didaskalia
gazeta teatralna

From the issue: **English Issue 2021**
DOI: 10.34762/e3ah-tb41
Source URL: https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/they-are-future-hope-and-call-action

/ participation

They Are the Future. Hope and a Call for Action

Agata Siwiak | Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

The text discusses two theatre performances, *h.* directed by Daniel Stachuła and *To my jesteśmy przyszłością* (We Are the Future) directed by Jakub Skrzywanek. Both productions are primarily addressed to teenage audiences and represent engaging theatre. Their main subject is violence suffered by young people due to their psychosexual orientation and gender. The author of the article notes the efficiency (effectiveness) of the two projects, which she associates with the concept of 'performance of possibilities'. Performative ethnography, but also experimental pedagogy, feminism and studies of homophobic violence provide the research framework for the text.

Keywords: theatre; ethnography; homophobia; pedagogy; violence

Daniel Stachuła's *h.* (premiere: 15 October 2019) and Jakub Skrzywanek's *To my jesteśmy przyszłością* (We Are the Future; premiere: 19-20 October 2019) have a lot in common, though their creators come from completely different artistic backgrounds. Skrzywanek is a young director, graduate of the Krakow Academy of Theatre arts, and has a strong position in mainstream theatre; Stachuła – a theatre pedagogue, Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Polish Studies in Poznań, opera director and former teacher. The

two productions are addressed to young people. Both Stachuła and Skrzywanek used the method of performance ethnography oriented towards critical pedagogy. Stachuła carried out an ethnographic intervention and performative action in a school; Skrzywanek conducted a series of interviews with young people and then invited four of them to take part in the performance in an independent Krakow theatre. Both artistic actions make changes in the lives of the audience and the participants, transforming their vision of the world and its cultural scripts. Lastly, both performances were created on the fringes of mainstream theatre.

According to Bryant Keith Alexander, performance ethnography[1] is a social action, based on the union of performance and ethnography, that is an excellent method of researching and inspiring culture and presupposes political activism and the possibility of social change; "This social action… is not necessarily that which is set into violent motion to overthrow dominant structures of oppression: it is a physical force set against the desire of knowing and being in the world" (Alexander, 2009, p. 412). I understand being in the world as the opportunity to express a self that is honest and critical of culture and the fields of power generated by it. A self that decides what it will speak and take action about. Alexander also highlights the value and social and educational effectiveness of the alliance of ethnography and critical pedagogy. One of the authors invoked by him to describe this phenomenon is Peter McLaren, an acclaimed scholar of critical pedagogy. His concept of enfleshment is based on the assumption that the body is "that meeting place of both the unthought social norms in which meaning is always already in place and the ongoing production of knowledge through particular social, institutional and disciplinary procedures" (McLaren, 1993, p. 275). The researcher claims that it is the body – feeling, dialogical, discursive and performative – that gives rise to the awareness that can lead

to transformation.

Both Stachuła's *h.* and Skrzywanek's *We Are the Future* are excellent examples of work under the rubric of critical performance pedagogy. Both performances expose the cultural mechanisms of patriarchal power and the related hegemony of heteronormativity which entails a culture of silence, a culture of fear and power over the body. They also offer hope, pointing to the potential of the politics of the voice and the practice of freedom which can change the biographies of children and young people. To describe the works under analysis, I carried out interview-based research. In the case of *h.* I spoke with pupils of Dr. Franciszek Witaszek Primary School in Poznań, which was a partner in the production, the Polish teacher who supervised the project on its behalf, the school's principal, the director and the counsellor who led the after-the-show workshops with him[2]. I conducted a group interview with the director and performers of *We Are the Future*. Due to the pandemic, I was not able to talk to the audience. The aim of these meetings was to acquire an ethnographic base that would enable me to produce a "dense description" of the two works, comprising the impact and transformative potential of the plays, the methodology and ethics of the artists" work and the environment and context in which the performances were created.

h.

The play premiered in a classroom in the above-mentioned primary school. It received financial support from the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw[3] as part of the the 4th Jan Dorman Competition and was produced at the Stanisław Moniuszko Wielki Theatre in Poznań. The starting point for the work was Aleksandra Szyłło's report *Mamo, jestem zerem* (Mom, I'm a Zero;

Szyłło, 2015) in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, about the suicide of Dominik Symański, a first former of a lower secondary school in Bieżuń. Although the boy's psychosexual orientation is not known, he was a victim of "violence motivated by homophobia" (Pogorzelska, Rudnicki, 2020, p. 43). As Szyłło writes, Facebook fan pages such as *Dominik Szymański – dobrze, że zdechł* or (Dominik Szymański – It's Good That He's Dead) *Pedał Dominik Szymański* (Dominik Szymański Homo) continued to be created even after his death. A comment on one of those pages read: "Higher school of tying shoelaces"; Dominik hanged himself at home with shoelaces tied to a doorframe.

