

## Land of Smile (2019)

The latest premiere at the Music Theatre in Lublin proves that its artistic team has finally overcome its recent struggles. "Land of smiles" directed by Joanna Lewicka **has everything you would expect from a good operetta - from the great delivery of arias to impeccable sense of humour**. Extra words of appreciation are due to Marta *Elbruzda* Gózdź who was responsible for the costumes and scenography. China as envisioned by her was one of the most beautiful images I have ever seen in theatre. It was also a great pleasure to watch dancers who clearly found themselves at ease in this Asian scenery.

Tomasz Kowalewicz  
*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 31 May 2019

[...] The idea of engaging Joanna Lewicka - **a young, ambitious and feisty director with a vision** - resulted with a hit. [...] The artistic team not only came back to its best shape when it comes to singing and dancing but also successfully handled **the complex dramaturgy that the director has managed to squeeze out of the libretto**.

**It was simply pleasant to watch (and hear)** despite the performance lasting nearly three hours and half. Keeping the audience's focus was even more challenging for the choir and ballet dancers as the set design and decorations were kept to a neat minimalist minimum. Luckily both the choir (fabulous entrances) and the ballet (perfectly trained especially for the suites) coped perfectly. For the first time in a long time at the Music Theatre in Lublin, its physical space has been finally given a real "role" too as the stage was creatively arranged to use its entire depth. All it took to succeed was a little bit **of artistic vision [of Ms. Joanna Lewicka]** and a lot of hard work coordinated by the choir director prof. Grzegorz Pecki. The modern staging has not conflicted with the conservative music thanks to brilliant staging ideas that have proven moving (such as the perfect entry of little Lizzie), hilarious (for example the entry of the Witlewski as Fu-Li) or simply impressive (like golden costumes so huge that they have practically replaced set decorations at the beginning of Act II).

After years of turmoil and probably of excessive caution, **the Musical Theater of Lublin has finally satisfied the audience**. It delivered a loveable operetta by matching the popular title with a sincere vision taken to life by a wide range of talents. What more could you ask for?

*Nowy Tydzień*, March 28, 2019

On the stage of the Music Theater in Lublin, "Land of Smile" **has flourished to the fullest of its beauty** like a lotus flower. It's far from obvious in times when directors are doubling and tripling anxiously to make operetta palatable to the contemporary audience by introducing plastic decorations or silly jokes. **Fortunately, director Joanna Lewicka has bet on the classics. She approached Lehar's melodrama with love and attention to every little detail. As a result, the viewer may truly break away from "here and now" and travel to other worlds:** worlds that don't exist anymore, but captivate imagination with their fabulous sceneries, salon manners, exotic scents, unobtrusive theatricality and subtlety. The world of "Land of Smile" is one in which each of us would like to be, even for one day of our lives.

Vienna [recreated] on the Lublin stage is parsimonious but sufficient because it is the human factor - the soloists, choristers and ballet - that makes up the scenery. **While protagonists are bringing the story on, there is always something interesting happening in the background too.** We have acrobats, musicians, heroes strolling sleepily. **Stage movement plays an extremely important role here: it builds the first and further plans, and sets the mood of each of the scenes.** Additional value comes from beautiful costumes, in many cases spectacular (for example the gown of the Baroness). These costumes alone are enough [to fill the space]: on the green grassland covered in a delicate fog, they look like movie sets from "The Leper" or "Night and Days". The scenery becomes even more glamorous in the second and third acts depicting China. But even here, the images are created less by decorations and more by the choreography and lights: **perfectly synchronised and recalling the atmosphere of the Far East.** Paper lanterns, fans, golden ballet suits and shiny, trailing robes of soloists - all these are reflected in the mirror floor, creating **the breathtaking effect of a lake surface,** with human figures floating on it. It is rather difficult to describe with words this vivid and sensual visual setting. The performance **captivates with creativity of stage solutions** - each of them being simple but brilliant. [...]

