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/ CRIPPING PERFORMING ARTS

A Play on Words and Looks: ‘PokaZ’

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The article offers a poetological analysis of *PokaZ* (*ShoW*), a performance directed by Justyna Wielgus that references the practices of freak show. Piniewska discusses the compositional strategies used in *PokaZ* to subversively crip the oppressive freak show genre. Adopting the perspective of critical disability studies, the author reflects on the popular cultural images of disability (a victim, a hero, an eternal child, and a medical specimen) and discourses thereof (discourse of pity, medical discourse) referenced in the performance. The analysis centers on the ways of talking about and looking at disability that shape artistic communication with an audience.

Keywords: show; freak show; disability; discourse; gaze

A word of introduction

Disability in the field the arts often opens representations to reality and provokes one to verge beyond the world of the stage. A disabled body evokes questions concerning how one looks (or used to look) at it and what one says (or used to say) about it. In general terms, it prompts reflection on the

socially, historically and politically conditioned relations between the stage and the audience. Considered alongside these topics should be their emancipatory possibilities and, by extension, the practice of cripping the arts.

Following the struggle for equality in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement of persons with disabilities embraced the term *crip*[1] (*cripple*), which has incidentally also seeped into academic discourse; a similar gesture of 'perverse appropriation' (Zdrodowska, 2016, pp. 400-401), reclaiming a pejorative term routinely used as an invective,[2] concerns its Polish equivalent, 'kaleka.' I am interested not so much in the sociolinguistic aspect, but in the gesture or mechanism of interception, for I believe a similar principle permeates the composition of Justyna Wielgus's *PokaZ* (*ShoW*). In this sense, a cultural reflection on the potential for cripping the arts can arise from formal and poetological considerations of the organization and construction of specific scenes and the mechanisms in play in these discursive interceptions. For it is the play on words and looks that sets the stage for *PokaZ*. And I regard the stage not only literally (as a physical space), but also metaphorically: as a place where communication plays out (verbal and non-verbal, always bilateral; Ubersfeld, 2002; Świontek, 1999), conditioning the relationship between the observer/speaker and the observer/listener in the arts. 'Stage' is also a concept at work in the analysis of communication and social behavior (Debord, 2006; Goffman, 2008), which is not without significance with regard to the subject matter of this article.

In *PokaZ*, the de facto starting point is the current social situation (the 'social stage'):

> What images does a cityscape reject or marginalize? What and who do the citizens and residents of Warsaw refuse to look at? In June and July 2019, sociologist Bogna Kietlinska, PhD, and Aleksandra Zalewska-Królak, MA, conducted qualitative exploratory research for [the] Teatr 21 [company] on the theme of "rejected images in public space […]. The[ir] research and graphic arts have inspired the performance *PokaZ* (Drzewiecki, 2020).

It is not merely about the image itself, but rather about the entanglement of images and words; only an analysis of the play on words and looks will fully expose the social oppression played out in the show at multiple levels, at the same time demonstrating what the strategy of cripping the art involves, especially with regard to *freak shows*. In turn, an analysis of the (historicized and socialized) images of disability and discourses on disability activated in the performance, conducted from the perspective of critical disability studies (Schalk, 2017), along with an examination of the ways in which they play out, will enable reflection on the 'social stage' and the relations of broadcasting and receptive nature. *PokaZ* is an extraordinarily important performance not only because of Teatr 21's invaluable collaboration with today's recognized artists (Diana Niepce, Helena Urbańska, Katarzyna Żeglicka) or the correspondences between the piece and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's book *Staring*, published and publicized at the time, but also (and above all) because of the composition and stage organization in *PokaZ,*[3] which warrants investigative attention.

Freak show

In addition to the actors of Teatr 21 (Michał Pęszyński, Aleksandra

Skotarek), the authors of the performance (Justyna Wielgus – direction and stage movement; Justyna Lipko-Konieczna – dramaturgy; Wisła Nicieja – stage design) invited several contributions from outside the company (Diana Bastos Niepce, Maciej Kasprzak, Wojciech Stępień, Helena Urbańska and Katarzyna Żeglicka). The cast features a majority of performers with both physical and intellectual disabilities, eye-catching bodies, and queer makeup sported by some of the characters.

The title of the show lays down its framework as a display of oddities and a freak show.[4] Suspended above the stage is a neon, lit up throughout the performance to highlight the letters that form the words 'show,' 'specimen,' and 'eye,' as if to mount tension with respect to the central concepts behind the show. A quick disclaimer is due here: I am well aware of the complexity of the freak show genre, narrated using a variety of tools, methodologies and points of view. For the purposes of this analysis, I merely wish to operationalize the category of the freak show and venture an interpretation of the stage-audience relationship (rather than its historical reconstruction). In doing so, I embrace the perspective proposed by David A. Gerber, recognizing the violence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century freak shows, interpreted as (yet another) historical practice of objectifying people with disabilities (Gerber, 1996). Gerber's perspective seems to correspond with that adopted in *PokaZ*.