I watch the play in one of Poznań's private schools. We enter a large classroom along with an audience of eight-graders and sit on the benches around. A plywood chest sits in the middle of this space. Also present in the room are female teachers, who help us to our seats. We sit cramped. At one point one of the teachers says: "Silence, please, the artists are about to begin the performance." A travestied motif from Franz Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* (the production's audiosphere was created by Przemysław Degórski) plays in the background. As the lids at the sides and top of the chest open, a boy (Olaf Przybytniak) and a girl (Julia Korbańska) emerge who perform a neoclassical choreography around and on the chest. According to the script, the dancer is an alter ego of Franek, the play's protagonist, and the girl clearly symbolizes death. This poetic, even elaborate scene is an introduction to a very dynamic theatre edited like a video clip whose rhythm is set by an online soundscape and videos made on TikTok (the latter by the duo Ośko/Bogunia). The text is based on the newspaper report, the performers' improvisations and Marcin Teodorczyk's article *Black Pink*[4] about Dominik Szymański's story. The dramatic structure of *h.* is both simple and strongly affective, which was the director Daniel Stachuła's intention

from the beginning:

> At one point I realized that the play has the structure of a classic melodrama. It is based on emotions, provokes the audience to empathize with the protagonist and revolves around three figures: the victim, the tormentor and the defender (Stachuła, 2020).

The victim is Franek (Michał Kurek), his friend Kaśka (Angelika Mierzwa) comes to his defence, and the violence is perpetrated by his schoolmates and the Counsellor (also played by Mierzwa), who epitomizes the Polish education system. Franek and Kaśka record a video clip that they post online. This marks the beginning of an "internet drama" as "injurious speech" (Butler, 2010) appears under the clip: "homo", "what a faggoty face, I feel sick." The girl urges Franek to delete the video, and when Franek says it doesn't make sense because they are not going to stop writing, Kaśka asks: "So? You're just going to sit and wait until they stop?", "Well, I can't really walk up to them and say, "hey, don't do this", Franek replies. When the boy, encouraged by Kaśka to report the situation to an adult, visits the school counsellor, she says: "I was on hall duty today. You had history there and I deliberately watched to see if something was going on. And nothing was going on, sunshine." She adds that such nice students couldn't possibly hurt Franek.

When the boy lists the insults from online comments: "homo", "moron", "slag", "faggot", the woman interrupts him, unable to bear these words. She clearly wants to end the conversation and suggests two solutions: telling the boy's mother about the situation (shifting the responsibility for school violence onto the parent) and removing his TikTok account: "No TikTok, no

problem, right?" She thus victimizes the boy: "If you hadn't been there, the whole thing wouldn't have happened so you asked for it." (This is reminiscent of blaming raped women: "If you hadn't dressed like that…").

Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska's studies (2019) of the relationship between gender and school violence show that when young people sexually harassed because of their gender or orientation seek help from adults, the most recommended strategy is to minimize contact with the perpetrator, endure the attacks in silence, escape and evade. On the other hand, some students point out that teachers often take the side of the perpetrators, particularly when the latter have a strong position in school and are popular (Chmura-Rutkowska, 2019, p. 276). The silence of the victims is convenient for those who have real and symbolic power over the education system.

Marzenna Pogorzelska i Paweł Rudnicki, authors of the book *Przecież jesteśmy. Homofobiczna przemoc w polskich szkołach – narracje gejów i lesbijek* (2020), begin a chapter on homophobic violence with teachers who act as guardians of gender norms, even though the highest percentage of perpetrators are boys and young men. But, as the scholars write, it's the teaching staff who wield special power in school; violence of on their part has a much stronger impact (Pogorzelska, Rudnicki, 2020, p. 97). The already-mentioned Peter McLaren (1998) notes that there is no stronger voice in school than teacher voice. It can be a destructive or emancipatory factor in a student's life. One voice can change a young person's circumstances. McLaren points to a particularly harmful aspect related to concealments. Any discussion of teacher authority would be incomplete without the mention of Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic violence – subtle and transparent even to its victims (see Bourdieu, Passeron, 2006). Symbolic violence is used in the "hidden curriculum" – unofficial, elusive and implicit

messages conveyed by required readings, students' relations with teachers and the vision of the world reproduced by adults. The hidden curriculum always represents the dominant ideology and unreflectively recognizes it as natural, normal and the only true one. Pogorzelska and Rudnicki note a fact that is obvious but deserves to be mentioned also in this context. Socially internalized normality and naturalness are historically conditioned in Poland by the Communist regime's policies, opposed to those of the Catholic Church, but consistent with them as regards non-heteronormative people. Today they are associated with the dominant nationalist groups and still with the Church, whose presence in school is symbolic (crosses in classrooms) and real (clergy and catechists). Both these centres of power stigmatize homosexuality and non-binary gender: they describe them by means of pogrom ("the Bible condemns gays"), pathologize them (disease, deviation), regard homosexuality as a sin (one of the dominant narratives in religion classes), produce and disseminate the story of alternativeless heterosexuality (textbooks which depict only heteronormative families, send messages along the lines of "when you grow up, you'll have a girlfriend or wife" to boys and "boyfriend or husband" to girls), and use the strategy of "significant absence and silence" (Pogorzelska, Rudnicki, 2020, pp. 61-68).

