

MACIEJ MIARCZYŃSKI

ORCID: 0000-0001-5539-9248

Lodz University of Technology, Poland

THEATRE OF 13 ROWS. THE DEVELOPMENT OF AVANT-GARDE THEATRE CONCEPTS

TEATR 13 RZĘDÓW. ROZWÓJ KONCEPCJI TEATRU AWANGARDOWEGO

Abstract

The main goal of avant-garde theater was to search for new means of expression in acting and in stage design. Its idea was to reject the traditional form of stage and auditorium and its division by a curtain to create new relations between them. Screenwriters, directors, stage designers created new relations between actors and viewers. Art wasn't meant to be reserved only for upper class. It was meant to be for everyone. The viewers started to experience performances collectively in line of the trend of democratization of arts. The main scope of this article, using the literature review and an interview with architect Jerzy Gurawski, is to present how avant-garde theatre concepts have been developing and how this evolution was inspired by the ancient Greek theatre.

Keywords: avant-garde architecture, theatre architecture, theatre

Streszczenie

Głównym celem teatru awangardowego było poszukiwanie nowych środków wyrazu zarówno w grze aktorskiej, jak i w materii scenicznej. Według jego idei, odrzucono tradycyjną formę sceny i widowni oraz ich podział za pomocą kurtyny, aby stworzyć nowe relacje przestrzenne między nimi. Scenografie, reżyserzy, projektanci tworzyli nowe relacje między aktorem a widzem. Sztuka teatralna nie miała być zarezerwowana tylko dla wyższych sfer, lecz miała docierać do szerszych grup społecznych. Widz zaczął na nowo doświadczać przedstawienia kolektywnie, zgodnie z nurtem demokratyzacji sztuk. Poniższy artykuł, dzięki przeglądowi literatury oraz wywiadowi ze współtwórcą Teatru 13 Rzędów arch. Jerzym Gurawskim, ma pokazać, jak rozwijały się koncepcje teatru awangardowego i jak rozwój ten był inspirowany przez grecki teatr antyczny.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura awangardowa, architektura teatralna, teatr

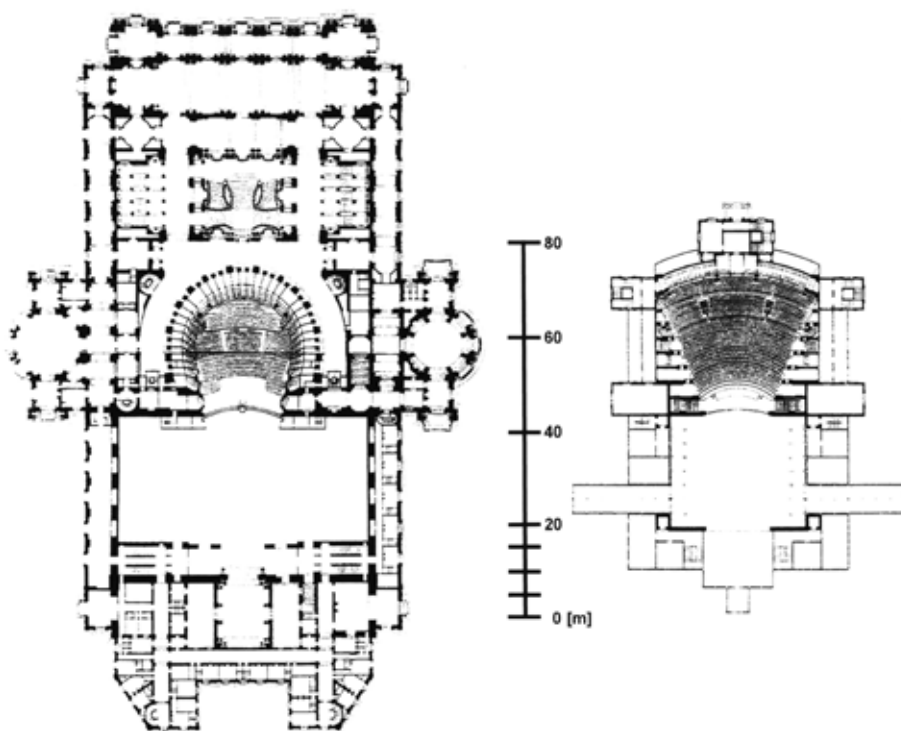
1. INTRODUCTION

From the ancient theatre of Epidaure, through baroque ballrooms and palace theatres, ending with more modern shoebox and vineyard halls, the shape of auditorium and stage have significantly changed. Along with the above, people had different opportunities to reach culture.

