

Steps OF Change

By Cathleen McCarthy



FROM BYTOM W CZORAJ BEUTHEN O/S GESTERN, MEZEUM GORNOSLASKIE W BYTOMIU



Newly democratic Poland is home to Swarthmore's latest foreign study program—an unusual combination of environmental engineering and modern dance.

When Allen Kuharski first went to Poland in September 1981, to study scenic design at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, communism was alive but in crisis. He searched the city in vain that winter for a store that sold winter coats—or a restaurant that served a decent meal. Food shortages were widespread and so were corrupt practices, like state-run “dollar stores” that forced Polish citizens to convert their zlotys into overvalued American dollars—a supposedly illegal practice—to pay for basic necessities.

Kuharski has returned to Poland many times in the last 18 years to study Polish theater and history. He has watched the country evolve from communist rule to a free-market economy. Now director of the Theatre Studies Program at Swarthmore, he sits in Essie Mae’s snack bar in Tarble in Clothier on a May afternoon, trying to explain Poland. I’ll be accompanying him—along with Steven Piker, professor of anthropology and foreign studies director; Arthur McGarity, professor of engineering; and Kim Arrow, assistant professor of dance—on a summer journey to Krakow and Bytom, where they plan to lay the groundwork for Swarthmore’s newest foreign studies program. President Alfred H. Bloom and his wife, Peggy, will join them to discuss the program with local government officials.

Since the trip, an exchange program has been established that will send five Swarthmore students to Poland for the next spring semester, and an environmental engineering professor and choreographer from Poland to teach at the College in the next two academic years.

The students going to Poland are among nearly 100 Swarthmore students who will spend the spring semester studying abroad as participants in the College’s growing foreign studies program. This fall, there were 68—half of them in Western Europe and only 3 in Eastern or Central Europe. Eight were in France; 6 each in England, Ireland, and Italy; 5 in Spain; and the rest scattered through 21 other countries—including 7

Members of the Silesian Dance Theatre (left) perform during a Swarthmore residency in February. Their visit led to a program that will take Swarthmore students to the historic mining region of eastern Poland (top, ca. 1936), where they will study theater, dance, and environmental change.

in Costa Rica. Thirty-eight percent of the Class of 2000 will have studied abroad for at least a semester—according to Piker, about double what it was 10 years ago.

“The faculty couldn’t be more supportive of foreign study,” Piker says. “It’s part of the Swarthmore agenda: international education.”

President Bloom sees foreign study as one vital component of an education for the next century. “Swarthmore has an increasing commitment to educate students for a global world,” he says. It’s essential, he believes, for students “to understand, appreciate, and learn from other cultural perspectives—but even more important, to see the extent to which we, as societies and as individuals, share similar hopes and values and deal with similar problems, and how important it is to build on these commonalities to reach collective goals.”

Swarthmore is a member of several college consortia that sponsor foreign study programs. “The virtue of consortia membership is that we consider these good programs; by being a member, we can have a little input into their design and content,” Piker says, “but we have no responsibility for running them.”

One factor in the increasing popularity of foreign study may be the revisions made to the College’s Honors Program in 1995–96, which made it easier for Honors students to integrate a foreign study experience into their preparation for external examinations. Craig Williamson, English professor, associate provost, and Honors Program coordinator, has tracked the number of Honors students abroad as part of an ongoing study of the Honors Program. Their numbers have risen along with those of the rest of the students, he reports, from 17 percent a decade ago to 28 percent last year. It’s possible to do Honors preparation abroad, but most students prefer to work this out on campus with Swarthmore faculty, often spending time abroad during the sophomore instead of the junior year.

Until now, Swarthmore has actually administered only 1 of the 100 or so foreign studies programs offered to its students—the 40-year-old Grenoble program in France. But in 1995, Sharon Friedler, professor of dance and director of the dance program, pioneered a looser form of faculty and student exchange

in Ghana, resulting from a Cornell visiting professorship offered to J.H. Kwabena Nketia, a world-renowned ethnomusicologist. Friedler returned during a leave, and students from other colleges can now participate in the Swarthmore-initiated Ghana program.

