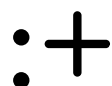


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Public to Private: A Theatrical Game with Disability

The presence of disability in the public sphere is a challenge to society, which, through a number of institutions, mechanisms of action and applied concepts determines the conditions of visibility (or rather invisibility) of all that is different. The body of a person with a disability establishes a visible difference; it constitutes a scratch on the smooth, transparent surface of reality perceived through the prism of the category specifying the norm. A non-disabled body is treated as self-evident. A disabled body undermines this self-evidence, at the same time revealing the constructed nature of the norm that is based on exclusion from the field of perception of all which visibly deviates from it. In this sense the disabled body constitutes a performance of difference, the power of which is based on a paradox of in(visibility) formulated on the site of tension between the same and the differentiating other.

In the introduction to the book *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander stress that for people with disabilities defining disability as a kind of performance is not a theoretical abstraction, but a living experience.¹ In Goffman's theatre of everyday life a person with disability is an actor aware of the fact that they attract the gaze of spectators – interaction partners and bystanders. By appearing in public space, they become exposed to view, forced at the same time to deal with the gaze that is rarely neutral, and very often stigmatizing. Goffman terms stigma as a sign of all socially discrediting otherness, produced and readable from the position occupied by those who the author calls the normals. In this perspective, stigma does not bear an essential character, but is a cultural construct. Nevertheless, according to the researcher, it is precisely the stigma that determines the conditions of an encounter and is hard to disregard in the process of (self)identification of the bearer of the stigma.²

Both Goffman's concept of stigma, and, more significantly, understanding performativity as proposed by Judith Butler, support such an understanding of disability, which sets itself apart from pathologizing medical terms. Researchers focused on disability studies and performance art, such as the aforementioned Sandahl and Auslander, postulate that disability (as well as ability) should be treated in performative

1 Cf. *Bodies in Commotion. Disability and Performance*, ed. Carrie Sandahl, Philip Auslander (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 2.

2 Cf. Ervin Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, trans. Aleksandra Dzierżyńska, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2005).

categories, just like gender, sexuality and race. However, a particular site of disclosure and research of the performative character of dis(ability) is not as much (or not only) the theatre of everyday life, but rather a space of planned, purposeful performance – the stage, which is determined and defines the mutual relationship between the actors and the spectators. The stage reveals that peculiar, already mentioned paradox of (in)visibility experienced by all disabled actors or performers, which was probably most aptly termed by Petra Kuppers. According to the researcher, a performer with a visible disability must deal with two fields of cultural meanings in which disability is caught: invisibility in the public sphere and hypervisibility causing dissonance and provoking automatic categorizations. The first means that the disabled person is not perceived as a member of the community actively creating the public sphere, and thus becomes removed onto its periphery, becoming invisible. The latter means that disability, when it appears in sight, is always in advance framed by cultural imaginings and narrative scripts that obscure everything else that the disabled person would like to communicate. In a theatrical situation, it boils down to the belief that ‘a disabled body naturally tells of disability’.³ And, after all, even if the actor/performer consciously and deliberately refers to their experience of disability, they at the same time show that its understanding is not naturally given, nor is it self-evident. What is more, they reveal that disability does not belong to the natural order, but it is culturally shaped and dependent on culturally variable strategies of representation of the disabled body, and the body in general. It sometimes happens that a disabled performer, through invoking those cultural clichés and a play on them, manages to disarm them altogether.

Often such deconstructive activity is not an end in itself, but a precondition necessary to proceed to the ‘real’ subject. Sometimes, to weaken the stage hyper-visibility of disability, which clouds everything else, paradoxically one must enhance it. Catherine Cole, a performer who had lost a leg, and who begins one of her shows, *Five Foot Feat*, by taking her prosthetic leg off, explains it as follows: ‘That show opening moment is in a way a message: «this is what my body looks like. Feel whatever you need to feel in this regard, and then let’s move on»’.⁴

Cole refers here to a new experience for her: as a person with a disability she is a walking spectacle of disability, which people stubbornly stare at or from which they avert their eyes. Both the first and the second reaction is equally loaded with meanings (in Goffman’s terms they both belong to the logic of stigma). By displaying her own body on her own terms while inviting the audience to look on, the performer redefines the communication situation, in which the gaze and its appropriateness/inappropriateness ceases to be a problem in itself, or even the only problem beyond which the viewer cannot see past.

