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THE CHILD IN THE THEATRE – A RECONNAISSANCE

First, a few words by way of explanation of the title, which could suggest that the article will focus on theatre created by children, on productions for children or on the educational value of the theatrical art in the socialisation of the youngest spectators. Studies devoted to the subject make up a substantial collection – let us just mention two post-conference volumes published by the Children's Art Centre in Poznań, which also included articles dealing with the issue¹. Even richer is a corpus of texts analysing and interpreting the presence of child protagonists in Polish drama, from the Romantic era to the present day: from Józio and Rózia (Adam Mickiewicz's *The Forefathers' Eve part II*), the Priest's children (Mickiewicz's *The Forefathers' Eve part IV*), Orcio (Zygmunt Krasiński's *Un-Divine Comedy*), Isia (Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Wedding*), through Hesja and Mela (Gabriela Zapolska's *Mrs Dulska's Morality*), Zosia and Amelka (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Country House*), Świntusia Macabrescu (Witkiewicz's *Gyubal Wahazar*), Tadzio (Witkiewicz's *The Water Hen*), to Kasia, Wojtek, Piotrek (Marek Pruchniewski's *Lucia and Her Children*), Żarówka, Żelazko, Szczyl i Kabel (Paweł Sala's *We'll Be Good from Now On*) or Small Metal Girl (Dorota Masłowska's *No Matter How Hard We Tried*), just to mention a dozen or so among them.

So far, the presence of the child in the representing world of theatre has not attracted much interest. The main reason behind this state of affairs may have been the nearly universal practice of having adult actors play child characters in theatre. The few exceptions only confirmed this rule, which for obvious reasons did not apply in

¹ *Dziecko i teatr w przestrzeni kultury*, vol. 1. *Teatr w świecie*; vol. 2. *Świat w teatrze*, ed. M. Karasińska, G. Leszczyński, Poznań 2007.

cinema. It would be difficult to image an adult actor instead of Jackie Coogan in *The Kid* directed by Charlie Chaplin (1921) or mature actresses instead of Shirley Temple in *The Little Colonel* by David Butler (1935) or Elizabeth Taylor in *Lassie Come Home* by Fred M. Wilcox (1943). Of course, the list of examples is very long and also includes Polish films, for example, Sylwester Chęciński's *History of a Yellow Crackow Shoe* (1961) with the then 11-year old Marek Kondrat or Robert Glinński's *All That Matters Most* with Adam Siemion (1993) as Andrzej Wat.

On the other hand, the incompatibility of an adult in the representing world and a child in the world presented in a theatrical work aroused no controversy, it was nearly transparent and could be ignored on the basis of the convention. In any case, in the history of this artistic discipline – not only in Europe – there was a strong rationale behind such substitute representation: lack of women in theatre in ancient Greece or in Elizabethan theatre, in which female characters were played by pre-pubescent boys, or their absence until the 20th century in the Japanese Nō theatre and Indian Kathakali. In traditional kathakali centres all-night performances feature only men, with women – from outside Kerala, where the genre originated, and, more broadly, India – being allowed only in training and “amateur” shows. On the other hand, in 19th century European theatre, including Polish theatre, there emerged the opposite convention whereby young men were played by young actresses².

It should, therefore, not be surprising that child characters in productions of the above-mentioned plays were treated by reviewers just like other protagonists. They were not seen as separate beings with an unstable social status, but rather as figures of smaller adults – like in medieval painting. That is the first possibility. The other possibility is that these were fantasies of adults involving children, also perverse ideas featuring them, whose representations on stage were prompted by findings of psychoanalysis. In both cases the semiotic bodies (protagonists) completely covered the phenomenal bodies (people/actors), no real life emerged from behind representation. Let us mention just two productions.

In a production of *W małym dworku* (*Country House*) directed by Wanda Laskowska³ we find an example of the second possibility mentioned above. The production staged at Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw paved the way for Witkiewicz's plays to be presented in the most important Polish theatres, which soon transformed him into a classic⁴. Very few analyses featured descriptions of Dyapanazy

² Cf. D. Kosiński, “‘Cóż za chłopiec piękny i młody...’. Role chłopięce w kobiecym wykonaniu w polskim teatrze dramatycznym XIX wieku”, [in:] *Inna scena. Ciało, płeć pożądania, tożsamość seksualna i tożsamość płci w polskim dramacie i teatrze*, ed. A. Adamiecka-Sitek, D. Buchwald, Warsaw 2008, pp. 59–68. The title of Kosiński's article is slightly misleading, because it concerns the roles of young men and not children.

³ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Wariat i zakonnica — W małym dworku* (*The Madman and the Nun — Country House*), dir. W. Laskowska, Warsaw, Dramatyczny Theatre (Big Stage), premiere: 16 December 1959.

⁴ Cf. P. Rudzki, “*Witkacy — awangardowy klasyk*”, *Notatnik Teatralny* 2011, no. 62–63.

Nibek's daughters. Moreover, even if critics did mention the actresses portraying these protagonists, they did so – not surprisingly – in one sentence, placing them together with other performers⁵. Jan Kott stood out, because he painted a laconic, but imagination firing, on account of its allusions to surrealism⁶, portrait of Zosia (Alicja Wyszzyńska) and Amelka (Janina Traczykówna). In a review published by *Przegląd Kulturalny* he said that both “were surrealistically and unexpectedly giggly”⁷. Andrzej Wirth, on the other hand, in his just as succinct description referred to a psychological type category, touching upon perverse sexual mores: “fine, very modern portrayals of nymphets”⁸. It was much later that analysts of the protagonists of Witkiewicz's dramas began to refer to the type of innocent girl or boy initiated into the sexual sphere by her or his mentor⁹.

Un-Divine Comedy is the second from a long series of productions directed by Konrad Swinarski at Stary Theatre in Kraków¹⁰. Orcio as interpreted by Anna Polony would be a good example of the first possibility of treating a child protagonist in the theatre. In this case we have at our disposal longer descriptions of the interpretation prepared by the then 26-year-old actress. Her age is mentioned, because the character of Orcio was woven from so many elements consistently building his madness¹¹ that only an artist with some considerable professional experience could have dealt with it. The supernatural abilities of the young, poetic protagonist of Krasiński's drama acquired additional justification in the world presented in that staging. Orcio suffered from epilepsy as if the child's strangeness and his superawareness required a clinical explanation. “The first theatrical Orcio,” noted Jan Kłossowicz in his review, “played [...] not as a little angel and devil, but also as an epileptic”¹². Thus, Polony's Orcio could be regarded as a prefiguration of Gustaw-Kondrad as played by Jerzy Trela in

⁵ Cf. S. Polanica [S.E. Bury], “Witkacy”, *Słowo Powszechne* 1959, no. 305; Z. Karczevska-Markiewicz, “Sztuki dla smakoszków”, *Życie Warszawy* 1959, no. 305; JASZCZ [J.A. Szczepański], “Dziwactwo, kociokwik i coś jeszcze”, *Trybuna Ludu* 1959, no. 351; Z. Greń, “Witkiewicz, czyli o bezsilności”, *Życie Literackie* 1960, no. 2; C. Skołuda, “Realista mimo woli”, *Teatr* 1960, no. 5.

⁶ It is enough to bring to mind Balthus, who was associated with surrealism, and his pictures depicting young girls (see also G. Bataille, *Les Larmes d'Éros*, introduction by J.M. Lo Duca, Polish translation and afterword by T. Swoboda, Gdańsk 2009).

⁷ J. Kott, “Witkacy przeszajnowany”, *Przegląd Kulturalny* 1960, no. 2.

⁸ A. Wirth, “Zborsuczona Zapolska”, *Nowa Kultura* 1960, no. 2.

⁹ Cf. J. Ziomek, “Personalne dossier dramatów Witkiewicza”, [in:] *Studia o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu*, ed. M. Głowiński, J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1972, pp. 83–105.

¹⁰ Z. Krasiński, *Nie-Boska komedia (Un-Divine Comedy)*, dir. K. Swinarski, Kraków, Stary Theatre, premiere: 9 October 1965.

¹¹ Jan Paweł Gawlik wrote that the form of madness was so suggestive that it nearly bordered on kitsch (see *idem*, “Świetność i żart, czyli Nie-Boska”, *Kultura* 1965, no. 47).

¹² J. Kłossowicz, “Anty-Nie-Boska”, *Polityka* 1965, no. 45. Jerzy Zagórski wrote: “I personally found Anna Polony as Orcio convincing, but some of my interlocutors insisted that she had added too many grotesque features to this embodiment of degeneration, turning this frail child into a cripple” (*idem*, “Ważka rzecz w Krakowie”, *Kurier Polski* 1965, no. 293).

a staging of Mickiewicz's *The Forefathers' Eve* prepared by Swinarski in the same theatre eight years later¹³. Both renditions of the protagonist's improvisation were planned by the director as consequences of sudden epileptic fits which distorted and, at the same time, expanded Gustaw-Konrad's perceptive abilities. Swinarski talked about it with the actors during analytical rehearsals¹⁴.

