



Kasia Lech

Dramaturgy of Form: Performing Verse in Contemporary Theatre (2021)

How does verse function on stage from a dramaturgical point of view? How is verse always heteroglossic, always 'in dialogue', and always the result of multiple interpretations? Where is verse located in performance now, and why has it slipped out of view as a formal and compositional device?

In this Library interview Kasia Lech introduces us to *Dramaturgy of Form: Performing Verse in Contemporary Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2021), which pays attention to the dramaturgical effects of verse on the contemporary stage, exploring case studies from playwriting, musicals, experimental performance, hip hop and gig theatre and digital media, across a number of cultures and languages.

Kasia Lech is a scholar, actor, storyteller, and puppeteer. She is a Senior Lecturer in Performing Arts at Canterbury Christ Church University, where her research focuses on verse, translation, and cross-cultural encounters.

[00:00:15 to 00:01:19] Montage of video material from YouTube trailers for Marta Górnicka's *Hymn do miłości* (2017), Teatro Inverso's *Rosaura* (2016) and Inua Ellams' *The 14th Tale* (2009), selected by Kasia Lech and edited by Juan Salazar

[00:01:22] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

The title of this book is *Dramaturgy of Form: Performing Verse in Contemporary Theatre*.

[00:01:35] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

The idea for the book and my work on verse goes back all the way to the early 2000s, studying in a drama school in Wrocław – a Polish state drama school. In my second-year assessment – Interpretation of Verse runs for three years in a Polish drama school, and that's a separate subject from voice work, for example – in the second year you work with the classics. So anything from Polish romantics to Polish renaissance to Shakespeare and Calderón, et cetera. But you work in a sort of two-three weeks' system. So you work on a monologue but you never finish it, you leave it and then you go to the next one, the next one, the next one. And then for the assessment you pick one of them that you worked on and you perform it. And I picked this precious 19th-century monologue of Princess Wiśniowiecka. She has a vision, she is a woman that married below her 'status' and also was haunted by visions of Poland – there's a lot of things happening in those dramatic Polish dramas! In that text she needs to perform that she's okay to marry somebody else, even though she's already married to someone else, and at the same time she's haunted by a vision that she's trying to suppress because she doesn't want people around her to see that she has that vision. It is written in a beautiful way by Juliusz Słowacki, that when she goes into a vision, it starts getting sing-songy because she is half-Ukrainian, has Ukrainian roots. And I really wanted to perform it. That was my favourite subject, Interpretation of Verse, so I spent hours researching it, trying it, playing with it, and just had this whole vision to perform it. My professor was totally with me, so you know he might have not been exactly happy with how I was performing, but he was getting the vision and my ownership of it.

And then came the assessment. In a Polish drama school, at that time – I don't really know how it is exactly at the moment – it wasn't that the professor that was assessing you was the professor that was training you, it was the entire professorship of the school coming in, watching it as a performance and then meeting for an hour, two, three hours and marking every single one of us individually. And we're trying to listen to what's happening and not being able to. And he came out of



that assessment, and he said: 'Well, you know, I'm going to give your grades', because you get the grades publicly, there's no feedback, just grades. And he said: 'Well, before I read the grades, I just want to say that there is one grade I disagree with.' And that was my grade. I got three and a half, which is really poor, and that broke my heart because I did not understand what was happening and I couldn't get any feedback. I was really upset because I had this vision. And he didn't understand as well because, you know, people were saying: 'Oh, the dress wasn't this and the dress wasn't that, and she wasn't looking where I wanted her to look.' And that was very difficult. On the same day – that was a morning assessment – on the same night we had Contemporary Scene assessment with a professor that was there as well at that assessment. He gave us feedback at the end for our assessment, and he was saying: 'Kasia, you know I also want to address your verse performance.' And I said: 'Yes', you know, still heartbroken. And he said: 'There were a lot of things said about you, that you know about too much thought went into costume, all that stuff. But actually, none of that was a problem. The problem was that you got yourself so much into rhythm that it became very emotionally monotonous, and that was the biggest problem. I disagree with everything else that was said.'

