

Theater

Theatre of the Eighth Day Stages its Noted *Wormwood*

By Tom Sellar

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No military police expected in New York (hopefully): *Wormwood*

Few theatrical premieres have been as politically charged as *Wormwood's* 1985 opening in Poland. Staged by a dissident ensemble called Theatre of the Eighth Day, the production dared to openly portray life under Martial Law (declared in 1981) through poetry and gesture.

Now, 20 years after the Eastern bloc fell, *Wormwood* has returned with its original cast. Theatre of the Eighth Day—founded as a student ensemble in 1964—will perform the work at Abrons Art Center November 11 through 15. The presentation gives American audiences a rare glimpse at a staging now legendary in theater history.

Polish theaters had been temporarily closed following the military action, but had reopened under the scrutiny of censors and the Security Service. *Wormwood* was an unauthorized performance taking place in a university auditorium in Poznan. Company member Ewa Wojciak described the event in an e-mail to the *Voice*: "Everything was ready when the university rector appeared and explained to us that the building was surrounded by military police. She asked us to call off the premiere because there was a threat of the police intervening and the audience could be in danger. We had no way out. But because so many people had come from all around Poland for the premiere we quietly arranged for a performance the following day." They outwitted the authorities by doing it in the afternoon, an unheard-of time for theater events.

Officials outlawed *Wormwood* that night. The cast was harassed, threatened, and formally banned from the Polish stage. But Eighth Day's members, committed to depicting something rotten in the Communist state, went underground and continued to play; at an illicit performance near an ironworks two weeks later, more than 2,000 people came. "The reactions were fantastic," Wojciak recalls, "laughter, standing ovations, and tears. It was an attempt to escape from a state of hopelessness and oppression. It showed the strength of human dreams and spoke of creativity as a means for surviving oppression."

"Eighth Day was able to transform the political situation into an art form full of humor and energy, not just something darkly pessimistic," says Kathleen Cioffi, author of *Alternative Theatre in Poland*. "They're full of self-criticism and irony."

Last year, the ensemble presented a new piece in New York called *The Files*, an account of their history that quoted from recently unsealed police surveillance records. "We were surprised at how good we felt playing *The Files* in New York," says Wojciak. "The American audiences demonstrated a global intelligence, a capacity to identify with our history."

This year, local audiences will have many opportunities to connect with that era's history and art. *Wormwood's* presentation is part of a citywide "Performing Revolution" festival kicking off November 6. Sponsored by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the events explore the role of the arts in those momentous changes, through theater, literature, dance, music, and film, as well as talks and exhibitions held at various cultural and academic institutions. (A complete schedule can be found at performingrevolution.org.)

Other notable offerings include two contemporary works from Hungary's Győr National Ballet; a new oratorio making music out of U.S. State Department documents, among other sources; a Romanian film festival; and a weekend of 1980s rebel bands, including Dezerter (Poland), Kontroll Csoport (Hungary), Psí Vojáci (Czech Republic), and Pankrti (Slovenia). Twenty years ago, the unimaginable happened, and a massive totalitarian system fell without sustained violence. This fall, artists like Wojciak, who nourished their national cultures with dreams of change, are coming to New York to demonstrate how it was done.