On the opposite extreme of these conventionalised representations of children we should place their real presence in the stage world, which we would like to examine, taking several productions of repertoire theatres from the last 12 years as examples. The "stage world", for the participation of children undermines the traditional division into the world that is representing and one that is presented, giving representation – and this is the first thesis – a performative character¹⁵. Moreover, the social "unreadiness" of children, their functioning outside the Jungian personas¹⁶ or Goffman's facades¹⁷, and their not fully crystallised sense of shame or embarrassment¹⁸ have – and this is the second thesis – a subversive potential, undermining the obvious nature of the order of social roles and revealing the potentialities lost by adults in the enculturation process.

In his production of *Holy Mothers (Die Präsidentinnen)*, Krystian Lupa¹⁹ included a performative sequence which is not included in Wener Schwab's play. Intended as an event taking place during the interval, it never fulfilled its function, because the spectators remained in their seats. It remained an inherent part of the production, creating a surprising interlude. When towards the end of part one Mariedl (Ewa Ski-bińska) manages to calm down Erna (Bożena Baranowska) and Greta (Halina Rasia-kówna), who have been quarrelling, the latter brings a bottle of wine and the three protagonists living on the margins of culture drink in order to forget the "filth of life". Dulled by alcohol, they fall asleep wherever they were sitting: in a dilapidated arm-chair – Erna, on a tattered couch – Greta, and on the palimpsest floor, with its many layers of paint and lino – Mariedl. At this point the door to Erna's cluttered and poor

¹³ A. Mickiewicz, *Dziady (The Forefathers' Eve)*, dir. and design K. Swinarski, Kraków, Stary Theatre, premiere: 18 February 1973.

¹⁴ Cf. the documentary *Dziady Adama Mickiewicza w inscenizacji Konrada Swinarskiego*, written and directed by J. Chlebowicz, phot. J. Popczyk, ed. K. Miklaszewski, Polish Television (Kraków) 1973.

¹⁵ As understood by Erika Fischer-Lichte (see *eadem*, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt (Main), 2004).

¹⁶ *Persona*, [in:] A. Samuels, B. Shorter, F. Plaut, *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis*, Routledge 1986, pp. 106–107.

¹⁷ See E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Polish translation by H., P. Śpiewak, ed. and intro. J. Szacki, Warsaw 1981, pp. 59–62.

¹⁸ See H. Jakubowska, *Socjologia ciała*, Poznań 2009, pp. 233–234.

¹⁹ W. Schwab, *Prezydentki (Holy Mothers)*, Polish translation by M. Muskała, adaptation, direction, design and music by K. Lupa, Wrocław, Teatr Polski (Świebodzki Train Station Stage), premiere: 17 September 1999.

room, the most valuable object of which is a colour TV set bought in a second-hand shop, open and we see a 12-year-old boy sneaking in hesitantly. He looks around the room, goes back and calls his friend. With him comes a girl of the same age, whom the boys do not want to let in. Eventually, they allow her to enter the room and poke Mariedl, who is lying there, with a long stick. Her movement causes panic, but they quickly calm down, because the woman does not wake up. Encouraged, they touch her again and then in comes a man wearing grey-blue overalls: a caretaker or perhaps member of the theatre's technical staff. He firmly chases the children out, turns off the light in the bathroom, straightens the fur cap on Erna's head, tidies Mariedl's dress on her thighs, picks up a bottle that has been knocked over and leaves by the side door on the opposite side to the door used by the children.

The three kids look "normal" – they do not live in basement flats like the women, but are children of middle class parents and behave "naturally", as if they have accidentally, when playing outdoors, found themselves not in Erna's room but in a theatre. Maybe they are children of some people in the audience, whom the parents could not take with them, because the performance is for adults. Bored by waiting for their parents, perhaps they managed to sneak to the Świebodzki Train Station Stage through the back door, perhaps through an old railway platform – the stage is in a disused railway station. Their uncertain ontological status – characters in the play or casual participants – is stressed by the undefined status of the man who has chased them out. All possibilities seem equally likely, as a result of which the spectators not so much watch a play, but follow a one-off, unique, real event – a performance. This impression is strengthened, when the production is on tour abroad, and the company involves in the performances children from the country in which they take place (Sweden, France, Latvia, Ecuador, Spain). In this case the strangeness of the children – speaking a language different from the one spoken by the characters/actresses – becomes even more intense in the world presented. The spectators' perception shifts from the order of representation to the order of presence; the creation of a fictitious world in their imagination is suspended. "Consequently," argues Erika Fischer-Lichte in her book, "the perceiving subject and object 'become one', which leads to the emergence of an uninterrupted stream of associations or reflection on one's fate"²⁰.

