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1.

In one of his early essays, Tim Etchells, artistic director of the company Forced Entertainment – he avoids describing himself as ‘leader’, preferring to be known as someone who stimulates collective work – recounts an anecdote which is a good illustration of where most of the company’s activities start. It’s a story about hippies from the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco: in the late 1960s, they were so fed up with the coachloads of tourists staring at them that they resorted to carrying mirrors to reverse the situation. Whenever a bus passed, they held the mirrors up, inviting tourists to look at themselves.¹ ‘What was it you wanted to see?’ ask the actors who have ‘forced entertainment’ as their company name.

When it comes to Anna Karasińska’s theatre, such simple questions as ‘What is this, actually?’ and ‘What was it you wanted when you came here tonight?’ or ‘What was it you wanted to see?’ can also be asked. Reviewers have described her work – and particularly her debut production, *Ewelina płacze* [*Ewelina’s Crying*, 2015] with the company TR Warszawa, as an antidote to boredom in theatre: funny, brilliant, unorthodox, ‘simple in a sophisticated way’.² Critics have agreed that Karasińska has brought freshness and originality to theatre – mainly because of her earlier professional experience, which had nothing to do with the stage: she had been a philosophy student then completed a degree in film and television directing at the Łódź Film School.

But casting Karasińska in the role of an autodidact just starting out in theatre doesn’t fully grasp the conceptual background of her theatre work. As demonstrated by her five productions completed to date – *Ewelina’s Crying*, *Drugi spektakl* [*The Second Performance*, Polski Theatre in Poznań, 2016], *Urodziny* [*Birthday*, Komuna// Warszawa, 2016], *Fantazja* [*The Fantasia*, TR Warszawa, 2017], *Twórcy* [*All Imaginary*, Stary Theatre in Kraków, 2017] – what we’re presented with is a highly coherent, through-conceived project. In this project, the theatrical situation is generated by a complicated system of reflections, rather than by a single mirror held up to the audience. And the complicated system is part of a long-term quest.

Karasińska’s works don’t exist in a vacuum, but relate in a number of ways to the works of other artists from the performative-arts field,

1 Tim Etchells, ‘Play On: Collaboration and Process’, in *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 65.

2 Witold Mrozek, ‘Abstrakcyjna *Fantazja* w TR Warszawa’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 16 April 2017.

including the Forced Entertainment collective mentioned above, the Croatian choreographer and writer Ivana Müller and British-German choreographer Tino Sehgal. The objective behind identifying these touchpoints or common areas is to broaden the reflection on some of the strategies employed in Karasińska's theatre. My askance perspective is also due to the fact that I didn't see Karasińska's works in sequence as they premiered, but started watching them when all five had already been completed. I was interested in paradoxes that seemed an inherent part of her theatre, gestures recurring or abandoned, mysterious blind spots where a peculiar kind of interdependency comes about between actors, the production and the audience.

When she made the decision to enter the 2014 edition of the Teren TR competition organized by TR Warszawa, in which she made her debut with *Ewelina's Crying*, Karasińska quickly came up with

a working title for her first project. She named it Random Disconnects and her aim was to focus on the effect of strangeness (the idea of *Ewelina's Crying* came to her while she rehearsed for that first, eventually abandoned, project).³ The choice may seem surprising, given that Karasińska has been regarded as a theatre novice. Though the situation of 'random disconnection' is ultimately examined in a disguised form in *Ewelina's Crying*, in Karasińska's later productions, this peculiar take on the effect of strangeness is at once the most engaging and, paradoxically, the most mysterious mechanism at play in Karasińska's theatre.

2.

