

The Quick Change Artist: Remembering Daniel Gerould

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The Polish playwright-novelist-artist Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz (also known by his nom de plume Witkacy) offered clients of his “Portrait-Painting Firm” a sliding scale of representation that ranged from Type A, “‘slick’ execution, with a certain loss of character in the interests of beautification,” all the way up to Type E, which could include both “subjective characterization of the model” and “abstract composition, otherwise known as ‘Pure Form’” along with “spontaneous psychological interpretation at the discretion of the firm.” Even so, the painter warned, this least naturalistic of his styles might still unexpectedly produce exactly the same results as Type A even though different methods of execution were used. (The seventh category, sketches, was reserved for children because they “could not sit still.”)¹

It was Daniel Gerould who first explained Witkacy’s Types to me some years ago and they have taken up permanent lodging in my imagination ever since. Elegantly refraining from drawing a vulgar straight line from realism to abstraction, the Types embody the Polish modernist imagination in all its playful, mordant, inspired glory—a distinct and wonderfully weird sensibility that Dan, it sometimes seems to me, almost singlehandedly introduced to the English-speaking world. Fittingly, two sets of Witkacy’s paired self-portraits embodying one of the Types (E, “spontaneous psychological interpretation”) embellish the cover of his last and aptly titled book, a collection of essays called *Quick Change*.

Though he applies the label to Witkiewicz, Dan was himself a quick change artist, albeit one of a very different order. Dan’s legerdemain lay in the astounding range of his erudition, as expressed in a kaleidoscopic outpouring of meticulously researched but highly readable scholarship, translation, publication, and instigator of theater productions. *Quick Change*, which I read as one devours a thriller or a box of chocolates (for the essays in it are both thrilling *and* delicious), offers a wonderful road map to his scholarly explorations, not just in the dense fairytale forest of twentieth-century Polish and Russian theater but in such esoteric territories as patient simulations in the training of medical doctors; a French erotic puppet theater of the 1860s; the varying fortunes of the walk-on character Fortinbras, both inside and outside *Hamlet*, on Western and Eastern European stages; and a history of theatrical representations of

¹ “Rules of the S. I. Witkiewicz Portrait-Painting Firm,” in *The Witkiewicz Reader*, ed. and trans. Daniel Gerould (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), pp. 239–242.

the Laocoön Group that concludes with a nod to Tadeusz Różewicz's proposed simulation of the famous Greek statuary in marmalade.

As always, each curiosity Dan inspects here is embedded in a satisfyingly comprehensive historical matrix. A study of Witkacy's doubles is developed within a fine discussion of the history of the *Doppelgänger* in the nineteenth century and earlier. Modern medical simulation is set within two frames: first, that of counterfeit and real illness on the premodern and modern stages, and, second, that of an overarching trend toward the theatricalization of life. It also includes instructive digressions on the performances of Charcot, the theatricalization of madness, and hypochondria as a form of initiation into death. In my copy the essay "The Apocalyptic Mode and the Terror of History" bristles with turned-down pages as Dan explores the aesthetic expressions and cultural foundations of end-of-the-worldism in turn-of-the-20th-century Russia and Poland.

Dan's intellectual curiosity habitually spilled over into areas that seem unlikely at first glance. Who else could add to his amazing list of interests a learned treatise on an instrument of beheading? *Guillotine: Its Legend and Lore* is an amazing work right down to its illustrations, my favorite being the ivy-covered guillotine (I know it's there, though I've just gone through the book several times without locating it). Yet this study grew directly out of his work with early French melodrama, Grand Guignol, and the greatest "guillotophile" of them all, the writer Villiers de l'Isle Adam, whose sci fi robot novel *The Future Eve* Dan dissected in a definitive essay, included in *Quick Change*, that was to be important to my own work. Nor did one have to be a Slavic scholar, Slavophile, or even theater person to gain unfailing stimulation from every issue of *Slavic and Eastern European Performance*—generously comped to me by Dan, as he did so many of his own books.

Now I come to what for me is the most important quality Dan possessed. During a respectably long lifetime (even as it seems far too short to all who loved him), he consistently displayed a deep empathy for the many artists he studied whose brief, tragic, and often violent lives were so different from his. His short essay in *Quick Change* on Andrzej Bursa together with Bursa's play *Cagliostro's Animals* brings this playwright's work vividly to life. The same goes for the playwright Stanisława Przybyszewska, whose works first brought Dan and his wife Jadwiga Kosinka into my life in the year 1989. Having had my imagination prodded and provoked by those decidedly nonidentical bad boy twins of interwar Polish literature Bruno Schulz and Witold Gombrowicz, I was prowling the perimeters of this territory in search of new delights when I came across an intriguing volume from Northwestern: a collection of Przybyszewska's letters with a lengthy introduction by the translators.

It was not so much the letters themselves in *A Life of Solitude* but the poignant and deeply insightful biographical study by Jadwiga and Dan that immediately captured my attention. Rich in historical and cultural detail, it tells the harrowing tale of a daughter abandoned, then taken up, by a narcissistic famous father. She idolizes and imitates him, remaining psychically imprisoned inside the fatal circle of his charisma even while outgrowing him creatively. A greater talent than her celebrated father, she dies of malnutrition and tuberculosis. Her pauper's funeral is rumored to have had four witnesses: three humans and the howling stray cat who had been her only companion. As much as the painful story itself, the many ethical and creative issues it raises, and the fascinating cultural context of the aesthetic movements of early twentieth-century northern Europe, what impressed me most in this study was the humane compassion these biographers showed for their subject. No intellectualizing, no pat psychologizing, no overfamiliar judgments. Just simple compassion. The review I wrote of this volume sparked a correspondence and friendship that was to endure over decades.

Out of a wealth of choices Dan's great subject, arguably, was none other than that protean rascal Witkacy in his many disguises. Besides the invaluable *Witkacy Reader* and the volume of play translations published (and in many cases performed) through the Martin E. Segal Theater, four of the twenty-eight essays in *Quick Change* are devoted to aspects of the Polish artist-playwright-novelist's work, more than on any other figure. In "Fregoli, Witkiewicz, and Quick Change," Dan defines what he calls the "specifically Witkacean metamorphosis" in terms of this artist's transformations of physical appearance as a performer and, at a deeper level, of psychic identity over a lifetime. This discussion, as always, takes place within the historic frame of the "transformist," the quick change artist of Western Europe, the most famous exemplar being the Italian Leopoldo Fregoli, who could effect twenty changes in 2 minutes.

Witkiewicz's own conclusions about the broader implications of quick change—mask wearing and "pseudomorphosis," with their accompanying side effects of inner restlessness and psychic emptiness—were negative. In Dan's paraphrase: "The result of the collective theatricalization of life, by which acting and lying . . . become widespread, is that society itself and its institutions become subject to endless transformation. All forms grow blurred and identities unstable; regimes and ideologies succeed one another in the body politic, as selves do in the individual psyche." I suspect Dan himself may have shared this view, since this theme of the "theatricalization of life" runs through other essays in this last compendium accompanied by an undercurrent of discreet reservation. In closing this essay, Dan passes a rare personal judgment along with his aesthetic one: "Witkacy's living museum of masks fails to achieve self-

transcendence and remains forever arrested in the deformed grimaces of old forms struggling with a Sisyphean task of endless transformation.”

Under the quick change opus of the gentle Yankee gentleman who was Dan Gerould, in contrast, the foundation remains rock solid.