The work of Teatr 21, created by actors with Down syndrome and autism, reveals a lot of tension and dependencies belonging to the circle of interests of researchers focused on disability studies. As a proposal of a completely specific theatre formula it calls for wider reflection and description, at the same time granting an insight into the problems of

3 Petra Kuppers, ‘Deconstructing Images: Performing Disability’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 11, 2001, p. 26, in Sandahl, Auslander, p. 4.

4 Ibid.

theatre companies created by people with disabilities, which increasingly co-create in Poland the current one might term as social theatre. One of the actors of Teatr 21 defines the relationship between the stage and the audience in following terms: 'The viewer sees the actor, and the actor sees the viewer'. Such a definition of a specific theatrical situation sets an understanding of theatre as a site of reciprocity and communication – as a meeting space. But at the same time it forces to think about the gaze as the basic category of exchange and the stake of a theatrical game in which persons with disabilities participate.

In Teatr 21 the audience is not concealed by total darkness, which on one hand exposes the viewer's gaze and makes it problematic, yet on the other hand allows for the equivalence in the relationship based on mutual seeing one another. The actor ceases to be an observed or (furtively peeped at) object, and becomes an actively looking subject. The type of gaze censored by appropriateness, termed by Rosemary Garland Thomson as staring or stubborn examining of a person with a disability and causing discomfort on both sides (both the viewer and the viewed) becomes replaced by a more open and generally accepted mode of looking.⁵ A paradigmatic situation, in which this both tabooed and tabooizing gaze termed by Thomson as staring appears, could be a situation in which a child, still ignorant of cultural precepts of propriety, looks on with open curiosity at what is different, exposing itself to the disapproving remark on the part of its embarrassed guardian: 'Don't stare'. The reaction might attest to the fact that what was displaced from the sphere of social visibility, excluded from the public sphere, relegated to the domain of privacy and considered a certain aberration from the dominant order, arouses at the same time curiosity attracting one's gaze and fear forcing one to look away. In performances with the participation of people with disabilities both this curiosity, as well as the fear, are drawn into the theatrical game.

This invitation to openly look and make the theatrical field of gaze exchange into a potential meeting space does not mean the abolition of distance. Actors with disabilities often use distancing techniques to emphasize the aesthetic, artistic or fictional dimension of their work. Overcoming the resistance of the gaze does not, after all, mean crossing the barriers associated with what Petra Kuppers calls hyper-visibility. This limitation again in a sense is a property of the gaze of a viewer, who – invited to look on in a theatrical situation – is at first inclined to see disabled bodies telling of disability, and in a theatrical presence of actors to see first of all their privacy. 'Disability obscures the blurred boundaries separating fiction and the artistic form from the real life. Is disability «fictional», or «real»? asks Jim Ferris in his essay 'Aesthetic Distance and Fiction of Disability', describing an artistic project in the preparation of which he was involved, which included the participation of performers with disabilities.⁶ By analysing the effects of work of a company consisting of people with disabilities who agreed to take part in the project, as well as by trying to capture the way in which the resulting show *Do You Sleep in That Thing?* (DYS) influenced the audience, the author captured

5 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Dares to Stares. Disabled Women Performance Artists and the Dynamics of Staring' and Jim Ferris, 'Aesthetic Distance and the Fiction of Disability', in Sandhal, Auslander.

6 Ferris, p. 56.

the particular tension between what is theatrical and what is (no longer/ not yet) theatre. He describes it thus:

The difference between what is practical and what is aesthetic, between art and reality, between the work and the performer, have been confused by the clash of cultural expectations of people with disabilities in the world outside the theatre and those established within the theatrical world. *DYS* toppled the stereotype-based expectation that people with disabilities should not stand out, and certainly not stand in the spotlight, except in situations wherein they're trying to obtain donations. But the key non-obvious aspect concerned the extent to which the performers were seen as actors playing fictional roles as opposed to people with disabilities telling their stories.⁷

The uncertainty formulated in the last sentence can be translated into a misgiving of another type, which often manifests itself in the reactions of viewers coming into contact for the first time with theatre companies featuring people with disabilities, or rather, in a certain impasse blocking spontaneous reactions: are we dealing with an event that we should be judging from an aesthetical or ethical perspective? Meanwhile the tension between what is aesthetic and what is ethic, between what is public and what is private, between theatrical fiction and reality can be regarded as a particular artistic quality of that type of theatre, requiring one to abandon sharp and categorical distinctions between those two orders. Artistic specificity understood in such a way is also at the same time an expression of the political aspects of theatre involving people with disabilities.

