

The birth of an artist, or the beginning of Jan Sawka's creative path

First, some biographical facts. Facts set in the Polish socialist reality of communist Poland.

Jan Sawka (1946-2012) - one of the most gifted visual artists of my generation - may have been born in Zabrze, but as an artist he was really born in Wroclaw and Krakow as a "rising star" of Polish visual culture. His graphic and poster work was a significant hallmark of a phenomenon that is easily bestowed with many epithets. "Student" - is sometimes apt, although sometimes most... misleading.

That's why - especially from a global perspective - it's worth looking more closely at this very quaint-sounding and unambiguous epithet of "student," usually associated with a specific academic community. The second half of the twentieth century, precisely in Poland (or, if one prefers, in the People's Republic of Poland), was so different that the country's social practice significantly expanded and modified the original meaning of this semi-sociological term. Especially in its combination with the nouns *culture* and *art*.

STUDENT CULTURE - for it was in Poland for nearly a quarter of a century (1955-1980) - a MOVEMENT OF THE YOUNG INTELLIGENTSIA, which just before October and just after 1956, and then in the tragic period of the subsequent decline of the reign of the apparatus of Wladyslaw Gomulka (1967-1970) and the team of Edward Gierek (1976-1980) did not receive another significant opportunity to appear in public life.

At the very threshold of its birth, the movement formed three of its own areas of very dynamic integration, from which emerged - in effect - a well-prepared, and therefore incredibly effective, attack by the young generation of Poles on the mentality of a society plunged into communist malaise.

The first symbolic (because it "inoculates" this "imperialist poison" - as jazz was defined by the party mouthpieces) place of contestation became Jazz Clubs, uniting in their musical catacombs and basements top-class performers and listeners - admirers of young fighting music.

And there was someone to listen to back then. The heroes of the Sopot Jazz Festival, which became Europe's New Orleans, began to travel around Poland. In Cracow, Andrzej Kurylewicz's band with Wojciech Karolak, Andrzej Dąbrowski, Jan Byrczek and Wanda Warska shaped the refined palates of Polish jazz fans. The most frequent musicians in Warsaw were Andrzej Trzaskowski, Zbigniew Namysłowski, Jerzy "Duduś" Matuszkiewicz and Krzysztof Sadowski. In every Polish city - from the sea to the Tatra Mountains - the auditoriums of cellars and clubs sprouting up like mushrooms after the rain filled up when the above mentioned were joined by Krzysztof "Komeda" Trzcinski, Jan "Ptaszyn" Wroblewski, Jerzy Milian, Roman Dyląg or Michał Urbaniak.

Most interestingly, all of these artists were well known in the U.S. due to their frequent joint music-making with the masters of world jazz.

At the same time, this "rash" of Polish talents, attracting crowds of fans, meant that more and more public concerts were allowed in communist Poland in city squares, previously reserved either for dances between party activists and socialist labor leaders, or for populist screenings of the soviet-era kitsch that was soothing "the working masses of cities and villages." Then, too, the intimate stages of Jazz Clubs became an avant-garde forge of new music, and increasingly popular and recognized (even officially) jazz virtuosos met here for nightly improvisations of endless "jams", enthusiastically joined by masters from across the Ocean. Dave Brubeck, Stan Getz or The New York Jazz Quartet were regular visitors to Polish cities that loved jazz. This is how the idea and practice of Jazz All Souls' Day, which today operates around the world, was born in Poland - in such tension and commitment and in such purely artistic confrontation.

The second bastion of the Polish artistic intelligentsia was strengthening simultaneously and quite independently. For the jazz "underbelly" was joined time and again by stages and theaters - not long ago: ZMP stages (ZMP was the Polish variant of the Soviet Komsomol, which, just after the death of the two hatchetmen of free thought (Joseph Stalin in the USSR [March 8, 1953] and Boleslaw Bierut in the People's Republic of Poland [he died in Moscow - March 12, 1956]) managed (a little shyly still) to smuggle onto the theatrical boards a number of moral and political jokes, the type for which the parents of courageous performers not long ago were thrown in jail. Slowly becoming, already legally, cabarets, theaters, and student theaters, they were created and animated mainly by graduates of various art schools, thirsty for their opportunity to debut their talents. They were artistic outsiders, fascinated by avant-garde innovations in world art. And this is true across the board. The foyer of each such theater, which usually found its place in unfinished "basement rooms," became at the same time a multifunctional place for artistic manifestations: a gallery, a café and a dance floor.

