

# Making Your Own Story of It: Oliver Frlić's *Klątwa* (Engl.: "The Curse") in Warsaw as a Theatre of Emancipation

NIKLAS FÜLLNER

## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses Oliver Frlić's production of *Klątwa* (Engl.: "The Curse") which is based on the play with the same title by Stanisław Wyspiański. *Klątwa* premiered in Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw on 18 February 2017 and created the biggest theatre scandal in the early theatre history in Poland as both the right-wing government and the right-wing movement in Poland regarded it as blasphemous and – unsuccessfully – tried to prevent further performances. In *Klątwa* Oliver Frlić questions the understanding of historiography promoted by the Polish government that prefers to focus only on stories about heroes and he criticises both the abuse of power in the church and in the institutionalized theatre. The strategies of Oliver Frlić's political theatre are analyzed in the light of Jacques Rancière's thoughts about critical theatre. In *Klątwa* Frlić develops a theatre of dissensus in the sense of Rancière. He undertakes a "dissensual re-configuration"<sup>1</sup> of political theatre by changing the frames, by playing around and by questioning the means used in theatre. But Frlić also deviates from this strategy when he creates images on stage that convey meanings directly and simply. Yet, these images fit into Frlić's strategy of questioning the official Polish historiography by deconstructing the symbols it is based on. Oliver Frlić's theatre of emancipation, a theatre that believes in the potential of the spectator to emancipate him- or herself as suggested by Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator* (Rancière 2009), manages to make visible authoritarian and undemocratic developments in Polish politics and to offer a critical approach to history in contrast to the one-sided view the Polish government tries to establish.

## KEYWORDS

Oliver Frlić, political theatre, Jacques Rancière, contemporary theatre, Polish theatre, historiography.

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1 Rancière 2010, p. 140.

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Oliver Frlić's production of *Klątwa* (Engl.: "The Curse") which is based on the play with the same title by Stanisław Wyspiański. *Klątwa* premiered in Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw on 18 February 2017 and created the biggest theatre scandal in the early theatre history in Poland. For several months protesters assembled in front of the theatre at every performance day accusing the performance of blasphemy. The Neo-Fascist organisation ONR (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, Engl.: National Radical Camp) attacked the theatre and members of the audience. As a result, a private security service was hired to protect members of the cast and the audience. Nevertheless, members of the production team have been threatened. One actress, Julia Wyszynska, received death threats and experienced censure when the premiere of a TV production she was to appear in was cancelled by the TV station.<sup>2</sup> Right-wing politicians and the episcopal conference demanded that the performance be banned, and right-wing media asked the city government of Warsaw to cut the funding for the theatre. Finally, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage Piotr Gliński (PiS, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Engl.: Law and Justice), who is also Deputy Prime Minister of the current right-wing government in Poland, deprived the renowned Malta Festival in Poznań of funding because Oliver Frlić was chosen as one of its curators.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, he cut the funding for the Dialog Festival in Wrocław when its curators decided to include *Klątwa* in their programme. Yet, the city of Warsaw, which is governed by the opposition party, the PO (Platforma Obywatelska, Engl.: The Civic Platform), issued a statement, "that the city has no tools enabling censorship and doesn't wish to have them, because theatre is an autonomous institution"<sup>4</sup>. As Teatr Powszechny belongs to the local government and is not under influence of the national government, it is impossible for the Minister of Culture to interfere directly, but there is an ongoing lawsuit against Oliver Frlić with the intention to ban the performance.

All these incidents have to be regarded in the light of the change of government

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2 Adameicka-Sitek 2017.

3 Agata Adameicka-Sitek and Marta Keil 2017.

4 See *ibid.*

after the elections in Poland in October 2015. Since then, the Polish government has followed an authoritarian and nationalist agenda in the field of culture and education amongst others. Several artistic directors of those theatres which are under the control of the state have been replaced<sup>5</sup>. Deputy Secretary of Culture Wanda Zwinogrodzka (PiS) explained the government's action as part of a cultural war against the liberal left: "The left roaring is laming our ability of articulation. It has to be dampened after all to start speaking."<sup>6</sup>



FIGURE 1. *Kłątwa* (dir. Oliver Frljić, *Teatr Powszechny* in Warsaw, 2017). Photo Magda Hueckel.