Transferred to the present day, Wiktor Rubin's *The Doll*²¹ exposed both the ruthlessness of turbocapitalism and lack of principles in the world of celebrities – equivalent of 19th century aristocracy – in Poland, and the conventionality of theatre, juggling various conventions: from psychological theatre, through Brecht's estrangement effect, to grotesque and farce, characteristic of plebeian art or *commedia dell'arte*. During the show, the light was put on in the auditorium several times and the actors played/were among the spectators, for example, in the scene when the

²⁰ E. Fischer-Lichte, *op. cit.*, pp. 252–253.

²¹ *Lalka (The Doll)* after B. Prus' novel, stage adaptation by J. Janiczak, W. Rubin, dir. W. Rubin, Wrocław, Teatr Polski (Jerzy Grzegorzewski Stage), premiere: 20 December 2008.

Krzyszowski (Dominika Figurska i Rafał Kronenberger) were quarrelling. Both had body mikes and, running between the rows of seats and taking members of the audience as witnesses, they hurled insults at each other. During another sequence, Łęcka/Kinga Preis walked among the spectators giving out authentic leaflets of the Wrocław Children's Hospice, encouraging people to pay some sums into its account and asking them to transfer 1% of their income tax to the hospice.

There was another tier of representation moving towards presence, art towards life, a tier associated with the popularity of the actors themselves. Television viewers associate Preis, known for her many theatre and film roles, with the *Father Matthew* TV series, Figurska became popular thanks to the *L Is for Love* soap, while Bartosz Porczyk (Wokulski) is recognised by fans of *Colours of Happiness*. Thus the representing world, like the world presented, was also to some extent created by celebrities. That is why the scene most emphatically breaching the order of representation was the first scene in act two. Suzin (Adam Cywka) tries to persuade Wokulski to run his business associated with deliveries for the army. Both are standing on the right side of the proscenium; at some point the nearest door to the foyer opens and in comes a group of a dozen or so children "in need", for whom Wokulski pours some soup or, in fact, sweets, into plastic bowls. The children look neither poor nor abandoned. Suzin talks to them with a strong Russian accent, they are silent, exchange some quiet remarks among themselves or giggle, but none of them replies to him. After receiving a ladle of sweets, each child goes to the end of the queue to get another one. The sequence is brief, but the presence of children, the unpredictability and unexpected nature of their behaviour make it more highly performatively charged than the action-breaking scenes featuring professional actors.

It should be added that Helunia, a few years old girl character, in the production was played by a senior member of the company – Krzesiśława Dubielówna (over seventy years old). The decision to cast this particular actress as the under-age daughter of Stawska (Rasiakówna) cannot be treated as directorial perversity or exemplification of a common belief that people become more childish as they age. What will be more helpful in explaining this is Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology. What a child and an adult have in common is integration of the self – unconscious in the case of the former, conscious in the case of the latter²².

In his two previous productions – of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*²³ and *The Elementary Particles* after Michel Houellebecq's novel²⁴ – Rubin cast adult actors as teenage protagonists. It was not, however, a return to the practice described

²² See *Self*, [in:] A. Samuels, B. Shorter, F. Plaut, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-137.

²³ F. Wedekind, *Przebudzenie wiosny (Spring Awakening)*, Polish translation by J. Diduszk-Kuśmierska, dir. W. Rubin, Bydgoszcz, Polski Theatre, premiere: 30 czerwca 2007.

²⁴ M. Houellebecq, *Częstki elementarne (The Elementary Particles)*, Polish translation by A. Danilewicz-Grudzińska, adapt. J. Janiczak, W. Rubin, dir. W. Rubin, Wrocław, Polski Theatre (Świebodzki Train Station Stage), premiere: 7 June 2008.

at the beginning, but its persiflage-like quotation. Costumes made the protagonists of Wedekind's play look like school children, they became a clear signal of the idealising – or Gombrowicz's infantilising – by adults of teenage consumers of popular culture, who know *Brokeback Mountain* and quote Houellebecq's novels – the action of the play was moved to the present day.

The situation was similar in *The Elementary Particles* – in scenes recalling episodes from Michel's (Cywka), Anabelle's (Preis) and Bruno's (Wiesław Cichy) childhood, the actors were dressed in school uniforms. However, unlike the costumes from Wedekind's play, here they were not a sign of oppression – with children having to be what adults see them like – but a signal that the future would be determined at this stage of human development. A good illustration of this observation can be a nearly film-like sequence featuring Anabelle and Michel. On their way back from school, carrying their school bags, they talk about their future together. The first version of this dialogue ended hopefully. However, after a "freeze-frame", the tape was rewound, with the characters slowly walking back. Then the scene was repeated, but it did not stop at Anabelle's optimistic line; it went on and Michel talked about his strangeness in the world, strangeness that would prevent him from experiencing happiness with the companion of his childhood years. As we remember, the protagonist dies following complications related to her pregnancy, when she is finally with Michel; complications caused by earlier abortions.

