

IT IS NOT A BIG DEAL TO BE INDIFFERENT

Conversation with Maciej Stuhr

Did the experience of the Polish reception of 'The Aftermath' teach you anything?

Maciej Stuhr: I will probably say nothing new. I will repeat what Wojciech Młynarski said: 'let's keep doing what we think is right'. I realised then, even stronger, that there were certain matters and certain subjects which required debate and one could dispute them, to greater or lesser extent, but this is not for the sake of applause or in order to please everyone. This is rather because, one feels that one should do this. For my film and theatre roles, I believe that there are stories that should be told to the people. Regardless of the fact that the price for telling such stories as 'The Aftermath' is quite high. I felt this on my own skin...

How high was this price?

The loss of a huge part of my audience, so for me as an artist, this is one of the highest prices. Despite this, I still believe that this part of history had to be faced. As a matter of fact, we have to confront it all the time.

Was it after this film that you had to stand face to face with right-wing hate, with such kind of political conduct?

I rather have the impression that at that time, it simply started to become clearer who wanted to be a traditionalist and who wanted to change the world. There had been various conflicts and differences in opinions, discussions even arguments in the past,

but they were not as strong. This new quality was demonstrated to us in all its splendour, in the second decade of the 21st century (the premiere of the famous film by Wladyslaw Pasikowski, took place in 2012 – editorial comment). Since then, nothing is as it used to be in the public discourse. On the one hand, this was to me a great surprise, and on the other – a kind of strong baptism by fire by the public, which I did or didn't have to undergo. Stay in the safe zone and pretend that there are matters of no interest to me, that I would not engage in the dispute of this sort. Or, to stand firmly on my own ideological ground and defend it as an artist and as a citizen. My choice was, as everyone knows, the second option, because it seems to me more significant, important and meaningful to a lot of things I do in my life.

During Woodstock Academy of Lovely Arts you used a phrase 'cheeky gob'. This was more of the comment on your temperament, or a declaration that you felt obliged to speak up on the ideologically and politically important matters?

I am not specially concerned... simply if I feel that something has to be said, I say it even if the cost is high – in this sense, I confirmed that I had a 'cheeky gob' and this was probably caused by my temperament. At the same time, I consider myself to be an unusually quiet person, even if I say that I like to tell jokes and then I also disclose my temperament. Moreo-

ver – for half of my life, I thought of myself as a person in the middle! I tried to listen to both sides of the conflict and I am still trying to do this, but...

Is this more difficult now?

It is different. Personally, I think that one cannot still be a man of the middle, a person I had tried to be for the first half of my life. The times now are such that one cannot pretend that something 'doesn't concern me' and that the truth is 'somewhere in the middle'.

I thank you for these words, because we, by continuing to be in opposition, ex-parliamentary, in the street, pay certain prices, we pay for being there...

I can imagine.

We need such words. What about the people of the arts? Has politics at these new times, poisoned relations among them? Do these explicit ideas cast people away from your environment?

As far as they are concerned, this environment is exceptionally unified and homogenous. The right is dreaming of replacing cultural elites, but despite the passing years, we still can't see who would be able to make films, who would make modern art, who would write these right orientated books. Of course, there are such people, but art specifically requires an audience. Nobody will be forcing people to go to cinemas or theatres. People will want to see what is simply good.

To be honest, in my environment – and I know most of it – from the conversations and observations, I estimate that around ninety percent support the vulnerable, those who face more difficulties now, minorities, refugees, all those over whom majority wants to impose its will... This is at any rate, a natural position and a role of the artists, that they stand on the side of those who need support. In this sense, it seems we are rather exceptional environment. I think, that other environments are a bit more divided.

And have less of the left sensitiveness?

Part of what is characteristic of the left is written in the idea of the art itself. This doesn't mean that we are a left wing mouthpiece. This is not what it is about here, we often are not the electorate of the left. However, looking at the vulnerable and those who suffer because of the dictate of the majority, is a natural response of the artist. I suspect, that the rulers here will have trouble to create an artificial cultural elite from above, because this cannot happen by decree.



Maciej Stuhr on 'Przystanek Woodstock', 2016. Fot. Ralf Lotys, source: Wikipedia.

It may be said that the government is trying to muzzle you. Do you see more auto-censorship among your colleagues?

It varies. Auto-censorship is the right word. We do not have, as it was in the People's Republic, a censor's office, but we know that certain people, certain names, if engage in some social issues, they will close the doors for themselves. This is a particular dilemma for young artists, who are starting to conquer the world... this can happen to them. This requires incredible courage from the young artists. If one has still not achieved a lot and one faces a dilemma whether to collaborate with the devil or not.

There comes the matter of the price?

In certain areas of the so called showbusiness – as the name indicates – there is a matter of business, i.e. money. Business cannot be made against the politics, because it is always immersed in some political situation. The bigger the business, the more careful one should be, because it may slow down the business. As a result, in some corporations, TV stations or productions there is a kind of anxiety to be extra careful. Indeed, I meet as an actor or a presenter, with great anxiety, should I slip, not jokingly and someone, not just me, but also the payer, will get it. This form of censorship, this kind of fear not to fall out with someone, this prevails now in Poland. You know, I want to emphasize it – it is something entirely new! This had never been before. One could laugh at Tusk and Kwasniewski, one could make sketches about them and nobody was afraid that there could be any dire consequences. The scare is enormous now.

I go back for the moment, to the social energy we witnessed in the last five years. Were you more of the observer than a participant of the pro-democratic demonstrations? Is it worth to keep this energy going?

We must! I marched in demonstrations from the call of my heart and also from curiosity of what this social energy was like on the street – at the time of the fight against the laws on the courts in 2017, we were marching every few days – but it is also worth watching how the world changes, where at this time the human energy is cumulated and we must not be offended by this. The fact that there are not millions of us in the streets shows something about us and we should make conclusions from this. We could perhaps, be offended by this 'passiveness' or find new means of expression – more of our reality is happening in the internet and human emotions are cumulated there, including protests. They are very chaotic, sometimes full of overt emotionality and we are not yet able to pool them, we are not able to exploit this internet, so that it will, like a lens, concentrate the scope of these emotions. This is a task for those who want bigger changes – to think of a way to encompass them. Not to expect that here, in Poland ...

We will have the pictures of today's Belarus...

Yes, or from our history from 30-40 years ago... These times are different and we must find a new idea.

Thank you very much for this conversation

Monika Piotrowska-Marchewa