Persons with disabilities – along with other bodies deviating from the accepted 'norm'[5] – were put on display for entertainment and profit (Bogdan, 1990), primarily in museums, circuses, amusement parks, and during carnivals. The theatrical and visual potential of the freak show manifests itself in the encounter of the observed and the observer, staged within the framework of meticulously directed shows (in circuses and dime museums),

and featuring ‘bizarre’ scenery and ‘provocative banners’ (Garland-Thomson, 1997, pp. 51-52),[6] as well as elaborate makeup, including in photographs and postcards.[7] Among others, these aspects of the freak show aim to construct intelligible and easily reproducible meanings through schematic modes of presentation. Robert Bogdan distinguishes two basic strategies in the freak show: the exotic, used primarily to emphasize the racial and ethnic difference of persons identified as ‘wild’ and juxtaposed with animals; and the aggrandized, which emphasized the extraordinary skills or high social status of ‘freaks,’ in spite of their physical difference (Bogdan, 1990).[8]

Paraphrasing Michael M. Chemers, every disabled body on stage (in theater, and socially) enters into a dialogue with the freak show tradition.[9] From a historical perspective, it is impossible to consider disability in theater without recognizing the years of oppression associated with ‘staging stigma’ (Chemers, 2008). I purposely refer to the body in the context of freak shows, because the stage in such displays is limited to corporeality;[10] What attracts the viewer is precisely the body that deviates from the accepted ‘norm,’ which is intended to engage the audience affectively: to stir emotions, perhaps revulsion, disgust, curiosity. It is only around this body that an appropriate (schematic) narrative can be constructed, showcasing specific skills of the performers, embedding them in an appropriate mode of representation.

In opposition to the Aristotelian principle of catharsis and mimesis (wherein a character similar to the viewer is supposed to arouse pity, and the structure of the stage seeks to bring the viewer closer to the world being viewed), it is the difference and the impossibility of identification that is vital here. Viewers do not desire to be similar to the one(s) being viewed; they mere wish to take visual pleasure at a distance, so as to assert, ‘That’s not

me.' Thus, the freak show perpetuates the division between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal.' The perpetuation is not only metaphorical but also literal, in that it produces a space that places/exposes the 'freak' in the visual field. It is the staging of a particular relationship between the one who stands on the stage and the one who stares that lies at the heart of oppression towards the one that is put on display. Embedded in the frame of the show, this body is stripped of performative power, if not downright reified. Garland-Thomson points out: 'the body envelops and obliterates the freak's potential humanity. When the body becomes pure text, a freak has been produced from a physically disabled human being.' (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 59). Therefore, one can hardly speak of full-fledged stage communication here, as the two sides of the stage are at a distance from each other. When asked what draws audiences to his shows, Lew Graham, a manager associated with one of the most popular circus troupes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Sideshow), answered, 'an abnormality.'

While the freak's body – placed in an appropriate context and suitably directed – is crucial to the reception of a freak show, the spectators bodies, and therefore their points of view, their chronotopes, are not indispensable in this sense. In the relationship established by the stage, the spectator functions as a Cartesian 'disembodied eye/I;' the one that engages in 'just looking.' The reference to the term coined by Maaike Bleeker (2008), a scholar of visuality in theater, is not accidental here. Bleeker's claims regarding Bentham's Panopticon as interpreted by Foucault (2009) are reminiscent, albeit by means of a nonobvious juxtaposition, of the workings of a freak show stare:

> In the Panopticon, a disembodied all-seeing subject of vision is

> opposed to a body as object; subject and object are strictly separated. The disembodied subject appears as master over the body seen. This power is closely related to knowledge. The body/object cannot escape being known and mastered in its entirety by the subject seeing. It is this seeing, dissociated from the body and the other senses, that provides the subject with its power and knowledge (2008, p. 164).

This juxtaposition refers not only to the discussed relationship between the body, the object, and the disembodied spectator, but also (and above all) to the metaphorical spatial separation, expressed through the projected and indelible distance between them.

Artists with disabilities (and their associates) have deliberately referenced and appropriated the freak show formula. They dismantle the stage, originally construed in oppressive terms.[11] They provoke the audience to regard disability on their own terms. *PokaZ* is but one example of such artistic practice with subversive potential. The piece premiere at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw.[12] Thus, the museum space conveys additional semantic potential, stabilizing the frame of representation.

