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LOURDES OROZCO

How does a child perceive such things, or rather how is it that they are so perceptible, so obvious, to a child, who perhaps, like dog, reads signs which have become invisible amid the conventions of the grown-up world, and are therefore overlooked in the adult campaign of deceit?

Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea*

CHILDREN AND ANIMALS ON STAGE: AT
THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURE, POLITICS
AND ECONOMICS

Research in Performance Studies has often understood children and animals as theatrical devices that bring the real to performance providing an opportunity to reflect on representation. Animals and, arguably, children are, as Nicholas Ridout suggests, outside 'the theatrical economy' (2004: 58). Often objectified and absorbed as signs within a performance's web of significations, they are taken to be a disruptive element that exposes the constructiveness of performance (Peterson 2007: 43). However, the increasing presence of children and animals in performance practice, as demonstrated by the works of Alain Platel, Romeo Castellucci, Rodrigo García, Jan Fabre, Ivo von Hove and Quarantine, among others, demonstrates that they are not just a metatheatrical device but also performance's engagement with their current status in contemporary society.

The increased participation of children and animals in the market economy and the media has prompted reassessments of their socio-

political role. In the case of children, recent surveys carried out in the US, China and European countries such as Sweden, Italy and the UK concluded that children and adolescents - within the ages of eight and 18 - spend between a third and one half of their waking hours engaged in the media resulting in an increased consumer activity within this age range and a subsequent impact in marketing strategies (Strasburger and Wilson 2002: 8-9). Children and animals are also regularly used as marketing objects in advertising, and specific markets have been created to satisfy their needs/wishes and those of their parents/owners. They have steadily become rampant consumers and, as their media objectification demonstrates, commodities. The existence of specialist animal and children shops, dedicated ranges of clothing, food and other consumables, and their breeding and manufacturing by the application of genetic engineering not only demonstrates their participation in consumer culture but also the unsustainability of traditional categories such as childhood, adulthood, animal and human.

Animals and children are also crucial players in the global economy. Used as labour force, marketing devices and in the arts, media and entertainment, they are central to modern society's workings. Children's labour in sweatshops and recent animal pandemics (BSE, foot-and-mouth, avian and swine flu) demonstrate their influence on markets worldwide. Performance practice that includes children and animals is not aloof from these

reassessments, which have often taken an ethical turn, as the wellbeing of children and animals is monitored by protection laws and guarded by agencies worldwide (RSPC/RSPA, PETA, Save the Children and so on). Recent controversies around the Armani Junior advertising campaign, the iPod 'Baby Shaker' game and **performances involving animal mistreatment by Rodrigo García ('Accidens', 2006) and Marco Evaristti ('Helena', 2004)** continue to challenge the objectification of children in consumer culture as sexual beings, labour force or entertainment as well as the industrialization of animals for human consumption as food, pets, scientific experimentation or vanity objects.¹ The involvement of performance in these debates has become increasingly relevant.

ANIMALS AND CHILDREN: FEAR AND RESPONSIBILITY

Les Ballets C de la B's 'Wolf' arrived at the Avignon Festival's main stage in 2004. Directed by Alain Platel and with a dramaturgy by Hildegard de Vuyst, the performance is a contemporary exploration of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's life and music featuring dancers, musicians, circus artists and fourteen dogs, ten of which appear onstage every night. Emulating an urban landscape, the shopping streets of any Western city, 'Wolf's' performance space is made of graffitied walls, metal fences and shutters, advertising banners, a TV screen. The dogs move freely around the stage. They play with each other, follow the performers around, they sleep. 'Isn't it beautiful, a pack of dogs falling sleep onstage?' (Platel 2004). However, their role far exceeds bringing beauty to the performance: in the open stage of the Palais des Papes, ten loose dogs are an exercise in risk-taking.

As Platel and de Vuyst point out, the dogs also have symbolic signification, they 'represent danger, a threat' and their presence enables the C de la B team to explore two interrelated kinds of fear present in contemporary society (Platel 2004). The first derives from the materiality of

the animals on stage: 'we are slightly worried that we will lose sight of them in this enormous space,' de Vuyst admits (in Platel, 2004). As the dogs move freely, they need to be continuously watched to avoid accidents, mistakes. The second is a metaphorical transposition of the former: the fear of losing control, a fear that is, in their view, imposed by society's political and economic powers whose pursuit of safety has done away with individual freedoms. In 'Wolf', by providing an illusion of freedom, the dogs perform a celebration of losing control. Given agency to do as they please, the animals demand trust from the performers, the audience and the technical team. By trusting them and accepting their behaviour, 'Wolf' offers an opportunity to work through these imposed and self-imposed fears and constraints and to participate in a collective illusion of freedom.² This is important because, for Platel, these fears have social and political implications. They are a consequence of what he perceives as Europe's identity crisis, which affects the Continent at national and domestic levels: 'Europe has gradually lost its national identity, its ideas of family and religion. There is undoubtedly a lack of points of reference, and all this has made way for a void and thus for fear' (Platel 2004). The animal's meaning onstage is then related to a broader set of current metaphorical and social concerns explored by Ulrich Beck's concept of 'risk society' - a society governed by the constant management of uncontrollable risks (Beck 1992) - and his theories on individualization understood as the effects that 'the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, neighbourhood, etc' have on the individual and thus in society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 2).

