

Awe, so awkward

Circles around PAC as a training field for staying with the ambivalent

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This text is not a typical academic statement, nor is it an artistic manifesto. Rather, it is a notation of joined reflection and discussion, circling around, spiraling into and swirling up the topic of awkwardness.

We decided—at the suggestion of the editors of the book—to focus on one topic: awkwardness. We tried not to attach ourselves to any rules, to test different tools of conversation, expecting that nothing would come of it. In the end—after circling around the topic of awkwardness, common experiences and thoughts on PAC, different emotions and strategies related to awkwardness—there are more questions here than answers, and some themes or sentences are repeated (this is inevitable in dialogue, especially when the topic is about awkwardness). We invite you to think of this conversation as iterations. With each repetition, a given question or sentence takes on a slightly different meaning depending on the changing context. We have outlined the context and our position from which each of us in the following dialogue:

Stanislaw: I have a PhD in theater studies, and I work at the Polish Academy of Sciences, on the editorial board of an academic journal devoted to theater history and theory (“Pamiętnik Teatralny”), and as a theater critic and lecturer. I attempted to parse out the topic of awkwardness in my discussions with Judith more analytically, and I feel that these conversations kept bringing new topics to mind,

mainly those related to the dynamics of interpersonal relations (in the theater and in the academy). It's as if it's awkward to talk about awkwardness *per se*—or maybe the feeling of awkwardness applies to so many areas that it 'pulls' other topics with it.

Judith: The elusiveness of awkwardness as well as the huge potential for hands-on uproar and crisis has fascinated me—both in my work as senior artist for the MA Applied Theatre—artistic theatre practice & society at University Mozarteum Salzburg and beyond in theatre and education. Working on the text took about 8 months. We exchanged letters through May and June 2023. After the first editorial comments, we changed the structure of our text—instead of exchanging letters, we decided to shorten them, chop them up and organize them into a dialogue. Working on this text, discussing it together and changing it made us get to know each other better and trust each other more. We started as a dialogue from different perspectives, but during it we moved from that *modus operandi* to making it our mutual statement. From a certain point onwards, we knew what we wanted to write, what form the text should take and what roles we would take in it—paradoxically, we got to know each other's perspectives to such an extent that we could write for each other, even disagreeing with each other—Judith would sometimes add passages that Stanislaw would say in the text and vice versa. It's a bit awkward—both for us and probably for the readers. But we decided to embrace it, and we invite you to do the same.

Round 1: Circling around awkwardness and ourselves

Judith: What does that mean in practice... how did we... merge with the topic? Would a different topic have called for a different approach? What are your strategies? I am very much overacting on it. The more I feel it, the more I tend to act 'normal'... not even believing myself. Making it harder and harder to say "wait, this feels off—I don't know what to do". Although we also talked about the power of silence in producing awkwardness, I must admit there

was also an ironic sense of relief when I—or someone else—finally did or said something...

Stanislaw: From personal experience—I don't like to be in a conflict situation, so whenever I disagree or object, I try to smile, turn the situation into a joke—as if I can't bear the awkwardness of the fact that someone might feel offended or think badly about me (this is very narcissistic, in a way). Besides, it 'softens' the discussion, which is sometimes good and sometimes makes the power of critical thinking and exposing differences disappear—'the agon' disappears. Different thought: the relationality of awkwardness was also an important thread in our discussion for me, that sometimes we feel that someone has acted awkwardly, or we ourselves feel awkward because others are looking at us. There is a theme of shame and embarrassment and this strong need to somehow clear it up, smooth it over, get it right, just to make it nice for everyone. This in itself leads me to think that awkwardness is a very theatrical/performative action that can be analyzed from many sides and can also be a tool for change, provocation, etc. If the awkwardness is conscious and planned, is it still awkwardness?

Judith: How did we come up with it? I'm trying to remember. Most likely, it was having long Zoom conversations with colleagues circling around our musings and blind spots with regard to Performing Arts in Contexts, both in PAC and beyond, and our work within it.

Stanislaw: As far as I remember, the topic of awkwardness came up in one of our first drafts of the text for this book... I have a feeling that awkwardness as a topic has also somehow become our way of acting, discussing and thinking, with all its consequences.