The new program in Poland will be exclusive to Swarthmore for now and will accommodate only a handful of students each year. Though they represent nothing close to its investment in the popular Grenoble program, the College has made a commitment of resources and faculty time to both the Ghana and Poland exchanges.

Try not to jump to conclusions in Poland,” Kuharski warns. “There are so many levels to what people there are doing. There is a certain lack of trust that can seem like cynicism, but Poles are incredibly idealistic at the same time.” Living with communism for so long left them distrustful, he explains, but defeating it added the conviction that good will triumph in the end.

The connection to Poland is more than a professional one for Kuharski. His forebears emigrated from Poland in the 1850s and established a Polish community in Wisconsin. Kuharski’s grandmother’s first language was Polish, but he had to learn it in school. Since his earliest trips to his ancestral home, Polish cities have become tourist friendly—especially after borders opened and visa restrictions were dropped in 1990. In fact, according to the World Tourism Organization, Poland is now the fifth most popular tourist destination among European countries. It is this transition—still ongoing—that Kuharski believes makes Poland perfect for on-site study.

Arthur McGarity thinks so, too. McGarity has lived and studied off and on in Poland for a decade—twice on Fulbright fellowships. His first yearlong stay began in 1989 on what he likes to call “the day the Cold War ended.” He and his family landed in Krakow on the last day of the communist parliament. The next day, the Solidarity party took power. “During the first four months, it was basically the same: long lines, shortages, no meat—all the old stuff.” McGarity and wife Jane’s children were ages 2, 4, 6, and 8 at the time. “We saw remarkable changes. Poland took the ‘cold-bath’ approach to the free market,” he

says. "They just jumped right in."

On Jan. 1, 1990, price controls were lifted. Stores filled with goods, he recalls, but prices shot so high, nobody could buy anything. "Things started to change dramatically then," he says. "By the time we left in June 1990, vendors were setting up on sidewalks, selling stuff they'd gotten from Germany or other countries in the West." In April of that year, McGarity, a committed environmental engineer, helped organize Poland's first celebration of Earth Day. The country's dire environmental conditions were being acknowledged for the first time by the new regime.

McGarity returned for six months in 1998. "Usually the Fulbright committee frowns on people returning to the same place for their second grant," McGarity says. "But I made the argument that Poland was a very different place, and they bought that." He pauses. "And it was very different."

President Bloom's philosophy about global problem solving is at the heart of why both Allen Kuharski and Art McGarity, scholars from widely different disciplines, want students to study in Poland. The catalyst for the emerging foreign study program—and the linchpin for both its artistic and environmental components—is the Silesian Dance Theatre, a contemporary troupe of international reputation based in Bytom, a town of 208,000 in the coal-

mining region west of Krakow. At Kuharski's suggestion, the company and its director and choreographer, Jacek Luminski, visited, taught, and performed at Swarthmore in February 1999. Luminski, Kuharski, and Sharon Friedler put their heads together then, and now the choreographer is inviting Swarthmore students to live and work at his cultural arts center in Poland.

For McGarity, Silesia means something else; it's one of the most polluted regions in the former Eastern Bloc. His base of operations is Krakow—specifically, the Politechnika Krakowska, where he has long-standing connections. But Bytom is only a two-hour train ride away, and McGarity plans to use the dance/theater program to leverage Swarthmore's first semester abroad program for engineering students.

At another college, it might seem extraordinary that it took a contemporary dance troupe to bring an engineering foreign studies program to fruition. Things don't get more "interdisciplinary" than this situation. Thus, it has all worked out in a distinctly Swarthmorean way—something McGarity seems to relish. This is, after all, a man who chose to teach engineering at a small liberal arts school, not MIT.

