

# The New York Times

## Weekend Arts

### When Courageous Artists Ripped Holes in the Iron Curtain



Richard Termine for The New York Times

Tadeusz Janiszewski (bottom of frame), Adam Borowski and Ewa Wojciak, members of Theater of the Eighth Day, performing “Wormwood” at Yale.

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IN 1985 a dissident troupe of Polish actors called Theater of the Eighth Day defied the ruling Communist Party and its censors by creating a play about the bleakness of daily life under martial law, imposed from 1981 to 1983. With ragged costumes and only a few props — most notably a sailboat that symbolized the dream of escape — the actors prepared to mount “Wormwood,” an unusually blunt and unvarnished work of protest theater.



Erazm Ciolek/Karta Center Foundation, Warsaw

A 1985 photo of a theater audience in Warsaw, in the “Revolutionary Voices” exhibition.

When the authorities learned of the scheduled premiere at a university in Poznan, an industrial city four hours west of Warsaw, military police descended on the campus and effectively shut down the show. But Theater of the Eighth Day quickly spread news by word of mouth that the show would go on the next afternoon, a time less likely to attract police notice. And so it did.

“And just like that, ‘Wormwood’ was outlawed,” said Tadeusz Janiszewski, an actor in the original production. “We began moving from town to town, performing in churches and warehouses on a few hours’ notice. Once, in an ironworks, we drew 2,000 people.”

Now, 24 years later, Mr. Janiszewski and the other three original actors are remounting the production at the Abrons Arts Center in Manhattan as part of a festival of theater, dance, music, film and exhibitions across New York City that examines how the performing arts contributed to the fall of Communism in Warsaw Pact countries. Called Performing Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe, the festival, which opened last week and runs through March 31, commemorates the 20th anniversary of the fall of the [Berlin Wall](#) and other politically transformative events in that region.

Among the other events will be a staged reading in English on Monday night of scenes from a new anthology, “Playwrights Before the Fall: Eastern European Drama in Times of Revolution”; a concert reading on Wednesday evening of “The Velvet Weapon,” a backstage farce based on interviews with leaders of the Velvet Revolution in the former Czechoslovakia; and on Thursday night and Nov. 30 the Untitled Theater Company No. 61, a New York group, will present “The Velvet Oratorio,” a retelling of the revolution through dramatic scenes and choral music based on [Vaclav Havel](#) plays.

The festival also includes some productions that are not explicitly about the fall of Communism, like Taylor Mac’s fantastical play “The Lily’s Revenge,” running through Nov. 22, about a flower seeking happiness and love, and battling an oppressor, the God of Nostalgia, who wants life to remain as it has always been.

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, which organized the festival, has an exhibition opening Wednesday of theater production photographs, props, costumes and multimedia footage that explores ways that Communist-era underground artists subverted the censors to encourage freedom of thought and speech.

The exhibition, “Revolutionary Voices,” in the library’s Vincent Astor Gallery at [Lincoln Center](#), was culled partly from artists’ personal records and keepsakes. Organized by theme — for example “history as metaphor” and “secret police and censorship” — the show emphasizes how plays were written as parables involving family dramas or the [Roman Catholic Church](#) that well-attuned audience members would recognize as critiques of Communism. One section describes how theater companies sometimes asked critics to omit in their reviews any mention of the more overt criticisms of government or the party. The critics usually complied, said Aniko Szucs, who organized the show with Karen Burke.

“The cultural responses to totalitarianism and the censorship of the arts differed from country to country,” said Ms. Szucs, who grew up in Hungary. “But one common thread through the undergrounds of the Eastern Bloc was that artists wanted their ideas to spread and be considered by the general population. A freedom of speech, however constrained, was very much fueled through the arts.”

The pieces in the anthology “Playwrights Before the Fall” also demonstrate how writers relied heavily on metaphors and symbolism. “Military Secret,” by Dusan Jovanovic of the former Yugoslavia, is set in a zoological institute where human scientists and anthropomorphic animals illustrate how a rigidly ideological system can crumble into chaos.

Daniel Gerould, the book’s editor and a professor of theater at the Graduate Center of the [City University of New York](#), said plays like “Military Secret” and “Wormwood” were historical landmarks not only because of their narratives and characters, but also because of their “prophetic nature about people who were chafing under the system and could simply not chafe forever.”

He continued: “What we had in theater in Eastern Europe was a measure of what was going on beneath the surface of life in these countries. Through the arts you felt the tremors and shocks of change that might have initially been imperceptible. And it enabled people to get an inkling of what was to come.”

Jacqueline Z. Davis, executive director of the Library for the Performing Arts, said the festival grew out of an idea from Ms. Burke to organize an exhibition on the role of musical performances during the Velvet Revolution.

“I loved the idea but said that wouldn’t be enough, that we should look at the arts in that part of the world and the way that ideas about democratic ideals were expressed through culture, often subversively, leading up to the events of 1989,” Ms. Davis said.

“What was most striking to me was that because people could not gather in East Germany or Poland or Romania or the other countries for overt political reasons, they gathered instead at performances,” she continued. “The artistic communities in these countries took on the responsibility of expressing unhappiness with government through their work.”

The 60-minute production of “Wormwood” is among the festival’s most obvious examples of anger rising to the surface. The play’s four characters scavenge for food, are beaten at times and huddle in fear, but still look hopefully toward a new day, represented by the tiny sailing ship that passes among them from hand to hand.

After a performance of “Wormwood” this month at [Yale University](#), the actors joined in a discussion with audience members about the play’s history in Poland. The actors expressed pride that in the 1980s they were

not simply preaching to the converted — fellow members of the intelligentsia — but to the poor and to laborers who turned out for their surreptitious performances.

“Sometimes before the performance we would start in a very playful way, saying that one hour of freedom was in front of us, so we had to make use of it,” Mr. Janiszewski told the Yale audience. Afterward in an interview he added a coda: “No one can say, or would claim to say, that artists brought down Communism. But we were a part of that history, I think, and our part is something that I’m very proud of.”

*Performing Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe continues through March 31; information at [performingrevolution.org](http://performingrevolution.org).*