During the direct democracy in ancient Greece, great theatres with enormous auditoriums such as: Epidaure, Argos, Odeon of Herodes Atticus were highly available for their citizens. According to the American sociologists Richard Sennet, in the ancient Greek theatre, interactions between the actor, the speaker and the viewer as well as between the viewers themselves

can be observed. Thus, creating one, unified space for everyone. “Such a disciplinary space of eyesight, voice, body had one great virtue: through concentration of attention on a speaker and identification of others in the audience who might call out challenges or comments, the ancient theater sought to hold citizens responsible for their words.”¹, modern times.

There was however another exception. In the fourth quarter of the 19th century, the boundary between the stage and auditorium began to disappear by the emergence of the Great Reform of Theatre introduced by Richard Wagner and his Festspielhaus in Bayreuth. In comparison with the Italian baroque theatre, the Festspielhaus is revolutionary. Its unified space of stage and auditorium is clearly visible. Its main idea is to reject the curtain, creating a common area for actors, musicians and the viewers². The history has come full circle, after times of limited access to the culture, the social relations known from the direct democracy were slowly restored. People again started to experience performances collectively (Ill. 1).



Ill. 1. Theatre Garnier in Paris (left), Festspielhaus in Bayreuth (right). A comparison of French version of Italian baroque theatre to the “Theatre of spatial unity” by Richard Wagner. Source: P. Obracaj, *Sztuka teatru a ewolucja architektury scenicznej. Od wzorców ateńskich po światową standaryzację włoskiej sceny barokowej*, Politechnika Opolska 2005.

¹ R. Sennett, *The spaces for democracy*, Michigan University, 1998, p. 10.

² P. Obracaj, *Sztuka teatru a ewolucja architektury scenicznej. Od wzorców ateńskich po światową standaryzację włoskiej sceny barokowej*, Politechnika Opolska, Opole 2005, p. 13.

The avant-garde theatres in the 20th century had the same goals formulated by the Great Reform of Theatre. Its idea was to search for new means of expression in acting and in stage design. Its goal was to reject the traditional form of stage and auditorium and its division by a curtain to create new relations between them. Screenwriters, directors, stage designers created new relations between actors and viewers.

Of course this wouldn't be possible without the technological development. The emergence of electricity, dynamic lights as a basic element of scenography, new common "tent" space covered by the roof shaped by the calculated acoustic method of Gustav Leon, etc., brought new possibilities for performing and experiencing concerts and spectacles³.

In Poland, one of the most iconic examples of avant-garde theatre is the Theatre of 13 Rows created by Jerzy Grotowski in Opole. I had the opportunity to have a conversation about the development of avant-garde theatre and its inspirations with one of its creators – architect Jerzy Gurawski.

2. AVANT-GARDE THEATRE CONCEPTS

An example of a search for relations between the stage and auditorium was a concept of "Simultaneous theatre" by a painter and stage designer Andrzej Pronaszko and architect Szymon Syrkus. The author describing his concept mentioned a poem by Giuliamme Apollinaire written in 1916:

*A circular theater with two stages
One in the middle and the other like a ring
Around the spectators permitting
The full unfolding of our modern art
Often connecting in mysterious ways as in life
Sounds gestures colors cries tumults
Music dancing acrobatics poetry painting
Choruses actions and multiple sets⁴*

Pronaszko and Syrkus, while creating the Simultaneous Theatre in 1927–1928, were aware of Appollinaire's poem, and their concept represented the same idea. Idea of theater of spatial unity. The auditorium was located in the centre, and the stage was situated in two circular rings surrounding the viewers. Both rings would rotate at different speeds and in different directions, giving additional dynamics to the performance⁵. The authors goal was to achieve unification of the stage with the auditorium in line with the democratization of culture (Ill. 2, 3). In the following years, Pronaszko with construction engineer Stefan Bryła also created a concept of the Moving Theatre. In this example, the stage was situated along the walls of the theatre and its center was occupied by a circular rotating auditorium. With the help of special mechanisms, it rotated towards the current place of action⁶ (Ill. 4).

