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/ CHOREOGRAPHY FOR FAMILIES

The Politicality of Choreography for Families from the Perspective of Performance as Research

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to provide a reflection on the choreographic practice in the field of dance performance for families in the context of related fields of politicalness, from the perspective of performance as research. The author describes some important moments in the global and Polish cultural policy concerning dance for children and presents an understanding of politicalness after Ana Vujanović and Mark Franko. The text undertakes reflection on the usefulness of the language of posthumanism (Chikako Takeshita, Karen Barad and Donna Haraway) in research into choreography intended for families. The author gives an insight into the creative practice by analysing the dimensions of politicalness in three performances by the Holobiont collective which she co-founded.

Keywords: performance as research; choreography; the political; TYA; posthuman

Dance and choreography for children are currently undergoing intensive development (Bylka-Kanecka, 2020). Both Poland and the world are host to more and more dance performances addressed to young audiences.

Influential international TYA (Theater for Young Audience) festivals offer increasingly more events in the field of dance and choreography for children, including those addressed to the youngest audiences. Perhaps the most vivid example of this tendency is the International Dance Festival for Young Audience, held in Germany[1].

I believe that the moment when the field of choreography for children and families has emerged as a prominent fixture on Polish and international stages is the right time to devise a language for their description and critical reflection on the subject. This would enable one to define the specificity of dance and choreography for children (along with drawing an everdenser map of its key questions), facilitate communication with people from other disciplines, help highlight the potential behind this type of choreographic work, and take a step towards adequate intellectual, institutional and financial conditions for its development. I consider the advancement of critical thought in the field of choreography for children and families to be particularly important also because of the intertwining of public and private dimensions that are characteristic of this context. With the evolution (if not an outright boom) in research on childhood, it is impossible to ignore the need to revise the forms and content of artistic events intended for children. Today, it seems necessary for artists to consider audience agency, and in this context the democratization of artistic experience carries considerable weight: after all, the history of children's emancipation only dates back about a century, and their dependence on adults remains indisputable. Thus, when thinking about children, it seems worthwhile to take a broader look at the entire system (first that of the family, then that of society), and at the ways of creating performances that are also systems in their own right.

My choreographic practice within the Holobiont collective, which I co-create

with Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, has revealed to me a series of difficult and important questions about the balance of power, the ways in which power is produced and used (by the artist, the parent, the child), the means of communication with the audience, and the methods of caring for oneself and for event participants. The interlocked systems of relations, stagnant and temporarily produced structures, expectations, alliances, misunderstandings, ruptures, refusals and engagements that we witness during our performances, lead me to reconsider not only the political aspect of our work, but also the critical potential inherent in choreography for families. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the choreographic practice of dance performances for families in the context of politicality from the perspective of performance as research[2].To this end, I will list the most important developments in the cultural politics of the recent years towards dance for children; furthermore, I will articulate an understanding of politicality that is especially dear to me, sharing the ideological vantage point of my thinking about choreography for families and analyzing four performances of the Holobiont collective developed between 2016 and 2019: *DOoKOŁA* (roundABOUT)[3], *Księżycowo* (Moonland)[4], *_on_line__*[5] and *Gdzie kształty mają szyje* (Where Shapes Have Necks)[6]. This article deliberately does not offer reflection on our latest performance, *Mój ogon i ja* (My Tail and I), since it constitutes Holobiont's first piece focused entirely on somatic practices; as such, I plan to cover it in a separate article in the near future.

Cultural politics

The past few years saw two groundbreaking events that illustrate the powerful dynamics of change in choreography for children: one of them took place in Poland, the other had an international character. On the domestic scene, the event in question was Mała Platforma Tańca (the Little Dance

Platform), held for the first time in the history of Polish dance. Organized as part of the biennial Polska Platforma Tańca (Polish Dance Platform; est. 2008), the event took place in Gdańsk on August 30-31, 2019. Organized by Instytut Muzyki i Tańca (the Institute of Music and Dance) in Warsaw, Miejski Teatr Miniatura in Gdańsk, and Fundacja Polka (the Polka Foundation), the event featured performances addressed to children and families, a panel discussion on dance for children, and outdoor movement workshops. Mała Platforma Tańca was initiated by Ula Zerek and Katarzyna Ustowska, associated with the aforementioned Fundacja Polka. The appetite for an event of this type had also been articulated during Polska Platforma Tańca in 2017 by Alicja Morawska-Rubczak, an expert in theater for the youngest audiences, during the panel *What's the matter with dance... for children?* Mała Platforma Tańca enabled the consolidation of the Polish community centered around dance and choreography for children and families, and was an institutional signal testifying to the recognition of the development of this trend in Poland. Although the 'family' platform took place a few days before the 'adult' platform, which did not help their integration (Lemańska, 2019), the bilingual catalog published on the occasion was a link between the two events and an invaluable archival and promotional material[7].

