

# ACTORS' SCRIPTS

## From Handwritten Marginalia to Acting Practices of the Nineteenth Century

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### Abstract

The article focuses on the handwritten notes actors made in their scripts and the role these notes played in transmitting the text and acting practices across generations. Using the example of manuscripts covering 95 roles of Warsaw actor Alojzy Żółkowski Jr. (1814–1889), the author demonstrates that the physical interaction with the script, including repeated handling and memorisation, left a tactile imprint that connected actors across time. This sensory engagement turned the script into a living, evolving document, reflecting both the actor's work and the ephemeral nature of performances.

### Keywords

theatre, 19th century, acting practices, Alojzy Żółkowski Jr., actors' role script

Herecké scénáře. Od rukopisných marginálií k hereckým praktikám devatenáctého století

### Abstrakt

Článek se zaměřuje na ručně psané poznámky, které si herci dělali do svých scénářů, a na roli, kterou tyto poznámky hrály při předávání textu a hereckých postupů napříč generacemi. Na příkladu rukopisů zahrnujících 95 rolí varšavského herce Alojzy Żółkowského mladšího (1814–1889) autorka ukazuje, že fyzická interakce se scénářem, včetně opakovaného zacházení s ním a jeho memorování, zanechávala hmatatelný otisk, který herce spojoval napříč časem. Toto komplexní zapojení smyslů při studiu role proměnilo scénář v živý, vyvíjející se dokument, který odrážel jak práci herce, tak efemérní povahu představení.

### Klíčová slova

divadlo, 19. století, herecká praxe, Alojzy Żółkowski ml., scénář herecké role

David Bellwood, an actor at the Globe, says, ‘In theatre, a script is always an object of the future’ – words that will be said, things that will be done. When they mark their scripts in rehearsal, actors enact this future over and over, tinkering, polishing, fine-tuning, making records for and of a performance that hasn’t happened yet, and annotations capture some of that work (Boyer 2021: 11).

### What dictionaries do not mention

The French theatre historian Jean-Marie Thomasseau once remarked: ‘To our knowledge, no theatre dictionary has yet included an entry for *manuscript*’ (Thomasseau 2005: 9). This statement is both intriguing and paradoxical. The paradox lies in the fact that the vast majority of theatrical documents, especially of noncontemporary theatre, are manuscripts. Inventories of old theatrical materials are predominantly lists of manuscripts rather than printed works. Researchers interested in historical playwriting, acting, or staging practices inevitably must turn to such backstage materials as letters, notes, sketches, manuscript copies of entire plays, or extracts (individual scripts) for each actor. Administrative documents like repertoire plans, financial summaries, agreements, and contracts were also, if not entirely, at least partially handwritten.

Although printing technology became increasingly cheaper and more accessible to the general public in the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the growth of the press and pocket editions of novels, it had not yet supplanted handwritten text in many areas of social life. In the late 1830s, a student at the Warsaw theatre school, later known as the prominent German-speaking actor Bogumił Dawison, earned his living as a copyist and translator in legal offices and newspaper editorial boards (Dawison 1960: 214).<sup>1</sup> Calligraphy remained foundational in schools and offices.<sup>2</sup> This means that most people with any level of education were familiar with manuscripts in public, official space and in the domain of artistic communication. Plays sent to theatre directors<sup>3</sup> or submitted to a literary competition were manuscripts. The ‘actors’ libraries’, as they grandly called their private collections, were essentially collections of handwritten copies, bound, and meticulously annotated with their signatures and ownership marks. Among the practices in theatre at that time, which supported both the actor’s work and material livelihood, was the manual copying of roles. On the one hand, this aided in learning the text: motor memory, relying on hand movement, helped to embed the lines in the actor’s mind. On the other hand, many poorly paid performers supplemented their income by transcribing roles.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 The modest beginnings of Bogumił Dawison (1818–1872) are all the more intriguing given that he went on to achieve the highest stage honours and European fame as an outstanding interpreter of Shakespearean roles. Born into a Jewish family in Warsaw, he performed on the Polish stage in Warsaw, then in Vilnius, and finally, from 1840 to 1846, in Lvov (Lemberg), demonstrating remarkable talent in acting (he was also a translator of plays and a director). In Lvov (which, along with the southeastern part of former Poland, was under Austrian partition), he emerged as a bilingual actor, also performing in the German theatre. From 1847, he began a dazzling career on the stages of Hamburg (Thalia Theater), Vienna (Burgtheater), and Dresden (Königliches Hoftheater). He toured the United States. Toward the end of his life, he suffered from mental illness, likely due to overwork (Raszewski 1973).
- 2 Calligraphy ensured the alignment of the user’s writing with established norms and forms—both typographic and stylistic—while simultaneously enabling the expression of individuality and personal uniqueness through handwriting. Handwriting is often referred to in Polish as *charakter pisma*, aligning it with the individual’s character.
- 3 Authors preferred however to present their work personally and in the form of oral readings... from manuscripts.
- 4 See the chapter “Kopiowanie i kopiści” [Copying and Copyists] in Jarząbek-Wasył (2016: 56–66).

Staging a dramatic text also involved notation by hand—on the margins of printed pages or in the manuscript of the play. The theatre, at various stages of preparation for a premiere, not only produced manuscripts (as discussed by Thomasseau: 2005, 2008) but consequently became ‘recorded’, preserved, captured in the immediacy of its action—through the medium of handwriting. This handwriting belonged to actors, playwrights, prompters, stage managers, and finally anonymous copyists from theatre offices.

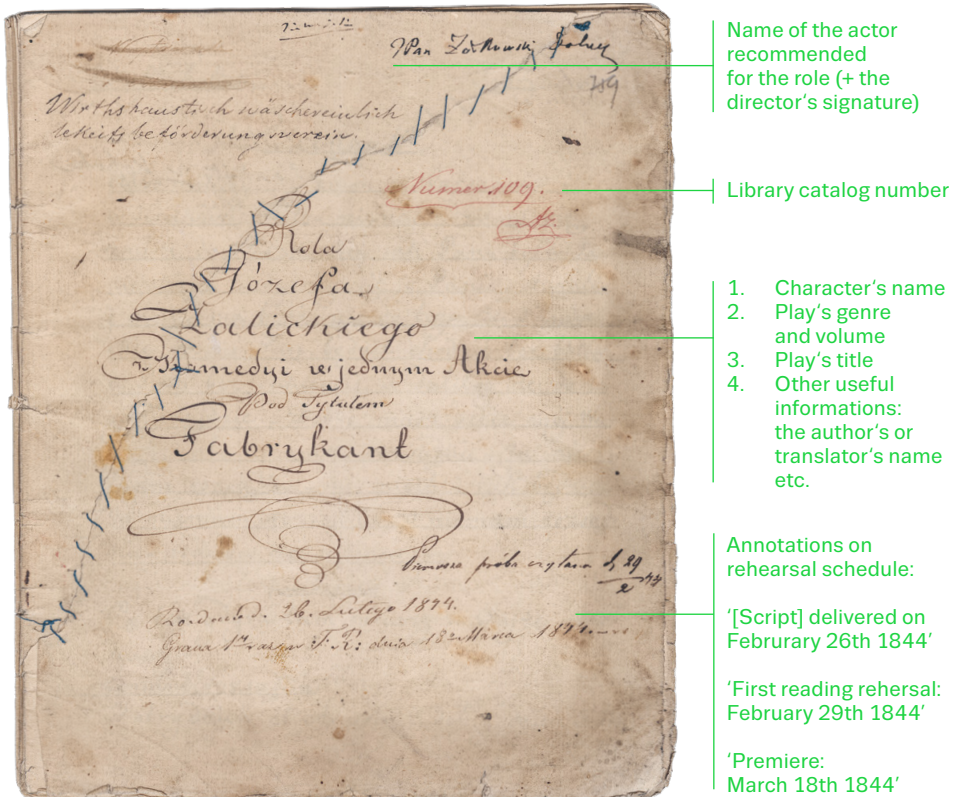


Fig. 1. The cover of the script from Alojzy Żółkowski's collection. Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław.