³ M. Leśniakowska, *Architektura teatralna w Polsce w XX wieku* [in:] D. Buchwald, M. Jarzyna, P. Morawski, *Architektura teatralna w Polsce*, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Warszawa 2012, p. 146.

⁴ G. Appollinaire, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, [in:] *Modern French Theatre: An Anthology of Plays*, edited by M. Benedikt, G.E. Wellwarth, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966, p. 66.

⁵ M. Leśniakowska, *op. cit.*

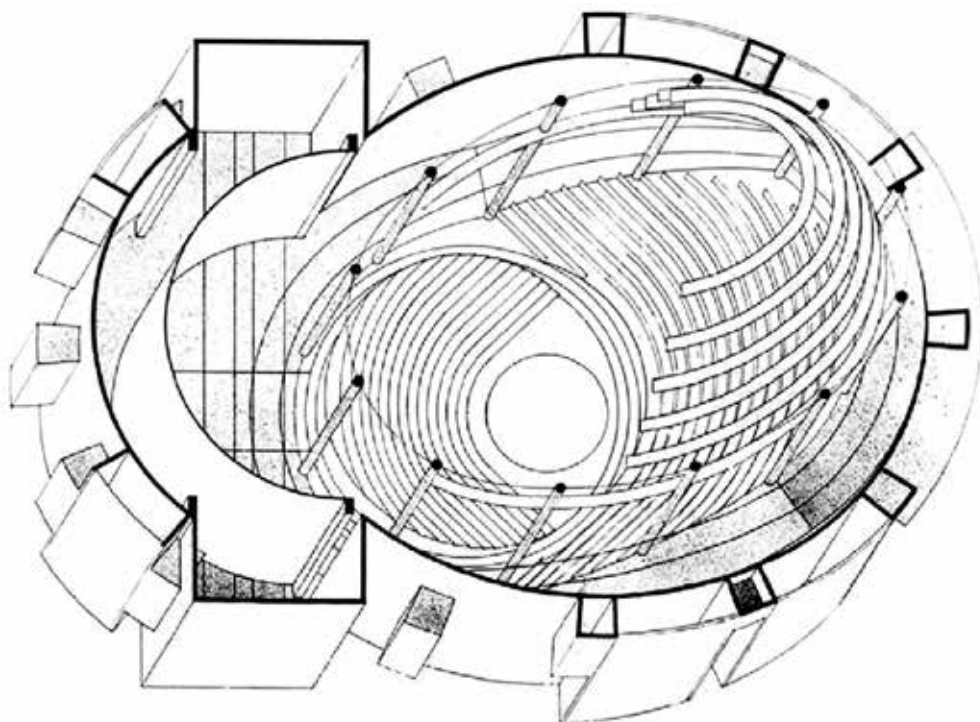
⁶ K. Sienkiewicz, *Andrzej Pronaszko i Szymon Syrkus "Teatr symultaniczny"* [in:] <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/andrzej-pronaszko-i-szymon-syrkus-teatr-symultaniczny> (access: 9.05.2021).



III. 2. Szymon Syrkus, Andrzej Pronaszko, Zygmunt Leski – Simultaneous theatre mockup. Source: S. Syrkus, H. Stażewski, *Opis teatru symultanicznego Andrzeja Pronaszki i Szymona Syrkusa przy współpracy Zygmunta Leskiego*, Praesens, nr 2, Warszawa 1930, p. 146.



III. 3. Andrzej Pronaszko, Stefan Bryła – Moving theatre mockup. Source: AS. Ilustrowany Magazyn Tygodniowy, nr 17, Spółka Wydawnicza Kurier s.a, Kraków 1935 (ed. Jan Malczewski).

