aspects of their life: from their appearance to their participation in public life. In a fifth and final scene, we see Orlando entering the present, looking into the future, and asking the audience questions: Can you promise that you are not a woman? How do you know that you are not a man?

BL: That's interesting; the way that Sally Potter interprets that in the film, with this arrival of the queer pop singer Jimmy Somerville – it becomes this angelic, actually queer, British figure in a way.

AB: We finish with Madonna. *Laughs.* Woolf's novel is extremely digressive, but I believe that what's truly essential in there can be easily distilled. In our show, the people onstage are the most important, with their experiences, sensitivities, and perspectives. They are the true narrative of this work. And, interestingly, some of them – one in particular – had massive issues with Woolf's text, finding it archaic and not representative. They questioned its presence in the show, pointing to the fact that such a linear and domineering narrative is in opposition to queer thinking. They couldn't handle this god-like-narrator who, as in any patriarchal story, explains how things are in a binary manner. As a result of this, we did not stage a narrator but created new linguistic forms when referring to Orlando.

BL: The stage is littered with large gendered and bodily objects from art history to popular culture that have been blown up to a larger-than-life scale. It is wonderful to watch them move on the revolve stage, activating one another in this circular movement. What function do they play in the performance?

AB: There is a hand of Rodin's *Thinker*, the penis of Michelangelo's *David*, and dolls' heads, including Ken's. Kozyra, the designer, describes it as a box full of toys, damaged by a naughty child. They are the physical images which have

been placed in our heads and have affected our binary and normative thinking for centuries. The objects are placed on a revolving stage reflecting a circular concept of time and filmed from above, which is then projected on the back wall. The audience, like gods, are watching what is unavailable to them in everyday life: the movement and struggle of people – the actors on the stage – who are restricted and challenged by these huge objects in the same way that these artificial representations obstruct our everyday thinking. At the end of the performance, all elements disappear, leaving the stage empty. There's no return to the old world; order has been shaken. It's time for a change.

BL: Yes, 2022 is a framing device – though time moves back and forth. The revolve suggested history is circular, but it still changes. It exhausts women – we see Orlando, who as a woman has to run against the current of history, dodging these bodily objects, the way this dress responds to the objects animates history as embodied. The trans binding of 2022 is replaced by the corset that suffocates Orlando – the choice to constrict is very different from the social pressure to constrict. The actors speak about different needs: Lulla talks about the need to breathe (discussing the men hiding during the Warsaw Uprising who had to hold their breath to avoid being discovered); the need to be visible is also apparent in Pepe's transition, which is fully displayed through images and words. Transitions are not mono-directional. Pepe's movement from dyke to patriarchy to *chłopak* [boy/lad] counterposes Orlando, whose moustache becomes her vagina.

You mention the position of the audience. On the night I attended, there was quite a young and visibly queer audience – that was interesting because the performance makes the audience the object of the queer gaze. At points this gaze was accusatory or expressed queer pain, at other points it is about curiosity. In the scene where the performers just looked at us, some elderly audience members said, 'Say something!'; then they started to applaud, either to provoke action or because they thought it was over. They certainly did not know how to handle this moment.

You were finding your own understanding of *queer* with local audiences. At one point, Lulla said that this production made the theatre 'powszechny' (as in common or shared). That brings us to your earlier point about our understanding of queer being too often based on Anglo-American conceptualisations of this term.

AB: It definitely is, similarly to our understanding of feminism. Anglicised and Western cultures colonised feminism and queer narratives. It requires some effort now to discover other contexts and regions with their own histories. But it's happening. Younger generations are hungry to find out about their past. That's why Lulla's presence is so important in our work. In Poland, 1989 and the collapse of communism was a cut-off point, the past was defined as negative and should have been forgotten, replaced with new visions of the future based on Western models. But in recent years, this started to change and – with boundless appreciation and gratitude towards Stonewall – people want to find their own Stonewall now. Polish queerstory is not coming from nowhere. It's rooted here and built on different narratives.

BL: Have you incorporated Joanna Krakowska's untranslatable term *odmieńczość* into this creative process or thinking?²

AB: At some point in our rehearsals, we had a lengthy discussion around terminology and Krakowska's *odmieńczość*. Re-discovering the past requires renaming, finding our own vocabulary. In the case of queer, it's not easy due to different contexts and understandings. Some simply write *queer* with the Polish spelling *klir* in an attempt to own the term, but in our rehearsals, we agreed that Krakowska's term is the most accurate for now. New language and terminology will undoubtedly continue to form.

BL: I mean, queer is trying to break through the idea of certainty in all cases, and that goes with this next question. How complicated is it if you embrace queer as non-hierarchical, as non-rule abiding? How do you work with that in a professional theatre context?

