***The Secret Agent* in the Netherlands: Interview with Izabela Pacholec**

**Robert G. Hampson**, University of London

On 3 December 2017, in a reception at Warsaw’s Royal Castle, the Polish President, Lech Kaczynski, launched ‘The Year of Joseph Conrad’. Conrad was born exactly 160 years earlier in Berdyczow (now Berdychiv, Ukraine), the son of Apollo and Ewa Korzeniowski, both from Polish *szlachta* families and both involved in the organizing of the 1863 Uprising against tsarist rule. His parents were arrested for their political activities, tried and sentenced to exile in Siberia. As a result of the harsh conditions in which they lived, Ewa died of TB in 1865 and Apollo died in 1869. Conrad left Poland in 1874 for Marseille, where he made his first voyages on French ships. In 1878, he began his career in the British Merchant Navy, rising to the position of captain by 1888. In 1895, he published his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*, and over the next 30 years he published a succession of novels, novellas and short stories, including ‘Heart of Darkness’, *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *Victory*, *Under Western Eyes* – and *The Secret Agent*. Conrad died in Kent in 1924.

*The Secret Agent* (1907) is Conrad’s London novel. It takes off from an incident in 1894, when a young anarchist blew himself up in the park surrounding Greenwich Observatory. Conrad’s narrative is focused on Adolf Verloc, who runs a seedy Soho shop as a front for his involvement with various radical and revolutionary groups. In reality, however, Verloc is working as an informant for the police and as an agent for an unnamed (but readily identifiable) foreign embassy. Conrad’s novel takes the reader into a world of asylum seekers, political refugees and the policing of such groups. At the same time, at the centre of the novel, is the Verloc family and the family dynamics of Verloc, his wife Winnie, her mother and her brother Stevie. It is a profoundly ironic novel, where much of the reader’s pleasure is provided by Conrad’s tight control of his deeply sardonic narrator. Nevertheless, despite the importance of the narrator’s mediation of, and commentary on, the events he presents in the novel, Conrad also saw the works dramatic potential. He adapted it for the stage, and there were ten performances at the Ambassadors Theatre, London (2–11 November 1922). This dramatic quality was also seen by Alfred Hitchcock, who produced the first film adaptation of the novel as *Sabotage* in 1936.

‘The Year of Joseph Conrad’ was marked by numerous events in Poland, including conferences in Warsaw and Olzstyn; a new play about Conrad’s 1914 stay in Zakopane; and a closing reception in the Royal Palace in Warsaw on Conrad’s birthday in 2018. ‘The Year of Joseph Conrad’ was also celebrated outside Poland. The Polish Cultural Institute in London worked with the Joseph Conrad Society (UK) and others on a year-long programme of events that included a Study Day at the British Library, an anthology of Conrad-inspired short stories, *Conradology* (Comma Press, 2018), and a Joseph Conrad Bike Tour around some of the Central London sites associated with Conrad and his novels. In addition, Sofia University in Bulgaria published five essays on Conrad in *Literaturata*, the journal of the Faculty of Slavonic Philology, to join the celebrations. In Holland, Izabel Pacholec, the creative director of the theatre company In My Head, was commissioned to write and produce a play about Conrad or adapted from his work. She chose to produce an adaptation of *The Secret Agent*. I came into contact with Izabel through the short talk I was asked to give at an event in Culemberg in November 2017 that launched the ‘Conrad Project’. The event was dedicated to Joseph Conrad and included a large audience of school-pupils as well as the Polish ambassador and the British deputy ambassador. The ‘Conrad Project’ was run by *de Gelderlandfabriek* (a former furniture factory now an arts hub) at Culemberg and In My Head: it began with this event, which initiated the educational programme, and culminated in a series of performances of the adaptation in March 2018. After these performances, Izabela agreed to be interviewed about her experiences: I was interested in her selection of *The Secret Agent* and in the radical way in which the novel was adapted.