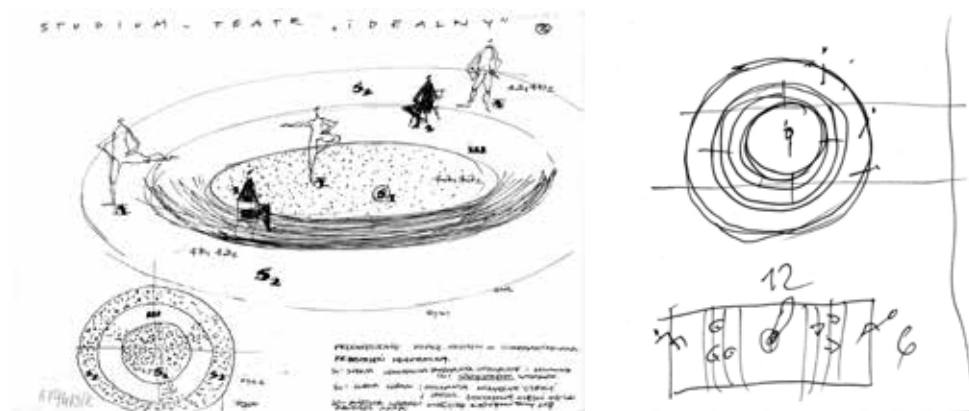


III. 4. Walter Gropius, Erwin Piscator – Total Theater, Berlin, 1927. Source: <https://www.utopiantheatres.co.uk/guidegropiusp.html> (access: 10.05.2021).

This concept was created in parallel with another unrealized concept of the Total Theater by Erwin Piscator and architect Walter Gropius. Their idea was to use the latest technological improvements to achieve simultaneity and unity of stage and audience. In this project, different parts of audience were to freely move and the place of action could be placed on numerous mobile platforms. Multimedia projections were covering all the walls surrounding the viewers.

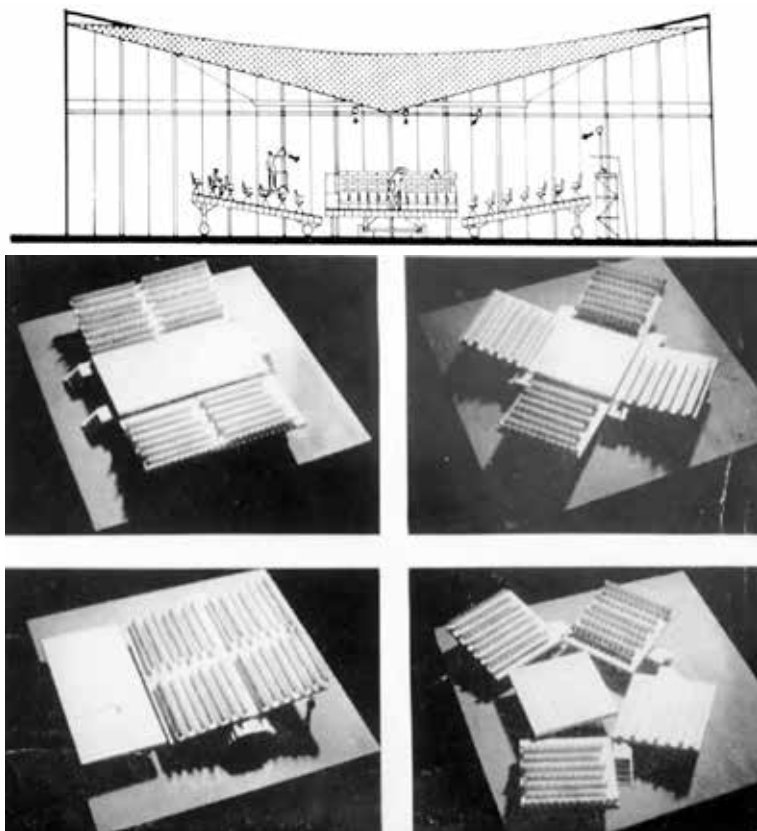
3. THEATRE OF 13 ROWS

An example of a search for the relationship between the stage and the audience is Jerzy Grotowski's Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole, where in the 1960s, in cooperation with the architect Jerzy Gurawski, he created a stage space, making the audience active participants of the performance. They both met after graduation of Jerzy Gurawski from the Technical University of Cracow. His master thesis on experimental theatre was the basis for their future work. Similarly to the concept of simultaneous theatre, they began with the stage located in the centre. However, the two surrounded rings were occupied by the viewers – the inner ring, and actors – outer ring. It all created a common space of actors and spectators. Furthermore, this concept was put into a small hall with dimensions of 6 by 12 meters, proving that it could be placed anywhere (Ill. 5, 6, 7, 8).



