Provocative as our title may sound, Krzysztof Warlikowski is among those artists who have generated the most conflicting opinions, who have met with resistance, or even indignation. Small wonder, at any rate, given that his theater has aimed to expose what is perceived as different, other, and even hostile in Polish culture and society, and what has come with the transformation processes after 1989. He has stubbornly been labeled a “provocateur.” It has swiftly turned out, however, that Warlikowski did not seek to identify with the model of the provocateur, that he was trying to mobilize processes whereby bonds were forged and empathy created in the theater, that he longed for understanding, not to create scandals, though his self-expression also led to extreme, uncompromising, transgressive situations. By “understanding” we mean less superficial acceptance, tolerance, or other gestures of this sort than, on the one hand, building a personal, capacious, and biting theatrical language, and on the other, attempting to evoke a lively and multi-tiered reception process, taking into account various perspectives, approaches, and experiences. “Understanding” here is a readiness to take on the task of reading speech which is initially strange, incomprehensible, and foreign. Another thing that seems indispensable in reading them is the hermeneutic strategies of psychoanalysis – the classical rhetorical figures of the language of the unconscious developed by Sigmund Freud. Strategies like condensation, displacement, repetition, transferal and working-through, idealization and sublimation, repression and resistance. In the psychoanalytical process speaking and understanding are lined with traps, at risk of overuse, erroneous interpretation, they are always a live, one-time, and unique situation – this is why the psychoanalyst or therapist must have a high degree of self-consciousness, responsibility, and knowledge of the phenomena of projection and transferal. Freud was convinced that, however shocking the truth about a man that was revealed during a discourse of the unconscious, it was always part of the experience of a “common unhappiness,” whether a person liked it or not. I cannot find a model that would better grant us an idea of how Warlikowski’s theater functions, its social situation and resonance, though I do realize that here the psychoanalytical process occurs in a spontaneous, unstructured fashion, full of abuses, enduring compulsions, unexpected breakthroughs, faulty interpretations
and blind alleys; as such, it demands a non-dogmatic, even somewhat eclectic approach – and, ultimately, must remain a metaphorical depiction.

Perhaps the protagonist of this book ought to be clarified at once. It is not Krzysztof Warlikowski – the man, the artist, the theater director, not even in a very limited sense. Warlikowski stands as a fascinating event in Polish theater and culture as such, a field affected by many phenomena: theater, psychology, culture, society, politics, and religion. This book shifts the center of gravity toward the dynamics of reception, it ties Warlikowski’s theater into the process of Polish society’s transformation after 1989, using tools developed in the anthropology of theater, performance, and cultural poetics. Warlikowski’s theater is an event in which actors, viewers, and critics have taken part, and still do – this living interhuman constellation is, after all, constantly changing, much as assessments of this phenomenon are changing, individual attitudes are being revised, and interpretations are becoming more profound. Warlikowski is a process, a field, and a space – and one that seems ever-expanding. This shared space includes the woman who demanded that Jacek Poniedziałek put his underwear back on during the performance of Hamlet, and the girl who, during a performance of The Bacchae, crawled into the swimming pool built on stage. These are only two spectacular examples of audience reactions, ones that are widely known and described; they perfectly render the problematic nature of the border between stage and audience in Warlikowski’s theater, which is always sharply drawn, so that it can be questioned and transcended. This explains, for example, the obsession with scenes that mirror the audience. Thus the fondness for the conventions of the Classicist theater with no fourth wall, demanding the actors perform facing the audience, and that every question directed at their partners be first planted in the audience space to ascertain the power of its resonance.

As such, this is not a book about Krzysztof Warlikowski the theater artist, but a book about “Warlikowski” – the object of the audience’s desire. A fetishized object, but also one who stokes revulsion, aversion, and opposition. This is why I proposed a different kind of narrative in this book, one that departs from ambitions to replicate a coherent artistic structure. The plays are analyzed as a series of trouble spots, a constellation of sites with a particularly powerful emotional and affective impact. I have tracked fragments of social rituals in Warlikowski’s performances, used as tools to activate the audience’s attitude (wedding scenes), I have indicated material objects with great potential to affect viewers’ memory and emotions (tables), violent gestures with clear cultural origins that evoke anxiety (the cultural imagination of liminal “monsters”), and situations where actors undress and change clothes (problematizing the experience and image of the body from a queer perspective). The book’s fragmentary narrative is meant
to help extract those elements of Warlikowski’s performances which could be treated as symptoms of the social drama, the crisis of identity to date, the collapse of stabilized rituals, an approach to the sphere of phantasms. Though I have made reference to Victor Turner’s concept of the social drama, I have tried to dilute its “optimistic” conclusions, which mark out dialectic processes to overcome all the crises of collective life. I have placed the emphasis more on liminal aspects, on the effect of dispersed significance, on the materiality of the world on stage, which we struggle to assign unambiguous meaning, and on the “unhappy” aspects of the performative acts.

Krzysztof Warlikowski made his debut in 1992; his first play at the Stary Theater in Krakow (The Marquise of O., based on the novella by Heinrich von Kleist) was a spectacular catastrophe, rejected by audiences, and even mocked by some. Warlikowski swiftly, however, found support at the Nowy Theater in Poznań, where he made three premieres which met with a very lively response (Marie-Bernard Koltès’s Roberto Zucco, in particular, was given ovations by the young audiences). At the same time, he began working abroad, at first mainly in Israel and in Germany. We ought also to mention his efforts to tackle Shakespeare’s most difficult dramas at a very early stage: The Merchant of Venice (Wilam Horzyca Theater in Toruń), A Winter’s Tale (Nowy Theater in Poznań), and Hamlet (School of Drama Beit Zvi in Tel Aviv).

But Warlikowski’s theater which concerns us here begins at the premiere of The Taming of the Shrew at the Dramatyczny Theater, 3 January 1998, and includes the next few performances, which were made at the Rozmaitości Theater (sometimes coproduced by other theaters), a place where Grzegorz Jarzyna, who ran the stage, broke with the conventions of theater institutions. At this point began a cultural process in which, as many believe, Warlikowski reconfigures the consciousness of the Polish theater, exerting a profound influence that went well beyond artistic categories. These productions were Hamlet, The Bacchae, Cleansed, The Tempest, Dybbuk, Krum, and Angels in America. The last of these premieres was staged on 17 February 2007. Proof of this profound effect is the scattered opinions, the reactions during the performances, the readiness to take up lively and personal discussions with the artists. And though this impact defies reliable description, I would not risk denying its existence, power, and vitality. In this book, however, I can only consider the mechanisms that provoked such a reception of Warlikowski’s theater.

I do not say that “Warlikowski is us” in a sentimental fashion, whether personally or through any other kind of identification. Divergent processes are at work here: displacement, going beyond one’s own “I,” the unpredictable endowment of meaning, the disarming and inspiring opportunity to find oneself aligned with the other.
The last chapter of the book was written specially for this English-language edition: it presents the situation of Warlikowski and his ensemble after leaving the Rozmaitości Theater and creating a separate institution – the Nowy Theater. As it turns out, this was more than a change of address; it was also a chance to reformulate the dramaturgical rules and to make an attempt to redefine the relationship with the audience on new grounds.