

Christian Understanding of Patriotism in Selected Child and Youth Theatre Plays

Chrześcijańska wizja patriotyzmu w wybranych spektaklach dla dzieci i młodzieży

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Abstract: Patriotic upbringing in the spirit of Christian faith is an important factor influencing the development of children and teenagers. It emphasizes the importance of tradition, which holds space for historical figures who become role models. In this process, theatre activities prepared by youngsters and addressed to their peers play a major role. Among numerous stage plays of questionable quality, appears a growing number of groups who approach this task with an increasing level of maturity, especially in recent years. They operate within biotheatre and create biogramas (often while being unaware of it). The historical figures mentioned in this article and brought to life by a few particular theatre groups exemplify the direction theatre initiatives for young audiences are heading towards.

Keywords: Youth theater, amateur theater, biograma, biotheatre, patriotism, education

Abstrakt: Wychowanie do patriotyzmu w duchu chrześcijańskim jest istotnym elementem rozwoju dzieci i młodzieży. Skupia się ono na ukazaniu istotnej roli, jaką spełnia tradycja, w której wyjątkowe postaci mogą być wzorem do naśladowania. Ważną rolę w tym procesie pełnią różne aktywności teatralne, przygotowywane przez młodych i skierowane do ich rówieśników. Wśród wielu bardzo słabych przedstawień teatralnych dostrzec można w ostatnich latach pojawiające się środowiska, które w coraz bardziej świadomy sposób podchodzą do tego zadania. Działając na polu bioteatru, stwarzają (często będąc tego nieświadomymi) tzw. „biogramaty”. Zaprezentowane w artykule postaci ukazane przez wybrane zespoły teatralne są przykładem ukazującym kierunek rozwoju tej części działań artystycznych skierowanych do dzieci i młodzieży.

Słowa kluczowe: teatr amatorski, teatr młodzieżowy, biogramat, bioteatr, patriotyzm, wychowanie



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INTRODUCTION

The subject of patriotism, which appears in theatre plays addressed to young audiences focuses mainly on didacticism and morality. The goal of such plays is not only to introduce the audience to compelling historical events and figures, but also to shape proper attitudes towards life. Traditional understanding of patriotism which emerged at the time Poland was not being considered a sovereign country, may be defined as devotion to one's homeland, as well as respect and admiration of it. Such outlook encourages sacrifice and readiness to defend the nation's independence. Youngsters brought up with the spirit of patriotism in mind tend to prioritize their country over their personal gain. Moreover, they are ready to work for the country's well-being and sacrifice their health or even life for it, if necessary.

According to Polish Church, the Christian understanding of patriotism emphasizes the importance of attachment to and concern for one's motherland, which is built upon several historically shaped characteristics such as: statehood, language, nation, culture and tradition, as well as the legacy of separate regions of the country and their local specificity (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 1972).

Among collectives such as family, school, religious community or various non-governmental organizations, which introduce younger generations to patriotism, a vital role in creating and shaping cultural environments is played by activists.

The issue of globalization tasks them with teaching next generations of Poles how dramatic our history has been, as well as with emphasizing the beauty of Polish lands and the uniqueness of Polish literature, music, art, film or theatre. Rapid societal and technological changes call for a diligent search for proper language and collaboration space between high and mass culture, where vast traditionalism of Polish customs and invaluable experiences of past generations can interact with the current experiences, hopes and worries of generations of the present (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 1972, 11).

Lately, the topic of patriotism has been raised in academic discourse, however, the interpretations of this issue and the methods of teaching about it tend to focus on propagating certain opinions and forming political/societal agendas rather than highlighting the importance of homeland in the nation's history or personal histories of individuals. Those interpretations concentrate on identifying the wrongs of one's special relationship with their country and precipitous understanding of such connection by describing patriotism as a chauvinistic or nationalistic movement. The circles which embrace such an approach are attempting to label Poles as hostile towards different nations, which allegedly do not accept their right of sovereignty and independence. They draw attention to Poles' mistakes and incorrect comprehension of history. Moreover, they push for severing ties with the past in order to build a future for the contemporary youth.