As Karasińska likes to emphasise, she doesn't 'rely on a completed statement, already extant in literature or film. She doesn't choose her topic out of a list headed "important."'⁴ One gets the impression that the subject is of no interest at all to her: her works are based on a theatrical situation, usually set in motion as part of a conceptual idea. Karasińska's pieces, like Forced Entertainment productions, are based on play or on a rule:

a simple but strict framework which allows performers inside it to make decisions, improvising more or less freely, with the underlying structure as a kind of safety net and guarantor of formal cohesion. Each is both game and a catalogue; a focus on one or another performative (and often linguistic) modus operandi or system of exchange.⁵

In *Ewelina's Crying*, this mechanism takes the form of TR Warszawa actors playing volunteers who are playing TR Warszawa actors; in *The Second Performance*, actors play the audience as seen by actors; *The Fantasia*, meanwhile, is at first glance a catalogue of potential

3 'Nie umiem zauczestniczyć', *Pan od kultury*. *Teatralny blog Mike'a Urbaniaka*, 29 October 2016, <https://mikeurbaniak.wordpress.com/2016/11/28/nie-umiem-zauczestniczyc/>, [accessed on 22 January 2018].

4 'Nie umiem zauczestniczyć'.

5 Tim Etchells, 'An Island, A Prison Cell, A Hotel Bed, A No Man's Land: Some Thoughts About "Quizoola!24"', <https://www.forcedentertainment.com/notebook-entry/an-island-a-prison-cell-a-hotel-bed-a-no-mans-land-some-thoughts-about-quizoola-24-by-tim-etchells/> [accessed on 7 April 2018].

productions (designed with the actors in the minds of the audience) projected onto the actors. As a part of these systems, improvisations take place during rehearsals and provide the director with material for writing her scripts. Karasińska does not emphasise advantages of collectively working on a script, nor does she relate her method to the tradition of devised theatre. The purpose of improvising with actors is testing the concept which is there to begin with, and to include in the script the here and now of a given company (for instance, institutional considerations and casting circumstances). In many respects, Karasińska's works are gems of metatheatre. But in my view, although exposing the mechanisms of theatre (above all its structures, the tricks it plays and expectations it formulates) broadens the scope of creative freedom and brings about new opportunities, it's not at the centre of Karasińska's experiments.

Obviously, her work has much in common with institutional critique, unmasking mechanisms of the production of art. Although institutional critique has been present in global art since the 1960s, it has only recently gained prominence in Polish theatre. Nonetheless, it has quickly become common ground for directors associated with 'auto-theatre'⁶ (Anna Smolar, Michał Buszewicz, Agnieszka Jakimiak, Weronika Szczawińska, Wojtek Ziemilski, Justyna Sobczyk and her Teatr 21, a company of performers with Down's syndrome and autism). According to critic Joanna Krakowska, who coined the term 'auto-theatre', speaking from the stage in one's own name rather than in the name of a character is at the heart of this mode of theatre. In it, performers:

style="padding-left: 40px;">speak in their own words and about themselves. They refer to their own experiences, explore their personal limitations, reveal their weaknesses, problematize the situation in which they speak, define and question their identities, disclose the backstage of theatrical process, relations inside the team, institutional restrictions, economic conditions, ideological uneasiness.⁷

In her first two productions, Karasińska directly appropriated the expectations directed at her, making them part of her process and of the productions. In *Ewelina's Crying*, she exposed the aspirational narrative inherent in the very fact of entering a competition, her own position as an emerging director – but also the fact that rehearsals were taking place in one of Warsaw's trendiest theatres. Yet an anecdote about the TR bathroom, where stars take a piss, and the structurally twisted story about a group of amateur (surrogate) understudies appearing before the audience because TR company members didn't find the time, performed on stage by TR actors with the exception of the eponymous Ewelina, demonstrate that we're poles apart from the patronising or naive tone often lurking beneath pointed criticism. Instead, Karasińska's approach has much in common with Tino Sehgal's strategy: the choreographer employs jokes and humour to disturb rigid institutional structures by literally

⁶ Joanna Krakowska's term, in Krakowska, 'Auto-theatre in the Era of Post-Truth', trans. by Monika Bokinić, in the present issue *Polish Theatre Journal* 1:5, 2018, www.polishtheatrejournal.com.

⁷ Krakowska 'Auto-theatre in Times of Post-Truth'.

setting in motion with choreographic action those features of a museum or gallery which remain beyond a visitor's view. Sehgal turns exhibition 'guards' – transparent for visitors yet present in every room – into performers; alternatively, in his production *Kiss*, he intensifies a gallery's physical, sensuous aspect by re-playing love scenes known from artworks. His works are lighter on commentary and heavier on event. A humorous concept is another aspect his works and those of Karasińska have in common.

