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The Virtual Theatre Of Witold Gombrowicz

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Recommended Citation

Allen J. Kuharski. (2004). "The Virtual Theatre Of Witold Gombrowicz". *The Other In Polish Theatre And Drama*. Volume 14, 183-200.

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The Virtual Theatre of Witold Gombrowicz¹

... a rubbish heap. The point is precisely that I come from your rubbish heap. Through me speaks everything that for centuries you have cast off as refuse. If my form is a parody of form, then my spirit is a parody of spirit and my person is a parody of a person. Isn't it true that one cannot undermine one form by opposing it to another, but rather by a laxity in one's attitude towards it? No, it is not an accident that at the very moment when we desperately need a hero, up pops a clown...a conscious and therefore serious clown. You have been too literal for much too long—too naïve—in your game with fate. You have forgotten that a man is not only himself, but also pretends to be himself. You have thrown into the garbage whatever of the theatre and the actor lies within you, and you have tried to forget about it—today through the window you see that a tree has grown on your rubbish heap, which is a parody of a tree. Assuming I have been born (which is not certain) I have been born to unmask your play...

—Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, vol. 1

Who was Witold Gombrowicz and what do I mean by his “virtual theatre?” And beyond that, what is unique and significant about the Gombrowiczean theatre? In Polish culture, Witold Gombrowicz the writer certainly needs no introduction, but Gombrowicz the playwright remains curiously ill-defined thirty years after his plays first freely entered the Polish theatrical repertory. There are two quite distinct ways that Gombrowicz's work has become known and circulated in the world: via publication and via performance. Due to the combination of censorship and the delayed production of his plays in Poland, several generations of Poles could only experience Gombrowicz via the printed word (and there largely via underground publications) rather than in theatrical performance. In spite of the richness of Gombrowicz scholarship in Polish studies, and the explosion of the theatrical production of the playwright's work

¹ This article was originally given in the form of a slide lecture using over 180 archival images at Swarthmore College in November 1997 and again in June 1998. Various versions of the lecture, at times focusing on one of Gombrowicz's plays in particular, have been given since at the Yale Drama School (1998), Tampere, Finland (2000), Lublin, Poland (2000), the University of Utah at Salt Lake City (2000), California State University at Long Beach (2003) and the University of California at Santa Cruz (2003), in addition to Indiana University in 2002.

in Poland since the 1970s, the critical approach to his work remains primarily literary rather than theatrical in nature and understanding, perhaps reflecting the long experience of Gombrowicz as the forbidden writer whose work was discreetly circulated and read in private. That the hoary specter of the anti-theatrical prejudice perhaps still limits the critical discourse around Gombrowicz also remains a possibility. Does calling Gombrowicz “playwright” rather than “writer” arouse an anxiety? Does it imply a lowering of the stakes of his work in an unspoken cultural/literary hierarchy? Or is it simply the discomfort of confronting a new aspect to an already familiar face—or, even more disconcerting, a face that is revealed to be a series of ever-changing and mutating masks?

It is important to note, however, that there is no doubt that the initial knowledge of Gombrowicz’s work in Western Europe was most significantly spread by the successful theatrical performance of his works in the 1960s and early 1970s. His fame, if not his publication, was made possible by important theatrical productions in Paris, Stockholm, Berlin, and Zürich, among others. Outside of Poland, the most significant first point of contact with Gombrowicz’s writing has certainly been via performances of *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia*, which is ironically one of the least discussed texts in the criticism of his works in Poland. This surprising critical neglect of the text has been partially addressed by Monika Żółkoś’s recent book-length study of the play entitled *Ciało mówiące (The Speaking Body)*.

My production history and bibliography of Gombrowicz’s works in performance around the world contains information on over 200 productions of *Ivona* in twenty-eight countries, the majority of which have not taken place in Poland. Gombrowicz himself considered *The Marriage* his most important text, pointing to the central role of playwriting in his understanding of himself as a writer. The depth of engagement by theatre artists and audiences in the making and experience of a live performance has no parallel in the circulation of printed texts: thousands of actors around the world have memorized, rehearsed, and performed *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* and *The Marriage*; hundreds of directors, designers, and composers have devoted months of their creative time to the interpretation and production of these works; and hundreds of thousands of spectators have come to know these texts first via live performance. Gombrowicz himself was very aware that the existence and circulation of printed texts by no means indicates that they are actually being *read*. In contrast, in the theatre, it is more possible to quantitatively measure the reception of live performances.