**Robert G. Hampson (RGH):** *I wonder if we might start with some basic information: when was the play performed; where; for how many performances; what kind of audience numbers? What was your role? Who was the dramatist?*

**Izabela Pacholec (IP):** *The Secret Agent* was performed in Culemborg on the 8th, 9th and 11th of March 2018. We played five shows and aimed to create a high-quality performance, bringing the current issues of Conrad's work close to the public, also to young adults. This last goal was achieved by cooperation with the department of English language at the Public Regional School Community of *Lek en Linge* in Culemborg. In November 2017 the project started with an educational programme, for the involvement of young people; there was a special learning framework with lessons, documentaries and lectures about Conrad and his work and in March this year 200 students came to see one of the five performances of the play.

I would like to mention here that to our delight, you, professor, agreed to be a part of the project by giving a lecture through skype, last November, which we all appreciated a lot. The dramatist Mieke de Wit and myself as director of the play have both deepened our knowledge about Conrad , the background of *The Secret Agent,* and the novel, thanks to your skype contribution.

The audience of the other four shows, adults mainly, had the opportunity to participate in the lecture by our dramatist, taking place just before the play. A bit of historical background, the life of Conrad and the context made the whole experience a bit more […] edible. I must admit I did have high expectations of my audience, I mean, it’s Conrad, after all.

**RGH:** *How did you come to be doing an adaptation of* The Secret Agent*?*

**IP:** I was asked by (my personal contact at) The Polish Embassy in The Hague to produce and direct a play or an adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s work due to Conrad’s year in 2017. As you know, Conrad wasn’t really a playwright but when I started research on his work to find out what could have been suitable for a stage performance I got fascinated with the currentness of *The Secret Agent*. The lines told by one of the minor characters Michaelis left me restless: ‘the future is as certain as the past – slavery, feudalism, individualism, collectivism. This is the statement of a law not an empty prophecy’. To which Ossipon replied with:

Nonsense. […]. There is no law and no certainty. The teaching propaganda be hanged. What the people know does not matter, were its knowledge ever so accurate. The only thing that matters to us is the emotional state of the masses. Without emotion there is no action.

Conrad wrote that in 1906–07 and there is a certain truth in those words when you look closely at how democracy works nowadays. I would love to start a discussion about Brexit and the emotion of the masses at this point but […] let’s get back to *The Secret Agent*, it is slightly less explosive subject.

The novel *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* was published in 1907. The play *The Secret Agent: A Drama in Three Acts* was published in 1923.

The novel has been republished many times and also been filmed. But the play is hardly known to the audience, and I was amused to find out that there are only around 1000 copies of the play worldwide. In the Netherlands I have found the one copy, signed by Conrad, in the Special Collection of the Library of Leiden University. I was not allowed to borrow it but they did let me take photos instead […] with white gloves on, patiently turning page after page and taking hundreds of photos. However, the play was never before translated into Dutch, and my advisor, a true anglophile, Mr Ron Bijnen translated it specially for this project. All in all it does make it an interesting anecdote, doesn’t it?

**RGH:** *Why* The Secret Agent*? What attracted you to this novel?*

**IP:** Not only the striking lines of Michaelis of course. But also Winnie […]. Winnie is a true portrait of a woman from her social class, who does not have many opportunities, her destiny lies only in being a good wife […]. Together with my young actress, Stella van den Sigtenhorst, who played Winnie, I spent many hours on building the authentic psychology of Winnie. It was really interesting to see how historical dependence shapes someone’s way of thinking and the collective of norms and values a person possesses. On the other hand, an aspect of personality itself is more universal and, as Stella is an introvert and quiet, it did actually help her to develop Winnie’s role, but yet we still needed to dig deeper to understand Winnie’s ability to love her brother so much and to […] murder. The result of all that work turned out pretty well after all, I think.