And it made me start thinking about that, and I wrote my Masters thesis about acting with verse and how verse provides acting tools and means of expression. That was supposed to be then turned into a PhD with Professor Pięczka at the University of Wrocław, who unfortunately died a few months after I graduated. At the same time straight after that assessment, my professors of verse, three of them, asked me to sit in the classes and start doing assistantship. It's the way drama schools in Poland work: you do a PhD, that's one thing, but also you need to do 'assistantship' to be lecturers. I started doing assistantship with them, so I was sitting in the classes and watching others and giving feedback and helping professors to communicate with younger students. And that happened still after I graduated from drama school, I continued that. So there were those two things happening... Then it all went on pause when I went to Ireland. I just took a complete career break that I needed. I went to Ireland by accident, I stayed by accident, and two years later I woke up one day and said: 'Okay, so what's happening with that PhD?'

And I contacted universities in Ireland and I started talking. I picked University College Dublin with my wonderful supervisors Dr Cathy Leeney and Dr Catriona Clutterbuck. I wanted initially to write something about training and how can we train actors for that, because that idea that was still there: what were the tools that I needed to address that feedback from the assessment and exam? But they asked me: 'Okay, but why do you need that new method?' I said: 'Well with the current methods, the focus is on the rules and what an actor has to do, but actually nobody talks about what it gives you.' And they asked me: 'But what does it give you?' And then, you know, I could answer, intuitively but I actually had no evidence, hard evidence. So actually, my PhD was about what it gives you and what does verse bring to the performance? That got funded by the Irish Research Council – a postgraduate scholarship – and that was great. And I'm very, very grateful for that.

But even then, it wasn't that argument in the book – it wasn't there. It was really about what it does, what functions it performs. But at the same time I was still performing and creating work in Ireland, in Polish theatre in Ireland, work that was multilingual. And that idea of multilingualism and heteroglossia and my practical experience of that made me shift how I understand and made me clarify exactly, name what it is that the verse does in a performance in one sentence. And that's what the book is about.

[00:09:00] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

So the book looks at verse in theatre, but also across other media like social media, like movies, transmedia projects, across different languages and cultural contexts. So the main focus is Ireland, Poland and the UK, because that's what my experience of theatre is rooted in. But it addresses productions from Russia, Spain, Nigeria and artists working across several linguistic and cultural contexts. All those works were created in the 21st century – so the performances.



The overarching argument is that verse is heteroglossic. What it means is that it is built on the dialogue, it has a dialogic nature, which means that there are often contradicting viewpoints interacting with each other. And some of those viewpoints are facilitated by the words, and some of those viewpoints are facilitated by the structure, rhythmic structure that structures the words as well as grammar and syntax. And that's the basic argument. But then what happens is that heteroglossic nature, those dialogues, that 'in dialogue' quality of verse has dramaturgical consequences. And those dramaturgical consequences are particularly suited for contemporary theatre practice and that constantly changing world, those contexts that escape in simple geographical, cultural or national boundaries, that heteroglossic nature of the contemporary world. And that's the overarching argument.

[00:10:57] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

So this is the first book to look at verse as a dramaturgy and to look at it as a performance rather than something that is rooted in literature. And it shifts that discussion, which is on the one hand central for theatre because Western theatre has been created in dialogue with verse and in a strong relationship with verse – you know, from all Shakespeare, Greek drama, Calderón, Molière, Racine to contemporary dub poetry and hip hop, verse is there all the time – but at the same time, as a subject of research in performance, it has been very peripheral, and, in particular, in English language scholarship there's that 20th-century sentiment that somehow verse is dead to theatre. Some American scholars have expressed the view that it is something that is from the past, you know, covered with dust. So it changes that perspective and it very much shows verse as something that is at the forefront of contemporary theatre in terms of aesthetics, its politics, its engagement with society.

It also offers a new way of analysing verse in a performance context through that dialogic interaction. And that suits dramaturgs, directors, people interested in studying verse or verse drama in the broadest sense of performance, so also, for example, poetry. But it also starts questioning existing methods of verse-speaking training because it also shows that actors are at the forefront of that, an actor is central to the process of verse dramaturgy. And it's interesting that there's only very few of the productions I talk about that actually have a named dramaturg. In a lot of those productions, a lot of those works, the dramaturg role is either occupied by an actor, or they shared and collaborated between different members of the team. And it's not because they are in that traditional paradigm of playwright to director, quite the opposite – they challenge that paradigm. But it's about actors taking much more ownership, and agency in contemporary verse performance.

