

# Plastic Shoes Unite

by Julia Kaluźna

*Before going through the process of writing this essay, if faced with Roy Adzak's statement that "Good art is not what it looks like, but what it does to us," I would've brushed it off as a mere platitude. But after reflecting on the impact of the spoken word on an audience's psyche, I no longer have the audacity to listen to a performer without a certain respect of and appreciation for their impact on society. I am not afraid to think in what some would call utopic terms, since even the simple, ten-minute performance I was asked to analyze allowed me to notice the stifling borders of my thinking. Something as prosaic as a comedic stand-up routine turned out to be a life-changing stimulus for self-inquiry. The comedian's choice to sing particular songs that are nostalgic for Polish people in times of political turmoil, and the way he evoked deep emotional reactions from the audience, turned out to be a guiding model for me as an artist who wants to use her agency to unite, instead of polarize. In turn, thanks to Nuar Alsadir's essay, the ability to read simple expressions as gateways to vulnerability and deeper insight, allowed me to realize the power of humility as a medium for honesty on stage. Thanks to this work, every detail of the video, every word in the essay and every act in life became a priceless teacher for me as an artist, a citizen, and most of all, a curious human being.*

—Julia Kaluźna

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Modern Talking's "Cheri Cheri Lady," a number-one song on the Polish discotheque charts in the eighties, starts to play. Thousands of audience members start to clap. Igor Kwiatkowski, a legend of Polish contemporary cabaret, enters the stage, dancing clumsily, and attempts to sing along: "Na na naaaa!" (0:00:01-0:00:15) Cheering and singing fills the entire concert hall. The performer has only sung one verse, and laughter has already united the audience.

Nine minutes into his monologue, after recalling entertainment legends from the last three decades, Kwiatkowski starts to imitate Michael Jackson. "Oooh!" he cries to initiate "Billie Jean," and launches into the song, his body mimicking Jackson's choreographic language. Just as quickly as he began, Kwiatkowski halts his performance and launches into an invented story about Jackson coming to Poland to buy moccasins. He describes the roundabout in Jelenia Góra (his hometown) where "Michael" saw the Polish "relaksy," plastic moccasins popularised in the Polish People's Republic in the times of the Cold War. He recalls how he tried to communicate with the singer by adding an "English accent" to the Polish language, and imitates how Jackson responded with his typical "high-pitched sighs" and sharp movements, in response to the pain of wearing tight shoes. The story ends with a message directed at the eye of the camera: "To

children who watch this, please remember that Michael Jackson learned his ‘moonwalk’ in our Polish plastic shoes” (Kwiatkowski, 00:11:50-00:14:47).

Placing the joke in the realm of fiction (Michael Jackson did not buy moccasins in Poland) and infusing it with shared memories of living conditions in Poland during the Cold War, makes Kwiatkowski’s joke stand out from the standard fare of Polish comedy. Polish audiences are accustomed to seeing caricatures of current politicians, church leaders, and diplomats. Such performances, streamed live on TV and watched by millions of Poles in their homes, became an exaggerated copy of reports from the parliament broadcasted on the same channel for years. This context explains how unexpected it was for the audience to see a comedian who enters the stage dancing to Modern Talking, beatboxing several times throughout the ten-minute performance, and ending it with Jackson’s moonwalk.

During Kwiatkowski’s set, the audience conveys their visceral emotional reactions—wiping tears, holding stomachs, clapping vigorously. Such unconscious responses are what Nuar Alsadir, a psychoanalyst interested in exploring the psychic dimension of laughter, would read as a natural response to the release of tension, or, as she calls it, the “massive discharge of the energy that had been mobilized towards holding it down.” In her essay “Clown School,” she examines laughter through a psychodynamic lens. Alsadir notes that psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott called laughter a “gateway to the subconscious” which she argues stores the “unsocialized self,” or in Nietzsche’s terms, “the one you are” (6). Her essay ultimately traces the reasons for the “spontaneous outbursts” of laughter to the recognition of oneself with the human, vulnerable side of the performer (2). She compares the entertaining aspect of clowning, or “play,” to dreams, which act as a form of “self-revelation” of the psyche (7). This ultimately leads her to equate comedic performance to a “therapy session,” which both disarms and heals (2).

Kwiatkowski’s audience was in desperate need for the therapeutic quality of laughter. This performance occurred in May 2019, four years after parliamentary elections that acted like a red flag to a bull for all Polish citizens. For the first time since 1989, when Polish citizens gained the right to independently vote after World War II, a victorious right-wing populist party—Law and Justice (PiS)—won enough votes to form a majority government. In between the time of the elections in 2015 and the upcoming elections in 2019, a storm of protests flooded the country. Law and Justice’s radical, and increasingly dictatorial decisions—to remove all judges supporting the opposition, to ban abortion and to take full control over the public media—divided the public unlike any other time in Polish contemporary history. Mothers protested in parliament’s corridors, fathers placed their sleeping bags in front of the law courts, and children were protesting at schools. The personal became political, and the political became personal.