Viewers take their seats on chairs and on the floor around the performers, with the latter set up as living exhibits. Before the observers sit down, they can look at the ‘exhibition,’ only in this case the ‘exhibits’ reciprocate the gaze, provocatively maintaining eye contact. Their costumes, unusually skimpy and revealing of their bodies, encourage onlookers to stare.

The stage design also reinforces the frame of the show: the performers stand on rectangular mirrors that multiply the images, while a cameraman,

present throughout the performance, follows and projects their every move on a screen. Though we are not in a theater building, we nonetheless deal with theater here. However, this is not meant to be a passive viewing experience; the audience learns the rules of the show at the beginning. Urbańska enumerates them, with Kasprzak interpreting them into English:[13] one can extend and reduce the distance, sit where one wants, take the floor and, most importantly, stare at the performers. Thus, the show – directly and indirectly (for more on this, see the latter part of the article) – projects an engaged, active spectator, who, unlike in a freak show, not so much is not, but rather cannot, be a passive observer.

The first question addressed to the audience, 'What do you see?,' shatters the distance, as the actors and actresses hand microphones to the audience, intimidating some viewers. I assume that the social stage on which staring (at disability) plays out is originally grounded in visual, Foucaltian violence. Those who stare are to conceptualize what they see in language, with the discourse on disability naming and characterizing the object-subject of the gaze in a violent way. Thus, the onlookers may walk into a trap, especially since the person who first asks the above question is an 'able-bodied' individual (i.e., one without a disability); it is only then that a person with a disability reiterates it.[14] The question 'What do you see?' could thus be followed by another: 'What will you say you see?' During the performance I watched, no one thematized disability. After all, disability should not be the defining factor. But then again, on the other hand, one may wonder whether it should be acknowledged. Perhaps pretending not to see disability, not to notice it, is also inappropriate? Perhaps we lack the adequate language? In any case, it was easier for the audience to answer the question by simply recounting what the actresses were wearing.

This seemingly simple, in fact provocative question makes one uncomfortable, perhaps even reminds one that looking at disability on stage is historically loaded. The freak show functions as a backdrop for images of bodies crammed into specific patterns of stage presentation; bodies were referred to in a specific mode. In *PokaZ*, the show functions as a frame that activates: first, the memory of the violent history of freak shows; and second, the very issue of cultural clichés and stereotypes of disability, partly associated with the freak show, partly a product of subsequent times. It is through this frame, and incidentally within it, that a deconstruction of social perceptions of disability is possible.

Victims and hero(in)es

'Thanks for the pity,'[15] says Aleksandra Skotarek in one of her interactions with the viewers. As a brand of discourse on disability, the discourse of pity—rooted in its charitable model—materializes in two stereotypes. Polish studies in the social imaginary of disability invoke the figures of the 'helpless victim' and the 'brave hero' (Leonowicz-Bukała, Struck-Peregończyk, 2018). In Anglo-Saxon disability studies, the problem seems more multifarious, with these two figures referred to using established terms: the supercrip and the poster child. It would seem that these stereotypes are disjunctive, since one can reduce them to a victim-hero relationship; however, underpinning them are the same semantic structures and assumptions.[16]

Stereotypes produced by the discourse of pity correspond to figures of oddity displays, pointing to the historical continuity of narratives on disability and the cultural models of its representation. The stereotypical supercrip (as an apotheosis or a 'superstrong' character) corresponds directly to the 'aggrandized' representation (to invoke Bogdan's term again).

Garland-Thomson also references a photograph of Charles Tipp ('Armless Wonder'), pictured surrounded with household objects, holding a knife and a piece of wood that he whittles with his feet ('freaks made from people with congenital disabilities usually performed mundane activities in alternative modes choreographed to amaze audiences' [Garland-Thomson, 1997, pp. 51-52]). This example would fit the bill as a usual supercrip narrative. In the cases of the 'freak' (considered as a staged and directed character) and the supercrip involve the same representation mechanism: the person with a disability is meant to inspire and amaze the audience with their (both ordinary and extraordinary) abilities. Inherently designed to evoke pity in the viewer, the poster child demonstrates that while the purposes behind representing disability may vary, the mechanism at work remains the same. Staged in a particular way, the body and its (mandatorily) visible disability are to affect the audience through the sense of sight, performing a host of functions. Moreover, one can interpret the visual presentation itself, as seen on posters, as an extension of postcards, photographs, and brochures, integral to the freak show.

In her ironic monologue, Diana Bastos Niepce, a wheelchair-bound dancer and choreographer, unmasks the stereotype of supercrip (thus, she dismantles the socially perpetuated image it at the very level of presentation formula [Skwarczyńska, 1953]). The story concerns walking the dog in the park: as the performer cleans up after her dog, she is addressed by a woman who is impressed by Niepce's conduct. The story ends with the punch line, 'It is so inspiring to see you pick up your dog's shit!' Reducing this situation to a direct phrase exposes the absurdity of the regular supercrip narrative.