It also shows that verse is shifting the broader ecologies of theatre and aesthetics of theatre. In a sense it makes the use of what Hans-Thies Lehmann said in his *Postdramatic Theatre* book that – and I'm paraphrasing now, I haven't learned the book by heart! – that there will come a time when theatre will shift to that stylised approach again. And it shows how the postdramatic aesthetics and verse are meeting in those contemporary works, shifting – challenging definitions of theatre, of postdramatic, of actor, of character [of form and content relations].

[00:14:13] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?

The structure of the book responds to – in my head, it's not articulated in the book, it's for me, but I think it's worth sharing it – [it] responds to that idea that verse is somehow stuck in the past. So when I was thinking about the book, I had to make the tough choices of things I want to write and the productions I will write about, because there was so much – and it was painful making that decision of what I will not write about.

First of all of course there is an introduction, and then there's a theoretical chapter that introduces my theory and explains how that method of analysis works. But then the remaining three chapters – chapters two, three and four – look at verse in that context of past, present and future. So the second chapter looks at translation and adaptation in the context of verse, but it looks how verse re-



energises those ‘treasures’ from the past, like a Greek tragedy, like Calderón, like romantic drama in Poland. The third chapter then looks at the current political context. So it looks at identities that escape simple geographical, national or linguistic boundaries. It looks at precarity, it looks at protest and how verse provides a platform of engaging with that moment, now, and how it gives voice to voices that are marginalised in contemporary theatre and the broader cultural context. And then the final chapter, the fourth chapter, looks at verse in new forms of theatre. So looking exactly in that postdramatic context, how it shifts and problematises our understanding of the relationship between content and form, how it plays with temporal structures. It uses Rebecca Schneider’s idea of new materialism a lot, in particular when I talk about work by Marta Górnicka, which is postdramatic chorus. The structures she uses are verse, but at the same time I call it ‘verse on steroids’. What she does is just versified verse – I don’t know if that makes any sense but that’s what it is. So it’s the future, if you like.

That’s how the book is structured.

[00:16:48] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

It depends ‘when’. So the constant choice of what I will not write about, especially that when I was finishing, there were so many new exciting works being created [I could not write about it]. So that choice was very painful, and it was not enjoyable at all. But at the same time, because it comes from love and it comes from my practice and comes from the whole journey that I went through from Poland, Ireland, to the UK, it felt like an expression of something that was important and long-time coming. In a sense there were parts of the book that were just swimming out of my mouth, in particular that chapter about marginalised identities – so, chapter three. It was just there! It was just there and was waiting to come out. So in a sense, it felt very much cathartic.

[00:17:58] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

There are a lot of favourite moments and it depends on which hat I have on – as a Polish theatre writer, a theatre-maker, a scholar. I have always battled with Polish romanticism and patriarchal ideas, so any time I write about a production that challenges it, these are always my favourite moments to have a dig at Polish romanticism. But I think overall my favourite section is that section three, chapter three that looks at verse that is no longer as Ibsen once called it ‘the language of the gods’ – verse was the language of the gods and therefore no self-respecting playwright should ever use verse in theatre.

But the fact that some verses now reclaimed by those that are not allowed to have a voice in theatre that are somehow pushed to the margins, that idea I find very powerful and it somehow feels like a karma coming back. So I loved writing that chapter, and this is probably my favourite in terms of my work as a theatre-maker as well and working with stereotypes. But I also really enjoyed those elements where the actors come to have ownership and claim their agency over the production, when they become the force, whether as a playwright or playwright-performer or whether as a dramaturg or a translator. So all those moments that really shift the existing ecologies of theatre making that shift the ownership and where the agency is – these are my little pearls that I really like in that book.

Transcription by Nick Awde

Clips Summary

[00:00:15 to 00:01:19] Montage of video material from YouTube trailers for Marta Górnicka’s *Hymn do miłości* (2017), Teatro Inverso’s *Rosaura* (2016) and Inua Ellams’ *The 14th Tale* (2009), selected by Kasia Lech and edited by Juan Salazar



Works Cited

Lehmann, Hans-Thies (1999/2006) *Postdramatic Theatre*, London and New York: Routledge.

Audio available at www.auralia.space/library3-kasialech/.

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