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Mystery and artistic veil – Widma [Phantoms] by Stanisław Moniuszko and Paweł Passini

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to analyse Moniuszko's *Phantoms* with a particular focus on the relationships between music and libretto in order to compare them later with modern strategies of performances staged recently in Polish operas and concert halls. The source-historical context referring to cultural and perceptive aspects of *Phantoms* serves as a starting point. The question is also raised concerning the relationship and fusion of arts constituting that intriguing work. A search for dramaturgic-theatrical aspects of Moniuszko's work assumes an attempt to capture a so-called 'intentio operis', created at the intersection of Mickiewicz's text and musical intentions of the composer. The analysis was centered on selected aspects of dramaturgy of a few performances of 'Phantoms' staged at the Wratislavia Cantans Festival (2017, dir. P. Passini), the Wrocław Opera, (prem. 2018, dir. J. Fret), and the Polish Royal Opera (prem. 2017, dir. R. Peryt). All stagings were an interesting attempt to reinterpret a starting form of cantata bringing it closer to theatrical work. This paper intends to answer the following questions: what dramaturgic and theatrical strategies are generated by Moniuszko's cantata? To what extent does the cantata nature of this music-textual work contributes to new theatrical interpretations? To what extent are modern stage productions the answer to an artistic potential present in its music-textual layer? Do the new projects of its visualization and dramatisation result, even indirectly, from the structural and staging potential of the work, or whether they attempt to add new artistic ideas in order to make *Phantoms* more attractive as a starting, incomplete, music-textual structure?

KEYWORDS: Stanisław Moniuszko, Adam Mickiewicz, *Phantoms*, *Forefathers' Eve*, cantata, Paweł Passini, stage production

I

I would like to use the category of mystery to bind my reflections on Stanisław Moniuszko's *Widma* [*Phantoms*] and one contemporary stage production of that work into a synchronous whole. I have in mind here Paweł Passini's intriguing and – for many commentators – controversial spectacle performed in the 52nd International Wratislavia Cantans Festival in 2017 at the National Forum of Music in Wrocław. It was also filmed in a television version that same year. The stage project of interest to me here was derived from a specific diachrony: from the

theatrical potential of the cantata and from the work's dramatic structure, genetically linked to the second part of Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*].

Passini's *Phantoms* departed considerably from earlier approaches and productions, at the same time expanding the scenic potential encoded in the spectacle-mystery genotype of the work. It is worth considering the extent to which the intentions of three creative artists – the poet, the composer and the theatre director – representing three different eras, three types of art and de facto three perspectives on aesthetic issues come together in this contemporary stage production and whether the huge dramatic and theatrical potential of the musical *Forefathers' Eve/Phantoms* was confirmed in this realisation, enabling it to be interpreted anew.

As we know, the category of (the) mystery connected to art or entering into various relationships and interdependencies with it has a very interesting and noble tradition, above all in the sacred domain and in the Middle Ages. Thanks to Romantic and modernist reflection on the role and meaning of art, during the nineteenth century a specific, distinct status was imparted to the emergent connections in this area. In my view, we may concur with Agnieszka Ziółowicz (1996), who proposes not only considering the mystery from a generic perspective, but also interpreting it more broadly, including within the context of a universalising theory of art and Władysław Stróżewski's concept of integral aesthetics concerning the aesthetic relations and supra-aesthetic qualities of a work. Then, in the case of the links between the mystery and aesthetics, not only does art discharge the role of a valuable medium, but its inalienable value is closely linked to the possibility of 'illuminating', 'manifesting' and 'transcending' qualities that considerably surpass it.¹ In relation to the links between this concept and drama, Agnieszka Ziółowicz (1996) signals, in the introduction to her study:

It certain plays are spoken of as mysteries, then we should expect that not only will they be vested with specific aesthetic qualities conditioned by the tradition of the genre, but *they will be enveloped in a specific axiological aura proper to works indicative of the realm of supra-aesthetic qualities*. Hence in relation to particular works, 'mystery' *must be understood as an integral phenomenon*, a system of internal relations and meanings dominating both the *compositional* (aesthetic order) and *worldview* aspects (supra-aesthetic order) [of the work] [my emphasis].

Let us add that a theatrical production is a particularly interesting way of linking the category of mystery to an aesthetic context, projecting the possibility of 'pinning' the time and space of the performed spectacle in the sphere of relations and meanings referring to the level of supra-aesthetic qualities as crucial experiences of the audience of an aesthetic event occurring with their participation.