In *The Second Performance*, Karasińska took on a 'post-success' situation and the ominous question frequently asked by the media: 'Your first production was a success, what next?' With the implication: you'll be finished in no time. Through she had planned to stage a self-help book about cleaning for a time of disorder at the Polski Theatre in Poznań, Karasińska decided to do an about-turn and focus on the audience. This gesture of contrariness had a whiff of artistic suicide about it. The director seemed to give up on creating anything. She made the stage available as if it were a blank sheet of paper, asking the cast to reproduce a catalogue of typical audience-members behaviour, then to carry out tasks which an audience could potentially assign. Thus a person in the audience became the object of observation and play. 'What is it about those human persons who, as Richard says in *Showtime*, "Like to sit in the dark and watch other people do it?"' As Tim Etchells has wondered: 'And people (like me and maybe you) who will pay money to sit down and watch others act things out, pay money to see pretending'.⁸

The theme of looking as an oppression was taken up in Karasińska's next TR production: *The Fantasia*. 'Adam [Woronowicz, a popular theatre and television actor] plays a person in the audience who goes to see every show because he wants to look at people', Karasińska, in the balcony, instructs Woronowicz. 'He used to look at people on trams and in shopping malls, but they didn't take it all that well. But in theatre, he feels he's allowed to look'.⁹ In Forced Entertainment productions, actors impute deriving a pleasure from looking (scopophilia) to audience members; they entice that pleasure, engage it in a game of attraction and repulsion (by performing confessions, for example, and by asking countless questions about life and giving countless answers, by excessive acting in scenes of death and agony – the images most desired by audiences). Etchells asks: 'Did you dream of looking that had no consequence, no ethical bind, no power inherent in it, no cost? You won't find that here'.¹⁰ Like members of the British collective, Karasińska exposes the voyeuristic spectator, but applies different rules to drawing her into the game of meanings. In Forced Entertainment productions, theatricality is the instrument of choice in games that actors play with the audience. Never mind that everything has a makeshift look to it, that the stage set and costumes seem taken straight from a children's party or a charity shop: with a heap of costumes and a pile of cardboard boxes with slogans, there's no end to performing events, as in *12am: Awake & Looking*

8 Etchells, 'Play On', p. 64.

9 Excerpts from the script for *The Fantasia*, directed by Anna Karasińska, dramaturgy by Magdalena Rydzewska and Jacek Telenga, premiere 9 April 2017 at TR Warszawa.

10 Etchells, 'Play On', p. 65.

Down (1993). In Karasińska's work, the theatrical situation is simpler, stripped of the theatricality carried by costumes, stage set or props. If a prop does come up – as, for instance, yoghurt does in *The Fantasia* – it's more of an exception corroborating the rule. Playing with projections and fantasies of projections replaces playing with stage conventions.

3.

The Fantasia is based on anything we can imagine, or what we can try to imagine or are unable to imagine. It's the process of designing a performance where an audience member is an imaginary co-author. As we learn from Karasińska's opening remarks from the balcony – 'you can't see this, but it can be imagined' – the performance we're about to see will now come into being, live with the exception of several excerpts that participants got used to during rehearsals. The actors haven't been assigned their roles. Karasińska – there can be no doubt it's her as she addresses the audience and the actors directly – emphasises that she's going to react to events on stage and read out the course the performance will take. For this reason, there's no such thing as a single perfect course of events. For, rather than 'played back from the tape', Karasińska is live herself, and it's possible that she'll laugh or make a mistake, or be at a loss about what to do next.