It is important to note that the pattern of reception of Gombrowicz’s work varies greatly in different parts of the world, and Poland is not alone in first experiencing Gombrowicz the novelist and diarist before Gombrowicz the playwright. Two notable examples of this pattern outside of Poland are Argentina and (until recently) the United States, where theatrical productions of



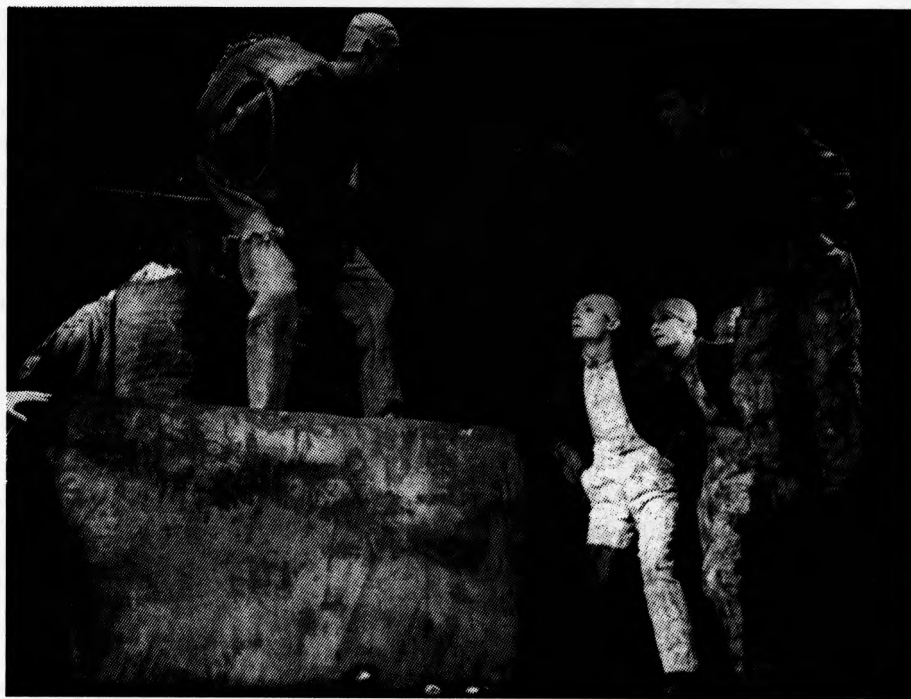
Witold Gombrowicz's passport photo. Issued in 1939 in advance of the ocean cruise to Buenos Aires which would lead to his twenty-four-year exile in Argentina in the wake of the German invasion of Poland. The playwright would not return to Poland before his death in 1969. Photo: archives of Rita Gombrowicz.

Title page for the Spanish translation of Witold Gombrowicz's play *The Marriage* (*Ślub*), published in Buenos Aires in 1948. Spanish translation done by Gombrowicz in collaboration with Alejandro Rúsovich. The first published version of the play in any language. Photo: archives of Rita Gombrowicz.





Barbara Krafftówna as the title character in the world premiere of Gombrowicz's *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* (*Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda*), directed by Halina Mikołajska, at Warsaw's Polish Army Theater (later renamed Teatr Dramatyczny). 1957. Another Polish production of the play would not take place until 1975. Photo: Franciszek Myszkowski, Archive of the Union of Polish Theater Artists (ZASP), Warsaw.



The Marriage (*Ślub*), directed by Jerzy Jarocki and designed by Krystyna Zachwatowicz, at the Student Theater at the Gliwice Polytechnical Institute, 1960. Photo: Stanisław Gadomski, archives of Rita Gombrowicz

Gombrowicz's work have remained relatively rare, and where no production has yet had the impact of the early work of Jorge Lavelli in France, Alf Sjöberg in Sweden, or Ernst Schröder in Germany. In these former cultures, the literary Gombrowicz, the writer's writer, the cult figure of the "Ferdydurkist," still dominates, and I would argue unfortunately limits his potential impact beyond the confines of narrow literary or academic elites.

My discussion here is based in part on my archival research on Gombrowicz's work in performance. I have relied primarily on the archives of Rita Gombrowicz, which are now housed in the Beinecke Rare Book Collection at Yale University. I have also used the archives of the Union of Polish Theatre Artists (ZASP) in Warsaw, the Polish branch of the International Theatre Institute in Warsaw, and those of the International Gombrowicz Festival in Radom. I am also greatly indebted to the earlier work compiled by Zofia Biłek-Dąbrowska in her bibliography published in *Gombrowicz i krytycy* (1984). My production history and bibliography currently documents over 400 productions of Gombrowicz's works in over thirty countries.