Ill. 5, 6. The idea of theatre in the rings and its application in the 13 Row Theater by Jerzy Gurawski. Source: author's private collection.

The concept of Gurawski's master thesis was noticed outside the Iron Curtain and described in the French magazine "Aujourd'hui – art et architecture" in 1962. Jerzy Gurawski, browsing the magazine, was surprised by the fact that his concept wasn't the only one that supported the same idea. A theatre with transformable auditorium was also a subject of experiment in Atelier theatre in Belgrade created by Bojan Stupica. Another concept presented was a French Theatre de l'Espace by Eduard Autant-Lara who was inspired by the Syrkus' Simultaneous theatre. German Ideal theatre project by Kurt Gutzeit or Baylor University theater in Waco concept by Paul Baker are just other examples of avant-garde theatre concepts, among which Poland had its proud representation.



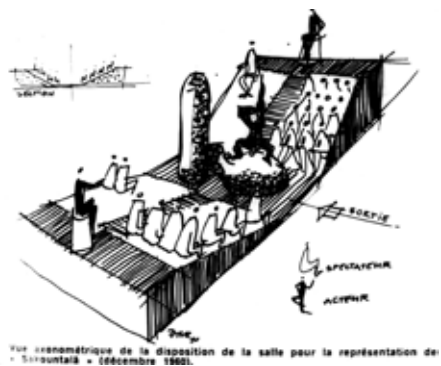
Ill. 7, 8. The concept of a theatre with a transformable auditorium by Jerzy Gurawski, Cracow 1959. Source: J. Pollieri, *Les salles modernes et les principes scénographiques* [in:] *Aujourd'hui art et architecture* nr 42–43. Scénographie nouvelle, Paris 1960.

Jerzy Grotowski, in his further research in the theatrical form, used not only the Apollonian idea related to conversation and dialogue, but also the Dionysian ludic idea, creating a new theatre in Italian Pontedera. He moved the theatre to the rural shed, again proving that theatre can be placed anywhere.

The work of Grotowski was continued by his student Włodzimierz Staniewski, who uses the ludic aspect and involvement in the life of local community at the Centre for Theatre Practices “Gardzienice” near Lublin.

4. REJECTING THE CURTAIN

Each play in the Theatre of 13 Rows created new and unique relations between actors and viewers. For instance, the first play titled “Siakuntala” was just an embossed version of two-ring concept, with the addition of lights focusing on actors and the main event. Further plays evolved into completely new concepts of relations between participants of the performance.



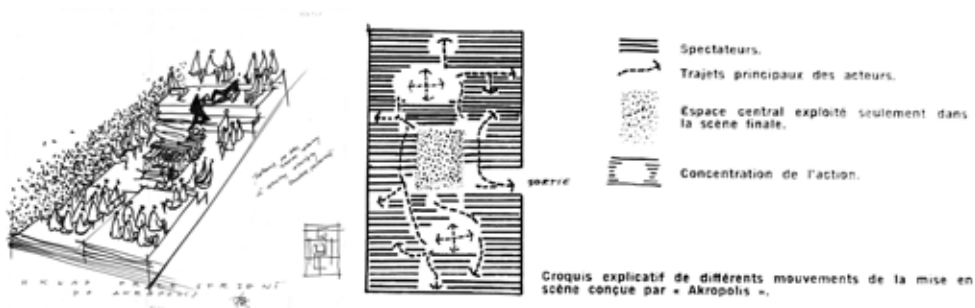
Ill. 9. *Siakuntala*— stage and auditorium layout. Source: Aujourd'hui art et architecture, 1962, p. 162



Ill. 10. *Dziady*— stage and auditorium layout. Source: Aujourd'hui art et architecture, 1962, p. 162

The scenography for their next play “*Dziady*” by Adam Mickiewicz was completely different. Circular relations were transferred to a pattern similar to random islands (Ill. 9, 10). The concept of spatial relations for *Kordian* play by Juliusz Słowacki was again completely different from its predecessors. In this case, it was essential to make an illusion of a psychiatric hospital where the main character was situated with surrounding viewers.