In a 2016 there was a demonstration that came to be known as “Black Monday,” thousands of Polish women donned black clothes and went on strike in order to oppose the government’s efforts to tighten abortion laws. A year later, approximately 100,000 Poles took to the streets in 143 protests in cities, towns and villages across the country (Cocotas). In July 2018, Reuters reported, “Crowds gathered outside the presidential palace in Warsaw chanting: ‘Shame’ . . . and ‘You will go to prison’” (Koper). On the very day of Kwiatkowski’s performance, right-wing Law and Justice supporters marched the streets in protest against pressure from America to

compensate Jewish families whose property was seized during WWII (Gera). The streets boiled with fear and hatred.

This is why the one, unified roar of laughter in Kwiatkowski's audience was so surprisingly freeing. As suggested by Alsadir's "Clown School," his willingness to belt off-key pop songs and poke fun at his doughy physique by becoming winded after one minute of dancing reveal a process of stripping away the "layers of socialization" (9). This in turn reveals "the clown that had been there all along—or in Winnicott's terms, your 'true self.'" Whenever he sang he revealed not only his own true self, but also "the interior of the audience members, who recognize themselves in what [he] is expressing" (14). Alsadir explains that the spectators "mark that recognition with laughter, sometimes the only acceptable form of catharsis" (14). Indeed, when Kwiatkowski's audience is laughing, it is clear that his performance entails not only entertainment, but also a deep, therapeutic purge of the deep resentment that stifled smiles for so long.

Connection-seeking, Alsadir's theorized cause of cathartic laughter, is the building block of Kwiatkowski's joke. He enters the stage inviting the audience to sing with him, and what he first observes after the music stops is how quickly his generation tapped their feet to the music. He plays with his audience's expectations by not only calling attention to their automatic bodily responses triggered by the memory of dancing to Modern Talking, but also uncovering the deeply hidden, nostalgic memories which his listeners share. He takes them on a journey through their own teenage rooms filled with posters of Limalh and Sandra (two leading Polish pop stars of the eighties), and reminds them of how the whole nation sang English lyrics phonetically, due to the lack of English classes in schools during the Soviet occupation. The smile on the listeners' faces marks a successful attempt to reach the shared subconscious accessed through the recalling of the past, and to find a common denominator binding all regardless of political standpoint.

However, the urge to laugh does not necessarily mean to disregard the increasingly dictatorial rules in the country. Quite the opposite—Kwiatkowski wants his audience to see how absurd it is to have to fight against their own nation's army. The division between "the Depeches" and "the Metals" that he mocks in the middle of his performance could be read as an indirect commentary on two opposite political camps (00:06:55-00:07:07). His jokes filter reality through a magnifying glass to make his audience finally see what they have perhaps unknowingly participated in. He seduces you with laughter to kick you in the gut with the Polish plastic shoes.

Alsadir traces this kind of provocation to the goal of leaving the audience "unsettled" and, consequently, "changed" (3). She explains that "when we are struck, . . . an opening is created for something unexpected to slip in," and in Kwiatkowski's work, the "opening" entails the loosening of one's rigid political ideology and making mental space for other viewpoints (4). Confessing her own tendency to "hide behind [her] intellect [rather] than expose [herself] as a flawed and failing human being," Alsadir suggests that many of us rely on comfortable personas as a defensive strategy (5). Kwiatkowski's humor ultimately disarms not only the citizens sitting in the audience but also the individuals who trigger the conflict. He follows John Lennon's incentive to laugh, quoted by Alsadir: "When it gets down to having to use violence, then you are playing the system's game. The only thing they don't know how to handle is non-violence

and humor” (15). It appears, therefore, that laughter may be the most paradoxical, and yet most powerful, medium of excavating what aches.

I wondered why I laughed, why I chose to replay Kwiatkowski’s performances over and over again and not the other comedians I watched with my family. I realized that I watched the standard political satirists when I wanted to confirm my own complaints about the world and affirm my own sense of helplessness and anger. But Kwiatkowski’s apolitical, absurdist comedy helps me to dismantle my doubts about my potential to enact change, and lets some fresh air inside my stifling mind; he allows me to take a step back and realize that complaining will not take the too tight plastic shoes off my feet. He makes me aware that the key problem-maker I need to make peace with is myself.

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