

by Allen J. Kuharski,
Production Dramaturg

LITERARY KARAOKE: FROM GOMBROWICZ TO HELL MEETS HENRY HALFWAY

This is the recipe for the theatrical mixtape called
Hell Meets Henry Halfway.

1/3 Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz (specifically his novel *Possessed*)
1/3 American playwright Adriano Shaplin
1/3 Pig Iron Theatre Company

This formula for creating a new American play was at first a source of confusion for critics and audiences familiar with any one of the elements in the mix. The play landed best with those that came with no prior knowledge or expectations.

As an early mentor to Pig Iron and the production dramaturg going into the project, I had both extraordinary challenges and rare opportunities.

First, I was the stand-in for a largely unfamiliar dead foreign playwright, and was accountable both to Rita Gombrowicz, his charming French Canadian widow and literary executor, and the formidable group of “Gombrowiczologs” in Poland planning and funding the Gombrowicz centennial events in 2004, who commissioned the piece.

Second, I was the mid-wife for the writing of a new play by a very present, very American, and very vital young writer of exceptional talent.

Third, for the first time I was to work on a devised piece created through ensemble improvisation according to Pig Iron’s working methods, which combine the approaches of master clown Jacques Lecoq, avant-garde director Joseph Chaikin, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and various contemporary dance companies. I had introduced Pig Iron to many of these artists when they were students at Swarthmore sixteen years ago, but they were now master practitioners in their own right. The production also allowed me to observe in practice what I had already concluded from my research: the affinity between Gombrowicz’s writing and the theatrical practice based in Lecoq’s teaching.

Hell Meets Henry Halfway is the first stage adaptation of one of Gombrowicz’s novels attempted in English. But this is not a translation, nor a

conventional stage adaptation (though the source text is recognizably there in the characters, setting, themes, and mood). It is instead a new play, the first written in English under the influence of Witold Gombrowicz.

Gombrowicz was performing a kind of karaoke in *Possessed*: it was published under a pseudonym in 1939 as an experiment in writing pulp fiction for a mass audience, an attempt at “passing” as a writer for a popular readership. It serialized a gothic tale of desire and intrigue among vivid young characters in a remote castle. Gombrowicz, like the Prince in the novel, carried the secret of this literary bastard child until just months before his death.

The collision of Gombrowicz with Adriano Shaplin proved a fortuitous one. Having spent years reading about the Polish playwright’s fierce and theatrical personality, I realized Shaplin’s character was cast from the same metal. Gombrowicz and Shaplin’s theatrical voices combine the farcical wit of Oscar Wilde or Joe Orton with neo-Shakespearean soliloquies and dizzying verbal duels. But even more importantly, similar deep impulses generate and drive the terrifying eloquence of their characters.

So it became clear that the more Adriano Shaplin wrote as he pleased, the more Gombrowiczian ***Hell Meets Henry Halfway*** would become. We received Rita Gombrowicz’s blessing to proceed with a quote from her husband, the moldering theatrical corpse: “it is forbidden to forbid.”

Can we cue up this number?

Sarah
Sanford
& Gabriel
Quinn
Bauriedel



WHO WAS GOMBROWICZ?

Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz (1904 – 1969) is a key figure in twentieth-century literature and theater. After arriving in Argentina within days of the German invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II, Gombrowicz spent the last half of his life in exile. His work celebrated pacifism, freedom of expression, and a radical individualism. For decades, his work could only be published in Polish by the Paris-based dissident publishing house *Institut Littéraire* and smuggled through the Iron Curtain. While banned in Poland for most of his life, his writing was both widely translated and performed abroad. Gombrowicz today is required reading for Polish high school students, but his agnosticism, open bisexuality, and progressive political views have kept him a contested and controversial figure. In 2004, his centennial was celebrated around the world, including an international theater festival in Poland. The festival originally commissioned ***Hell Meets Henry Halfway*** and was planned in part by Pig Iron’s dramaturg Allen Kuharski.