'Performers tell in this theatre about themselves', says a member of Teatr 21. And others add: 'The fact that an actor speaks about themselves is normal. But we're not acting so that we'd feel good, but for the viewer to get something out of our show. We – actors – have a right to communicate something to the others'.⁸ What constitutes one of the essential components of a specific aesthetic based on blurring or nullifying the boundary between what is private and what is public, between the reality of the body and its theatricality, allows for itself to be considered at the same time in terms of politics, according to Jacques Rancière's philosophy of the aesthetic as being political. In the words of Rancière:

Art is not politics because of messages or feelings that it communicates on the subject of the world order. Neither is it politics for the way in which it shows the social structure, conflicts or identities of social groups. Art is politics through the very distance taken towards its functions, through the type of time and space introduced, through the way it divides that time and peoples that space.⁹

The last sentence refers to what Rancière calls the division of sensuality, which is the essence of both art and politics, or art as politics. Politics

⁷ Ibid, p. 59.

⁸ Piotr Swend, Daniel Krajewski, Barbara Lityńska in conversation with Justyna Sobczyk, in *21 myśli o teatrze*, ed. Ewelina Godlewska-Byliniak, Justyna Lipko-Konieczna (Warsaw: Fundacja Win-Win, Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2016).

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Julian Kutyla, Paweł Mościcki (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007), p. 24.

does not mean here the wielding of power or fighting for it, but rather, just like art, it means the configuration and reconfiguration of certain space conceived of as common, important objects recognized as common and subjects capable of disposing of them, deciding on them and speaking out on their own matters. The division of sensuality is therefore a distribution of 'places and identities, separation of space and time, visibility and invisibility, noise and speech', writes Rancière. And he immediately adds: 'Politics consists in the reconfiguration of a division of sensuality defining what is common to a community, in introducing there new objects and subjects, in making visible that which was not visible, and in recognizing as speaking entities all those who were perceived as noisy animals'.¹⁰

In the last quote Rancière refers to the Aristotelian definition of man as a political being due to his ability to use common speech, a quality not shared by him with animals. The latter have at their disposal only a voice capable of expressing pain or pleasure. From such a perspective the struggle for recognition of one's voice as a meaningful one, as speech through which one 'has a right to say something to others', as well as to speak of oneself among others, is a struggle for recognition as a full-fledged political entity, able to co-create the space of what is common, and to speak on one's matters. Theatre as a public space par excellence can become a locus of visibility and audibility for people with disabilities, who by the force of cultural beliefs and a specific configuration of space were pushed into a sphere of political silence and invisibility. What seems key here is first of all the right to recognize one's own voice as meaningful, the right to recognize one's speech as socially important and, in consequence, being recognized as an entity capable of formulating an autonomous artistic message, which is at the same time a political message.

The second episode of the theatrical series *...i my wszyscy* [... And All of Us] produced by Teatr 21 was titled *Upadki* [Falls], as proposed by one of the actors, Daniel Krajewski. The initial acting improvisations revealing the potential meanings of the title had their source in the character of the clown, mime and the virtuoso of failure, Charles Chaplin. That leading comedian of silent movies through the medium of the burlesque most fully expressed the tragic dimension of the history of the western world in the twentieth century. It was precisely the actor portraying a worker in the movie *Modern Times* that inspired *Upadki*, a show problematizing the presence of people with disabilities on the job market in the times of capitalist free market economy.

Characters created by Chaplin evoke laughter and arouse pity at the same time, they make trivial mistakes, they fall down on a straight road, they confuse directions, they're naive, good-natured, cordial in a child-like way. In situations of emotional agitation they lose control of their body and its impulses, while trying to conform to a particular convention they commit blunders upon blunders, they misread the signs, they do not read between the lines. They fall, just to pick themselves up again moments later and return to their chaotic, disordered activities winding up the spiral of life. They express the desire to exist and its fragility, in a burlesque and comic form they reveal the tragic difficulties of a human being in adapting to a rapidly changing and shrinking living space.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 25.

