

## **TOMASZ WIŚNIEWSKI: POLISH ECHOES IN COMPLICITÉ**

The main objective of the Project is to examine some echoes of Polish culture in one of the leading British theatre companies called Complicité, and to depict the functionality of these echoes in the aesthetics of the group. Led by the artistic director Simon McBurney, Complicité has been inspired by Polish literature and theatre in at least three productions (*The Street of Crocodiles*, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* and *Mnemonic*). The echoes are manifest in setting (Warsaw, Tarnów, and Drohobycz), literary inspirations (Olga Tokarczuk and Bruno Schulz), thematic references (Poland as part of a new Europe), and adaptation of some techniques characterising Polish experimental theatre-makers (Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski) to the creative methods developed by Complicité. On the one hand, the Project aims to scrutinise the semantic contribution of such influences to the aesthetics of the company, and on the other its objective is to discuss challenges that arise when adopting foreign sources. The core question is that of the balance between enriching inspiration and cultural appropriation.

The strong influence of Polish culture on a prominent British cultural phenomenon is in itself a rare accomplishment – not only in theatre – and for this reason alone the phenomenon deserves academic investigation. Polish echoes in Complicité are clearly marked, and their functioning has evolved. Performed between 1992 and 1999, *The Street of Crocodiles* not only reflected McBurney's fascination with a new translation of short stories by Bruno Schulz but also adapted some elements of Tadeusz Kantor's visual aesthetics. The play was produced at Britain's National Theatre (1992) before transferring to the West End (1999). In 2022-2023, Complicité toured their adaptation of Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. Urgent, if provocative, the narrative contributed to questions of radical ecological activism that has been explored by the company in other recent productions. In June 2024, Complicité decided to re-adapt their production of *Mnemonic* (1999), whose trans-European dimension reflected the then-urgent question concerning the emergence of a new European identity in the decade after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In Complicité, there is as much space for expressing post- and neo-colonial attitudes, as there is for the emergence of the new reality in which CEE is gradually being assimilated as part of a European/global perspective.

The Project covers new material, though some foundations for the study were established in Wiśniewski's book *Complicite, Theatre and Aesthetics* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016). The research profile was introductorily sketched out on 28 March 2023 when Complicité, the Barbican Centre, the Polish Cultural Institute in London, the European Theatre Research Network at the University of Kent, and the Between.Pomiędzy Research Group organized Wiśniewski's audio-visual lecture titled "In Conversation: Polish Echoes in Complicité" as part of the programme accompanying the performance *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* in London. The project was continued in the form of a conversation titled "Olga Tokarczuk by Complicité" conducted by Paul Allain and Tomasz Wiśniewski at "The Geography of the Theatre Imagination" conference organised at the University of Gdańsk (19-20 May 2023), and then at the guest seminar "Polish Echoes in British Theatre" at Sidney Sussex College, University of Cambridge (22 February 2024). The three research events concentrated on the mutual impact of Polish and British theatre and proved the relevance of this pioneering research proposal in an international context. The already established cooperation with the European Theatre Research Network (ETRN) at the University of Kent will be furthered as part of the Project.

Expected results of the research include: the English language monograph on *Polish Echoes in Complicité*, four academic articles exploring the theme "The Geography of the Theatre Imagination: The Case of Complicité," research visits to the University of Kent (UK) and the Sorbonne (France), the thematic issue on "The Geography of the Imagination" by the quarterly *Tekstualia*, organisation of a hybrid seminar discussion on the work of Complicité, and delivery of four conference papers.