

"Unidentified Play" by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, adapted and directed by Tadeusz Minc at the Teatr Mały of Warsaw, stage design by Andrzej Sadowski, music by Jacek Sobieski

The Teatr Mały of Warsaw gave the premiere of a Witkacy play discovered after the last war. An ambitious and risky undertaking considering that only fragments of the untitled play had survived and that the list of dramatis personae, where Witkacy usually gave a detailed description of his characters, was missing. Nor was any mention or commentary found in the notes left by Witkacy that could cast light on the author's intentions. The publishers called the work *Unidentified Play* (*Dramat nie rozpoznany*). The central problem of the play is, however, clearly delineated by the incomplete material composed of a nearly complete second act, a large part of the third act and a fragment of the first act. Konstanty Puzyna has this to say, "(the play) takes up the problem of the place of ethics in Witkiewicz's system of thought, a problem to which Witkacy devoted little attention even in his theoretical writing, having once placed it beyond the bounds of General Ontology."

The discussion on the idea of good is conducted by the two leading characters, Józef and Karnak. Józef propounds the idea of absolute good, he says that "this is the only added value of our era through which mankind had moved forward until now — the only value after the end of art, religion and even philosophy." Karnak questions the value and the rationale of the idea itself: from the point of view of individual psychology (defense — a narcotic against the senselessness of existence), from the social point of view (refuge of the weak), and finally from the philosophical standpoint (good is not based on any philosophical premise). Yet Józef's idea upsets Karnak for he himself can propose nothing. This in broad outline is the problem of the dispute. But the play stands not only on its theme, it also stands on the dramatic material in which it is set but which, unfortunately, cannot be fully reconstructed. The free structure and the surprising juxtapositions of Witkiewicz's stage works do not suggest any set rule of reconstruction. We have a vague idea that Józef is a petty criminal and a moral depraver who is in turn depraved by Assistant Professor Karnak's philosophical ideas. Actually not enough information about the stage character. We do not know, for instance, what are the relations between Józef and the whole crowd of characters in the play. This may not have any bearing on the merits of the dispute, but it must certainly reflect upon the stage form and the wealth of thought contained in the play.

Tadeusz Minc, who directed the play, has

taken this incomplete material to fashion a scenario. He introduced a new character, casting Witkiewicz himself as the hero, to give cohesion to the action. He also broadened the range of associations by bringing in facts that the audience learned elsewhere about the author, his life and thoughts. The play opens with a prologue and ends with an epilogue composed by Tadeusz Minc.

A man is sitting on a valise among the uprooted trees of a small wood. The voice of a woman, issuing from a loudspeaker, relates the final moments of Witkacy's life. Witkiewicz committed suicide in September 1939. The date is significant, but to those who do not know it, the suicide itself makes a forceful impact. The man pulls out a red lipstick and draws a line across his neck "cutting" his throat. This moment establishes a solemn mood although, on the other hand, the artificial and metaphorical nature of the scene softens the literal horror of the moment. This is followed by a group pantomime of characters that seem to have been pulled out of the moth balls, all clad in scanty frivolous costumes. Against a background of insistent circus music, Józef makes a few stabs with a knife. Two individuals enter to arrest him. A moment later, Józef falls to his knees and by means of a verbal *coup de théâtre* works a miracle (a storm) and transforms himself into a spokesman and martyr of good. Although he is a hero from a second rate theatre, yet his words carry weight. His stage life is in fact a martyred buffoonery which stands in sharp contrast to Józef's dispute with Karnak — we may add that the debate is too discursive, prolix and not funny, hence conducted in a language little suited to the stage. It is difficult to understand much of it, many of the convoluted arguments fail to register. Karnak is also Witkacy (he is played by the same actor). This double identity gives the play an auto-thematic character which also justifies, to some extent, its lack of cohesion. It also suggests that the author's suicide was an act of an inherent disagreement with what he proposes through his protagonist, disagreement with the search for a way out in the absurd idea of good that is not founded in any value, of a hopeless good derived from the Camus myth of Sisyphus.

This interpretation of Minc's production is more conjecture than statement of fact. The production seems a free impression, an effort to imbue the play with stage rather than intellectual meaning. Could the vaguely defined Voice stand for the subconscious? For the evil spirit Józef? Minc made him a

1. Le Theatre en Pologne  
6-9 1978



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Guardian Angel straight from the satirical journals. This may not mean much, but it works on the stage as does the whole production, maintained in the style of a cabaret parody of a scruffy little theatre. In view of the obvious dearth of thought, one cannot in this instance speak of a Witkacy super-cabaret.

The play offers excellent entertainment with hints of deeper meaning for those who would look for it. But if we dispense with asserting claims worthy of Witkacy, the effort of the producers will not seem to have been wholly in vain. The play conveys no clearly set out ideas, nor does it contribute much to the Witkacy tradition. It is, however, enjoyable and unpretentious and it does have the distinct flavour of a Witkacy work.

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