

## ŁAŹNIA NOWA THEATRE & CULTURAL CENTRE – KRAKOW, NOWA HUTA, POLAND

**Key words:** building capacity | leadership | place | community rooted | co-creation | by habit | by choice | by surprise

### *Synthetic data sheet*

Full name	Łażnia Nowa Theatre & Cultural Centre
Address	Osiedle Szkolne 25, 31-977 Krakow - Nowa Huta, POLAND
Legal status	Public, municipal cultural institution of the City of Krakow, grown from an association founded by current theatre directors – artists: Bartosz Szydłowski and Magdalena Szydłowska.  The institution is a member of Trans Europe Halles network
Year of establishment	2005 / 11 years as public institution (the previous location as Łażnia Theatre Association – est. in 2002 was Krakow Jewish district 'Kazimierz')
Website	<a href="http://laznianowa.pl/">http://laznianowa.pl/</a>
Social Media	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram
Area of activities	Theatre
Kind of activities	Dramatic theatre with line-up programme of over 40 productions in last years, theatre education projects, theatre festivals (foremost Divine Comedy International Festival), national and international touring of their theatre productions, open space events provided for the town district residents, it's also a concert and conference venue.  It's an audience focused professional art institution intriguing co-creation and dialogue of theatre directors, professional actors and amateur artists - district residents. Łażnia Nova is well known for its careful selection of modest, honest, trustworthy, high profile cultural projects that, consistently acts against the stereotype of theatre as an elitist place,

	reaching out new audiences. The theatre has an artistic reputation and impact that attracts top profile theatre professionals in Poland, to offer their contributions
Total amount of budget	7.800.000 PLN - about 1.800.000 €
Sources of funding	1.300.000 PLN (17%) – sales; 4.930.000 PLN (64%) city subsidies for statutory activity, festival and other projects; over 1.500.000 PLN (19%) of other subsidies and donations
Number of employees	23-25 full time work contracts (15-16 administration / management + 8-9 technicians). Artists are contracted for particular spectacles productions and artistic or education projects
Number of annual attendances	30.000 per year (2015), 160-220 every spectacle, 15-17 shows a month in 2016 / 300-400 every festival performance / open space events in the 'Lagoon' area of Nowa Huta district – over 90 events for 90 days of summer in 2016

Data refer to 2015

### **Background information**

The theatre building is 4,500 m<sup>2</sup>, former workshops halls of the school for mechanics, renovated and adapted as a multi-functional cultural facility. The institution is located in the very centre of the 250,000 inhabitants district of blocks of flats for steelworks employees of Nowa Huta<sup>11</sup>.

Those directly responsible for the focus of the program are the directors of the theatre, Bartosz Szydłowski and Małgorzata Szydłowska. 4-6 people employed in promotion, marketing, sales and production units, to concretise their projects with the involvement of the district residents, directly support their ideas for AD projects. Nowa Huta district residents are Łażnia Nova's priority audience, together with theatre audiences from Krakow, the region and visitors from other parts of Poland.

In their local AD approach, the audience is divided into three circles. The first one is composed of 15-20 Nowa Huta residents who are deeply engaged in the theatre's practice, partnering with professional actors in theatre productions, taking part in specialised trainings. The second circle is for those who attend Łażnia productions as

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<sup>11</sup> This huge area was constructed as a showpiece of Stalinism in 1950's. It was a privileged forefront scene of the communist's propaganda as one of idealised places of social and economic development behind the iron curtain. This socialist realism style area was an architectural and ideological manifesto, a contradiction to neighbouring space of intellectually vibrant, cultural heritage old city of Krakow. The inhabitants of Nowa Huta were strongly affected by its history up to the end of communism. This place was also an important scene of protests of Solidarity resistance movement. Nowa Huta witnessed the downfall and demystification of its industrial prominence and became stigmatised as an unattractive, degraded, forgotten, unsafe, dead-end zone. Łażnia Nova Theatre aims to challenge such stereotypes and empower local citizens with theatre productions and cultural-social participatory projects.

spectators or join-connected event, like concerts or open-air activities. The last circle is one of wider resonance, those audiences that have added this institution to their mental maps, as an integrated, irreplaceable part of the district, city or country.

