

# STRAIGHT INTO THE EYES – JACEK ŁUMIŃSKI AND THE *SILESIA*N DANCE THEATRE (1991-2011)

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## ABSTRACT

The final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the turning-point for the development of Polish contemporary dance. In 1991 Jacek Łumiński established the *Silesian Dance Theatre* in Bytom. The theatre is said to be in the avant-garde of all activities related to contemporary dance development in Poland. It was J. Łumiński and his theatre who pioneered new trends in contemporary dance at the beginning of the nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the same time they have conducted educational activity over the intervening twenty years.

The aim of this article is to present the artistic and educational activity of the *Silesian Dance Theatre* of the recent twenty years. In the beginning the author presents a choreographic portrait of J. Łumiński, the founder and choreographer of the *Silesian Dance Theatre*, and creator of the Polish contemporary dance technique. Then an analysis of J. Łumiński's dance style is carried out, and the review of the *Silesian Dance Theatre's* choreographic attainments is presented.

The final part of the article discusses the wide spectrum of educational activities undertaken in the field of contemporary professional dance by the *Silesian Dance Theatre*, and the phenomenon of the theatre on the Polish stage.

**Key words:** Jacek Łumiński, *Silesian Dance Theatre*, contemporary dance, history of dance in Poland – 20<sup>th</sup> century, dance education.

The *Silesian Dance Theatre* was acclaimed the most interesting European Phenomenon in the field of dance by the renowned "Ballett International/Tanz Aktuell" in 1996. Its artistic activity was inaugurated on April 4, 1992 with the first premiere that consisted of two works: *Longing* and *Ma guerre a Moi*. Its founder, director and choreographer is Jacek Łumiński. He believed in the possibility of establishing a theatre that would be of his own creation and due to his own style, and one that he had derived from Polish folk culture and the tradition of the Polish Jews<sup>7</sup>.

## JACEK ŁUMIŃSKI: A PORTRAIT

Initially, J. Łumiński<sup>8</sup> directed his interests towards music, later on his interests started to incline towards stage art. He began to cultivate his talents with the dance education at the Warsaw ballet school in 1974-78. Yet, the regimen of the school, the straightjacket of the classical dance exerted on him such pressure that he could

<sup>7</sup> If not differently marked, all the quotations are translated by Wiesława Grecko-Wajs.

<sup>8</sup> Information concerning Jacek Łumiński has been taken from the following sources: *Catalogue of the 12. Annual International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival, Silesian Dance Theatre, Bytom 2005*, p. 36; *Catalogue of the 17. Annual International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival, Silesian Dance Theatre, Bytom 2010*, p. 46-47, [http://www.stara.stt.art.pl/en\\_en/about/jacek\\_luminski.html](http://www.stara.stt.art.pl/en_en/about/jacek_luminski.html), retrieved: 23.06.2012.

not tolerate it any longer, and as a result, five years later he moved over to the *State Jewish Theatre* in Warsaw. There, over the six following years (1979-1985), he learnt acting and the theatre, by attending actors' college, and performing on stage and participating in artistic productions by such directors as: Jakub Rotbaum, Szymon Szurmiej or Juliusz Beger. Apart from this he took part in perfecting days organised by the *Fine Arts Admirers' Society*. Moreover, he performed in the play *Danton's Death* directed at the *Athenaeum Theatre* by Kazimierz Kutz, as well as in many other plays all over the country. He graduated in Dance Pedagogy at *F. Chopin Music Academy* in Warsaw (1981-1985). In the years 1985-1988 he danced at Conrad Drzewiecki's *Polish Dance Theatre* in Poznań. At the same time, he studied modern dance technique at professional courses in Kiel, Essen and Copenhagen, also in the USA, at *Alvin Ailey Center*, the *Juilliard School*, and the *Bartholin Academy*.

In 1988 J. Łumiński established his first team at the *New Dance Theatre* in Olsztyn. It was his act of rebellion against the routine code of conduct and the ballet clique. He was persuaded into the enterprise not only by friends from the *Polish Dance Theatre*, but also by his academic peers. The *New Dance Theatre* lasted two years, the first one in Olsztyn, the second in Chorzów. He was overwhelmed with disappointment as to the limited possibilities of creativity in Poland, on the other hand he gained immense life experience, which was so useful much later, in the *Silesian Dance Theatre*.

When *The City University of New York* offered him a post as a lecturer, the city of Bytom was ready to establish an independent dance team. It was during discussions with Bożena Kociołkowska and Avi Kaiser he was helped to face the challenge. B. Kociołkowska, the leading Polish ballerina had organised a dance festival in Gdańsk in 1991, A. Kaiser from Israel, a leading modern dancer in Europe, at that time worked as a choreographer in Belgium. In October, 1991, under the favourable auspices of the city of Bytom, J. Łumiński begins to establish a new enterprise, the *Silesian Dance Theatre*. In January 1992 he started to work with a new artistic team. The *Silesian Dance Theatre* in its initial phase consisted of nine members chosen by J. Łumiński and A. Kaiser from among candidates recruited via national media. The premiere turned out to be a grand event. This was when a new stage in the history of Polish dance was initiated, and the *Silesian Dance Theatre* was announced as the first professional Polish modern dance team.

J. Łumiński has received recognition in many international circles. The numerous awards, grants and scholarships he has received, achieving outstanding effects in shaping the unique style, technique and form of dance, prove his value. J. Łumiński teaches at dance workshops all over Poland and abroad, among and others, in the USA, Canada Israel. Since 2000 J. Łumiński has held the post of Curator at the *Contemporary Dance Coproduction Fund* (within the European Union programme). In the same year he was granted a title of professor at the *Swarthmore College* in Philadelphia, USA. Beginning in the year 2004 he started to work on his post-graduate thesis at the *Indiana University* in Bloomington, USA, at the Anthropology Faculty headed by prof. Anya Peterson Royce. After completion of his theatrical arts doctorate at the *Academy of Theatre* in Cracow he was admitted to the post of the dean of its *Dance Theatre Department* in 2008.