This is how the artistic bohemia effectively was recreated, which had so successfully been fought in 1948 by the "healthy youth" of the ZMP (The Youth Association of Poland) militia.

STUDENT THEATER united not only young people of all artistic disciplines, but also students of absolutely non-artistic majors who were thirsty for "spiritual nourishment."

A similar *openness* and *multipurpose* structure was amazing to see in the STUDENT CLUBS, treated by both their organizers and attendees as a piece of their own home, a place that did not exist within communist practice, where one could feel *free*, where one could *safely* exchange one's own views, where one could - finally - *loudly* ask competent people *difficult questions*....

It is therefore not surprising that it was the student club, permeated by dreams of living unfettered by the communist corset, that became the place of discussion of life and the world, that immediately became the primary place for the integration of student youth communities. First those - dormitory, neighborhood and departmental, and then university and city-wide.

More: these club establishments - much like the Jazz Clubs and Theaters - were usually organized by people who were already mature and fully-formed - adult intelligentsia, both those

"perpetual students," stigmatized at the ZMP hood courts, and treated later as "outsiders," expelled from universities not only for their views but for their "wrong" social background, and young scholars, for whom open discussion and an exchange of ideas came from a natural need to publicly articulate social sentiments.

Over time, it was in or next to the Clubs that all creative circles managed to integrate.

Here it is worth recalling once again that it was Polish student clubs that took over or even re-created the independent jazz cellars that were so distinct in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Suffice it to say that Kurylewicz's ensemble wandered from the Cracow Jazz Club to "Jaszczury," and Warsaw jazzmen were at one point taken in by the club environment of the "Hybrid," where, incidentally, the Polish Jazz Federation was founded.

The Clubs also became full of new cabaret stages, musical theaters, poetic stages, not to mention art openings, presentations of film novelties (including all-night marathons of world film), author meetings, sessions, discussions, debates, symposia, competitions or weekly dances and magnificent staged balls.

The community clubs of large cities (Krakow's "Klub Pod Jaszczurami," Poznan's "Od Nowa" and "Nurt," Gdansk's "Żak," Wroclaw's "Pałacyk," Warsaw's "Hybrydy" and "Stodoła," Lodz's "77") began to outdo each other with detailed programming for each day of the month. A very broad repertoire was indeed being created, taking into account almost all the needs of the attendees and effectively eliminating the primitive model of socialist patronage.

The basic and revolutionary premise of the discussion-type events seemed to be - verifiable in the years of political upheaval and the defeats of successive party teams - the postulate of the actuality of the *problem*, a living *problem* of concern to the student community, and especially to the circles of the young intelligentsia, a *problem* that was sought in vain in the effectively censored media, official government enunciations or televised "live" parteitags. The student club thus accustomed its regulars to practices unheard of in the People's Republic of Poland: here was a high-ranking speaker confronted face-to-face with a young mass (several hundred people) audience, not disguising either very detailed questions or direct accusations against the authorities.

But when the regime became terrified of this ideological "vent," the club's program made a significant adjustment. Without abandoning its mission, it focused on the broad popularization of various - as it was then called in activist esperanto - "socio-cultural" formats.

Thus, they provided attractive presentations (in order to get away from the ideological boredom that blew in from the so-called mass events) and a very wide of events were still in force. This meant that a given day of the week was assigned to a given discipline. For example, in Krakow's "Jaszczura" in the second half of the 1960s, Mondays were dominated by theater people, Tuesday by musicians and visual artists, Wednesday by politicians and journalists, Thursday by singers and stage performers, and Friday by filmmakers and athletes, Saturday

was a day of fun, and Sunday morning was a literary breakfast with a prominent poet, novelist or playwright. In a word: the Student Club then functioned like today's... television cultural channel.