There do exist certain theatre communities, be that adolescent or those performing for adolescent audience, which occasionally discuss the subject of traditionally understood patriotism. Mostly, however, their works are not of the best

quality as regards both their form and subject matter. Their choices often allude to socialist realism without proper understanding of it. Lines recited in a barely acceptable way, static presentations or archaic methods of performing fail to reach contemporary viewers. A fatigued onlooker not only ignores what is being presented to them, but also associates such form with unrealistic, vapid spectacle, detached from reality.

Nevertheless, among the myriad of badly told stories, another kind of plays is slowly emerging, namely, plays which challenge the widespread belief that they are mediocre and ineffective. These theatrical pieces attempt to discuss the events in Polish history in an appealing manner and introduce the audience to remarkable historical figures which, in turn, may encourage viewers to engage in reflection. Such an approach is often presented by those who adhere to the Christian concept of upbringing. Their works exemplify biographical drama, or *biograma*, a movement in Polish dramatic literature whose popularity has grown in the last several decades.

1. REMEMBERED BIOGRAPHIES

The usage of biographies in theatre has recently caused the emergence of artistic movements such as biographical theatre (*biotheatre*) and biographical drama (*biograma*). They are not easy to classify, however, they may be described by recurrent sources of inspiration. Those phenomena, although popular during various periods of Polish dramaturgy, have been meticulously analysed only recently. Several valuable elaborations in which the subject was addressed attempted to characterize *biograma* as a new dramatic form which arose due to various modifications and amalgamations of older literary genres.

In the area of the latest, widely varied practices of writing for theatre, a particular interest may be observed in biography as an artistic expression genre as well as an inspiration for screenplays and theatre plays. Theatrical and dramaturgical projects inspired by the lives of famous individuals or, in broad terms, literary and stage representations of particular individuals' lives, very often appear in modern works of the Polish theatre and, when it comes to individual performance techniques, they are quite diverse – which has been enough to invent separate terminology for them in the field of critical and academic commentary (Popczyk-Szcześna 2020, 59).

In the last few decades, it can be observed that theatre writers exhibit an increasing interest in biographies. This interest is manifested in the emergence of various dramaturgical works based on the lives of chosen individuals in the form of *biograma* on stage. However, in modern theatre, biography is often treated as a tool for exploring alternative realities. Such an application helps to present history in an unconventional manner and allows artists to highlight historical details which for various reasons have not yet been addressed. Among the playwrights and directors who employ this form of narration are: Wiktor Rubin, Paweł Demirski, Krystian Lupa, Jerzy Jarocki, Remigiusz Brzyk and Michał Zadara.

Biotheatre and *biograma* go beyond the limits of classic biography and separate themselves from its traditional patterns of presentation. In modern

theatre biography is neither the main part of stage narration, nor a central point impacting the plot. It is merely regarded as a starting point and an opportunity to highlight problems minimized and silenced in the past. And nowadays, artists desire the freedom to speak about them confidently and courageously.

With that in mind, the elements of biograma in theatre developing in Christian communities and aimed at children as well as adolescents and teenagers assume a different role. Playwrights, who have familiarized themselves with details of certain personas' lives attempt to convey them on stage and present them to young audience members in a reliable manner. The choice of stories told in this process is not arbitrary. Most often, the characters are known to the youngsters, are somewhat connected to them or have the capacity to become their role models. These works are written for the sake of neither reckoning with history, nor attempting to use specific biographies as vehicles for directors' opinions. In this regard the plays are slightly conservative and focus on the well-known, but sometimes forgotten facts as well as introduce viewers to the profiles of certain occasionality.