Get McGarity talking about his end of the Poland program, how-

ever, and it doesn't take long to gauge the seriousness of his intentions. "Upper Silesia has serious environmental problems," he says, "and Bytom is right in the middle of that region. The environment there was exploited to produce steel for the Soviet military for decades, and coal is still being mined and

burned." But there will be plenty of pollution problems right in Krakow for students to explore." Just to the east of Krakow, he says, is a steelworks. The prevailing wind blows in the opposite direction, fortunately.

"But west of Krakow is Bytom," he points out. "So pollution elbows in."

Like Kuharski, however, McGarity warns against jumping to conclusions. "Be careful. I've seen journalists portray this area as a toxic waste dump, but it's not," he stresses. "It has difficult problems, but there are beautiful places. It's remarkable, really, how the environment has survived all this. These problems are solvable."

In Krakow at the end of June, there is no evidence of that elbowing pollution. As I wander into town the first day,

Steps OF Change



A century of coal mining has left its mark on Bytom (left). The home of the Silesian Dance Theatre (above) is a former hunters' club. Directed by Jacek Luminski (far right), the Polish dancers performed the North American premiere of "Melody to Plait a Twig" at Swarthmore last February (right).

LEFT AND ABOVE: CATHEEN MCCARTHY

the sky is a dazzling blue, and there is no sign of soot in the air or on the buildings. The only visible smoke issues from grizzled old vendors who puff cigarettes, hunched over their buckets of flowers along the sidewalks. At an outdoor market, families bustle around stalls laden with bread, meat, and perfect vegetables. Goods seem plentiful on this Friday morning and so do buyers.

On the Rynek Glowny, the city's central square, a costumed polka band performs—the ultimate cliché of Old Poland—while New Poland crisscrosses the square: waifish young women who look like models in their capri pants, platform slides, and purple hair.

Next morning, I'm off to Bytom for the last weekend of the 10-day dance festival and conference organized by Jacek Luminski's Silesian Dance Theatre. From the windows of the train to Bytom, there are still no visible signs of environmental ravage. Morning mist clings to the passing countryside, flat but lush, sprinkled with small farms, red-roofed houses, occasional haystacks, and winding streams. A middle-aged woman, who might once have been described as a

"peasant," brings her dog on the train, while a yuppie across the aisle talks into a cell phone. I can already see it's a land of contrasts—particularly between generations.

In the Bytom cultural center, where the dance company is based, Luminski's class warms up to classical music in the main dance studio, awash in sunlight streaming through the back windows. His is one of many classes being taught today here and in various venues around Bytom. Like Luminski's class, the dance being taught and performed at the festival is contemporary. He puts on a Barry White CD for the first combination, and the young dancers begin to follow him across the floor, flinging and unfurling their bodies in Luminski's idiosyncratic version of the "release method." As the music changes to Aretha Franklin, even the youngest dancers still rock out to "Dr. Feelgood." The music jumps unpredictably from classical to Europop and back again, but the movement gets only more frantic, and the 20-somethings sweat to keep up with the wiry 40-year-old choreographer.

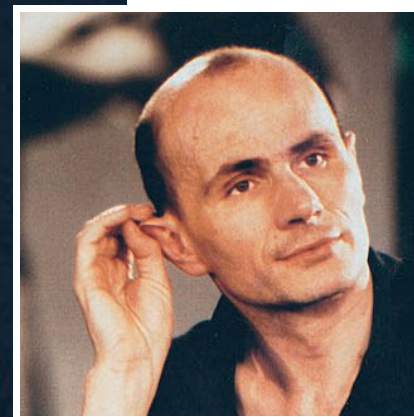
Luminski's movement and choreography are based, in part, on his 15 years of research into

Poland's Jewish traditions, particularly Hasidic ecstatic dance, prayer rituals, and wedding customs that flourished in prewar Poland—and a strange syncopation he discovered in the music of Kurpie, a region long isolated in the woodlands between Warsaw and Gdansk. "I look for different rhythmical patterns," he tells me later. "You can find them in any music—classical, rap, or jazz. Sometimes it takes my students time to understand the structure because it's so unusual."