The theatre was attracted to start AD activities as tools for highlighting the cultural identity of residents of the Nowa Huta district. Based on earlier experience, practice and intuition, **they were ready to take on the demanding work with people whose trust was manipulated, mystified and idealised** through decades of local history and finally betrayed after the democratic transformation of Poland. The **Theatre's response was an affirmation of creativity, transparency and trust, providing symbolic gestures for reconciliation.** To Bartosz Szydłowski Łaźnia Nowa Theatre mirrors the tradition of ancient Greece, with myths, polis and logos marking, but not determining, the sense of 'my' place. His dream is to develop the best cultural institution in Poland, but the goal is not reached as long as the institution runs only on the leader's energy.

### ***What do they want? Goals and achievements***

The aim in Łaźnia Nowa is to create a shared space, somewhere both artists and residents feel comfortable. Nowa Huta is an inspiration and the theatre is expressing affirmation of people living there. This participation theatre is about the stage becomes a special locus of identification, the germ of a community: *the audience and the artist are on the same side - neither is wiser*<sup>12</sup>.

**'For us, it is the audience that matters' is the theatre's manifesto, visible everywhere in the theatre space and staff approach.** Its most unique feature, that sets this place apart from other theatres in Poland, is its aim to overthrow the boundary between stage and audience and its commitment to treat theatre as a meeting point of various social groups, crossroads of different viewpoints and beliefs. At the very foundation of Łaźnia Nowa Theatre lays the theatre's close contact with the local community. Inhabitants of the district – regardless of their age, gender and social status – are invited to participate in artistic projects, workshops, meetings and theatrical events.

The strategy towards A.D. issues seems started from balanced combination of increasing (building from scratch) the audience and in the same time immediately deepening the relations with the reached audience. After 11 years, it looks like, there is more need to diversify the audience and deepen further the relations – taking the actions to another scale and next level of the sense of community engagement.

### ***How do they do it? Making it happen***

The essence of a theatre's relation with its audience is a mystery that excites both sides – the things you don't know about the other - bringing a special chemistry to this relationship. Therefore the tools explored are primarily management and communication

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<sup>12</sup> Łaźnia Nowa is spiritually in agreement with the art genius Stanislaw Wyspianski, who acted in Krakow in the late XIXth and early XXth century, against rejection of the audience.

tools, not so much data collection. There is a need to inspire solutions that have a direct impact on the audience.

**There are infrastructural components in Łażnia Nowa that help to build relations with the audience.** One is the flexibility of both stages that gives directors and technicians a chance to completely re-arrange the space according to audience needs and perceptual capacities. Auditorium seats are fully adaptable, movable in every direction in the theatre. People can sit together and divided, in front, behind or around the artists. The building itself provokes interactions with visitors – the marketing unit arranges guided tours as an “escape game” - visitors have to find their way out. Some facilities, like the music-recording studio, open the institution to new audiences, like young bands coming to record their *demos*. The theatre building is still ready to host new people and ideas – there are lots of options for rooms not yet in use. There is an area surrounding the institution – a sort of garden, now re-cultivated, who will be used for education and social integration events for neighbours of Nowa Huta theatre.

**Promotional tools activated by the Marketing and Promotion units are varied but not aggressive,** including 90 summer events offered for free, 1100 tickets given for free to schoolteachers and students. They search proper, effective promotional channels and media formats. They operate through “impact agents”, project participants.