The autonomous material significance of these records remained unnoticed for a long time. It was overshadowed by other issues, such as the dilemmas of intertwined literature and theatre (Markiewicz 1987) as well as the gap between creation and edition processes. As long as theatre was fully identified with the dramatic text, theatre manuscripts were seen as the preliminary step to the finished literary work. Being merely an unsteady draft, cracked and shredded into stage dispositions, the theatre copy was considered less important than the printed version of the drama, especially by those who recognized drama's dominance over theatre itself. Editors and publishers would rather think of these manuscripts as errant versions of what should be the literary text. On the other hand, for advocates of theatre's primacy over drama, the manuscript was even less appealing as it lacked the vitality and openness of a performance. Despite the multilayered and often multicoloured form, it represented simply a dry verbal

score, a *scenario* that needed to be filled with the real sounds and colours of the night show. Thus, the manuscript was either deemed insufficiently literary or overly literary and textual. It appeared with all its imperfections when compared with a perfect finalisation: of the performance or of the publication. However, handwritten notes are sometimes the only way to capture the creative decisions of the writer, actor, and director. Undoubtedly theatre documented both its dynamic relationship with the verbal core of drama and the corporeal nature of performances through handwritten notations. And it happened not only during rehearsals but also throughout many years of a play's staging. The theatrical manuscript (whether a promptbook, director's copy, or actor's script) resembles a unique palimpsest accumulating layers and meanings over decades (Poskuta-Włodek 2016).

This text focuses on actor scripts from the past as crucial documents directly illustrating the actor's creative process. The main aim of this article is to highlight the connections between the specific codification of role copies in the nineteenth century and the work of actors of that time. As evidence, I have chosen manuscripts that once belonged to the Warsaw comedian Alojzy Żółkowski junior (1814–1889). The collection of ninety five roles<sup>5</sup> represents one-third of Żółkowski's entire acting career. It is a magnificent assembly, encompassing roles performed from the 1830s to 1889. Each script exhibits characteristic features typical not only of Warsaw manuscripts but also of Polish actor scripts in the nineteenth century as a whole.

Interestingly, over these years, the rules for editing and transcribing copies for actors changed little. These are exclusively manuscripts, in the form of stitched sheets.<sup>6</sup> On the cover, we find consistent notes: in the upper right corner, the name of the actor to whom the role was assigned by the director, with the director's signature indicating his decision. Legally, as with the old principle of *signatum est principi*, this sanctioned the moment of task assignment and the commitment to complete it on time. On the cover, next to the performer's name, the director often noted the date of role distribution, marking the initial stage of work on the production. Sometimes actors themselves recorded rehearsal dates, as visible on illustration 1. We learn that from the distribution of roles to the premiere, three weeks elapsed, with rehearsals likely lasting no more than two weeks. Occasionally, Żółkowski received a role relatively early but performed it only several months later. At times, a part remained in the drawer for several years, awaiting the right moment.

In the centre of the role's cover page, the character's name, the play's title, the author's name<sup>7</sup>, the genre (tragedy, comedy) and volume (number of acts) typically appeared. A glance at the manuscript was enough to determine whether the role was 'major', 'difficult', or 'significant'. On one occasion, Dawison, already a mentioned young actor from Warsaw, noted in his diary: 'The entire role includes three-quarters [of a sheet], appearing only in the second act. Initially, this made an unpleasant and even painful impression on me' (Dawison 1960: 208). The text easily presented on three-quarters of a sheet, which equates to approximately three pages, indicated

5 The collection is housed in the Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław, reference no. 13021 II.

6 In the context of the aforementioned practice of actors copying their lines, it is worth noting that Żółkowski did this infrequently. His status as a star allowed him to avoid this obligation. Instead, he had a preferred copyist among the staff of the theatre library.

7 Interestingly, in the illustration 1, the play title *Fabrykant* [Factory owner] is displayed on the cover without mentioning the author. One might think the playwright took a back seat, as his name wasn't considered commercially appealing. However, this was not the case – in this instance, the playwright (Józef Korzeniowski) was so well-known within the Warsaw theatre circles that his name didn't need to be explicitly mentioned.

a secondary character that the audience would forget moments after it exited the stage. The young performer anticipated much more ambitious challenges, both in terms of memorization and the opportunity to impress the viewers. Hence the ‘painful impression’ experienced by Dawison and many other artists in similar situations.

The numbers and seals on the cover indicated the theatre’s proprietary rights, yet some performers maintained their own catalogue and numbered roles for themselves.

Thus, the role’s title page (often doubling as its cover) serves as a map of institutional and individual manoeuvres around the text: we learn who entrusted the role to whom and when, for how long, and the significance of the role. But the typography of the first page is merely a starting point for further research.

Inside the part, the focus was exclusively on one character. Lines from other characters were condensed into fragmentary excerpts, often referred to as ‘last words’, and typically underscored to avoid confusion during study. Actors thus had only their own text in hand and almost nothing more! As for the lines spoken by their scene partners, they could only speculate. If the work was unpublished, the only chance to grasp the entirety—let’s add, orally—was during a reading rehearsal.

The monological structure of the script stems from the production’s working model (Jarząbek-Wasył 2016). After receiving their roles, actors had time to study at home for two to three weeks, sometimes longer.<sup>8</sup> Each actor worked early on, preparing their roles at home, which aligned well with the format of the script. Upon the director’s summons, they attended a reading rehearsal – a literal reading, as it did not involve textual analysis at a table, but the complete vocalisation of the entire text from beginning to end by one or several readers. Typically, the author or the theatre director, or the stage manager would perform this reading. The unpublished dramas (which represented the greatest opportunity for the theatre as potential repertoire discoveries) were therefore fully explored during this rehearsal. Then went *memory rehearsals* [*próby pamięciowe*], which took place directly on stage, with the script in hand and partially committed to memory. There were, depending on the complexity of the text and staging, several to a dozen rehearsals. Exceptional cases were noted when the number of rehearsals reached twenty. Yet this was clearly insufficient to establish the entire framework of the play and roles from scratch; instead, the effects of individual actors’ efforts were combined.