Judith: Looking at this first line of our simultaneous writing, one thing keeps appearing: I never seem to spell the word right—awareness... A nice Freudian slip. Hyper awareness? And the moment of misreading. Of being too prepared or too little. Of feeling in the wrong place. Being between assumptions, plans, agendas—if hidden or not. In this, the thought of transparency came up. Who is taking on what role in a process and discussion—and why?

Stanislaw: We've talked about on one of our Zoom calls the various hidden plans, assumptions or pressures that cause feelings of awkwardness, especially when something doesn't go the way we expected. And that these hidden intentions are often a tool to power/control (over oneself, over the process, maybe also over others). This is where awareness is needed, awareness of awkwardness, in order not to abuse one's position and for awkwardness to become an advantage.

Judith: Can we practice being in a state of not knowing? How can we retain the ability and the will to be curious? To be shaken? To dare to stick out and, at the same time, bravely go ahead even though the context is not yet clear? To be as prepared as possible and yet know that the situation will always call for something else? And then there are the well known hands-on moments: the lack of clarity in what others say, think, feel and do. The knowing that I only ever know what I know, and it will bring—when aware—awkwardness in processes with others when confronted with my blindspots and personal perception.

Stanislaw: On the one hand, awkwardness turns out—for me, at least—to be very creative and inspiring. On the other hand, I had a constant need to abolish the feeling of awkwardness. When there was some kind of stop, silence, lack of concreteness, I had the feeling that I was completely unproductive (and I still have this neoliberal conviction in me that I should produce something all the time, just to show that I am useful and competent). This was hard for me, understanding that awkwardness is a natural part of any process—and that it doesn't at all have to lead to the production of some incredibly brilliant thoughts, ideas or plans. Writing about this I have a feeling of slight embarrassment, because somehow I've often heard these kinds of sentences and thought—"mhm, aha, sure, nice, but when it comes down to it, these beautiful ideas have no practical application".

Judith: Have you ever lost contact with someone for so long that it became awkward to get in touch again?

Stanislaw: Yeah. But it provokes me to think about the PAC, which—at least the two times I attended—was a very intense interpersonal experience. It's only held once a year, and then I don't get in touch with most people at all in between. But paradoxically, I somehow like it. I feel comfortable and safe in it. Perhaps because I knew that this was the nature of these meetings and did not feel awkward. Is awkwardness always due to not knowing?

Round 2: Awkwardness as a challenge to standards

Stanislaw: For the moment, it seems to me that awkwardness is a topic for a separate book or collection of essays (probably someone has already written one) or for a performance.

Judith: For the book of essays about awkwardness, titles that I can think of off the top of my head would be: Contexts change contexts; Silence as an amplifier; what was not said—Playing with Power; In your eyes—when you look at me (and) I look away; Hidden agendas and open questions.

Stanislaw: When I think of awkwardness, I'm reminded of one of the definitions of affect I heard in some literary theory classes: Affect is something that is itself in motion and has the ability to move us (emotionally, physically, mentally). It seems to me that awkwardness—as a feeling, an action—is something similar. Something very unstable, dynamic, fluid, and at the same time causing a stir in all involved. In this sense, awkwardness is queer, if we assume that a feature of queerness is changeability, instability, constant transformation. For me, queer is an important category when I think about PAC—not only because of the queer working group and our discussions in Zurich. Queer as an idea and practice can help PAC to practice the ideas of equality, diversity, exchange, inclusivity. And at the same time, queer is very often awkward because it challenges social norms.

Judith: Yes, the non-confirming, the bravery to look for and explore new forms... How do we get from here to there? How do form and context fit together for PAC?

Stanislaw: It seems to me that queer is also about courage—the courage of nonconformism, of saying no, especially to those people who are ideologically close to you. And any such saying “no”/“I disagree” causes a stir—and awkwardness, because it shifts the established order.

Judith: Shifting the established order as an action... taking seriously—or at least trying to do so—the communication and questions, thinking along with each other. How do we ‘really discuss’? How do we go out of encounters changed? Is that always awkward? Before? In the moment of change? Feeling out of the comfort zone, having to re-evaluate, re-center, re-orientate and be in crisis ... Realizing we might not even have been aware of them beforehand... I sometimes only realize my expectations when something does not go to plan... a discomfort I cannot explain at once... And then: how to not only queer but make PAC more awkward?