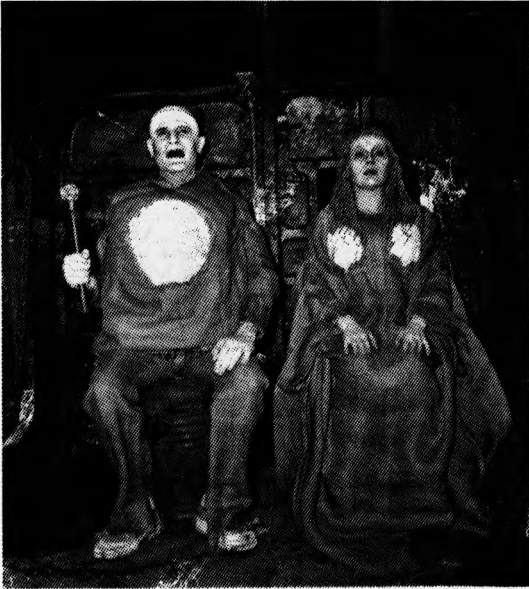
Gombrowicz the Playwright

Witold Gombrowicz the playwright is unique and significant in the annals of world theatre on several scores. Gombrowicz could be called Poland's Jean Genet, but could also just as aptly be dubbed the Polish Oscar Wilde or Joe Orton. While his work possessed the philosophical depth of a Genet or a Sartre, he also possessed a key trait that they lacked: a sense of humor and one of the wittiest voices found in 20th-century European theatre. Gombrowicz rightly found such comparisons with foreign playwrights odious and limiting, and his position on this score was in no small part due to his parallel rebellion against the limiting notions of "Polishness" held by both Poles and foreigners. He did not want to be known as the "Polish" anything. I would argue that his contribution to 20th-century theatre is both as significant and as distinct as that of Brecht, Genet, or Beckett—though the precise nature of this contribution is still being defined in both the theatrical performance and the criticism of his work. It is indeed a sign of the remarkable depth of Gombrowicz's theatrical accomplishment that his work remains an artistic and theoretical open book decades after his plays first began appearing in performance alongside those of his contemporaries such as Beckett or Ionesco. One key to the theatrical originality and importance of Gombrowicz's work for me resides in this principle of "virtuality."

To the best of my knowledge, Gombrowicz remains the only example in world drama of a playwright whose work was generally first produced, and first gained fame, via productions in translation in foreign countries. There was only one professional production of his work in Poland in his lifetime (the 1957 world premiere of *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* at Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw), followed by one student production of *The Marriage* in Gliwice in 1960. The text of *The Marriage*, indeed, was first published in a Spanish transla-

tion in Buenos Aires in 1948, and its first professional stage production was directed by the Argentinean Jorge Lavelli in French in Paris in 1963–64. The text's eventual publication in French translation was made possible by the success of the stage production. The world premiere of *Operetta* took place in Aquila, Italy, in 1969, just months after the playwright's death. The world premiere of his posthumous play *History* took place in Marstall, Germany, in 1977. This pattern also applies to the very significant category of stage adaptations of Gombrowicz's non-dramatic writings. The first stage adaptations of his short stories (eventually collected under the title of *Bakakaj*) took place in Germany (a television adaptation of *Premeditated Murder* in 1967), France (Luc Bondy's student production of *A Feast at Countess Kottubaj's* at the École Jacques Lecoq in Paris in 1968), and in Italy (a double bill of *A Feast at Countess Kottubaj's* and *Premeditated Murder* at the Teatro del Satiri in Rome in 1973). The normalization of Gombrowicz's work within the Polish theatre did not begin until the 1974 Warsaw production of *The Marriage* by director Jerzy Jarocki and designer Krystyna Zachwatowicz at Teatr Dramatyczny—the same artistic team that produced the Gliwice student production in 1960. Between 1960 and 1974, Jarocki and Zachwatowicz were only able to stage the play in French and German translations in Western Europe (in Paris and Zürich). The 1974 Warsaw production of *The Marriage* launched a wave of Polish productions of Gombrowicz's work in his native language just as foreign productions entered a period of decline in the late 1970s and 1980s. Curiously, censorship of the performance of Gombrowicz in Poland was lifted more than fifteen years before his works could be freely published without government interference.