The best proof is the calendar of theatrical events in the period of just one academic year (1966/67) in the already mentioned Krakow's "Klub Pod Jaszczurami". In just nine months, almost all the stars of the Polish professional stage presented themselves to the student audience in masterly performances, and in the tightly filled historic halls, ones that remembered the wedding of the Russian usurper to the Polish throne, Dmitri Samozwaniec, to Maryla Mniszechówna, daughter of the governor of Cracow in the early 17th century, real theatrical quarrels took place with an array of top Polish theater directors.

In turn, the three most outstanding Polish directors of international fame (Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor and Józef Szajna) completely electrified the several hundred participants with their happenings.

And that this was an obligatory tradition in Poland from the beginning of the birth of the club movement is enough to recall a decade earlier a memory from the Gdansk club cafe "Zak". For its organizers recalled, years later: "'Zak" was a kind of university and ... a place for a first date. For many of us a second home. This is where most of the ideas, events AND scripts were created. The time stolen from our studies was devoted to making cabarets, films, a student magazine."

Student clubs thus shaped the young Pole as a whole. Their impact was so strong that it was immediately socially ... mythologized.

Take the example of the Warsaw "Barn". The existence of this modest "barrack", where students of the Warsaw University of Technology found shelter.

Its truly beyond-Warsaw and above-society impact is best illustrated by the dilemma sweeping through the Polish press at the time, and contained in a question that was very bold for the time: "Does the 'Barn' stand next to the Palace of Culture, or the Palace of Culture next to the 'Barn'?"

The popularity of the "Barn" was breaking all records in the early 1960s. "From here," as recalled in 1968 in the weekly "Polytechnic", "all social news of the kind, how and what to dance, how and what to wear to be fashionable, was spread.

And another statement - equally important and relevant to understanding the strength of the movement, which in its nationwide network was very heterogeneous and denied any "egalitarianization," so beloved by all our socialist neighbors.

Therefore, no less important than the social clubs were the university clubs. They were characterized by completely different ways of influencing smaller communities, more closed

environments: the university, the department, the student neighborhood or even the individual dormitory.

Two Krakow clubs of the Jagiellonian University: "Nowy Żaczek" and "Nawojka" - the most active, creative and popular in the 1960s - set their sights on a program that included the obvious description for their location: "STUDENT CULTURE FOR STUDENTS."

And this consistently carried out principle bore fruit brilliantly in the university environment. It bore fruit, by the way, mainly because the mistake of limiting themselves to a clique of acquaintances was not made.

In a word: the POLISH CLUB MOVEMENT developed some very original cultural patterns. From the perspective of half a century, at the beginning of the new century, it is very clear that the program concept of Polish student clubs was an innovative forerunner of the activities of today's globally important cultural centers. It was as important an offering as the once just post-war vision of a network of community centers that humanized Polish society, exhausted by World War II. This concept - effectively lost in the People's Republic of Poland, by the way - was realized in democratic France thanks to the fascination with the Polish model by the exceptional Minister of Culture, Andre Malroux.

The history of STUDENT CLUBS AND THEATERS reminds us of a truth long known to every economist: this world-impressive POLISH YOUTH CULTURAL MOVEMENT could not have formed without a patron. What's more, without a patron strong and sensible enough so that this movement, at the moment of another crisis of communist ideology, would not have to - every time - go straight underground. Which, by the way, was what the crafty party players, always ready to accuse the student community of anti-socialist activities, were counting on. That BENEFACTOR who strengthened the Movement and who took it upon itself to maintain and develop the areas won, turned out to be the ASSOCIATION OF POLISH STUDENTS - an organization not only replacing the discredited ZMP at the universities, but - more importantly - guided for almost twenty years - to the scorn of the party die-hards and other youth organizations providing more than ideological services to those die-hards- by the principle of THE CONSTITUTION OF BASIC FREEDOM FOR ART AND CULTURE. And it is strange that the young revolutionaries from under the sign of Solidarity never recognized this movement, plunging into multiplying the merits of their own generation, gathered around the youth "annex" of Solidarity - the NZS or INDEPENDENT STUDENTS' UNION.

