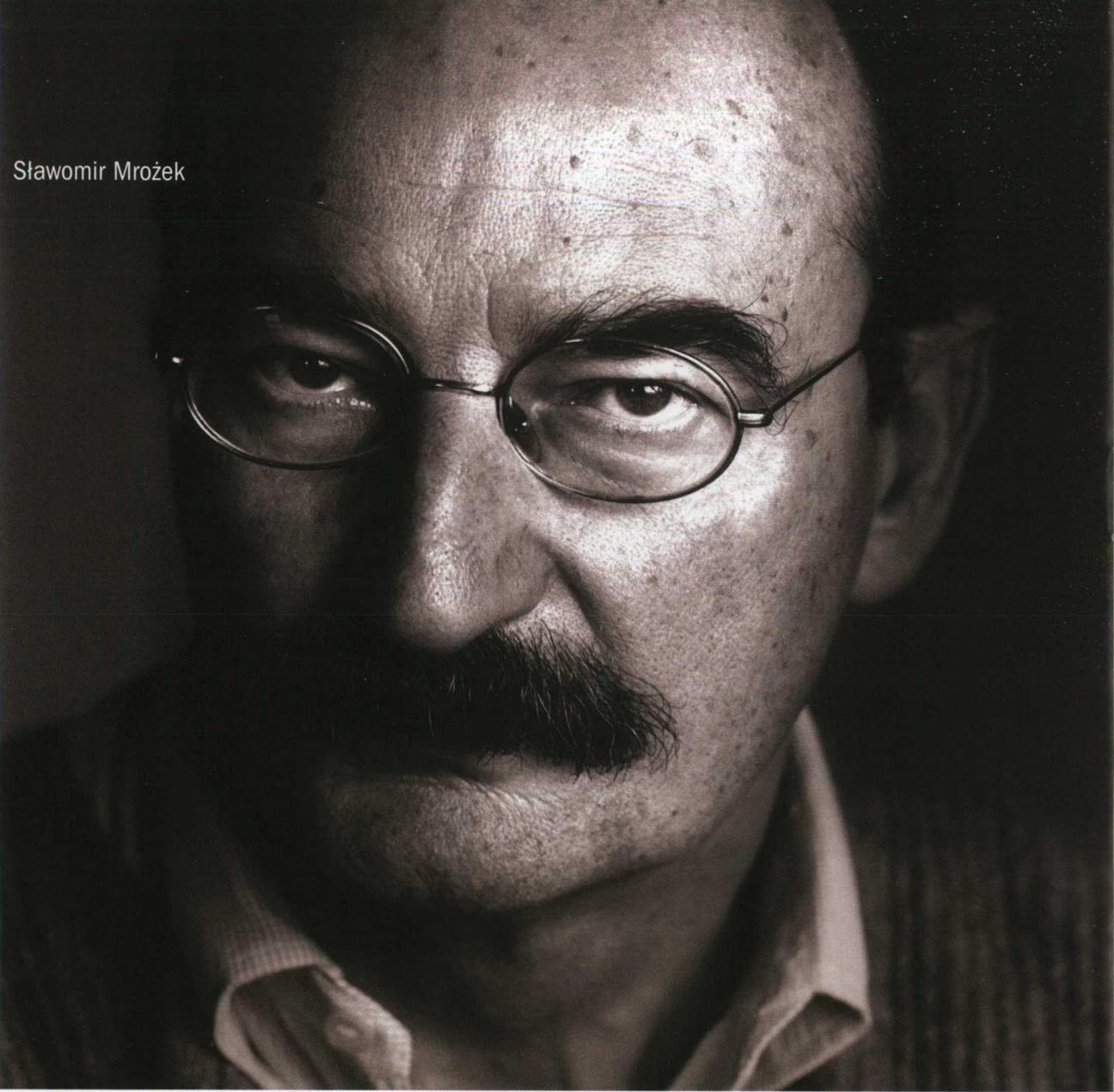


Sławomir Mrożek



BEGW

The Sullen Humorist



JERZY JARZĘBSKI

Jagiellonian University
 PAS Committee on Literature Studies
 Prof. Jerzy Jarzębski is a critic and scholar of contemporary literature focusing on Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz and Stanisław Lem. He is the author of numerous books and publications, winner of the Kościelski Award, and member of the board of PEN International.