Apart from taking a humorous approach to the performativeness of theatre presentations, *The Fantasia* involves play with the exposed and the hidden from its outset. The rules of the game are revealed to the audience, but are also deviated from. The event-like character of the production is stressed, but repetitiveness is also implied. The attention of the audience is drawn to the director's presence – yet she's seated out of the audience's view. ('I'm very small in this large room and my desk lamp is small, too'.) Performing live gives the cast the opportunity to become 'attuned' to the audience – but also places a performance within the range of failure, given that the person in charge of the whole action can make a mistake or suddenly become speechless. In addition, the principles of Real Time Composition (RTC) echo in the opening declarations: the basic premise of this method is that, rather than look for 'creative' solutions, one should focus on what's been found then develop it. ('The ability to look at ourselves looking at (ourselves looking at) things', in the words of João Fiadeiro, who has developed RTC.) Incidentally, in an interview, Karasińska recalled taking part in RTC workshops convened by the director Wojtek Ziemilski in May 2015: it was then that she discovered she had always worked this way, only unaware of the method.¹¹ She also commented on the fact that people regard *Ewelina's Crying* as an improvisation, when it's based in fact on a highly complex dramaturgical mechanism.¹² I imagine the same is true of *The Fantasia*, though not all my doubts have been dispelled after watching a single performance.

The Fantasia is a production for six actors and an empty stage. Apart from Rafał Maćkowiak, Adam Woronowicz and Maria Maj, also

11 'Kto szybko zaczyna, szybciej kończy' – Arek Gruszczyński in conversation with Anna Karasińska', *Dwutygodnik* 172:11, 2015, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/6241-kto-szybko-zaczyna-szybciej-konczy.html>, [accessed on 22 January 2018].

12 'Kto szybko zaczyna, szybciej kończy'.

in *Ewelina's Crying*, the cast includes Agata Buzek, Zofia Wichłacz and Dobromir Dymecki. What's the nature of their presence in the production? With a few exceptions, they haven't got any lines: they mutely carry out tasks assigned to them by the director. Called forward by name, they edge a little closer to the front of the stage at first to mark their presence – but this gets blurred over time, as the audience gets to know the language of the performance. The opening sequence is a crypto-presentation of sorts: of the actors (each will be called forward once, and thus introduced) and of the method of producing the narrative. Dymecki is the first to be addressed by Karasińska:

Dobromir will play a white bear now. We are in a theatre, so it's easy for us to believe the bear is real – but if you take a really good look at it, you'll see its fur is artificial [...]. There's a person underneath the fur: we can't see him, but we can try to imagine him. [...]. Or perhaps it's not him at all, but his friend, filling in for him on Wednesdays.

As far as the real is concerned, we begin from zero: the person in the audience can see the director assign a task to an actor, as if during a rehearsal. Ostensibly, this looks much like basic actors' tasks, similar to practice in drama school in a class of that same name. And so there are simple, everyday observations and emotional states to recreate; there are abstract tasks, too, such as playing an open jam jar. But is the task really the point? Maybe it's pure description? Is the aim to recreate reality through acting, or rather to evoke in the actors some sort of an after-image of reality, a trace of previously recorded experiences and images? The actors' reactions to the instructions is somewhat unusual: they at once play and don't play what's been suggested to them. In his review of *The Fantasia*, Witold Mrozek called this effect 'the haiku of theatre', 'where acting is reduced to a situation or emotion outlined in a flash, with few strokes: two facial expressions, a gesture, a twist of the body. Evocative images in a few lines'.¹³

It seems to me there's another aspect to this: watching oneself in this sketchy part or temporary identity; and revealing, for a moment, one's attitude to it (surprise, disappointment, amusement, at times satisfaction). Actors become a medium for a stream of images, but also for their own passions and emotions. This game of fantasising takes place in front of both the audience and the other actors, tinged delicately with rivalry. The performative aspect and the energy of the performance (created live, as announced) is generated in the crevice between the part-non-part and the micro-commentary. The script follows that path, too: tasks are often assigned in keeping with the principle of contrast, which frequently triggers a comical effect; or else tasks supplement or overlay one another, sucking actors into scenes of almost epic proportion. All actors are told to take turns playing the same character or, the other way around, one actor will play the same character over and over again. Strategies are numerous. The reverse of this minimalist approach to events manifests itself in language. Unlike when Karasińska triggers events on stage, in constructing her narrative she refuses to start with the basics, moving immediately

¹³ Mrozek, 'Abstrakcyjna Fantazja'.

onto a multi-tier illusion. The opening image of a white bear draws us in only to be reversed or shifted with each subsequent association and, in the end, to emerge as something completely different than what it seemed in the beginning.