Let's go back to the Counsellor's advice. Dominik refuses her suggestion that he close his social media accounts. It's his struggle to have a voice, to be present; his only gesture of resistance. Rudnicki and Pogorzelska emphasize that "silencing, depriving of a voice, suppressing the narrative, and training in silence are all instruments of domination over children and youth, used not only by teachers, but also by their peers from the dominant group." They add that the strategy of taking away the voice has a long history in modernist societies, and the alternative to silence is the "adoption of the language of the dominant group" (Rudnicki, Pogorzelska, 2020, p. 64). In

schools the language of the dominant group is adopted most often by boys (and, on a broader social plane, by men) – Polish and foreign studies show that they are usually the perpetrators of violence against LGBT people. Homophobia is often intertwined with sexism; some of the comments under Franek's video read: "he dances like a homo", even the boy repeats: "I was a cunt (for them)". A boy who does not comply with the patriarchal model of "hegemonic" or "dominant masculinity", as R.W. Connell (1995) would say, will also be a "chick", "slut", "skank" (Chmura-Rutkowska, 2019, p. 260) for the dominant group.

In the play Franek commits suicide like Dominik Szymański, hanging himself with shoelaces, though not at home but in a classroom. The scale of young people's suffering in Poland is unprecedented. The 2017 report of the Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation (Włodarczyk, 2017) states that "in terms of suicide attempts resulting in death among children aged 10-19, Poland is second in Europe after Germany" (2017). According to Marta Abramowicz's (2017) studies, 67.2 per cent of LGBT people aged 14-17 confirmed they had suicidal thoughts in the months preceding the survey; in the 18-25 age group, the percentage was 46.1. The rate was 10% in the general population. Still, the government sees no need for changes in the Polish education system so as to make school a safe place. Sex education in schools doesn't exist and is equated by those in power with the sexualization of children and promotion of pedophilia. And there is no systemic anti-discrimination education either for teachers or children.

In the last scene, Kaśka fantasizes about the boy's possible alternative life:

> He smokes cigarettes with his mates behind the school. His mother lays into him for that all the time. …

He goes to gym and wants to be strong.

He’s overcoming his insecurities.

He’s a boring teenager who doesn’t stand out from the crowd.

He’s like you.

Franek’s friend is another victim of the tragedy – a defenceless witness without the support of adults. The trauma of her friend’s suicide – a burning wound, a hole – will stay with her for a long time, perhaps forever. Admittedly, Kaśka is brave: 60 per cent of witnesses are only passive bystanders to violence, 51 per cent pretend not to see or hear anything, 41 per cent respond to violence with laughter (Chmura-Rutkowska, 2019, p. 268). In addition, being friends with the victim condemned her to isolation and exposed her to peer violence.

Daniel Stachuła also engaged students from the Primary School No. 9 to work on *h.* in an advisory capacity as experts. The function was performed by the people who had accepted the teacher’s invitation. They were the first to see the performance and, with Stachuła’s encouragement, could suggest changes to the authors.[5] The experience was very important to the young people in terms of agency; they were also proud that an adult artist treated them as partners: he suggested that they work together on the production and took their opinion into account (“We felt that our opinion mattered, that it later worked in the performance and that it was thanks to us”; “It was super that we were responsible for that [the performance – AS]”; “It was incredible that we had said something and the result was a real change).

The experts, Anastazja, Ania, Kamil, Kuba, Oliwia, Sandra and Zuza[6] from eight grade, said that watching the play was a very strong emotional experience for them ("We've never been to a performance that has moved us so much. Many of us were crying") and expressed belief in the transformative power of theatre ("I watched the teachers" reactions; some were crying, they were moved. Something may have fallen apart for them. Maybe they saw themselves as they once were. We sometimes assume that adults don't understand, but, in fact, they can understand, they can even change their worldview"). They also thought that theatre can serve as an intermediary between them and adults ("It was great that the play was both for us and for adults and helped them understand our life better"; "It's good that the performance gave some adults something to think about, especially the teachers, who should know that you need to help young people when they have problems"; Anastazja, Ania, Bartek, Jaźwińska, Kamil, Kinga, Kuba, Oliwia, Sandra, Zuza, 2020). The pupils who saw the performance – Oliwia and Sandra from sixth grade and Bartek and Kinga from eighth – told me how the play had helped them work through violence: it "was very useful because me and girls from my class used to post hate comments and we now know what it means"; "When we left after the show, we didn't have to say anything. And we have never hated online since then" (ibidem).

Even though Stachuła invited "experts of experience" to consult them about the play as early as the rehearsals, *h.* could be regarded as a classical form of theatrical performance with a closed structure and stage performers. But that would be an oversimplification. The key consideration here is where and for what audience the show is performed and how it affects and transforms relations in that community. The performance is not played in a theatre or a community centre, but in a school, an institution whose practice is subject to the authors' critical insight and a place where the story told in the play may

have happened. School is also a space of intervention and change. An important element of the intervention is after-the-show workshops, where the moderators can resolve with the audience and performers what has happened during the play on an emotional and real level (such as the early departure by one of the female students). As a result, the school and the attendant situation become a kind of ethnographic "trap" – it can capture the interactions, tensions and relations generated in the school community. Caught in the trap, they are exposed and can be viewed as though in freeze-frame, and then reflected upon and worked through. A case in point is the understanding of the hate that happened in Poznań's Primary School No. 9. In Poland, the phenomenon of "trap" was expertly analyzed by Tomasz Rakowski, Dorota Ogrodzka and Ewa Rossal (2017), who proposed a project of creative and opening ethnography combining "the spheres of anthropology and its 'dense participation' with a simultaneous creative process that brings out unnoticed and unknown cultural potential." According to the scholars, this concept of "trap" becomes a new metaphor in anthropology and art theory.