Academia: When did you first come across Sławomir Mrożek?

Jerzy Jarzębski: I can't remember when I first started reading Mrożek, but he was undoubtedly the writer of my generation - people born in the late 1940s and studying during the 1960s. He

was our model of literature and humor - absurd humor, at that. I remember a time when Czesław Miłosz wrote in an article reviewing my book about Gombrowicz ["Gra w Gombrowicza, 1982 - ed.] that while he couldn't deny my erudition, he was shocked that my views were so unbecoming of a Pole. He meant that he expected me to fall to my knees before Gombrowicz and confess my sins, or perhaps attack him - after all, what he wrote was harshly critical of Poland, our traditions and ethos. Meanwhile, we had just finished reading Mrożek, and were fully on his (and Gombrowicz's) side.

What was your first Mrożek play - was it "The Police," or perhaps "The Émigrés"?

Neither, actually. To start with, back at high school, I read short stories from the collection "The Elephant," and I followed his cartoons published in the "Przekrój" weekly - "Through Sławomir Mrożek's Glasses." At the time, we saw him purely as a humorist, not noticing the dark dimension to his wit. We thought of his writing as intriguing, but fairly light, so it came as a bit of a shock when he made his name as a dramatist - perfectly serious, albeit maintaining his droll outlook. I remember going to the Grotoska theatre to see "The Martyrdom of Peter Ohey" (1959). In the play, the protagonist suddenly loses his privacy when a tiger makes a lair in his bathroom. So, Ohey is sitting in the hallway, soaking his feet in a bowl, while his wife is being seduced next door, and next to him a teacher leading a school trip proclaims, "Tigers do not destroy crops. If denizens wish to cultivate potatoes in boxes, they can do so without the slightest worry." That's the sort of writing we thrived on - this mixture of absurdity and horror.

"Charlie" (1961) is another play that seems amusing on the surface but has an underlying layer of terror. An ophthalmologist is visited by a half-blind old man, wielding a rifle, led by his grandson. The man suffers from dementia, while the grandson is a simple bully. They are looking for a certain Charlie: the old man wishes to kill him, blindly waving around the rifle. The doctor dashes around his office and cowers behind the sofa, swearing that he isn't Charlie, that he doesn't know Charlie, never even heard of any Charlie. Finally the visitors give up, saying, "We'll be off, then, but if this Charlie turns up, call us." They leave a phone number as they go. The doctor breathes a sigh of relief, and immediately his phone rings: "Charlie here. I'll be along shortly." The ophthalmologist thinks a moment and calls the number left by his visitors. Not that he has to, but he does it anyway. And here we have Mrożek at his most bitter and critical. The situation may seem funny, but it has an undercurrent of cruelty: it suggests that power should be handled with care, and it's best to suck up to those who wield it. The same theme is explored in the one-act play "Out At Sea" (1961). A raft goes adrift in the middle of the ocean, carrying three castaways: Small, Medium and Tall. Soon they are starving, so they are forced to choose which one

will be eaten by the others. They first ponder whether to vote, or draw straws, but the stronger two don't like the odds, so they decide to murder and eat the Small castaway, since he "deserves it." They even convince him that by agreeing to the slaughter, he will contribute to some kind of greater Cause. He believes their assertions, delivering a pathetic parting speech. As he does so, the others find a forgotten tin of food, but instead of admitting it, one whispers to the other, "Leave it, don't show him. Let's not ruin his great moment."

Is this grim vision a reflection of a social order dominated by two categories of people?