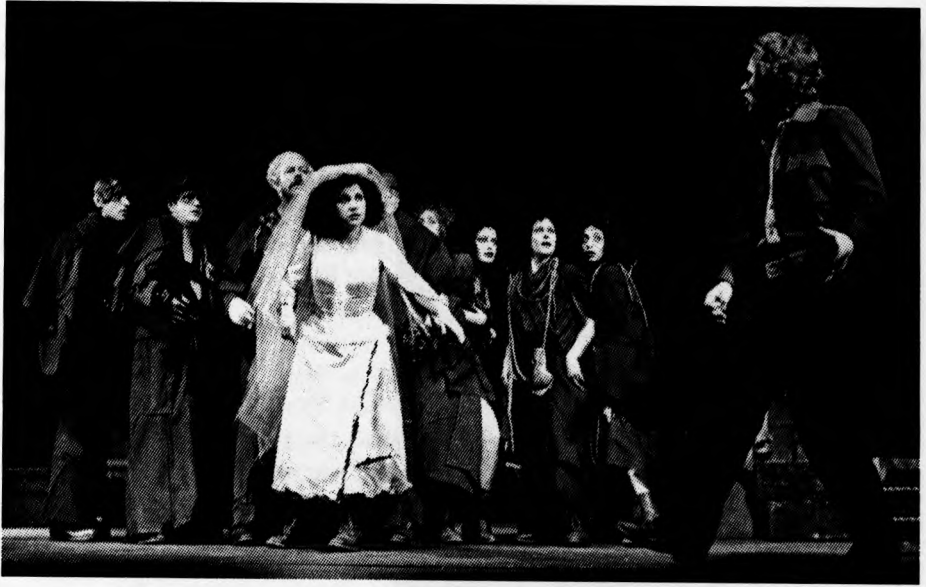
The unique pattern of the theatrical production history of Gombrowicz's work reveals one aspect of his virtuality: Gombrowicz as the playwright *par excellence* of "virtual Poland," or the Polish diaspora. Three out of four of his plays were written in emigration in Argentina or France. All of Gombrowicz's plays, with the significant exception of the explicitly autobiographical *History*, are perfectly suited, if not originally intended, for export to foreign theatre artists and audiences. In the three major plays, there is only one passing reference to Poland or anything Polish: the setting of the action of Henry's dream in *The Marriage* in Gombrowicz's birthplace of Małoszyce. The "Polishness" of these plays is subtextual and substructural by design. Gombrowicz's own biography and his use of his own experience of Poland and its culture are translated into pure theatrical metaphor no less for a Polish audience than for a foreign one. Whatever Gombrowicz's private indebtedness to earlier Polish playwrights such as Mickiewicz, Słowacki, or Wyspiański, he pointedly only acknowledged Shakespeare, Goethe, and Alfred Jarry as theatrical inspirations. The significance of these foreign playwrights to his work both marked an innovation in Polish dramaturgy and made his works immediately (if not always completely) accessible to foreign theatre artists and audiences. Gombrowicz set the mould for the younger playwright Sławomir Mrożek, demonstrating how to become a Polish playwright who could be played anywhere—and in Gombrowicz's case,



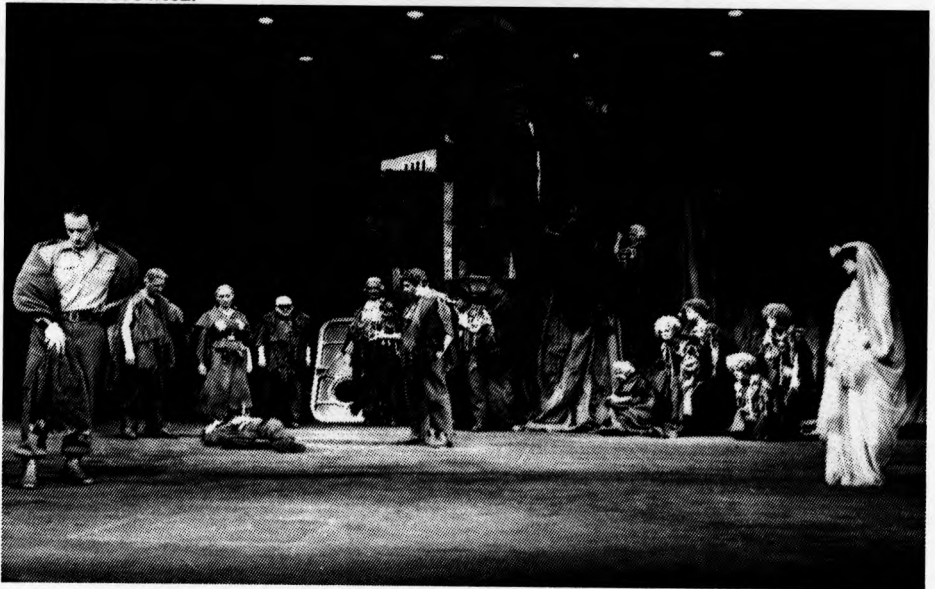
The Father (Alexis Nitzer) and The Mother (Juliette Brac) in the French premiere of *The Marriage (Ślub)*, directed by Jorge Lavelli and designed by Krystyna Zachwatowicz, at the Théâtre Récamier in Paris in 1964. Photo: archives of Rita Gombrowicz.



Peter Lilienthal's West German television adaptation of Gombrowicz's short story *Premeditated Murder (Zbrodnia z premedytacją)*. Iduna Films, Munich. 1968. Photo: archives of Rita Gombrowicz.



Jerzy Jarocki's production of *The Marriage* (*Ślub*) at the Schauspielhaus in Zürich, scenography by Krystyna Zachwatowicz. 1972. Photo: Leonard Zubler, archives of Rita Gombrowicz.