AB: Yes, that's fascinating. It's something to be reflected on and questioned. Joanna Krakowska rightly asks in her book whether queer is possible at all in the mainstream. Doesn't it stop being queer as soon as it enters mainstream buildings and spaces? Aren't the two in opposition? Following those doubts, I asked our cast what it meant to them to be working in one of the main theatres in Poland. Was this denying them and their work something? For many, the priority was emancipation, and emancipation equalled freedom and agency, including entering and taking over a mainstream space. For the cast of nine, each person found that this show freed different things

for them. Lulla's emancipation meant that at last she was acting in a 'real' theatre. Her dreams from over 60 years ago had come true. For another person, the fact that she/he entered a theatre space created a feeling of ownership and liberty. So, there are many understandings of queerness. I hope that all this is reflected in the non-linear, multi-genre form of the show.

It can be scary to create something which you know might not be understood. My shows are often fragmented, drawing on different styles and modes, but this one is a step further, playing with form even more, reflecting the meaning and dramaturgy in a deeper sense. I wasn't sure if the audience would follow our choices. Would they understand why a song is sung out of tune? Would they realize that was a choice, not an accident? Does it matter? One of the performers, Filipka Rutkowska, introduced us to the beauty of failure. And this is what he/she does in the show: singing out of tune together with another actress, who sings in tune. I'm not sure if and how the audience reads that – but we are still taking them on a journey of meanings, exploring and stretching the form. It can be challenging from a directorial point of view, but questioning virtuosity and celebrating failure means staying truthful to our exploration. It can also be a life-changing discovery.

There comes a time in the rehearsal process when I have to try and settle on a structure and composition. In this case, this was three weeks before the premiere. Not too early to stifle the life of the material, but also not too late. There's still space for changes, but after the opening not so much. This is when the show starts existing on its own, with its own form and structure, so deconstruction and failure stop in some way. That sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it? There's a lot to think about when it comes to the collision of queer and mainstream. Many questions, not necessarily many answers.

BL: I was just thinking of this last night at a drag show in Warsaw. One of the drag queens made an entrance and then the incorrect song started playing. This failure became this really productive moment for improvisational performance. The performer was outraged by the wrong song and stopped the whole thing, and the audience being in a queer club were so delighted and transported by this failure. It was so eruptive. Somewhere else, the performer might have tried to pretend it hadn't happened, to erase the failure.

2. See Joanna Krakowska, *Odmieńcza rewolucja. Performans na cudzej ziemi* (Kraków: Karakter, 2021).

AB: Yes, so much depends on context and expectations. We talked a lot about expectations in our rehearsals. What would the audience want from us? How different would their expectations be for each Orlando, each actor? And how could we challenge those expectations? Maybe we should go against them? But following our actors' desires sometimes meant doing the obvious. For example, we knew that the presence of a very famous drag queen would create an expectation of having a drag show, but then we also wanted to follow Lulla's craft and passion. Was this a compromise? Maybe. But then any strict formula can become suffocating. The concept of *queer* is rich but can be easily misunderstood as a generalisation. It is not about creating an idea of a united collective or just one way of doing something, rather it comes out of an extremely diverse community who produces a variety of actions and choices.

Assuming that the audience might not all be queer, we were trying to second-guess their needs and intentions. But how can we know who is queer or who is not? I asked the ensemble what their dream outcome of the show would be, and some responded that they would love everyone to realise that we are all queer. Can we ever free ourselves from binary normativity? Is that even an option? When we imagine we are free from normativity, aren't we actually still trapped in it?

BL: So we need to change how we think about character and characterisation as much as audience and public?

AB: I think so. Or at least question that.

BL: I suppose that makes sense in that everybody is coming in and out of this body of Orlando in the performance.

AB: Yeah, and everybody is carrying different stories. I hope that's reflected in the work and our diverse cast. There is a drag queen, an older person who in everyday life lives as a man, but occasionally transforms into his female persona. There is a middle-aged heterosexual man, two cis-hetero women of different ages, two trans men, with varied experiences, a well-known female cis fine artist, a queer female DJ, and a non-binary artist. All of them build Orlando.

As I mentioned before, narratives created by bodies onstage are essential to my understanding of theatre. Simply through their presence, these bodies tell stories beyond words. And within the show's universe of nine, we created a micro-society.

BL: And actually, the whole question of opening up a professional stage to non-professional

actors is already opening up the scope of who has space on the national stage.

AB: Exactly. There are two opposite strategies of survival: a revolutionary one that objects to all norms and mainstreams, creating new worlds, and an assimilative one. Both of those strategies are present in liberation movements. I see the invitation of non-trained actors – I prefer the term to 'non-professional' – as both revolutionary and assimilative. We are conquering mainstream space and questioning its ownership, perception, and aims.