This working style underwent certain changes due to external circumstances<sup>9</sup>, new trends in theatre, and a repertoire demanding different tactics. Alojzy Żółkowski began his career during the Romantic theatre era and celebrated his fiftieth anniversary at a time when European stages were becoming laboratories for new aesthetics (naturalism and symbolism). His roles from the 1830s and 1840s show significantly fewer revisions. At times, he resorted to caricaturing the characters or was inadequately prepared, which was occasionally criticised in reviews (Szczublewski – Szwankowski 1959).

8 As it was said before, a privileged leading star could expect to receive their roles months before the rest of the troupe.

9 These circumstances included, for example, the extent of performance schedules, which depended on the number of subsidiary stages and the size of the staff, as well as audience attendance. Warsaw was considered—among other permanent Polish theatres—the most stable centre, where a large population and a substantial number of theatre enthusiasts allowed for a longer run of plays, and consequently, a longer period of preparation. While Warsaw Theatres premiered a new production once a month and kept it in the repertoire for a longer period, in the small city of Kraków, premieres occurred weekly and were usually repeated a maximum of three times. Accordingly, the rehearsal period was also shorter. This situation did not change until the end of the 19th century.



It was not until the mid-1840s that the parts of this actor became densely annotated. This was likely due to the transition from parts in vaudevilles and melodramas to characters in social comedies and realistic dramas, which required a focus on the individual and their environment. However, the most significant factor for his acting style was that the theatrical culture in Warsaw allowed actors to maintain long-term associations with the characters they played. Some of his roles Żółkowski retained for 40–45 years (e.g., the character Szarucki in Korzeniowski's comedy *Majster i czeladnik* [*The Master and the Apprentice*], which he performed from its premiere on March 17, 1847, until the year of his death in 1889). This prolonged engagement with characters and the evolving approach to them was shaped not so much in rehearsals but through individual work on the role. It is true, however, that in the second half of the 19th century, critics began to appreciate (and mention) the number of rehearsals, and Warsaw actors also acknowledged their necessity. Nevertheless, they still saw rehearsals, no matter how many there were, as the final stage rather than the beginning of intense preparations for the premiere.

To summarise, the logic behind preparations for performances at that time was not much different from today's practices, except that the number of rehearsals and their duration were significantly shorter. There was also a different balance between individual and collective work, with a predominance of the former. This model of creation emphasised concentration on individual work, while simultaneously demanding from the performer imagination and sensitivity regarding what their stage partner was doing and saying at the same moment. Put differently, the fragmentary, single-layered construction of the script compelled interaction with other performers. In copies of roles, actors can be seen adding more extensive parts of their scene partner's words (extending the 'last words').<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the scripts, the tautological word 'end' always appears. This was theoretically done so that actors would not interfere with either the literary structure of the dramatic text or the decisions of the censoring authorities. The latter did not want any changes in the officially approved form of the drama. In the Polish theatre of the partition period, these were highly sensitive issues. It was enough to change the words 'courier from Edinburgh' to 'courier from Petersburg' and the Warsaw audience understood the allusion and mocked the Russian authorities in this way. But was nothing added to the actor's scripts indeed?

The manuscripts owned by Żółkowski contained additional graphical and semantic layers, with the character's monologue text often overlaid by his handwritten professional notes (alongside personal, unrelated annotations). Only this entire composite formed the 'body of the role', expressed through movement, gesture, and intonation. This raises further questions to be explored in this article: not only about how Żółkowski worked (how he took notes) and established the existence of the stage character, but also about the dynamics of direction—who was directing whom (the author, the director, the actor)?

10 Yet more thought-provoking is the evolution of a whole practice of actor's work, characterised by a duet action. In Polish theatrical jargon, there was even the special term of *passing the role* [*przechodzenie roli*] with someone. Learning the text involved meeting with another artist and jointly reading and discussing it. It's not unlikely that some peripatetic element was involved: mobilising ingenuity, psycho-physical activation of thinking about the text through movement in space (see Jarząbek-Wasył 2019).

The script passed from hand to hand, from actor to actor—hence, deciphering and supplementing it became part of the work of the next user. Another question explored in this study is whether the system for developing stage characters devised by individual Polish comedians could be transferred to others, potentially across generations. The issue of passing on performance traditions is particularly intriguing because its medium was paper (the script) and handwritten notes, often nearly unreadable to the layperson. All this boils down to one pivotal question: what did it mean to study a role in manuscript form, knowing that it was the work of someone else's hand, yet it should become my own?

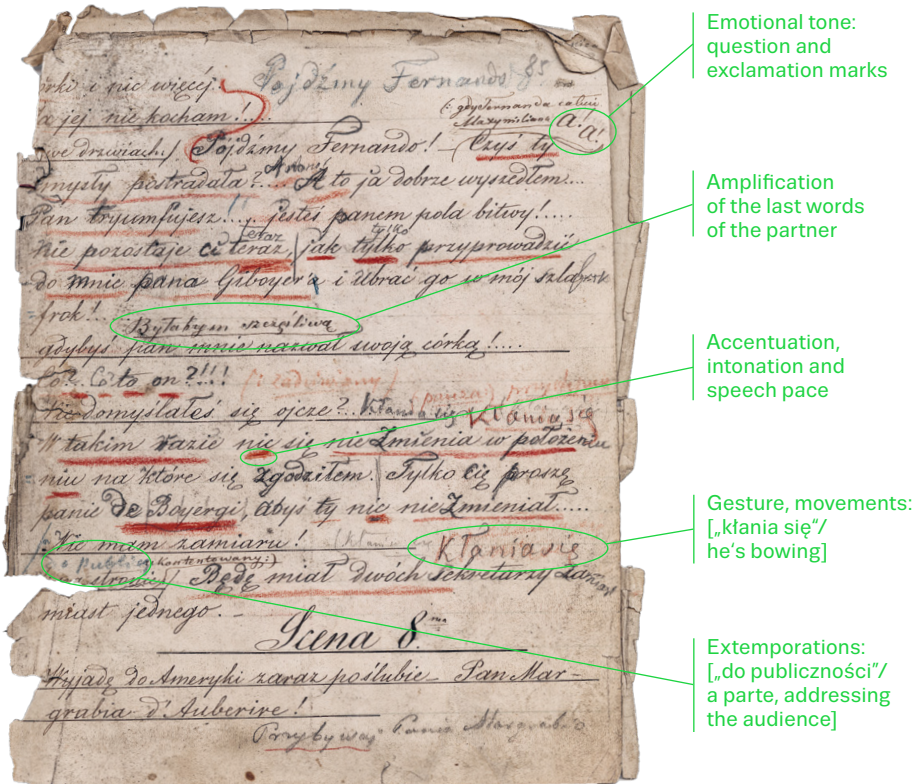


Fig. 2. Marginalia in the script of the role of Maréchal (*Le fils de Giboyer / The Son of Giboyer* by Emile Augier). Alojzy Żółkowski's collection. Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław.

The text modestly aims to provide historical and descriptive insights. Although I am aware of the 'archival turn' in contemporary humanities and ongoing theoretical reflection on the performance and archive/documentation.<sup>11</sup> Some of the significant issues in this discourse, such as the relationship between archival document and embodied experience, also appear in these reflections.