The controversy over Oliver Frljić's production of *Kłątwa* was a preliminary peak in the cultural war initiated by the government. According to theatre scholar Agata Adamecka-Sitek, there is no other production "probably even in the post-war history of Polish theatre – that has divided Poles with equal force and at the same time created a particular kind of 'community clash'"<sup>7</sup>. So, what is it that created this clash? As most people who opposed the performance have not seen it, only some images from the performance which were spread and discussed determined the discourse. These are: a scene in the first part of the performance in which a female character performs a fellatio on a statue of Pope John Paul II, after which the other actors hang a sign with the words "Defender of the paedophiles" around his neck, and the final scene in which a wooden cross is chopped down with a chain saw by the same female character. Both images are strongly connected to Polish history and culture. Pope John Paul II has been worshipped in Poland since his election

5 See Anna R. Burzyńska 2017, p. 17-18.

6 Quoted from *ibid*, p. 14 (translation of the author).

7 Agata Adamecka-Sitek 2017.

in 1978 and his visits to the communist Poland where he met with the opposition are regarded as fundamental to the later fall of the Iron Curtain.<sup>8</sup> However, the Pope's unwillingness to shed light on the many cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church that were made public in the 1990s was never questioned by the Catholic Church<sup>9</sup>, and even today Catholic priests are protected by the Polish government. For example, their names do not appear in an open online database run by the government which names all convicted paedophiles except priests.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the cross is also seen as a symbol for the successful Polish resistance in the communist era. Erecting a cross in public was seen as an act of resistance against the communist government that wished to reduce the influence of the church. For example, in the newly built working-class town Nowa Huta local people erected a cross in 1960 and defended it successfully against the police.<sup>11</sup> But nowadays – although the separation between church and state is enshrined in the Polish constitution since 1989 – the church continues to maintain a strong influence on the government, and erecting a cross has become a symbol of the right-wing movement. It was used, for example, to draw attention to right-wing conspiracy theories around the death of former president Lech Kaczyński (PiS) in an airplane crash in Smolensk, Russia, in 2010. Using these strong images in his performance Frlić questions the role of the Catholic Church in Poland, but he also questions the one-sided manner in which the Polish government wants history to be written and taught in Poland. In her first policy statement in November 2015 the newly-elected Prime Minister Beata Szydło (PiS) stated:

*Not only is the State an organization, it is also moral quality, and we shall take it into account in any real and wide-ranging project aimed to repair the State. Once again, we must make our country the subject of Polish pride. We mean here the entire educational policy. And also the cultural policy. It must aim to strengthen patriotic attitudes. It must generously benefit from the enormous opportunities offered by the sphere of culture for reconstruction and construction of Polish remembrance. [...] With the support of public funds, we should create works which tell Poland and the world about our outstanding compatriots, about our heroes. And they shall be an inspiration for future generations of the people of Poland. We should not be ashamed to build the ethos of Polish heroes.<sup>12</sup>*

If Polish history is seen only as a history of heroes, then there is no space to talk about Polish people as perpetrators, for example in the Second World War. Oliver Frlić's performance is questioning this understanding of historiography, which is one reason why it met with so much disapproval from the right-wing.

Oliver Frlić's performance is based on Stanisław Wyspiański's play *Klątwa* (Engl.: "The Curse"). Wyspiański, who wrote *Klątwa* in 1899, is regarded as the

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8 See Friszke 2009.

9 See *zeit.de* 2015.

10 See *katholisch.de* 2018.

11 See Friszke 2009.

12 See *premier.gov.pl* 2015.

father of Polish drama and belongs to the cultural pessimist and neoromantic movement of the so-called *Młoda Polska* (Engl.: Young Poland), which turned away from the rationalist positivism of the previous generation.<sup>13</sup> In *Kłątwa*, Wyspiański recounts an incidence that happened in a village near his home town Kraków. A vicar's housekeeper has two children with the vicar and is afraid of the punishment for her sins. The village community is blaming her for a draught the village is suffering from. The housekeeper thinks that she needs to make a sacrifice and kills her two children. The village community, still afraid of the wrath of God, finally stones her to death.

In his performance Frłjić uses only a few passages from the play text. One reason for his decision to refer to a more than hundred-year-old play by a canonical Polish author seems to be to show that dramatic reflections on the power of the church are as old as the Polish drama itself. Additionally, this way he as a non-Polish person manages to position his production right in the canon of Polish theatre history, in which Wyspiański was, and still is regarded as an idol by many renowned theatre makers.<sup>14</sup> Yet, only one scene in Frłjić's performance quotes passages from the play and tells the story of a woman who is made pregnant by a priest and is then expelled from the community. The other scenes in the performance are mainly inspired by the reflection on both the powerful role of the church in Poland and the powerful role of theatre. Eight actors, three of them men and five women, act on a nearly empty stage for almost the whole performance. The only object on stage is a big wooden cross at the back. At first, the actors come on stage in seemingly everyday clothes. By the end of the performance all of them change into preaching gowns.