You mean the know-it-alls, or the intelligentsia as we like to call them, vs. the uncouth bullies? That's how Mrożek is read by Błoński. I've thought it through again, and I think that the division is oversimplified, even though to some extent it is true. There are different takes on this in Mrożek's plays and short stories. Let's take "Tango" and "The Émigrés." In "Tango," we have a family of intellectuals, active in the artistic spheres, for generations focusing on dismantling and reconstructing social values. The youngest generation, represented by Arthur, tries to revitalize this axiological cultural framework. It all changes with the arrival of Eddie; the ruthless bully takes advantage of Arthur's weakness to seize power. This is something that terrified Mrożek: this arrival of thugs (for example barbarians from the East) who would destroy the entire culture in which we live, replacing it instead with a notebook filled with platitudes copied from a mate who works down the cinema. In "The Émigrés," two Poles live under the stairs in a hovel somewhere in the West. One, AA, is an intellectual, a political migrant writing an opus on the perfect slave. The other, XX, is a slave himself; a slave to labor. He is trying to save up to return home, so he humiliates himself in his toil, doesn't spend any money, and saves every penny just so that he can feel like a bigwig on his return to Poland. So here we also have a "wiseguy" and a "uncouth simpleton", except in a different form - XX is not a cynical monster like Eddie, but instead he is an under-educated simple man with a strong family instinct.

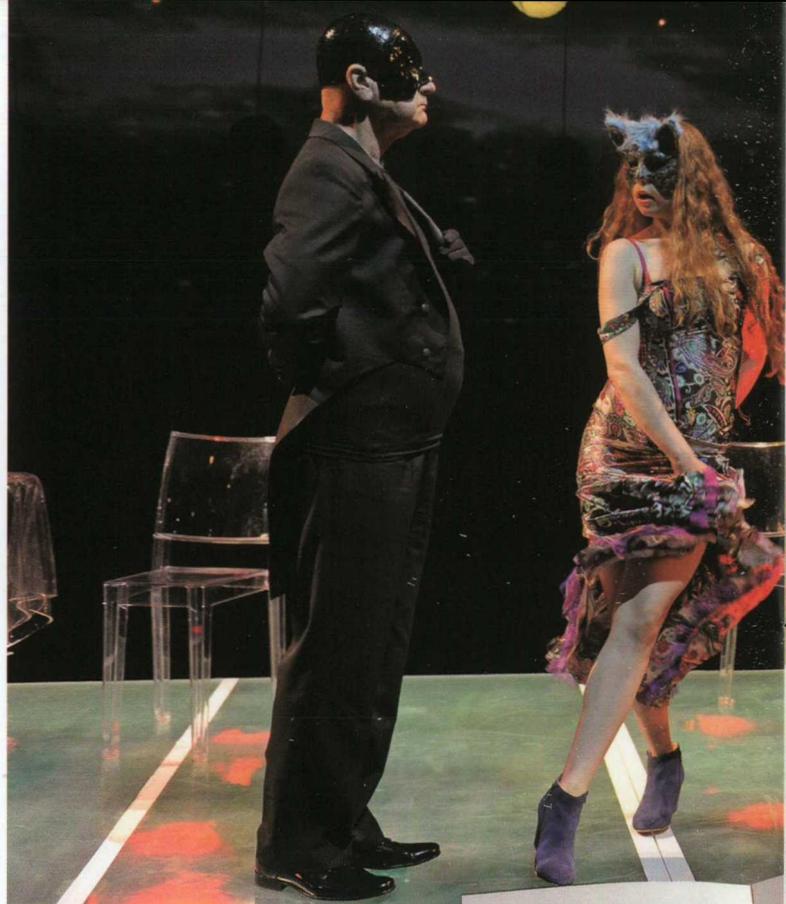
What do you see as the source of this dualism?