It would be difficult to imagine having children appearing in Wedekind's play or in fragments dealing with childhood of the protagonists of Houellebecq's novel. On the other hand, themes associated with early sexual initiation, sexual abuse of children by adults, or other, dark topics are explored by the cinema as if the celluloid tape or the hard disk of a camera provided a sufficient barrier to any possible depravation of young amateur actors. It is enough to mention the film adaptation of Houellebecq's novel or three Polish films challenging the common stereotype of children's innocence: Robert Gliński's *Hi, Tereska* (2001), *Katarzyna Rosłaniec's The Mall Girls* (2009) and Paweł Sala's *Mother Teresa of Cats* (2010). Though we could point to at least two theatrical productions in which children did appear despite the drastic nature of the topic.

In a production of Wedekind's *Lulu* directed by Michał Borczuch²⁵ at Kraków's Stary Theatre the title role was played by Marta Ojrzyńska, but some scenes illustrating under-age daughter trafficking in bourgeois homes featured children. The girls resembled miniature copies of their mothers: the same dresses, similar moves, identical gestures. The context in which they appeared in the stage world made the spectators very uncomfortable. First, it made the problem tackled by the work even sharper, making hiding under the umbrella of convention impossible and,

²⁵ F. Wedekind, *Lulu*, Polish translation by M. Muskała, J. Margański, dir. M. Borczuch, Kraków, Stary Theatre, premiere: 26 October 2007.

consequently, it transferred the spectators from the level of aesthetic contemplation of a work of art to the level of ethical dilemma – for the costumes could not hide the phenomenal body of very young performers.

The first ever staging of Petr Zelenka's *Coming Clean* prepared by the same company²⁶ directed by the author himself, told a story of a writer (Krzysztof Globisz) who raped the 11-year-old son of his friends. It was not, however, a story of crime that was punished, but rather a story of the power and hypocrisy of the media today. The writer, wracked with guilt, decided to confess his sin in a television talk-show entitled "Coming Clean". Instead of being condemned, he was applauded by the audience directed in the studio. Though the episode was never broadcast, its protagonist was offered his own programme on television. However, just as in the case of *Lulu*, the spectators in Stary Theatre had to confront themselves with the presence of a child in the stage world – an 11-year-old victim of a paedophile. The plot was staged linearly – from the friends' visit, giving the boy sleeping pills, through the rape, about which the contrite writer talked to his publisher (Jan Peszek), to the television sequences. In this case, the presence of a young performer made the real world obscure the world presented. The ethical dilemma seemed more important than the aesthetic space.

In *Farinelli*, a monodrama the protagonist of which is not only the most famous Italian castrato, but also the co-author of the text and the actor performing on stage (Porczyk)²⁷, we twice see the Boy, Kacper Kuryś, finally not an anonymous child. First he just walks across the stage, then he sings a lullaby, which is absurd from the point of view of the world of adults: "Once there was a princess, / with a cleaver in her back. / The prince looked for her for ages, / they found her in the rubbish bin", repeating its lines louder and louder. In the world presented of this, as the authors put it, mental installation, the Boy is a trace of memory, representing Carlo Broschi before the operation that transformed him into a perfect tool and an art object. Yet the actual presence of a child on stage – earlier we see Kacper on screen in a romantic film sequence – leads to the above-mentioned shift of the audience's perception from representation to presence. As Jung argued in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* written down by Aniela Jaffè:

the sight of a child or a primitive will arouse certain longings in adult, civilised persons, longings which related to the unfulfilled desires and needs of those parts of the personality which have been blotted out of the total picture of the adapted persona ²⁸.

Therefore, childhood is – as he believed – a "more complete picture of the self, of the whole man in his pure individuality"²⁹.

²⁶ P. Zelenka, *Coming Clean*, Polish translation by K. Krauze, dir. P. Zelenka, Kraków, Stary Theatre, prapremiere: 27 October 2007.

²⁷ A. Herbut, B. Porczyk, *Farinelli*, dir. Ł. Twarkowski, Wrocław, Polski Theatre (Small Stage), premiere: 18 June 2011.

²⁸ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections. Recorded and Edited by Aniela Jaffè*, Vintage 1989, p. 244.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.