In 2002, when asked by Danuta Lubina-Cipińska, a Polish national daily, "Rzeczpospolita", journalist about his intentions linked with establishing the *Silesian Dance Theatre*, he answered: "I have always trusted that contemporary dance will gain its enthusiasts, especially among young spectators. I intended to create such an institution that would gather followers, combine artistic and educational values and, at the same time, execute service functions directed towards independent artists" (Lubina-Cipińska 2002). While in an interview published in "Ultramarine", in June 2011 he said: "Moving over to Silesia, firstly, I wanted to adjoin art with all that concerns common people: identity evolution, involvement with the environment, infrastructure, architecture. I have never been interested in art for its own sake - art for its own benefit. Art has a definite human dimension, not just selfish, the more such artistic activities take place, the more people change. It seems to me that over recent twenty years of our work people have placed confidence in us. That is the most difficult. Obviously, one may establish a theatre. Yet, the most difficult thing is to survive" (Podziewska 2011). Back in 1991 when J. Łumiński moved over to Bytom, none of the local authorities believed in establishing a dance team that would function longer than a year. A similar case took place in 1994 when the *Silesian Dance Theatre* organised the *International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival* for the first time. The members of the town council of Bytom doubted whether any foreigner would care to come and visit the Festival, and particularly visit Silesia; yet, Bytom may appear attractive. In the further part of the interview J. Łumiński said: "At certain while »The Village Voice« published a map of Europe with highlights on Bytom, Berlin, Vienna, Paris... None of us dared to expect such an approach to the matter - we just did the thing we had deep faith in. The fact of placing Bytom among cultural centres of Europe was incredible to me and all of us at the Theatre. (...) Both Americans and Europeans admitted that Bytom had become the main centre of dance development in Poland..." (Podziewska 2011). From that time on people come to Bytom from all directions of the world to get to know the unusual dance style created by J. Łumiński. The *Silesian Dance Theatre* has gained fame as the main promoter of contemporary dance in Poland.

### POLISH DANCE TECHNIQUE

J. Łumiński has created a new form and style of contemporary dance on the basis of a rich national tradition. The choreographic style and the movement material are drawn from traditional and contemporary dance forms, and are tightly connected with Polish culture. J. Łumiński persistently sticks to his own way. The source of his inspiration is within the various folk traditions of Poles and Jews. It was in the *Jewish Theatre* (J. Łumiński is a member of its staff despite being of non-Jewish origin), that he encountered Jewish culture. Although it was relatively late that he became acquainted with Hassidim dance, Jewish religious rites and wedding customs, so typical to pre-war Poland, he soon received international recognition as an expert in the history of, as he calls it, Jewish dance in Poland. J. Łumiński's contemporary dance style was initially influenced by numerous culture-inducing elements which emerged in 1981, in the course of his research of

the dance folklore of Polish Jews, basically Hassidim, and Polish folklore, mainly of the Kurpie and Podhale regional folk music. Such choice reflected features of Polish mentality, history and geopolitical situation. In his choreography work J. Łumiński adapted some ideas of Hassidim dance, stress is put on the proper work of the spinal cord and the pelvis, which enables the dancers to move with unbelievable speed in any direction. The dancers rush into the space of the stage with immense power and unspeakably fast. Both the features grow out of the object of his fascination, kinetic energy, and are typical of his choreography. According to the authors of the *Report on contemporary dance in Poland*: "The specific feature of Łumiński's creation of movement is analysis of the sequences of particular phases of movement, in which the discipline of the body, well-trained muscles, awareness of beginning a gesture and muscles involved, together with a technique of passing on energy, allow freedom in creating particular phrases. For example, some movements are based on the rule of hanging and counteracting" (Grabowska, Szymajda 2009a, p. 21). Such attitude to the act of movement results in the spectator's impression that the dancers do not obey the laws of gravity.

J. Łumiński fascinated by the Polish folklore travelled around regions of Kurpie, Podlasie, the province of Lublin, Podhale to observe folk dance. He commented on that: "We know from history that ostensive contemporary dance styles and techniques originate from tradition. (...) That is how we approach our task in the *Silesian Dance Theatre*: over the surface of something familiar, meaning the tradition of contemporary dance, I place something not known to me, yet, very close, reaching my cultural roots" (Goźliński 1998, p. 15). Talking about folk music of Kurpie or Podhale he explains: "These are the two regions that had enjoyed relative freedom and little external influence due to their geographical, safe location. These regions have preserved extremely interesting musical forms and performance manners linked with the feeling of freedom and aloofness" (Goźliński 1998, p. 15). Contemporary dance always emphasizes the relation between the dancer's body and the earth. Still, to artists equally important is the expression of the body getting rid of its limitations, disconnecting from the earth. Dance functioning as a prayer (as in case of the Hassidim tradition), or as attachment to a supernatural power has been included in the style of the *Silesian Dance Theatre*. "The unfinished gesture, suspended, as if broken in the middle, and then, again appearing in the unexpected point of space. The dance entangled in a spiral spins along with the troubled music. This may be a mere attempt at a short description of the kind of movement into which the dancers put their bodies. The movement is not imitation of folk dances, of their language: concise but shut and no longer developing. (...) If there is anything left of the old dance languages, that would be of the Hassidim dance. Again, the point is not in quoting, it is in finding inspiration for gestures so that they are their own, individual, extricated from their own bodies and built on their own experience" (Goźliński 1998, p. 15). There is no space for improvisation here.