The characters portrayed by Chaplin combine comedy with tragedy in the same sense as described by Paweł Mościcki in his text 'Playful Pain. Chaplin and Pathos', by becoming the interpreters of a modern form of pathos, wherein suffering finds its expression in the medium of burlesque fun – the title *playful pain*.¹¹ At the same time via their activities they open a gap for the spirit of human freedom: 'As Luis Delluc wrote, Chaplin «constructs movement from his own sorrow», he introduces it into the world of the burlesque as an animating and driving principle. The sorrow is subject to further metamorphoses, changing from the object of exploration to its tool, thus exceeding the space of pain'.¹² It is precisely those moments of short-term exceeding of the space of pain through a gag, through sad laughter, through cheerful defeat, that grant an insight into the essence of human freedom.

Upadki was announced in one of the scenes of the first episode of the drama series of Teatr 21, bearing the title *...i my wszyscy. Odcinek o [...And All of Us. Episode o]*. The main inspiration for the scene was a sequence from the movie *Modern Times*, the last silent film by Chaplin. The movie was made ten years after the introduction of sound to film, it was therefore an anachronism, not fitting in with the changing, accelerating modernity. That inadequacy became also the subject undertaken by the director in the film, parallel to the subject of the human individual's incompatibility with the changing dynamics and modes of life based on industrial development.

In the film sequence referred to, the worker portrayed by Chaplin fails to adjust to the mode of operation of the machine, more precisely to the speed of the conveyor belt at the factory. The source of humour in this scene is the titanic effort of the human body trying to keep up in this biased race. If we assume that the ideal to which the protagonist aspires is an efficient body, continually improving its performance, meeting the target, then it seems that the conveyor belt reflects the model characteristics of a new man exactly through its full ability, speed and precision.

The human body, the body of a worker operating the machine, seems clumsy, inefficient, imperfect, slow, devoid of rhythm, chaotic, 'inhuman'. The appearance of this reversal reveals not only the ruthless performance policy characterizing the capitalist industry, but above all it shows the mechanism of depriving a human being from its right to dignity, which Hannah Arendt terms as inalienable in *The Human Condition*. It is a remote, yet clear foreshadowing of the policy of life unworthy of living (*Lebensunwertes Leben*), the policy that Teatr 21 critically referred to in their event *Tisha B'Av* (at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, 2015).

During the series of initial improvisation announcing the later production *Upadki*, the actors Daniel Krajewski and Aleksander Orliński brought onto the stage at the same time two office tables, two chairs, paper, a stapler, a hole punch, and pens. Within a certain time each of the actors had to perform a sequence of typical office tasks, starting with the preparation of his workspace. In a convention typical for Chaplin, the work proper did not really take place, because the protagonists faced

11 Paweł Mościcki, 'Playful Pain. Chaplin and Pathos', *A View. Theory and Practice of Visual Culture*, 5, p. 4, www.pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/204/342, access: 25 January 2015.

12 Ibid.

compiling difficulties posed to them by their own bodies: tripping over their own feet, slipping on a flat surface, colliding with non-existent obstacles. The hidden sense of those improvisations was based on a reversal analogous to that shown in *Modern Times*. In fact, it is certain social projections that make individuals with Down syndrome 'disabled' and place in their way unseen obstacles, the substance of which is, however, insurmountable.

Actors therefore perform on stage what is socially expected of them prior to their activities, in the form of stage gags. Those are, however, just as in the case of Chaplin, gags carefully directed according to the formula: 'That's how you see us, now we take over this image of us and in turn we present on stage your perception of us'. The laughter, which occurs on the part of the viewer, is the laughter arousing from the recognition of one's own prejudices, yet it often dies on the viewer's lips, opening a field of real communication... These are the most powerful moments of the shows produced by the company. Just like in the scene from *...i my wszyscy...*, in which the actors describe their professional situation in a simple, gestural way. More than a dozen people are walking the stage at the same time, with door handles hanging off their necks like bunches of apartment keys. They use them to open invisible doors, behind which there's 'nothing'. 'I'm going to work. There's nothing here. I'm going to work. There's nothing here. Is this some kind of a joke?', they repeat with ever greater determination. A number of viewers recognized their own condition in this scene, and for many it was a shocking experience, discussed in the foyer long after the actors had left the stage. Not without significance, the show's opening coincided with the first perceptible signs of the economic crisis in Poland, which from 2008 on drained the Western world constructed on the ideology of success and prosperity.

Chaplin's movie that inspired the group draws on the relationship of the human body with the machine. It is largely this relationship that contributed to the invention of the modern vocabulary describing disability. The industrial development, at its height in 1880,¹³ and associated with the dynamic formation of the factories and their appropriate labour relations, as well as work culture, lead in a short time to the creation of a separate social group rarely discussed in history books, namely, the maimed. This group was joined by thousands of war invalids following the First World War.