**The process of casting for co-creative audience productions** is also a kind of smart tool. This is well illustrated by the announcement transmitted through paper and digital media. The theatre provides well elaborated arguments, in a simple language style, expressing what ‘being an amateur actor’ could bring to someone’s everyday life. The intriguing component is the one that says: that being an amateur actor in Łażnia brings ‘some small money added to your monthly budget’. Audience individuals who get through the stage of acting workshops, take part in rehearsals and productions that are sold to the public, get moderate pay. This is considered as a fair condition of cooperation with the institution, as well as the one of amateurs sharing theatre wardrobes with professionals. People from castings sometimes get a wider recognition of their achievement. One of the amateur actors from Łażnia, Mariusz Cichonski (a gas distribution company employee in his non theatre work life) was awarded a best actor prize of the theatre festival in Torun, winning with many young professionals.

The success of the Łażnia Nowa is that the **idea and daily live practice of the institution resonates with local people and their symbolic needs of identity representation.** In one of the sociological surveys done in 2015 with the sample of 5000 district inhabitants, the data indicators show that Łażnia Nowa is seen by residents as a sign of improved life quality and positive changes in Nowa Huta.

The institution gained the residents trust through transparency, but it also won credibility because of the conditions from which they started - from scratch - in the neighbourhood. They begin in barely survival conditions and with the fear of having no public at all, in a place stigmatized as post-industrial, remote, a dead end housing block. They had from the start co-creation as the organisation’s main objective. After 8 years of work, they now have a complete infrastructure, good working conditions and brand recognition stability. Their presence in Nowa Huta is now out of the question and their role in the Krakow and Polish cultural landscape is well established. The climate has changed for Łażnia among public authorities and political decision makers. Łażnia and its leader are respected, appreciated, followed, consulted, their voices are seriously considered in public debate on cultural policies. It’s a kind of top rank place to work for theatre directors. It’s a place of sold-out performances with over 30,000 spectators annually. Budget efficiency has an important role in this reputation and achievement. If the theatre

budget is larger than the normal budget of an independent theatre, it has to prove that it takes responsibility for its social role and impact.

One of the ambivalent but surprising effects is the **people who have gotten energy and inspiration from Łaźnia are not giving it back to Łaźnia, but somewhere else.** This is something audience centred organisations should get used to, as part of a natural process of creative spill overs.

**The role of the AD leader** – in this case the institutional director as a key person - is to make a **'constant, spiral walkabout' in the streets of Nowa Huta.** But the strategy for Audience Development is immensely expanded now, far beyond a simple walk among local residents. The pressure in this up scaling is huge. Above all, the critical impact of the leader is that of keeping an eye on the artistic quality, the people invited to work in Łaźnia, keeping the diversity of funding and maintaining a democratic culture within the organisation.

The Łaźnia Nowa case in Nowa Huta shows that **a key factor in audience-centred art institutions is the personality of the leader, his or her constant presence, moderation and supervision of the AD strategy implementation. It's a careful control of credibility, responsibility, and empathy.** It's empowering and securing long-term processes, management of chaotic moments, developing new formats for Audience Development. The leader "reminds" the team that local people are the real owners of the theatre and essential shareholders. What helps a lot in the case of Łaźnia Nowa is the fact **the founder is rooted in the local context**<sup>13</sup>.

As Bartosz Szydłowski expresses it: *"For anyone in a leadership position in place like this, **the first question raised every morning is 'what am I am doing in this place?'**. The community expects an individualised, personal and answer, far from ideologies and policies.*

One regret felt by the Łaźnia Nowa director is not having enough time for the team-building activities with the staff. The director acknowledges that when engaging heavily in Audience Development, there is never enough time left to discuss ethical issues and realize a team development strategy.

**Interview:** Bartosz Szydłowski - Łaźnia Nowa Theatre and Cultural Centre, Krakow

**Interviewer:** Marcin Poprawski – AMU Culture Observatory, Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland)

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<sup>13</sup> He came back to the place of origin, went through the process of re-identification with the district, gave back something to the community passing himself through the emotional stages of irony, hate and love. This was not a coincidence that the first Łaźnia Nowa production he directed was based on the story of Oedipus.