11 On the Polish ground, this is discussed, among others, by Dorota Sosnowska (2017). However, in these new approaches, the medium of manuscript does not occupy a prominent place, perhaps because we live in an era of audiovisual and digital recording, where handwritten annotations play a minor role.

## 'I have improved this!' Żółkowski's Acting Method

Alojzy Gonzaga Żółkowski junior (son of Alojzy Fortunat, comedian and satirical writer<sup>12</sup>) was the most popular Warsaw comedian of the nineteenth century. He entertained the city for nearly sixty years and occasionally was seen there by European visitors like Pierre-Thomas Levassor<sup>13</sup> or Benoît-Constant Coquelin<sup>14</sup>. Born during the Napoleonic era in 1814, in the capital of the Duchy of Warsaw<sup>15</sup> Żółkowski the younger spent most of his adult life until his death in 1889 in the capital of partitioned Poland. However, during this period, Warsaw became part of the Russian Empire, and he worked in the Warsaw Theatres, which were termed 'governmental' due to their imperial (tsartist) administration.<sup>16</sup> Despite this political and financial dependence, as well as strict censorship, Warsaw theatre had the right to communicate in Polish (see Waszkiel 2015, Rulikowski 1938).

Żółkowski was, in many respects, a fortunate individual. He inherited his talent from his father, whom he observed behind the scenes. After his father's early death, he was taken under the wing of the best artists in the Warsaw theatre: the actor, teacher, and director Bonawentura Kudlicz, and the actor, writer and critic Ludwik Adam Dmuszewski. In his youth, he also studied music under the composer and conductor Karol Kurpiński, and throughout his life, he enjoyed playing the piano. At the beginning of his career Żółkowski simultaneously honed his acting and singing skills – a typical educational model of the time. Although he ultimately devoted himself to dramatic art, particularly comedy, his education influenced his versatile abilities, utilised in vaudevilles and even operas. He performed roles in the French repertoire of *pièces bien faites* and *hautes comédies*, portraying various social types such as barons, princes, and bourgeois characters – his Margrave de Rochepéans in



Fig. 3. Alojzy Żółkowski. Portrait distributed among readers of *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*. National Library in Warsaw.

- 12 In many respects Alojzy Fortunat Żółkowski (1777–1822) was an even more colourful figure than his son. He gained fame not only as a comedic actor in Wojciech Bogusławski's troupe but also as a playwright and satirist, a well-known wit throughout Warsaw, and a philanthropist. He was active during a difficult period for Poland (the loss of statehood), channelling both entertainment and subversive elements into his vibrant comedy (he edited and filled with his own writings the humorous journal *Momus*). Though he died prematurely, he managed not only to establish a distinct acting style but also to found the Żółkowski acting "clan" (his wife, sons, daughter, and even some grandchildren were actors) (Raszewski 1973).
- 13 Pierre-Thomas Levassor, simply called Levassor (1808–1870), a French comic actor, famous for his transformist talent in plays featuring the motif of quick costume changes. In the 1830s and 1840s associated with the Parisian stages of the Palais-Royal and Variétés, he was also a skilled vocalist, performing singing roles in vaudeville productions. He toured across Europe, and in the 1850s, he visited several Polish cities.
- 14 Benoît-Constant Coquelin (1841–1909), brother of Ernest, also actor, was a member of the Comédie-Française from 1864 to 1892, where he created the leading parts in forty-four new plays by Émile Augier, younger Alexandre Dumas, Edward Pailleron and others popular French authors. He made a series of tours in Europe and the United States. While visiting Warsaw in 1883 he played, among other roles, Molière's Tartuffe. In the 1890s, he successfully performed in plays by Edmond Rostand, including the title role in *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). His acting manual, *L'Art du comédien* (1894), was translated into Polish and published in 1913 as *Sztuka aktora* by Józef Mikulski, an artist of the Warsaw Theatre.
- 15 The Duchy of Warsaw was a short-lived state established by Napoleon (in 1807) and briefly reactivating Polish statehood in truncated form.
- 16 Incidentally, Tsar Alexander II was an admirer of his work, rewarding him with various gifts and inviting him to perform at his country residence in Skierniewice near Warsaw.



Victorien Sardou's *Les Ganaches* (in English adaptation: *Progress*, Polish title: *Safanduby*, premiere in 1870) was particularly renowned, as was his Count Fontblanche in Jean François Bayard's and Ernst Jaime's *Son Le reveil du lion* [*The Awakening of the Lion/Przebudzenie się lwa*] (premiere in 1849) (illustration 2). However, he also presented characters from native Polish comedy, including works by Aleksander Fredro, Jan Aleksander Fredro, and Józef Korzeniowski.



Fig. 4. Characters played by Żółkowski. Tableau. *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne* 322 (1889). National Library in Warsaw.

Blessed with an exceptionally expressive face, good posture, and voice, he embodied in a partly satirical, partly benevolent manner the ideals of upper and middle-class life. From the most banal human types (and the most 'paper-thin' characters), he created amusing and lively personalities (illustration 3). Contemporary audiences were fascinated by literally everything about him: his face (it was said he could express laughter on one side and sadness on the other, see Szczublewski – Szwankowski 1959: 114), naturalness (he avoided excessive makeup and characterisation), charm, inventiveness, finesse, and improvisational flair. Stories of his wit circulated among actors and often made their way into newspapers as anecdotes. In his hometown, every return to the stage after illness or leave was celebrated. These tributes culminated in his 50th stage anniversary in 1882, when Żółkowski received congratulations from various groups, including Czechs living in Warsaw, and was awarded the Tsarist gold medal on the

ribbon of St. Andrew. In 1885, he was also honoured with the Saxe-Ernestine House Order during performances by the Meiningen troupe in Warsaw (Szczublewski – Szwankowski 1959: 38, 40). The significance of Żółkowski is reflected in the number of articles dedicated to him, including entire special issues published shortly after his death (for example, *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, 1889, no. 322). It was said that as many as 100,000 people attended his funeral (see Jarząbek-Wasył 2012). He was hailed as a genius of performance, yet later researchers suspected privately he was an uninteresting, ordinary man lacking in intellectual strength. Historians perceived Żółkowski as someone with limited horizons, whose entire approach relied on intuition and non-analytical sensitivity (Szczublewski 1963: 31). In the twentieth century, the question concerning Żółkowski wasn't just about whether he was truly a great actor, but rather how he achieved his skill. Today, the only means of verifying this is through examining his roles and the manuscripts that supported his work and learning.

Upon examining Żółkowski's parts, what initially appears as a single-layer structure of the character transforms into a multi-layered composition of annotations. As he once lamented to a friend:

My dear, people think that I take everything out of the sleeve, but look how I'm working on it – here you go, I'm writing down everything, what to do and where, even when to raise my hand, when to change my voice, when to stand up and when to sit down. Yes, my dear, I work like a dog before I go on stage. And how am I tortured by stress, agonized, how many prayers would be whispered to get the role become success! Memory work – it's easy as pie; I read the script twenty times and by the nineteenth one I've got the whole role in my head, but that's still the beginning of the work ahead...' (Gawalewicz 1889).

To inquisitive journalists eager to see and read his notes firsthand, the famous comedian remarked that there was nothing interesting in them, as in hermetic writings illegible to anyone (Mefisto 1887).