I'm convinced that Mrożek had serious trouble coming to terms with his own identity, and I think that these two traits are the flip sides of his

Sławomir Mrożek

own personality. Of course he tends towards the intellectual, even though he didn't come from a family of long-standing intelligentsia or any kind of upper classes. In any case, regardless of his background, Mrożek understood rural Poland and its inhabitants, and never idealized them, even though he had a certain empathy for them, suggesting that he identified with them at least in part. There were many such ambiguities of his existence and factors shaping it. After all, he was suspended between the East and the West; he came from the absurd country that is Poland, where people intertwine hilarious, romantically stylized declamations with pastoral chitchat. He used this to great effect in "The Turkey," with the quips being some of the best known excerpts from Mrożek's works.

The protagonist of "The Hunchback" is another character with a clearly dual personality. The intellectuals at the boarding house where the action takes place abandon it fleeing from the impending war, leaving behind the invalid, a true misfit. In "Vatzlav," the hero finds himself in a similar position: he is a man from Eastern Europe who makes his way to the West, where he is forced to "perform" himself. He remains undefined, and he must come up with a new concept of self to fit in with the new situation. Mrożek found himself in all these positions, never quite certain who he really was, and he was tortured by his own identity. Very important in this context is the beginning of the "Journal," which was saved from destruction. It's 1962, and Mrożek is working on a play "Who's There" - a work he never published or even finished. The protagonist is Almost Johnny. Other characters are also "almost," not quite defined, not quite complete: a quasi-milkmaid, a not-quite-father, a not-quite-mother. They are like that, because that is Mrożek's main problem: he must define himself first, but in reality it isn't something he can do. The torment is based on the fact that he has been shaped by a culture that follows a clear value system and has a clear social structure. Meanwhile, the culture has been destroyed by its own participants, as happens in "Tango." Or perhaps the world is simply backwards, as in "Carnival." The latter features a few well-known characters, such as Satan and Lilith. They appear to be clearly-defined, and yet they remain somewhat negated: no one is quite who they are supposed to be. Mrożek's tactics mean that his world is fuzzy, almost shattered, without clear definitions. It is under constant threat from disorder and chaos.

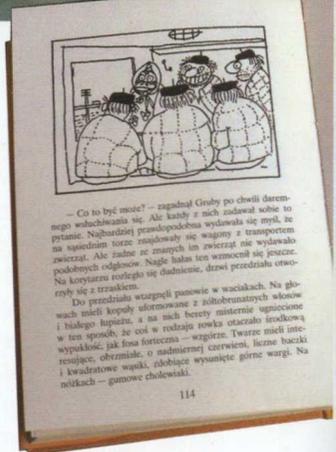


During the 1960s, Mrożek's plays were performed at theatres throughout Western Europe. What made them so popular?

It wasn't just ordinary popularity; it was success on an unprecedented scale, and not just in Europe. I've seen a summary: every year, several theatres around the world staged Mrożek's plays. And why? Because his dramas were simply universal. The issues presented in "Tango" are easily extrapolated to situations in different cultures. It's the same for "The Émigrés." We all know that scores of writers lived in exile throughout the 20th century. Expatriates had been numerous ever since the interwar period, and to a large extent they were responsible for shaping world literature, so Mrożek's play captured something shared by many others around the globe. In 1960, I saw "Out At Sea" staged by an American student theatre. In their interpretation, Small Castaway was cast as a Latino - representing ethnic minorities - Medium was an American middle manager, while Tall was a fat capitalist with pockets overflowing with money. Mrożek's writing translated perfectly into American categories.

Which of Mrożek's plays is important and current enough to be on Poland's stages now? I was thinking of "Tango" and "The Émigrés."