His experience the previous winter with Swarthmore students was eye-opening, he says. "I was amazed at how receptive they were, how committed they are to what they want to do, and how easily they get new ideas. They were not always able to do what we wanted, but you could see that they understood what we were thinking about," he recalls.

One student, Jim Harker '99, made such a strong impression that Luminski invited him to come to Poland after graduation to dance with the company. Trained as a gymnast in high school, Harker is remarkably flexible, which helped him master Luminski's acrobatic movements. Harker is here at the festival, but after dancing 10 hours daily for the past week, he has strained his knee and is sitting it out today.

Thirty-eight percent of the Class of 2000 will have studied abroad for at least a semester.



SILESIA DANCE THEATRE

ELEFTHERIOS KOSTANS

After the last class of the day, the buzz is audible in the theater café as students mingle with teachers, dashing down mineral water and \$2 plates of vegetarian goulash before the nightly performance. Tonight, a German company opens with a stark, hour-long modern number, followed by an entertaining piece by a Polish troupe, featuring characters in costume—ostensibly hookers and a pimp. The featured dancer wears a Marilyn Monroe-like wig and 3-inch heels at one point yet still manages to dance beautifully. At the climactic moment, the lights dim, and video images of her flash, showing her slowly undressing until she is naked. The number closes to wild applause.

This performance, Kuharski tells us over dinner, is typical of contemporary dance in Europe right now, which is really an amalgam of theater and dance. At 10:30 p.m., we join the crowd gathered on the town square, where a “happening” is scheduled. Several dancers in druid-like robes carry torches and hand them off to people in the crowd. Choreographed by a Bosnian and involving Russian, Polish, German, and American dancers, the event, we are later told, is meant as a statement of global solidari-

ty. But as this strange and somber spectacle drags on, some boys begin to hoot; others wander off.

I think of something a local steelworks manager and member of the town’s Cultural Commission said a few days earlier at a meeting with McGarity, Piker, and Kuharski: “As far as culture goes,” he said, “it doesn’t get any better than Frank Sinatra as far as I’m concerned. I can’t really understand anything beyond

that—and that’s fine. I still think the Silesian Dance Theatre is good for the community.”

The commission he represented expressed more interest in the economic boost a relationship with Swarthmore might mean to the city and in a possible connection to the university at nearby Katowice, a Silesian city between Krakow and Bytom. “They are already discussing introducing dance into the curriculum at the university,” Kuharski says, “and one way to do that would be to make the Silesian Dance Theatre an institution for dance studies connected to the university. A connection like that is something the community can understand more easily than naked people doing avant-garde dance while much of the system is in collapse.”

Steps OF Change

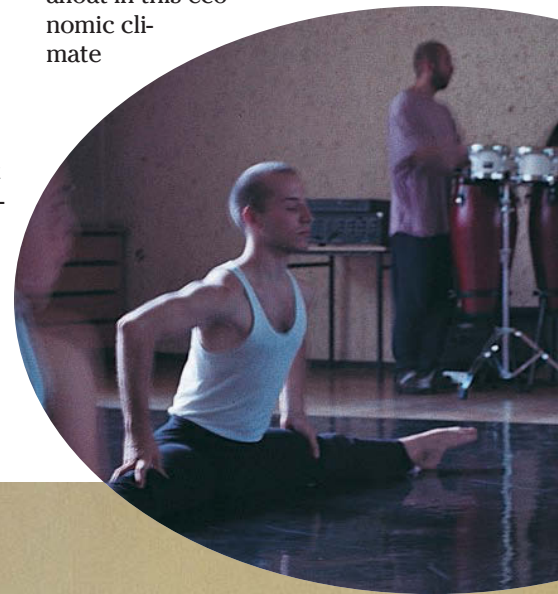
The Bytom city government currently subsidizes the wages and rent of the Silesian Dance Theatre, which employs 17 people, including the dancers. Last year, when the Ministry of Culture threatened to withdraw funding, Luminski called in the national press. “The old comrades’ method,” he says with a wry smile. “I told them that they were using this for the elections, to make people vote for them. We also wrote to the deputies of the Polish government, and we now have five of them supporting us very strongly.” Whether or not it was due to Luminski’s political savvy, the funding came through.