Inside the manuscripts containing Alojzy Żółkowski's roles, we find a multitude of annotations, consisting primarily of elliptical insertions and symbols. They cannot be read in a linear or novelistic manner, nor in a conceptual-directorial way. To understand them, one must take into account the context of the theatrical situation, dramaturgical tensions, and be aware of the set of conventions within which this theatre existed.

Alongside colourful graphical annotations (lines, underlines, strokes, drawings), there are textual interjections (words, comments) marking intonation and accents, important words in sentences, speech tempo, and character emotions (described verbally or with punctuation marks such as question marks and exclamation points)<sup>17</sup> (illustration 4). The entire complex prosodic layer is recreated and integrated into the text through a series of added punctuation marks.

At this point, it is worth revisiting the initial question concerning the possibilities offered by manuscript versions of texts. Polish theatre researcher Maria Prussak (2023), citing interwar studies by Sergei Balukhatyj (1927), discusses differences in

17 We also find sketches, mainly of heads: these are studies for characterization, including hairstyles, facial hair, and expressions. An interesting character is a villain in the play *The Secrets of Paris* (1844). Żółkowski clearly distorted the face to depict the inner evil of the character. Moreover, he evidently used illustrations from the novel that served as the basis for the play.

punctuation systems between texts prepared for the stage and those adapted for readers (printed texts). The former often exhibit greater freedom and even a degree of carelessness, using lowercase letters at sentence beginnings and unconventional symbols such as multiple dashes, vague dots and commas, and sometimes a complete absence of punctuation. In contrast, texts intended for readers feature more punctuation marks, reflecting the playwright's deliberate efforts to convey logical and emotional nuances in the text. Handwritten transcripts of roles in their 'unfinished' prosodic state (pre-editing, pre-premiere) invite the actor to develop their own system of signs within, such as Żółkowski's preferred triple exclamation marks, potentially diverging from the author's original intentions.

Most of Żółkowski's surviving roles consist of non-poetic texts, which complicates speculation on how the same actor would approach poetry, given its melodic and rhythmic qualities that may not always align with logical or psychological significance.<sup>18</sup> His musical education might have sensitised him to the importance of tone and volume—indeed, in one of his opera performances, the delivery of a single sentence often determined the success of the portrayal.<sup>19</sup>

Żółkowski also noted physical movements and gestures, tightly linking them to specific words. Off-the-cuff remarks, hummed melodies, grimaces, smiles, micro-gestures, such as surreptitiously wiping one's hands on the tails of a coat or the movements of feet in cramped or slick shoes – all these contributed to the image of the character, fragmented like in pointillist painting into details that the audience somehow saw as a harmonious whole. These details also saturated, or perhaps even ruptured, the fabric of the role in the manuscript.

Żółkowski's gestural score and stage business were meticulously detailed, despite his reputation as an excellent improviser. He didn't pull tricks out of a hat but rather worked hard and deliberated extensively over them. He anchored the existence of play characters in subtle actions centred around the theatricality of speech acts. He obsessively sought to comprehend and control every aspect contributing to the irrational, physiological, and psychological dimensions of character actions, all while recognizing his role in engaging with the audience—captivating their attention and fostering understanding. Despite this monumental effort, later researchers deemed him intellectually deficient. How could this be?

This likely occurred for two reasons. Firstly, Żółkowski either couldn't or chose not to engage in theoretical speculation about his characters. He kept no intellectual diaries, nor did he maintain preparation notebooks or lists of additional readings on

18 As for punctuation and accents, one could imagine a scenario where the annotations within the role resemble musical notation. French writer Ernest Legouvé taught the Italian actress Adelaida Ristori to handle the melody of the French language in this manner: After some careful reflection, I wrote out *Beatrice's* part in strong, heavy letter, on lines pretty far apart. These letter I then marked with three kinds of signs in red ink. The first consisted of lines drawn up and down vertically; the second were curves drawn all along the word or longitudinally; while the third were marks placed over the syllables, pretty much as the dactyls and spondees marked in our school prosodies. The object of the vertical or up and down lines was to kill, to utterly annihilate all the e mutes [...] The longitudinal and curved lines, starting from the first syllable and pouncing plumb on the last, said pleasantly: "Hurry up, hurry up! don't lag on the way!" [...] Finally, the marks placed over the vowels whose intermediary sounds do not exist in Italian, recalled to her eyes, by a characteristic sign, some particular intonation which I had already made her ears and tongue quite familiar (Legouvé 1885: 17–18). That could be a method for learning poetry.

19 An example is the brief phrase 'Suprême zieleniaczek,' which was delivered with a special accent in Stanisław Moniuszko's opera *Hrabina [The Countess]* (premiered in 1860), amusing and thrilling the audience.

his desk. His research rarely extended beyond the play and its dialogues. Secondly, his disqualification from intellectual merit stemmed from his evident egotism, both in life and in his acting strategies. Żółkowski brought a realistic and vibrant portrayal of the lives of landowners or townspeople to the stage, with all their physical and mental presence. However, at any moment, the performance could transform into the actor's self-admiration: a masterful imitation of human beings that the audience admired for its own sake. During those moments, spectators would forget about the motivations and adventures of the character, playing with independent details, humorous quips, or quirks. They looked at characters, but at the same time at the performer. The marginalia in his scripts can reveal personal wit and creativity on a metatheatrical level for which Żółkowski was famous. He meticulously planned where and when he would deliver certain lines 'to the audience', thereby breaking the fourth wall. This practice is undoubtedly risky; on the one hand, anticipating applause implies a desire to provoke such responses at any cost. On the other, it may demonstrate an exceptional understanding of the audience's needs and moods, and a knowledge of what amuses and entertains people.<sup>20</sup>

The performer's preparatory work, encompassing both character construction and audience engagement, was so meticulous and complex that considering this actor thoughtless would be unfair. Yet, he consistently referred to all these actions simply as 'corrections' or 'improvements' (see illustration 8). He corrected the copyist (when the writing was not clear enough), corrected the author (when the latter did not understand the theatrical requirements), corrected the character (when it seemed too laconic in expression to him as a performer), and finally, over the years, he corrected himself, adjusting his approach to the character as his own acting energy, body, and movements changed over time.<sup>21</sup> In his performances, he could give the impression of being intuitive and spontaneous, but during his work, he proved to be a perfectionist. His annotations had a purely professional dimension, and one can actually find in them features akin to modern acting techniques, as mentioned by Boyer (2021), especially the idiosyncratic closeness to the character.

One might question whether this diligent Warsaw artist was primarily an actor devoted to character interpretation or a director envisioning the entire production. However, this inquiry can be misleading because in the context of the nineteenth century, Polish theatre directors were almost exclusively actors as well. Thus, the perspective of the acting task—interpreting and presenting a person in their typical or exceptional traits—prevailed over other ambitions that might arise in stage directors. The acting was the essence and heart of the performance. However, if we consider that directorial duties involved overseeing the entire play from a bird's-eye view, determining the stage

20 One might wonder to what extent the controlling performer was prepared to accept random, unforeseen events occurring on stage and in the audience, and how adeptly he reacted to them. Allegedly, in such moments of unexpected chaos (technical malfunctions, for example, lights going out in the audience, misunderstandings between actor and audience), Żółkowski reacted quickly and wittily, while his prompter, focused on him, only made sure to record new bon mots invented by the master.

