

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SHOEMAKERS  
BY STANISLAW IGNACY WITKIEWICZ**

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Witkacy (Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewica) is no doubt one of the most prolific artists of the twentieth century. He is not only a brilliant playwright but also a painter of over a thousand paintings, together with writings in criticism, aesthetics, philosophy, fiction, and sociology.

Encouraged from infancy by his father, Stanislaw Witkiewicz, the famous artist and critic, to experiment in any creative activity, Witkacy began drawing at age 3; at the age of 5 he was already painting in oils. Then at the age of 6 young Stas from painting turned to piano. It was also during this time that he became interested in literature. At the age of 7 Stas began to write plays mainly influenced by Shakespeare and Maeterlinck.

However, overwhelmed by too many choices for a career and pressured by a brilliant and demanding father, Witkacy took more than two decades to decide what he should do in life. It was in 1918, three years after his father's death, that he turned to play writing seriously. While painting only to earn a living (as he himself claimed), he was practising various forms in writing and developing theories for the theatre.

Witkacy had a vast outlook and an ability to diagnose the ills of his own age and of the future. He was never a "contemporary" of his own age but a "contemporary" of the post-war\* and postmodernist era, due to his accurate prophecies both in literary theories and human condition.

Now, more than thirty years after his death, he is honored as one of the most brilliant artists of the century. His paintings, plays, and literary theories, as well as his portrayal of the human condition in the universe mark the beginnings of the many literary movements. Of these, two are *The Theatre of the Absurd* and *The Theatre of Cruelty*.

Witkacy rejected the compartmentalisation of the human mind, of the arts, and of life in general. His life-style, his works, and his ideas are like the "bits and pieces" of a Picasso painting, showing the different aspects of one reality. As an admirer of Freud, Einstein and Picasso, deformation and the relativity of reality preoccupied him for years.

*The Shoemakers* is Witkacy's last surviving play. Witkacy began to write the play in 1927, but was only able to finish it seven years later in 1934. The play, which portrays the incurable symptoms of a diseased society, was never published or performed during the writer's lifetime. The writer's longest and greatest play was not given a professional performance till 1971. *The Shoemakers* deals with the social, sexual, and artistic spheres. Witkacy presents an era in which incurable boredom and inescapable despair and frustration are the only prevailing elements.

In *The Shoemakers* -subtitled "A Theoretical Play With Songs in Three Acts" using sets of "threes", Witkacy not only deals with political, social and sexual issues, but also probes the evolution of society and individual human condition before and after the revolutions. The play opens on a shoemaker's workshop located "high above a valley... as if placed on high mountains". The shape of the workshop -where almost everything takes place- is triangular. The cherry-colored curtain, the gray wall, and the sky are all triangular. In this triangular background, there are "three" shoemakers. The car horns, the shrieking of factory sirens, and the dead tree trunk complete the sterile world view of the opening lines. However, the "threes" continue throughout the play.

Witkacy uses the triangle image to emphasize the scientific and Hegelian dialectical approach to subject matter. Within a "three" -act structure Witkacy deals with three social classes, three revolutions, three political "isms". The three classes are the working class, the bourgeoisie, and the aristocracy. The three political "isms", [fascism, communism and (technocratic) totalitarianism] are the outcomes of the revolutions (or vice versa).

Triangles insert triangles, and sets of threes can be divided between the "concrete" and the "abstract", that is, settings and concepts. Two intersecting triangles create the six-pointed star, symbol, of God the Creator. In Buddhism three is the Trimurti: Brahma the Creator, Vişnu the Maintainer, and Şiva the Destroyer. However, despite these pointed and mystical allusions to creation, throughout the play only

one boot is produced. The revolutions do not even bring any creative processes. On the contrary, they bring only destrution.

Each act of *The Shoemakers* ends in a revolution: Act I in a fascist revolution, Act II in a communist, and Act III in a future post-industrial, technocratic totalitarian one. Yet neither of the revolutions can cure the ills of the previous one or bring meaning to life and to this "hateful" existence.