Henry (Piotr Fronczewski, left) and Molly (Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieślak, right) in the Polish professional premiere of *The Marriage* (*Ślub*), directed by Jerzy Jarocki, scenography by Krystyna Zachwatowicz, at Warsaw's Teatr Dramatyczny. 1974. Photo: Antoni Zdębiak, archives of Rita Gombrowicz.

played for years anywhere *but* Poland. Among the revelations of studying the production history of Gombrowicz's plays is that in fact they became part of the repertory of the national theatres in both Sweden and France before they enjoyed this honor in Poland. The first production of one of Gombrowicz's plays at Warsaw's Teatr Narodowy (Jerzy Grzegorzewski's production of *The Marriage*) only took place in 1998.²

A second aspect of Gombrowicz's "virtual" nature was his personal distance from the professional theatre, and even from the performance of his own works. After leaving Poland in 1939, Gombrowicz never maintained close personal ties with actors or directors, was never part of a theatre company, never participated in rehearsals for any of his works, and pointedly avoided attending the West European productions of his work produced before his death in 1969. The only confirmed account of Gombrowicz's attendance at the performance of one of his plays was for an amateur performance of *Ivona* in Nice in 1967, which was also attended by the French surrealist poet Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes. According to Rita Gombrowicz, Gombrowicz had to excuse himself in the midst of the performance due to a severe attack of asthma.

A profound paradox is revealed by Gombrowicz's sustained, even stubborn, distance from the professional theatre: those who know him personally consistently described him as the most theatrical person they had ever met. His personal distance from the professional theatre can be understood as a combination of personal preference, censorship, and cultural dislocation as an émigré, dissident, and political refugee. More significantly, the same forces that isolated Gombrowicz personally from the professional theatre also delayed the performance of his plays. Three out of four of Gombrowicz's plays (all except *Operetta*) waited at least twenty years for their first professional production, often in a foreign language, only to prove undeniably stage-worthy texts and to enjoy steady and prestigious professional production thereafter. Gombrowicz thus confounds one of the truisms of theatre history: that great playwrights tend either to be "men of the theatre" (the Greeks, Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Strindberg, Fo) or closely associated with such artists (Chekhov, Gorki, or Bulgakov with Stanislavsky in Russia, for example). Gombrowicz belongs to a special subgroup of playwrights, including Büchner in Germany, the Polish Ro-

² The first production of Gombrowicz at Teatr Narodowy technically took place in 1981 in the form of a stage adaptation of his novel *Possessed* (*Opełani*), under the direction of Tadeusz Minc. The 1998 production of *The Marriage* remains the first production there of one of Gombrowicz's plays per se. The problematic status of Gombrowicz's plays for Poland's national theatre is suggested here by the fact that whatever the virtues of the Minc production, it was based on Gombrowicz's most obscure and problematic novel, originally published under a pseudonym and not acknowledged by the author until just before his death. It would perversely take seventeen years for one of Gombrowicz's plays to enjoy the same privileges of production at the Narodowy granted to *Possessed*. This was more than thirty years after *The Marriage* was successfully performed at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm in 1966, and sixteen years after *Ivona* was produced at La Comédie Française in 1982.

mantics, and his older contemporary Witkiewicz, who lived and worked apart from the theatre world and had their theatrical work recognized only belatedly in performance. Curiously, the pattern also fits the late plays of Eugene O'Neill, such as *Hughie*, *A Touch of the Poet*, and *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*—which were all produced decades after they were written and were then first performed in Swedish at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. The world premiere production of O'Neill's *Hughie*, in fact, was possibly performed in repertory with the Swedish premiere of Gombrowicz's *Ivona* in the mid-1960s.

Another distinguishing feature of Gombrowicz's theatre is the significance of stage adaptations of his non-dramatic writings. While Gombrowicz wrote in various genres, in practice he consistently sought to confuse the boundaries between them. This was one expression of his baroque, as well as postmodern, sensibility. Gombrowicz's close personal friend, translator, editor, and collaborator Konstanty Jeleński called the playwright's novels a form of autobiography and his so-called "diary" a disguised novel. Gombrowicz's widow Rita has gone further, saying that everything that Gombrowicz wrote was a form of theatre—suggesting that his novels, short stories, and diaries form a kind of theatrical metatext or hypertext.

