

## Revolution – Caution Advised

**The Modern Poland Foundation presents a podcast titled: *Revolution – Caution Advised*.**

There's nobody who was as fascinated with revolution – and as terrified of it – as Witkacy. It was terror of an eyewitness, too. During World War One, the artist was an officer in the elite Pavlovsky Guard Regiment. He could volunteer for Russian army thanks to friends in high places and it was a conscious political decision. Witkacy didn't believe Poland could regain independence through alliance with Austria. In short, he didn't believe in Piłsudski's political views.

The artist spent the beginning of the war in officer school and was later sent to the front. On 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1916 he was wounded while fighting for Vitonezh village. The offensive was led by general Brusilov against German and Austrian armies.

Witkacy was in Moscow when the February Revolution broke out. It targeted tsar Nicholas the Second and it preceded the October Revolution. The experts argue whether Witkacy was chosen to be a people's commissar or was just a passive observer. We only know that he didn't like reminiscing on that period, and when he did, it was in vague terms:

Recently I learned a lot from observing (I can't describe it differently – unfortunately, I just looked at it as if from a theatre balcony, unable to participate due to schizoid inhibitions) the Russian Revolution, from February 1917 to June 1918. I witnessed it up close as an officer of Pavlovsky Guard Regiment, which started the revolution. I consider those who could not live through this event so intimately to be a pitiful cripples.

Witkacy announced that we would learn more from his posthumous writings. Unfortunately, his diary from 1914-1918 burned during the Warsaw Uprising. Therefore we can base our judgment only on the writer's suicide, committed on 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1939 – a day after Soviet army invaded Polish territory. It's a hard proof of his fear of Russian Revolution.

Hence, it makes sense to take a closer look at *The Shoemakers* – a play about revolution or, more precisely, two revolutions in a row. The topic is announced in the stage direction to the first passage spoken by Sajetan Tempe, an old shoemaker. He speaks while “roughing some shoes with a huge hammer”.

You would need just a few minutes on specialist e-shops to learn that a standard shoemaking hammer weighs 400-600 grams. Turning it into a “huge hammer” changes it into a symbol – the one you would cross with a sickle. We could argue whether it's a symbol of labour and working class, or punishment by forced labour (as in a song from the third part of Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*). Either way, it's not a mundane tool anymore.

The trick with symbolic hammer is only the first breach in realism, which Witkacy was never too fond of; he preferred his own pure form theory. He never defined it precisely – it was based on a pessimistic assumption of “metaphysical emotion loss” among modern people. For them to react to art at all, the author would need to shock the readers or spectators, according to Witkacy. A good shock device was to construct the text in a completely bizarre way. The plot was to be illogical, the topic – random, and psychological credibility or cause-effect relations – suspended. It's well exemplified in Sajetan's

extended monologues, long after having been killed by the apprentices (“I’ll talk now. It’s fine y’all killed me, I’m scared no more and I can talk straight”).

The effect is magnified by the fact that Sajetan’s death is presented as true, not theatrical, at one point:

just so you know, by the time you get the coats back from the cloakroom, I’ll be dead already – it’s more than sure. Got a hole in the head from an axe, and holes from bullets in stomach and brain – through the ear...

However, the most savage, deformed phenomenon in the play is the language. In Polish, we don’t swear like a sailor – we swear like a shoemaker; Witkacy takes it to a next level. His characters shout at each other things such as: “Shut up, you motherflounder! shut up, you son-of-a-gut!”. But that’s not the end of his linguistic innovation.

The quotes show that the shoemakers, small-scale artisans, mix up countryside dialect with philosophical jargon:

What I wanna say is: y’all just discourage us with your old crappy useless frick-fracking analytics. Those bourgie ass-lickers, Kant and Leibniz, made the tools! Get outta here, both of you! Go blow some smoky-ass sticks.

The idea of treating class difference with such nonchalance in a play about revolution is more profound than just fantastic grotesque. It also reflects Witkacy’s views on the future of humanity. He was afraid of the threat of homogenisation and its result - “worse and worse boredom”. It’s shown through the boards appearing during the play, perhaps alluding to intertitles in silent cinema. Historical events of seismic magnitude can significantly hasten this process – but it’s already budding.

Some of Witkacy’s political tirades don’t sound too out-of-place today:

Why are they always just pawns in some irrelevant backwater idea or intrigue? At its core, or rather at its bottom, you can always find a revolting, impotent, neutered polyp of international Big Money – a corporation either purely backward or truly evil.