The last act conveys a world gone mad. It is a world in which everything is meaningless or deceptive. Words have lost their meaning. All is endless and meaningless discussion. There are no real threats. Hyper-workoid's F-Bomb (H-Bomb?) is a dud. He himself is a eunuch. Instead of the girls coming from "Euphorion" (something that will give them life) the "mulsh" comes. Moreover, the prophetic Mulch from Wyspianski's *The Wedding* proves to be a man-about-town in tails who is eager to dance to the tune of a tango coming from the Savoy Hotel in London. The romantic images, the folklore, the traditions and myths of a nineteenth-century Poland are long dead and forgotten. Now everything is deadly boring, sterile, and false, heading towards self-destruction. The play ends with no hope for mankind who has been ground in the mills of meaningless existence.

*The Shoemakers* is a grotesque "comedy of manners" in which the representatives of each class become unrecognizably disintegrated. The worker Sajetan becomes as bad as the capitalists, Scurvy, "son of a whore", metamorphoses into an endlessly smoking dog maddened by sexual drives, and the sadistic, devouring, nymphomaniac Duchess with the "contagious bitch virus" changes into a "creature" and put into a cage. Human existence in this "cancerous comedy" is reduced to "eating, reading, messing around, screwing, and falling asleep"<sup>1</sup>. "There's no such thing as humanity -there's only worm's in the cheese, which is a heap of worms itself." (p. 250) Drugs and cocaine are no longer enough to save man. While "boredom" and "still worse boredom" are mounting up, the powerless, insect-like creatures, in meaningless conver-

<sup>1</sup> Daniel C. Geroud and C.S. Durer (trans.), *The Shoemakers* in Stanislaw Ignacy WitVuciewicz, *The Madman and the Nun and Other Plays* (Seattle and London: 1968), p. 228. Further references to *The Shoemakers* will be to this edition, with page numbers given in the text in parentheses.

sations, try to find answers to unanswerable questions on the meaning of human existence. Realizing that they are living in a universe in which "truth doesn't exist", and that "everything is relative", they see themselves as "sitting on the lid, right by the safety valve". Pessimistically, they look forward to death which will bring an end to their seemingly endless misery.

Rape and sexual drives are extremely important themes in the structure of the play. Sexuality stands in the middle of the intersecting triangles. While trying to rape the eager Duchess, the shoemakers and Scurvy show that, metaphorically, each class lusts to rape the other, in order to exist. Besides, in a world where there can be no honest, innocent, and meaningful relationships, the only way of communication is by raping. Thus, Witkacy shows the degraded human and class relationships through pathological sexual drives.

To represent the bourgeoisie Witkacy has chosen a perverted prosecuting attorney to imply that even the most important institution of the system (justice) has gone rotten. The Duchess who "devours" men and enjoys being watched ("while doing it") symbolizes the equally immoral aristocracy. Representatives of the working class are the shoemakers, not the factory workers or the peasants. By this Witkacy impbes that the only shred of art left in the world is making shoes, and that is a working class function. For the shoemakers, portrayed with sympathy and humor, even the creation of one boot, completed in the opening scene, represents art's last gasp. Unlike *The Water Hen* and *Gyubal Wahazar*, *The Shoemakers* does not cast Witkacy's two favorite characters, the "artists" and the "child". The son, Joseph Rempe, unlike Tadzio (*The Water Hen*) or Piggykins (*Gyubal Wahazar*), does not have the intuitional and creative powers typical of the Witkacy "child". In fact, Joseph Tempe has no significance at all. The "artist", on the other hand, never makes his appearance; the (artisan) shoemakers with their one boot show to what pathetic depths art and creativity have sunk. No longer will there be any mystical or philosophical creations.