## **Annex 1 - What things they do (selection)**

**Theatre productions integrating professionals with amateurs** (selected): 'The Mission Movie Fan Club' – theatre production with professional actors and over 20 local residents on stage inspired by „The Mission” movie, 'Paradiso' – involving actors professionals and people with the spectrum of autism, 'Apparently, you were never 13-years old girl, sir' – engaging performances of teenage girls from the residential district, other productions with local people as co-creators or co-authors of the theatre performance: 'Enter the Dragon', 'Architect', 'Fakir', 'Conrad – Machine', 'The History of Bogdan W.', 'Emigrants', 'Experiment – Love', 'Supernova, and many more.

'**Łażnia -active**' is a local leader coaching project – extending the A.D. projects to residents themselves, creating their own initiatives.

'**Ice-breaker**' - over 40 issues of Nowa Huta's free bi-weekly in 10-15,000 copies delivered to residential area free of charge. It was an affirmation of all that is happening in Nowa Huta: everyday affairs, portraits of people, the gossips on the block, and the news from Łażnia. Its aim was *creating a situation that activates residents and helps them to see how much depends on them.*

'**Lagoon Art - Nowy Bulwar(t).**' – 90 free admission events of different arts media, professional and amateur artists - in an open space of Nowa Huta recreation lake site - for 90 days of the summer.

'**Theatre as a gathering**' – shows series including art project '1001 Block of Flats Fairy Tales' - the puppet theatre with some parts for residents, neighbours choir etc. – the story of the Nowa Huta building no. 19, that becomes Every-block. It is supplemented by the creative architecture workshops for kids: 'Repairing the block of flats'

'**Theatre for everyone**' – accessibility initiative with the number of free admission tickets to 10 top productions of the theatre for people with a most difficult economic and social life conditions – in cooperation with social help institutions from Nowa Huta.

## **Annex 2 – Bartosz Szydłowski's features for AD**

Łażnia Nowa director, in conversation, when describing in an honest way his institution's AD approach, is sceptical about ready tools or fast receipts. What he did instead is formulating spontaneously a set of features or forms that are working with the audience in his community.

*Not pushing too much – but intrigue.* Looking forward, intensely striving for the audience could be a dangerous gesture. One should not create fake, artificial situations, but rather create an appetite, curiosity, not forcing audience to join if you want them to perform.

*The beginnings are essential in relations.* One of the most touching moments of the theatre was its initial opening when the **district residents (called by theatre leaders 'daily life specialists' delivered to Łażnia theatre their everyday life objects, as prompts, or simple truth stories told and recorded - as foundational gesture of the place and the local audience's blessing for creation of new theatre productions.**

*Leader's relations with engaged audience are demanding or... engaging.* 'Having' audience in the theatre is not success, yet. It's easier to get them here, than to keep them for longer. When working co-creatively with the audience, engaging them seriously,

it's so easy to offend their identity or taste. They demand leaders presence, time, attention, and personal engagement.

*Audience centric theatre leader should constantly reposition him.* This is all making a pressure on theatre professionals regardless their everyday commitments, duties that are coming from expansion, or range of institution activities scale. **Effective work of the leader with its audience is giving his or her time, patience, doing simple things, gossiping, having a coffee or cigarette together, taking a generous approach – it's a kind of purgatory for an experienced artist. It's basically, citizenship school of sharing, being sensitive to the other, and thinking through the other perspectives.**

*Ethics continuous with aesthetics in AD.* The best path to get the audience involved in a new art aesthetic is building credible, honest relations and a climate of trust. That means, that theatre director or acting professional should be as less focused on her/himself as possible. Another issue is professional sensitivity to not determining people the way, they are not able to understand or follow. What matters is credibility of engagement work processes and not the effect. What matters is being you and not making just an impressive effect.