Let's try to imagine this. 'At the moment, Zosia is playing someone who stands with her back to you across the street. She's got her hood on; she reminds you of someone, but you can't remember who that is; Agata is playing a girl wearing a blouse with colourful patterns. Majka [Maria Maj] is playing a man who's just swallowed a magical pill and starts to think he's a woman. Rafał [Maćkowiak]'s playing someone who totally reminds you of Sindbad the Sailor; and Adam [Woronowicz] is someone who could be wearing a shahid's belt.' The call to 'switch' marks the end of each image or sequence of associations. The actors move to different spots on stage and the game of fantasising starts all over again. Karasińska stimulates the audience's imaginations, instructing actors to play never-ending catalogues of existing and non-existent people, conditions and events. The actors also play members of the audience, actors appearing in *The Fantasia*, and even those among the actors who hope they won't have to play certain things. 'I would like to tune people to the process of their own thinking and their own free associating, to the way that they make meanings, to the way that they are reading, to the ways in which as spectators they are in a tension, both with the material and with other spectators etc.'¹⁴ – this is how Tim Etchells described a strategy which, in my view, is similar to the one adopted by Karasińska. As seen by Etchells, work in theatre 'tries to break some habitual ways of looking and thinking, to challenge those, to make them impossible, to push you with too much information, to starve you with too little, to unsettle you by jumping from one tone or emotional register to another, to combine ideas in ways that are surprising'¹⁵ In Karasińska's work, the fantasia of the title is a bridge leading towards the audience's involvement in the process of filling in blanks in the performance and taking an attitude of authorship towards it.

4.

Générique [End Credits], a project of a performance posted in open access on everybodystoolbox.net, is one example of audience participation in creating an imaginary production. The project comprises instructions to an event based on the structure of a game and collective creativity, taking as its starting point the idea that actors and audience discuss a performance which has just (sort of) taken place.¹⁶ It's a post-show talk in which the non-existent show can be created by means of a collective depiction and thus granted presence. Thus the performance will be performatively acted out in language, provided that a temporary community and exchange platform can be created as part of the event.

14 'The Errors Indicate a Direction', Tim Etchells in conversation with Katarzyna Tórz, London, April 2015; published in Polish translation by the interviewer as 'Błędy wskazują kierunek', in Tim Etchells, *Tak jakby nic się nie wydarzyło. Teatr Forced Entertainment* (Poznań-Kraków: Korporacja Ha-art. 2015), p. 252.

15 'The Errors Indicate A Direction'.

16 <http://everybodystoolbox.net/index.php?title=Générique>, [accessed on 22 January 2018]

Karasińska is interested both in disarming relations between performance and audience and in playing with the existing/non-existing, absent/present and visible/invisible. Karasińska shows no less contrariness than the *Générique* team in using self-referential themes to add specificity and substance to the situation on stage, but she invariably does this by shifting things slightly. For example, halfway through *The Fantasia*, the entire performance is suddenly subjected to self-review: 'At the moment, Adam is playing an actor who has just appeared in a new performance, and it's the kind of performance where he first stands on stage like a cunt for a very long time and says nothing, and goes on from there to play a snake's tail'; meanwhile, 'Majka is playing someone who comforts herself with the fact that, in another theatre performance, actors, hidden completely inside paper cones, play cones'. The audience gets a mention, too: they play an active role in imagining the performance, admittedly, but not the performance they're currently seeing: 'Majka is playing a person in the audience who doesn't like the show and thinks she should have gone to that other theatre after all, to see a show called *Hatred and Your Fault*, which is on there tonight. She is imagining that other show to be able to sit through this one'. There's also the theme of powerlessness, articulated at the very outset of the performance, right after the first 'switch' of image: 'Dobromir is playing someone who can't imagine anything and would like to have it all shown to him'.