We Are the Future

The production was staged as part of the *Laboratorium młodego teatru* (*LAB*) , a programme of the Proxima Nowy Theatre in Krakow. The *LAB* brings the youngest generation of Polish theatre artists into contact with renowned international artists who serve as tutors. This format is an excellent method of alternative education for directors. Skrzywanek worked with the visual artist Katarzyna Kozyra, German playwright Jens Hillje, Romanian director and dramatist Gianina Cărbunariu and French dramaturge Camille Louis. Hillje, associated with Berlin's Gorki Theater,

which specializes in participatory, engaging and documentary theatre, inspired Skrzywanek with the work methodology of the acclaimed Argentine artist Lola Arias. Her works network “experts of experience”, who would probably never meet outside theatre. Skrzywanek was guided by the same idea.

The American art critic and historian Hal Foster, author of “The Artist as Ethnographer”, notes the transfer that has occurred in avant-garde art: the artist’s role changes from producer to ethnographer. As ethnographer, he leaves the mainstream and its institutions to identify the places of social exclusion, the periphery shut out of the privileged capitalist universe, and acts with and on behalf of its inhabitants (Foster, 2010). During the eight weeks of work in Krakow, Skrzywanek, who matches Foster’s concept of “artist as ethnographer”, interviewed twenty-seven teenagers, with each conversation lasting from one to three hours. He collected more than seven hours of recorded material. He had earlier made around a hundred phone calls and sent seventy e-mails, occupational therapy centres, care and education centres, parish youth clubs, Catholic youth circles, schools, young environmentalists acting as part of Climate Strike, volunteers for Caritas and animal shelters as well as musical bands. Seventy per cent of the calls and emails remained unanswered. Of the twenty-seven people, only four boys wanted to meet with him, and they would later cancel the meetings anyway. The girls, on the other hand, were eager to meet and talk:

> There was no shame or fear in them, even though they were talking about their biggest experiences and problems. When I asked, Why did you trust me right away, I heard many answers similar to that given by Aga (one of the four participants in the project): “Because no adult has ever asked us about it” (Skrzywanek, 2020).

Skrzywanek selected four people aged from fourteen to eighteen who took part in the rehearsals and later in the performance. He justified his choice of collaborators by his desire to introduce young people to each other who would otherwise probably never have met, but "could do something for each other" by working on the play (ibidem). He met Aga – K-Pop Fan – at a music school; Eryk – Man Who Wasn't There – through the schools" Polish Red Cross Club; Patrycja – Future Madam President – through Climate Strike, Martyna – Escape Artist – through the Centrum Placówek Opiekuńczo-Wychowawczych "Parkowa" (Parkowa Centre for Care and Education Facilities) and through his collaborator, artist Alex Freiheit, who had worked with Martyna at a workshop as part of the *Karioka* Girls *Rock Camp*Kraków[7]. The director's original idea was to fantasize with the young people about the future. However, at the first meeting attended by Martyna, which lasted almost three hours, the plan was, to quote Skrzywanek, "steamrollered flat."

> I felt helpless. I was supposed to exchange fantasies about the future with a teenager, and she tells me in detail about the acts of violence experienced by her in a mental hospital. I get hit with all this stuff and I don't know what to do with it. After that conversation I went to the Planty[8] and started crying. I called Tomek Kireńczuk (project curator), who looked tenderly after us and I got a lot of support from him (ibidem).

The emotional experience was accompanied by a change of the work paradigm: "After a few meetings I decided I had to get rid of all the dramatic frameworks I had prepared. I had to switch from my usual mode of expression and direction: from speaking to listening" (ibidem).

After the interviews, Skrzywanek met with the group over four months. Two-week workshop rehearsals were held in July. The director of *We Are the Future* sees workshops as the basis for making art, and here he used the tools of theatre pedagogy from his earlier cooperation with Justyna Sobczyk and Dorota Kowalkowska,[9] experienced experts in the field. He met with the young people in early September to present the proposed script for the performance – Aga, Eryk, Martyna and Patrycja told me later they were very happy with it. The script was based on the interviews and rehearsal improvisations, but the performers could decide what they wanted to say in the performance – they could introduce changes until the third dress rehearsal.

"If something changes in their lives now, they'll be able to include it in the dramaturgy of the play. Working in this way, I took into account the fact that the production might fall apart," Skrzywanek adds (Skrzywanek, 2020). Before the premiere in October, the group worked for another two weeks. I really appreciate such a long process; as a curator of engaging projects I know that this type of work should be spread over time so that the relations and mutual trust between artists and participants can mature. The director told me about the special, intimate atmosphere of the rehearsals, at which the other adult was Kalina Dębska, the producer and, to use Skrzywanek's words, "much more": his support in the creative process and work with the young people. The rehearsals described by Skrzywanek evoke the relaxed ambience of a summer resort where a group of friends meets: "It was a great experience, the theatre was closed for holidays and we had the building to ourselves, we were like a commune; we ate, chilled out and fooled around together. There were no rigid hierarchies – for example, I was also the scene shifter and the general stagehand." This mood facilitated the release of stories – some people shared very intimate accounts of violence with

Skrzywanek. Some of them didn't make it into the production. Each time the director asked: "Are you sure you're ready to tell these stories?" At the same time, he was asking himself the question: "Where is my role as an artist, where as a confidant, guardian, sharer of responsibility?" When he told Katarzyna Kozyra about the very emotional character of the creative and relational process, her first question was: "Kuba, do you have supervision?" (ibidem). The experience of working on the production has convinced the artist that psychological supervision is necessary as a support in this type of projects.