2. ROLE MODELS IN WOJCIECH KUŁAK'S "TUTAJ JEST DOBRZE"

Nurturing patriotic values begins in families, however, during the process of upbringing, schools come to play a major role in it. That process is a cycle of various activities which ought to be perpetual and continuously actualized. In this process

the witnessing of life, in which such values find their place, carries notable significance. Respecting one's homeland and developing a personal sense of patriotism becomes a link with other nations as well as uplifts the spirit of friendship and cooperation in the name of personal dignity, dignity of others and common good. Patriotic principles unite other values such as love, freedom, responsibility, justice, solidarity, family, honour, loyalty, labour, respect and courtesy (Drzeżdżon 2013, 79).

One of the more interesting examples of schools which emphasizes the importance of shaping mature moral attitudes, including those related to patriotism, is the St. John Bosco's Salesian School Complex in Łódź. There, a prolific theatre group, *Teatr BezNazwy*¹ ("Theatre Without A Name") has operated since 2005. Its artistic activity plays an important role in nurturing patriotism. Owing to such artistic initiative, children and teenagers gain understanding of the world, develop their passions, interests and, through studying/performing scenes based on biographies of numerous figures, learn about their histories, which, in turn, helps them raise their national awareness. Since the group's inception, over five hundred students have participated in its activities, and fruits of their labour in the form of plays can be admired by countless young audience members. It was this group which performed a play created by a Salesian, Wojciech Kułak, titled *Tutaj*

¹ Further details on the group's history and its educational significance may be found in Lach 2020, 134-145.

*Jest Dobrze*² (“It is great here”). The work tells a story about a group of juvenile boys from Poznań during World War II. The screenplay, built upon various biographical documents of young people from the city, is a tale of youth, joy, friendship, and immense courage. Such reports prove to be greatly inspiring to young spectators in the present day, just as they were at the time of World War II. The characters: Czesław Józwiak, Jarogniew Wojciechowski, Edward Kaźmierski, Franciszek Kęsy and Edward Klinik – known as “the Poznań Five” – experience the war as young students of the Salesian oratory in Wroniecka street in Poznań. Their story is often adapted to theatre plays in order to encourage self-reflection and introduce the audience members, especially the young ones, to new role models. The seventy fifth anniversary of the heroic boys’ deaths was the catalyst for the play to be created.

The narration contains the young boys’ story arcs developing around certain locations where war prisoners were detained. Wronki, Berlin, Zwickau and Drezno are associated with subsequent stages of Gestapo investigation and interrogation of captives. There, the main characters mature rather quickly and alter their way of thinking. They undergo spiritual metamorphosis akin to the Mysteries of The Rosary which describe the events in the Passion of Christ and aid the characters in their suffering from the hands of the homeland’s enemy. What the boys had experienced was possible to be described in a screenplay thanks to the authentic letters sent to their loved ones from prison. The letters, surviving in good condition until today, are important pieces of evidence, which visualize the horrors of those events.

My dearest Liduś! I have enjoyed the holidays like never before. I even sang carols, though only for a short while. The guards did not like it. As punishment, I had to stand still. Throughout the entire Christmas day, I stood in water reaching my waist. But I still felt Baby Jesus being born. (...) My dearest parents, you ask me if the joy I’m writing to you with is dishonest. Not at all! I am not falsely joyful or falsely sad. Whenever I feel worried, or pleased, it is real and honest. I’m learning to suffer with a smile on my face. (...). My lovely sister! Today, after having experienced many lessons about life, I look at the world differently. Prison changes a person. (...) My beloved! I am sending you all some of my mementos. Mainly, this album. It is not nice-looking, but to me it is very valuable (*Tutaj jest dobrze*. BezNazwy Theatre. Screenplay: Wojciech Kułak, pp. 10-11).

These well-preserved letters not only describe real-life events, but also allow modern audience to peek into the souls of the boys from Poznań. Sincere documents written by the youngsters have become a guiding light and an incredible tool aiding in the upbringing of a current teen in the spirit of patriotism (Musielak 2017; Skibilska 2022). Presented as a stage play and performed by actors in an age range similar to the characters’, they are crucial to shaping and promoting the notion of loving one’s homeland.