Art may be treated as a symbolic medium of supra-aesthetic qualities. In connection with his production of *Phantoms*, Paweł Passini, in an interview given to Magda Podsiadło (2017), appeared to deliberately signal this particular status of art, being in the form of an 'artistic performance', which, in the director's

¹Agnieszka Ziółowicz (1996) explains that among supra-aesthetic qualities Stróżewski (1986, p. 43) lists the quality of existence, the quality of truth and truthfulness, moral qualities and the quality of the sacred.

opinion, is ‘the only ritual available to us today’ that projects the possibility of revealing that which is supra-aesthetic. He complemented his opinion with the following comment:

If I were to seriously and effectively render that which Mickiewicz relates to us, then I would make an artist’s studio the setting. I would take an actor, a bit of paint and a canvas. And, reinvigorating the form, I would attempt to understand the nature of contact with another world, with the world of spirits. *I think that only the work of an artist can shed some light on what is irrational and unexplained within us.* Because it is in the space of dreams, representations and symbols that we can experience today what is ghostly in Mickiewicz’s world [my emphasis].²

The stage of the National Forum of Music in Wrocław undoubtedly became just such an Artist’s Studio – the artist being Paweł Passini. Let us consider in what sense and to what extent Passini succeeded in translating those creative intentions into Stanisław Moniuszko’s dramatic-musical spectacle *Phantoms*.

II

‘God! What’s this abomination?...’ – this quote within a quote is the title of a review of *Phantoms* posted on one popular blog devoted to contemporary music and musical drama. Dorota Szwarzman (2017) lambasts Passini’s production, points out the director’s mistakes and places a veto on theatrical experiments that marginalise the presentation of the musical fabric of Moniuszko’s work. Such critical reviews abound. They confirm that Passini stirred up a real hornets’ nest and imparted to this work of ‘two bards’ – as nineteenth-century critics dubbed Mickiewicz and Moniuszko – overtones not previously taken into consideration with regard to the manner of staging this lofty play, this ‘national drama’, in its musical form. In addition, the context linked to preparations for the celebrations of the bicentenary of Moniuszko’s birth turned that composition at that time almost into an occasional cantata, deserving a ‘serious and appropriate’ treatment on a modern theatre stage. But this post-apocalyptic vision, indicating the deliberate forging of links to mass culture, to a visual-filmic convention triggering associations with science fiction films, provoked, and even obliged, reviewers to express their firm opposition to such an iconoclastic treatment of Stanisław

² Passini also emphasises in this conversation his wish to capture and interpret Moniuszko’s intentions in setting Mickiewicz’s work to music. He supposes that the composer could have been anxious to inscribe *Forefathers’ Eve* in the broad context of European representative art: ‘It occurred to me that Moniuszko wanted to set the most important Polish dramatical text within the European musical tradition, between oratorio and opera, and thus make it accessible to the Western listener. He wanted to make this incomprehensible poet, immersed in folk ritual, understandable for people brought up in a different culture. Hence he confronts that ritual with nineteenth-century operatic music, seeking a key to Western reception’. Although the perspective of the ‘Western listener’ as an important reference point for Moniuszko’s compositional work should be regarded as at least dubious, as it superimposes a modern-day vision of intercultural inspirations and relations onto the functioning of artistic culture in the nineteenth century, the trope of Passini’s creative experimentation referring to the musical-representative conventions that held sway on European stages in Moniuszko’s times seems wholly justified.

Moniuszko's *Phantoms*. Yet let us stress that there were also some positive, or moderately positive, reviews and commentaries allowing us to regard this spectacle as at the very least intriguing.³

So what did Passini do with *Phantoms*? First and foremost, he invested his production with echoes, voices and references representative of the world of contemporary culture and art – both popular, as we briefly saw above, and 'high-brow', which is certainly worth mentioning. Contemporary tropes which were designed to intrigue listeners and be decoded by them were inscribed above all in the visual-expressive plan of the spectacle: there are allusions to painting, film, happening and theatre classics. Passini employs these visual signs and inspirations to render the additional layer of the theatrical message and of his own directorial vision into a conceptual point of reference for what is occurring on the plan of the familiar dramatic plot and its lyrical musical setting.

