This substantial anthology of eleven twenty-first-century Polish dramas and texts for the stage in excellent English translation emerged from transatlantic collaboration between Polish writers, translators, theatre experts and practitioners. Nine of the fine, flowing translations are by Artur Zapałowski, who deserves star billing rather than being listed equally prominently in the cast of translators alongside Benjamin Paloff (translator of Magda Fertacz’s Trash Story) and Wojciech Ziemilski, who interpreted his own one-man performance Small Narration. Joanna Klass’ preface and the introduction by Polish academics Joanna Krakowska and Krystyna Duniec offer largely insightful contextualization of the diverse yet balanced selection of works. A 45-minute DVD contains excerpts from Polish productions of five works.

The anthology seeks to engage a ‘global readership’ by demonstrating that current Polish theatre artists and dramatists are engaging with ‘aspects of modernity visible in every country on this planet’ (pp. x-xi). Memory work features prominently – addressing the twentieth century’s dark past of the Holocaust, genocide, forced migration and colonialism – alongside contemporary gender inequality and the fallout from neoliberal economic transformation. The editors’ transnational framing posits a deprovincialization of Polish theatre, which now transcends ‘obscure topics peculiar to the local situation’ (p.xv). At times, the dismissal of discontinuities with the twentieth-century canon of Polish theatre, such as Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor, can seem too hasty (p.x), particularly with memory themes running through (A)pollonia. However, the authors showcased here, several familiar from seminal Polish-language anthologies [1], do share a post-1989 condition manifested in the flux caused by the destabilization of grand narratives of national identity and their accompanying patriarchal and heteronormative order, as well as the disillusionment accompanying post-socialist transformation. The old notion of ‘Polonia’, a ‘romantic and fin de siecle [sic] myth that, denying modernity, persisted as long as it could not be made material’ (p.xiv), is, according to the editors, fragmented, deconstructed and pluralized.

In place of a heterogeneous construct binding heroism, martyrology, exclusivist victimhood and exceptionalism, the editors frame the anthology around ‘Polin’, ‘Transpolonia’, ‘Postpolonia’ and the awkward-sounding ‘Lack-of-Polonia’ that accompanied the independence that gave Polonia a body complete with ‘freaks, aliens and outcasts’, ‘real problems of real people’ and ‘postmodernist uncertainty’. Perhaps the editors’ Polonia is cast as
a straw woman and 1989 made an all-too-clear-cut break between acts. But still, the variety of themes and forms, from traditional drama through verbatim pieces to performance art, convinces that this anthology indeed presents a "polyphonic narrative about Poland as a symbolic site that, in "mixing memory and desire", brings into focus the transnational experience of the twentieth century and the anxieties of the twenty-first" (p.xvi). The four fragmented frames of a deconstructed Polonia are not explicit on the contents page, while the works themselves highlight significant overlaps between these categories. Though symbolic of fractured grand narratives, they are unlikely to become useful analytical concepts.

Two works under 'Polin' – Krzysztof Warlikowski's (Apollonia and Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk's The Mayor – address the fate of Jews and a sense of ‘national loss since the Holocaust through discourses on victimhood and guilt’ (dustjacket). They reflect the debate, denial and soul-searching triggered by Jan Gross' 2000 book Neighbors that transformed Polish public memory and identity discourse (p. xx-xxi). Sikorska-Miszczuk's work draws inspiration from post-Gross materials, like Tadeusz Słobodzianek's Nike prize-winning drama Our Class that has been performed worldwide but is strangely omitted from the editors' contextualization. Sikorska-Miszczuk produced two versions of The Mayor, both translated here, one more metaphorical and allusive from 2009, while the 2011 version features real names, including those of Gross and the mayor of Jedwabne Krzysztof Godlewski. The play charts his tragic drama as he denied his townspeople's wishes for oblivion and instead commemorated publicly the massacre before having to abandon Poland. Warlikowski’s (Apollonia, meanwhile, comprises a collage of texts from Greek tragedy through to contemporary literature, including Jonathan Littell's The Kindly Ones. An extended treatise on the themes of sacrifice, responsibility and violence, disrupting both individual and collective solace sought in celebrating sacrifice, Warlikowski's powerful piece highlights the futility of the post-Holocaust search for closure.

Polonia’s second fragmented form is 'Transpolonia', with Dunja Funke and Sebastian Majewski's Transfer!, Fertacz's Trash Story, and pilgrim/majewski's right left with heels all addressing Poland's troubled relations with Germany. Transfer! features a verbatim collage of testimonies of five Poles and five Germans, often in their eighties who performed their stories of forced migration from their countries' respective prewar eastern borderlands. Illustrative of what Aleida Assmann has termed dialogic memory, Transfer! constructs a binational 'community of displacement' (p.xxvi). While perhaps querying megalomaniacal or monopolistic Polish claims to victim status, the editors' reading that the work avoids 'reapportioning the guilt' (p.xxvi) is questionable. The Big Three at Yalta, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin loom over the stage. They embody not only a founding myth of Polish postwar ressentiment, but also, together with the brutality of the Red Army, an object for externalizing any responsibility for Germans' suffering, caused in part by Polish settlement. Polish and German victims' memories appear unequal in Transfer!, as the colonizing, yet largely reflective, nostalgia for the lost Polish east is denied Germans reminiscing about their Heimat.