Such attitudes, however, cannot be learned from textbooks. Discovering and incorporating them into one’s life may happen only when the intellectual approach is

² *Tutaj jest dobrze*. BezNazwy Theatre. Screenplay: Wojciech Kułak. Direction: Sylwia Gajewska. Premiered: May 7, 2017. Łódź.

being enriched with real experiences and feelings. Hence, in school systems, recounts of past events play a major role, especially when told by the current students' peers, who had treated the subject of admiration for homeland as a foundation for personal growth – not only intellectual and theoretical, but also confirmed by their own, often tragic choices. If the concept of patriotism is assumed to stand for a collection of attitudes with national identity at their core, then the example of five young men from Poznań, tortured and murdered by Nazis, becomes essential in the process of perfecting and determining correct civil attitudes.

Wojciech Kułak's stage play has been performed by the young theatre adepts in Łódź on numerous occasions, each time met with critical acclaim. Model behaviour of the teenage martyrs is still being promoted by various Salesian circles for educational and pastoral purposes all over Poland. New monographs, in-person meetings or theatre activities inspired by the lives of "the Poznań Five" appear to this day.

3. LITTLE HOMELANDS IN PAWEŁ OZGA'S "KSIĄDZ DOMINIK MAJ – KAPŁAN SERCA BOŻEGO"

The effectiveness of proper raising of children and teens strongly depends on education which ought to be accurate, diverse and responsive to modern requirements of educational institutions. However, it has to be noted that patriotic upbringing does not happen in societal isolation. Separately from the didactic process, family and family traditions, literature, mass media or religious education impact the sense of patriotism the most.

How a child's personality as well as its sense of personal, societal and national identity develop depend on which educational model is followed. With that in mind, before admiration for the history of one's country and nation can truly mature, the importance of a different measure should be noted, namely,

aiding a child in building a concept of "little homeland" by creating opportunities for new experiences in the nearest area. Such aiding is tailored to their psychophysical characteristics as well as their immediate comprehension capabilities. It stimulates their behaviour with eagerness to learn and openness to what is and who is new (Drzeżdżon 2013, 76).

The youth's identification with their local history and its heroes may develop with the help of educational paths which are being implemented in many communities and relate to cultural legacy of particular areas where the youth reaches adulthood. In practice, children and teens, in agreement with previously established goals, gain and broaden their knowledge about their region, people, customs and culture. Such a "little homeland," intertwined with family or local collectives, becomes dear to students, and strengthens their regional and national identity.

An example of a collective whose formal purpose revolves around educating minors is Happy Childhood Foundation,³ which has operated in Lublin since

³Happy Childhood Foundation – Fundacja Szczęśliwe Dzieciństwo.

1990. For more than three decades, the organisation has originated a variety of training schemes for children, adolescents and adults who work with youngsters. The founders developed a formative/educational program called Youth Academy to carefully guide the newest generation of Poles through their early years of life.

The program of Youth Academy is built upon three pillars: God, Honour and Homeland. Those fundamental values do not strictly pertain to ideals. Participants strive for incorporating them into their life by completing detailed programs of religious and societal formation initiatives as well as by honing their talents throughout the period of 12 semesters (6 years). Pupils' progress on the way to academic prowess is measured by obtaining Shells and Pearls, successively accumulated throughout the years and proudly displayed on a blue sash. What makes Youth Academy so valuable is the method of teaching which appeals to adolescents – youth theatre and television. TV programmes produced by teens promote important ideas and values. Theatre plays themed around faith and patriotism are also presented on stage. Parish Magazines are regularly published with great success. Additionally, evangelical gatherings are being hosted; they encourage prayer to Virgin Mary for fruitful education.⁴