When the passerby requests to take her picture and share her story on Facebook, Niepce refuses. The performer resists being confined to an image.

Her refusal to be photographed by a normate (and for the normate's purposes) is a significant gesture: an act of defiance against the visual violence embedded in the history of disability, perpetuated through photographs, brochures, and freak show postcards.

Thus, the stage in *PokaZ* subverts the visual order of stereotypes of disability, along with the discursive order per se. The performance explicitly stigmatizes the stereotype of inspiring cripple, rooted in the discourse of pity, is stigmatized explicitly, at the same time questioning its very rationale: 'I could tell you my story, but I won't – I don't want to be a part of your inspiring fairy tales' (note the ironic opposition between the phrases 'my story' and 'your fairy tale'). Refusing to tell one's own story (much like refusing to be captured in a photograph) is one strategy for dealing with the discourse of pity; the other is to caricature it, to perform the stereotype to fulfill one's purpose while satisfying the interlocutor by visualizing their assumptions about disability. Niepce enacts (doubly: while on stage, she enacts a practice enacted in real life) the deliberate induction of pity at a public office; thus, she becomes a victim in order to comply with her interlocutor's notions, as if in a masquerade of disability, as dubbed by Tobin Siebers (2008). Bent over in a caricatured posture of humility, the performer delivers a monologue in Portuguese with an emotionally charged, trembling voice. The soliloquy is not interpreted. Yet, it is not necessary to understand it at the verbal level, as Niepce's gestures and facial expressions are sufficient to convey the message. By leveraging and subverting the social expectations that she regularly performs in everyday life, Niepce is able to accomplish her goal.

Moments later, her demeanor and manner of speaking shift dramatically. Her exaggerated facial expressions and gestures, calculated tone of voice,

and mischievous smile, all point to the irony triggered by the stereotypes imposed on the artist.

Perpetual children

Another stereotype exposed by the actors and actresses is the image of perpetual child, which may relate to the representation of the poster child. It is the "childification' of disability, intended to affectively influence audiences, that contributes to the perpetuation of, in particular, the stereotype of intellectually disabled or little person, frequently staged as perpetual children in freak shows (Garland Thomson, 2009, p. 173). *PokaZ* engages and challenges this cultural cliché by addressing the sexuality of persons with disabilities. One can distinguish three ways of addressing this issue: group scenes, direct confessions, and conversations/interviews. The starting point of the first practice is the question of what it means to be a woman. For, in light of the stereotypical vision, actress Helena Urbańska is not one (at least according to her university instructors, who suggested that she was 'not feminine enough'). Urbańska's story prompts a number of caricatured and satirical impressions of women whom patriarchal society regards as synonymous with femininity, e.g. Marilyn Monroe and Kate Moss: wearing high heels, with a cigarette in hand, rhythmic hip movements, and coquettish laughter. What this scene also demonstrates as Skotarek (a woman with a disability) joins the lesbian actress on stage, is the dual normativization of the stereotype: the male gaze always projects the woman as able-bodied and heterosexual. Skotarek obeys a series of commands: 'Touch your cleavage, but not like that, you're not a slut […] Try to laugh as if you wanted to say "Thrust me on the table and have sex with me, John!"' It is easy to overlook, to disregard the rather silent partner in this scene, to whom the actress directs her words. Onstage is Stępień, a middle-aged man

with an appearance, posture and attire that one would consider as 'normative.' In the subversive world of *PokaZ*, where the stage is populated by persons with disabilities and queers, it is the 'normate' who becomes the Other. However, the audience learns about the sexuality of Urbańska – whose appearance might otherwise be considered stereotypically canonical – through the words written on her legs, such as 'queer' and 'love is love.' Urbańska also addresses her sexuality directly, asking the audience whether she 'looks like a lesbian,' thereby raising the issue of the visibility and invisibility of identities deviating from the 'norm.'[17]

Within the performed scene, there is nothing unusual about a woman with a disability directing such a message toward a man – unlike in everyday life, where the sexuality of people with disabilities remains a taboo subject. Joining the actresses are the fellow performers in a dance scene set to the tune of Beyoncé's *Single Ladies*. The image is simple, albeit rare: a group of diverse persons having fun together, dancing, fooling around.