On the international arena, the watershed event in the recent evolution of dance for families with children was the establishment of the Young Dance Network (YDN) in 2021[8]. The organization was created and will operate under the umbrella of ASSITEJ International[9], the world's largest organization facilitating the development of performing arts for children, which currently runs its centers in eighty-five countries around the world. The YDN is one of six networks operating within the association, alongside those focused on the development of young professionals in the areas of TYA

(Next Generation), screenwriting (Write Local Play Global), performing arts for children under five (Small Size), academic researchers (International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network), and theater for children towards inclusivity (International Inclusive Arts Network). The context of the establishment of the Young Dance Network is important because of the decision-making and opinion-making capacity of ASSITEJ International, which contributes global and continental guidelines and reports. The association's involvement has a tangible impact on the cultural policies of many countries while also fostering the promotion and distribution of financial resources facilitating long-term artistic activities. The establishment of a separate network dedicated solely to dance for children thus offers hope for the advancement of the field and its increased visibility. The latter is a value articulated in the YDN objectives, along with (among others) building awareness of the potential of dance in educational contexts, creating a platform for the exchange of experiences, creating joint projects, building knowledge, or defining and promoting the specificity of dance. The YDN's symbol is a circle that illustrates inclusiveness, and the lack of hierarchy and assessment. The network's definition of dance is broad: 'Everybody can dance and join the dancing community,' reads one of the first sentences of the YDN activity description. Though seemingly vague, this statement carries a fundamental meaning as a strong ideological statement in the spirit of democratization of dance.

The aforementioned events prove the existence of a critical mass of people involved in dance and choreography for children, and the need to popularize this field. Such a need has also been recognized by Instytut Muzyki i Tańca, which seeks to promote Polish dance pieces internationally, under the umbrella of the recently established PolandDances program. I personally associate the current moment in the history of dance for children with the

slow yet persistent hatching of something that has been present, in varying degrees of intensity, all over the world for many years now. It is my belief that asking questions about what, how and for whom we create is of particular importance at this moment.

At this point, I should mention the issue of production methods. I think it warrants a separate study. It is still a mystery to me how to produce a dance piece so as to cater not only for the audience but also myself. How to ensure appropriate financial, space and time conditions for the people who create movement performances for children? In particular, how does one achieve this goal as a parent of small children, dividing one's time between working in the studio and communing with one's family (which is also the case with me). While every venue that has hosted our performances has been supportive and open, I still believe that creating a performance is a process similar to caring for a newborn, one that requires attention, time and strength. To make a living solely from making dance performances for children, this symbolic birth would have to occur several times a year; my creative processes, however, take much longer, as does my recovery after premieres. How to produce a dance piece in close relation to oneself and with respect for others? How many open rehearsals should one organize? To what extent should one involve families in the process of performance creation? How to take care of the life of a dance spectacle that is produced outside of a repertory institution? Some of these problems concern the entire Polish dance community, yet my focus lies with the forms of institutional support for artists who are also parents and for those who create performances for children and families. I hope that the existence of Mała Platforma Tańca, along with the global trend of developing choreographies for children will spearhead the emergence of systemic (Polish and global) solutions in this area.

Politicality

In this text, I propose to frame politicality in the broad sense of a filter (by which I mean a lighting filter rather than a straining mesh), which reveals the emerging and dissolving meanings, subjects, their collective definitions, and their mutual dynamic arrangements and relations. Such an approach is close to the notion of politicality proposed by Ana Vujanović, who also conceived of politicality as ways of acting and intervening in the public sphere (Vujanović, 2018)[10]. At the same time, I assume that choreography is always political, whether one likes it or not. Therefore, I am not interested in the judgment of politicality or non-politicality (and, even less so, in the competition for being deemed the most and least political). What I am invested in, on the other hand, is how politicality manifests itself in dance events intended for children and families. In other words, I am preoccupied with the politicality of the events in question (in terms of their structure, color, quality, terrain, rather than 'size'). How are the elements resulting from conscious reflection structured, and (oftentimes more interestingly) where are the unconscious artistic assumptions (and the performance itself) revealed? Sticking to this psychoanalytic metaphor, I understand reflection on politicality as an analysis of what is on the surface combined with an insight into what is hidden but manifests itself in various ways. In this respect, then, I am close to the reflections offered by choreographer and researcher Mark Franko, who in one of his seminal texts on the politicality of dance argues that, 'In fact, to speak […] of dance as not political means nothing. Research around dance should therefore continuously revisit the complex interactions between dance and politics defined in different ways' (Franko, 2018, p. 39).