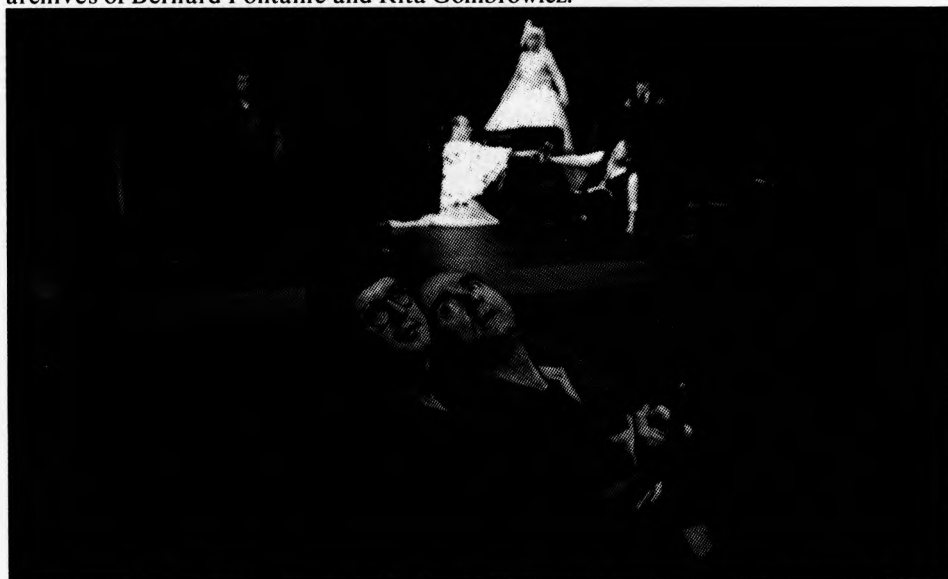
The history of Gombrowicz in performance substantiates Rita Gombrowicz's argument. Roughly one-quarter of all theatrical productions of Gombrowicz since 1957 have consisted of adaptations of his diary, short stories, and



King Ignatius (Sigge Fürst) and Queen Margaret (Margaretha Krook) in Alf Sjöberg's production of the Swedish premiere of *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* (*Ivona, księżniczka Burgunda*) at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre. 1965. Photo: Beata Bergstrom, archives of Rita Gombrowicz.



Witold Gombrowicz seated alongside the surrealist poet Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes with the cast of an amateur production of *Iwona, Princess of Burgundia* (*Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda*), directed by Bernard Fontaine (standing second from the right) at the Palais de la Méditerranée in Nice. It was the only occasion the playwright ever attended a performance of one of his plays. December 19, 1967. Photo: archives of Bernard Fontaine and Rita Gombrowicz.



The Drunkard (Wojciech Malajkat) and Henry (Jan Peszek) in Jerzy Grzegorzewski's production of *The Marriage* (*Ślub*) at Warsaw's National Theater (Teatr Narodowy), 1998. Photo: Wojciech Plewiński.



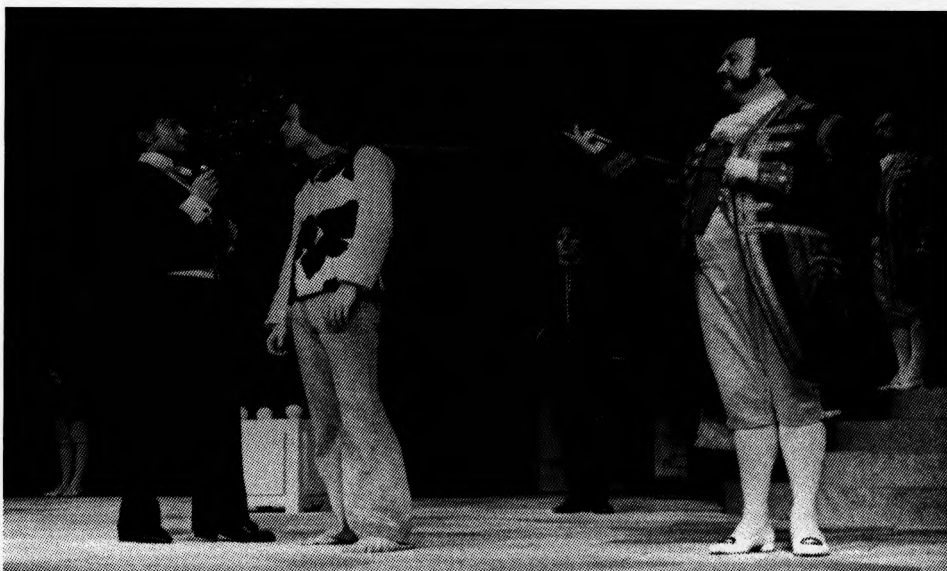
Henry (Andrzej Seweryn, center) and Molly (Céline Samie, upper right) in the Comédie Française's production of Gombrowicz's *The Marriage* (*Ślub*), directed by Jacques Rosner. Salle Richelieu, Paris. 2001. Photo: San Bartolomé.