Bruno Bettelheim's *Symbolic Wounds: Puberty Rites and the Envious Male*, travestied by Skrzywanek and recurring like a refrain, provides the framework for the play. The offstage voice of a male narrator describes the stages of the rite of passage in French, but they are differentiated in terms of gender only when mutilations are discussed: penile subincisions, excision of the labia and cuts from the vagina to the anus. Carol Gilligan, American feminist, scholar and developmental psychologist writes about initiation into patriarchy in terms of gender differences. Niobe Way's studies of boys (2011), cited by Gilligan, prove that at successive stages of development, they become increasingly ashamed of intimacy, friendship and emotional expression, rightly fearing that they will be branded with the patriarchal stigma of non-masculinity. In boys, the repression of relationships, the language of tenderness and empathy causes self-aggression – depression and, in extreme cases, suicide – and aggression, including homicides. Girls, on the other hand, are trained to make sacrifices, to be nice and polite. The process deprives them of a voice and the opportunity to articulate anger for the sake of avoiding conflict and protecting relationships, which translates into self-destructive behaviours such as eating disorders and cutting. Patriarchal training always involves violence, against men and women alike,

and does not privilege either sex. It is based on silencing and suppression of women's and men's true emotional selves.

The voice of the play's narrator turns into the young people's stories about the fear that paralyzes the body and causes them to inflict pain on themselves. A huge cocoon (the set is designed by Aleksandr Prowaliński) appears on a dark stage and splits, its parts enveloping the performers who dance to Rihanna's hit *Where Have You Been*. Shedding the cocoon in the insect world does not signify adulthood but subimago – the penultimate stage of ontogenetic development. The play then unfolds into a series of ethnographic autoperformances in which the young people explore the self in and in relation to society and the self as transformative force of society (see Alexander, 2009, p. 598). During the workshops Skrzywanek asked the teenagers to write hate speeches that later formed part of the play's dramatic structure. The first hate speech is given by Patrycja: she talks about how much she hates her body and its sexualization. The body that prevents her from being taken seriously and makes her perceived as weak and stupid. Martyna's hate speech comes next, a study of the terrible institutional violence in Polish psychiatric hospitals for children and young people. Martyna describes one of the punishments to the audience like a definition:

> Pyjamas – a punishment used in children's psychiatric hospitals. It consists in isolating the punished person, taking away all her things (including cosmetics and clothes), leaving her only in underwear and making her wear striped pyjamas (hence the name). While in confinement, the person is obliged (depending on the offence, e.g. swearing, smoking, attempted self-injury or physical contact with another person) to memorize a stanza or an entire poem or read a

required book, e.g. The *Laments* by Kochanowski[10].

Aga uses her hate speech to make a serious change in her life. Her appeal, with the recurrent words “You heteros”, reveals the difference between herself and the majority addressed and accused by her of creating a world in which coming out and the attendant disclosure of her own voice and lovelorn body carries the risk of violence, fear, shame and exclusion. In Aga’s case, Skrzywanek was confident that she was ready to come out. He asked her: “Are you sure a theatrical performance is the right place for something so intimate?” Her answer was unequivocal, strong, and, in my view, full of belief in the transformative power of art: “Kuba, you’re giving me a chance to do it in the most perfect way and this chance will never come again” (Skrzywanek, 2020). The performative act allows Aga to make a change in her relationship with her father:

> Immediately after the premiere, my father hugged me and said he loved me. And then we didn’t talk about it for a month – my father had left because he lives abroad. When he came, we started talking about the performance and I was surprised at how well he had coped with what he heard there; my father told me he wanted to work on himself (Aga, Eryk, Martyna, Patrycja, 2020).

All of the hate speeches reveal oppression of the body, its weakness and vulnerability.

Patrycja is explicit about her hatred of the body. Martyna speaks of its self-annihilation and an illness related to her eating disorder: “How am I supposed to do it when the same thought from two, three or four years ago

comes back to me! I DON”T WANT TO FEEL MYSELF! I WANT TO NOT LIVE! I WANT TO BE FORGOTTEN, BURIED. How can things get better when I’ve been throwing up your fucking dinner week after week!” (ibidem).

Aga addresses “heteros” to express her pain that she can’t fulfil her needs in a non-heterosexual relationship without being stigmatized. The girls feel their bodies as burning wounds, Eryk has no sensation of his own body – he is a Man Who Is Not There. He says in his hate speech:

> Why am I not there? Because I have no imagination, I have no interests. People call me a chameleon – black at night, can’t be seen. Transparent during the day – can’t be seen. …They didn’t see me at all when I escaped from the hospital as a child and ended up in the jungle… And I tried to raise myself in the wild.

