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New Actors in the Social Drama of Polish Burial Culture

Along with the economic transition, effort has been taken to construct the funeral anew. New actors have appeared on the funeral scene. In this article I discuss the undertaker, the embalmer, and the master of ceremonies. I also present other experts belonging to a broad spectrum of roles that are in the process of professionalization: carpenters, florists, tailors, exporting crews, and technicians. Description of the various actors includes how the new role is constructed, its performance, and specifics. I note the process of acquiring competence in a new profession. The specificity of funeral work necessitates resolving the conflict between the economic undertaking and assumption of responsibility for a rite of passage. Funeral representatives are mediators between sacred and profane spheres, where the products and services sold must have ritual significance for all the actors. Entrepreneurs have to develop skills and strategies on many levels, from the relationship with the client to building an image in the public space. There is a change in both the cultural experience of the generations and their continually reconstructed social dramas—defined by Victor Turner and Erving Goffman as the process of social interaction—where each actor is assigned a role to play. The processual approach to ritual assumes that each presentation has its own scenario and dynamics.

Key words: social actors, funeral, undertaker, embalming, master of ceremony, competence