'Old People, Children and Animals' (2008), a performance by UK-based Quarantine, brings another element into the fear equation: responsibility. On the elevated stage that dominates the performance space, there is a drum set and Betty - a parrot - who looks directly at the audience placed on a chair behind a

¹ García's piece, 'Accidens', featured the live killing, cooking and eating of a lobster. Presented worldwide, the performance has been banned in some Spanish and Italian cities. Evaristti's 'Helena' tantalized the audience to the killing of ten goldfish each of which had been placed in a liquidizer. The director of the Trapholt Art Museum (Denmark) where the piece was presented was taken to court under charges of animal cruelty.

² In Francis Fukuyama's view, 'trust' is instrumental in the development of ethically driven societies, since trust enables ethical community formations and the embracing of socially constructed fears (Fukuyama 1995).

microphone. A bright spotlight shines directly on the animal. The opening scene of the piece is unequivocal; the parrot has displaced the human as the star of the show. But is Betty performing when she looks at her surroundings, at the audience, and makes parrot noises? Minutes later, Maia, a four-year-old child is brought into the space. Like the parrot, Maia is let be during the entire piece; playing about with toys and cardboard boxes she entertains the audience by entertaining herself. 'I was thinking about my relationship with my mother and how, now she's older, the direction of responsibility changes. I began to develop this idea of who and what we are responsible for and that naturally drew me to children and animals,' Quarantine's artistic director Richard Gregory, explains (Stanley 2008).

Like Betty and Platel's dogs, Maia is a theatrical hazard. Her unawareness of the context in which she has been placed makes her prone to misfire. As a four-year-old her emotional and/or physical needs might get in the way of the performance. She might start crying, or she might want to stop playing and leave the theatre. In placing Maia onstage, Quarantine demonstrate their willingness to take risks because to some extent the child's performance - like that of Betty and Platel's dogs - is unpredictable. However, this risk-taking far exceeds the performance boundaries. Firstly, Maia's sole materiality demands an engagement with the risk-reduction structures that are in place in contemporary Britain (e.g., Children and Young Persons Acts). For her to participate in the piece, the company needs to have her parents' consent, a license issued by the local authority which will monitor the child's health, her treatment and the length of time that she will be onstage, and Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks will have to be carried out on the Quarantine troupe to ensure her safety.

Her presence also foregrounds responsibility. Placing her in an estranged and dangerous environment, the company is accountable for Maia's wellbeing. But responsibility is also to be

taken for her social risk taking, that is to say, for the social effects that her presence in the performance will have on her. Peta Tait's work on twentieth-century female aerialists considers social risk-taking to be as crucial as the physical risks that their performances entailed, since these artists were also subjected to social scrutiny due to their strong, muscular and, therefore, what were perceived to be masculine physicalities. Tait believes that these social framings not only shaped their performances - the costumes they wore and the acts they attempted - but also their identity and social status (Tait 2005: 84). Similar notions of risk-taking can be applied to Maia and other children who regularly take part in performance and/or other forms of entertainment, since their public display transforms their position in society from anonymous into public individuals whose identities are shared and available.

Fear and responsibility become central to practice dealing with children and animals. Mistakes can occur, risks are taken, all involved are accountable for them. However, risk-taking and responsabilization processes, as understood by Beck (1992 and 2000) and Giddens (1999) correspondingly, are more than just performance methodologies. They are also performance's engagement with the political, social, economic and cultural shifts that these processes continue to bring about. Beck's influential concept of 'risk society' claims that contemporary society is constantly threatened by 'manufactured dangers - uncontrollable risks' that have caused 'modern societies to focus less upon technical and economic development and more and more upon the problems of managing the hazards that this development entails' (Beck in Garland 2003: 74). Thus 'we no longer choose to take risks; we have them thrust upon us' (75). Together with the disenfranchisement derived from individualization, today's individuals have more freedom, more mobility and more agency, but have also experienced a radical shift in the location of responsibility. Theirs are 'do-it-yourself biograph[ies]', 'risk and a tightrope

biograph[ies]' as today's risk- and individualized societies create a context in which freed up individuals live in 'a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 2). Global threats from economic crises, environmental catastrophes or life-threatening epidemics are taken to be individual responsibilities as people are accountable for their attitudes towards savings, carbon consumption and personal health. Furthermore, increased individual responsibility takes place within a general state of uncertainty: 'we don't, and we can't know' (Giddens 1999: 2). Blind choices are a cause of anxiety as they constantly demand an engagement with control in a society governed by unmanageable risks. Current political, social and economic structures encourage this behaviour of lone decision-making producing individual accountability in a society liberated from the weight of tradition.³ In today's risk society this making of choices is - as Giddens (1999), Garland (2003) and Hacking (2003) propose - tight to moralization. Making the wrong choices, engaging and/or avoiding

risk-taking and making mistakes is morally and socially judged. Intrinsicly embedded in society, performance is not alien to these processes.