The laughter accompanying the group scene is contrasted with the seriousness of the next sequence (intended as a direct confession), which addresses the widespread infantilization of persons with Down syndrome. This arrangement of the two scenes, as well as the transition from 'we' to 'I,' amplifies the words of an actress with Trisomy 21: 'It wasn't nice when you called me a child.' It is not only with the message but also with the form that the scene challenges the stereotype of perpetual child. In a monologue addressed *ad spectatores*, the actress transcends the imaginary framework that society imposes on her, thus regaining her own voice. In addition to addressing an unspecified yet specific addressee, Skotarek also delivers a simple message from the stage: 'My body is sexual,' she exclaims emphatically, while simultaneously baring her breasts. The message, along

with the accompanying image, has an affective impact on the viewers, primarily through the sense of sight; the stereotype of child assumes its asexuality, and it is this assumption that the viewers must confront, as they behold a new image that defies their preconceptions. The actress explores her body, exposes her breasts, takes a close look at her hands, experiences her physicality, examining it on stage. It seems as though she gazes at her body as something alien, despite the subjective exclamation about its sexuality. The sense of estrangement or unease expressed by Skotarek does not negate her body's autonomy; rather, it is precisely through an acute awareness of her own body and careful self-observation – in opposition to external narratives that infantilize people with disabilities – that Skotarek is able to boldly proclaim her sexuality. This theme is also explored in *Libido romantico* and the video performance *Body to Body with Marilyn*.

Another stage mechanism is at work in the case of Niepce and Pęszyński's conversation about sex. Two persons with disabilities (physical and intellectual) discuss their respective experiences, favorite sexual positions and first times, shattering social taboos. The conversation resembles an interview, which makes the viewer acutely aware of the absence of such statements in mainstream media, at the same time emphasizing that the performative format selected seeks to give voice to the interviewees and their statements. These three sequences concerning the sexuality of individuals with disabilities allude to different conventions: cabaret-style humor and laughter; the gravity of direct confession and interpellation; and the curiosity-driven interview or conversation. Despite the varied forms and aesthetics, they serve the same purpose: this time, the portrayal of a disabled person's sexuality is shaped by the individual themselves, not by others. The sexuality of people with disabilities has been (and perhaps still is) discussed in two primary contexts, both of which effectively deny it. The

first is the aforementioned infantilization, where the erotic needs of disabled individuals (especially those with intellectual disabilities) are overlooked, since the latter are reduced to 'perpetual children.' Second, if one reconstructs the historical ways of addressing disability, one will find that they have involved sterilization, forced isolation in women's and men's centers, and mass murder. Although the play does not portray this most brutal slice of history directly, every time a person with a disability – both on and off stage – raises the topic of their sexuality and reproductive rights, they inevitably revisit the specter of eugenics, marginalized on the pages of history.[18]

The ironic interaction between the actors and actresses and the audience can serve as a metatheatrical commentary on the discussed scene. Niepce concludes the interview with the words, 'I'm sorry for these questions, I'm sorry for this conversation, I know you weren't prepared for it;' she and Pęszyński are soon joined by the other actors, who run through the audience, issuing direct apologies to selected viewers. One actor says, 'We're sorry for dragging you to the theater on a day like this and for taking up space here. Our bad,' thus raising the issue of the absence and invisibility of people with disabilities in theater and public spaces. Again, the tension between comedy and seriousness mounts as Skotarek delivers her lines: 'I'm sorry you think I'm retarded,[19] I'm sorry, I'm sorry I have Down syndrome.' While the actress begins the monologue in a solemn manner, she soon transitions into an increasingly exaggerated howl (is she laughing? crying?), collapsing onto the floor and continuing her round of apologies. The monologue abruptly ends with Urbańska stating, 'Alright, Olka, just sit down already!' This time, the scene—underpinned by irony, caricature, and hyperbole—causes the audience discomfort.

Medical specimens

Petra Kuppers contends that one of the reasons for the termination of freak shows was 'the rise of the medical system […] as bodily difference becomes a matter of medical discipline, and displays become confined to the medical theater'[20] (Kuppers, 2003, p. 37). Nevertheless, it seems impossible to draw a clear-cut boundary between the freak show tradition and the medical gaze, nor between science, natural science, and entertainment, as evidenced by the work of P.T. Barnum (Goodall, 2006). Wieczorkiewicz recounts a type of bidirectional mediation, 'wherein science influences narratives of the miraculous, and imagination fuels an empirical approach.' Physicians and scientists were frequent spectators at oddity exhibits, observing and embedding the bodies on display into scientific and medical discourse. In turn, 'scientific questions were again translated into stories that attracted audiences by stimulating the imagination' (Wieczorkiewicz, 2019, s. 261). Thus, the invocation of medical theater practices in *PokaZ* becomes all the more intriguing:

> Most specifically, the 'medical theater' refers to the operating room, the operating theater. More broadly, the 'medical theater' is also used to refer to the places and practices that surround demonstration as a method of dissemination of medical knowledge. Patients, or corpses, were paraded or dissected in an amphitheater.[21]