21 I omit in this study a certain level of his annotations: the most intimate ones. In Żółkowski's parts, there are also notes that do not possess an artistic dimension but yet shed light on moments dedicated to his work. These entries allow for a glimpse into the existential and daily backdrop of the performer's life. Within Żółkowski's notes, such occurrences are pervasive: he recorded the hours spent learning his roles (initially reading them dozens of times over several days). It is known that this study took place at various times of day and night, interrupted occasionally by other obligations or events—sometimes due to pain from a sore leg, other times from longing for fresh air or leisurely strolls in the park.

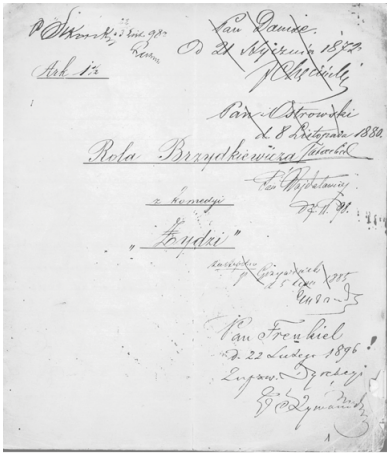


Fig. 5. The cover of the script with the names of six actors from 1872 to 1898. Mieczysław Frenkiel's collection. Theatre Museum in Warsaw.

background, ensuring smooth regulation of the pace of the entire spectacle, changes in decor, appropriateness of details, and maintaining the coherence of all elements of the performance, then Żółkowski's notes certainly did not concern such matters. He thought exclusively about his character and the effect he could achieve through it. On numerous occasions, he openly ignored or even ridiculed his partners if they did not adhere to 'his' rules. Here is how the aforementioned focus of actors on their individual parts could also lead to egotistical excesses. The idiosyncratic bond with the character being portrayed, formed through a network of professional notes, simultaneously transformed into a one-man show, a demonstration of pure artistry for art's sake. These moments shattered the illusory boundaries of the represented world, which were so carefully maintained in the realism-driven direction of that era.

So deeply intertwined with the actor and their creative strategies, roles entered into a cycle of inheritance by subsequent performers. They could become the legacy of future generations.

### An object of the future

Actors kept manuscripts at home for as long as possible, guarding them like treasures, reluctantly responding to management's appeals for their return, as it meant passing the text to other performers. This was especially true for beloved and long-repeated plays. Having physical access to a role's copy and holding it firmly represented a kind of monopoly on its performance within a given troupe. Some performers, when asked to send back the parts, regarded it almost as the confiscation of their property or the tearing away of a limb, a loss of self. This occurred because these were not ordinary copies but specific variants of role interpretation.

Actor scripts sometimes allow us to reconstruct the process of succession – the circulation of the document from performer to performer. The same manuscript could serve – as in the case of Brzydkiewicz's manuscript in Korzeniowski's *Żydzi* [*Jews*] – six actors (illustration 5). What exactly happened, however, when such a marked manuscript fell into the hands of another performer? Was dealing with the predecessor's notes a help or a hindrance in the work, and did it oblige the new performer to anything? The matter is not as simple as it seems. Much depended on the actor's position, experience, and the expectations of the audience (and management).<sup>22</sup> If an actor,

22 In nineteenth-century theatre, the career of a young actor could take one of two paths: either excelling in imitating predecessors or seeking their own voice and originality. It's important to emphasise that the first path was not viewed negatively. On the contrary, the talent for mimicking great actors on stage was appreciated and compared to the continuity of the painting workshop: 'they imitate just as master copyists imitate Leonardo da Vinci, Tintoretto, or Titian, down to the replication of every stroke' (Grzymała-Siedlecki 1973: 177). The skillful ability to copy the achievements of predecessors was seen as an art form rather than a surrender of one's own identity. Thus, there were actors who could be described as 'copyists.' Whether they copied from memory, from remembered scenes, or obtained the scripts of their masters is difficult to determine.



stepping in suddenly, had to repeat exactly the ideas of his predecessor, the copy was an invaluable aid.<sup>23</sup> The same applied to debutants. It can be assumed that when the young Alojzy Żółkowski took over some roles from Józef Zdanowicz (1786–1839), he carefully reviewed his copies. He made very few notes in them at that time, as if he were respecting their inviolability.<sup>24</sup> Here and there, he found single underlined phrases and words that his predecessor had highlighted in the performance, which he likely took as a hint or aid for working out the intonation of a particular moment in the dialogue or monologue. If he had known his ‘teacher’ from stage performances and seen how he played the character, he could now delve into how Zdanowicz approached the role ‘with pencil in hand’. In the actor’s scripts, we also find lists of costume elements (the actors themselves were responsible for costuming their characters), adding another layer of inspiration: how to dress (illustration 6).

Żółkowski did not want to imitate predecessors forever. Soon he started to create his own models for his characters. He wrapped them in an incredible web of stage notes. But eventually, his creations – and his scripts – fell into the hands of other performers. They faced an even more challenging task: Żółkowski’s character types were so beloved that the audience did not allow for any changes. From iconographic comparisons, one can conclude that Żółkowski was imitated, and his ideas and tricks were adopted (illustration 7). However, it required greater courage to oppose tradition.

When the comedian Mieczysław Frenkiel (1858–1935) joined the Warsaw troupe in 1890, ‘the memory of Żółkowski [...] somewhat hindered [his] first steps’ (Świerczewski 1928: 12). Years later, it was stated that he used ‘a different method, a different system of means than Żółkowski’ (ibidem 15), matching him in comedic ability. The greatest difference lay in Żółkowski’s explosive *vis comica* contrasted with Frenkiel’s restraint (already educated in the new school of modernist acting). Additionally, in Frenkiel’s approach, the comedic elements of the role ‘always emerged without personal commentary, from the depths of character’ (Bogusławski 1962: 231), whereas Żółkowski frequently revealed a histrionic distance from the role. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that

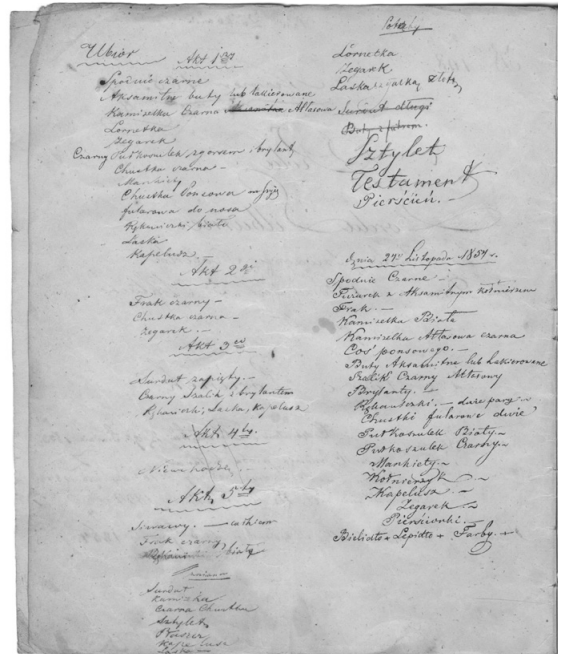


Fig. 6. The role of Lord Lilburn (*Night and Morning* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Charlotte Birch-feiffer), the list of elements of the costume (1844–1854). Alojzy Żółkowski’s collection. Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław.

