



Łukasz Twarkowski. Photo: Kris Ćwik

Łukasz Twarkowski: ‘I really hate the dictatorship of the theatre space, I’m all about freedom’

[FEATURES](#) JAN 15, 2025 BY [NATASHA TRIPNEY](#)

Łukasz Twarkowski’s work defies easy categorisation. Over the past few years, the Polish director has made a name for himself making thrillingly large-scale work that is both cinematic and immersive at some of the biggest festivals and stages in Europe. He’s arguably one of the most exciting figures in modern European theatre.

Now, London audiences – finally – get a chance to take in his work with *The Employees*, his 2023 show for Warsaw’s Studio Theatre, based on the acclaimed science-fiction novel by Danish writer Olga Ravn.

The Employees, which is set on a spaceship carrying a crew of humans and humanoid robots, is a far more intimate piece than the work for which Twarkowski has become known. He was initially resistant to adapting the book – stories about robots felt a little oldhat, a topic from 10 years ago – but once he read it, he became obsessed with it. It's not really a book about the technology of artificial intelligence, he clarifies, it's about consciousness. "It's an extremely sensual novel in which she goes very deep under the skin of our existence," he says. Alan Turing understood that the most important question is not whether a machine can think, he explains, but whether a machine can act in a way that makes us believe that it thinks. This invariably leads to questions about ourselves, about how we work and what it might mean if a machine "functions in the same way that I am functioning"?

Twarkowski's work is characterised by the freedom he offers his audiences to move. "I really hate the dictatorship of the theatre space," he says. "I am always dreaming about giving as much freedom as possible to the spectator." The level of freedom depends on the nature of the space. With The Employees, the audience can move around the space between acts, although the Studio Theatre in Warsaw is much smaller compared with many of the spaces he's worked in, which brought with it certain constraints, but also provided a test for him and his creative team. "It was kind of a challenge to do something that was as small as possible," he says, to figure out how to create the sense of an entire spaceship in a relatively confined space.

'Can rave be political? I truly believe that it can'

Twarkowski's theatre career began in Wrocław, with form-fusing pieces including 2011's Farinelli, based on the life of the famed opera singer. In

2013, he staged Stanisław Wyspiański's Acropolis at the National Old Theatre in Kraków in collaboration with the Identity Problem Group, the Polish interdisciplinary artistic collective that creates multimedia installations, short films as well as performances, of which he is a member. In 2017, he started to work increasingly outside Poland, directing LOKIS, a triptych of stories with mockumentary components, based on a text written by Anka Herbut, at the National Drama Theatre, Vilnius, Lithuania.

It was a huge success and Twarkowski was awarded the prestigious Golden Cross of the Stage Award for his direction.

He returned to Lithuania for Respublika, an enormous immersive performance that lasts for six hours and is usually performed in warehouses. "It needs space – at least 1,000 sq metres," he explains. The piece, which fuses installation and cinema, takes place inside a space that includes dance floors and even a sauna, and is invariably followed to a rave, often with big-name DJs in attendance. When an outdoor version of the show was performed in Malakasa in Greece, it culminated with a rave featuring two of the top names in modern electronic music, Richie Hawtin and Palestinian DJ Sama' Abdulhadi.



The Employees at Studio Theatre, Warsaw, Poland (2023). Photo: Natalia Kabanow



ROHTKO at the Dailes Theatre, Riga, Latvia (2022). Photo: Artūrs Pavlovs

Twarkowski took his inspiration for the play from the Republic of Paulava, a self-governing micro-state founded in 1769 by Catholic priest Pawel Ksawery Brzostowski. “It was called the peasants’ paradise because he abolished serfdom,” he explains. This prompted two trains of thought in relation to societal change. One was about the idea of a basic income, he says, and “how you can really change the world once you are not forced to work”. The other was the question of freedom and how “we are still slaves of capitalism”.

He describes the creation of the show as a kind of social experiment, in which the actors and creative collaborators ended up living together as a commune in the woods. There was no obligation to work. There were no formal rehearsals. They simply experimented together, during which time they were observed and filmed.

Twarkowski’s passion for rave permeates his work. He recalls attending an illegal rave in Crimea, Ukraine, in 2006 as a moment “where I felt, probably for once in my life, really free”. He wanted to transmit this feeling to his performers, who ranged in age from 27 to 65. It was important to him to have a spread of people, not just young people. Over time they grew to love rave culture, and to appreciate the power of “being together, dancing together”.

Though every process is different, an intensive rehearsal period is typical of Twarkowski’s way of working. Rehearsals for his 2022 show ROHTKO started with a laboratory period in which the cast spent a lot of time working with cameras.

Rehearsals are not just about working together, he stresses, they’re about spending a lot of time together, listening carefully to each other, and forming “a group with a common dream”.

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ROHTKO, produced by the Dailes Theatre in Riga, is another monumental show in which the lines between theatre, installation and film are blurred. The four-hour piece is inspired in part by the work of the Latvian-American artist Mark Rothko and one of the largest art forgery scandals of the 20th century, but also by different cultural understandings of artistic originality and how the Western idea of a ‘fake’ doesn’t mean the same thing as it does in many places in Asia. Ironically, he was just about to embark on rehearsals when his agent pointed out the existence of the Netflix documentary *Made You Look: A True Story About Fake Art*, which covers similar thematic ground. (“I see where you’ve stolen your ideas from,” his agent joked). As with so much of Twarkowski’s work, and that of his regular collaborator, the dramatist Anka Herbut, there are multiple strands of interrogation at play. Much of the performance centres on a small Chinese restaurant, raising other associated questions of authenticity. The piece also explores the idea of value and what that means in the era of the NFT. “How is it possible that something that doesn’t exist physically can cost \$64 million?” Capitalism, he says, “always has to find a way to monetise things”.

In a time of increasing social polarisation, Twarkowski’s talk of common dreams sounds deeply appealing. While he thinks his work has succeeded in breaking down boundaries between the theatre and non-theatre worlds by attracting an audience who are into clubbing, he’s aware that most people who come will share roughly the same views. Yet at the same time he’s convinced it can still have an impact, that there is something profound about the act of dancing together, of moving to the beat as one. “Can rave

be political? I truly believe that it can,” he says. When the full-scale war on Ukraine started in 2022, it was a difficult time – Lithuania shares a border with Russia – and for a period, his focus was elsewhere. “It was hard in the beginning to convince even yourself that this is a political gesture,” he says.

His views have evolved though. “Dictators will always try and destroy joy,” he says. Coming together in this way can be a source of joy, absolutely, but perhaps, more importantly, it can also be a source of hope. “I would say I don’t do political theatre because I don’t know how to,” he says. “But at the same time, I understand that whatever we do is political, and our shows have some kind of impact.”

The Employees is at the Southbank Centre, London, from January 16-19.

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