**RGH:** *What else attracted you to the* Secret Agent*?*

**IP:** Narratives, Conrad is a master of subtle irony. I must also admit I do have a weakness for the period from about 1900. My undergraduate dissertation in literature at Leiden University was dedicated to a Dutch writer who lived back then. It was an extraordinary era. Conrad, however, was a fatalist and he knew perfectly well that such evils as Stalinism and Nazism might happen. That prophecy can be found in lines told by another anarchistic comrade in *The Secret Agent*, Yundt, when he argues with Ossipon and Michaelis during the secret meetings in the backroom of Verloc’s shop in Brett Street, and moreover in the character of the Professor who gives Verloc the explosives, without even caring or knowing what it’s meant for, not caring whether it would kill a child or six policemen. It’s a pity Conrad didn’t leave clues for us how to create a harmonious order in the world.

**RGH:** *What were the initial ideas you had for the adaptation?*

**IP:** I will try to answer that question by describing the artistic vision I had in the first place. The different spaces of de Gelderlandfabriek, a former furniture factory, which is now home to young professional culture entrepreneurs and visual artists, were an interesting starting point and contributed to the mysterious atmosphere that I wanted to create. The artistic vision involved the idea that the three acts would take place at different spaces within de Gelderlandfabriek, which created a unique challenge for both actors and the audience. But I didn’t know I would have to work with five actors only. The play consisted of twenty roles!

**RGH:** *It is clear that you had certain restrictions – such as the size of the cast. How did you respond to these restrictions? What impact did they have on your conception of the adaptation and on the performance?*

**IP:** Well, my crew and I had to be extremely creative to make something good out of it. First of all, we reduced the number of roles to nine, which meant that all actors except one had double roles. Therefore, it was necessary to create the narrator who would introduce each act to the audience briefly. I had the honour to work with one of the masters of storytelling, Eric Borrias. He truly seduced the audience. But he also had a double role. Winnie was the only single role.

**RGH:** *It is clear from the casting that you were also interested in gender. Inspector Heat, for example, is female. Could you say a little more about the thinking behind these gender changes?*

**IP:** Yes, I also had to be creative with the gender of the characters. So Inspector Heat became a woman, impossible in the time of Conrad, yes, but I must admit it wasn’t my intention to stick to the time of the novel and keep as close to it as possible. No, my intention was barely to suggest the time of the story, but rather to send a universal message that this story could have happened any time in any period. Besides, Inspector Heat being a woman made it an interesting power dual with the assistant commissioner in their scene.

It was not only Inspector Heat who changed gender, but also Lady Mabel who became Sir Mabel (a spoiled dandy from society, hungry for sensation, permitting himself to be charitable to old Michaelis, who stayed in Lord Mabel’s country house near Greenwich, an idea that made him adore himself even more). That role was played by a young, very talented actor Marijn van den Bogaard. I am truly proud of his performance; his other role was that of Stevie, hence he was a very important actor in the play. Stevie, so pure and autistic, was certainly not an easy character to develop, but Marijn did some research on the subject and worked on every move, gesture, grimace and every sound the boy had to make. The audience found both creations masterly.

**RGH:** *The fact that you didn’t ask the actress playing Winnie to double and undertake other parts suggests that Winnie is at the centre of your conception of the play. Could you say more about that?*

**IP:** Yes, Winnie indeed is the centre of the play. What I found interesting was the relation between the victim and the assassin to be found in her. Winnie in fact is the tragic victim of her destiny and Verloc’s double activities. She had to marry Verloc for the sake of her beloved brother Stevie. She then lost Stevie due to the actions of Verloc. It transformed her from victim to assassin by murdering Verloc. She killed herself after all. Ossipon who used her for his own purposes analysed her as a criminal type according to Lombroso, one of the very first criminologists in history. But that wasn’t quite right, she became a criminal eventually but she always stayed a victim. She paid the highest price of all. Winnie’s tragedy is the ultimate proof of the insanity of terrorism that caused the family drama.

