

MOST OF MY PLAYS ARE ABOUT LOVE

Interview with Ingeborg von Zadow

Guest of Honor of the 28th Polish Playwrights Conference in Obrzycko

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We meet in the Obrzycko palace, in a room called “After the Rain” and it really is raining outside. It’s a gloomy, dreamy day in the beginning of September, outside there is just the river, the trees and the rain. “It’s so beautiful and peaceful here. I could stay here for a month and write!” – says Ingeborg before we sit and start talking.

Katarzyna Matwiejczuk: Witold Gombrowicz once said: “In art nothing is as difficult as easiness”. What struck me most in your plays was the clarity and simplicity of your style. There are no unnecessary words or characters. How do you achieve such clarity of form that seems so easy? Do you cross out a lot or are your plays born “complete”? Do they come to you, like to Mozart?

Ingeborg von Zadow: (laughs) No, they don’t come to me. Of course, the initial idea usually does. But I need to work a lot on cutting lines and rearranging scenes. Now that I’ve got more experience, I don’t cut as much anymore, but it’s still sometimes easier just to start writing and later to throw out all the lines I don’t need. The more experienced I become in playwriting, the more I believe that it’s good to have a structure before you start – sometimes a pretty detailed structure, sometimes just an idea of where the characters are going and where the whole plot is going. Since I started spending more time on structure, I have less to edit. So it’s gotten easier, but I don’t like this first part: all that thinking it through – I prefer the writing, that’s the fun part. But the writing feels more free if you know what you are doing. So it does make sense to concentrate on making a plan first.

KM: You've been writing plays since a very young age. How old were you when you started to write? I don't mean only writing plays, but being able to write and read altogether. What were your first experiences with writing when you were a kid?

IvZ: I didn't learn to read and write at an extremely young age – I was six, that's pretty normal, I think. The playwriting started when I was eight years old – I saw a play performed by the theatre group of my school. It actually wasn't a play for children, but "No Exit" by J.P. Sartre, in which the three characters are in hell and they discuss with each other for the whole eternity. I was absolutely fascinated by it. I probably didn't understand everything, but I understood the existential situation. This performance was the moment I started loving theatre. I knew it was make-believe, but I thought: "I want to do this". I did not think "I want to write", but "I want to make theatre". I wanted to act, but my problem was that I didn't have any plays, so I started to write little scenes. I then had my own theatre group from the age of 13 through to 19 and I wrote plays for them. This is when I realized that I am not very good on the stage, but that I am maybe good at writing. I learnt a lot through working with my actors – they kept asking me all these questions – „why is my character doing this at this point” - or telling me „I can't speak this line” etc. I had to reflect all these questions and I learnt a lot just by looking for the solutions.

KM: It's very interesting and touching what you said: that as a kid you felt so amazed by the world of theatre that at first you only knew that you wanted to be a part of it – no matter what role you would play in this world. I always wanted to be a director, but later I realized that maybe I am better at writing.

IvZ: Yes, it is a great job. As a playwright you get to create the ground on which everyone else in the theatre works. I also tried directing with my theatre group, but I didn't follow up on that professionally. It's very different work: as a playwright you work with make-believe people and as a director you work with real people. Both, of course, can be complicated at times ;-).

KM: You said your love for the theatre started with a play by J.P.Sartre. I want to ask you more about your literary and dramatic masters. You said once that your favourite of Shakespeare's plays was "Midsummer Night's Dream"...

IvZ: I said that? (laughs) I'm a bit surprised! I wouldn't have mentioned Shakespeare as one of the authors that influenced me especially. Maybe if I would study more Shakespeare then I would be influenced more by his writing. When I started writing, contemporary playwrights from the Netherlands had a big influence on me, especially Suzanne van Lohuizen but also authors like Ad de Bont. Suzanne used to be my teacher for a while. We had lots of one-on-

one conversations and her style surely influenced my own at that time. Apart from them, I connected to the absurdists, like Beckett and Ionesco.

KM: One can feel this streak of absurd while reading your works.