Beata Fischer  
*beatafischer.com*, March 27, 2019

[This staging of] "Land of Smile" does not burst conventions nor sneak anything that is not in the original libretto: it is extremely faithful to it. [Instead], **director Joanna Lewicka together with dramaturg Grzegorz Kondrasiuk sought deeper meaning in the original German text.** One of the results is emphasising the atmosphere of the Viennese Prater recreated in the first act. The amusement park - the space of childhood dreams - serves as the reference point for the entire performance. Liza who falls in love with a Chinese prince is forever the little girl on a rocking horse. After all, do we stop dreaming innocent fantasies when we grow up? The fairy-tale version of the Orient brought to life by sets and costumes designed by Marta "El Bruzda" Gozdz does not recall the real China but rather a conventional fantasy land: one anyone could long for.

**The phenomenal "living" garden or the ceremony of passing the yellow caftan are scenes that will be remembered for a long time.** Unhappy lovers Liza and Su-Chong (Anna Barska and Sławomir Naborczyk) and the Little One and Gucio (Paulina Janczaruk and Łukasz Ratajczak) do not leave any viewer indifferent.[...] **Although everyone, including the audience, ends up with a broken heart, we all secretly love it.**

Sylvia Hejno  
*Kurier Lubelski*, 1 April 2019

[...] Joanna Lewicka created a **spectacle that very clearly refers to contemporary social problems.** Although the director remains **faithful to the original text**, she managed to **highlight the most sensitive issues:** cultural clashes, the inability to communicate across divisions, the differences of women's status in society depending on the culture. From the beginning of the second act, I've suffered the way Lisa and Mi (Su-Chong's younger sister) were treated by men and genuinely emphasized with the young Chinese woman whose drama depended on her desire to break free from the conservative court and escape to the more progressive Europe.

**What distinguishes the "Land of Smiles" from other productions of the Musical Theater is the visual layer.** The set design has been reduced to a minimum, props are virtually absent. The costumes designed by Elbruzda are a pleasing combination of vivid colors, rich accessories and timeless simplicity. Still, the **choreography makes an even greater impression.** The dancers of the Musical Theater had long struggled with synchronizing movement in group scenes [in other productions]. [In "Land of Smiles"], this weakness has been creatively turned into a strength: In most scenes, each dancer follows a different routine. This solution resulted not only in **eliminating the embarrassing dissonances**, but also **nicely diversified stage movement** - despite the modest scenery, I had the impression that the space was **completely filled up.**

Ewa Jemioł  
*Dziennik Teatralny*, 13 kwietnia 2019

## STRYJENSKA. Let's dance, Zofia! (2018)

[...] Lewicka avoids obvious associations which usually haunt Zofia Stryjenska. [...] The torn, seemingly chaotic narrative [of the performance] perfectly captures the heroine's anxieties: her longing for intimacy and the happiness of family life, always at odds with her readiness to sacrifice traditional family values on the altar of Art.

In the background of this personal story, there is great history. Stryjenska - although seemingly an egocentric artist detached from the political world - becomes a symbol of common 20th century experiences in the microscale of an individual life. [...] And even the contemporary viewers of the 21st century can easily identify themselves with the heroine in constant pursuit of money, clients, benefits, and additionally in constant travels, forever unrooted, as a *pole* in Olga Tokarczuk's novels.

This current dimension is emphasized by the language of the performance, which owes a lot to the painter's original vocabulary and word plays - surprisingly close even to today's abuse of English language ([mixing English and Polish words and pronunciations]). Also the score composed by Christoph Coburger is close to the contemporary tastes: free from typical associations conditioned by Polish folk culture, the German composer focused above all on how to use the sound layer to illustrate the heroine's stream of consciousness, especially her mood swings, without referring *kujawiak* or *oberek*.

[...] From impressionist scenes, half-sentences, film snapshots emerges a portrait of the passionate, dancing Zofia - an artist who could not compromise nor fit into the schemes, who failed any attempt to reconcile career with motherhood, who suffered the humiliation of betrayal, a Polish woman seeking her place in Europe, running away from the homeland but missing it before even crossing the border. [...]

When, in the finale, Landowska put a colorful wreath on her head, grabbed her hips and sang a pure and emotional folk song, the first and only in the whole performance - one of the ladies sitting next to me sighed: "Yes, that's about me ...". One needs nothing else to confirm that in Lewicka's performance the fate of Stryjeńska becomes something more than just a colorful moral anecdote from the past century.