Apologists of the NZS quickly forgot that the cultural activity of the ZSP was a significant BREAK in the so-called cultural policy of the country of the so-called Socialist Camp, which was the ideological base for Soviet expansion into the world and sanctioned the restriction of the fundamental freedoms of the Individual.

This BREACH was a phenomenon on a world-wide scale. Constituting something of a pressure-release valve, it was not only culture-creating. For it acted as a sensitive barometer of

creative aspirations and rapidly "deepened" at the moment of each attempt to cement it over by the hard core of the party apparatus of power, impatient with the liberalism of cultural policy.

Therefore, it is no wonder why it was the most interesting artistic phenomena of the Movement, phenomena of national, European and world dimensions that were born and bore fruit during periods of all Polish crises of the Socialist Camp and dangerous twists of communist ideology.

On the other hand, it is clear that only these significant artifacts (e.g., the student theater of fact and its dissident performances or the literary and journalistic current of Young Culture, heralding an aesthetic and thought revolution) survived, and it is these that constitute the significant contribution of these several generations to Polish and world culture.

And finally: student art and culture was the NATURAL COLLECTION OF FUTURE PROFESSIONAL CREATIVES OF NATIONAL and sometimes even WORLD CULTURE. The launching pad for the careers of these outstanding individuals was their youthful achievements in the student movement, far beyond the epithet "student."

In a word: the so-called student theaters developed a new type of actor, not only capable of using his so-called natural aptitude on stage, not only searching for form and new expression, but also involved in shaping the thought profile of his entire group in absolute contact with the audience. The student actor shaped the material he was working on. If it was to be a drama then it had to be avant-garde and unknown in Poland.

It should not be forgotten that it was the Polish student theater that reminded Poland of the existence of unperformed and forbidden authors, such as Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and Witold Gombrowicz, who are now known throughout the world; it realized the mental significance of the plays of Tadeusz Różewicz and Sławomir Mrożek, which are played throughout the world; and it tested the dramatic validity of Bruno Schulz's prose.

Not to forget the "Polish" language of pantomime, born in the Wrocław "Gesture" developed by Andrzej Leparski (today a respected educator in Catalonia) in opposition to the world famous ensemble of Henryk Tomaszewski's Wrocław Pantomime.

On the Polish student stages - in addition to the highly expressive images of dance theater, ballet and pantomime, the phenomenon of purely visual spectacle was born, embodied today in multiple practices. One of these is the Visual Theater of the Catholic University of Lublin and its creator - Leszek Mądzik, triumphing around the world in ever new performances of his "invisible" theater. And also - the formation of Gardzienice near Lublin, an example of a new type of theatrical pedagogy, shaped by a student of Jerzy Grotowski - Włodzimierz Staniewski.

There is - finally - another theatrical form that has brought world fame to Polish theater. This is the collage spectacle of documentary theater, which uses the entire staffage of textual notation (prose, poetry, journalistic and scientific forms) and visual media citations (radio, photography, film) to activate the audience and move it. Initiated by the spectacles "Spadanie" (Falling Down)

and "Sennik Polski" (The Polish Dreambook) by Krakow's STU Theater (pioneering productions by Krzysztof Jasinski), and expressively realized mainly by Teatr Ósmego Dnia (Theater of the Eighth Day) and Teatr i 77, this form has become a model for many underground productions of the late 1980s and professional explorations by the well-known and respected theaters of Walbrzych and Legnica, today looking for a way to truly connect with new generations of Poles.

The phenomenon of Polish student theater in the world - besides politics, with the repressions of the 1980s only ennobling this theater - was strengthened by the concept and idea of the OPEN THEATER, formulated by Bogusław Litwiniec, creator of Wrocław's "Kalambur" and originator of the International Festival of Student Theaters (later: The Open Theater Festival) - an instructive confrontation of the young struggling theater of the West. And the constantly striving, in a meaningful and self-defining way, young theaters of Eastern Europe.