The best notion to describe J. Łumiński's choreography is syncretism. "In case of Łumiński it mainly results from simultaneous looking ahead and looking back over the shoulder. Łumiński integrates distant music and dance worlds" (Goźliński 1998, p. 15).

The *Silesian Dance Theatre* has demonstrated an original approach to the art of dance which it had derived from folk culture. Nevertheless, folk tradition or folk dance are never used in their canon, or, moreover, in their processed forms. They rather constitute a field one can relate to when in search of art that aims at creation of a Polish mode of contemporary dance.

Rituals, ecstatic elements and folk musical structures constitute the main source of inspiration to the team and J. Łumiński. Additionally, they constitute the base of the *Silesian Dance Theatre* team's style. Moreover, they are decisive as to the dancers' dance techniques. The choreographer calls for two streams of contemporary dance: German expressionism, or rather neo-expressionistic dance theatre, and American modern dance. J. Łumiński consciously takes advantage of tradition. Generally, it can be stated that the innovative style of contemporary dance performed by the *Silesian Dance Theatre* gained its shape, on the one hand, throughout examination of the working mode of such masters of modern dance as: Martha Graham, Anna Sokolow or Jose Limon; on the other hand, by facilitating the native tradition. Artistic creation by C. Drzewiecki<sup>9</sup>, too influenced J. Łumiński's dance style. "The combination of vitality, virtuosity, and elegance in Luminski's work is an expression of its home environment. (...) Łumiński's choreography at once reflects his knowledge of Polish dance history and Polish and Jewish folklore, the social and spiritual reality of contemporary Poland, and his erudite knowledge of contemporary dance in Europe and America. Most strikingly, Łumiński's work is truly dance *theatre* (...). Łumiński has defined and refined a unique and highly expressive choreographic and theatrical language to be found nowhere else" (Kuharski 2002, p. 15). J. Łumiński in his works relates both to the tradition of the Polish grand directors/actors such as Jerzy Grotowski, Józef Szajna, Tadeusz Kantor or Henryk Tomaszewski, whose theatres were inspired by movement and visual, and to the choreographic creation of C. Drzewiecki or Pola Nireńska. One of the most important aspects of J. Łumiński's activity is reconstruction of bonds between the Polish contemporary dance theatre and its pre-war history which had been forcefully hidden away.

J. Łumiński, interviewed by Marek Skocza, gives a brief definition of his dance method: "This carnal attitude towards learning the world, close to the ideas one can face in cultures out of Europe in which there is no division between the mind and the body. All this is done in accordance with the plans worked out on the basis of Polish culture, mainly that of Kurpie, Podhale and Polish Jews, although, not only within these limits. In my method all the elements interact with each other" (Skocza 2011). As to culture of Podhale, J. Łumiński takes advantage of the phenomenon of *apokopa* (disappearing voice either at the beginning or end of a word); he is intrigued by the rate of *rubato*, too, he puts forward a question concerning changeable measure in a musical piece and the influence of the way music is played on dance. He is also interested in the way energy is collected in the body and then liberated, as to produce yodel-like utterances which can be observed in powerful singing, emitted from the deep throat, both in case of mountaineers (*helokanie*), and those living in

<sup>9</sup> C. Drzewiecki started working with the *Silesian Dance Theatre* in 1998. He prepared a spectacle *Waiting for...* with music by Paweł Szymański. The premiere took place on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998.



Kurpie. Taking into consideration Hassidim culture, he employed the idea of independent movements performed simultaneously and differently by the upper and lower halves of the body, yet, interacting with each other. Still, the most important element of J. Łumiński's method is the use of sensuality, as the author puts it: "owing to carnal acts, a human being enters a different level of thought" (Skocza 2011).

Numerous critics and theoreticians dealing with the problem of dance theatre pay attention to the way sensuality is presented on stage. Anna Królica, author of a text devoted to functioning and presenting the body at Polish dance performances, thinks that it was in the 70's. of the twentieth century that a grand turn towards the body takes place, especially in the field of theatre. However, the Polish dance stage is merely in the initial phase of shaping the aesthetics of contemporary dance, when the inter-war dance (*Ausdruckdanz*) is not taken into consideration. In A. Królica's opinion, the Polish dance performances that have been created in the last twenty years definitely expose a moving, dancing body functioning as a sign, while sensuality itself does not function as a theme. One of the reasons why the body is used in such a way is exposing the plot rather than focusing on the actors' physical presence. The author, when relating to choreographical performances of the *Silesian Dance Theatre*, is of the opinion that the dancers working in its earliest time were technically best prepared. At that time actors aimed at achieving "»incredible body«, typical of virtuosity-oriented techniques, (...) a fit, strong and muscular one" (Królica 2010, p. 339). Quite often choreographies contained elements of a feat (as climbing up the rope, treading along high and narrow constructions, performing overhangs or somersaults). Physical fitness and endurance of the body were of major importance. On the stage the dancers were to present anonymous bodies. Such a result is achieved when choreography is applied within the framework of a group. Such work involves unification of work of the body, which, in turn, fades the uniqueness of gestures. "In arrangements by Łumiński there is little space for exploring dancers' privacy, or searching for authenticity of the body and reactions. According to contemporary dance conventions, otherwise than in ballet, loud breathing or specific tachypnoea may be permitted. At that point are the limits of the »truth of the body«. (...) In none of the performances the body constituted the main theme, nor was it analysed as if in laboratory" (Królica 2010, p. 340). In today's European dance theatre physical features of the body are not associated with the looks solely, it also has to do with sexuality. As A. Królica notices, J. Łumiński in his work avoids erotica, "should it ever appear, then it would always be clad in theatrical costume. As in the ballet, it is conventional, (...)" (Królica 2010, p. 339).