In attempting to analyze and provide insight into the work I have co-

authored, I am, on the one hand, stepping onto the slippery ground of a never-quite-objective perspective and the attendant competence anxiety (Berendt, Guzy, Majewska, Ruszkiewicz, Wawryk, 2021). However, seeing that the number of critical texts on choreography for families is still scarce, I think that any contribution to the expansion of discourse is potentially valuable. Writing from the position of a person actively shaping the Polish dance scene allows me to explore topics from the dual perspective of practical experience and theoretical reflection. I hope the text will inspire readers toward further in-depth and serious reflection on the political load embedded in the oft-inconspicuous performances for the young and youngest audiences while also encouraging creators to build and scrutinize their own subjective ideological networks in the context of constructing events for children and families.

The first step in this journey is to unveil the part of the ideological grid that underpins the work of the Holobiont collective. One strand that I find particularly useful in reflecting on dance and choreography for children – a strand that is still rarely associated with performing arts for children – is posthumanism[11]. The themes explored by posthumanist authors have been my starting point in creating the majority of performance concepts and applied texts for the subsequent works of the Holobiont collective. These references are most often not to be found in the synopses of the performances written for the audience, where marketing communicativeness comes into play, but they are instead part of processual work on the performances. And even if I do not trace each of our performances directly to posthumanist texts, I can nonetheless see *ex post* that our work continues to revolve around specific posthumanist premises.

The post-human

The name of the collective I co-founded was coined in 2018[12]; it was inspired by Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). The term 'holobiont' (Gr. *hólos* - all, whole; *bíos* - life), created by the biologist Lynn Margulis in 1991 and invoked by Haraway, refers to a complex organism coexisting in symbiosis with various other organisms. And while the researcher uses the term to describe the relationship of humans to non-humans, the 'holobiont' seemed to me an apt metaphor for the family, which amounts to a diverse and complex whole; not only as a (mostly) genetically related jigsaw puzzle, but also as a certain system with a realm of shared experiences (emotions experienced together, a common place to live, meals eaten together, etc.) that shape their family microbiota. This whole is immersed in a larger network of relationships that are society, culture, ecosystem, matter, cosmos.

I find the metaphor of family as a holobiont particularly interesting because of its ontological aspect in the context of contemplating subjects and objects (and subjectivity and objectivity) of all participants of our family art events. Posthumanism takes away our confidence in holistic and stable categories, pointing to their often unexpected dynamics, in which aspects, persons, subjects, objects, threads other than the most audible ones come to the fore, and the hierarchies and power arrangements between them are in constant motion and can be viewed from many subjective perspectives. I find this ontological fluidity or vulnerability particularly inspiring precisely in the context of thinking about children, childhood, and the reciprocal relationships (including power) between adults and children. I treat the terms themselves and the fields of association tied to the words 'child,' 'childhood,' and 'adult' as permeable, incomplete, changeable, and sensitive

to cultural processes.

Contesting Early Childhood is a series of publications that explores the constructs and practices of childhood in an insightful, interdisciplinary and bold way, combining practical and theoretical perspectives[13]. Its authors focus primarily on preschool education, analyzing (from the perspectives of philosophy, pedagogy, neuroscience, political science) how preschool care can shape ethically conscious democratic structures. The series is also invaluable for the visibility of research on pre-school children. It places them at the center of serious and critically sound reflection on the impact of adult-made structures on children and their development.