In *We Are Still Watching*, a 2012 production by Ivana Müller, the Croatian choreographer, artist and writer whose works, in my view, provide an important context for Karasińska's work, nothing was shown to the audience. An audience of sixty people sat around the four sides of an empty stage and read out loud lines that had been written for them. In this project, Müller looked at the idea of participation, with reference both to theatre and political practices. This is how she recounted her explorations into the piece's opening concept: 'in *We Are Still Watching*, the role of spectators-readers coincides with the role of citizens-voters. One of the questions that we kept asking ourselves when working on this performative proposition was: How to stay political in an extremely scripted and seemingly "well organized" society?'¹⁷ What Müller and Karasińska have in common is their search for a new, active role for an audience member: no longer a spect-actor¹⁸ or the emancipated viewer;¹⁹ what's more, both artists share an interest in issues of perception and visibility.

But Karasińska is interested in existential rather than political motivations – which is why I would point to another production by Müller as the prototype for experiments underlying *The Fantasia*.

In *While We Were Holding It Together* (2006), Müller constructs a simple situation: for over an hour, a group of performers (actors? dancers?) remain on stage in a single tableau vivant. The image is composed with some care (someone lies down, someone stands, someone sits), but it doesn't bring to mind any specific visual representation

17 <http://www.ivanamuller.com/works/we-are-still-watching/>, [accessed on 20 January 2018].

18 A concept proposed by Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre.

19 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009).

(whether in painting, sculpture or film). It resembles an unbearably protracted film still where some gestures are expressive and others are perfectly ordinary. Dramaturgically, the performance is propelled by language, providing a different context for the image each time. Unlike *The Fantasia*, in Müller's work the performers design meanings as they incorporate bodies frozen in one position into specific sets of coordinates. Who and what are we looking at? A rock band on tour? A picnic in a forest? Sculptures on an auction or locked in a warehouse? The list of suggestions is long, the combinations increasingly absurd, the narrative brilliantly funny. The text always starts with the words 'I imagine...'. The evocative power of language makes the audience look, imagine and let themselves be drawn in to the game of creating sense. *While We Were Holding It Together* tells us about the power of imagination but, above all, about images: always volatile and dependent on who's looking.

From the point of view of choreography, Müller is much more interested than Karasińska in relations between language and bodies in space. Performers' bodies are only seemingly static; towards the end of a performance they tremble visibly, exhausted by the effort of holding a single position for an hour. Choreography is also relevant at the level of language: thoughts can move instead of bodies, as is often the case in conceptual choreography. In *While We Were Holding It Together*, language is not only a tool of shaping notions and ideas, but also the driving force behind the performance, engaging the audience in the process of conceptually filling in blanks of the production, and positioning themselves as co-participants. Similarly, in Karasińska's *The Fantasia*, statements also play a predominantly evocative role: they trigger subjective reactions of an audience member, stimulating her imagination. In both cases, what's at stake is not the multiplication of subjective courses of events, but creating a temporary community through the collective work of the imagination. As in the title of Müller's piece, the actual event is the attempt to hold 'It' together. What is 'It'?

5.

Karasińska said in an interview: 'First you need to disarm the situation: audience-production-theatre. And then create a community, a place of exchange'.²⁰ The director dismantles the theatrical situation and makes use of volatile actors' identities to get to the real in theatre. A search for presence takes place by an accumulation of absences: the absence of staging in the traditional sense of the term, the absence of the part, of the story. We're here and now, faced with an empty stage, a group of actors, and the potential of the (barely outlined) characters and stories. This type of theatre does not seek to locate the space of experience on the line where the fiction of the dramatic world and the audience's imagination meet, but instead seeks to mediate between the real player's world and the audience²¹ – thus Hans-Thies Lehmann on his experience of

20 'Nie umiem zauczestniczyć'.

21 Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'Shakespeare's Grin. Remarks on World Theatre with Forced Entertainment', trans. by Marc Svetov, in Martin Andersen Nexö, Judith Helmer, Florian Malzacher (eds.), *'Not Even a Game Anymore': Das Theater von Forced Entertainment / The Theatre of Forced Entertainment* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2004), p. 115.