### THE *SILESIA*N DANCE THEATRE: FROM TRADITION TO THE PRESENT TIME

The *Silesian Dance Theatre* is an authorial team. J. Łumiński created the majority of the choreographies. Still, next to his works, another four were created within the framework of the *Choreographic Laboratory of the Silesian Dance Theatre* by Sylwia Hefczyńska-Lewandowska. Yet another ones was created by Korina Kordova and a duo of Sebastian Zajkowski and Leszek Stanek. The team cooperated with such

recognized choreographers and pedagogues dancers as A. Kaiser, legendary A. Sokolov, Melisa Monteros, Mark Haim, Sam Costa, Diane Elshout, Frank Handler, Paul Clayden, Hilke Diemer, Mihai Mihalcea, Idan Cohen and the legend of the Polish modern dance, C. Drzewiecki. On its stage was also performed a reconstruction of a choreography by P. Nireńska, acknowledged Polish dancer and choreographer of the interwar period<sup>10</sup>.

J. Łumiński prepared over twenty choreographies for the team. His earlier productions were inspired by the Polish and Hassidim folklore. The folklore became the basis of J. Łumiński's stage language which can be observed in such spectacles, as *Mokosz*<sup>11</sup> or *Bjamgwamm*<sup>12</sup>. The press wrote: "Having returned from America where the team had received enthusiastic reception and press reviews the team decided to present their performance to the Silesian audience. (...) probably the most attractive was *Mokosz*. The word itself relates to Slavonic mythology and conveys »earth giving birth to people and later on devouring them«. On the stage joy of existence was emphasized by the movement, movement cutting the space and conquering the world, then the world gradually, in solitude, ceased to exist and united with the earth in a powerless clench. (...) The dancers' costumes are grand: spinning layers of skirts and wobbly peasants' jackets, all the creation of a Canadian designer Madeline Brian. She knows how to select materials to match the character of the dance (georgette was used for this purpose). The performance is filled with Polishness, inspired by H. M. Górecki's music and notes characteristic for Podhale and Kurpie" (IS, 1995). As to *Bjamgwamm*, in the same review, we can find the following description: "(...) it is spontaneously jolly and undisturbed by despair. Finnish and Lapland dances together with the music of Podhale and Silesian Beskid liberate elements. One can register »Silesia's« familiar sounds of mountain echo, and at that point we can clearly see differences in the rendering of choreography. Extremely different" (IS, 1995).

J. Łumiński's consecutive works of choreography performed by the *Silesian Dance Theatre* become viewed as sensual and poetic in the eyes of critics and reviewers. "In his performances, Łumiński intensifies the sensual perception of a spectator not only with his dance but with elements of classical theatre and music that create time and space. Consequently, he sets his theatre in the many hundreds of years tradition of a poetical theatre (...)" (Leśnierowska 2002, p. 7). Simultaneously, the team bear in mind how sensitive today's viewer is, used to new forms of transmitting artistic contents. That is why "Łumiński sometimes applies a modern TV advertisement viewer's code, which may be the only way to draw their attention. Łumiński uses the code as a tool in order to achieve his goals with the spectator not always aware of the input being sneaked into his mind" (IS, 1995).

There are direct relations to the Polish reality in the Bytom team's performances.

<sup>10</sup> Premiere of reconstruction of Pola Nireńska's choreography *Song of Mourning* to Ernest Bloch's music took place on the stage of the *Silesian Dance Theatre* on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Premiere: June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1994, music by Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, Polish folk music, costumes by M. Brian, *Silesian Dance Theatre* in Bytom.

<sup>12</sup> Premiere: October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1994, Finnish, Lapland and Polish folk music/ Johann Sebastian Bach, Bartłomiej Pękiel; *Silesian Dance Theatre* in Bytom.

Some of them may be observed in the performance *WK-70*<sup>13</sup> describing communist Poland's heritage and national vices of Poles. J. Łumiński created a fascinating spectacle illustrated with Polish and Georgian folk music interlaced modern sounds. The setting of *WK-70* is an empty stage with a lengthened glass construction shifted by the dancers at the time of performance. It is the dancers and the construction that create the dramatic tension. The construction symbolises a gigantic anonymous block of flats that is divided into concrete bedrooms. Here, women and men meet fleetingly and accidentally. The meetings are sometimes brutal, sometimes tender. Only rarely the meetings take place outside the glass construction which at times reminds us of a block watched furtively by the passers-by.

The performance can be interpreted in many ways. One thing is certain, though, through the movement and dance perfectly coordinated with music, J. Łumiński manages to achieve incredible concentration of emotions, painful memories and reflection over the state of Poles of today. Both the critics and viewers announced *WK-70* to be the greatest achievement of the Polish contemporary dance and the *Silesian Dance Theatre's* final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The press published many reviews in which the outstanding features of the performance were emphasised. Sandra Wilk wrote after the premiere in "Życie" / "Life": "The latest performance of »Wk-70« has enchanted many people. (...) the most important thing is that this performance is truly universal and it would fit in all time frames. All these elements decide that we deal with a real world – class masterpiece" (Wilk 1998, in: Furmaniuk K., Kuśnierz R., Łumiński J. (eds.) 2002, p.66). Review of Mirosław Haponiuk is couched in a similar style: "In the piece *WK-70* perfection of the performers was coherent with clarity and expressiveness of the composition and with a heap of unique theatre ideas. There was no doubt the dancers from Łumiński were dancing about themselves and us – about children of huge apartment blocks. (...) The piece from the *Silesian Dance Theatre* is one of the strongest testimonies of contemporary times from our country and at the same and time it is evidence of many possibilities typical of contemporary dance form" (Haponiuk 1998, in: Furmaniuk K., Kuśnierz R., Łumiński J. 2002, p. 70).