“I keep hearing these [cultural] programs will be made national eventually,” Luminski says. “The people on the national level understand the value of community, the value of what we do.”

Still, keeping an avant-garde theater afloat in this economic climate



A tour guide (second from left above) shows President Al Bloom, Allen Kuharski, and Pegggi Bloom (left to right) the Jagiellonian University, where Swarthmore students will study Polish language and culture. Top inset: Jim Harker '99 learns the Martha Graham technique at a dance festival class.



would be challenging even in a large city. “It is difficult,” Luminski admits. “That’s why it helps when national television and newspapers cover us. People here see that there is something to this, even if they don’t understand it at all. We are trying to build positive snobbery.”

On the last morning of the festival, Kim Arrow conducts his final yoga class. He has already performed at the festival, dancing and playing his didgeridoo; this morning, he played drums for a class on Martha Graham technique. At the College, Arrow teaches modern dance and rhythmic drumming—not yoga. But he has studied Ashtanga yoga intensively for several years. For 10 consecutive days, with a translator shouting his directives in Polish, he has been aggressively stretching out young dancers from all over Eastern Europe. After class, the dancers applaud, and two young Polish women approach

with a camera, asking if Arrow will pose for a picture.

Afterward, Jennine Willett, an American dancer who was invited to join Luminski’s company a couple of years ago—and a loyal attendee of the yoga class—takes Arrow and me to a café in

Bytom’s central square. Like Willett and the other company dancers, visiting theater and dance students will stay in theater housing. Willett exists, humbly, on about \$300 per month—pretty close to the average income in Poland, according to Kuharski.

Walking back to the theater, Arrow admires the art nouveau ornament on the once-grand buildings. Form is all that sets them apart beneath the thick layer of soot that has turned the town a monotonous gray. “Bytom looks a lot like Pittsburgh before it was sandblasted,” Arrow remarks. Now and then, a recently cleaned-up building glows amid the gray, reminding us how beautiful this city could be.

The effects of communism linger, Willett tells us, and for an American, it’s sometimes frustrating. “Living under communist rule for so many years, many people picked up the habit of putting in hours just to collect a paycheck. If you ask a question,” she says, “their instinct is to send you to someone else, so they don’t have to deal with it.”

A program such as this one could only happen at a school like Swarthmore.

Two days after the festival ends, President and Mrs. Bloom, Steve Piker, and Art McGarity arrive in Bytom for a press conference and a meeting with the mayor. Talking with the mayor, a reformed communist who has not always supported funding the Silesian Dance Theatre, Bloom eloquently describes the concept of the small liberal arts college, and McGarity explains the “synergism” between the engineering program in Krakow and the dance and theater program in Bytom.

Luminski is hoping this new connection with a respected American college will help solidify his tenuous hold on city funding. Bloom and Kuharski offer Swarthmore as both a model and a facilitator in Poland’s struggle to redefine its system of higher education, including incorporating dance and theater in university curricula—something now unheard of in Poland. This suggestion seems to please the mayor.

After the meeting, Bloom, Kuharski, and Luminski huddle in the parking lot to discuss another forthcoming meeting. “We cannot become advocates on internal political issues,” says Bloom. “It would be inappropriate as well as damaging to the relationships we are trying to develop. What we can do is speak to the extraordinary cultural and educational contributions the Silesian Dance Theatre makes and to the benefits to both Swarthmore and the Dance Theatre that will follow from building a clos-



PHOTOS BY CATHLEEN MCCARTHY

Left: Professor of Engineering Arthur McGarity, Jacek Luminski, President Bloom, a translator, and Director of Theatre Studies Allen Kuharski (left to right) explain the proposed foreign study program at a press conference in Bytom. Above: Assistant Professor of Dance Kim Arrow teaches Ashtanga yoga at the festival.

er association between us.”