Stanislaw: Can a PAC be more awkward and more queer? Probably yes, but much depends on—note—the context. We talked several times during our meetings about the discussion that arose after one of the Country Reports, prepared by a person from Egypt (and the room was full of people from Europe) and the dispute over the definition of political, which was not really resolved or pared down. I suspect that if the conversation had taken place in Egypt rather than Switzerland, and if the balance of power in the room and the course of this discussion would have been different. Making the PAC more queer is not just about representation (that’s obvious), but also about the balance of power and awareness of its hidden agendas.

Judith: Then again: who was part of it in which way? When I think back on who was actively involved—the two people mainly discussing and some bringing in ideas to mediate—I wonder: are situations less awkward the more active one is? Also, I remember a lot of emo-

tionality, which might have been part of the awkward—and then again a lot of laughter (perhaps a kind of a comic relief).

Stanislaw: As said: not necessarily a relief—the situation was not pared down but rather we stayed with it. Stayed with the trouble if you so wish. Maybe that is what PAC can be also about? Staying with the unknown, the unresolved, the unexpected.

Judith: Maybe it can be a practice of dwelling in the ambivalent that also informs the way we work together: do we want to really discuss, or just convince others of our view? Are we ready for it to be awkward and for perhaps nothing to come of it, except the fun of the process itself (and even that—the fun—is not guaranteed)? I suspect that it is very difficult for us—people who are established in the theater and the academy, often leaders or teachers—to really allow ourselves that we don't understand something, don't know something.

Stanislaw: You asked, “how do we really discuss”.—I think that's when we really discuss, when everyone involved changes under the influence of the discussion. This, of course, is very difficult—and I think it's easier to achieve in smaller discussions or one-on-one conversations, because then we are really able to understand the perspective of another. And change, I think, is awkward. Or perhaps put another way—uncomfortable. Does uncomfortable always mean awkward? How to get to a queer PAC—I have no idea, except that one should meet and include other perspectives, but that doesn't have to lead to anything at all. I guess it also requires that something clicks between selected people who would have different perspectives and experiences.

Judith: Thinking back on the discussion—there was also a lot of repetition. Again, reformulating, stating a new perspective. Maybe there is a potential of awkwardness as well... Going in circles that turn into spirals... Queering PAC by inviting and staying with other perspectives... as we are in higher education might that be a point... a way... to start?... very open, very abstract question...

Round 3: PAC—Problematizing Awkwardness in Contexts

Judith: When was the last time—in the context of PAC, or the context of performing arts in context—that you felt you came out of an encounter changed? Or maybe... not yet changed completely... but unstable, in flux? I will think about when that was for me and report...

Stanisław: As for meetings that changed me when it comes to PACs—I think, above all, such meetings that had not only a professional dimension, but also a private one. It was with whom I spent time outside of the official conference program and managed to maintain relationships through joint projects beyond the annual meetings (for example, with you on the occasion of this publication). I think change happens when a relationship goes beyond one context, when it exists in other dimensions.

Judith: Interesting: having different experiences and perspectives—what makes you click? A common goal? A common passion? Is PAC passion driven? Does passion lead to awkwardness? Or to the erasure of awkwardness? Brings my thoughts back to the ‘gaps between us’ Mira mentioned and we have also been talking about. What about that we will never fully understand each other? A blessing? A burden? A potential?

Stanisław: Certainly, a common goal unites, passion certainly does too... Whether the PAC is united by passion, it's hard to say. I'm not sure. It seems to me that it certainly unites curiosity, but unfortunately—perhaps this is misleading—I also have the impression, as always with such societies, groups and conferences, that it also unites complacency. Now that I think about it, it seems to me that the PAC is just such a non-place, a space that is safe and interesting, but a little out of the ordinary, detached from our everyday reality. I'm not saying it's a bad thing, but I guess it's hard to feel really uncomfortable/awkward when we meet for 2 days in some super place. It's nice, in a while, and then we'll say goodbye, we'll part ways... I think that in a PAC, inspiration and change don't necessarily come from awkwardness... But maybe I'm wrong.