Jarosław Cymerman  
*Pismo TEATR*, nr 2 / 2019

## Let's dance with an extraordinary artist: the performance about Stryjeńska

Love after love, addictive jealousy, serial betrayals, studying in male disguise, misery, kidnapping, psychiatric clinic, syphilis, war, disinfection camp, debts, alienation, premature death of her son - the fate of the painter and graphic artist Zofia Stryjeńska **revives on stage in the show "STRYJENSKA. Let's Dance, Zofia!"**.

**This performance is a revelation.** Stryjeńska's biography explodes thanks to three women: director Joanna Lewicka, actress Dorota Landowska and playwright Anna Duda. Their Stryjeńska **re-evaluates human existence.** We follow a series of images and texts, songs and videos, flashbacks from the nightmares of the 20th century, poems. **The show impacts us through its humour and spirit.** Without this brilliance we would hardly bear the stories of despair in which death is always premature.

**Viewers often laugh** because of the irony of fate and because of the comic strength of the actress, who easily jumps from lightheartedness to grief. This is the existence - of Stryjeńska, Lewicka, ours. **We identify with the figure so distant but so close to everyone.** We crave to become Stryjeńska, although we shiver at the thoughts of bohemian lifestyle, poverty, illness, suffering.

Stryjeńska seems familiar thanks to the kujawiak dancers she depicted in her art but she has actually remained eternally foreign. **The director neglects the folklore and rejects any labels that would cater to nationalist tastes. On the contrary, she celebrates the universal human existence and opens the Polish theatre and history up to the world. [...]**

The performance is based on the drama by Anna Duda "Let's Dance, Zofia!" which, in turn, was inspired by a book by Angelika Kuźniak and most importantly by original personal diaries of the painter which were published recently. However, the end result depends primarily on **the mental energy of the director, actress and playwright - three volcanoes of imagination.**

**Director Lewicka applied video to show atrocities of the past. But also of today;** the persisting hatred of refugees, cosmopolitans, minorities. [...] Thanks to the way in which extreme emotional states are depicted, the performance emerges as **a masterpiece of psychological and historical truth.** [...] In metaphysical registers, Stryjeńska's language is meaty. Her **memories move us deeply.** Her body screams from pleasure and suffering, from pain and joy. She is also female and male, androgynous. [...]

We are all Stryjenskas: vagabonds, nomads and exiles. [...] **We need performances like this one, without the common hurra-patriotic blast but instead intimate, sincere, healing.**

Dr. hab. Tomasz Kitliński

*Wyborcza.pl* Lublin, 5 December 2018

## The right to be yourself

[...] Munich, Paris, Geneva. Together with Stryjenska, we embark on a journey through the places where she lived, loved, suffered. In the background, on a screen, we see the same places in modern times. An artist eternally teared between the men with whom she has tried to create a home, and the need to stay alone and create art. **The story of a colorful bird who dreams of singing her own song of freedom.** And who fights for it, but loses more often than wins. [...]

Stryjeńska is an artist with nerves on the outside, always full of emotions and excitement. When she loves she loses herself in love and when she works she loses herself in work. Dorota Landowska embodies these qualities of Stryjeńska perfectly. Her performance is haunting, she nearly floats in the air while talking passionately about love and art, and then immediately falls down into the abyss of depression, anxiety and madness. She pulls the audience into this journey through her experiences, feelings and emotions. **And we are sitting quietly, melting into our seats, trembling with emotions, holding our breath. And only after the show is finished we can fully admire this little great woman. Or women: both Stryjeńska and Landowska.** The first one for boldness in the pursuit of life on her own terms, the other one for the ability to recreate it on stage. **What a beautiful play.**

*Notatnik Kulturalny*, 24 marca 2019

## Insanity, art and steadfastness of the spirit

**The monologue directed by Joanna Lewicka on the centenary anniversary of granting election rights to women in Poland, is a story about a personal struggle against the tide.** Tormented by passions, torn between the freedom of the artistic spirit and pragmatic social norms. [...]