**RGH:** *You also decided to make Verloc invisible. Could you say more about that?*

**IP:** ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’ they say, or rather, in our case, the mother of invisibility. The role of Verloc was too important to combine it with another role: it would not have been authentic for the audience anymore, if the actor who played Verloc was also required to play another role as well. And I couldn’t really afford more professionals. Therefore we had this idea to make Verloc invisible and let the other characters only talk about him in crucial scenes. It required many changes in the text but we have managed to create a continuous story, partly told by the narrator.

**RGH:** *You mentioned that one of the ideas you worked with was the layers of Verloc’s activities. Could you say more about that and how that was manifested in the production?*

**IP:** The credits for that aspect of the play all go to you and the lecture you gave in November 2017 via skype. Verloc was collaborating with everyone, being truly a double agent, even when it came to his family life. In my play I tried to show that by creating an atmosphere of claustrophobic circles of relations between characters. It’s hard to explain, but the play gives a theatre maker the possibility to work with movement and under suppressed emotions, which can illustrate the layers that can be found in the novel.

**RGH:** *One of the most obvious features of Conrad’s text – and one of the most challenging for a dramatization – is his use of a narrator with a sustained ironic tone. You also used a narrator. Could you say more about how that narrator was used – and whether you saw this as related to Conrad’s use of a narrator for the novel?*

**IP:** Eric Borrias, whom I have mentioned before, wrote all the pieces for the narrator. I, as director, was naturally involved in the process of writing, I communicated what I wanted Eric to reveal to the audience and what I wanted to be left untold. We did have some discussions with Mieke, my dramatist on that point, I must admit, as I wanted the pieces to be enigmatic and Mieke rather wanted to give the audience a few clearer clues to understand the story. Eric, as a master of storytelling with a great sense for narrative, tuned perfectly into Conrad’s ironic tone and indeed also into the wishes of the director and the dramatist.

I have asked Eric to translate a few fragments of the pieces of the narrator into English for you and your readers. I have chosen fragments from different parts of the play, to give you an idea of the kind of rhythm we achieved. Eric was delighted to do this for us and moreover he even recorded it for you. Anyone who is interested in hearing it can listen to it here: https://www.facebook.com/1589022587840135/videos/1764118983663827/?hc\_ref=ARQP7fvdakqaOSu2g1djhPV18sSPJnk7WPT58I5s7ucCwLxonnoVNlQdItT9sHNKHGY.

*Fragments of the narrator in the play written and translated by Eric Borrias:*

[…] I’m taking you to London. O, not the London of nowadays, with its fancy boutiques, trendy shops, the big money and the real estate prices that force the common people to live in the brick waste keeps, the outskirts of town like stray dogs. No, this is not the story of these days, but does it matter […]

And what about Winnie’s marriage with Verloc? The moments of true love were as rare as the customers in his bookshop. She loved her brother. She loved him deeply, more than his own mother. Winnie.

Look at her. There she is, sitting in a room behind the book shop.

[…]

The invisible visible game of power and impotence. Attack! A pawn on his way to the enemy. O, no king, no bishop, knight or queen is his target; the rogue, the tower! And in this game the tower of science […] the observatory of Greenwich.

Completely senseless and therefore the ideal target. The more senseless the action the bigger the re-action.

Countermovements in the same game.

[…]

Not a bad thought. The door opens and a man enters the restaurant. Long black coat, collar up. The fact that his hat is too small and his shirt is full of stains doesn’t seem to matter him. He hasn’t known any better days, like the restaurant. He doesn’t seem to care. He looks at the tea-drinking wreckages, gives them a deadly kiss. His looks are self-assured, listen carefully, not arrogant, self-assured, as he walks to the man behind the table, with a patronizing smile on his face. The man gets up from his seat and closes the curtains.