The performance consists of a series of scenes that stand on their own. In the first part these are mainly choreographed and stylised scenes involving the whole cast, the second half consists mainly of solo monologues spoken by the members of the ensemble. In the performance, two common strategies of political theatre, the theatre of representation i.e. representing conflicts on stage and the theatre of non-representation with seemingly 'real' people on stage telling their 'real' stories – a form of political theatre that was popularized by the works of Rimini Protokoll – are problematized by Frłjić. For example, there is one scene in which the whole cast comes to the front of the stage where all actresses and actors sit down and recount how each of them has experienced sexual abuse by a priest. Here, one of the strategies Frłjić uses becomes evident. As the actors give their real names and tell the audience which roles they play in the performance, the illusion is created that they are recounting personal experiences of abuse. But after every male member of the cast has said that he plays the priest in the performance and after finally all female and male members of the cast have recounted their own experience of sexual abuse, it becomes clear that Frłjić plays around with the expectations of the spectators and wishes to point out that the boundaries between fiction and reality are never clear in theatre, even when the actors create an atmosphere of being just themselves. This irritation removes the security the audience assumes to have about what is 'played' and what is not and

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13 See Miązek 1984, p. 231.

14 See Sugiera 1993, p. 60-61.

leaves the audience feeling unsafe. The same is true for a scene in which one character played by an actress asks who in the audience has ever had an abortion and tells them that she is pregnant and will have an abortion in the Netherlands. Here again, at first, her story and questions to the audience seem real, but again we realise that she is performing and does not recount her personal experiences. In another scene one character makes a speech, disparaging gay people and Muslims, who according to him are all terrorists and have to leave the country. A detection dog is brought on stage, and the actor announces that he will use it to identify Muslims in the audience. The character's speech seems personal and frightening, but when the actor goes into the auditorium and starts to sniff at the spectators they are again reminded of the fact that he is just performing. In still another scene one actor complains about his role in the production and blames Oliver Frljić, who did not want to give him a better part, and in a further scene the actress who performed the fellatio on the statue of John Paul II says that she does not get any good job offers anymore and that the payment she gets for this performance is much too little. She also tells the audience that she was asked to play a character who tries to find a contract killer on the Internet who would kill Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS), the former Prime Minister and leader of the ruling party. After that she repeats again and again the sentence, "Theatre is fiction". Then another actress comes on stage and recounts the production history and the problems that occurred after the premiere. She criticizes Oliver Frljić for departing the country after the premiere and leaving the theatre and the ensemble to deal with the conflict he created. Again there is a play with the expectations of the spectators and a blurring of the boundaries between playing and not playing and this uncertainty is used to criticize on the power relations in the theatre business without clarifying whether this criticism is expressed by the actors or by Oliver Frljić. One moment the illusion is created that the actors are just speaking for themselves, and in the next moment this illusion is broken, and it becomes clear that everything is staged, and the spectators are reminded that they are watching a piece of fiction on stage. As mentioned above, Frljić in this way interrogates common strategies of political theatre. At the same time he suggests his own strategy which is to create conflict in the audience by making the spectators feel unsafe about how to perceive the performance and what to think about it. This is not only true for the spectators in the audience but also for those outside the theatre, who only hear about the performance from the media. Oliver Frljić states that he finds it essential to establish conflict in the theatre: not a conflict represented by characters on stage, but as a result of his performances. In an interview with the *Polish Theatre Journal* he states: "When I want to create a conflict with the audience, my dream is to have antagonism between every audience member. The goal is to divide them as much as possible and thus to reaffirm their uniqueness. The task is not to unite them, not to find a common denominator or a common system of values that we share."<sup>15</sup> And Frljić wants this conflict to go on not only in the auditorium as "theatre is not just what we see on stage but also the perception created before and after the show."<sup>16</sup>

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15 Keil and Adamięcka-Sitek 2015, p. 6.

16 Ibid, p. 2.



FIGURE 2. *Klątwa* (dir. Oliver Frljić, *Teatr Powszechny* in Warsaw, 2017). Photo Magda Hueckel.

Frljić's notion to create conflict in the auditorium and to question established ways of making and perceiving theatre is very reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. Frljić even points out that connection himself and starts the performance with a choreographed phone call with the whole cast, who gathers around an old-fashioned telephone handset, to Bertolt Brecht. The spectators cannot hear Brecht's answers, but they can imagine them from the responses of the actors and actresses on stage. They ask Brecht what strategy political theatre in Poland should apply nowadays. Brecht does not seem to be sure and seems to be more interested in information about the females in the cast.