In terms of stage design, this spectacle refers both to the apocalyptic aura of the paintings of Zdzisław Beksiński and to Théodore Géricault's famous *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819). Passini also introduces references to Tadeusz Kantor's open-air happening in Łazy in 1967. That was a 'Panoramic Sea Happening' produced on a beach – a 'sea orchestra' conducted by the artist and a tableau vivant reinterpreting Géricault's painting. The evocation of the figure of Tadeusz Kantor, represented on stage by the Shaman – in a stripy dressing-gown, holding a tuba, alluding to images of Kantor from extant photographs of the famous seaside performance – induces the viewer to construct a sequence of further associations referring back to the work of that master of theatre. It evokes first and foremost his *Umarła klasa* [Dead class] (1975), which corresponds emphatically to the subject matter of *Forefathers' Eve* and to the attitude of an artist encountering spirits thanks to art. Yet the series of associations does not end there. Also crucial proves to be the trail leading to the cinematographic art of Ingmar Bergman, and especially *The Seventh Seal* (1957), in which Death plays chess with a Knight. In Passini's show, Death proves to be not only an opponent for the Shaman/Kantor in the game of kings, but also an accuser, commentator and go-between, lending his voice to the spirits of the dead raised in the ritual. The evocation of Bergman's cinematographic masterpiece in *Phantoms* is not merely a unjustified wielding of a palette of erudite associations. This strand also merits closer discussion. Another interesting procedure is the multiplication of the tasks and functions of the character of the Shepherdess. She acts as victim and medium in the mysterious seance, but she also conceals herself right at the start of the show

³ Most of the numerous reviews written after the show are available online. They include texts by Mirosław Kocur, *Dziady X* [*Forefathers' Eve X*], teatralny.pl; Rafał Zieliński, 'Widma' – brawo za odwagę. Spektakl, który intryguje [*Phantoms* – full marks for courage: a show that intrigues], wyborcza.pl; Filip Lech, *Paweł Passini i Andrzej Kosendiak*, 'Widma' [Paweł Passini and Andrzej Kosendiak, *Phantoms*], culture.pl; Jacek Marczyński 'Widma': Mankamenty narodowego obrzędu [*Phantoms*: the shortcomings of a national rite], rp.pl; Dorota Szwarzman, 'Przebóg! cóż to za szkarada...' ['God! What an abomination...'], szwarzman.blog.polityka.pl; Revd Andrzej Draguła, *Plaża umarłych* [Beach of the dead], wiesz.com.pl. Their analyses could be made the subject of a separate study.

behind an ancient mask lifted straight out of Greek theatre, signalling, in a way, the theatrical, or simply quasi-ritual, character of the events on stage.

The accumulation of meanings, symbols and reference points undoubtedly makes up a meaningful whole. Separate in-depth reflections might be made on the subject of the connections and relations between outstanding works of various forms of art in this spectacle. Here, we will merely point out that the fact that they help to forge successive layers of the artistic phenomenon of *Phantoms* undoubtedly helps to intensify the message of Paweł Passini's show.

Let us add that the ritual of the summoning of the dead is arranged like a quasi-mystery, played out in the concert hall of the National Forum of Music – on the stage and in the auditorium, in the gallery above the stage. Thus, within a space adapted for the purposes of an experimental rite, all those present – both the performers and the audience – took part in the spectacle played out in their midst. The spectacle takes the form of a symbolic quasi-ritual, in which the time-space framework and the realities enabling it to be identified with a particular place, recognisable in a specific historical-cultural context, are stripped away. If *Forefathers' Eve/Phantoms* by Mickiewicz/Moniuszko referred, with poetical licence, to a folk rite from the eastern regions of the old Commonwealth of Poland–Lithuania, in Passini's show, the action takes place within an even more strongly reinterpreted 'folk domain'. This is rather a contemporary *theatrum mundi*: not a cemetery chapel (Witkowski, 2006, pp. 139–167),⁴ but an open space – a beach of the dead, as one reviewer aptly put it (Draguła, 2017). This is a quasi-space of the events of a global village, with clear references to art, to the socio-political conflicts of our times and to familiar clichés and notions relating to the primitive rites of archaic cultures. In this show, they are an equally important point of reference as the allusions to the war in Syria and the actions of Blue Helmets rescuing the population of bombarded cities from under the rubble, functioning like a symbolic Sign of the Times, entering the sphere of visual concept games on an equal footing to refugee boats, representing another symbolic reference – a highly suggestive contemporary version of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*.

