

## ***Pierwsze razy: a roaring show about the roaring nineties***

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On the 10th of June we saw *Pierwsze razy* at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Wrocław as a part of the 7th Review of New Theatre for Children Festival. It is directed by Jakub Krofta, with a script written by Maria Wojtyszko.

There are certain circumstances about this performance and our review that need to be highlighted. *Pierwsze razy* is a diploma show of the final year puppetry acting students. In Poland's theatre system, in which theatres hire actors full-time as part of their ensemble, this means that every student needs an opportunity to showcase their skills. This show is decisive for their future careers at theatre companies. The performance we saw was a so-called "green show." This denotes the final show during which actors try to surprise each other, make each other laugh and so on. Of course, the aim is to make sure that the audience doesn't notice, and although we didn't know exactly what was different, we felt there was certain messiness around the performance. Perhaps our eyes were particularly sharp, as the visual aspects of the show were our main modes of meaning making. This is because we are Dutch and do not speak Polish. We wrote this review in cooperation with Daria Anczewska, a Polish theatre student. All these circumstances impacted our encounter with the production and we want to reflect on the difficult encounter we had with the show. Although we have seen quite a few Polish-spoken shows during this festival, this was the first time that we had a hard time understanding the show, and engaging with its themes and the form.

*Pierwsze razy* stages stories of ten teenagers in the nineties in Poland. So the actors play one generation before themselves. There are a lot of important stories to tell; innocent teenage love, discovering sexuality, teenage pregnancy, transsexuality, underpinned by antisemitism-conspiracy theories about Jews, capitalism, censorship and becoming a part of the European Union. There are also references to Polish and global pop culture, for example in music choices. This is a lot to be discussed for a show that lasts 110 minutes.

During our conversation with Daria Anczewska, we learned that this multiplicity reflects the 1990s in Poland, when a lot was happening at the same time. Is it possible to fit every bit in one production? With so many themes, acting styles and scenography, are all stories explored as much as they deserve? For example, there is a beautifully done scene with shadow puppetry about a fifteen-year-old who had a miscarriage (played by Karolina Wanecha) in a doctor's office. She and her mom were treated badly by the doctor who called the teenager a whore. Her story is told in one scene and one mention, while it could have been a whole show. What risks does talking about such a sensitive subject without diving into it carry?

The Polish students pointed out the show's clever language, full of popular sayings and cultural wordplays. However, we, not being able to understand the language, were mostly focusing on the staging and structure of the show. And we wonder whether and how the show

could be encountered by international spectators, who don't have the knowledge of Polish (theatre) culture. The storylines feel not elaborate enough for us, because of the plurality of scenes and stories to be told. It feels, for us, as if the performance consists of consecutive small stories which mostly do not have time to unravel, even though their themes need that time. Because of the sudden endings of stories, the show feels very choppy and overwhelming at times. We are being taken from story to story, instead of one story as a whole.

*Pierwsze razy* is a show that tries to represent the many different stories of Polish teenagers in the 90s, which are hard to recognise for an international audience. The show is well made for the Polish theatre culture, but if we were curating an international festival, we would not invite *Pierwsze razy*.