*Keith Johnston's Impro system of improvisational theatre training methods are very effective with non-professional actors.* One of the tools that Łaźnia Nowa activated, is a cycle of workshops for the most engaged audience individuals – 15-20 people, done by a coach from Denmark, Steen Haakon Hansen, who is using Johnston's methods of improvisational theatre workshops and storytelling. This is to support the process of relations building.

*Provoking local residents to action and reflection – signalling demand of outcomes of their work - is the role of the institution that aims to engage audiences.* There is a natural potential in people's stories – the theatre is to let them be they in it. Institutions, and theatre directors failure is not exploring these potentials.

*Every cultural production done in Łaźnia is place specific.* Every theatre director invited here is prepared to do his free expression work in a way, that the people here could say: even if we sometimes don't understand everything – we feel that it is 'from here', it is something that district inhabitants keep as 'our' thing. **Made in Łaźnia means something for local people even if they do not follow some theatre pieces produced here.**

**There is a risk in institutional unbalance or unnecessary empowerments,** when working in the city space, outside Łaźnia building – offering a catalogue of events – like they do in summertime as an 'investment' in local people. Professionals from the theatre are keeping being modest in the territory of the residents, trying to not 'improve' what comes from the city district. **It's the gesture of leaving the space for average, ad hoc activism, improvised impulses from the audience. These are subtle but essential moments, that usually are seen intuitively only by a sensitive, empathic leader, but rather have to be learned by other professional followers from the institution team.** This is all to be tested in practice, in encounter with people.

The public theatre, like Łaźnia is a place of a healthy balance, of truth that easily tests fake situations. According to the theatre leader – *creating the place of the balance is the essence of audience centric organisation.*

### **Annex 3 - Focus on change. Organisational structure adjusted to AD goals**

Łaźnia as an organisation is in **constant revolution process. This organisation is faced with an everyday challenge of not having actors as employees**, a condition that makes the organisation flexible and light in weight, but also a reason of increased activity of management operations, negotiations, schedules coordination complexities. The institutions' organisational culture is built from passionate managers, administrators and very well integrated technicians team. What **Łaźnia is also aware is the urgent demand of the new unit in organisation, that is professional, passion driven people who will construct education and local communication sections, and relate them with the right management structure.**

According to the theatre leader **the audience is in focus as far as we are in concordance with ourselves in the art organisation. Focus on the audience approach and artists' freedom are deeply related.**

Łaźnia Nowa case is instructive in the sense, that the problem with audience centric organisations in Poland is usually defined in a far too straight way, delineated within ready fields of cultural education institutions, or culture-led social work formats and bureaucracies. Łaźnia seems to break through generalisations, clichés, unreflective judgements, and fast structuralisation.

### **Annex 4 - Inspiring policy makers – up scaling**

This is a story of the power of an unexpected, very far from regular standards of AD projects in Poland. It's not fake. It is based on **leaders empathic skills, social intelligence and imagination perfectly responsive with the site their work in.** Being in the same time ready to admit that there are shallow areas and overs implication dangers witnessed in this activity. The dilemma is the one of not having stable system of evaluation and support for such institutional approach in Poland.

**Creating a stable AD place, investing in a certain location with the continuous activities and an obligation to initiate certain variety of narrations is not easy.**

The mission of such a cultural institution is not judging their community, but constructing space of a free identification. The program is than not explaining but giving food for thought.

**Łaźnia Nova is accepting and cultivating mysterious relation of creative place and everyday reality. It keeps successfully a balanced proportion in it. It is running a longitudinal process of verifying artist's aberrations in life practice. That leads to the audience-centric cultural organisation.** Another, complementary way is to keep constructing audience engaged processes on the structure, fundament of the Greek myth, what is testing among Nowa Huta residents for 11 years: *reading Nowa Huta is like reading ancient Greek myths. There is energy, hubris, heroic deeds, facing fate, both harmony and chaos.*