III

It is hardly surprising that a sense of visual-expressive excess inclines the viewer to ask about the place and role in this conceptual game that were planned for the verbal and musical layers. Both layers tend to complement the artistic message rather than thrusting their way into the foreground. Does the

⁴Meanwhile, in the light of literary tradition, the chapel in *Forefathers' Eve* is an obvious relic of a conventional backdrop to the action in the fictional world in which the events depicted in horror stories were often played out. The nocturnal scenery of the second part of *Forefathers' Eve* is a reflection of a compositional schema well established in literature, including drama. Its realities tally with background motifs typical of the scenery employed in the above-mentioned *Kirchhofspoesie* (Witkowski, 2006, p. 158).

scenic concept, built by verbal-musical-visual means, form a dramaturgically coherent whole? Or does it create an unconvincing cacophony of spatial-temporal signs that disrupt the receiver's impressions? Does it thereby thwart aesthetic experience and eliminate the manifestation of the plan of supra-aesthetic, mystery qualities?

The answers to such questions are by no means obvious. As we know, the director not only acquainted himself with the material of Mickiewicz's play, but he has staged all the parts of *Forefathers' Eve* several times before, including at the Alojzy Smolka Puppet and Actor Theatre and as part of a Belarusian cultural encounters project. The 2015 Opole production, entitled [*dzadi*], staged as a prize-winning project in the 'Living Classics' Competition for a Production of an Old Work of Polish Literature to mark the 250th anniversary of public theatre in Poland, organised by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, rightly won awards and was appreciated by the critics.⁵ As a director of *Halka*, Passini is also familiar with the work of Moniuszko. It is worth emphasising that *Phantoms* is not a derivative continuation of previous ideas or the repetition of a tried and tested artistic concept. It is a distinctive, artistically original production, and there is no doubt that music forms an important part of it, organising and integrating the temporal flow of the drama.

In his introduction to the show on the NFM website, Passini (2017) describes the initial premises behind the production. He ponders the intentions that could have guided Mickiewicz as the playwright and Moniuszko as the composer:

In the folk ritual of communing with the dead, Mickiewicz and Moniuszko seek the *throbbing heart of spirituality*. At the same time, they seem to point to its reality and purpose. They are saying: we need to talk with our dead because – contrary to appearances – it is the living who leave this ritual nourished and consoled [...]. In our own personal darkness of today, we asked ourselves *what phantoms might appear to us*. And we were visited by the victims of war, the last war in Syria, but also earlier, equally bestial and senseless conflicts. Hence we juxtapose the songfulness of Moniuszko's phrasing with the vividness of a vibrating human organism. In the expression of the movement, in the post-apocalyptic aesthetic, in the sacrifice which the actor and dancer make of their bodies on the stage – in those elements we seek *counterpoint and complement*. And we pose the question as to whether *we are still capable of participating in a ritual, or are we no longer anything more than a group of masked observers*. Are we prepared to hear the voices of our dead? [my emphasis].

Particularly salient in this passage are two issues of an aesthetic and supra-aesthetic nature. By employing in his description the concept of representing a rhetorical figure of contrast between the 'songfulness of Moniuszko's phrasing' and the 'vividness of a vibrating human organism', the director suggests the need to pose questions relating to the mystery aspects of the spectacle and their connection with a sort of programme of the total synthesis of the arts in a veritably Wagnerian style. On the stage, the actor and the dancer 'make sacrifices of their bodies', and this ritual motif of art was certainly brought out deliberately. For

⁵ I have written more on this production in 'Poeta w czyścću' (see Lisiecka, 2017).

Paweł Passini, the folk ritual, as the ‘throbbing heart of spirituality’, not only constituted a reference point in his attempt to understand the poetics of the works by the nineteenth-century bards, but was also meant to trigger another artistic procedure rendering the production contemporary. In aestheticising the form of the mystery play after the fashion of the creative concepts of first Mickiewicz and then Moniuszko, he considered that as an artist of the theatre he had the right to provoke a contemporary audience and pose them questions concerning such issues as the current state of their spirituality and their need to participate in ceremonies and rituals, even if only through the intermediary of a play.