In my research and artistic practice, however, I am particularly interested in policies related to an even earlier stage than those associated with preschool settings. The question that recurs in our work concerns the moments and origins of the construction of meanings and structures. In this context, I would like to invoke the fascinating text *From Mother/Fetus to Holobiont(s): A Material Feminist Ontology of the Pregnant Body* by the feminist scholar Chikako Takeshita (2017). Taking her cue from agential realism creator Karen Barad's reflections on pregnant people, Takeshita introduces the non-dichotomous and non-individualized term 'mother-fetus' to describe the holobiont that is the pregnant person. Takeshita juxtaposes the feminist narrative about the fetus's autonomy from the mother (which for years has been construed in the context of an important struggle for female autonomy and reproductive rights) with Barad's thought and recent research in biology indicating a number of symbiotic bacteria that divide the fetus (as a holobiont-guest) and the mother (as a holobiont-host). From this perspective, in keeping with New Materialist thought, it is difficult to speak of the separation of mother and fetus, and the term 'holobiont' accurately captures

the relationality and complexity of this symbiotic, multi-organism entity. As Takeshita puts it:

> The participation of bacteria compels us to reconceptualize pregnancy not so much as a collaborative process between the Mother and Fetus, but as the integration of the fertilized egg into a holobiont. A holobiont by definition defies the self/other binary: the understanding that many of our 'personal' traits are defined by microbial activities interacting with the host genome has weakened the notion of a totally independent organism around which the 'self' is built (pp. 14-15).

I would like to juxtapose Takeshita's reflection with that concerning the Aristotelian categories describing life, i.e. *bios* and *zoe*, proposed by the posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti. According to classical philologist Karl Kerényi, *zoe* denotes all existing life, while *bios* outlines the distinct, characteristic contours of life that help distinguish one existence from another and express lives that possess particular qualities (Kerenyi, 1997, p. 16). Aristotle considered *bios* as

> the only one worthy of consideration and special protection […] while this biological aspect of life – *zoe* associated with the banality of day-to-day satisfaction of physiological needs – has been relegated to the undervalued sphere of everyday life […], confined to the domain of women and slaves (Bakke, 2012, p. 38).

In her own materialist concept (rooted in the Spinozian tradition), Braidotti argues that a contemporary change of the humanistic subject has occurred,

in which *bios* has been seen as *zoe*. In the words of Monika Bakke,

> The return of *zoe*, a force superseded by the humanist tradition, now calls for a serious consideration in humanities and arouses hope for seeing the recognition of the need for an urgent reformulation of the relation between the human and non-human. This, in turn, would make it possible to overcome the anthropocentric and androcentric ontology and ethics, consequently enabling the emergence of a different subjectivity, constituted with the full acceptance of *zoe* (p. 40).

Artistically, the most interesting question arising from the reflections of the aforementioned posthumanist scholars is (in my case) the one concerning the moments of emergence and distinction (as well as concealment and dissolution) of entities and meanings, particularly in the context of parental and caring relations. The history of childhood is replete with extremely anthropocentric visions of the child; perhaps the most dramatic example was the medieval habit of portraying children in paintings as minute adults. Seeing the child as an unfinished adult (a conviction that is unfortunately very much alive and still practiced today) assumes that young children's being in the world is a process of their 'humanization.' The posthumanist perspective, on the other hand, allows us to regard young children as full-fledged creatures, living in and maintaining a specific relationship with a particular environment. Such an understanding of relationality – subtly pronounced on the outside and at the same time radically experienced and constitutive on the inside – holistically connects the material and physical with the cognitive and emotional, recognizing the flows between various human and non-human agents and their influence on the way we experience

ourselves and the world at any given moment, is particularly close to me and resonates (I hope) in our performances. Equally important in this context is the aspect of parental relation, given that I only started to create pieces for children and families and initiate artistic meetings with Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska after giving birth to my first child. It was a very transformational experience for me, and accompanying my children in everyday life gave me a strong impulse to reflect on the origins of structures, meanings and politicality.

One particularly interesting and useful aspect of posthumanism in the context of creating dance performances for families is its interdisciplinary language, which incorporates terms biological and physical terminology into philosophical considerations. In the context of reflecting on movement and choreography, this language is a treasure trove of inspiring images and metaphors. Of particular artistic and analytical interest for me are the moments of recognition, acknowledgement and experience of mutual autonomy among family members, as well as the constellations of family relations and interdependencies. When does *bios* emerge from *zoe*? And how does (and what does) the holobiont that I am, and in which I am, function? Or, to borrow from Barad, 'When does matter come to matter?' I ask myself these questions and try to make them resonate in our performances when questioning the traditional hierarchical performance structure that consists of artists, adult audience, and child participants.