Majewski also co-wrote the darkly absurdist two-hander right left with heels where after their owner's suicide, Magda Goebbels' shoes present a longue-durée journey through postwar Polish history and its transnational entanglements. Tracing the Polonization of former German territories through to the rise of post-socialist homo- and transphobia, the boundaries of the Post- and Transpolonia concepts are blurred. The latter category gets a different shade of meaning, as it does in Julia Holewińska's Foreign Bodies. Her prize-winning text, classed
under ‘Postpolonia’, or texts exploring post-independence social metamorphoses through the prism of the body (p. xxviii), presents the fate of Adam and Ewa, based on real-life Solidarność activist Marek Hołuszko. In post-1989 Poland he became Ewa Hołuszko, whose fate embodies continuities in patriarchal power and ongoing struggles for women and outsiders to gain a public voice, as suppression takes powerfully corporeal forms.

A critical perspective on global and local colonizing attitudes appears in Frąckowiak and Szczawińska's ‘essay for the stage’ (p.334). In Desert and Wilderness: After Sienkiewicz and Others uses the Nobel Prize-winning Pole's work in a collage of anthropological, political and literary material commenting on colonial and postcolonial discourses. The co-authors add their own preface, arguing that some necessary effects, including use of ‘taboo words’ or actors blacking up on stage – which is admittedly initially jarring when seen on the DVD – could be read by Western audiences through an orientalizing lens, namely as evidence of ‘savage, Eastern-European ignorance’ (p.336). The ‘documentary surrealism’ (p.337), together with the self-reflexive commentary, highlights the intersecting post/colonial relations inhabiting the imagination within and about Eastern Europe.

Another reworking of a literary classic translated here is Paweł Demirski's Diamonds are Coal that Got Down to Business. This free adaptation of Chekhov's Uncle Vanya, first directed by Monika Strzępka, aptly enough, in post-industrial Wałbrzych in 2008, condemns the neoliberal ideological fervour that has had a real, detrimental effect on Poles. This darkly comic text, easily translatable and transferable in the globalized neoliberal twenty-first century, also highlights the restrictiveness of the editors' 'Lack-of-Polonia' concept.

The insistence on the works' transnational, transcultural, global and universal potential – the final adjective (pp.vi, xv) is perhaps particularly contentious – can seem a somewhat forced reproduction of fashionable cultural studies concepts. However, it was practice-based collaborative transcultural exchanges between Polish and North American colleagues that shaped the translations, with some pieces having already enjoying readings and stagings in the US [2]. Perhaps the framing of the anthology, both in the general introduction and individual introductions to each work, tends towards the needs of future performances rather than those of humanities scholars. Biographical information about the authors, even years of birth, is lacking, yet information about premieres is given. The original Polish text's titles or their publication details are nowhere to be found. Anthologies generally indicate where a text was first published. This would be especially useful as some dramas have appeared in specialist Polish theatre journals, making them hard to track down. The editors have thus made bilingual researchers' and teachers' task unnecessarily difficult. The value of textual translations in enabling ideas “to circulate, to transport, to disseminate, to explain”, as Susan Sontag's conception of translation that inspired the editors puts it (p.xi), seems underplayed. After all, some pieces are unlikely to be realized as ‘playable translations’ (p.xi): some of Transfer's! witnesses are dead and only Ziemilski can perform the autobiographical, personal trauma of Small Narration's family memory. Warlikowski's epic, postdramatic collage of texts is unlikely to work without his involvement (or receive clearance for performance).

Despite these generally minor reservations and irritations, the editors' selection and contextualization is largely praiseworthy and the translators' work consistently impressive. Like the companion volume Loose Screws [3], (A)pollonia offers readers and practitioners alike an exceptionally valuable collection of contemporary Polish stage works. Unfortunately, the physical quality of the book fails to match the intellectual content's excellence.
Beneath the neatly-designed dustjacket there is a flimsy, all-red, completely text-free softcover with a blank spine. This could be problematic for librarians, who often remove dustjackets. The softcover and binding seem too weak for the six hundred-plus pages. This reviewer's copy already looks battered without having faced either a performance space or the large number of readers this volume deserves. The numerous photographs are reproduced on the same paper as the texts, leaving some images unclear. Given the fairly hefty price ($45/£31.50), readers might expect a few pages of superior quality paper. Perhaps the DVD inflated the price, featuring excerpts of five productions, including 20 minutes of Warlikowski's eponymous work plus 5-7 minutes each of Masłowska, Demirski, Wojcieszek, and Frąckowiak and Szczawińska's pieces. While the selection from (A)pollonia presents one of the most powerful and key segments, the rationale guiding further selections is not obvious, beyond the snapshots of twenty-first-century Polish aesthetics. The DVD offers little added-value, particularly since the Polish National Audio-Visual Institute's online archive Ninateka already features a full-length version of (A)pollonia subtitled with Zapałowski's translation [4]. Perhaps his translations could also be added to the uploaded Polish-only full-length recordings of Transfer! and Wojcieszek's No Matter What...  

The underwhelming production should not deter readers from enjoying the insights into – admittedly liberal-leaning – stage-based explorations of pluralized and polyphonic visions of twenty-first-century post-transformation Poland and the debates over memory and fragmented identities. (A)pollonia is an essential purchase for scholars and researchers in Polish studies, of course, but also for those in comparative literature and theatre studies, as well as stage practitioners interested in the transcultural themes permeating this anthology and also the contemporary Western and postsocialist world.


Zitierweise:

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