Starting the performance with Brecht, Frljić points out the direction in which he wants to go – which is critical or political theatre –, but he also deviates from Brecht's approach. Brecht uses the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the alienation effect, as a tool to interrupt the flow of the audience's perception of the performance in order to make them curious about what previously seemed natural to them in order to teach them dialectic thinking. Frljić applies similar techniques for similar reasons but in contrast to Brecht he does not start from the premise that he can achieve certain effects in the audience by applying certain methods on stage but calls this cause-effect-relationship into question.

Frljić's approach to critical theatre can be regarded in the light of the concept of critical theatre developed by the French political philosopher Jacques Rancière. Rancière understands politics as an interruption of the established order and sees common features in politics and art: "Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the

sensible.”<sup>17</sup> According to Rancière, “there exists a politics of aesthetics that predates artistic intentions and strategies: the theatre, the museum and the book are ‘aesthetic’ realities in and of themselves.”<sup>18</sup> Rancière goes on,

*Within any given framework, artists are those whose strategies aim to change the frames, speeds and scales according to which we perceive the visible, and combine it with a specific invisible element and a specific meaning. Such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated.*<sup>19</sup>

For this kind of work, Rancière utilises the term fiction and states,

*‘Fiction’, as re-framed by the aesthetic regime of art, means far more than the constructing of an imaginary world, and even far more than its Aristotelian sense as ‘arrangement of actions’. It is not a term that designates the imaginary as opposed to the real; it involves the re-framing of the ‘real’, or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.*<sup>20</sup>

Rancière’s new approach to political theatre has met with both approval and criticism by theatre scholars. Polish theatre scholar Tomasz Plata, for example, remarks that Rancière addresses literature and theatre at the same time, which is problematic from the view of theatre studies.<sup>21</sup> And Benjamin Wihstutz, a German theatre scholar, criticizes Rancière for ignoring the social and performative dimension of theatrical aesthetics<sup>22</sup>, that is the participation of the spectator in a theatre performance as a social event. But although Rancière’s understanding of theatre should be broadened in certain areas, his approach to political theatre seems to be useful for the field of theatre studies. As Anneka Esch-van Kan states, approaching critical theatre through political philosophy is valuable as today’s political theatre tends to be self-reflexive.<sup>23</sup>

Oliver Frlić’s play with the boundaries between the real and the fictitious in *Klątwa* can be regarded in the light of Jacques Rancière’s approach to political theatre as a “re-framing of the ‘real’”<sup>24</sup> and as a way of “changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation”<sup>25</sup>. And similarly to the way

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17 Rancière 2010, p. 140.

18 Ibid, p. 141.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 See Plata 2018, p. 10-11.

22 See Wihstutz 2012, p. 153.

23 See Esch-van Kan 2012, p. 127.

24 Rancière 2010, p. 141.

25 Ibid.



Rancière describes it, this “politics of aesthetics [...] produces effects, but it does so on the basis of an original effect that implies the suspension of any direct cause-effect relationship.”<sup>26</sup> Rancière criticises theatre reformers like Brecht and Artaud because according to him they believed in a cause-effect relationship in their artistic work as they expected to create certain effects with certain techniques. Rancière believes that “There is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action.”<sup>27</sup> According to Rancière, there is instead “a process of dissociation: a rupture in the relationship between sense and sense, between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt”<sup>28</sup>. In Rancière’s view Artaud and Brecht followed in their theatre work “the logic of the pedagogical relationship”<sup>29</sup>, which aims “to abolish the distance between his [the schoolmaster’s] knowledge and the ignorance of the ignoramus”<sup>30</sup>. According to Rancière, the performance “is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator”<sup>31</sup>. Instead, it is “always a third thing [...], alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it.”<sup>32</sup> Rancière notices a “logic of emancipation”<sup>33</sup> in the relationship between performance and spectator and opposes attempts to reduce the distance between performance and spectator by a knowledge transfer. He states:

*It is in this power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists – that is to say, the emancipation of each of us as spectator. Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We learn and teach, act and know, as spectator who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed.*<sup>34</sup>

Rancière attributes to the spectator the ability to emancipate him- or herself; in his political theory he attributes the same to the citizen. A cause-effect relationship between the performance and the spectator is therefore not compatible with how Rancière defines politics and democracy. According to Rancière, the “aesthetic cut that separates outcomes from intentions and precludes any direct path toward an ‘other side’ of words and images”<sup>35</sup> is unavoidable.

Rancière’s undifferentiated and negatively connoted reading of Brecht and Artaud as pedagogues is an attempt to expose his own position by defaming others and has to be examined and read critically. Additionally, his negative interpretation

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26 Ibid, p. 142.