BL: How did you work with the creative team in terms of sound and lighting?

AB: I work with some of the team regularly, such as Artur Sienicki, a lighting designer, or Arek Slesinski, a set and costume designer. We understand and know each other, trust one another, and share similar values. I also invite new people according to their expertise and practice. This time we were joined by Anu Czerwinski who worked on video, and Katarzyna Kozyna who designed the set. The DJ set was mainly created by a Warsaw queer scene DJ Wyrodna (Karolina Kędziora), as well as Pepe Le Puke. It's supposed to invite and transport the audience to a safe queer space: a club. Most of it reflects musical queer manifestos significant for LGBTQ+ movements. Some of the creative team also perform in the show and for most it is a debut in both roles. I was very aware of my position as director, a heterosexual, white, cis woman, and wanted to work with people who understand queer and are curious about making theatre. It was challenging sometimes as there was plenty to learn, but very refreshing and needed.

BL: Do you find that working with non-trained, or non-professional actors requires a different approach to the rehearsal room or forms of communication? There are certain kinds of cultural codes that actors become very accustomed to that might be totally new for non-professional performers.

AB: We discussed theatre processes from the beginning of the rehearsals so that everyone had a chance to learn about theatre codes and practices. Things like scheduling, tech rehearsals or collaboration between various departments aren't necessarily obvious. Transparency throughout the process and open communication were key. And patience, too, as some things might take time. But this exchange works both ways. Working with non-trained performers and a creative team from outside professional theatre can be extremely freeing, as it questions well-known and accepted theatre codes, redefines our practice and ways of creating.

What was essential in this process was creating a united team. As the cast was mixed between the Powszechny's company and invited artists, it was vital to create a feeling of unity and belonging. Building trust and getting to know each other was essential. I focused a lot on creating and supporting a gentle and fun environment in a rehearsal room. The long rehearsal time helped too – I planned for three months. It can't be sped up. And by the end we became a true company.

BL: I think that people often know if they have been invited to collaborate in a tokenistic, representational way, or whether they have been invited as a creative person who can develop work out of a particular positionality.

AB: Exactly. Everyone who has participated in our work has been essential to this process. We shared every aspect of the production, from research to dramaturgy to marketing. Everybody brought so much to the material with their sensitivity, understanding, and desire to emancipate. It's thanks to the cast that *emancipation* was so present during the generation of performance material. We are all aware how new, delicate, and empowering this collaboration has been; I don't think there were any other large-scale shows in Poland before us with this

kind of representation of non-binary and trans performers and such a mixed cast of professional and non-professional actors.

BL: Perhaps this goes back to the question of solidarity and care, because you can be a professional performance-maker or artist, someone who has worked in other spaces, but to come into a theatre like Teatr Powszechny can be intimidating in lots of ways. The ensemble, it's very much their home – it is the place where they work on a regular basis and they have a very specific relationship with that space. These two terms are displayed on the outside of the theatre, *solidarność i troska* [solidarity and care] (see [Image 5](#)). Are they then influencing the way you think about the kind of work you make, or do they simply reflect the work that you're making?

AB: I try to make work this way anyway. The hierarchical, often violent, way of working, where all achievements are credited to one name in some bizarre, almost divine way is harmful and untrue. In theatre companies, we practice our societal agreements – it does matter how we communicate and work if this is a space of respect and true exchange. I really hope that this is reflected in any of my rehearsal rooms. And, of course, it's not a surprise that I've



Image 5. Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw. The sign translates as 'solidarity and care'. Photograph by Teatr Powszechny Archive.

collaborated with Powszechny for so many years. It became my theatre home exactly for that reason.

Sometimes I worry about the *solidarność i troska* motto, though. These terms can be easily overused as fashionable slogans rather than a practice. Or they can be misunderstood. We should probably define them in a more precise way before they lead to confusion or circumvention. Nevertheless, they are beautiful and inspiring, allowing us to imagine a society in which people are more aware of each other, looking after one another, listening. I would like to live in that kind of society, wouldn't you? The reality is much more complex, but we can still practise those notions in a rehearsal space, questioning theatre hierarchies and codes. I'm aware that the way I work can be challenging for some actors, as the process requires full engagement, open conversations, and co-creation. It can be demanding and not everyone is interested in working this way, which is ok. I see my role as a captain who takes responsibility for bringing a ship to land, but the whole crew is needed to navigate it on the way.

Working on *Orlando. Biographies*, I did something which I hadn't done before in a professional context. We started by writing a company contract together. It was fairly detailed; for example, we agreed not to be late. As you can imagine, sticking to strict formulas could be tricky. A few weeks later, almost everyone was late. *Laughs*. But nevertheless, creating that contract bonded us. It was the first thing we did together, listening to one another and imagining our common creative space.