Stryjeńska had to disguise as a man to study painting, chased her beloved with a revolver, traveled, created art and lived from hand to mouth. On stage, we see that above all she craved for living life to the fullest, dancing through it. Her need for independence earned her the reputation of an insane woman which resulted in her husband forcing her into a mental institution, fortunately only temporarily. **The monologue providing insights into this fascinating artist is an inspiration to steadfastly dance your inner dance, despite any possible obstacles.**

Sylwia Hejno, *Kurier Lubelski*, 27 April 2019

[...] **There is a need for national heroines who could contribute to promoting feminist values.** [...] **Joanna Lewicka is a director who consistently tackles feminist themes but without ideological doggedness.** The monodrama about Zofia Stryjeńska is another proof of that. [...] Talking about Stryjeńska, Lewicka takes up a number of current topics regarding feminism and gender issues. She tells the story of a woman who wants to dance through quotidianity like her idol Alexander Sakharov used to dance on stage. Live and create, away from politics and ideology, close to her cherished lovers whose silhouettes perfectly match cheap romances, but in real life they become a burden as colorful as banal and difficult to bear. [...] However, romantic adventures and disappointments are not the most tragic part of the story which really focuses on Stryjeńska fighting for her freedom with an astonishing zeal. [...]

[...] Reading Stryjeńska's diaries, it is easy to imagine an eccentric, extroverted and hyperactive crazy woman, but Landowska builds her character with restraint. We face a woman recalling **her worst misfortunes in a brilliant way, without ever trivializing or ridiculing anything.** Which does not mean that the dominating tone is serious. Landowska **does excellent work at bringing humor out of passionate verses.** Perhaps at the root of Stryjeńska's phenomenal style is the need for aestheticization. [As the performance does not showcase her paintings], **we discover her artistry only through the language.** [...]

[...] Stryjeńska constantly longs for opposites. For full creative and moral freedom, and at the same time for a family home, which she is unable to build, wandering around Europe's hotels in search of income and shelter from creditors. **Soulless economy is in her biography like huge concrete walls** in the basement of the Center for the Meeting of Cultures [where the monologue premiered.] The austere interior devours a small stage with a cramped and cluttered room. **Maybe the mere bringing this tiny room back to life in this ruthless reality is a victory?**

Dominik Gac  
*teatraly.pl*, December 21, 2018

### **Don't be ashamed of love: Stryjeńska. Let's dance Zofia!**

After the performance of "Stryjeńska. Let's dance Zofia " **Zofia Stryjeńska has the face of Dorota Landowska.** [...] Preparing for the project, the authors **followed Stryjeńska's footsteps throughout Europe.** They visited Germany, France and Switzerland. They walked the painter's paths and tried to look at the world through her eyes. They have searched for the Parisian scents she enjoyed, the chill of the walls of the academy where she was studying, the roughness of the wall of the house where she used to work and the sunshine that poured into her Swiss apartment. **These journeys are reflected in the post-monodrama (a new form of theatrical expression) prepared by the authors.** It's evident that the show was made **out of love for the painter.** [...]

Tomasz Sobierajski  
*Elle Man*, 30 January 2020

[...] **Magic!** A witch, a shamanic virtuoso of brush and pen, a woman who needed loneliness to create and closeness of another human being to exist. Zofia Stryjeńska, the heroine of the monodrama "Stryjeńska. Let's dance, Zofia!" **lets us into her soul, the soul that is wounded, burning and full of nooks.** This journey, so unobvious, turned out to be an extremely interesting experience. **The performance directed by Joanna Lewicka has the undoubted advantage that it draws and hypnotizes from the very first moment. Shockingly contemporary and at the same time remarkably classic,** it could be applauded equally stormy at the Studio Theater, the National Theater, and even as a street spectacle. Dorota Landowska thrives in an ocean of artistic ecstasy, drawing us into the **vortex of events, memories and emotions.** [...]

[...] In this puzzle **everything is in the right place:** film sequences (the idea for it too), soul-tapping music, an impeccably sung final song [...], arrangement and use of the stage, props and finally the actress herself.

[...] Several artistic sensibilities and several perspectives on art were creatively joined not only to tell the story of a great artist from a century ago, but also to reflect on how the world has changed ever since. [...] **This theatrical invitation to discuss the impact of external circumstances such as politics, society, family on any creative process** sparks a reflection about the challenges of living and working as an artist - in any era. [It also shows] how searching for new paths impacts daily life... and how much hardships of this daily life hinders the search.