Forced Entertainment. I think a similar contention would also be relevant to Karasińska's theatre. What's the nature of negotiations between actors and audience, mentioned above? For Lehmann, their source is in language: 'the dimensions of linguistic symbolization, address, exchange, speaking and hearing, will become the catalysts of theatrical communication.'²² Even if a narrative is based on strategies of estrangement, using fragmentariness and deconstruction, it still remains the central feature of the event on stage. To an extent, this is corroborated by Karasińska's statement on her narrative-building method. She describes the structure for the script of *Ewelina's Crying*, her first production, as undulating:

We constantly make the audience laugh, we keep them anxious, and occupy their minds with something other than what it's really about. People don't know why they react the way they do. But they are experiencing something. There's no point putting a name on it, but it does work.²³

The Fantasia, too, keeps making the audience laugh: the humour stems both from the text – funny micro-stories recorded there, the way the material is put together – and from the way these absurd miniatures are distributed, juxtaposed with specific actors for whom they are designed. Apart from the viruses of self-referentiality (fragments about actors and the audience), the narrative structure includes sequences in a rather different key, more disturbing and mysterious, related to images of death or violence: the recurrent motif of the anonymous, unnoticed death of a man in China's Xi'an province; the story of a youngster who killed his friend with a baseball bat; the story of a boy who will be scared to death by a wasp. These features don't break off or disrupt the narrative in any decisive way, but are performed using a slightly different acting strategy, less humorous and illustrative, more internal; notably, Karasińska opts for longer pauses between subsequent statements, to give the actors more time to confront the depictions. To me, these images were the most memorable, mainly owing to the dramaturgic mechanisms that triggered them.

The stories are not constructed based on a straightforward dramatic effect – quite the contrary. In the story of murdering the boy with a baseball bat, the main characters (the murderer, his sister and his victim, played by Dobromir Dymecki, Zofia Wichłacz and Adam Woronowicz, respectively) have been juxtaposed with opinions of the deed: 'Agata and Majka are playing people who think those who are like the one played by Dobromir are not human at all. Rafał is playing someone who prefers to think people like the one played by Dobromir don't exist. Dobromir's playing someone who doesn't exist'. A similar narrative gesture is applied in the story of the unnoticed death of a man in the Xi'an province: 'Adam is playing someone who jumped into a river in the Xi'an province and no one found out or wrote about it in the papers.' After replaying the death in minute detail – the actors play a person who knew the dead man, a meadow by the river he jumped into, the mother of the man, a cheap Chinese watch still working for a minute after its owner drowned, the

²² Lehmann, 'Shakespeare's Grin', p. 115.

²³ 'Kto szybko zaczyna'.

dying man's final words, spoken in Chinese: 'Adam is playing a person who checked in Wikipedia there's no such thing as the Xi'an province'.

The negative space revealing itself in *The Fantasia* links experiments undertaken by Karasińska with the underlying assumptions of negative performativity, where gestures based on failure or refusal – themes of invisibility, non-emergence, powerlessness, inactivity – are major artistic strategies. The production combines the perspective of communal fantasising, in keeping with scripts suggested by the director, with the possibility of a failure of imagination – the refusal or inability to get involved – which is an inherent part of the experience. Between the audience's potential involvement in the production of meaning and a refusal to acknowledge this involvement, a realm of ephemeral exchange and mindfulness opens up. This act of taking the viewer closer to the image before suddenly cutting her off from it brings about a powerful effect of strangeness: the catalyst of experience.