Bartosz Kamiński wrote: "The thing is about Poland and Poles, about the curse of the communist system and national vices, about dark powers that had been used to build the system, and those which are still stuck within us. The performance is shocking, it can also be interpreted universally, without relating exclusively to the Polish experience. There is lots of Polishness in *WK-70*, beginning with hypnotic Kurpie notes of Apolonia Nowak, ending with Łumiński's choreography style and his technique, in fact a fusion of most contrasting techniques of contemporary dance" (Kamiński 1998, p. 9). J. Łumiński in his performance is moving from the concrete to the abstract. The performance keeps the spectator in tension for more than an hour.

Another J. Łumiński work *Innocent Dreams on the Wane*<sup>14</sup> tells us about people and their condition in the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is a touching story of human

<sup>13</sup> Premiere: April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1998, music by P. Szymański, Johann Jeremias du Grain, Kudsi Erguner, Elizabeth Valletti, Georgian and Polish folk music, costumes: Hanna Nowicka-Rożeń, lights: David Herrieget; *Silesian Dance Theatre* in Bytom.

<sup>14</sup> Premiere: April 29<sup>th</sup> 1999, music: Karl Jenkins, Meredith Monk, P. Szymański, Hildegard von Bingen, Agathodaimon, Eleni Karaindrow, Luz Lasal, Oracle and Medieval music; *Silesian Dance Theatre* in Bytom.



weakness, hope and disappointment, of love, violence and loneliness. The performance deals with timeless matters. It shows the anxiety, fears and problems bothering people of decline of the second millennium. We are lonely despite our desperate attempts to change the state. Despite the flow of time and advancement in civilization, a human being constantly needs acceptance, to be loved by others and to feel safe.

*Innocent Dreams on the Wane* is a spectacle illustrated with musical collage which brilliantly emphasizes its dramaturgy. It lasts one and a half hours. The story is about young people, relations between a woman and a man, their magnetism, sexual opposition which creates such strong attraction. It is about feelings, bonds and love, yet, it is also about biological determination of the human nature. "Łumiński's group touchingly shows what hurts, what we wouldn't like to carry along treading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the third millennium, namely aggression. Aggression, most clearly shown in wars. Łumiński's performance hurts even more as it shows the war beginnings within ourselves. (...) One sparkle is enough to destroy the border between the Good and the Evil, (similarly to pulling down the wall in the play). From the debris it is difficult to return to the good. It is difficult to retrieve lost innocence, especially when everybody else becomes indifferent. The final act of struggle of the one who has managed »to see through« remains a powerful warning to us. The piece is full of beauty and wisdom" (Skocza 1999, p. 7).

J. Łumiński's another performance<sup>15</sup> was inspired by a tale about treasure hidden at the rainbow's end. Naturally, the rainbow is used as a metaphor. The point is that a human being looks for 'treasure'. J. Łumiński says: "Most frequently it is so that even people find their treasure, they are incapable of appreciating it. Certain traces of villainy appear and each of us tends to commit acts of villainy, heavier or lighter. They absorb so much of our energy that we forget our vital aims. We forget about looking for our »treasure«" (Dąb 2001, p.10).

*End of the Rainbow* is a morality play, dance constitutes the most important, yet not the only form of expression. Scenography (a high scaffolding was designed), costumes, accessories, obvious music and lighting are contrasted with less than obvious words. The starting point here takes the form of a medieval lament. *The soul has left the body*, still it procrastinates the definite abandonment of our world, it cannot say goodbye to the near ones, being aware of the fact that there are yet "purgatory sufferings" to go through, before it can enjoy the state of eternal life. Seven dancers, seven souls publically analyze their sins and then confess sinful deeds, by expressing contrition and sorrow the sinners get the chance to have their sins forgiven. Scenography constructed into a high scaffolding resembles either a cruiser's front, a house, or a nightclub... Dancers in an effort to climb it, slide down, undertake other attempts - all in vain. Dorota Mrówka wrote about the spectacle: "Łumiński's latest performance is metaphor of human fate, searching for what counts most of all in every individual's life. (...) In the spectacle one can find love plots, including the difficult one, unfulfilled nostalgia for the past, need of acceptance, loneliness, parting and reuniting" (Mrówka 2001, p. 9). A huge con-

<sup>15</sup> *End of the Rainbow*, premiere: May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001; music: P. Szymański, Russian and Polish folklore, Georg Friedrich Haendel, Kimmo Pohjonen, Richard Barrett, Paul Obermayer; scenography: J. Łumiński; costumes: H. Nowicka-Rożeń; *Silesian Dance Theatre* in Bytom.

struction placed in the middle of the stage, the only part of scenography, is of great importance to the performance. Dancers, apart from the surface of the stage floor, can utilize some horizontal levels of the construction. This allows minute planning and the use of stage space for choreographic arrangements. The performance is unusually dynamic due to constant changes in rhythm and tempo, and to parallel lines of the events taking place on the stage. The music undergoes sudden changes. We can hear a pre-war tango, pitiful folk songs and also contemporary classical music. Along with the music, the viewer can observe changes in the mood, light, dance arrangements and also the substance of the particular episodes.

In the *Straight Into the Eyes*<sup>16</sup> leaflet we can read: "Once more, we are struggling to create a discourse about honesty and seeking anastomosis, a critical connection of causeways with the natural environment. *Straight Into the Eyes*, stresses the importance of interrelationships between humans. Too many times we forget about other people, they have their distinctively defined and developed needs, longings, beliefs, and customs, etc. *In the eyes our soul lives*, represents a truth recognized within a multitude of diverse cultures of the world; its meaning is recognized intuitively, revealing our personal nostalgia, our co-existence with an undefined yet connected realm" (*Straight Into the Eyes* leaflet, 2003, p. 3).