23 It could also have been a trap. A certain actor from Lvov, replacing his predecessor in a play, was harshly judged in reviews for leaving in some sensitive expressions that were jarring to the audience’s ear. The actor wrote a letter to the press, explaining that he was using a copy with no deletions or stylistic corrections (see Jarząbek-Wasył – Maresz 2019: 370).

24 Some of these scripts are preserved in the discussed collection at the Ossoliński National Institute.

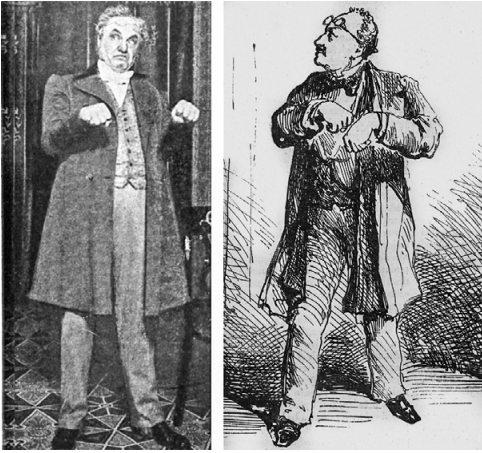


Fig. 7. The character of Jeniakiewicz (*Wielki człowiek do małych interesów* [Great man for small business] by Aleksander Fredro) as presented by Mieczysław Frenkiel in 1928 (photo) and by Alojzy Żółkowski in 1877 (drawing). Jarząbek-Wasył 2016: 131.

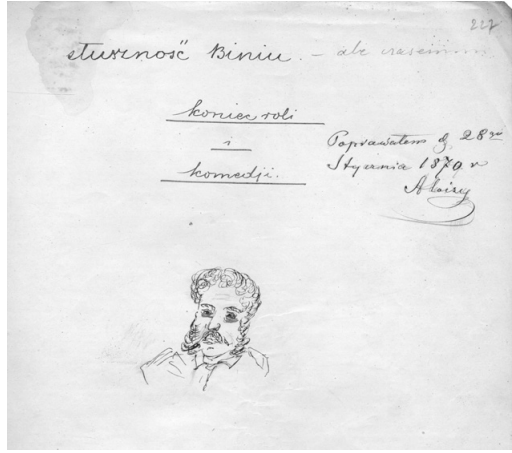


Fig. 8. The end of a part with Żółkowski's annotation (outlined in ink): 'I corrected this on January 28th 1870'. Alojzy Żółkowski's collection. Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław.

the younger colleague followed in the footsteps of the elder and only modified the script at a certain point. Here is a recollection of both actors in the role of Caussade in Victorien Sardou's play *Nos intimes* (translated into English as *Friends or Foes*; in Polish *Nasi najserdeczniejsi*):

The scene revolves around Żółkowski, and consequently Frenkiel, listening to a story that deeply embarrasses him for some reason or another. Both artists made this embarrassment evident primarily by avoiding eye contact with the storyteller. As the story dragged on, they needed to break the monotony. For this purpose, Frenkiel pretends to notice some speck of dust or something on his leg and lightly brushes it off with a slight, insignificant movement. 'How differently he played compared to Żółkowski!' my reliable informant reminisced. 'Instead of finding something on his own leg, he spotted something moving on the bluish floor and focused his entire attention on where that something, perhaps an insect, was heading; his eyes wandered across the entire stage!' We must resist these uncritical enthusiasms; in our view, Żółkowski was hamming it up here and interfering with his partner's storytelling (Grzymała-Siedlecki 1973: 29).

If we envision this as working with a script, it likely appeared that in the part of Caussade, belonging to Żółkowski, that moment of absentmindedness was noted (probably with notes like 'he doesn't look him in the eye' or 'looks elsewhere'). However, the manner in which the suggestion was developed by his successor was different. The same text and stage business conception led to different executions.

Frenkiel played these roles after the predecessor's death, there is a high probability that he had access to Żółkowski's scripts and was even a prisoner of Żółkowski's interpretations. He himself spoke about this stage of his career as follows:

At first, I had very difficult and hard experiences, as people constantly saw me as Żółkowski's successor, his individuality within me. I felt that the great and unforgettable shadow of my brilliant predecessor continually stood between me and Warsaw.

During that time, I experienced bitter and painful moments of doubt and torment. [...] All his roles were imposed on me. I had to play them—whether I wanted to or not (Świerczewski 1928: 33–34).

He was anointed as the second Żółkowski and destined to replicate the master's performance. Following Żółkowski meant being compelled to act 'like Żółkowski'; there were no other options. Simultaneously, he was constantly reminded that he would never match Żółkowski's greatness. The oppressive nature of this situation is further intensified by the scripts' form. I can imagine Frenkiel battling with two 'monsters': the audience's adoration for Żółkowski and the excruciatingly detailed scripts he left behind.<sup>25</sup>

The continuity of the dramatic character's concept inscribed in actor's parts mattered to theatre managements and audience. A new performer of a role also received, along with it, a 'key' to the character created by the predecessor, upon which they could build, positively or critically, a new version of the dramatic *persona*. This key was hidden in the challenge: which words to emphasise, how deeply to analyse the role, when and how to reveal hidden subtexts, where to place turning points in the character's dynamic progression, what to do with the face, hairstyle, what to wear, and perhaps also—how to find such a relationship with the character among someone else's marks and deletions so that it becomes a blank slate. After all, role interpretations also age, requiring renewal and a different approach; in such instances, the scripts provoke rebellion and revision. They need to be rewritten in one's own handwriting and grounded in one's own experience.

## Conclusion

The handwriting in actors' parts was of great importance. First of all writing establishes a unique bond between the scriptor and the text (both its meaning and its medium: the sheet of paper). A handwritten or corrected text feels more 'mine' than anyone else's. In the theatre, of course, copying was a routine and paid job, but even the 'technical' copyists chose to sign their manual work. Thus, in most cases, actors' roles were copied by someone else. On such copies, some performers, like Żółkowski, would add their own notes, further personalising them and imprinting their own artistic signature.

Handwriting is not easily 'erased' or 'obliterated'. Every trace of such an act becomes visible, thereby communicating moments of deliberation, discussion, or dispute surrounding the erased content. Even the most calligraphic script, in its most official form of a 'clean copy' of a play, is never infallible (nor does it aspire to be). Errors, inaccurately heard or transcribed fragments, will always be found. More interestingly, however, a theatrical manuscript allows for continuous intervention: certain scenes, dialogues, or tones are amended, others added or verified. These new variants of the text clarify it for subsequent users of the document or the same actor, revisiting their role. Thus, a play manuscript becomes remarkably unstable, fluid, and open – and hence fascinating. Żółkowski's role manuscripts exemplify this process, capturing the history of character creation and the perpetual refinement of both himself and his artistic creation. The most interesting aspect of Żółkowski's parts is not the enormous effort he put into them, but how his creations grew and transformed over time.