Post-dance

In October 2015, Stockholm hosted a major conference on experimental dance, which brought together world-renowned theorists, artists, teachers as well as curators. The objective of the Post-Dance Conference was to

provide ‘an opportunity to really find time and space to reflect on the developments and forces that have shaped choreographic imagination from the 1960s up to today.’ One of the outcomes of this three-day meeting was the publication of the subsequent proceedings. In one of the papers, Mårten Spångberg, a Swedish artist working in the field of choreography in its broadest sense, attempts to outline his understanding of the relationship between choreography, contending that, ‘Dance in its initial state is not organized, it is pure expression, but in order to be located it needs organization […]. There is no causality between choreography and dance nor is there between dance and choreography’ (Spångberg, 2017, p. 371). Spångberg presents dance as something primordial and vital, which we nevertheless need to recognize using specific structures. The theme of emergence and conscious renunciation of subjectivity also recurs later in his conference paper:

> Dance is not first of all a matter of subjectivity. Dance is a subject performing form. It is subjects or identities performing but their responsibility is not to issue subjectivity but instead to, so to say, become vehicles for the dance, to become anonymous (pp. 374-375).

The way Spångberg ennobles the anonymous, dissolute, consciously withdrawn subjectivity and identity of a vital being reminds me of the discourse on dance improvisation that flourished with the American avant-garde of the 1960s, one whose historical roots go much deeper, to ‘the cultural practices of African Americans and Native Americans’ (Ciesielski, 2020, p. 28). I understand the practices that allow us to disengage from the identity schema in favor of seeking the energetic, spontaneous, direct

presence to be what Spångberg calls dance. One choreographically relevant thread for me is to track my own attention and observe the dynamics and moments in which I am able to extract different perceptions, judgments, thoughts, associations, as well as those moments in which I allow myself to remain in a state of vivid non-extraction, 'not yet named,' suspension (which is also enabled by movement practices and choreographic tools). I find the moments of transition between one state and another to be the most interesting. The ability to recognize them, to distinguish them, and to play with them allows us to observe in ourselves the subjective and deep policies that guide us, and this is precisely what I would like to share and experience together with the people who come to our performances and co-create them through different kinds of participation. In this sense, I am interested in the personal politics (or perhaps better the micro- and nanopolitics) of families. Drawing once more on Braidotti and her interpretation of Aristotle, I wonder which areas of the family are established as *zoe* (seen as diffuse, vital, and customarily deemed irrelevant to the inner history of a given family), and which are situated in the realm of *bios* (felt as named, stable identity-wise, and resulting from traditionally bestowed superiority)? And how are these ideological beliefs or life habits practiced in the family context? Who determines them and in what ways? Are they immutable or negotiable? These are the questions that accompanied me during the creation of each of our performances.

Content, form, modes of production

Speaking of the politicality of dance and choreography, and drawing on the work of Ana Vujanović and Joanna Szymajda, I would like to focus on its three modalities (Vujanović) or dimensions[14] – content, form, and modes of production – and examine the first two in the context of the aforementioned

works of the Holobiont collective.

Our performances are based on assuming the significance of physical and emotional involvement in the child-parent relationship and the potential of dance art and choreography in deepening family relationships. When, after some time, I went back to the concept I had written for our first 'foundational' performance *DOoKOŁA* (which at the same time constituted a competition entry), I was reminded that the original working title of the piece was *Progres przez regres* (Progress Through Regress). Although we later changed it due to its limited marketing appeal, it nonetheless reflects the very beginning of the ideological field of our activity and the assumption that it is through access to a valuable, regressive state of mind of an adult parent or a caregiver that it is possible for a family to grow and accompany the child in its development. I understand this regressive state of mind as the ability to dissolve an identity that has been constructed over many years, and to be holistically open to the diversity of influences and experiences that occur during our interaction with our cares.

Our collective has consistently and consciously publicized all of our pieces as family events (intended for children and parents/caregivers alike). Our performances have been addressed to families with children of various ages – *DOoKOŁA*: 1.5-3-year-olds; *Księżycowo*: 2-year-olds and younger; *_on_line__*: 5-7-year-olds; *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*: 6-7-year-olds. Pre-school development seems to us to be especially valuable in terms of building family ties, which form the matrix of the child's subsequent social ties. When building movement material for performances, we use mainly somatic practices (especially Body-Mind Centering, the Feldenkrais Method, and Authentic Movement, often creatively interpreting them, e.g. our work in *Księżycowo* was based on translating the BMC logic into cacti), task

improvisation, and dreamwork[15]. All of these methods allow us to build bridges with children's experience in different ways while also providing means for sustaining children's memory and the open and attentive state of mind required to engage in open play during performances.

