

Creating Jerusalem by means of performance. Some reflections on Polish Passion Plays

Passion Plays are quite a new phenomenon in Polish Catholic religiosity. Only some of them have a tradition that is over sixty years old, and most of them have arisen and begun to flourish after the fall of Communism in Poland¹. Nowadays, Easter Plays – ones representing the last moments of Christ's life – are performed in many Polish churches, sanctuaries and cult sites, but also in city squares². Some of them, namely those presented along Calvary chapels, have a form of a procession; in others, subsequent episodes from Christ's life are presented on stages erected in squares, in parks, in churches. Notwithstanding the form of presenting Christ's Passion, the entire event always takes place in the performed Jerusalem. But this is a very specific Jerusalem, which must be considered on various levels.

The basic level is the stage design for Passion Plays. In the first moment, the audience coming to a performance sees only the Jerusalem built for them by a stage designer – or determined by the architecture of the Calvaries, for in the case of Passion Plays taking place there, their chapels play a role of stage scenery (only some scenes are enacted in stage decorations constructed for the purpose). Stage design for Passion Plays presented in churches or in squares is planned and prepared in a different manner. There, each episode has a designed scenery which is to evoke the Palace of Pilatus, the Jerusalem Temple, the Cenacle or Golgotha. Decorations are usually rather modest and symbolic; yet in spite of their amateur

¹ The participants vary very much: from those coming to the performance because of mere curiosity to those coming because of religious belief. My paper concerns the second group: the faithful who perceive religious services as an important part of their life.

² For five years (2006-2010) I have conducted research on seven Polish Passion Plays, enacted in Poznań, Zawoja Przysłop, Kalwaria Paławska, Miejsce Piastowe, Bydgoszcz Fordon, Inowrocław and Wejherowo.

character, they produce a harmonious whole and some of them represent a good or a very good artistic level. Looking at Jerusalem erected onstage, one may get an impression that stage designers do not pay much attention to historical research in order to attempt to reconstruct the real, ancient Jerusalem. Yet in reality, quite on the contrary, they build Jerusalem made of symbols known to them from religious painting and from religious movies. Thus, they manifest that they do not intend to introduce their audience into a carefully reconstructed ancient city, but into the sacral scenery of the place of Christ's death.

Moreover, Jerusalem built by means of stage decorations never represents a complete town, meticulously reconstructed by a stage designer. Even in the case of performances presented in the squares, stage designers do not construct an entire town. This is mostly because of budget shortages, but there is one more important reason: the structure of Polish Passion Plays is based on the Way of the Cross service. Hence, people proceed from one scene to another, or they follow a Passion Play action from one scene to another, as all the scenes are presented on separate stages (like in medieval theatre); correspondingly, subsequent episodes constitute separate dramatic wholes. As a consequence, Jerusalem in Polish Passion Plays has the same structure. It is fragmentary, and each place within is spatially separated from another. Viewers cannot feel completeness and integrity of the town where the presented story took place; nonetheless they are able to experience completeness of the place where the Passion of Christ happened. Jerusalem created by the organizers of Easter Plays is exactly the Jerusalem known from the Way of the Cross service or sacral fine arts. It is not a living ancient town (although some Passion Plays organizers, e.g. in Bydgoszcz Fordon or in Gdańsk, do try to present it in that way); it is a series of locations which were, and during Passion Plays are, a space for all stations of Christ's Passion. Ultimately, Easter performances reduce Jerusalem to the place of Christ's Passion.

Passion Plays staged in Poland very aptly combine the nature of a religious service and that of a popular mass event. Not all of them do that in the same manner; yet as a rule they are formally very up-to-date events which are based, however, on a traditional script of a religious service. Even if the stage design and costumes are rather simple and symbolic (since the entire financial support for spectacles comes from the donations of the faithful), the lightning and the soundtrack clearly indicate that popular culture is one of the sources inspiring the way of presenting Passion Plays. Even if the whole play is modest and its director ascetically dispenses with stage design and lightning, the actors' onstage expression suggests that they were looking for inspiration in thriller movies rather than in films based on biblical events. In that sense, Polish Easter performances can be seen as a *signum temporis*. As events, they locate themselves somewhere on the intersection of various orders: they are concurrently sacral and profane, ludic and solemn, popular and religious. In my opinion, this is precisely the reason why Polish Passion Plays meet the taste of their audience. They correspond to the religious sensitivity of the faithful, and this significantly helps the viewers and performers alike to engage in, apprehend and approve of the performance.

One of such aspects that involve people into the performance is the visualization of Christ's Passion itself. Organizers must present the Passion in a way that can be easily identified and accepted by the audience. The visual aspect of the performance is important, and a close relationship between the stage design of a Passion Play and images known from churches, prayer booklets, etc. helps all the participants (the actors and the audience) to recognize that they are taking part in a religious event, it helps them to get "into" the play. But stage decorations are not the only factor which engages the faithful into the performance. Stage design only frames the space in which participants may feel as if they were in ancient Jerusalem. Since such Jerusalem comes into being only during performance, in the interaction between the actors and the audience, that Jerusalem, similarly to the other elements of Passion

Plays, is in fact performed. Stage decorations do not create, but barely mark it. Some participants of Easter plays admit that decorations, despite not being realistic, help them to imagine how the Passion of Christ could look like. Some Passion Plays in Poland, however, are performed almost without stage design. This does not prevent anyone from feeling as if they were in the place where Jesus was crucified. But what enables members of the audience to feel as if they were witnessing the actual Passion of Christ lies much deeper than in the mere visualization of the place.