Treating living people like medical exhibits may seem as a long-forgotten practice, and yet Żeglicka's monologue contradicts this intuition: 'I'm thirteen years old, I'm standing on a stage in an auditorium filled with

people […] I'm standing and I realize just how cold and ashamed I feel […] this was my first performance ever.' The teenager was asked to undress, which she refused to do, and so she was allowed to leave her T-shirt and panties on. This is yet another practice that objectifies the non-canonical body, put on violent display; a body reduced (in accordance with the medical model) to a given medical condition and disability (in the case of oddity displays, a body reduced to its 'freakish' qualities). Żeglicka's monologue sets in motion the problem of 'medical gaze' (Foucault, 1999). In *PokaZ*, the actress is also seen standing on the stage, surrounded by a host of people, and wearing a see-through outfit that reveals her naked body. It is not necessary to thematize the difference between the two shows, as the tensions between them can be conveyed by the notions of shame and pride (relevant for disability studies).

Żeglicka's statement follows Skotarek's aforementioned monologue on sexuality, and the juxtaposition of these two scenes exposes two distinct ways of looking at the disabled body; although representing different perspectives, they both rest on the same ableist assumptions: the first focuses on the medical condition, or rather its interpretation according to medical discourse, while the second highlights social conditioning (asexuality, dependence entailed in the stereotype of perpetual child). While the goals, circumstances, and functions of freak shows and medical theater were different, one can observe similarities in the staging mechanisms and the visual dynamics of the visual relationship, involving the power of the viewer over the passive viewee. In this context, the form selected by Żeglicka – that of a monologue, a direct confession – enables her to reclaim agency as an active subject. This is not the only instance in Żeglicka's body of work that comes to mind in relation to medical theater and artistic practices referencing medicalizing discourses. In *Contrast Resonance*, the

performer executes a choreography, with sounds characteristic of an MRI machine heard in the background, which – along with the projected images and the accompanying narrative – immediately sets off medical connotations.

Imagine that

I consider Niepce's two monologues to be the framing device of the performance. The first, delivered at the beginning of the show, opens with a request addressed to the audience, who are to close their eyes and imagine the following scene: 'One day, you wake up in a different body, one that you don't understand, and that doesn't understand you.' This direct appeal to the audience creates a participatory dynamic, removing the safety of the fourth wall. The performance engages the audience's field of vision: on the one hand, it features an invitation to stare (what do you see?) and provocations; on the other, a directive to overlook, to close one's eyes to the images of disabilities on stage – perhaps also to culturally ingrained images of disabilities. The actress's monologue testifies to the experience of identity transformation: the act of becoming a person with a disability. The audience is asked not so much to watch, but to imagine, to try to empathize with the experience of corporeal change, and by extension, life change. Moments later, the audience can open their eyes again and tune in to the actress's monologue, punctuated by commands the commands: 'Imagine that,' 'Try this, it'll be fun,' or 'You can feel it.' The statement is replete with visual metaphors, comparisons, epithets, and action verbs that dynamize the story. The text becomes increasingly abstract, if not outright surreal; the successive comparisons of the sensations experienced by the 'new' body are arranged as follows: like the body of a doll – like that of a chicken – an octopus – a mermaid – a paralyzed cat – a happy monster – a rock. The choreography accompanying the story is dynamic, with Niepce performing

each successive metamorphosis with gestures and movements. The monologue has a finite composition, as the first phrase is reiterated at the end, albeit in a different tone. To imagine being/becoming disabled is inaccessible to humans, as impossible as empathizing with a fairy tale character, an object, an octopus and, one might add, a bat (Nagel, 1996). Thus, I interpret the actress's words as an objection to theories of empathy and a provocation, a statement that makes the viewers realize that, despite being asked to do so – they are be incapable of imagining what it means to be a person with a disability. In the context of the monologue, the experience of the body is unimaginable; in the context of the performance as a whole, so is the experience of multi-level discrimination, of the various forms of violence (symbolic and other), but also of being part of this community. Imagine that in order to realize there are some things you are incapable of imagining.

The closing monologue is structured in a different grain. Niepce's personal story as a dancer discovering her body with an acquired disability intertwines with a reflection on the 'social body.' The actress directly addresses what had not been explicitly stated on stage, though it always remains present: 'the fascist gaze on the perfect body, one that aligns with the norm.' Her narrative on departing from self-hatred towards a recognition of the 'beauty and virtuosity' of her own body, towards a redefinition of her artistic identity on new terms, intertwines with a reflection on being different in society. In Niepce's framing, however, difference is a source of liberation, not of violence. The fact that Urbańska reads out the monologue in English[22] (rather than delivering it from memory, as if to emphasize the role of mediation) makes for an interesting compositional device; from a technical perspective, this enables Niepce to focus on the demanding choreography. More broadly, it may suggest what things could be like if

statements on the need to accept diversity and recognize societal oppression were made *by* the Other rather than *about* the Other. As the monologue is read out, the actress, begins to undress, tenderly and attentively, slipping from her wheelchair onto the floor, exploring the boundaries of her body in a choreography that is completely different from the one accompanying the first monologue: less dynamic, profoundly sensual. The woman performs a subtle, slow-burning choreography; she does not move, but remains seated on the floor, arranging her legs into specific poses. This is not the type of movement the audience is accustomed to; this is the movement tailored to the capacities of a disabled body, executed on its own terms. This time, the actress's nudity is not provocative; it emphasizes the authenticity of her physical experience, fully exposed and thus profoundly vulnerable.