The most important substantive factor of our events involves building their content around abstract images and scenographic-sensory objects. There are twelve identical foam pink mattresses in *DOoKOŁA*. They are successively rolled up and hung up, molded into various shapes, and in the final scene laid flat on the ground. The set design of *Księżycowo*, vividly fleshed out, consists of a curtain of rock-like material and felt and metal objects of various sizes, whose shapes are inspired by various species of cacti. The third performance, *_on_line__*, takes place on a huge sheet of paper (roughly six by seven meters, depending on the type of venue), on which a large-scale, abstract image is created using pastels that capture the movement of performers and families. The title of the last performance, *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*, refers directly to playing with the abstraction. The scenography designed by visual artist Alicja Bielawska consists of colorful, mobile curtains, string arches and round, wooden objects that can be moved around the floor, opening a multitude of meanings. Each of these stage sets is designed and employable in such a way as to trigger the imagination of both young and adult audiences. In the conversations that follow each performance, we have heard a variety of stories triggered in children and adults alike. Adults frequently try to ascertain whether their perceptions and imaginations coincide with those we used to make the show, which is something children never ask us about. The foam shape we create is dubbed a flower, a fire extinguisher, a snake, and a pillow. The overhanging forms from *Księżycowo* are referred to as worms, jellyfish, aliens or shower snakes.

During the final _*on_line*__ scene, in which a giant drawing is hoisted up, accompanied by a sequence of color-changing floodlights (each bringing out different colors and elements of the drawing), we listen to the emerging stories of moons, rainbows, dinosaurs, and maps. The objects featured in *Gdzie kształty mają szyje* tend to be seen as curtains, fire, clouds (fabrics), portals, braids, gates (string arches), pebbles, caterpillars, and little human figures (wooden items). It is only in this performance that a poetic text appears, which came to life during movement improvisations. Its content and syntax do not exhaust the possible storylines and meanings. On the contrary, they encourage the audience to make their own associations and reassure the conviction that any personal logic is welcome. For example, the text uttered alternately by the performers in the first scene of *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*, reads:

> Welcome to our place. Once upon a time here it will be the same, although a few things would be different if it weren't for the fact that, over the hills and far away, there once lived someone who, much like red, always sought to be at the forefront, eager to succumb to the revolutions of blue and orange spheres, while purple messed around in the green gummy fern, not knowing that rain sometimes falls sideways, too.

In our performances, successive scenes do not form a single story (although in *Księżycowo* the narrative is present). Instead, they comprise a set of different actions taken by the performers in relation to each other, to the objects, and to the families involved in the performance. The objects and performers change their shapes, contexts, and meanings. They enable associations to hook onto something, to grow from and dissolve into

something, making room for more. Working with abstract forms and images that trigger the imagination of both children and adults allows us to emotionally and cognitively engage the family as a whole. This is a particularly important aspect for us, since we assume that a child does not exist in a social vacuum (no children's performance is possible without the participation of a parent or caregivers, such as, at the very least, a school teacher), and that parents, too, have aesthetic needs that can be satisfied by a family outing to a dance performance.

Another important and consistent element of our work to date is the inclusion of family fun in the performances. All our performances involve active participation of families (more on that later in the text). We have rejected the classic division of a play for young children: thirty minutes of performance plus ten minutes of play (usually without the performers). We believe that playing together is the most important facet of our work. If the families start to be active only once the show is over (and there are interactive parts in all of our performances), the show will not work as intended. This signals to us that the interactive parts are too short or too rigidly structured and do not allow for free and satisfying expression by the participants. Adult audiences, however, are often all too immersed in the classic convention of children's shows, and it is not always easy to get them to renounce that habit. One of our tried-and-true ways is to leave ample space for families during the common parts of each show. The performers tone their activity down for a while, sometimes to a provocative minimum[16], while letting the audience know that, without the parents' activity, the show will continue in a kind of suspension. By including the interplay of families in our performances, we want to appreciate the everyday interaction between children and adults, thus showing that it is precisely there where the greatest cultural value lies.