For the sake of clarity, let us stress that the question of the ‘throbbing heart of spirituality’ is posed by Passini, of course, from a different time and place in history than the time and place in which Mickiewicz and Moniuszko lived and worked. For Mickiewicz, the Forefathers’ Eve rite was rather the ‘throbbing heart’ of artistic inspiration. Michał Witkowski (2006, p. 158) aptly captured this situation when analysing the young poet’s ‘path to *Forefathers’ Eve*’, drawing attention to the numerous modifications to the original rite, deliberately enhanced with motifs derived from literary clichés and conventions. In his study, he summed up the links between the play and the supposedly folk realia:

Mickiewicz took the ideas of his predecessors and *restyled them in a new Romantic spirit*, imparting to them the outward stamp of native peculiarity. He transformed literary entities and *supplemented them with realities deceptively similar to the world of the common folk*. With regard to the scenes depicted in the second part of *Forefathers’ Eve*, *the poet deceived the reader with the folk character of the represented world*. He proceeded in a similar way in the ballads he wrote in a similar style to *Forefathers’ Eve*, which also beguiled readers with their supposedly folk character. In the vision of the world set out by this youthful play, one notes *the connection of its structure to the preferences of the sentimentalists, on one hand, and to the macabre tastes of romance writers* [my emphasis].

So the young poet drew inspiration from folk rites, transforming their themes and their form into an artistic work. Yet it was not meant as an attempt to preserve (or save) them as a vibrant, ‘throbbing heart of spirituality’, but formed the basis for his creative inspiration, artistically processed and referring – crucially! – in terms of form to the potential of operatic theatre productions.

Mickiewicz unquestionably aestheticised the folk rite of Forefathers’ Eve, and he did so for purely artistic reasons, creating in a work of art an exceptional picture of the represented world, referring the reader and the audience to the sphere of aesthetic, but also spiritual, experiences. Moniuszko, in turn, in composing his music for the bard’s drama and lending it the form of a cantata in lyrical scenes, essentially took that process of aestheticisation further. He enhanced it, at the same time distancing it from the mystery as the ‘throbbing heart’. Thanks to his use of musical solutions rightly associated with Italian operatic bel canto, he conducted that process a second time, as it were, imparting to *Forefathers’ Eve* the features of a mystery play, involving such procedures as creating through his music a suitable aura to the dramatic unfolding of events. Thus the music discharges an important function in setting the mood for the spectacle, reinforcing

the striking theatrical solutions of *Forefathers' Eve* as a spectacle. Paweł Passini essentially takes up that same aesthetic trope and purposefully forges a complex artistic creation from the embers of the folk rite. The mystery of *Forefathers' Eve* as a source of inspiration became the programme of its representation, prompting questions about the role and place of spirituality in art.

IV

Let us note that the questions asked by the contemporary director about the meaning and influence of the folk rite on the creative ideas of Mickiewicz and Moniuszko are not naive, unjustified or groundless. All the less reason to accuse them of lacking a reason and right to exist because they oversimplify the above-mentioned relationship of the synchronous fusion of the historical diachrony of the drama and the musical composition with the contemporary staging. Passini reaches the heart of the matter; he asks about the key relationship between Art and Reality as a vital source of spirituality and inspiration, without which it is impossible to constitute any values in Art, be they artistic, aesthetic or supra-aesthetic. Hence Passini's spectacle provokes and wishes – deliberately, it would seem – to irritate the contemporary viewer. It provokes above all with its form, but also with its highly modernised vision of the world, erected in manifest opposition to the 'songfulness of Moniuszko's phrasing'. It is a form woven out of journalistic shots and images familiar from television and internet news broadcasts, which thrust their way to the fore. Of course, they are freely available to the viewers, but they watch them from a distance, like the protagonist of the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime – with a feeling of the safe distance of an observer. The background of this artistic provocation is formed by an erudite network of aesthetic associations which enhance the message and intensify the connection between foreground and background: the works by Kantor, Bergman, Géricault and Beksiński, the references to science fiction films – a whole feast of stimuli, tastefully served, combined in an intelligent and refined way like a palette of colours. After all, the stage is an artist's studio.