Looking at the fragile, individual female body, one hears about how it functions on the social and cultural planes, which leads one to an obvious conclusion, from which, however, one does not always draw conclusions: that the private and the public are inseparable, and that bodies – to paraphrase Kate Millett – are 'a status category with political implications' (Millett, 1970, p. 24). Significantly, making the closing statement in the piece is Niepce, who applies the final touches to its compositional frame: 'Imagine that, one day, you wake up in a society that does not understand you, a society that *you* don't understand. Can you imagine that?' This phrase differs from the one uttered in the opening monologue by one noun only, with society substituting for the body. For it is not the body that is the problem; it is the way society perceives it. Joining the dancer are the others, with each and every one of them asking the audience the aforementioned question.

Using communicative strategies that engage the audience, including

monologue, confession, and dialogue (interview) – all of which establish the subjectivity of the performers – as well as juxtaposed comedic and serious scenes, and the deconstruction of the social imaginary of disability, *PokaZ* both dismantles and reclaims the stage. The performers speak not only in their own voices but also appropriate social languages that reveal the historically embedded attitudes toward persons with disabilities. The audience is thus compelled to confront the persistent ways of speaking about and looking at disability. We are not merely watching the performers; we are watching ourselves, our reality. The stage acts as a mirror reflecting cultural images and discourses of disability. The composition of *PokaZ* underscores that those without disabilities cannot fully grasp what it means to navigate one's way in society as a person with a disability. At the same time, the performance contemplates whether persons with disabilities can carve a niche in the social order, and do so on their own terms.

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Footnotes

1. For more on the functioning of the *supercrip* stereotype, see below. The article features the terms *crip* and *freak*. The second notion seems to be much more historically loaded, since it refers to a particular spectatorial practice and the ways of directing (construing) the freak, entailed in its tradition, as discussed later. The text merely signals the problems entailed in the juxtaposition these terms, for it is an issue that requires a separate study.
2. For the record, back in the early twentieth century, this lexeme constituted "a basic concept of rehabilitation and special pedagogy, whereas now [i.e., in 2014, which is when the cited article was published - A.P.] it has a mostly negative overtone, and denotes someone who is inept, awkward" (Bełza, Prysak, 2014, p. 28). Even in the late twentieth century, notes Dorota Sadowska, *Słownik współczesnego języka polskiego* (the Dictionary of Modern Polish Language, 1998) offered two definitions of said noun, referencing a physically damaged body and the inability of "normal" functioning, on the one hand, and a dismissive designation of a person unable to perform an easy task (Sadowska, 2005, p. 89), on the other. In turn, Marcin Garbat (2015, p. 143) notes that, "in colloquial terms, a cripple is a symbol of social vulnerability and empathy, someone helpless." It is difficult to concur with this statement and to find it empathetic from today's perspective. This is especially true with regard to the negative image of people with disabilities, construed at the level of language, as Alicja Fidowicz points out with reference to the collocation "kaleka życiowy" (lit. "a cripple in life"), "which the dictionary defines as 'a person who is inept, unable to cope with life, impractical'" (Fidowicz, 2015, p. 149).
3. The English version of the title (*The ShoW*) does not fully convey the meaning of the Polish original (*PokaZ*). Read backward, the Polish title forms an anagram (*ZakoP,* "bury"); moreover, when separated from the uppercase letters, the lowercase ones form the word *oka* ("eye(s)"), crucial in the context of the subject matter, i.e., the way society perceives disability and what it sees in the process.
4. Hereinafter, I limit my discussion of the constructs of freak and freak show solely to the context of actresses and actors with disabilities; I will thematize the stage presence of Urbańska and Stępień in the subsequent section of the paper.
5. I use quotation marks to emphasize the conventionality of this concept; for more on the construct of norm, see L.J. Davis, 2022.
6. Unpaginated sheets between pp. 51 and 52 feature historic photographs documenting the freak show.
7. Accompanied by comments and reflections on the various modes of presentation, Robert Bogdan's book (2012) features historical photographs and postcards. During shows, audiences could also buy "souvenir life narratives" featuring an element of the miraculous, attained through hyperbolized accounts of freaks' lives, as well as medical language,