In *Acropolis* we can observe a more organized layout. Again, creating a variation of relations known from ancient Greek theatre (Ill. 11, 12, 13, 14).

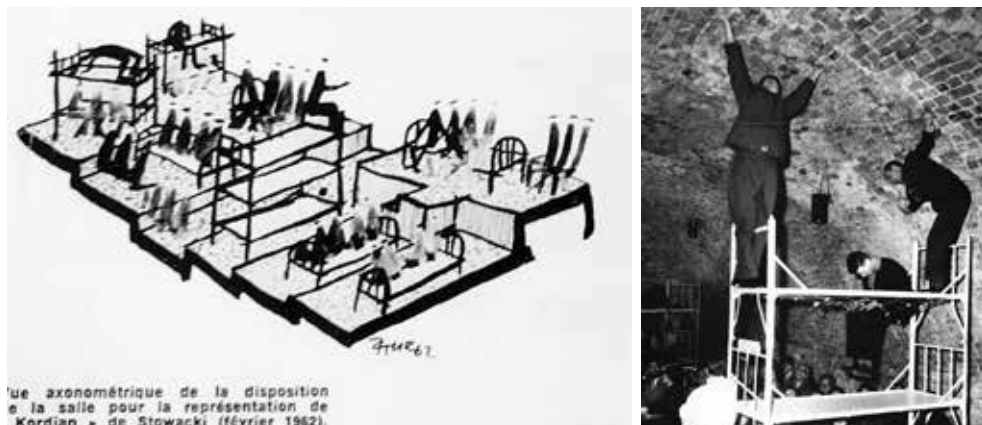


Ill. 11. (left) *Acropolis* – stage and auditorium layout. Source: <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/work/akropolis-wedlug-wypianskiegomskc742/> (access: 4.10.2022).

Ill. 12. (right) *Acropolis* – diagram of relations. (Source: Aujourd'hui art et architecture, 1962, p. 162).

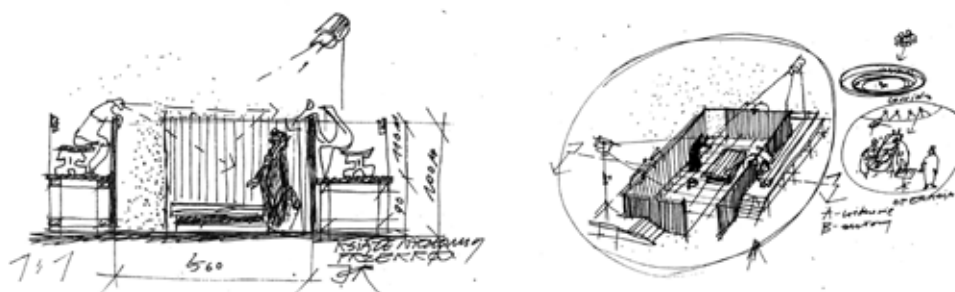
In *Książę niezłomny* by Juliusz Słowacki, the whole stage was surrounded by the viewers. Creating a “medical academy” style of observation (Ill. 15, 16).

Later, the Theatre of 13 Rows and its continuation – the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław, continued experiments with relations between the stage and the auditorium. Surprisingly, in their works, they abandoned moving parts of auditorium, because too much technology would distract the viewers’ attention. The most important thing was to reject the curtain and create a perfect relation between the viewer and all the people who created this theatre: actors, director, stage designer and architect. Relation known in the ancient Greek theatre.



Ill. 13. (left) *Kordian* – stage and auditorium layout. Source: *Aujourd'hui art et architecture*, 1962, p. 163.