*Straight Into the Eyes* is about being lost and attempting to reconstruct basic bonds between people. On the stage we can see young people who are lost in their everyday routine. The protagonists penetrate the deepest layers of human nature in search of the purest feelings. Feelings being remnants of the past true values that are left in today's complicated and chaotic world. An important part of the choreographer's intentions is a video<sup>17</sup> made to complement the play and to prolong live creatures' movement and gestures.

*Straight Into the Eyes* was successful overseas. As "The New York Times" wrote: "At a time when even the most serious choreographers like to entertain, Jacek Łumiński and his *Silesian Dance Theater*, a modern-dance troupe from the Polish city Bytom, make no concessions to popular taste. As always, Mr. Łumiński is uncompromising in his refusal to work within conventional categories. (...) The work is difficult, filled with non sequiturs that are anything but surreal. The images are enigmatic. But they probe deeply into emotional states through highly physical movement" (Kisselgoff 2002).

*La. La Land*<sup>18</sup> was inspired by Immersive Technologies, namely by Benedict Anderson's idea (Anderson 1983, pol. ed. 1997) of the, so called, imagined society. In the spectacle we can see the strong influence of technology on reality of the whole society, also in the way the virtual world tests sensual experience and human emotions. The play returns to the question if what we see is real. "Performance of *La la land* addresses important problems of the modern world. The candy

<sup>16</sup> Premiere: June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2002, music: Stepanida, Huun-Huurtu & Bulgarian Female Choir, Evelyn Glenie, P. Szymański, Polish folk songs, Brothomstates; scenography: J. Łumiński, video: Violetta Rotter-Kozera, costumes: Magdalena Duda.

<sup>17</sup> Kaleidoscope presentation of average people in their everyday situations with view of Upper Silesia landscape in the background.

<sup>18</sup> Premiere: April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010; music: Zbigniew Karkowski, Stefan Betke (Pole), Panasonic, Aleksander Lasoń; visualisations: Aleksander Jachimiak; lights: Łukasz Opieczonek.

colored, flower production design reflects the aesthetics of virtual reality, created with exaggerated care to detail, loaded with a desire to be more real than reality. Expressive dance performed to the beat of the music, a cacophonous variety of social relations appeared, the different needs of people, chaos" (Mikrut 2010, in: *Śląski Teatr Tańca*, 2011, p. 9). Alan Misiewicz wrote about this choreography the following words: "Seven dancers, undergoing a slow formation with each other. With time, however, everything loses its continuity. Slowly the world begins to be unreal. The reality still is beautiful, but not so perfect. Plush flowers growing in small pots create a captivating plush contrast to the seriousness of the problem of losing virtual reality. Identity theft takes place slowly. The faces of dancers overlap and intersect, and the music becomes a narcotic, it sets in a trance, as if not comforted, way back, flee" (Misiewicz 2010, p. 7).

Even rough insight into the above mentioned examples of J. Łumiński's choreography in the *Silesian Dance Theatre*, makes it clear that his spectacles are rarely based on literary tradition, rather than that, they relate to social reality. The artist's attempt is to transmit onto the stage human relations that he has observed. Yet, J. Łumiński's latest productions, in contrast to his earlier works, failed to inspire audience enthusiasm. Polish press tends to present negative reviews concerning J. Łumiński's works created with the *Silesian Dance Theatre* after the year 2000. Julia Hoczyk describes the state in the monthly "Kultura enter" as follows: "The *Silesian Dance Theatre*, previously creating interesting and innovative spectacles got stuck. The earlier performances, truly successful, reflected the history of the country and region (like *The Innocent Dreams on the Wane*, WK-70). Later productions, still less literal and with less obvious plots, were poetic, they carried powerful intensity of movement, the stage pictures were suggestive (among others *End of the Rainbow* or *The Centre of Gravity* – one of the earliest offers of Atelier with choreography by Leszek Stanek and Sebastian Zajkowski), then they were back at the starting point. The process of searching does not bring surprise. The technique is brilliant (...), causes admiration, yet it is boring when it begins to function as artistic creation for its own sake (as was the case, among others, with *The Chemical Reaction* or *Die Kunst der Fuge*). Performances dangerously begin to gravitate towards the plot and the tale, which would not be wrong in case of works that are intriguing, causing interest. Unfortunately, they are predictable, both in the intellectual and movement sphere" (Hoczyk 2008a). The author is of the opinion that productions presented on a smaller scale, like the ones prepared by the *Laboratory of Silesian Dance Theatre* soloists, S. Hefczyńska-Lewandowska and K. Kordova, are much more interesting. *Laboratory*<sup>19</sup>, carrying on its activity may evaluate into innovation, research and breaking with the form which might lead the team to new opportunities. Among the *Silesian Dance Theatre's* latest productions it is hard to notice any points of major importance, concludes J. Hoczyk.

<sup>19</sup> Information concerning activity of the *Choreographic Laboratory of the Silesian Dance Theatre* are also available from: *Catalogue of the 17. Annual International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival, Silesian Dance Theatre, Bytom 2010*, p. 11; W. Mrozek, *Raport o stanie tańca w województwie śląskim*. Institute of Music and Dance 2011, p. 5 (report available from: <http://www.kongrestanca.pl/pl/materialy>, retrieved: 22.04.2011, [http://www.kongrestanca.pl/uploads/files/11\\_raport-slask-pdf.pdf](http://www.kongrestanca.pl/uploads/files/11_raport-slask-pdf.pdf), retrieved: 22.04.2011), <http://www.stt.art.pl/index.php?lang=en>, retrieved: 23.06.2012.

## EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY OF THE SILESIA DANCE THEATRE

Over the twenty years of its functioning, the *Silesian Dance Theatre* has been engaged in many social and artistic projects<sup>20</sup>. Initiatives related to the local community are among them. The city quarter of Bobrek is a special field of the *Silesian Dance Theatre's* social work. Today Bobrek is a post-industrial unemployment area, once it hosted many large-scale industrial factories. At present, a project financed by the *Department of Culture and National Heritage, Bobrek Dance*, is carried out with the view to reaching the youth from an endangered social background. Earlier, in 2005, the *Silesian Dance Theatre*, among other activities, established a juvenile dance group, *Angry Young Men*. In the same year cooperation with a folk group *Piekarskie Klachule* was initiated. Such programmes are motivating marginalised social groups. Additionally, the team is realising integrative dance workshops addressed to the physically disabled (such as those in wheelchairs, or those with amputated limbs). Still another form of dance activity supporting the handicapped is work with the *Integration Dance Theatre Direction* and the *Tiny Direction*. Moreover, workshops and other activities are organised for orphans, residents of senior houses, elder citizens, members of the underprivileged social groups. Other activities applied at work are with those who suffer from mental disorders, physical disability, brain paralysis or blindness and comprise, among others, integration workshops or kinetic therapy. In case of youths endangered by their inadequate environment, the team has developed a project *Closer to Art*<sup>21</sup>.

The *Silesian Dance Theatre* co-operates with numerous governmental and non-governmental institutions worldwide for the realisation of social, artistic and educational projects.

As to educational activities, since 1992 the theatre has been conducting monthly dance workshops for amateurs, dancers and choreographers, both at national and international level. Owing to J. Łumiński and his theatre staff's efforts, the first Polish contemporary dance faculty was established in *Ludomir Różycki State Ballet School* in Bytom. In 1995 the theatre organised *Educational Workshops for Dance Teachers and Community Leaders*. In October 2005 the *Silesian Dance Theatre* started the *School of Performing Arts* project, which is meant to be a foundation for the first school of its kind in Poland, educating contemporary dancers on the academic level. The first year of education was a testing one, so as to see if organisational structures and the syllabus functioned properly. It was owing to the financial support of the EU that in the *Leonardo da Vinci* project over twenty participants received regular education.

<sup>20</sup> Information concerning artistic and educational activity of the *Silesian Dance Theatre* is available in *Catalogue 12. Annual International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival, Silesian Dance Theatre, Bytom 2005*, p. 19-20, W. Mrozek, *Raport o stanie tańca w województwie śląskim*. Institute of Music and Dance 2011, p. 5-6, [http://www.stt.art.pl/en\\_en/about/organization.html](http://www.stt.art.pl/en_en/about/organization.html), retrieved: 23.06.2012, [http://www.stt.art.pl/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&Itemid=177&lang=en](http://www.stt.art.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&Itemid=177&lang=en), retrieved: 23.06.2012.

<sup>21</sup> Information available at: W. Mrozek, *Raport o stanie tańca w województwie śląskim*. Institute of Music and Dance 2011, p. 6, *Catalogue 12. Annual International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival, Silesian Dance Theatre, Bytom 2005*, p. 52, [http://www.stt.art.pl/en\\_en/projects/outreach\\_projects.html](http://www.stt.art.pl/en_en/projects/outreach_projects.html), retrieved: 23.06.2012.

Classes in theory and practise were taught by professionals from Poland and EU countries. Apart from J. Łumiński and S. Hefczyńska-Lewandowska, the lectures and practise were provided by H. Diemer (of *Rotterdamse Dansakademie*), doctor Katja Schneider (of *Munich University*), and Roman Arndt (*Folkwang Hochschule*, Essen). In order to collect and keep professional materials concerning dance, a decision to open a dance library in Bytom was made. On September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2006, J. Łumiński and the rector of the *Ludwik Solski Academy of Theatre* in Cracow, Jerzy Stuhr announced a plan to establish a new specialization at the school – *Dance Theatre Actor*. One year later it was part of the Actors Faculty curriculum. Finally, in 2008 it was moved over to Bytom and became a newly founded *Dance Theatre Department*. J. Łumiński became the dean, while S. Hefczyńska-Lewandowska holds the post of his deputy. The curriculum joins fundamental training in dance techniques and with education in acting. The classes are conducted by *Cracow Academy* lecturers, among others: Dr Barbara Sier-Janik, Eva Lackova, Dr Janusz Skubackowski, George Blaschke, Joe Alter. The department educates art critics, performers and creators of dance<sup>22</sup>.

Taking education into consideration, the *Silesian Dance Theatre* is responsible for organising a considerable workshop block during the *International Contemporary Dance Conference and Dance Festival*. The first conference was organised in 1994. The event is said to be the elite's biggest and most important convention in Europe. Every year, over the recent seventeen years at turn of June and July dancers from all over the world come to Bytom and spend two weeks performing their acts and carrying out intensive dance workshops. There are parallel workshops indirectly related to dance: on criticism, writing, research of its history, photography or management<sup>23</sup>.

## THE PHENOMENON OF THE SILESIA DANCE THEATRE

The *Silesian Dance Theatre* was established at a difficult time<sup>24</sup> of systematic and economic transformation. It anticipated a new era of dance in Poland. It is one of the most important contemporary dance centres nationwide. According to J. Lesnierowska: "(...) the phenomenon of the Łumiński company consists both in dance and in THEATRE as such. (...) Łumiński's theatre is at the core an anthropocentric theatre. A human being is what interests the artist most. The topics of the spectacles are mostly and first of all human beings – their perennial strug-

<sup>22</sup> Information at Catalogue 17. Annual International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival, *Silesian Dance Theatre*, Bytom 2010, p. 15, W. Mrozek, *Raport o stanie tańca w województwie śląskim*. Institute of Music and Dance 2011, p. 7, <http://www.pwst.krakow.pl/?strona=2&lp=3>, retrieved: 15.10.2011.