[…]

The grease of his belly could not prevent the scissors from deeply entering his body for a second time. He staggered, fell on the couch. And Winnie […] again, and again, and again, and again […] Filth and blood […] filth and blood […] filth and blood […]

**RGH:** *You also changed the text in various ways. One of the most striking changes is the addition of a pole dancer. Could you say something about your thinking here?*

**IP:** Yvonne Smink, the artist pole dancer, a world champion, wanted to experience working on a theatrical play, which she hoped would enrich her expression. In the play she performed three times accompanied by a sinister sound design, created by the very talented sound designer and composer Zbigi Wolny. Her performances represented the movements, the time, Verloc’s layers. She somehow was the invisible Verloc self. The audience was amazed and reacted afterwards just like I meant them to.

**Appendix**

Izabela Pacholec (1977), Polish of birth, studied at the School of Visual Arts (Sydney, Australia) and Leiden University, lives in The Hague. She is the producer and creative director of In My Head and has comprehensive direction and production experiences at several theatres in The Hague and Culemborg (the Netherlands). Life and work of Joseph Conrad is close to her heart. The endless struggle between the feeling that goes hand in hand with the longing for the country of birth on the one hand and being at home in the new country on the other, which is to find in Conrads work too, is part of Izabela’s identity. When she directed the Dutch version of *The Secret Agent* onstage in Culemborg in 2018 (a national première) the theme of this play, the conflicts between the characters and the charged emotions were the main thread for the interactions between the director and the performers. At the moment Izabela is working on the original screenplay for her first full-size feature film. Also plans are being made to tour various European cities with *The Secret Agent*, the play.

In My Head is a concept that originated in the beginning of 2017. The idea behind it is a vision within which various artistic disciplines can be performed. The team consists of a few permament people and for each project several others are being invited. The first project of In My Head was a film festival, taking place in de Gelderlandfabriek, Culemborg, with the theme: war and peace. The theatre play *The Secret Agent* was the second project. Izabela’s first feature movie will also be a production of In My Head. It tells an adventurous story of a young Jew, Malehi , who flees from Radom, Poland, to the Netherlands. And it takes place between 1938 and 1945.

Description of the photographs:

Photocredits: Donald Schalk

DSC0 6290

The performance by the pole dancer symbolized Verloc and the passing time. Perfomance by Yvonne Smink.

DSC0 6296

The narrator sumarizes the dramatic facts about the siblings for the public. Narrator played by Eric Borrias, Winnie played by Stella van den Sigtenhorst and Stevie played by Marijn van den Bogaard.

DSC0 6306

Winnie and Stevie at home at Brettstreet 32 in London, before he is sent to Michaelis in Greenwich. Played by Stella van den Sigtenhorst and Marijn van den Bogaard.

DSC0 6321

Karl Yundt and Ossipon discuss the propaganda of the comrades in the parlour in the back of Verloc’s store at Brettstreet 32, London. Yundt played by Mieke de Wit and Ossipon played by Daan van Gent.

DSC0 6340

Professor and Ossipon in cafe in London, just after the explosion in Greenwich. Professor played by Eric Borrias and Daan van Gent as Ossipon.

DSC0 6353

Inspector Heat and assistant commissioner at the Special Crimes Department, London. Inspector Heat played by Mieke de Wit, assistant commissioner played by Daan van Gent.

DSC0 6365

Sir Mabel and assistant commissioner in the drawing-room of Sir Mabel, London, discuss the rumours about the explosion in Greenwich. Sir Mabel played by Marijn van den Bogaard and Daan van Gent as assistant commissioner.

DSC0 6386

Winnie griefs the death of Stevie just after she murdered Verloc, at home, Brettstreet 32, London. Played by Stella van den Sigtenhorst.

Appendix of personnel:

Cast: Marijn van den Bogaard, Eric Borrias, Daan van Gent, Stella van den Sigtenhorst, Yvonne Smink, Mieke de Wit.

Translation: Ron Bijnen

Dramaturgy: Mieke de Wit, Eric Borrias and Izabela Pacholec

Sound design: Zbigniew Wolny

Décor and light: Thiadmer van Galen, Patrick Verkade

Director: Izabela Pacholec