Later that day, the group meets with Piotr Bulahe, president of the city’s cultural commission, a stout middle-aged man who is a former coal miner, and, like the mayor, a reformed communist. “I want to stress that our country is in a very difficult period of economic transformation,” he says from the head of a conference table where President Bloom, Kuharski, Luminski, and McGarity sit with the translator who has been following us from meeting to meeting. “During such a transformation, little attention is usually paid to culture, yet we strongly support institutions like the Silesian Dance Theatre.”

The cultural director has a gentle demeanor and trades jokes easily with Bloom and Kuharski. Under communism, he explains, “the average family had a very easy life because their place of work did everything for them, from providing a flat to organizing cultural events. Many of these people are not independent, and it’s difficult for them to change their habits. That’s why I want to address mainly younger people.” He compliments Luminski for his community outreach programs involving senior citizens and children.

Bloom describes Chester, Pa., the impoverished city only a few miles from Swarthmore, and the Chester Boys Choir, the community outreach program organized by John Alston, associate professor of music—who, like Luminski, focused on the children. Chester has roughly the same population as Bytom, Bloom points out, with its own set of severe economic conditions, “and this is the wealthiest period in American history.”

As for Bytom, the director concludes, “It will take about 40 years to change the country and the face of our town because first [our generation] must die to make room for the second generation.” Just before rising to shake hands, he turns to Bloom: “I can assure you that our municipality will support this kind of cooperation, maybe because we want something out of it, too—not so much financial but in terms of information and experience.”

Back in Krakow, Kuharski arranges a tour for the Swarthmore entourage of Wawel Castle, the city’s main attrac-

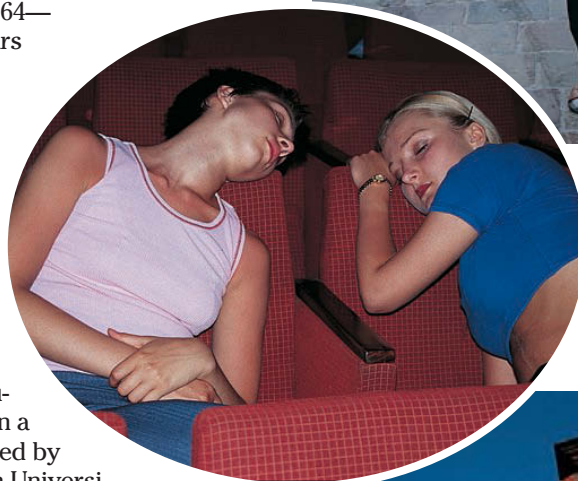
tion. Built on a hill in the Middle Ages, the castle housed Polish royalty for five centuries. Our guide explains why the trumpet played every hour from the tower of the grand Mariacki Church halts so abruptly. During a Tartar invasion, the legend goes, a watchman stationed in the tower lifted his trumpet to sound the alarm but was silenced by an arrow.

After the castle tour, we visit the ancient courtyard of the Jagiellonian University, founded by King Kazimierz in 1364—exactly 500 years before Swarthmore College, McGarity points out. Though most foreign study students will take classes at the Politechnika, engineering students will live in a dormitory owned by the Jagiellonian University, where they will study the Polish language. “Dom Piast houses a lot of international students—an interesting community for our students to be part of,” McGarity says, “and it’s close to all the good stuff in town.”

As we step out of the courtyard onto the cobbled streets of Krakow’s town center, an old violinist stationed there overhears our chatter and breaks into “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.” When we laugh, he asks, “You are English?” “American,” someone tells him. Without missing a beat, he lifts his violin and launches into Stephen Foster’s “My Darling Clementine.” We give him a couple zloty, and he bows.