Yet this extravaganza of colours and stimuli leaves the viewer with a sense of oversaturation, of a mish-mash of aesthetics, the experience of some inappropriate excess, since it turns out that the multiplied audiovisual message is a demonstrative veil placed over the mystery-style form and content. This is an accidental effect, however, arising contrary to the artist's designs. While beholding it, we involuntarily reflect on how strongly we are immersed in a utopian, overly aestheticised world that is insensitive both to the surrounding realities and to the entirely seriously treated mystery aspects of the play, the 'throbbing heart of spirituality'. Hence the rhetorical question as to 'whether we are still capable of participating in a ritual, or are we no longer anything more than a group of masked observers' is eminently justified.

At the same time, it turns out that the spectacle's dramatic structure, built on the aesthetic of excess, which is a theatrical manifestation and metaphor of a world filled with stimuli, references and journalistic bundles of images from the

global village, despite the complete audiovisual synthesis of signs and meanings, is incapable of triggering metaphysical feelings, and by the same stroke it does not simply offer up supra-aesthetic experiences and values imbued with the mystery of the sacred realm. It is rather a negative representation of those experiences and values; that is, it does not constitute them directly, be it only through the atmospheric music, as an equivalent in sound of the ‘throbbing heart’. On the contrary, the glut of visual effects and the wealth of references to a wide range of contexts of both the modern world and works of art triggers associations with the grandeur of operatic theatrical scenes, creating a scenic illusion by means of the extreme artificiality of its visual components. This aestheticised mystery play is based on tableaux that are capable of drawing the viewer into a conceptual game, involving the skilful deciphering and connecting of signs. It brings intellectual satisfaction, a sort of intellectual-sensory pleasure, so typical of the reception of a show that... is not, and essentially has no intention of being, a true, fully-fledged mystery play. It is rather a veil, mediating between reality, mystery, the stage and the sacred – adapted, through the mobilised artistic means, to the spiritual condition of our age of saturation and excess, in terms of the overload of both information and aesthetic impressions. The show asks questions of us, attunes us to seeking answers, beguiles us with its dramaturgical structure, referring to the concept of total theatre. But does the modern-day viewer still wish to believe in its power?

V

The imperative of a synthesis of arts as an overriding determinant of theatre productions complemented by a musical and visual message seems to shed a brighter light on the concept of the dramatic form of the second part of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve*. When writing his play and signalling in the subtitle that it was a ‘show’, the young poet projected it as a form that allowed of a musical setting, thereby construing a new type of drama that was open – at least potentially – to the work of composers and other creative artists in the future – artists who would be capable of making suitable use of the dramaturgical potential of this poetical structure and, together with music and stage design, would lend it the quality of a play understood as the best fusion of the fine arts, stimulating aesthetic experiences that would be capable of acting in a lasting way on the souls and minds and its beholders.

Such a task was taken up in the nineteenth century by Stanisław Moniuszko, among others. In writing music to Mickiewicz’s work and retaining its dual formal status – cantata and lyrical scenes – he not so much deprived *Forefathers’ Eve* of its theatrical provenance as he gave a clear signal for future theatre producers – a signal that could be captured from an historical, temporal distance – that this work was open to music and stagecraft. In his opinion, as a composer and an expert on theatrical realities, the theatre of his times was not yet ready to fully exploit the dramaturgical potential of the bard’s masterpiece. Yet time passed and worked to the benefit of both the poet and the composer and both of their works.

Almost one hundred and sixty years later, Paweł Passini turned to Moniuszko's *Phantoms*. This occurred in a completely different context – as the continuation of the remarkable path of *Forefathers' Eve* produced on the boards of twentieth-century theatres, staged by the greatest artists, in times when the dream of the power of the poetical word combined with image and music in the theatre, affecting the course of history and the fortunes of the nation – to mention but Kazimierz Dejmek's *Forefathers' Eve* (1967) and Tadeusz Konwicki's film *Lawa* [Lava] (1989) – found its almost prophetic fulfilment and confirmation. So that visual-expressive excess which Paweł Passini proposed in his production of *Phantoms*, provoking questions about the contemporary condition of the mystery qualities of art, may seem justified, and even desirable. In triggering such a keen reaction from the audience, he moved viewers to reflect on whether the potency of a play that invites them to a meeting – be it only symbolical – between the living and the dead is still sufficient to generate lasting aesthetic experiences – experiences that measure up to the influence of the ancient concept of theatre as a synthesis of the arts, in the power of which Mickiewicz, Wagner, Moniuszko and many other great artists once believed.

Translated by John Comber

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