Including families in on-stage actions also concerns the second of the aforementioned modalities of politicality, i.e. form. All of our performances consist of parts intended for watching, those conceived as joint movement activities, and those in which the boundary between the first and second type of scenes is intentionally blurred. *DOoKOŁA* begins with a viewing sequence lasting a couple of minutes, followed by a scene of shared play that begins with the gradual transfer of foam mattresses to the audience. The families stay on stage until the end of the show, with the performers acting with or parallel to them. In *Księżycowo*, which is addressed to families with children up to two years of age, the dramaturgy alternates (although the children can move freely throughout the performance). In the opening scene, which takes several minutes an unfolds in front of a breathing stone curtain, the children usually sit in their caregivers' laps (although there have been times when they have crawled towards the performer and wanted her to take them in her arms). Conversely, the part of the performance that takes place behind the curtain (i.e. in the actual performance space) is divided into sequences in which the dancers employ expansive movement, fragments in which they remain almost motionless and with their eyes closed, moments in which they themselves intensively interact with objects, scenes in which the object assists them in interacting with the participants of the performance, and sequences in which objects are handed over to the audience. In the final scene, the performers gather the available objects in one place and incorporate them into a movement sequence. The remaining two performances were intended for older children, aged between five and seven, and the creation of the interactive form took place within a structure that was explicitly communicated to the participants. *__on_line__* employs the convention of a game in which the performers' entry into the audience is a cue for joint action, while the subsequent 'watchable' scenes are signaled by

the pre-determined sound signal (gong chime) and a place marked out by a rectangle of light from which the audience will watch the performers' actions (each time situated along a different edge of the huge sheet of paper). Elements of surprise and challenge enable us to render this shredded structure playful and engaging both children and adults. In *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*, we proposed yet another structure. At the beginning, the audience is divided into two teams (purple and red), led by two performers. The first two scenes are structured in a three-phase rhythm: both teams watch the actions of the two performers before one of them takes one team to the stage while the other watches; then, the performers and groups switch. The last scene also begins with the actions of the performers being watched by both teams, but this time both teams join in, so that at the end they sit together in the middle of the circle made of wooden set pieces, taking a moment to watch the movement of the fabrics (set in motion by the windmills) together.

Depending on the performance and the target group, we plan different joint activities, always leaving room for individual reactions (to the highest degree in *Księżycowo*, and to the lowest in *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*). However, the transitions from the 'watchable' to the 'doable' parts invariably stress the fact that each of the people present in the audience may have a different sensitivity, expression, temperament, and sense of humor. And because it is paramount to us to leave room for diversity, we try to ensure that the invitation to act does not require an immediate response. We aim to ensure that joining us should be internally motivated, e.g. by curiosity or a desire to have fun, rather than a sense of obligation or embarrassment (which would be contradictory to our understanding of art for families).

All of our performances begin with verbal instructions. Almost invariably

(except for *Księżycowo*), the instructions are delivered by the performer(s). They include straight-forward and concise information about the structure of the performance, an introduction of the performers, and an invitation to joint family activities. The instructions preceding *Gdzie kształty mają szyje* are the most elaborate: not only do the performers narrate the complex structure of the performance by presenting the cues for entering and leaving the stage (the sound signal, the light, and the object in concrete movement), but they also blur the line between the technical instruction and the beginning of the performance by introducing the 'performing' objects with poetic names (*gryzdole*, *kuszynony*, and *mitasze owotne*) and dividing the audience into two groups, which is done somewhat in passing and in a playful manner, rendering the invitation to play unforced (according to our sincere hopes and feedback to date). In the course of our work on the four performances, we have come to appreciate the importance of the specific phrases used in the instructions, their power to make families more confident in entering the experimental performance, and the sense of humor that helps us connect with families. However, I am currently thinking about structuring the performances in such a way that they retain the interactive nature without requiring prior instructions. How to replace what has been spoken so far with stage action? We have been working towards this model in our latest production *Mój ogon i ja*[17], which premiered last December at Teatr Polski in Poznań thanks to the aforementioned PolandDances program supported by the Instytut Muzyki i Tańca.

Conclusion

Dance and choreography for children and families are particularly interesting in the context of politicality. During family events (in the broad sense of the word 'families'), we can observe how the structure (or a part of

it in the form of a parent/caregiver and a child) that forms a matrix of subsequent social relations functions in a public setting in relation to the structure of a performance that grows out of beliefs about children, parenting, care, and different philosophies of childhood professed by the artists who create choreographies with family audiences in mind. Choreography and dance for families also constitute an interesting crossroads where the human meets the non-human. Young children, with their uncompromisingly (in comparison to adults) expressive physiology and emotionality, remind us of our animalistic origins; placing their everyday movement (far from that practiced by most adults every day and from what dance is associated with) and play at the center of dance events is close to the postulates of dance democratization, which have resonated in theoretical discourse with great intensity since the American avant-garde of the 1960s. Looking back at the four performances of the Holobiont collective I have co-created, they can be seen as a certain intellectual whole, focused on the emergence and blurring of meanings and attempting to redefine the classical form of performances for children.