Judith: Speaking of time in-between: I like the picture of the satellite—being not close but there, knowing there are accomplices and practices of solidarity. Something PAC has taught me very hands on... an anarchic setting in a way. Funny maybe to say, as it is so very institutionalized at the same time. Personal connections within a professional setting—both carrying each other. What an interesting network—an open space (to not say safe space...) for differences, nuances, awkwardness turned openness... and yet, what a romanticized version, as we have pointed out regarding the power dynamics of discussions. I would be really interested to see if PAC has a layer on which it is united by passion... What are you burning for? What sparks your passion—how do we share it? Which ‘we’?

Stanislaw: You said it is an open space, but you didn’t want to use the phrase ‘safe space’—why? Does safe space exclude awkwardness?

Judith: I remember that the two of us were together in a group discussing the concept of safe spaces in Zurich. I had the impression—it was the end of the conference, we were all tired—that we weren’t really listening to each other at the time, we were just having separate monologues about safe spaces... Irony? For me, a safe space is a space where it’s safe enough for you to develop and discuss, and I think that’s combined with awkwardness... It requires attention, vulnerability and real dialogue. Without a false sense of comfort I guess.

Stanislaw: Yes, I too remember the weirdness of the discussion, the feeling of going in circles and some strange sense of fatigue or resignation to talk about the concept seriously. Everyone was talking, everyone was agreeing with each other, no one was really listening to anyone. I had the feeling that before and after this discussion I was exactly the same and had the same mind set.

Judith: What would have happened if we had pointed out the awkwardness/context in ‘safe-space-group’ right away? Would you have been able to? Were you aware and could have named it right at the very moment?

Stanislaw: If we had pointed out our awkwardness right away in the 'safe space' discussion, would anything have changed? I'm not sure, it's possible—but I also think having a frank conversation about awkwardness requires trust, which doesn't build up that quickly at all. I suspect that some people might be annoyed by this or pretend that it's not awkward at all. What do you think?

Judith: I guess thinking back to the 'safe space' discussion—not wanting to be the killjoy, wanting to give things time to develop kept me from stepping in right away. More waiting than doing. Once tried, then stopped. Was it awkward? More annoying. Or annoyance 'overwriting' awkwardness? "I was annoyed" is so much easier to say than "I felt awkward"—much less vulnerable. So I agree: acknowledging awkwardness needs trust. Then again, the more I trust people the less awkward I feel... going in circles... But maybe it's a matter of training? To feel uncomfortable without feeling awkward? How can we learn to seek the uncomfortable? Learn to want to be changed. Without being petty and clinging to how we used to be. Really be fluid, in transition and embrace that, hopefully with the help of others. Can PAC be a network, a community to evoke that for its members? Who does gain tools for change when and how? Can PAC be a training field for awkwardness?

Stanislaw: You asked: how can we learn to seek the uncomfortable?—instinctively comes to mind a phrase I heard: fear motivates. If you are afraid of something, if you are apprehensive about trying something—do it (within the limits of common sense, of course). That's what I always try to do when it comes to my work (it doesn't always work out and probably doesn't always pay off either).

Judith: Fear motivates—perhaps learning in small settings instead of a big one? Not in the mode of 'as if...' but 'what if...' I look forward to, in the next PAC, immediately telling you my moments of awkwardness. Staying in them as after this exchange I know it's just fine. An exchange that would not have happened without the (institutionalized) network of PAC... Where in a process are the awkward moments? Can we shift those to an earlier (or later) point and

thus make a change rather than trying to abolish them? If I point out the elephant in the room—do I make the situation more or less awkward? And what does that have to do with performativity? With performing arts? With contexts? And, as you rightly have pointed out, when that is the *modus operandi*—is it only a nice theoretical idea and not useful when trying to reach aims? Is the awe in there as a word? The ability and the will to be astonished? Can we practice to be in the state of not-knowing? Then again, so much that is connected to it, that possibly constitutes it, that came up in our conversations makes a lot of sense to me when looking at performing arts in contexts: giving space, being aware, trying to read and establish contexts. Embrace the ambivalence.