Disability will henceforth be seen as a loss which must be compensated, a defect that must be removed. The expression of this shift will be a function of a new language – the language of disability. [...] The concept of disability begins to include not only the sick, the mentally ill, the old and the infirm, but also people mutilated while working in factories and crippled by war: they all become covered by the social privileges they merit.¹⁴

13 Jean-Jacques Courtine notes that at the same time in Europe a new kind of sensitivity to the maimed and mutilated body was observed, defined by the ethics of care, an example of which was the 1883 ban in London on exhibiting John Merrick, known as the Elephant Man. Cf: Jean-Jacques Courtine, 'The Abnormal Body: History and Cultural Anthropology of Infirmary', in *The History of the Body*, 3, ed. Jean-Jacques Courtine, trans. Krystyna Belaid and Tomasz Stróżyński (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo Obraz Terytoria, 2014), p. 209.

14 Henri-Jacques Stiker, 'Corps infirmes', in Courtine, *The Abnormal Body*, p. 221.

The mutilated body becomes an object of rehabilitation treatments, a process of return to normalcy. The nineteenth century witnessed the development of orthopaedic centres, improvements of rehabilitation techniques reintegrating people with disabilities into society. Restoring people with disabilities to health ceases to be an act of good will, it becomes a full time job, a state and social responsibility of caring for those who suffered misfortune.

‘Medicine excels in determining and leveling absence. The medicalization of disability becomes the cornerstone of the later recognition of disability as a personal tragedy’,¹⁵ a state of passivity and dependence, even though it is in fact a fundamental tool of social control of persons defined and classified as disabled.

‘Discourses of professionals on infirmity/disability are directed against the unruly or maimed bodies [...]. The necessary regulations relating to the body were discussed, as well as the necessity of their socialization and rationalization’.¹⁶ This discipline and management of the body relates to the mechanism of biopolitics as described by Michael Foucault, the goal of which is to create a docile body that becomes moulded, trained, normalized. It is a process parallel to the development of industrial capitalism, with its performance policy and precise parameters.

Improvisations of actors inspired by Chaplin’s film also led to the creation of one of the key scenes in *...i my wszyscy. Odcinek o –* the job interviews. Daniel Krajewski plays here the person with disability who applies for a job. Two actors, Aleksandra Skotarek and Aleksander Orlński, take on the roles of seemingly open and friendly employers who ask a series of qualification questions. The evaluation criteria adopted by them are divorced from the reality of life of people with disabilities in blatant and funny ways. Against such background the absurd, it would seem, answers offered by Daniel sound sincere and convincing. To the question: ‘What are your strengths?’, the actor replies, ‘I am a Jew, I have Down syndrome, I can move around the city independently’. In the first two answers there takes place an interception and reversal of the official discourse appropriate to the Polish public space expressing the identity of the Other (in this case, a Jew, and people with disabilities) constructed on fear, denial and rejection. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Jewish identity with the identity of a person with Down syndrome made by the actor causes comic effect; by colliding two discursive clichés the stigmatizing power of language becomes disarmed, violence becomes checked, opening a gap for the element of human freedom. However, it is the third answer that gives the viewer an insight into the condition of life of people with mental disabilities. The core of the actor’s statement is of course his independent movement in public space. In this simple declaration of the actor, the declaration of independence, there is contained criticism of the ideology of compassion reaching the roots of the industrial era, often referred to also as care ethics, which ended up in locking the people with disabilities at home and in special care centres. To understand the importance of the actor’s words, one should recall, at least briefly, the mechanism of displacement of people with disabilities from the public space.

¹⁵ Colin Barnes, Geof Mercer, *Exploring Disability*, trans. Piotr Morawski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2008), p. 37.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 42.

The care ethics is a close derivative of industrial development and the productivity dogma associated with it, translatable into social status. Those excluded from production and circulation of goods are seen as flawed and inferior. The common perception is that they are losers at life, who could not cope with adulthood, could not take advantage of the opportunities offered to a creative and entrepreneurial individual by the modern world. Finally they are people who suffered social and existential fiasco. Human-trash, as Zygmunt Bauman would have written; people lagging behind the pace of transformations brought about by modern times, defined by being in continuous flux and constant change; people, whose existence is relegated to the grey zone of consciousness, and who supply the reservoir of fear of the success-oriented Western societies, because, contrary to the formula evoked by the author of *Liquid Modernity*, 'modernize or disappear', they do not disappear from the public space, and their marginal, but still living presence breaks the illusion of guaranteed advancement in life. The boundary between the human potential and human scrapheap is conventional, dangerously fluid and uncertain, therefore it must be continually reintroduced. One possible antidote to this fear response is, to a lesser extent than in the past, the social welfare state system regulating the grey zone to a degree, and, at least in theory, restoring individual unable to cope and weaker to the job market.