25 The scripts preserved at the Theatre Museum in Warsaw present a different picture of Frenkiel's work. Most of them bear hardly any corrections, except for truly significant roles, such as the Horodnitsky in Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (1916).



Many of Żółkowski's annotations pertain to nuances such as tone, sound, intonation, gesture, and visuality – elements that extend beyond mere words and are closely tied to the physical embodiment of the character. These annotations serve as a translation of text into body. To put it differently, 'unlike the annotations of a director or a stage manager, an actor's annotations gesture toward their embodied action' (Boyer 2021: 9). When examining the same scripts that the actor held for three decades, refining every sentence, a sense of coherence and organicity emerges within the character as a growing entity. Through their handwritten form, long-term use, and annotations, role copies in the nineteenth century allowed performers to meld with their creation. It is all true even when some scripts lack literal interpretative signs beyond abbreviations or deletions. They possess a fragmentary, partial, isolated, and provisional nature – serving the actor and aiding memory. In this sense, they 'aspire to ephemerality' (Boyer 2021: 11). The term 'ephemerality' adds complementary meanings in this context. Boyer uses it to describe the transient nature of stage directions scattered throughout Shakespearean scripts – practically invisible to editors and dispersed within the dynamic whole of a live performance.

These same texts are paradoxical in that they aspire to ephemerality, fully intended to melt away at the close of a production; never to be read except by a select few; never to be printed; never to be used pedagogically; and not even to be re-used by the same theatre company for later productions of the same play on the same stage (ibidem).

However, when we look at the actors' role scripts discussed earlier, ephemerality takes on a unique shade, as it becomes exposed and revealed, shown directly. When Żółkowski notes in his role: 'I made corrections on this and that day,' or 'I'm currently reading the role,' or when he persistently traces the letters in sentences, the

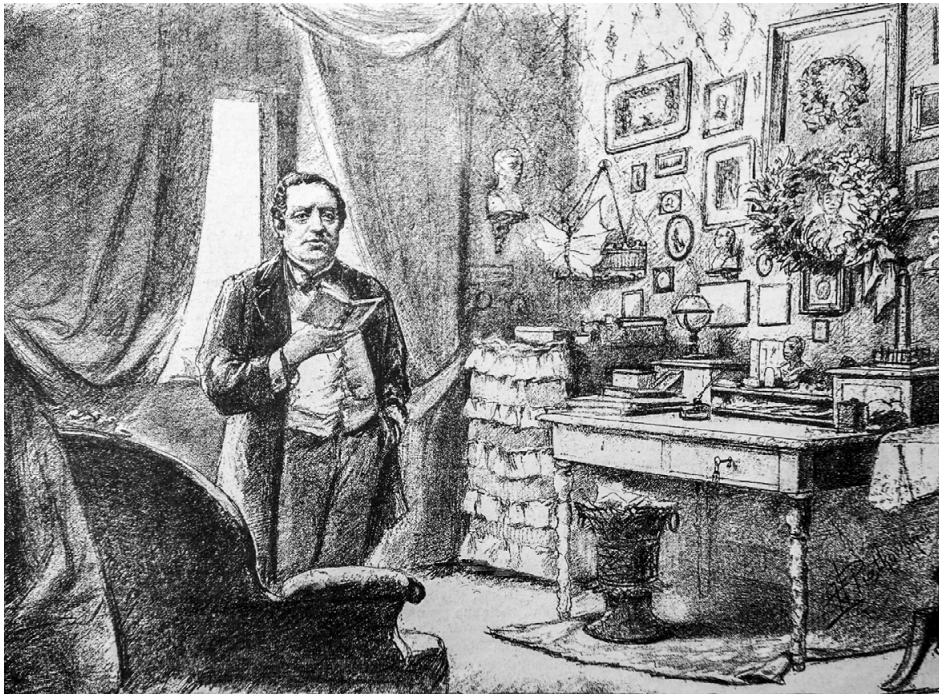


Fig. 9. Alojzy Żółkowski at home. Author: Henryk Piątkowski. *Kłosy* 1275 (1889).

provisional, isolated, and momentary act of an actor's preparation appears as a present moment captured in the document. This present moment is then 'glimpsed' by the next user of the archival material.<sup>26</sup>

The dynamics of actors' scripts involved not only semantic and textual elements but also corporeal and, importantly, intersubjective aspects: roles circulated among performers as physical, tangible entities. Ultimately, each script was integrally tied to the 'here and now' by the mediating sense of touch. This last point is particularly worth emphasizing. The manuscript of a role (or a print with handwritten notes, thus a semi-manuscript) was not only interpreted but quite literally handled. Actors learned their roles everywhere: some at home, others during rehearsals, and still others while walking or in cafes. The copy of the role became something constantly at hand, frequently touched, opened, and flipped through. 'I read the script twenty times, and by the nineteenth, I've got the whole role in my head', Żółkowski said (Gawalewicz 1889). This meant twenty sequences of touching the text: with eyes and hands. Tactile (or haptic) contact with a part was even more evident: the Polish actor sometimes limited himself to simply outlining the shape of the letters (illustration 8, 9).

And this is how Żółkowski's successor (and hidden opponent), Frenkiel, worked (according to his son):

"How did my father learn his role? This is a question that both he and I were asked countless times. Most often, laypeople imagined a man with a script in his hand, standing in front of a mirror, striking poses, making gestures, and faces. In reality, it was quite ordinary. After his afternoon nap, my father would light a small lamp on his desk, sit in his comfortable leather-upholstered armchair, wrap his legs in a blanket, open the script, and mutter the words under his breath, studying for hours, sometimes until midnight. Occasionally, to stretch his legs, he would get up for a moment, play a passage on the piano, then sit down again and continue memorizing [in Polish: *kuć, kuć na pamięć*]. And the rest? The rest came together during rehearsals [...]" (Frenkiel 1939: 89) (illustration 10).

This description is full of sensory impressions: the body relaxed after a nap, the taste of tobacco, the warm light of the lamp, the smooth, comfortable chair, the soft arrangement of the legs, and... touching the script. Studying a role is a sensory activity engaging all the body (in this sense I use the term 'haptic' experience). Mumbling the text resembles to trance-like activities such as spinning a prayer wheel or reciting a rosary. Simultaneously, it involves 'hammering' into memory; the Polish phrase *kuć na pamięć* [memorize by rote] was used by actors (and pupils in school), where the verb 'kuć' literally means striking and compressing heated material, as in forging horseshoes or steel. 'Hammering' a part into memory entails fatigue, sweat, and tears.

Touch was thus foundational in becoming familiar with a role. When the next actor received a document, undoubtedly somewhat worn after hours and years of use, they almost physically received the 'imprint' of their predecessor's hand and body experience. This imprint could not be erased or forgotten. Sometimes, decades later it can be revealed and analysed by a historian.

26 This can be compared to the principle of reenactment described by Rebecca Schneider (2011), although the American scholar focuses more on the role of reenactors and fictional or replicated objects in experiencing the past.






Fig. 10. Mieczysław Frenkiel at home, 1928.  
National Digital Archives.

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