**The text is fabulous.** The script was based on a drama by Anna Duda and developed **jointly by director Joanna Lewicka and actress Dorota Landowska.** [...] The show is directed and performed in a way which channels Stryjeńska's emotions and Landowska's sensibility. [...] **The atmosphere is magical.** You easily forget where you are and with whom, you move somewhere far away and begin to understand someone so different to us. It's rare in theater.

**Director Joanna Lewicka has consistently and wisely turned this monodrama into a kind of a mesmerizing journey,** at times vibrating, at other times insanely dramatic. It's a dance on the map of Europe through time, a dance against social norms and conventions, and finally a dance of the lonely madness. Stryjeńska's travels inspired the show creators to follow in her steps to the places in which the painter has actually stayed a long time ago and which have changed beyond recognition ever since. [...] Traces of these travels also appear in video projections within the show which is extremely interesting. [...] **The common success of all those involved in this performance is the fact that this story "lives", pulsates with passions, seems to be as authentically universal as if it concerned someone we know "here and now."** Our meeting with Stryjeńska is most valuable as it helps in appreciating the uncompromising nature of an artist's life and the universal patterns present in the lives of artists.

Włodzimierz Neubart  
*Chochlik Kulturalny*, 31 January 2018





## Womenstate (2018)

On Women's Day, we saw a **bittersweet, alternately light and moving story** about the position of women in the modern world [...] painfully making us all aware that the line behind which exclusion begins is not drawn by a prison wall, income or education level, but still, unfortunately, gender.

Magdalena Piekarska,  
*Gazeta Wyborcza*

[...] Every woman and man should watch "Womenstate. A Choir for One Actress" with the unique Agnieszka Bresler. **This is a serious life lesson, beautifully told.**

Agnieszka Bresler is great. For over an hour she fantasises about an alternative world order and tells tales based on true stories of Polish women. **And she captures the attention, which is not an easy task.**

[...] The International Women's Day is only worthwhile as long as it attracts attention to women's real needs and problems. And the Institute founded by Jerzy Grotowski is a great place for **young theatermakers looking for the right form for their vision, combining passion with professionalism.** The premiere's audience expressed strong emotions **by giving a standing ovation** - men and women alike.

counterpoint for a smile in the spectacle are **real women's stories.** [...]

małgorzata Matuszewska,  
*newspaper Wrocław*, 6 April 2018

A very successful monodrama composed with carefully combined notes of **sensitivity and autoirony** to capture real experiences of contemporary Polish women. [...] The audience immediately recognizes the **complex tone of the performance.** It's not about a simple affirmation.

Grzegorz Chojnowski  
Radio Wrocław, 13 March 2018

## A Midsummer Night's Dream (2012)

**For some of [the inmates engaged in the production], rehearsals were the first opportunity in years to see the world beyond the prison gates. [...] In the intensity of this work and the requirements that the director set for her actors, there was no particular difference between the rehearsal at the factory and in professional theater. She took them seriously, like partners,** which is rarely seen in custody. Everyone was disciplined and involved in the process of creating the spectacle. They managed to develop a common language. [...]

**It was Lewicka who came to them with the idea of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. [...]** In Lublin's show the forest is played by prison uniforms sporting the nasty shade of green. A professional actress in the role of Titania wears a fabulous, fairy-tale dress made of the same material. **The daydreaming takes place in a reality familiar to prisoners, as is told from their perspective.**

During a cigarette break, I ask one of the actors how he feels in a room where a real forest is behind an open window. He thinks for a moment and says he has no words for that feeling. **"Indescribable"** - he repeats several times.

**The problem of language has turned out to be fundamental.** Puck, played by a young actress, is a mediator between the world of prisoners and spectators. He explains the hermetic slang used by some of the characters in the show. The show is a beautiful attempt to facilitate an authentic meeting of extraordinary actors with viewers. In this sense, the first spectacle within the larger social project is a great success of the producers - Lewicka and Jeż - but above all the prisoners who participated. They are unpretentious: with lightness and wit, but honestly and without unnecessary dramatization, they speak in their own language about their situation.

Szymon Kazimierczak  
*Pismo TEATR*, nr 3 / 13