novels (approximately one hundred such adaptations in a dozen countries). Among the most significant of these must be counted Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class* in 1975 (freely inspired in part by the novel *Ferdydurke*), Teatr Provisorium and Kompania Teatr's *Ferdydurke* (first performed in Polish in 1998, and performed in both Polish and English on international tour until the present time), and Jan Jakub Kolski's 2003 film adaptation of Gombrowicz's novel *Pornografia* (the Polish entry for the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 2003). Kantor's *The Dead Class* and Provisorium & Kompania's *Ferdydurke* in fact stand as the two most widely reviewed stage productions in the production history of Gombrowicz's work—over eighty reviews, articles, and interviews in the case of *Ferdydurke*. In what I would dub the Gombrowicz theatrical “new wave” following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, stage productions of Gombrowicz's work both in Poland and abroad reached new highs—and fully one-third of this most recent production consists of adaptations of his non-dramatic works. All of Gombrowicz's novels have now been adapted numerous times for performance, as have his diary and at least ten of the twelve short stories in *Bakakaj*. Productions of *Ferdydurke* and the stories in *Bakakaj*, in fact, outnumber productions of the posthumous play *History*. In effect, almost everything that Gombrowicz wrote has assumed an active life as virtual or de facto performance text, a phenomenon without parallel in European or American theatre. The closest examples

would be the significant, but much narrower, history of stage adaptations of Samuel Beckett's prose (such as Joseph Chaikin's acclaimed stage versions of *Texts for Nothing*) or the long international tradition of adaptations of Russian playwright Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*. However, neither of these approaches the breadth and depth of the case of Gombrowicz.

Perhaps even more significant is the variety of performance genres in which these adaptations can be found. Gombrowicz's work has from the start simultaneously circulated in both classical and experimental/alternative theatres. In both France and Poland, his plays moved directly from the milieu of experimental student theatre to the professional centers of the theatrical establishment, yet has never stopped inspiring the work of young and experimental artists. Gombrowicz himself aggressively sought first performances of his plays in classical companies, yet eventually owed a great debt to the efforts and eventual reputation and prestige of the experimental artists such as Kantor who have consistently picked up his work. The category of "theatrical adaptations" today includes versions of Gombrowicz's work produced as television, film, radio, opera, performance art, happenings, modern dance, and even in the form of a wordless movement theatre piece performed by the deaf. Animated film remains one of the few genres in which I have yet to find an example of an adaptation of his writing. The protean theatrical energy of Gombrowicz's work has inspired two major operas in the 1970s by the contemporary German composers Boris Blacher and Volker David Kirchner (the young Pina Bausch played the silent title role in the world premier of Blacher's operatic version of *Ivona* in Wuppertal in 1973), and in 1998 Ulrich Wagner followed their example with his own chamber opera based on *Ivona*. The Polish composer Krzysztof Szwajgier composed a "mini-opera" freely inspired by Gombrowicz's *History* at Cracow's Teatr Stu in 1983, which later toured Poland and Western Europe. In addition, over two dozen different original scores have been composed for his play *Operetta* in a dozen different countries. Gombrowicz specified that there must never be a set score for the play, which is in effect a libretto for a mock operetta seeking a score. *Operetta* was also the inspiration for a therapeutic experimental musical theatre project mounted in a state home for the mentally disabled in France, which was documented in a film entitled *La moindre des choses* (*The Least of Things*) in 1997.

The quintessence of Gombrowicz's virtual theatre, however, is the manner in which he placed himself at the center of each of his works with a complex gallery of self-portraits. The most significant and complex character created by Gombrowicz is the one that he named after himself. This character of "Witold" appears in different incarnations in *Ferdydurke*, *History*, *Trans-Atlantyk*, *Pornografia*, and *Cosmos*. His most intentionally ambiguous form is as the author of the *Diary*, which has been interpreted by Beth Holmgren and others as more an exercise in the conscious creation of a literary persona than as a factually



Count Charmant (Gabriel Cattand), the Count's Pickpocket (Jean-Jacques Ruysdale), and Ladislaus (Jean Turlier) in the French premiere of Gombrowicz's *Operetta* (*Operetka*), directed by Jacques Rosner at the Théâtre National Populaire in Paris. 1970. Photo: Photo Pic, Archives of Rita Gombrowicz.



Teatr Polski of Wrocław's production of Gombrowicz's *History*, adapted and directed by Jacek Bunsch. 1985. Photo: Adam Hawatej



Tadeusz Kantor's production of *The Dead Class*, freely inspired in part by Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* and *The Marriage*. Teatr Cricot-2, Cracow, 1975. The production was performed over 1300 times in Poland and abroad until the company disbanded in 1991. Photo uncredited.