I hope that our empathy and understanding of care is visible in the show. It meant a lot to us, the way we collaborated and constructed the performance. In rehearsals, it was truly special to observe bond forming between Lulla and Arek, who created a duo in the most natural way. Arek, a cis heterosexual man, the only one in the show, an established Powszechny actor, placed himself in the role of a carer rather than taking centre stage. He looks after Lulla throughout the show in the most gentle and compassionate way, helping her get dressed and transform into a woman. Together they sing a song. They kiss (see [Image 6](#)). They are inseparable.



Image 6. *Orlando. Biografie* (2022) directed by Agnieszka Błońska. Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw. Photograph by Magda Hueckel.

A drag queen becomes a true queen, looked after by the least expected member of the cast.

BL: Looking back over these six productions at Powszechny, has your idea of the role of the director changed or transformed in that time?

AB: Definitely, but that's over time and various productions in different places, not only my work in Powszechny. I think I'm less scared of the unknown now. I'm happy to wait for the worlds to unravel organically. When I was younger, I was very nervous about the structure of a show and wanted to know everything at the beginning. Now I'm less worried. Of course, there is a moment before the premiere when the structure has to be decided on, but I'm much more interested in the journey of learning about each other, creating together, and connecting all the pieces we discover on the way. I'm allowing myself to be surprised, which is the most exciting thing. *A Choreographer's Handbook* (2010) by Jonathan Burrows has been a huge inspiration. It's a book I return to over and over again. I find it extremely reassuring as a celebration of the unknown. The process begins with themes and ideas which are later translated into theatrical moments and scenes – by colliding and composing these moments, a new narrative is born. I find this fascinating.

I've always been interested in collaboration and political theatre. My background is in applied social sciences, and so it's not a surprise that I've focused throughout my career on subjects of identity, social justice, and tensions between minorities and the majority. I often define myself as a political theatre maker – but then we could discuss for hours what political theatre actually means. Isn't all theatre political? I'm basically interested in people, their stories and presence in a space. It's irrelevant whether they're professionals or not, whether they're a repertoire company or a community group. They are all people and they are all actors. Their stories and presence tell so much about our condition as a society and our political contexts. My role is to support them: to lead a group of people through our group processes, to observe and listen, and to steer towards a translation of their stories and our discoveries into performance material.

Orlando. Biografie is dedicated to Joanna Wichowska.

Orlando is a love of change.

Orlando is a value worth taking care of.

It's Orlando.

Orlando is taking on different genders while still being the same person.

Orlando is experiencing the mystery of transition – and treating this transition as a source of knowledge.

Orlando is thinking about the birth of a new mind by using old thoughts and then reminiscing about the thoughts that are already gone.

Orlando is the acceptance of losing a part of yourself and the readiness to get a new one.

Orlando is the curiosity of the world.

Orlando is a simultaneous loneliness among people and finding understanding amongst them.

Orlando is entering a new state of focus, without knowing the laws that rule this state.

Orlando is going to the other side of your own reflection. What stays the same in a person after transitioning?

Text by Filipka Rutkowska

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Bryce Lease is Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies and Head of Knowledge Exchange at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. His research spans theatre, performance, museums, and memory studies. He is author of *After '89: Polish Theatre and the Political* (2016) and *Commemorative Theatricality: Embodied Dynamics of Memory and Memorial* (2026), and co-editor of *Contemporary European Playwrights* (2020), *A History of Polish Theatre* (2022), *Staging Difficult Pasts: Transnational Memory, Theatres, and Museums* (2024), and the journal *Contemporary Theatre Review*. He is Co-Director of the E3-Funded Centre for Performance, Technology, and Equity (PTEQ).

Agnieszka Błońska is a theatre director, researcher, and Senior Lecturer in Acting and Theatre & Performance at Falmouth University. Over the years she has collaborated with major institutions and organisations including the National Theatre Studio, Powszechny Theatre (Warsaw), Soho Theatre, Wildworks Theatre, and Tate St Ives. With over two decades of international practice as a director and researcher, her work explores themes of identity, collectivity, and politics of societal coexistence. Błońska's research focuses on the deconstruction of traditional dramatic structures through participatory methodologies and non-linear performance, recently investigating possibilities of immersive digital technologies, in particular sound, within live performance. She holds an MA in Sociology with specialisation in Anthropology of Culture from Warsaw University and a PG Dip in

Drama Directing from the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. A co-founder of Kerpow (Kernow Power of Women) and artistic advisor for Projekt Europa, she was awarded the Gorsedh Kernow Certificate of Recognition for Creative Work in 2022. She is

currently completing a yearlong research secondment (2025–2026) at the Centre for Blended Realities (Falmouth University), where she explores possibilities of digital technologies within participatory performance.