intended to attest to the “authentications of the extraordinary body” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, pp. 51-52).
8. Drawin on Bogdan’s diagnoses, Anna Wieczorkiewicz investigates examples of stage presentations based on the cases of Stefan Bibrowski, a Pole who, through a German entrepreneur, featured in the most popular American oddity displays as a “lion-man,” and Krao, a Siamese girl known as “half-human, half-monkey,” see Wieczorkiewicz, 2019, pp. 248-253. While Bogdan’s thorough compilation of historical material and analysis of the ways in which freaks were presented is not objectionable, his “neutralizing [of] the problem of exploitation [of people with disabilities - A.P.]” does raise questions (Gerber, 1996).
9. In his analyses of the freak show, Chemers follows in the footsteps of other researchers and scholars of disability studies, including Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, invoking the phenomenon of stigma as defined by Erving Goffman, which he considers not in essential terms, but in the context of social interactions.
10. From a different perspective, concentrating on the body simultaneously raises awareness of the problem of invisible disabilities (intellectual, visual, hearing). The freak show featured only people with disabilities that engendered a perceptible difference.
11. Conversely, some researchers consider freak show artists as active and conscious performers, benefitting from the situation financially and artistically. See Chemers, 2008, p. 9; Davies, 2015, p. 12.
12. While *PokaZ* has also featured in other venues, the museum context of its premiere is crucial.
13. While performing in the show, Niepce does not speak Polish, hence the piece is (for the most part) performed in two languages, with Urbańska and Kasprzak typically acting as consecutive interpreters.
14. Importantly, the question recurs in Pęszyński’s scene, who describes Żeglicka’s body with intense focus in an exquisitely poetic manner; when two persons with disabilities talk, when a normate’s gaze is not involved, the dynamic of their relationship is radically different.
15. All quotes come from a recording I have accessed courtesy of the show’s authors.
16. Notably, the poster child refers to images of children on posters promoting fundraisers for the sick and disabled (this way of representation can also apply to adults, infantilizing their image). They are portrayed precisely in such a way as to arouse sympathy and pity, to put the audience under the moral obligation to help the “weaker.” In turn, Sami Schalk identifies three types of supercrip narratives: regular (persons with disabilities become supercrips by merely performing everyday activities “in spite of” their “limitations”); glorified (those capable of exceptional achievements, both persons with disabilities and the so-called able-bodied individuals); superpowered (invoking the cultural imagery of superheroes with disabilities) (Schalk, 2016). While this article affords no space for a detailed reconstruction of the stereotypes referenced, they have been addressed extensively in the subject literature (e.g., Longmore, 2014; Falk-Allen, 2018; Hayes & Black, 2003).
17. Although queer individuals are also regarded as diverging from the “norm,” Urbańska’s presence in *PokaZ* demonstrates that as long as there is no difference and no possibility of visual verification of “otherness” (such as the inscriptions on the actress’s legs), one can pass oneself off as normative, which seemingly reinforces the initial thesis of the “non-normative,” visible corporeality that reinforces the freak construct.
18. For instance, when analyzing the social media of activists with disabilities addressing their sexuality and desire to have a child, one encounters comments that align with the

eugenics discourse, advancing the same arguments as a century ago. A case in point can be found in the Instagram posts by influencers-educators with disabilities such as Wojciech Sawicki (https://www.instagram.com/p/ClrJzxGI9VE/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D&fbclid=IwAR31tLPp_JuugtRKJ4NvcjA3UC4p12FG_ahHebcvGziryz8NbwFrE7YSM1w, accessed October 10, 2023) and Alex Dacy (https://www.instagram.com/p/CnTDN8WITV2/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D&fbclid=IwAR2rHVSL9LM9M_ozPm-pkNzHGmo973nUJDcT0aCKHU9gAQVGPmPPUhARspM, accessed October 10, 2023).

19. The original phrase as used in the piece reads, “Uważacie mnie za Downa” (lit. “You think I’m a Down”), wherein the full name of the genetic disorder (i.e., Down’s syndrome) is abbreviated and used as a derogatory term in order to stigmatize a person with said disability. (Translator’s note).

20. It seems that the term “anatomical,” as used in Polish literature on the subject, refers primarily to the theatricalization of autopsies. The adjective “medical” (medical) also refers to displays of persons with abnormal body structures or diseases before medical students-as-spectators, as well as surgeries observed by those students (in turn, in English, an operating room is also referred to as an “operating theater”).

21. Kuppers, 2003, p. 38. Anatomical/medical theater is a subject that requires a separate study; thus, in this instance, I merely signal its existence.

22. Interpreting the monologue simultaneously is Kasprzak.

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