Gilligan claims that boys are trained into patriarchy, which results in the separation of body and self, much earlier than girls; the process begins around the age of five (Gilligan, 2013). Even then, they are put to shame when they “cry like girls”; they have to manifest their courage and strength, they have to be “real boys”.

Eryk defends “traditional” values in the play:

> … We people were once created as animals, we were created to reproduce. I think that’s why a relationship should be between a man and a woman, only they can have intercourse for there to be a child. For me, a good family is when there’s peace between the parents and the child, when it’s raised in a good spirit, when it’s provided with essential goods and values. Love, respect… When

> people feel a homosexual attraction to each other, want to have sex, for me it’s not forcing things, but it’s just abnormal.

His vision of the social order, body, gender, love and sexuality is incompatible with the beliefs of Aga, Martyna and Patrycja. Eryk’s encounter with the girls creates an agon in the field of patriarchal power, an outcome that Skrzywanek claims was not designed by him: “I wasn’t aware of the nature of the female protagonists” relationships with their fathers or their sexual orientation” (Skrzywanek, 2020). The situation points to the emergence (see Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 225, 230-232) of social and artistic projects that spread like a virus in the apparently hermetic fields of power. Eryk seems sealed off in his vision of the world, but our conversation will show that his strict principles have broken down:

> I was a little tougher before working with the girls. I didn’t like the word “gay” or “lesbian”, I wasn’t okay with it. But when I talked to the girls, those barriers cracked a bit. My principles gave in already during improvisation. I actually thought, “Shit, why don’t I go to one of these parades?” But the more I thought about this, it affected me badly. I started to lose all my traditional values and I couldn’t find myself. I began to neglect school. I had a lot of questions on my mind. Everything had changed, nothing gave me joy when I started to think that way, because I’m a man who lives by principles. Two sides were fighting in me. Now I want to find a golden mean so that I still have some principles. And I think now that homosexuals are – I don’t want to use the wrong word – a normal part of society. I don’t care what they’re going to do at home, whether they will walk holding hands, but I still don’t like

> those marches – and that's my golden mean (Aga, Eryk, Martyna, Patrycja, 2020).

A feminist revolution takes place in the next scene. We see an effigy of the Great Creator Old Man on the stage as the performers conduct a ritual ceremony around the figure. They give sarcastic thanks to the Old Man for their despised breasts, fat bellies, arms, hands, invisible waists and stretch marks … Finally, they stick knives into the Old Man and rip the effigy to play with feathers from the stuffing. It's the women's revenge for the incorporated hatred of the body and the related shame, for its sexualization, for the body vomiting every meal, for the alternativeless heteronorm… For the performers, patriarchy is not transparent. By identifying it and expressing the recognition in the performance, they are initiated into a new order established on their own terms. The articulated aversion to one's body is in fact a chance to identify with it again. The symbolic "killing of the father" by the sons described by Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1993) is transformed and adapted by a feminist narrative: the act is performed in the play by daughters, women and warriors.

"Disfathering": the performers move from the symbolic to the real and personal plane. Patrycja radically rejects her father, a violent, abusive alcoholic. Aga, who will tell me later, "I have a different situation at home than the girls – everything seems right on the surface, but I've noticed in the last year that some things bother me," accuses her father of indifference. Martyna's father is absent, his place has been taken by her mother*:* "I remember he wasn't there and I don't know what kind of father he would have been for me, … but I know what my mother was like." Martyna accuses her mother of aggression and discrediting her. At the same time, the girl tries to protect her love for her mother, justifying her behaviour and

dissolving her guilt: “I know it’s not her fault, she couldn’t cope”; “I remember she didn’t have it easy”. The next scene brings forgiveness: the girl calls her mother to tell her that she loves her. The language of the performance changes: the words are tender and kind. Rebellion mingles with care, empathy and femininity. Gilligan notes: “Within a patriarchal framework, care is a feminist ethic. Within a democratic framework, care is a human ethic” (Gilligan, 2013 p. 25). The patriarchal division is maintained in the performance; democracy is still a distant prospect.

I was deeply moved by the scene of disfathering. I interpreted the erasure, absence and indifference of the fathers only in terms of a deep wound, disbelieving that a radical need to amputate the biological father was possible and regarding a repressed desire for his closeness as the real reason behind it. But I was reminded of the studies of the evolutionary anthropologist Sara Blaffer Hrdy (Hrdy, 2009) cited by Gilligan (2013, pp. 47-52). According to Hrdy, qualities such as empathy, ability to cooperate and mind reading continued to develop over the course of evolution. These characteristics are already evident in infants, who seek contact with their caregivers and read their emotions. The anthropologist holds that empathy was needed even by early hominids – in hunter-gatherer societies, a child had to be attended to also by other members of the group to survive. A baby who was better at gauging the intentions of adults was more likely to find a new caregiver and survive into adulthood. Allofamilies, which allow for the care of a child by people who are not its biological parents, are an alternative to nuclear families (two-generation families consisting of parents and their child or children), deeply rooted in our culture by the Holy Family. In this perspective, the disfathering scene represents not only the harm done to daughters, but also the choice of strong women who decide for themselves if they want to have a father. His presence no longer determines

their happiness and sense of being fully in the world as women and human beings.

