

Janusz Glowacki

Born in Poland in 1938, playwright Janusz Glowacki is also an essayist, dramaturge and novelist. He is the author of six plays, 10 books and 20 radio plays. All but four of his screenplays have been banned by the Polish censor. His novel, *Give Us This Day*, about the birth of the Solidarity movement, was also banned, became an underground best-seller and was published in the United States in 1985. In 1981, while he was in London attending the opening of his play *Cinders*, martial law was declared in Poland. He has not returned. Glowacki now resides in New York City.



Photo: Martha Swope

Playwright Janusz Glowacki.

Living in Paradox

by David Hlavsa

Janusz Glowacki appreciates the irony. Before he emigrated "by accident" from Poland in 1981, the writer had a considerable body of work in print. His radio and stage plays, novels, short stories and screenplays had met with acclaim from public and censor alike. He was something of a celebrity.

Now, in America, he is an aspiring writer.

Glowacki's work is rife with paradox, irony and double entendre. Fortune smiles enthusiastically as it offers his protagonists a choice between the frying pan and the fire. Glowacki writes from experience:

"I have this feeling of being schizophrenic. A feeling I am waking up in New York but all my dreams are of Poland," said the author in a recent article. "[*Hunting Cockroaches*] is about people living in two worlds, two languages. It's also a play about the different ways of being frightened. In Poland, you're scared of the police or prison and here you're scared of the super or how to get a green card."

When he arrived in New York, not only was Glowacki beset with the standard dilemmas of the emigre – problems well-detailed in *Hunting Cockroaches* – he was also thrust into the stultifying contradictions of the American theatre. Manuscripts were returned while calls went unreturned. No one would see him.

"Eventually, I met an off-Broadway producer. The first question he asked me was, 'How many characters are there in your play?' When I said 14, he asked that I reduce the number to seven, because there had never been a play off-Broadway with a cast larger than seven. I refused.

"The play was called *Fortinbras Gets Drunk*. Later I rewrote it with seven characters, but it has never been staged. It

seems that very few people know who Fortinbras is. Every producer eliminates him from *Hamlet*, trying to get the number of characters down to seven."

But soon Glowacki's persistence paid off. He was discovered by Joseph Papp. And after the off-Broadway success of *Cinders* and *Hunting Cockroaches*, at the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Manhattan Theatre Club, respectively, Glowacki calculated that he had amassed enough money from his efforts to live for three months.

Nonetheless, Glowacki prefers the economic censorship of America to the political censorship of Poland.

"A literature whose first reader is the censor, and which is written to outwit or evade the censor, is a pathetic literature. I know it only too well from experience. For writers who do not know how to – or do not wish to – evade the censor . . . there remain silence, emigration or the underground, which has been severely shaken by martial law."

Given the option, Glowacki is unsure whether returning to Poland or remaining in America would be the more courageous choice. But, despite the hardships, he is clear about his reasons for staying:

"Democracy offers possibilities: the possibility that we can meet openly, that I can write a play about what I hate about Poland and what I dislike about America without being expelled. This is important – facing all this trouble but having all these possibilities. Which is priceless, I think."

A Directing/Literary Intern at The Seattle Rep, David Hlavsa recently directed Woyzeck at the University of Washington and served as Assistant to the Director on Hunting Cockroaches.