<sup>23</sup> Information available at International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival: W. Mrozek, *Raport o stanie tańca w województwie śląskim*. Institute of Music and Dance 2011, p. 8, [www.stt.art.pl/index.php?lang=pl](http://www.stt.art.pl/index.php?lang=pl), retrieved: 23.06.2012.

<sup>24</sup> The beginning of the nineties of 20<sup>th</sup> century was in Poland a time of change: many state culture centres were liquidated, on the other hand, press censorship, state monopoly were got rid of. It was also the time of decentralization and commercialization of culture. With too limited state and local support of culture, the shape of it is influenced by the market. The market selects, decides on conditions, it doesn't willingly invest in supporting it, shaping cultural taste, cultural education. In the economic circumstances more often it prefers commerce rather than ambitious and of high aspiration enterprises. Local government being decisive as to local priorities, tend to ignore the matters of culture. The financial support of culture was little or none in those days.



gle with the world and with themselves. (...) In fact, the setting of all plays is in human inside – the arena of the soul’s wrestling with powers that transcend it. (...) The very struggle, which can be best expressed by dance, seems to be for the choreographer the basic sense of life, common to all people regardless of time. In this way, expressing his trust in man and the power of his soul, Łumiński declares for humanism” (Leśnierowska 2002, p. 7-8). As she says, to J. Łumiński the spectator plays the most important role. The performance is an act of communicating a crucial message, affecting the viewer’s reactions, influencing his senses, or, exchanging experience. As opposed to the theatre of word, the dance theatre investigates reality and serves as a mirror, so that audience can take advantage of the opportunity of self- reflection.

Roman Pawłowski of the nation-wide daily “Gazeta Wyborcza” gives following reasons supporting nomination of J. Łumiński to 1997 “Polityka” Passport, award granted annually: “Łumiński has taken up a Sisyphean task, meaning to cultivate modern dance in a country where modern choreography development was frozen for half a century by classical ballet. Łumiński’s original style is his greatest achievement. It draws from Polish and Jewish folklore and is recognized worldwide as the Polish dance style” (Skoczyna 1997, p. 69). The above mentioned style has its specific depth and unique beauty. No wonder the *Silesian Dance Theatre* is recognised and admired abroad.

The prestigious “Dance Magazine” announced J. Łumiński’s name among the top three world choreographers giving fair promise of development. J. Łumiński has proved to be among the most original creators of contemporary dance, his technique allows creation of suggestive arrangements and scenes filled with bravery.

Asked by M. Skocza about his and his theatre’s recent two decades greatest success, he answers: “First and foremost – theatre’s existence acknowledged internationally; strong and powerful. We are recognised. It is important that representatives of institutions established to promote Polish culture worldwide also appreciate the fact. (...) Secondly: the fact that theatre was established in Bytom and, consequently, Bytom citizens are aware of its existence. The awareness is not on a massive scale, yet, it is a proved fact. Thirdly, the *Silesian Dance Theatre’s* work was utilised in the act of establishing a *Dance Theatre Department* in Bytom at the *Ludwik Solski Academy of Theatre* in Cracow. It is beautiful to observe a new generation of youths growing up for contemporary dance, they trust in what we recommend. At the beginning of my teaching, my co-workers would say that I invent everything to make things different. Many of them left us to for the world stages, and today, that they are coming back, they are assuring us that even though they have seen a lot, they have never encountered anything like the creation of the *Silesian Dance Theatre*” (Skocza 2011).

## CONCLUSION

The *Silesian Dance Theatre* in the nineties of 20<sup>th</sup> century initiated an explosion of dance theatres in Poland. Owing to his courage and determination, in 1991 J. Łumiński established the first professional team of contemporary dance. Soon it became the leader on the Polish dance scene. Its significance grew due to J. Łumiński’s managing

skills and promotion abroad. The *Silesian Dance Theatre* works together with numerous Polish and foreign organisations and institutions which support its artistic and social activity. It gained estimation also due to its wide educational engagement. Since the beginning of the nineties of 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-wide and international dance workshops carried out by the *Silesian Dance Theatre* have had immense educational importance. These workshops enabled education of a new generation of Polish dancers, choreographers and adequate schooling of dance teachers. Yet, J. Łumiński's greatest aspiration was establishing the first Polish dance school at university level. After two decades of teaching generations of dancers at various workshops, specialization of "dance theatre actor" came into existence within the framework of the *Ludwik Solski Academy for the Dramatic Arts* in Cracow in the academic year 2007/2008. The specialization resulted from J. Łumiński's educational concept worked out on the basis his lengthy experience of organizing dance workshops. The first graduates of the *Dance Theatre Department* in Bytom will be leaving school in 2012.

The *Silesian Dance Theatre* is renowned for its accuracy as to working on perfection of dance technique. It was J. Łumiński who created dance method based on balance between the extremes. The dancer is situated between the floor and vertical elements of the scenography. This way dramatic dance is exposed and tension created. Dynamic changing of directions, unpredictable falls, polycentrism of impulses, concentration and dispersion of energy are basic elements of J. Łumiński's method. His way of artistic creation has earned him appreciation in Poland and abroad. In his spectacles he successfully combines modern choreography forms with dance and musical heritage of Polish folklore and Jewish tradition. Despite the fact that current J. Łumiński choreographies are less innovative in their composition and movement, formation of the *Choreography Laboratory* at the theatre brings hope for enlivening and creative revival of the team.

No doubt, today's view of contemporary dance in Poland would be completely different if it weren't for J. Łumiński and his *Silesian Dance Theatre* activity. Many generations of dancers and choreographers have been influenced by his work, particularly, by the new dance trends he has introduced. J. Łumiński has entered his name in the history of Poland and the development of contemporary dance at decline of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Translation: Wiesława Grecko-Wajs

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