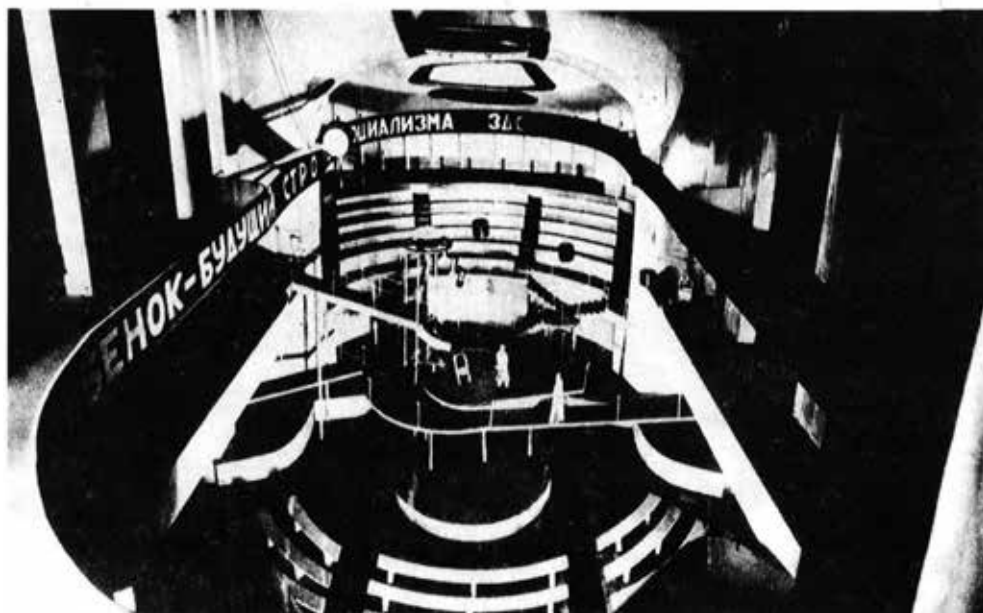
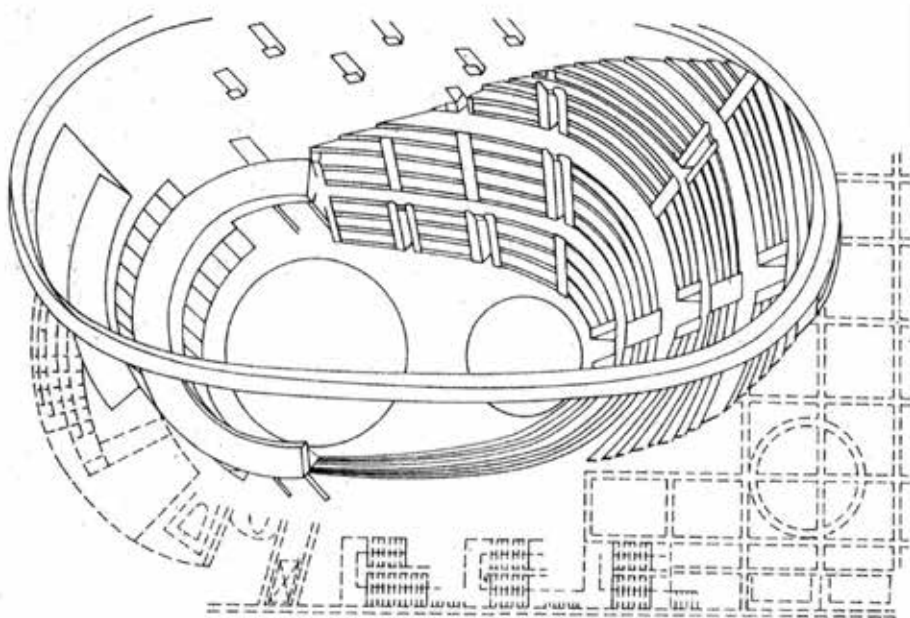
Ill. 14. (right) *Kordian* – photo from the play. Source: *Aujourd'hui art et architecture*, 1962, p. 163.



Ill. 15, 16. Drawings for *Książę Niezłomny*. Source: <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/work/ksiaze-niezlomny-wedlug-calderona-slowackiegomsksc771/> (access: 4.10.2022).

Their inspiration wasn't the concept of simultaneous theatre or the total theater. According to Jerzy Gurawski, they had no possibility to know about these concepts. He mentions the Adam Mickiewicz idea of monumental theater and its development into the concept of Wawel Castle Theatre by Stanisław Wyspiański and works of Wsiewołod Meyerhold and Aleksandr Tairov in Russia as their main inspiration, whose concepts were also closely related to the ancient Greek theatre. Meyerhold's concept also uses two rings but in other relations to the auditorium (Ill. 17).