In October, the trees along Magill Walk glow gold and amber against a vivid blue sky, and I recall the sky above Bytom’s gray buildings. I tell McGarity that Kim Arrow compared it with Pittsburgh before the cleanup. Bytom is like Pittsburgh all right, McGarity tells me—Pittsburgh about 100 years ago. “You saw a clear blue sky because you were there in July,” he says. “Go back now, and it wouldn’t be because they’re burning coal again. They don’t have to heat

Steps OF Change



Clockwise from top left: A Krakow street violinist serenades the Swarthmore contingent; dancers grab a bite between classes at the theater café; Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz presides over Krakow’s Rynek Glowny Square as the 14th-century Mariacki Church is renovated behind him; a dragon decorates a building in Warsaw; and exhausted dancers sleep through the final performance of the Bytom festival.





buildings in July.”

Bytom still gets more than 90 percent of its energy from coal, he says. “And coal is a very dirty fuel. The miners have to go deep to get the coal, through layers of saltwater, which they pump into the freshwater streams, degrading their ability to recover from the raw sewage. And the soil is contaminated from the metals in the coal. It’s better than it was, but the problems that remain are compounding.”

In Poland, students will see a society in transformation.

As the faculty part of the exchange, McGarity’s colleague from the Politechnika, Vlad Wojcik, will be a Cornell

visiting professor at Swarthmore for the 2000–01 academic year, and Jacek Luminski will spend the spring semester in 2001 teaching dance at the College as a Lang Professor of Social Change. Five students have signed on to spend the spring 2000 semester in Poland—a dance major, a theater major, one engineering student, and two concentrating in environmental studies. One student has expressed an interest in Poland’s transition to a free-market economy, so McGarity is arranging a tutorial. Theater student Heather Weyrick will live in Krakow with the engineering students, studying language and culture, and then she plans to move to Bytom to work in arts administration at the Silesian Dance Theatre.

Jim Harker, having learned the language and culture from his time dancing in Poland, is moving to Krakow. There, he will serve as the College liaison, orienting students as they arrive and taking them on theater trips throughout Poland that Kuharski has arranged.

“When my engineering students heard that Heather would be traveling all over Poland attending performances, they started perking up,” McGarity

says, smiling. There will be field trips for environmental studies as well, he adds, but theater and dance started looking good. “Given the kind of students we have, there is going to be an overlap—theater students will study environmental science, and engineers will take dance classes.”

No matter what students are studying, he adds, “issues come up very starkly in Poland—like the trade-off between jobs and the environment.” Both he and Kuharski are struck by the sad irony that many of Bytom’s steelworkers and coal miners were members of the Solidarity Party that brought down communism and now watch their industries undergo downsizing under capitalism. Those on the city’s cultural commission are dealing with the added irony of funding avant-garde dance and environmental cleanup while their mills close.

Silesia, although not the center of Polish economy, politics, or culture, offers a unique opportunity to study all these aspects of the nation’s transformation. The transformation of Silesia, Kuharski believes, ties the theater/dance program to the environmental studies program. “There is a need to think in a holistic, global way about issues,” he explains. “That’s what environmental studies teaches, what Jacek’s philosophy and performance is about, and what the transformation of Silesia is ultimately about. Silesia is in a terrible place because there has not been enough thinking about how economic issues, environmental issues, and cultural and educational issues come together to create a healthy community and a healthy environment.”

McGarity adds that “environmental problems are interdisciplinary by their very nature. Certain aspects of that you could ignore in the United States, but in Poland, they jump out at you. It’s a great opportunity for our students. If they can actually contribute something, that’s great, but they will definitely get a lot more back from seeing all these problems in one place.”

As President Bloom told Bytom’s cultural commission: “One reason this is such a valuable program for our students is that they will not only learn about Polish theater and dance but experience a society that is undergoing economic transformation and developing a new, postcommunist identity. That is a rare opportunity.” ■



PHOTOS BY CATHLEEN MCGARTHY