In addition to theater - the literary signature dish of the student movement has always been POETRY. In clubs and theaters, poets not only frequented, not only competed in contests for the best book of poetry, selected by a very professional jury, but also in poetry tournaments, which played out live, in front of the audience. In individual cities, poetic groups sprang up like mushrooms after the rain, seeking refuge in locales developed by the ZSP.

In Warsaw, at the "Hybrydy" Club, "Orientation Hybrydy" competed with the Poets' Forum. Orientation was founded by a group of eight headed by Barbara Sadowska, Zbigniew Jerzyna and Jarosław Markiewicz, who, under the editorship of the amazing Jerzy Leszin-Koperski, published three volumes of anthologies that included poems by the Polish beatnik, Edward Stachura.

Among the members of the Poznań group Próba one can find the names of Ryszard Krynicki and Stanisław Barańczak, well-known overseas.

In Cracow, after the debuts of the "Zebra" poets, led by Tadeusz Śliwiak, a strong accent of the new wave, called Young Culture, was heralded with the appearance of three poetic groups that emerged within the One Poem Contests for Jaszczury club Laurel Prize. The "Now Group," which proclaimed the manifesto of the "Magical Spells that a Metaphor Unleashes," brought together a select seven winners of individual contests (among them were the bards of the new poetic wave and its ideologues - Adam Zagajewski and Julian Kornhauser). In turn, the "Tylicz" Group, referring to the "rustic-Slavic" experience, including the outstanding poet Jerzy Harasymowicz, and the Muszyna Group, was joined by, among others, the best Polish poet today - Józef Baran.

In a word: a POETIC HARVEST, not only revealing reality in a metaphorical pill, but giving hope for the rebirth of dreams of FREEDOM....

And here there is a place to situate a fresh double graduate of Wrocław's art academies (the Faculty of Architecture at the Polytechnic and painting and graphics at the State Higher School of Fine Arts) - JAN SAWKA among a YOUNG POLISH VISUAL ARTISTS of the 1970s that was

as revolutionary as their contemporary actors or poets. The group with which Sawka became associated was not only extremely active, but also very talented.

The so-called Wrocław Four, which, in addition to Sawka, included Jan Jaromir Aleksion, Eugeniusz "Get" Stankiewicz and Jerzy Czerniawski, not only made their presence known in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but also made an artistic revolution in the perception of poster art and illustration, areas that greatly affected the average viewer on an everyday basis.

In the field of poster art (mainly: theatrical, film and music), without giving up either allusion and subtext, or the intellectual message, all of the Four tried to expand the storied metaphorical associations and very expressively, even emphatically endowed the viewer with an ambiguous game of imagination, juxtaposed brutally with the primitive surrounding reality.

The same was true of the book illustration, as the Wrocław Four set their sights on the most sensitive and sophisticated readers, concentrated in two circles: the child reader/viewer and the poetry lover.

That's why Jan Sawka's posters for the STU Theater's performances in their several and very different versions and his illustrations to the volumes of the poets of the New Wave: the Cracovian Leszek Aleksander Moczulski and the Poznań-based Ryszard Krynicki remain in my memory the most lasting way.

SAWKA - rightly described by the epithet of a constantly exploding "bomb" of creative energy, while still a student at Wrocław universities, shaped the unique character of the then very active Gallery of the Cracow STU Theater.

For he himself as the head of this Gallery - being the author of dozens of flyers and prints, was also the author of posters that were very important, because they prolonged the stage life of the performances. It is important to remember at least two in particular: the one from "Exodus" - a spectacle based on Moczulski's 1974 ritual poem - and the other for the "Crazy Locomotive" - a 1977 musical by Grechuta, Jasinski and Pawluśkiewicz.