Hope

I am writing this at a special time. For several months now, we have been in partial isolation due to the pandemic. The government has used this time to commit multiple violations of democracy and human rights. According to the 2020 ILGA Europe ranking – Europe's most important review of LGBTI equality – Poland is the most homophobic country of the European Union. The ranking is based on the assessment of the rights of LGBTI community. There are six categories:equality and non-discrimination; family; freedom of assembly, association and expression; hate crime and hate speech, legal gender recognition and bodily integrity; and asylum laws[11].

Domestic violence, including violence against children, continues to increase, as indicated by the studies of the Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation. Children who are not logged into e-learning sites receive practically no protection from the state, as though they didn't exist. The consequences of child suffering will be dire, translating into acts of destruction and self-destruction. The tragedy of non-heteronormative and non-binary children continues.

If we, people involved in theatre and art, want a new world, we should treat working with children and youth very seriously. We should not make theatre educators solely responsible for this. Rebecca Solnit writes:

> Hope and action feed each other. … Political awareness without activism means looking at the devastation, your face turned toward

> the center of things. Activism itself can generate hope because it already constitutes an alternative and turns away from the corruption at center to face the wild possibilities and the heroes at the edges or at your side (Solnit, 2019, p. 66).

I too see hope in action. I see it in the released voices of the heroines *We Are the Future*; in the split that occurred in Eryk; in the Primary School No. 9 in the Łazarz district of Poznań – in its staff and students, who told me how they realized the impact of the wounds they inflicted by their hate speech; in Zuza's account of her resistance in a religion class; in the creators of both projects.

I also see hope in the fact that almost all of the young people I have talked to appreciate theatre's power and agency. They would all be willing to work with Skrzywanek and Stachuła again. They blame adults for the scarcity of theatrical offerings for them. Patrycja put it explicitly: "Theatres are not friendly to young people. We're not even an object of marketing or anything" (Aga, Eryk, Martyna, Patrycja, 2020). Young people see theatre as a potential space for working through social tragedies and understanding class mechanisms and differences, motivation of adults, experience of mental illness and disorder as well as their own adolescence. Everything that is close to their hearts and that worries them. When asked what they would like to see plays about, they replied:

> About growing up, what it's like for different people in different environments, in rich and poor homes; for someone who seems perfect but in fact they are not.

About a person who harasses someone at school and then they go home and we're beginning to understand what goes on there and why this person is a bully. Such a play could show what's beneath this person's mask.

About how someone had a difficult situation at home, but they've pulled through.

About the world of adults so that we could understand them better. We get upset when adults answer our questions with: "You can't understand this because you're a child."

About young people's psychological problems.

About hate.

About tolerance.

About depression (Anastazja, Ania, Bartek, Jaźwińska, Kamil, Kinga, Kuba, Oliwia, Sandra, Zuza, 2020; Aga, Eryk, Martyna, Patrycja, 2020).

There is too much grumbling about the ineffectiveness of theatre. Change is possible, though perhaps not immediately and on a large scale; I'm convinced of that also because I have seen it many times as a curator of engaging art projects. As Solnit notes, change begins in microsituations that wear away a stone. I combine this view with the "performance of possibilities", an idea proposed by D. Soyini Madison (1998, pp. 276-286)

who believes that performance matters because it can bring about a change in the world. It seeks to expose harmful systems and motivates people to action. It offers hope that the public can learn more by revealing and eliciting silenced or disregarded voices about how power works. The performance of possibilities assumes that it can help audiences, performers and artists make a change in themselves and the world.

Translated by Robert Gałązka

Author

Agata Siwiak (agata_siwiak@o2.pl) – culture and theatre studies expert, curator and producer of performative and interdisciplinary projects, assistant professor at the Institute of Theatre and Media Arts of the Adam Mickiewicz University (UAM) in Poznań. As a curator, she works at the intersection of various media, critical practice and socially engaged art. She executed her projects in important public cultural institutions (a.o. Warsaw Biennale, Polski Theatre in Poznań, Polski Theater in Wrocław and National Stary Theatre in Cracow), as well as in a children's home, a refugee centre, a social welfare centre and detention centre. ORCID: 0000-0003-1830-0493.

Footnotes

1. An excellent Polish researcher and practitioner of performance ethnography is the anthropologist and ethnologist Tomasz Rakowski. He observes that an ethnography that joins forces with art and animation shifts its focus from the textual level to pretextual cognition, which is realized in action and being in the world. He emphasizes that the procedures of such cognition have only begun to be scientifically investigated and tested.
2. I also interviewed the performers and dancers of *h.*; after talking to Daniel Stachuła, I suspected that the play may be for them a form of reenactment of their recent school experience. The amount of material is so vast that it requires a separate study.
3. Thanks to the subsidy from the Theatre Institute, which not only co-finances productions, but also provides funds for individual performances, the play has been staged 27 times so far: in Poznań and nearby towns and villages. Around 85 per cent of the performances were shown in public schools, 15 per cent in private schools. About a dozen schools are in line to stage the play. The production received financial support again as part of the 5thJan