IvZ: Yes, of course, but not entirely. I try something different than them, maybe to be a little more specific in a way, connected. My characters are very much in touch with life and with each other.

KM: Maybe they are getting somewhere instead of just waiting.

IvZ: I always missed something in the Absurd Theatre. I remember being an assistant director for Ionesco's "Chairs" and I liked the play, but something essential was missing.

KM: Maybe it was the soul – these dramas are often very cold. Yours are not. For me, your dramas have more soul.

IvZ: Thank you, that is exactly what I try to achieve – to give the audience something to be in contact with.

KM: One of the most moving plays that I've read about love, dying and how it affects relationships is your "Pompeenia". I wanted to ask you how should we, as playwrights and as adults, address these difficult issues in plays for children? Should we give children hope, even if we feel it is false?

IvZ: I think you can only convey hope if you feel there is hope. I think the children will sense if you yourself believe it or not. Children are a smart audience. And for me "Pompeenia" is not a play about death. It's funny, because yesterday someone said exactly the same thing and I said: "I didn't think about death when I was writing it". For me „Pompeenia" is a play about parting. It is stated in the play that Nola will be back. She is going away for a very long time, but she will come back.

KM: I thought that maybe it was about reincarnation...

IvZ: (laughs) No. About love. Quite a few people have associated the play with death, but I haven't.

KM: But maybe it's not so different, because when you're a little child, when you part with your loved one, it feels like forever. And we truly never know if we meet again.

IvZ: Yes, and the play was written before the times of mobile phones, skype and other social media. I have the experience of going away for quite some time to a foreign country: telephone calls overseas used to be so expensive, you could afford one maybe once a week. I wonder if people nowadays – children and grownups – deal with this human experience of parting with someone close and being away in a different, easier way. They probably think "Oh, we can always connect", it is so easy nowadays. But what about the existential

dimension – is it still as big as it used to be? So I wonder how “Pompeenia” works for an audience today, because it’s 27 years old now, it’s one of my first professional plays.

KM: I think it is still relevant today. Apart from death, for me it’s all about love.

IvZ: Yes, most of my plays are about love, some of course more, some less.

KM: How do you meet your characters? Do you meet them in the street, do they come to you or do you build them meticulously from many different people you see?

IvZ: It’s very hard, I can’t really give you one answer. In these early plays, like “Pompeenia” or „Visiting Katt and Fredda”, I never really wondered about my characters, like “What do they do in real life? What is their profession? How old are they? What do they look like?” I wasn’t interested in those things. It was just: “What do they want? What do they feel? What is their situation?”. I tried not to root them in a specific context, so more people could connect to them. I focussed on cutting them down to the essentials.

But that was in the beginning, I have created many different characters since then. The characters in “Go Now Go”, for example, are more realistic – I tried to root the child in some kind of social life, but I still don’t know what she looks like. We also know a bit more about the older woman, these characters are not as abstract as the characters in my other plays.

Then I wrote this play for three year olds, ”Outside the House”, and the characters are named just A and B. What is that?! For the theatre it opens the possibility of giving the characters whatever sex they like, or no sex/gender at all: they can be perform as a triangle and a square or whatever. It’s not like in a playwriting book, where you have to define everything first and then you have your character. Am I being clear?

KM: Yes. There is no wrong answer.

IvZ: Yes... And the answer is different for each play.

KM: I’ve noticed a big difference between ”Go Now Go” and your previous plays. It has, as you said, more social background.

IvZ: In “House of Great Surprise” I gave the characters social differences: one of them owns lots of things, and the other one has nothing, except for his suitcase. Through this simple difference, I can get a conflict going. But then we don’t know which one is the rich one - because the one with the suitcase has his squirrel, which is something very different than a truck full of furniture. So, in a different way, he’s rich, too.

KM: I loved that play and the recurring theme of your work: bringing down walls and the way that material things weigh us down. Do you believe that theatre and art in general have the power of bringing down walls and disarming our fears? Or is it just another illusion that we have?