It is my sincere hope that expanding the scope of critical ruminations on choreography to include the broadly defined field of family will further the reflections of dance practitioners and theorists working in the dance and performing arts for children.

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Footnotes

1. See the official website of the festival, https://purple-tanzfestival.de/ [accessed: 1.12.2021].
2. In using the term ‘performance as research,’ I consistently refer to the methodology for describing and disseminating knowledge that originates in creative practices. See Arlander et al., 2017.
3. Authors: concept: Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, choreography: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, creation and performance: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Hanna

Bylka-Kanecka, Natalia Oniśk, artistic supervision: Dalija Aćin Thelander, music: Patryk Lichota, lighting design: Joanna Leśnierowska, Łukasz Kędzierski, costumes: Aneta Chudzicka Szycie na Miarę, produced by: Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk, co-produced by: Malta Festival Poznań, partner: Społeczne Przedszkole Lipowa Alejka w Poznaniu.
4. Authors: concept: Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, choreography: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, creation and performance: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Bożena Wydrowska/ Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, music: Michał Jacaszek, stage design consultant: Alicja Bielawska, lighting design consultant: Aleksandr Prowaliński, costumes and stage design: Lazy Studio, lighting directors: Zofia Krystman, Witold Juralewicz, sound directors: Piotr Trojanowski, Maciej Witkowski, produced by: Teatr Ochoty, co-produced by: Art Fraction Foundation.
5. Authors: concept: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, choreography: Holobiont collective (Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska and Hanna Bylka-Kanecka), creation and performance: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Dana Chmielewska, Paweł Grala, music/collage: Józef Buchnajzer, technical director: Łukasz Kędzierski, lighting design consultant: Joanna Leśnierowska, produced by: Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk, partner: Społeczne Przedszkole Lipowa Alejka.
6. Authors: concept and choreography: Holobiont collective, installation: Alicja Bielawska, creation and performance: Dana Chmielewska, Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, music: Patryk Lichota, technical director: Łukasz Kędzierski, produced by: Centrum Sztuki Dziecka, co-produced by: Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk.
7. At this point one should also mention two other landmark events in Polish dance for children. March 2022 saw the first International Academic Conference 'Dance in Education and Human Development,' organized by the Polish National Institute of Music and Dance. The conference was a prelude to the introduction of dance as a school subject in public comprehensive schools. The second event was the first edition of Matter and Sand Toy. Festival of Dance Art for Children, organized by Materia in Łódź within the framework of the Spaces of Art program, which took place in the second half of 2022.
8. The idea of the network first emerged in 2017, see www.youngdancenetwork.com [accessed: 1.12.2021].
9. See the official ASSITEJ website, https://www.assitej-international.org/en/ [accessed: 1.12.2021].
10. For other intriguing takes on the politicality of dance and choreography, see *Dance, Politics and Co-immunity*, 2013; *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, 2017, A. Lepecki, 2006.
11. Artists working in the field of choreography for children whose oeuvres have been inspired by posthumanism include: Dalija Aćin Thelander, Isabelle Schad, Jared Gradinger and Angela Schubot, Janine Harrington.
12. Our first production, *DOoKOŁA*, which premiered in early 2017, was signed with our names, without the stamp of the collective.
13. For more information on the series, visit the publisher's website: https://www.routledge.com/Contesting-Early-Childhood/book-series/SE0623 [accessed: 1.12.2021].
14. J. Szymajda, *polityka tańca* [entry], *Słownik tańca XX i XXI wieku*, http://slowniktanca.uni.lodz.pl/polityka-tanca/ [accessed: 1.12.2021].
15. Anna Nowicka taught me to work with dreams in the context of choreography, while

Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska learned it from Anna Godowska and Sławomir Krawczyński.
16. This aspect was also addressed by M. Maczuga, *DOoKOŁA - ruch do kwadratu*, https://e-teatr.pl/dookoLa-ruch-do-kwadratu-a230244 [accessed: 1.12.2021].
17. Authors: concept: Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, choreography: Holobiont collective in collaboration with Heike Kuhlmann, Adalisą Menghini and Ka Rustler, creation and performance: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, Dana Chmielewska, stage design cooperation: Mr.Tail, music: Józef Buchnajzer, production: Fundacja Performat, coproduction: Teatr Polski in Poznań, partner: Somatische Akademie in Berlin, distribution: Performat Production – Karolina Wycisk.

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