Jerzy Gurawski worked on the concept of his ideal theatre until the end of his life – March 2022. His latest achievement – the Theatre of Dance in Poznań, is a continuation of his ideas born in the 60s. In this case, he created a simple space, filled with dancers, stage designers, director, who would invite people to the theater.



III. 17. Meyerholdstheatre. Source: P. Obracaj, *Sztuka teatru a ewolucja architektury scenicznej. Od wzorców ateńskich po światową standaryzację włoskiej sceny barokowej*, Politechnika Opolska, Opole 2005.

5. CONCLUSION

The master thesis conducted by Jerzy Gurawski was a beginning of new way of perceiving the relation between the stage and the auditorium in post war Poland. It was also noticed outside the Iron Curtain and published in *Aujourd'hui - art et architecture* in 1962. The author was surprised by the fact that his work wasn't the only one which supported the idea of open theatre. Numerous concepts continued the tendencies to link the actor with the viewer. A theatre reform idea which was introduced by Richard Wagner in Festspielhaus in Bayreuth and finds its continuation to this day.

Some concepts are closely related, others evolved to completely new open forms but all have one thing in common, their main inspiration was the ancient Greek theatre created in the times of direct democracy.

Jerzy Gurawski, answering the question about the future development of democratization of culture, points out that it may go both ways. On the one hand, some performances can only be watched by limited number of viewers, which along with the growing popularity may cause a significant increase in the ticket price etc. In this situation, the performances may again be limited to the higher spheres, which is against their main idea. On the other hand, we can observe new ideas inviting people from all walks of life to the theatre to experience performances together, just like in the ancient Greek theatre.

References:

- [1] Appollinaire G., *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, [in:] M. Benediktm, G.E. Wellwarth *Modern French Theatre: An Anthology of Plays*, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York 1966.
- [2] AS. *Ilustrowany Magazyn Tygodniowy*, nr 17, Spółka Wydawnicza Kurier s.a, Kraków 1935 (ed. Jan Malczewski).
- [3] Leśniakowska M., *Architektura teatralna w Polsce w XX wieku* [in:] D. Buchwald, M. Jarzyna, P. Morawski (eds.), *Architektura teatralna w Polsce*, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Warszawa 2012.
- [4] Obracaj P., *Sztuka teatru a ewolucja architektury scenicznej. Od wzorców ateńskich po światową standaryzację włoskiej sceny barokowej*, Politechnika Opolska, Opole 2005.
- [5] Pollieri J., *Les salles modernes et les principes scenographiques* [in:] *Aujourd'hui art et architecture* nr 42–43. Scénographie nouvelle, Paris 1960.
- [6] Sennett, R., *The spaces for democracy*, Michigan University, 1998.
- [7] Sienkiewicz K., *Andrzej Pronaszko i Szymon Syrkus "Teatr symultaniczny"* [in:] <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/andrzej-pronaszko-i-szymon-syrkus-teatr-symultaniczny> (access: 9.05.2021).
- [8] Syrkus S., Stażewski H., *Opis teatru symultanicznego Andrzeja Pronaszki i Szymona Syrkusa przy współpracy Zygmunta Leskiego*, Praesens, nr 2, Warszawa 1930, p. 146.
- [9] <https://www.utopiantheatres.co.uk/guidegropiusp.html> (access: 10.05.2021).
- [10] <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/work/ksiazek-niezlomny-wedlug-calderona-slowackiegomsksc771/> (access: 4.10.2022).
- [11] <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/work/akropolis-wedlug-wyspianskiegomsksc742/> (access: 4.10.2022).

Author's Note:

Maciej Miarczyński, MSc, Arch.

Born in Poland, 1985. MSc Arch., PhD student in Architecture at the Lodz University of Technology, MSc in I.T. and Econometrics at the University of Lodz. His current research focuses on concert halls and theatre architecture, the evolution of stage and auditorium and its relation to social and cultural changes. maciej.miarczyński@dokt.p.lodz.pl