IvZ: Well, I guess it is hope we have: that it really could change something. I don't know if it can change something in a big way, but I feel that if individuals can really be touched by theatre and have new thoughts because of it, this could change the way they look at different aspects of reality. I am not into pedagogics very much though – I believe that the theatre should be a place of enjoyment. I want people laughing! We have alive actors and an alive audience in the same room, so something can happen there, between them, in the present. I like that, it's a collective experience. That's great and it could of course start people thinking, but I wouldn't rely on it. Theatre has to be very, very good and touching to have some kind of impact. And, of course, some plays are obviously more political than others; I am writing a play about neighbourhood at the moment. It's about how we deal with people we don't know, how we treat them and what happens if they come close. It changes your own world if you let someone in and not everyone wants that. In theatre, it depends on the audience if they want to let someone or a thought in. Of course, the play should always be good, that makes it easier.

KM: I like the theme of “letting in”, opening to others, which is a constant subject of your works.

IvZ: But unfortunately not a constant one in the real world!

KM: Astrid Lindgren once said that she writes for the child she used to be. Who is your ideal audience?

IvZ: I don't know. Of course, in the first place, it has to be interesting for myself. If I find it interesting, I can hope that it also attracts someone else's interest. But am I writing for my inner child? I don't know. I do remember being a child and I liked being a child. So, maybe, partly the answer is yes. But I have a different perspective now, because I am not a child any more. I don't know about the ideal audience. I don't have a view of how they are supposed to be. Open is probably enough.

KM: Your plays are very rhythmical and musical. Can you tell me more about your musical background and inspirations?

IvZ: I come from musical family – my mother is a musician and my father has a small publishing house for old music. From childhood to my early twenties I played the cello; music was always there and my connection to it is very strong. At the beginning of my career I used to work as an assistant of the director, also in opera. Now, after many years of writing drama, I was asked to write a libretto for an opera for children, „The Children of the Sultan” is to premiere in April 2020 at Theater Dortmund. It felt like it was the best thing that could happen to me! Suddenly these two important things in my life, writing and music, came together. The composer Avner Dorman was commissioned to write the music. We didn't

know each other before, but it worked out extremely well and I am absolutely thrilled with what became of the text I wrote when it was set to music. I knew that my words would not stay in the rhythm that I wrote them, that the words would be sung and not spoken, but the dimension that was added is more than I could have hoped for. Throughout the writing of the libretto, it was my goal to try to write the best possible “foundation” on which Avner could then develop his music as freely as possible. Of course, it was also useful for me to have some theoretical knowledge in music.

KM: Is it hard to be a female playwright? Is the gender of the characters in your plays important to you?

IvZ: I always try to write parts for women – I think it’s very important and it also feels like the natural thing for me to do. There are still not enough stories about girls and women on the stages. In Germany there are still more male actors in the theatre than women. The classic plays are full of men. We need to change that because it doesn’t represent society in a correct way. We need to write more good roles for women. And of course, we don’t want them just to be there – we want them to have something essential to do, something to want in life, something to succeed in. I feel very strongly about that. I’ve had enough of seeing women be the decoration.

Is it hard to be a female playwright? I do believe that it is not as easy for a woman to be successful as a playwright as it is for a man. I didn’t believe this for many years, but now I have come to the conclusion that it is true. Take a look at the theatre programs or the prizes, count your colleagues – you will find far more authors that are men. Is this because they are generally more talented? I do not believe that to be true. So there must be other reasons. Women lead very different lives and they are still also often made to do this. They are not as good as men at standing together and helping each other. They put up with much more and sometimes they don’t trust themselves enough. And often they are just not loud enough. Sometimes, it’s not a matter of talent, it’s a matter of „putting it out there“. But it also is a matter of „is anyone there to help you?“.

KM: Do you have any advice for young playwrights?

IvZ: Never stop writing! If everyone ignores you, you can at least entertain yourself ;-)

KM: “If there was no sea, it should be invented” – a quote from your “House of Great Surprise”. Is it your own opinion?

IvZ: Yes, I do love the sea. It can be wild and calm, and you can look so far when you’re there. The air is fresh and you can fill your lungs and take it in. Life gets simpler, clearer. And I love that.