Karasińska's Random Disconnects can be regarded as roughly her own version of Brecht's V-Effekt (the distancing effect). What in the case of Brecht's strategy has become a familiar, conservative convention introducing an element of distance into the production, works in Karasińska's piece on several levels at least: in language, structure and acting. In language, I would locate the effect of strangeness in operating the strategy of augmenting and blurring images, suddenly removing them from the field of vision, juxtaposing them in keeping with the contrast principle. Interestingly, these images are materialised on stage in quite a sketchy form, so they need to be quite distinctly displayed in the imagination, which in turn leads to intense identification. After all, *The Fantasia* is, among other things, a part of mental reality (a phantasm). An imagined scenario in which the fantasising subject can fulfil her longings, whether openly or covertly. It's difficult to say to what extent Karasińska's production activates this mechanism: 'People don't know why they react the way they do. But they are experiencing something'. It's this psychoanalytic aspect I find the most puzzling. In the structure of the entire piece, the 'separation' takes place by constantly shaking audience members out of the situation of imagining the performance: this is how all the meta-commentaries (a separate strand of the production) work. They are concealed in the narrative, subject to the rules of the game (X is playing an audience member who...; Y is playing an actor who...) – up until the finale, where 'everyone is playing a person who can play whatever she wants'. In this production, the ability to play what one wants equals the ability to walk off the stage.

This Random Disconnects effect is also manifest in the actors' extraordinary presence in *The Fantasia*. A comparison to actors working with Needcompany comes to mind (though, again, what matters here is not the visual side or the aspect of staging, as in the case of Forced Entertainment, but the specificity of presence). Lehmann used the concept of *détachement* to describe the Needcompany acting style:

We might say that the actors inhabit the stage in a strangely casual way: they always seem conscious of the theatrical situation and are also detached from it. While they are, or seem to be, indifferent to the presence of the spectators, it is also true that they might address the audience directly, sometimes

even thematizing their position as spectators. [...] If [...] enhanced emotion emerges, the fragmentation of the action onstage again produces the impression that it is somehow 'quoted', a momentary excitement that differs clearly from the classical creation of a role. The production does not try to lure us, forcefully, emphatically, into a fictitious reality, but brings us to experience the *désinvolture* or casualness of the performers. Interestingly enough, we have the impression that our cohabitation of the same space with the actors is more intimate in this case. Playing a role on stage isolates the actor from the reality of the theatre, whereas the restraint of [Jan] Lauwers' actors brings them closer to the spectators.²⁴

What Karasińska succeeded in achieving in her two productions at TR Warszawa, and what could be called the restraint of the actors, didn't work at the National Sary Theatre in Kraków. In *All Imaginary*, the particular kind of presence was replaced with acting: turgid, overcharged, lacking in brilliance. This is detrimental to the production in that it compromises all remaining aspects (play with the audience, nuances of narrative, even the title) as too literal and coarse. Despite employing many strategies known from her previous works, Karasińska's latest production feels flat and tedious. It puts up a barrier in its relationship with the audience. It doesn't work. This demonstrates that Karasińska's attempts to discover the mechanism of creating the communal here and now aren't sure to succeed with just any company. Her theatre is minimalist, conceptual and based on paradoxes. Leaving things unsaid, the fluidity of actor and audience identity, and maintaining the tension in the communication between performers and their audience, are requisite for the encounter to genuinely take place.

Translated by Joanna Błachnio

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ABSTRACT

Iga Gańczarczyk

We Can Try to Imagine This

The article takes as its starting point the premise that to cast the director Anna Karasińska in the role of an autodidact just starting out in theatre doesn’t fully grasp the conceptual background of her work for the stage. The five productions she has completed to date (*Ewelina’s Crying*, *The Second Performance*, *Birthday*, *The Fantasia*, *All Imaginary*) can be regarded as a highly coherent, well-conceived project. The present analysis concentrates on paradoxes inherent in Karasińska’s theatre, recurring and abandoned artistic gestures which bring about a peculiar interdependency between actors, the production and the audience. The article’s main focus is an attempt to characterise *The Fantasia*, staged at TR Warszawa in 2017, as the ultimate theatrical situation in which to observe the position of an audience member, an actor’s presence and the role of language. Karasińska’s works are examined from the perspective of institutional critique, meta-theatricality, auto-theatre and the effect of strangeness in a certain understanding of the term (Random Disconnects). The article further demonstrates that Karasińska’s pieces don’t exist in a vacuum, but relate in a number of ways to the works of other artists from the performative-arts field including the company Forced Entertainment and artists Ivana Müller and Tino Sehgal.