LOOSE ANIMALS AND CAGED CHILDREN:
RISK-TAKING IN PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

The stage has been transformed into a school gymnasium. Exercise bars, the lines of several ball games drawn on the linoleum, some chairs. Sixteen children aged between eight and fourteen enter the space and walk downstage to face the audience. They look at the spectators straight in the eye during their hour-long spiel about what adults have and have not told/taught them. 'You feed us. You wash us. You dress us. You sing to us. You watch us when we are sleeping. You explain to us the different causes of illness and the different causes of war' (Etchells 2007). This is *That Night Follows Day* (2007), a performance collaboration between theatre company Victoria and director Tim Etchells. 'I expected the children to perform,' a disappointed

³ This is what both Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 2) and Giddens (1999: 1-2) call the 'end of tradition': a collapse of traditional beliefs and frames of reference such as science, religion, the state etc.



• Betty, the parrot, and performer Emma Royle share the stage in Quarantine's *Old People, Children and Animals* (2008).

spectator exclaims. The real has entered the stage. Who are these children? Are they performing? Are they doing what they are told? What will happen if they forget their long and complex text? What if they make a mistake? Are they missing school? Should they not be in bed? The children's materiality is difficult to reconcile with the context of the stage in London's Southbank Centre.

Societas Raffaello Sanzio's opening scene of *Inferno*, a trilogy of performances loosely based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, throws the audience off similar precipices. Wearing protective body armour, one of the company's directors comes onstage: 'My name is Romeo Castellucci,' he tells the audience. Castellucci is then aggressively brought down by two police dogs who have been let loose while another eight, previously brought in by their handlers, watch the attack chained to the stage floor. The tension of the dog's bodies is transposed to those of the audience; their loud barking maximized by onstage microphones. Later on in the performance a group of children aged between two and four will enter the stage inside a glass-mirrored box. The audience will watch and hear them while a disguised adult supervises them.

Four hens and a turtle are freed from their cages as performer Agnes Mateus opens Rodrigo García's piece 'Une Façon d'Approcher d'Idée de Mefiance' (2006) with a movement sequence in which attempt and failure are physicalized. Let loose around the stage for large sections of the performance, the animals impose their will onto the performers' tasks constantly attempting to leave the stage. The hens resist staying in their positions, escape from the performers' hands and don't eat their corn as expected. The turtle, carrying a camera on its back, is reluctant to offer a close shot of its head, the director's most-wanted image for the piece. García has placed his technicians onstage in an attempt to provide some sense of security. On a space crammed by cables and flooded by milk and water, they regularly rescue the turtle and the hens.

The sole presence of these children and animals onstage is a challenge to risk-avoidance and responsibility. While most of these performances' Health and Safety procedures are invisible to the audience - the licences, the health and safety checks - and others - the body armour, the camouflaged childminder, the technicians onstage - have been assimilated as part of the artifice, they are all signs of real risk engagement. However, artistic performance offers the possibility to play and experiment with risk in a relatively protected environment that allows for a metaphorical exploration of the residues produced by a fear-driven and security-obsessed society. Platel's, Gregory's, Castellucci's and García's risk-taking represents a challenge to the structures of Beck's 'risk society' by, on the one hand, exposing the effects of 'responsibilization' on the human being and, on the other, defending the right of the individual to take control over their own lives. If the presence of children and animals in performance is a metaphor for what cannot be controlled, the looming danger of error, mistake and misfire brought about by their improbable presence and unpredictable behaviour allow these practitioners and the spectator to engage in relatively safe risk-taking.⁴ However constructed or manufactured these risks and mistakes might be, they are still real (Giddens 1999: 7).

Children and animals bring uncertainty to the theatre, and with it comes responsibility - the responsibility taken by artistic teams and also that of the audience, who are invited to reflect on the moral questions surrounding animal- and child-participation in performance and thus are encouraged to think about their own participation. Will they save the turtle from jumping offstage? Will they help Maia if she wants to leave? Will they assist Castellucci if the dogs don't follow the handlers' orders? These performances capitalize on the multiplicity of potential outcomes produced by the actions of children and animals in order to expose issues of trust, responsibility and fear. Absorbed in the financial and political structures of today's

⁴ Animals are unpredictable even when trained as demonstrated by Roy Horne's tiger attack suffered during a Siegfried and Roy performance in Las Vegas in 2004. In this incident Horne was bitten in the neck by a trained white tiger causing critical injuries and severe blood loss. See Peterson (2007: 33-4)

theatre and performance practice, these performances are accountable for their mistakes. If they go wrong, directors and producers will have to answer questions. But what is the role of the audience? While for them risk-taking functions largely at a metaphorical level, they are arguably willing partakers in an experience that commercializes fear and risk-taking. Watching the dog attack on Castellucci, *Inferno*'s children caged in a mirrored box, a turtle lost on a stage covered in milk and talcum powder the spectator is not asked to take risks but is offered the opportunity to watch someone else's endangerment from the comfort of the auditorium.

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