One of the fundamental elements of shaping a young person is inspiring their passion for theatre. Under the wing of experienced instructors, the pupils of Youth Academy periodically put together new theatre productions, in which they discuss subjects relevant to their peers. In 2016 one of the groups created a play titled *Ksiądz Dominik Maj – Kapłan Serca Bożego*⁵ (“Reverend Dominik Maj – the Preacher of God’s Heart”). The screenplay references focal points of his life and is based on a book by Rev. Jerzy Krawczyk (Krawczyk 2016). The publication contains a biography of the clergyman from Bychawa, interviews with witnesses of his activities, memories of him as well as numerous photos and images. It is an important document which authenticates the life of this charismatic priest. Even though 50 years have passed since his death, the memory of Rev. Maj is still alive, especially in the local community. He was a seemingly ordinary person, however, he had suffered in concentration camps during Communism. Rev. Dominik Maj is considered one of the Rays of Dachau. He died in Bychawa and is remembered as a saint.

To pay tribute to him on an anniversary of his death, young members of local theatre group decided to create a stage show about this remarkable cleric. The play was presented in the Culture Centre in Bychawa. On the opening night, pupils from Youth Academy performed alongside local priests, teachers, children and adults from parishes of St. John the Baptist and St. Francis as well as those from the parish of St. Francis of Assisi in Bychawa. The stage show is an example of biograma which presents a biography of a specific figure, who might be an individual unknown

⁴ The program and main objectives of Youth Academy are listed on its website: <https://akademiamlodziejowa.pl/> (access: July 12, 2023).

⁵ *Ksiądz Dominik Maj – Kapłan Serca Bożego*, Screenplay and direction: Paweł Ozga, premiered: May 7, 2017, Youth Academy Theatre, Bychawa.

to the masses, yet particularly important to the local, little homeland. One may refer to him as a martyr, who had survived the great torment of concentration camps and surrendered himself to self-sacrifice and tirelessly worked for the well-being of others. This phrase represents the essence of his existence. Even today the gravestone of Rev. Maj at Bychawa's cemetery is surrounded with vigil lights; he is considered a saint by those who regularly ask for his intercession.

The play validates the memory of the clergyman who had devoted his life to fellow believers. This memory is still alive and confirms a claim even the smallest amount of effort may motivate local communities to take part in creative activities. The stage show could be considered a history lesson. It reminded the audience about Rev. Maj's qualities, the most important events from his life, including the stay at the concentration camp in Dachau, as well as his last will. It is also a different approach to his legacy; a moving spectacle experienced in the flesh by the audience members who might have never heard of him before and, owing to this theatre event, could be inspired to become better people.

Because of such initiatives, youngsters, while learning about astonishing tales of key figures in history, develop a personal connection with their local circles. Additionally, they promote amplified patriotic awareness, especially to their peers, by playing certain characters on stage. Youth Academy pupils, through their abundant artistic efforts, pursue the path of wisdom and responsibility for their country. Each semester at the Academy focuses on one collective: family, fatherland or the Church. Youngsters eagerly study those collectives and seek answers to questions such as: how to build adequate groups or how to be level-headed leaders. By researching their history, they define their individual position in modernity.

4. EVANGELICAL MODEL IN BENEDYKTA KAROLINA BAUMANN'S "MIŁOŚĆ ZMARTWYCHWSTAŁA"

Christian formation of children and adolescents focuses on the axiological aspect of patriotism – awakening awareness of mature humanity, which does not fear following Christ. The pupils are presented with the truth about faith as a foundation of life and the truth about humans as beings created in God's image. As a result, children and teens sensitised to the basic Christian values become patriots for whom the principles such as: truth, love, mercy, courage, honour, generosity and respect of others' dignity become paramount. Therefore, a connection between spirituality and patriotism is not surprising.