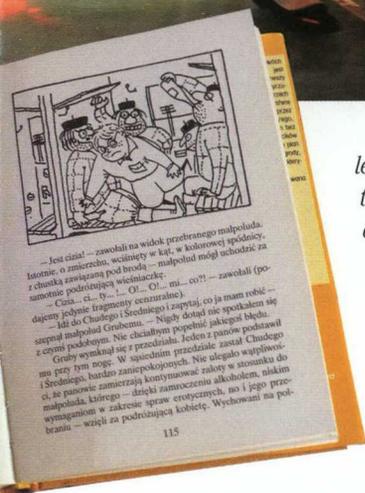
That's a very difficult question. Of course both meet your criteria, but there is an additional prob-



"Carnival, or the First Wife of Adam" as staged by Teatr Polski (dir. Jarosław Gajewski). Photo shows Jerzy Schejbal as Satan and Afrodyta Weselak as Lilith. Teatr Narodowy is also staging "Tango" directed by Jerzy Jaroeki



Jarub Ostrowski (2)



Know-it-alls (intellectuals) and uncouth thugs are the two dominant categories among Mrozek's characters. Here they are shown on sketches illustrating "Escape South" (edition published in 2002 by Noir sur Blanc)

lem that makes it difficult to transpose them to the contemporary reality. Both are examples of dramas that are clearly defined in terms of their existence on stage. There are other plays – such as some penned by Gombrowicz – that can be modified in a myriad ways; plays that exist on stage and evolve on it. It's not always that simple with Mrozek. This is partly the fault of our unequivocal perception of him as a writer who can't stand directors interfering with his writing, a writer who gets very closely involved with formulating the tasks for actors, stage designers, and so on. He was even sometimes seen as a manipulator – an author with a very clear vision of what's supposed to be happening on stage, and one who creates characters that are a little artificial. In any case Mrozek admitted it himself with a certain disdain, since it was an aspect of his work he enjoyed less. Additionally, I think it's difficult to introduce major changes to plays with an autobiographical element. In the screenplay "Amor," set shortly before the end of the Second World War, and in the drama "On Foot," taking place just after the war, he tackles father-son relationships. Both works are centered around a young boy, struggling with adolescence, finding his place in the world around him, and trying to make sense of things, while the world is in tumult, everything is changing rapidly, and political and social chaos seems overwhelming. This is very significant, and it really shouldn't be manipulated on stage in any way.

Mrozek earned a label of being detached, almost autistic. What was he really like?

I didn't really know him well enough on personal terms, so it's hard for me to say. We talked maybe five times. I met him at social gatherings at Błoński's a few times, but he usually just sat quietly and didn't talk to anyone. But it is widely known that he was much more open around women. One of my friends somehow found a common ground with him, and in his latter years – before he moved to Nice – she frequently conversed with him. There is another anecdote. One time, a few journalists came over from Ukraine, hoping to learn about Polish art and literature. Beautiful ladies. I presented a lecture, and afterwards I went along to a meeting between them and Mrozek. And he really relaxed, unwound, and talked throughout the evening – as though the silent hermit never existed.

What about Mrozek and politics? In 1968, he signed a letter against the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, in 1981 he spoke out against the introduction of martial law in Poland...

He was incredibly critical of the political system in Poland. The opinions he expressed in correspondence were extremely harsh. He did not allow for compromise or attempts to negotiate with the authorities. Of course, in his youth he was quite seriously involved in building the new Communist system, but he retracted almost immediately. Generally speaking, he wasn't political. His dramas are political in nature, of course, but he didn't tend to make a stand on individual events apart from the obvious ones you have already mentioned. It could be said that with all his inherent criticism, he remained a bit of an outsider.

But isn't it true to say that Mrozek's decision to move to Nice shows that his relationship with Poland was troubled?

Mrozek's relationship with Poland was always strained, since he simply couldn't tolerate the pomposity of Polish customs. As such, I think it's almost comical that his remains are the first to be interred at the new pantheon at the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul in Kraków. This gesture implies that he was a national and Catholic hero, even though he was clearly neither. I get the impression that even in his passing, Mrozek is playing an elaborate, grim trick on us. ■

Interview by Anna Zawadzka