In this "triangular" tragedy, the audience is aroused to laughter by the nonsensical usage of names. The names of the Duchess, besides implying seduction-provocation and debauchery (Provokskaya-Debochkova), seems also to carry an allusion to the Peace of Nicias-a futile attempt to establish peace in Ancient Greece (Irina Nikitovna). The Hyperworkoid's (the automaton) name is Oleander Squintpease (poisonous

flower, strabismus, pea). Joseph is not the Joseph in Genesis, or the Joseph of Arimathea. Nor is he the Joseph of Nazareth. This is one of Witkacy's typical devices: a clue going nowhere. However, Sajetan Tempe may allude to a notorious Sejanus, captain of the Praetorian Guard, who failed to overthrow the emperor Tiberius; and ironically to that beautiful valley, Tempe, which inspired Sajetan also implies Sa... tan and workshop the hell. Apart from aimless implications, Witkacy uses names which will add meaning to the play. Similarly, in the name Scurvy, the author makes a multilingual pun. In Polish, it means "son of a whore". In English, because of the nature of the disease, Scurvy implies "mean" and "worthless", like a "mangy" dog.

This tragicomedy, in many ways, resembles Witkacy's childhood plays. The comic use of names, unexpected cartoon violence (for instance, Sajetan hitting the Duchess), foreign words (German, French, and Italian), neologisms (such as "hypersupermegaphonopump"), rampant insults, the personal style of stage directions, and the presence of the author himself, can be traced through his childhood plays. Throughout *The Shoemakers* Witkacy himself is present either in the stage directions (as he writes "we" in *Cockroaches*) or in the dialogues of the characters. Scurvy "refers" to him as the "slop-artist from Zakopane". While the Duchess calls the play "drama of ideas", Sajetan calls it a "cancerous comedy". All the characters are aware that they are acting in Witkacy's play and speaking his lines on their own "small shoemakers' stage". While the Duchess is doomed to play in nonsensical plays, Scurvy has been persuaded "to take up philosophy". Farm Hand says, "You didn't let me finish and what came out was Goddam nonsense à la Witkacy" (p. 273). Sajetan beggingly cries for help, "Won't anything happen at the very last gasp of my life? Will I die in the middle of this cancerous comedy?" (p. 283) The characters on the stage are like "characters" playing "characters". While the play evolves in a Pirandellian manner, it ends with a Brechtian effect when the Terrible Voice, reminding the audience that they have seen a play, says, "You've got to have lot of fact / To finish with the final act" (p. 288).

Witkacy not only ridicules himself throughout the play but also attacks the audience. In the stage directions he calls the audience a "son-of-a-bitch audience", and Sajetan addresses them as such directly, (pp. 249,250). One time Sajetan calls them "the idiot public", and at another time First Apprentice blames them for having "lousy taste". However, the audience is not the only target of ridicule. Witkacy also makes

fun of certain theatrical conventions such as abridged symbolic scenes, sudden denouements, and the usage of French expressions and direct quotations. He mocks erotic novels. Further more, he belittles the directors and the actors either by his questions ("how to show that on stage, eh?") or with his explicit stage directions ("a small balloon filled with fuchsin" (for blood), "a clock mechanism" (for the beating heart)).

In *The Shoemakers* Witkacy presents a completely disintegrated world through an easy-to-understand and easy-to-tell, linear plot structure. The play is not set in another dimension. However, it is still very pictorial and theatrical. The play shows the fragmentation of systems, classes, human beings, human relations, and communication. It portrays a world heading towards complete sterility at a frenzied speed. It is a horrifyingly confining world behind "iron curtains" from which there is no escape. Humanity, whose vitality has been lost and whose "heart is on the tray" ready to be consumed by its "successors", has been reduced to insects dining on "excrementalia" of their own generation and the past one. Language has lost its meaning. Human behavior is merely responses to stimuli, devoid of any feeling. Placards saying "boredom" and "boredom getting worse and worse" appear on the stage to infuse the atmosphere with a deadly and suffocating tedium.

*The Shoemakers*, although written before the Second World War, anticipates the problems and anxieties of the post-war era "whose one foot is already in the grave" not only in the political and social spheres but also in the literary sphere.

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