

MROŻEK – THE MOST INTERNATIONALLY POPULAR POLISH PLAYWRIGHT

It is very intriguing, why weren't the literary works of Sławomir Mrożek honored with a Nobel Prize? Maybe the vision of our lives, relations, beliefs, roles which we play, politics and regulations, or values seen through the broken "mirror" of surrealistic humor and grotesque is too painful to be recognized?

Sławomir Mrożek was born on June 29, 1930, in Borzęcin, a small village near Cracow, where his father worked as a postmaster. There, Sławek spent his early years receiving a conventional Catholic education. His family survived the German occupation of Poland. In 1949, he graduated from Nowodworski Lycée in Cracow. The same year his mother died. Sławek briefly studied architecture, then fine arts and even oriental philosophy mainly to avoid being drafted into the army. The university studies were boring for him, so he joined the staff of *Dziennik Polski*. For a short time he was fascinated by revolutionary ideology and his journalistic pieces at that time reflected it. He was a political hack-writer. (Later on, he strongly criticized his fascination and involvement in communist propaganda).

In 1950, he received an award from the periodical *Szpilki* (*Needles*) for his satiric drawings. This activity was his training for becoming a future literary master of a satiric and grotesque perception of the world. With that approach, he continued the great tradition of Witold Gombrowicz. Mrożek's first short stories *Opowiadania z Trzmielowej Góry* (*Tales from the Bumble Bee Hill*) and *Półpancerze praktyczne* (*Practical Half-Armours*) were published in 1953, the year Stalin died. The satirical form also became a recognizable sign in his next stories: *Małeńkie lato* (*The Tiny Summer*, 1956) and *Słoń* (*The Elephant*, 1957). Mrożek discovered his talent for playwriting while writing for the famous student theatre Bim-Bom.



The one act drama *Policja* (*The Police*, 1958) was a great success. It showed in satiric form the strong need by any regime and its forces to create opposition, or even fake opposition to legitimize the regime's existence and actions. In 1959, he married artist Maria Obremba. Until 1963, the year when Mrożek and his wife decided to leave Poland, an amazing set of his dramatic works were published: *Męczeństwo Piotra Ohey'a* (*The Martyrdom of Peter Ohey*, 1959), *Indyk* (*The Turkey*, 1960), *Na pełnym morzu* (*At Sea*, 1961), *Karol* (Charlie, 1961), *Striptease* (1961), *Zabawa* (*The Party*, 1962), *Krynolog w rozterce* (*Dilemmas of a Dog Breeder*, 1962), *Czarowna Noc* (*The Magical Night*, 1963), and *Śmierć porucznika* (*The Death of the Lieutenant*, 1963). At that time Mrożek's plays were recognized and staged not only in Poland but also abroad. The popularity of his works helped him survive in Italy, yet he kept a Polish passport.

His masterpiece *Tango* (written in 1964) was published in the Polish monthly *Dialog* in 1965, and then translated into many foreign languages and staged internationally. It is considered the most important play by Mrożek, and after decades seems to be even more current than before. It shows in satiric form, the consequences of the domination of liberalism: the decline of values, traditions, and populist reactions expressing the "needs for bringing order" which opens the way for abuse and dictatorship. Another play written in 1964 *Dom na granicy* (*The House on the Border*) deals, through satiric vision of a house divided by the border, with the absurdity of regulations and their execution terrorizing and destroying the lives of normal citizens. Mrożek's drama *Vatzlav* (1968), consisting of 77 disjointed scenes, describes the fate of a newcomer (emigrant from the oppressive commu-

nist world?) to a decadent (Western?) world, the disillusion of his hero's dreams for a better life, and finally opportunism as a way to survive. The play was staged worldwide but also criticized for a lack of understanding of the "capitalistic world" seen from a perspective of a man raised in a communist environment.

After Mrożek's condemnation of the participation of the Polish People's Army in the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the communist regime in Poland banned his literary works from being published on the territory of the PRL. In 1969, tragedy struck his personal life – his wife died of cancer. However, he decided to stay abroad and in 1978 he received French citizenship. The 1970s were very successful for Mrożek's playwriting. Nine of his new dramas were published, among them *Emigranci* (*The Émigrés*, 1974). That ironic portrait of Polish emigrants brings a wider, universal perspective to emigration problems contrasting the psychology of an intellectual, political emigrant (AA) with an unsophisticated behavior of a financial emigrant (XX) with whom (AA) shared space in a basement.

In 1978 and in 1981 Mrożek visited Poland. He participated in the Polish premiere of his dramas: *The Ambassador* and *On Foot*. However, after the military crackdown of 1981, Mrożek again condemned the communistic regime in Poland in *List do cudzoziemców* (*A Letter to Foreigners*) in which he banned his works from being published or staged by the regime controlled TV in Poland. But his plays were still performed in many Polish theatres bringing crowds of fans. His play *Alfa* (1984) triggered a lot of emotions, because of the "defamation of the imprisoned Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa."

In 1987, Mrożek married Susana Osorio Rosas, a Mexican theatre director, and visited his dying father in Poland. Two years later, Mrożek and his wife settled on a ranch La Epifania in the mountains between Mexico City and Puebla. Unfortunately, the following year he fell gravely ill with an aortic aneurysm and had heart surgery. In 1996, because of the unstable situation in Mexico, Mrożek and his wife Susana decided to move to Cracow. His play *Love in Crimea* (1993), a pas-

sage of the Chekhovian themes, was staged in Paris, Cracow, and even in Moscow. It is an "intellectual collage" of the history of Russia, stereotypes about that country, as well as about the collapse of love, values, and the structure of society.

In 2002, Mrożek suffered a stroke resulting in aphasia. After years of recovery, in 2008 he and his wife moved to Nice in southern France where he died on August 15, 2013. His diaries and letters, published recently in Poland, brought to light a lot of information about Mrożek himself and his perception of the world.

Mrożek's plays are universal and presented on stages all over the world. A great variety of them are also available at YouTube. An extensive artistic biography of Mrożek is presented at: <http://culture.pl/en/artist/slawomir-mrozek> and an interesting interview conducted by Icelandic playwright Arni Ibsen with Sławomir Mrożek can be read online at: https://web.archive.org/web/20090723143831/http://au.geocities.com/masthead_2/issue5/mrozek.html

Mrożek's works translated into English include:

- *Six Plays: The Martyrdom of Peter Ohey, Enchanted Night, The Police, Out at Sea, Charlie, The Party*. Tr. Nicholas Bethell. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- *Tango; a play in Three Acts*. Tr. Ralph Manheim and Teresa Dzieduszycka. New York: Grove Press, 1968.
- *The Elephant. A Mordant Satire on Totalitarianism*. Tr. Konrad Syrop. London: Macdonald, 1962.
- *The Spring in Poland* (in: *The Eagle and the Crow: Modern Polish Short Stories*, p. 83-87). Tr. Konrad Syrop.
- *The Ugrupu Bird*. London: Macdonald & Co., 1968.
- *Three Plays: Striptease, Repeat Performance, The Prophets*. New York: Applause Books, 1986.
- *Vatzlav*. London: Cape, 1972.