27 Ibid, p. 143.

28 Ibid.

29 Rancière 2009, p. 8.

30 Ibid, p. 8.

31 Ibid, p. 15.

32 Ibid, p. 14-15.

33 Ibid, p. 14.

34 Ibid, p. 17.

35 Ibid, p. 82.

of the pedagogic relationship is linked to an overly optimistic attitude regarding the emancipatory potential of the spectator that can also easily be criticised. Yet, without a belief in emancipatory progress political theatre would be meaningless and it should therefore be accepted as a precondition.

The above-mentioned strategies which Oliver Frljić develops in *Klątwa* fit into Rancière's concept of critical theatre. As I have shown, Frljić questions both the theatre of representation and the theatre of non-representation in his performance. He undertakes a "dissensual re-configuration"<sup>36</sup> of political theatre by changing the frames, by playing around and by questioning the means by which theatre is produced. Yet, this does not suggest that Frljić does not deviate from this strategy in the performance. Frljić switches between the different strategies he employs. Some of those images which created the biggest public uproar, such as the fellatio on the statue of John Paul II, the logging of the wooden cross and the final image of the performance in which the whole cast kneels down and preys to the image of a glowing Polish eagle at the back of the stage while menacing sounds are heard, do not fit into the concept of the theatre of dissensus as they convey meanings in a direct and simple way. Yet, these images fit into Frljić's strategy of questioning the official Polish historiography by deconstructing the symbols on which it is based. The attempts of the Polish government to prescribe national historiography and culture are in this way clearly opposed and questioned and contrary readings are offered. A theatre that gives the audience the possibility to question, to choose, to connect and to reflect without leading them to a certain objective offers a way to critically reflect history and is at the same time a democratic theatre as it enables the spectator to be an active participator in the political practice. As Rancière puts it, in the theatre, "Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor every man of action, is the spectator of the same story."<sup>37</sup> According to Rancière, one of the basic prerequisites for a democracy is that there is an open stage for disagreement.<sup>38</sup> Frljić is offering this stage, while the Polish government is trying to limit it.

Theatre scholar Joanna Krakowska reflects on the strategies political theatre should employ in Poland at the present time and argues that theatre should become active in helping to overcome the division of the Polish society caused by the actions taken by the right-wing government:

*The question is: how to rescue ourselves from this deadly clutch, from this collapse down a precipice of mutual hate and contempt, from the conflict which may escalate to real violence? Today, nothing is more important in Poland than to prevent that. Prevent it by creating conditions for dialogue by seeking opportunities in elementary communication, through alternative points of view, through creating local communities based on empathy and dialogue. With its imperative for engagement, theatre has much to offer here.*<sup>39</sup>

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36 Rancière 2010, p. 140.

37 Rancière 2009, p. 17.

38 See Rancière 2002, p. 110.

39 Krakowska 2018, p. 3.

Krakowska's call for a theatre that unites the country has to be read critically as such a politically powerful theatre could easily assume a totalitarian shape. But the new form of theatre she describes in this context, 'auto-theatre' is a very self-critical theatre that goes in another direction. 'Auto-theatre' is according to her, a theatre that refers to the experiences of its creators and aims to

*[...] explore their personal limitations, reveal their weaknesses, problematize the situation in which they speak, define and question their identities, disclose the backstage of theatrical process, relations inside the team, institutional restrictions, economic conditions, ideological uneasiness.<sup>40</sup>*

Although not mentioned by Krakowska, Oliver Frljić's theatre fits into this strategy and is limited only by the fact that Krakowska speaks mainly about collectively produced theatre work, while Frljić seems to continue to operate within the categories of director and actors. That is why, as mentioned before, it is not clear who is speaking to the audience in the performance: the actors, the director or the playwright. But the theatre situation, the conditions of the productions and the limits of its political effectivity are problematized in the performance in a manner similar to that described by Krakowska. This way Oliver Frljić's theatre of emancipation, a theatre that believes in the potential of the spectator to emancipate him- or herself as suggested by Rancière, manages to make visible authoritarian and undemocratic developments in Polish politics and to offer a critical approach to history in contrast to the one-sided view the Polish government tries to establish.

#### **AUTHOR**

**Niklas Füllner** studied Theatre Studies and English Literature and Culture in Bochum, Bayreuth and Helsinki and holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from Ruhr University Bochum. He currently works as a research assistant at the Institute for Theatre Studies at Ruhr University Bochum in a research project called "Strategies of Political Theatre in Eastern Europe", which is financed by the DFG, the German Research Foundation. He also teaches theatre theory and practice at Ruhr University Bochum and has worked as a puppeteer for several theatre companies.

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40 Ibid, p. 2.

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