In Passion Plays, religious attitudes and beliefs of the members of the audience meet staged reality created by the performance director, the actors, the stage designer, the costume designer, the person who chooses and mixes music for the performance etc. Organizers of Easter Plays make every effort to engage people into their performance. They want to prepare not only an artistic or ludic event, but also to give deep religious experiences to the audience. To achieve this goal, some decide to treat the audience as the Jerusalem mob: on the way to Golgotha Roman soldiers push people away, shout at them, denying them access to Jesus, Simon of Cyrene is sometimes recruited directly from the audience. In some performances, at the moment when Christ is sharing bread with His disciples in the Cenacle, loaves of bread are distributed among the audience (who are supposed to share the bread among themselves). That, among other things, is the reason why those who believe in God, and declare themselves to be pious Catholics, feel that participation in a Passion play offers “something more” than a mere visit in a theater, but also “something more” than liturgy. They come to a performance not only to reflect upon the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection, but above all to experience events from the last moments of Christ’s life, to take part in them. In my opinion, the way in which a town erected onstage becomes the actual place of Christ’s Passion in the experience of the faithful is explained by Victor Turner’s concept of liminality (Turner 2002).

In Polish Passion Plays, the space where the event takes place, and the time in which it takes place, are liminal. To the faithful, the main motivation to participate in an Easter performance is to see the Passion Play, but often its atmosphere, its unique character actually involve the audience into the performed story. People engage in it with great emotions; to very many believers, the Passion Play is an important religious service of a kind, and that fact itself makes some of them enter a reflexive mood. The Lent and the Easter are in Polish Church filled with special services and meetings which not only encourage the faithful to reflect upon Christ's Passion and its meaning for Christianity, but also encourage them to revise their behavior, to adjust their life to Christian rules. In such religiously intense time, people coming to an Easter performance truly expect it to be something extraordinary, to be an unforgettable experience. And liminality, as Turner stated, pertains to the non-mundane, to the spectacular, to sacral events (see Turner 2002, p. 360). The form of Passion Plays itself makes them liminal, but it is the attitudes of the faithful that allow them to fully experience the liminality.

According to some theorists of performance studies, every participant of an event creates it to some degree (see Schieffelin 1998, p. 201; Palmer, Jankowiak 1996, pp. 240 and 245; also Fabian 1990, p. 11). Even being only an audience member, he or she takes a significant part in a performance, namely: performs – at least the role of a viewer. This observation is especially important in my analysis of Passion Plays. Performances obviously depend on people's acting. Without participants, there would be only an empty stage with Jerusalem decorations. But to create the liminal Jerusalem on that stage, people who would give life to it are necessary – not only the actors, but also, and maybe above all, the audience: all those who come with a desire to accompany Christ in His last way. Those who perform as if they were in ancient Jerusalem, in this way create the liminal Jerusalem.

In describing liminality, Turner indicated potentiality as its particular quality. Potentiality is strongly connected with a subjunctive mood which, according to Turner, rules liminality (Turner 1982, pp. 82-83): such understanding of the subjunctive mood is present in words of Passion Plays participants. The sentence: “we feel **as if** we were there (i.e. in Jerusalem)” expresses exactly the potentiality of a liminal state (cf. Turner 1982, p. 83). A person taking part in Passion Plays can experience a kind of transfer to an actual place of Christ’s death. Moreover, they can in a particular way participate in the events which happened two thousand years ago, feeling as if they were there, since the liminal is different from the natural and common; similarly, the subjunctive mood expresses wishes and that what is possible (Turner 1982, p. 83; Turner 1984, p. 20-21).

People participating in Passion Plays are aware of where they are, and what they are observing. They know that Christ walking along with them is just an actor and not the real Christ. They know that the scene scenery is not the real Jerusalem, it is not even a copy of it. But the symbolic relationship between stage scenery and the Holy Land (much stronger in the Calvaries), together with the symbolic reconstruction of the last moments of Christ’s life, is a sufficient stimulus for the Passion Play participants to enter the liminal space. The place of presenting Christ’s Passion, even if it is actually a city square or a park, becomes sacral in the sense that the faithful experience it as if it were sacral.

The faithful gathered at a Passion Play totally use potentiality of the liminal and perform as if they were watching the death of the real Christ. By feeling that they are there, they create Jerusalem. As has already been mentioned above, it is Jerusalem known from religious art, from the teaching of the Church. Also behavior in such a Jerusalem is deeply rooted in the teaching of the Church. It resembles ritual behavior, rite gestures proper to liturgical services. Although Jerusalem created during a performance is not a real town, but a reflection of religious imagery, to the faithful it is the most authentic Jerusalem, since it

allows them to feel as if they were accompanying Christ in His Passion. Such Jerusalem exists in human religious experience, not in historical reality. It is made of the believers' imaginary image of the place of Christ's death and resurrection. It is a town not erected and reconstructed, but performed and experienced. It endures only in a performance, in a Passion Play – it is liminal reality. It is created exactly by means of performance and vanishes with its end, when the liminal again becomes mundane. Then, it survives only in the experiences and memories of the faithful.

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