An overburnt match whose drooping end is a charred human head (Exodus) or the barely breathing wench of exuberant femininity spread out on the railroad tracks (Crazy Locomotive) will always remain in the memory thanks to the sequence of incessant, changing associations provoked by these images, in the background of which the author's loud laughter can be heard.

Sawka, however, did not stop there. Suffice it to say that in just three years - our Theater, with which I was strongly and emotionally connected since 1967, both as its literary director and as the author of festival-winning adaptations (Lagerkvist's Dwarf or Różewicz's Daughter), and, finally, as co-author of two revolutionary productions (Falling Down and The Polish Dreambook), I saw him bestow such significant painterly visions, touching the very essence, that to this day - they best instruct anyone new to the history of the theater the meaning and beginning of the path of the STU Theater.

Then - our paths parted for more than two years. Janek left the country as a laureate of prestigious French awards and prizes, as well as becoming a Parisian resident, a scholarship recipient of the President of France. And when everything seemed to be a cornucopia of fortune due to international recognition, Sawka is suddenly declared by our authorities "an enemy of the homeland" and has to flee, because he is threatened with deportation.... Thus, he found himself in New York.

In January 1979 I visited New York as an actor of Kantor's Dead Class, and since our performances were on the stage of the famous off-off-Broadway Theatre La Mama and lasted more than a month, I passionately acceded to Sawka's daily invitations, and for six weeks of morning meetings, I was given the chance to understand the direction of a rapidly developing career.

At the time, Sawka was earning a living with politically topical satirical drawings for the New York Times and the Boston Globe. With amazement - every second or third day I discovered in these very prestigious pages a new drawing of his, not only original in form, but very funny and thought-provoking on the situation noted. A situation usually very conflicting and therefore likely to be well noted by an ordinary American.

So I admired Sawka not only for his diligence and excellent technique. I was impressed, as was every reader, by that proverbial "flash" of intelligence with which the artist is able to endow every line of ordinary - it would seem - notation. For each of these drawings contained a nuanced message of commentary.

Since the eloquence of each drawing by Sawka was immeasurably and constantly astonishing for me personally, I decided to check my reception several times. And then it turned out that each time it could be completely... different. Several sophisticated readers of the daily press, indicted by me for their interpretation of the depicted scene, always interpreted it in ... their own way.

"Sawka has a devilish intuition" was Seymour Chwast's commented on these observations of mine at the time. Seymour Chwast, a true authority in the field, one of the most prominent American graphic designers, creator of the "Push Pin graphic style", now an aged (b. 1931) progenitor of the drawing avant-garde of New York.

"He fits my pattern of an artist-graphicist who must amaze both with his form and its subversive irony," he added, slipping me freshly printed issues of the "Push Pin Graphic" magazine he had edited.

One of them from late 1978 I remember to this day: the cover of a piled-up magma of clustered, swept-back hats in the form of a "Tower of Babel" labeled with a one-word comment: "Fashion." When, looking at it for an extended period of time, I finally burst out in undisguised laughter, Chwast happily stated: "With you, the conversation makes sense!".

So we talked for a long time about many topics (including the artist's Polish family roots), but the subject of Sawka's talent (who, incidentally, arranged this meeting) returned several more times.

Leaving Chwast's studio, I was proud to know Sawka. However, I never told Jan about it, and neither did he tell me about his daily work on a series of paintings, which, as he said while feasting with me on Coney Island, "You will see that they will amaze the world!"

I suspected that this must be the case. I had known him in Cracow, but it was not until witnessing that "creative drive" of Jan's, which I felt in the New York winter of 1979, that I realized that Sawka was another Polish diamond, a diamond already polished.

In all this hodgepodge of artistic events of January and February 1979 (in addition to the daily performances of "The Dead Class" - I was chasing interviews with my idols, American giants of world drama: Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, as well as to meetings arranged for me by the indefatigable Sawka, in this confusion of weather surprises (in New York and New Jersey, after a severe frost, a massive snow fell, which surprised everyone: both me and Sawka), the light of his artistic brilliance shone. I was even more pleased by this than the undying success of The Dead Class.

Krzysztof Miklaszewski, Krakow, September 2021