Dorman Competition (2020), which will allow twenty more presentations to be held in Poznań, the Poznań County and the Wielkopolskie Province.
4. The drama was published in *Nowe Sztuki dla Dzieci i Młodzieży* 2019, no. 45.
5. The students suggested changes to the character and behaviour of the Counsellor, whom they found anachronistic and unrealistic (for example, she didn't know how the Internet works) in the play's original version. They argued that such a person could not work in contemporary school and they really wanted the world portrayed on the stage to be realistic so as to ensure full identification with it. The director made changes in the play that were consistent with the students' recommendations (Stachuła, 2020).
6. I decided not to reveal the children's names due to the necessity of obtaining the consent of their legal guardians. Such consent would mean that the guardians could control the content of the children's statements. As a result, the material could lose its authenticity.
7. A feminist educational project implemented by the Stowarzyszenie Kobieca Transsmisja.
8. Planty is a green area in the center of Krakow.
9. Skrzywanek co-directed *Superspektakl* featuring actors of Theatre 21 with Justyna Sobczyk at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw (2017) and worked with Dorota Kowalkowska on the production of *Kiedy mój tata zamienił się w krzak* (When My Dad Turned into a Bush; based on Joke van Leeuwen's story) at the Jerzy Szaniawski Theatre in Wałbrzychu (2017).
10. Jan Kochanowski was a XVI-century Polish poet.
11. See https://www.ilga-europe.org/.

Bibliography

Abramowicz, Marta, *Przemoc i dyskryminacja ze względu na orientację seksualną w doświadczeniach osób o orientacji biseksualnej homoseksualnej w Polsce* (unpublished doctoral dissertation), Uniwersytet Gdański, Gdańsk 2017.

Alexander, Bryant Keith, "Performance Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture" [in:] *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks 2005.

Bourdieu, Pierre, Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Sage Publications, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi 1977.

Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, New York 1997.

Chmura-Rutkowska, Iwona, *Być dziewczyną – być chłopakiem i przetrwać. Płeć i przemoc w szkole w narracjach młodzieży*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2019.

Connell, R.W., *Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics*, Cambridge 1995.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *Estetyka performatywności*, trans. by M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, Księgarnia Akademicka, Krakow 2008.

Foster, Hal, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1996.

Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, Project Gutenberg Ebook (released 2012).

Gilligan, Carol, *Joining the Resistance*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2011.

Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer, *Mothers and Others: the Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2009.

Kwaśniewski, Tomasz, "Jak dziecko chce się zabić, może liczyć na materac na korytarzu. Psychiatria dla dzieci to katastrofa", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 8 April 2019.

Madison, D. Soyini, *Performans, personal narratives and politics of possibility*, [in:] *The future of performance studies: Visions and revisions*, ed. S. J. Dailey, National Communications Associations, Annandale 1998.

McLaren, Peter, *Life in Schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*, Longman, New York 1998.

McLaren, Peter, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*: Towards a political economy of educational symbols and gestures, Routledge, New York 1993.

Ogrodzka, Dorota, Rakowski, Tomasz, Rossal, Ewa, "Odsłonić nowe pola kultury: projekt etnografii twórczej i otwierającej", *Kultura i Rozwój* 2017, no. 3(4), pp. 89-112.

Pogorzelska, Marzanna, Rudnicki, Paweł, *Przecież jesteśmy. Homofobiczna przemoc w polskich szkołach – narracje gejów i lesbijek*, Impuls, Kraków 2020.

Solnit Rebecca, *Hope in the Dark*, Haymarket Books 2016.

Szyłło, Aleksandra, "Mamo jestem zerem", *Duży Format*, supplement to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 8 July 2015.

Way, Niobe, *Deep Secrets: Boys Crisis of Connection*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2011.

Włodarczyk, Joanna, "Przemoc wobec dzieci", *Dziecko Krzywdzone. Teoria, badania, praktyka* 2017, no. 1, pp. 192-213.

Agata Siwiak's conversation with Anastazja, Ania, Bartek, Kamil, Kinga, Kuba, Oliwia, Sandra, Zuza – students of the Dr. Franciszek Witaszek Primary School No. 9 in Poznań – and with Joanna Jaźwińska, a Polish teacher, held on 20 February 2020.

Agata Siwiak's conversation with Anna Kicińska, principal of the Dr. Franciszek Witaszek Primary School No. 9 in Poznań, held on 20 February 2020.

Agata Siwiak's conversation with Daniel Stachuła, author of the concept and director of *h.*, held on 4 February 2020.

Agata Siwiak’s conversation with Joanna Jaźwińska, a Polish teacher at the Dr. Franciszek Witaszek Primary School No. 9 in Poznań, held on 9 March 2020.

Agata Siwiak’s conversation with Joanna Żygowska, a theatre pedagogue who led the workshop after the performance of *h.*, held on 16 May 2020.

Agata Siwiak’s conversation with Michał Kurek, the actor playing Franek in *h.*, held on 12 February 2020.

Agata Siwiak’s conversation with Aga, Eryk, Martyna and Patrycja, performers in *We Are the Future*, held on 29 February 2020.

Agata Siwiak’s conversation with Jakub Skrzywanek, author of the concept and director of *We Are the Future*, held on 19 March 2020.