In 2020, a theatre group called *Dziki Koty* ("Wild Cats") operating at the Bolesław I the Brave High School in Kłodzko created a musical inspired by the life of Bl. Julia Rodzińska, a Dominican sister and a martyr of the concentration camp in Stutthof. Owing to artistic initiatives of the director and author of the libretto, sister Benedykta Baumann, residents of Kłodzko and neighbouring villages had an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the story of a beatified sufferer through a play titled *Miłość*

*zmartwychwstała*⁶ (“Love Resurrected”). The audience of the musical was mostly comprised of students who were taking part in school Lenten retreat. Later, the show was performed on several different occasions in front of a bigger, varied crowd. The absence of excessive set design, the presence of play of light as well as only essential props and costumes being used let the spectators focus on the story told by young actors and brought them back to the time Bl. Julia Rodzińska lived.

Difficult life of the Dominican sister, who was one of the 108 beatified Polish martyrs of World War II, became the focal point of the libretto, based on sister Benedykta’s publication titled *Niebo w kolorze popiołu* (“Ash-coloured Sky”) (Baumann 2020). It is a yet another example of biotheatre – a play derived from a biography of a particular figure. The first part of the musical presents little Stasia as an orphan, then recalls her time at the gymnasium, her monastic vocation and communal/educational initiatives in Vilnius during the interwar period. In the second part the audience witnesses the dramatic fate of Poles in Vilnius region after the outbreak of WWII. The third part visually transports spectators to the concentration camp in Stutthof, where sister Julia fulfilled her Dominican and Christian calling among tormented and hopeless prisoners as well as violent officers of coercive apparatus of the Nazis – until her untimely demise.

In the story of Bl. Julia Rodzińska, sister Benedykta noted her incredible resilience which had given mankind hope in a time when fear loomed large over the world. Despite the Coronavirus pandemic, which, after the premiere, prevented it from being performed for months, the play gained new depth after the end of its hiatus. The account of those specific events became a universal example of a self-aware person deciding for themselves, following their vocation and taking on a “sign of the times” role. Even though beatified sister Rodzińska never drew attention to her heritage, her subservience and devotion to morals she had been taught may inspire humility and dutifulness in others.

CONCLUSION

In modern theatre, especially since at least the end of the twentieth century, increased popularity of biography may be observed. The vast majority of current dramaturgical and theatre projects utilize texts and screenplays inspired by biographical material. This trend, which focuses mostly on presenting the profiles of extraordinary historical figures is a suitable method of upbringing adolescents in the spirit of patriotism. Unfortunately, its interpretations vary.

The interest in biograma in contemporary theatre prioritizes rediscovering forgotten truths about humanity and revealing hidden details previously present in public discourse. It explores alternative realities which are simultaneously dependant on outstanding traits of biographies’ main characters, and conditioned by how the stories of specific figures were told. Creators of the present day are

⁶ *Miłość zmartwychwstała*, direction and libretto: Benedykta Karolina Baumann, music: Przemysław Piechocki, premiered: March 9, 2020, Wild Cats Theatre, Kłodzko.

especially sensitive to the aforementioned aspect of biographies forged by only seemingly neutral, a priori rules. Therefore, the material which is used by them for their stage work is only a pretext – biography is a starting point, not a central aspect of stage narration. It slightly differs, however, when it comes to modern amateur theatre. For many theatre groups, focusing on biographies becomes an opportunity to present particular historical figures to the audience, which may encourage children and teens in particular, to reflect and emulate those characters.

This idea can be often seen in groups created for educational purposes. Schools, various foundations and associations, as well as religious communities frequently stress the importance of raising the youth in the spirit of patriotism. Previously mentioned collectives: the school in Łódź, Youth Academy in Lublin or the theatre from Kłodzko are only a few examples of initiatives in this field. Admittedly, a faulty formal approach, or incorrect patterns being followed (such as archaically structured commemorative plays) are often noticeable in many school theatres, however, their lively and sincere involvement in those projects cannot be overlooked. The subject of patriotism in stage shows created by those communities, despite not always being met with enthusiasm of critics, works well as an educational tool. It is beneficial to focus on further professional development of those groups as well as to recognise how much of an important role they play in advocating for maturing in the spirit of patriotism.

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