Teatr Provisorium & Kompania Teatr of Lublin's stage adaptation of Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke*, directed by Janusz Opryński and Witold Mazurkiewicz. 1998. Photo: Ken Reynolds.

reliable account of Gombrowicz's day-to-day life. In Holmgren's words

... Gombrowicz's *Dziennik* (*Diary*) offers neither a definitive portrait of the artist nor a private record of an individual's thought and experiences, but, rather, a provocative, instructive, mystifying, and self-defending enactment of the artist's personality and self-styled personal mission—an enactment, moreover, which avails itself of the possibilities and, ultimately, must abide by the limitations (both stylistic and ontological) of artistic expression. (69)

Gombrowicz, therefore, who was denied free access to the stage until sixty years of age, instead became an actor in his personal and literary life, an actor whose most accomplished role was as his own alter ego. The purest embodiment of the "Witold" character is found in Gombrowicz's unfinished play *History*. In Gombrowicz's manuscript, the character's speeches are initially assigned to "Witold," but later are simply marked "I." Such a merging of dramaturgical subject and object stands as a unique phenomenon in world drama. The apparent line between author and alter ego could hardly be thinner. In this is anticipated one of the most famous devices of Tadeusz Kantor's subsequent "Theatre of Death," in which Kantor himself always appeared on stage as a character named after himself who also openly "performs" the function of both director and subject of the piece. In *Let The Artists Die!* (*Niech szczerą artyści*; 1985) Kantor at once realized and surpassed Gombrowicz's seemingly impossible effect of merging the theatrical/dramaturgical subject and object called for in *History*. In the piece, the program listed Kantor himself playing the character of "I" and other members of his company playing "I-When-I-Was-Six" and "I-Dying."

The relationship of "Witold" the character to the reality of Gombrowicz the author is less important theatrically than the character's dramaturgical function. On one level, the various Witold figures function as diversionary tactics designed to belie the authorial hand still invisibly in control offstage. In the novels, the Witold figure is always both narrator and actor in the plot, again calling attention away from Gombrowicz's true role as *Uberregiser* of the narrative, one who has scrupulously cast and costumed his fictional alter ego. More importantly, the "Witold" characters are all variations on a central archetype, Gombrowicz's "serious clown," the most consistently used of a stock catalogue of types drawn on by the playwright throughout his career. Konstanty Jeleński has argued that the members of Gombrowicz's family are the source of a set of stock characters that recur in his plays, what I would dub the *commedia dell'Gombrowicz*. The "Witold" archetype extends beyond the characters explicitly identified as such and includes Philip in *Ivona*, Henry in *The Marriage*, and Fior in *Operetta*.

Characters such as Prince Philip or Henry share a gift for stage direction. The plots of *Ivona*, *Princess of Burgundia* and *The Marriage* revolve around

the creation of a tacit play-with-the-play by these characters. They share this talent with the "Witold" narrators of *Ferdydurke*, *Pornografia*, and *Cosmos*. Perhaps the most important common denominators of the plays with the novels is this premise of the improvised creation of a "theatrical event" or "happening" by the hero/narrator figure, or a figure closely connected to Gombrowicz's alter ego. The character of the stage director Fryderyk in *Pornografia* is the one place where Gombrowicz explicitly identifies one of his characters in this way, and thereby announces that both theatricality and the ethics of the theatrical process itself are among his thematic concerns. The Witold characters or their partners also often assume roles in the plays they themselves direct. In *Operetta*, Gombrowicz's use of alter egos is the most subtle and complex. Both Konstanty Jeleński and Jan Błoński have argued that Gombrowicz cast the play with various alter egos representing different facets of Witold in *History* (Jeleński, 13–14). The fashion designer Fior thus assumes the role of the director of the play-within-the-play with his masked ball *cum* fashion show. The Pickpockets represent the oppressed, rebellious, and anarchic side of Witold's nature, and the instinctual and eternally youthful Albertina becomes the symbolic embodiment of his Dionysian sensuality, androgyny, and regenerative powers.

The "Witold" archetype in its many and varied incarnations allowed Gombrowicz to dramatize various potential "selves" rather than a coherent, factually autobiographical one. These characters thus often represent unrealized aspects of himself, aspects that he could reveal only through the "dream" of theatrical creation. Thus, both his novels and his plays can be understood as theatrical improvisations on the theme of existential self-definition. They are all in a spiritual sense true even if none match his factual autobiography. This search led to mythic self-portraits in *History* and *Operetta* as well as to debased and shameful ones in *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*. In *Ivona*, he probed his own capacity for callousness; in *The Marriage* and *Pornografia*, his potential as a murderer; in *Cosmos*, his threshold of psychosis and sexual perversity.

Gombrowicz in his works, therefore, is at times simultaneously author, hero/narrator, director, and actor. During the course of his thirty-year exile from the working world of the theatre, Gombrowicz imaginatively created a one-man repertory company whose only audience was generally himself. By the same token, it is fair to say that today somewhere in the world, one of Gombrowicz's virtual selves is almost always appearing on stage.

In the opening words of Gombrowicz's *Diary*:

Monday.

Me.

Tuesday.

Me.

Wednesday.

Me.

Thursday.

Me. (3)

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