

Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk's unusual brand of dark comedy

By Dara Weinberg

Los Angeles audiences have the rare opportunity to encounter Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk's unusual brand of very dark comedy and to hear this playwright's work in English translation.

Dear Mr. Pantofelnik:

I'm writing to you regarding an important matter. Though you might not find this particularly disturbing, I'm standing on one leg. ... Where are you? Please come back this instant. Tell me all the stories I was deprived of. And please connect me to the pipe pumping water from the wellspring of our national culture. By the way, who are you? What is your religion? Just to be on the safe side, I celebrate Ramadan, go to Midnight Mass, meditate in Nepal, and fast on Yom Kippur. But I don't know who I am, so it's all phony anyway. I'm scared someone will denounce me any day now. I love you: did you know that?

Your devoted son, Franswa. [Writing to a father he has never met – Ed.]

'The Suitcase' deals with contemporary Polish citizens trying to come to terms with their history, particularly the history of the second World War and the troubled relationship of Poles to Jews. Sikorska-Miszczuk bases the world of her plays, in part, on the Polish town of Jedwabne, which has had its deeply upsetting history — the Poles attacked the Jews of the town during the Nazi invasion — extensively publicized and explored in Jan Gross' book "Neighbors," Tadeusz Slobodzianek's play *Nasza Klasa* (Our Class), and the reporting of Anna Bikont (mentioned below), among many others.

With so many other writers searching for factual accounts relating to Jedwabne, Sikorska-Miszczuk's work takes a different tack: it makes frequent use of surrealism, breaking the fourth wall, self-referentiality, and acerbic irony. She acknowledges the disturbing humor that can arise around situations of historical atrocity. Her character Franswa writes to his father, "I'm scared someone will denounce me any day now." When people live in fear due to facts from the past having been concealed — when the truth is not fully understood — situations of inadvertent comedy can emerge. Sikorska-Miszczuk's plays are not documentaries, nor are they intended to be. No one could accuse her of taking her subject matter lightly — rather, she finds dramatic strategies other than funerary seriousness with which to address this tragic history.

Here's what Sikorska-Miszczuk has written:

"In 2009, I wrote 'The Mayor,' a play in which I tried to tell the story of a mythical Town that has to face the Truth about a past atrocity. ...

Two years later, I concluded that the story I had told in 'The Mayor' was too 'cryptic.' The main character — the mayor of the title — is a real-life person described by the journalist Anna Bikont in her excellent and riveting reportage 'Jedwabne — the desperate search for something positive.' (Gazeta Wyborcza, March 23-24, 2002)

I decided therefore to retell the story, based on the facts and expertise, as another of my characters, Franswa Jackoh, says to the Miserable Tour Guide at the Holocaust Museum in 'The Suitcase.' ... I was looking for a less mythical space in which to place my characters. All the same, the play is a fiction, and not a docu-drama."

— Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, Warsaw, September 2011

Sikorska-Miszczuk's fairy-tale-esque plotting, speaking inanimate objects, and characters named by personality ("Miserable Tour Guide") may bring the plays of Sarah Ruhl to mind; but Sikorska-Miszczuk's situations have sharper edges. The facts of history and the characters' confused psychological responses to those facts give these plays teeth. Her dramatic sensibility, unlike Ruhl's, does not necessarily move towards the happy ending. It may be more accurate to compare her to Tony Kushner; or it may be that there is no exact analog for her writing in the English-language theater. LA residents will have a chance to decide for themselves.