The grotesque language is not just supposed to make us laugh or surprise us. Witkacy probably tries to express the chaos that was left in him after he witnessed the real, historical fact of Russian Revolution. But his conclusions are more general – he believes they would be relevant to any modern revolution.

That is why the status of events presented in the play is so peculiar. They’re not directly reflecting any historical reality; in fact, they are intentionally incongruous with any reality, however defined. Witkacy pictures revolution as a bloody cabaret. But at the same time, he treats it as a purely intellectual construct, an idea that needs to be comprehended – and not as a sequence of historical events. Thus, references to historical occurrences in the play are quite vague. Witkacy proposes two stages of the revolution: the first one is represented by the shoemakers and the second one – by the “hyper-prole”. The concept might allude to February and October revolution, but perhaps it’s better to interpret it as an abstract construct that would tell us something about revolution in general.

The historical events went as follows: the February Revolution overturned the Russian tsardom in 1917 and replaced it with a liberal-democratic government. Then, the October Revolution – an armed coup prepared by the Bolsheviki, the radical arm of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party – introduced a communist party dictatorship. It’s possible that the October Revolution is presented in

the play through the characters of Hyper-prole and Comrades. The former acts as if a propaganda poster came alive:

Here he comes – like a march of misery – horrifying uber-revolutionary of some sort, a hyper-prole even. Probably one of the real rulers, ‘cause those puppets? (*points at the Shoemakers*) They’re a joke. He’s got a bomb huge like a cauldron and a ton of hand-grenades and threatens us all with ‘em. And his own life? I don’t even need to tell you how much of a damn he gives.

The Hyper-prole says things that Witkacy would never agree with:

It needs to be understood once and for all: there is no justice and there can’t be any. It’s good enough there are statistics. We should be glad about it.

Those words resonate well with the impersonal political and philosophical jargon of the Comrades. They mean that the fate of the population – that can be decided using statistical methods – is more important than the fate of an individual. For someone as individualistic as Witkacy, it’s the final historical cataclysm. He saw the first signs of it during his life.

Since we know now that *The Shoemakers* reflect on reality through analogies, let’s see what signs of the final disaster Witkacy noticed and pointed out in his play. Probably the most important of them is – to put it mildly – the flamboyant emotionality of the characters. Since the beginning, all the characters orbit around duchess Irina Wsiewołodowna Pervertoff-Podberezka. She’s described as “a gorgeous brunette, very nice and alluring. Aged 27-28”. The shoemakers make shoes for this prominently sexual character. Prosecutor Scurvy whines like a dog for her and subsequently turns into one because of her. There’s even a scene in the play where Scurvy, provoked by Sajetan with a vision of social change, explains his indolence with those words:

Can’t you see I’m hiding a horrible tragedy of my real position from you? And a frankly terrifying inner void? Save for the so-called problem of demonic Irina Wsiewołodowna, there’s completely nothing at all inside me – just an eaten-up shell of a non-existent cancer.

The mysterious impact of the duchess is presented in a grotesque way – as everything is in the play. She repeatedly explains who she would sleep with and under what conditions, or who she would torment by spurring insatiable desire, and in what way.

Witkacy’s characters seem to believe that such social relations are unbearable in the long term. That’s why prosecutor Scurvy jails everyone present – he sees them as a threat to the future of society:

It might seem funny, but nobody knows that this was the perverse node of powers that could tear down all of our future and swallow the world in anarchy.

The struggle elicits an equally volatile as surprising reaction. The first revolution, lead by the shoemakers, starts with labour. Their prison comes with forced idleness – the most horrifying place in it is called “slothhouse”. The characters, provoked by the sight of a perfectly equipped workshop, finally give in to temptation and start working frantically. Labour is treated with almost religious reverence: the shoemakers exclaim things like: “Praise the boot!” or “the boot is the absolute!”

The duchess can find her place perfectly in the new world of the shoemakers’ revolution. It’s only during the second revolution when the rulers can resist her charms. In Witkacy’s terms, it’s proof of final mechanization of social relations.

What conclusions can we draw from the strange concoction that is *The Shoemakers*? Perhaps the most important one is that despite Witkacy's pessimism, his play represents something, that is of value on its own: an individual response to witnessing history. It's probably not necessary to go as far as the playwright does – sometimes it seems he believed weirdness of the argument to guarantee intellectual honesty. Nevertheless, it's important to think for yourself in the age of multiple ready-made interpretations of the past. The history that's not reflected on is even more dead than Sajetan Tempe by the end of *The Shoemakers*.

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