People with physical disabilities, or, to an even greater degree, with mental disabilities, find themselves in a slightly different, but in many ways analogous situation. They are people surrounded by a halo of social compassion guaranteeing them a fixed income in the guise of minimal social benefits, and at the same time permanent exclusion from active participation in the job market and the distribution of profits and risks resulting from it. The most common criterion of social assessment of people with disabilities is the criterion of personal tragedy. It allows for a quick mourning period for the public loss of an individual no longer qualifying as the norm, whose further existence becomes 'burdened' onto the family, preferably in private space – at home, or in social space – a dedicated care centre. If the remediation of the deficit (recovery of full fitness as a result of rehabilitation) is not possible, the ideology of care can lull any potential discomfort resulting from the alarmingly efficient socio-technical exclusion of people with disabilities from the public space by social services, which are compensatory in nature, but definitely not emancipatory. Thus, a person with a disability begins to live 'at society's expense' and their status becomes comparable with the status of a child. The deficit of social status becomes remediated by an excess of care without end grounded in the moral, medical and economic order of discourse. Any additional needs articulated by individual excluded in the manner described above from the public space that exceed the stereotype of a person with disability are perceived by the society as an indiscretion, insolence, ingratitude, loss of rational judgment and proper assessment of one's condition, and finally – madness.

In *Upadki* the actors of Teatr 21 play with this kind of establishing of identity and pattern of a person with disability. They decide to take a trip to the sources of the definition that outlined in such a permanent way the boundaries of their life opportunities. To this effect they go on an all inclusive trip to 'far Mongolia', according to the imposed and well-known discursive genealogy associating their physical appearance (so-called mongoloid facial features) with the dwellers of the land of

steppes and yurts... 'A long, long time ago', begins Aleksandra Skotarek, 'a British doctor, Doctor Down, travelled to far Mongolia and brought back to us the Down syndrome. We've had problems ever since', jokes the actress. In this statement a system of social regulations is revealed. It is this strict definition and pinning down of types and degrees of disability that determines the participation in the public space and the distribution of labour.

An all-inclusive trip is a metaphor for the fate and aspirations of the actors. As people with a mental disability they have relatively narrow space of freedom and self-fulfillment; there is a general belief that everything should be done for them and they should be relieved of everything. This form of 24/7 service obviously comes at a price. According to Polish law, persons with mental disabilities can be deprived of liberty by their parents or guardians. In practice, however, this does not happen as often as one might think. Subject to supervision, trapped in the ideology of compassion and personal tragedy, they very quickly learn and assimilate content according to which, as dependents, they not meet certain social roles. Even if their greatest desire is to leave home, to begin living independently, to start a family, for the benefit and safety of themselves and their loved ones they have to indisputably give those dreams and aspirations up.

This efficient and effective mechanism rationalizing the relinquishing of one's dreams on the part of people with mental disabilities is shocking. It is aptly recognized by an actress of Teatr 21, Aleksandra Łuczak: 'I'm going to have children, I'm going to have a husband, I'm going to have a family and that will be the end of the world'. This is the motto of the last episode of the series ...i my wszyscy – the show entitled *Klauni, czyli o rodzinie* [Clowns, or On Family]. This apocalyptic dimension of punishment inscribed into the actress' statement is equivalent to cautionary messages inherent in coming-of-age stories for adolescent boys and girls. In those stories and fairy tales, however, disobedience is crucial. As an act of will, an expression of courage and curiosity it establishes the coming of age, becoming an adult, which also brings about a change in social status. The warning cited by the actress, in the injunction referring to a divine instance punishing for transgressions and rewarding good deeds, is not about foreshadowing initiation and entering a road to freedom. This sentence is a prelude to a family, social and public disaster. Transgressing the unwritten ban of procreation regarding people with disabilities, particularly with mental disabilities, the very possibility of offspring, revealing itself merely in what is uttered as an existential need, threatens to undermine the social role imposed on people shielded by care and supervision, and therefore a regression into pathology constituting the reverse of the compassion ideology. Thus, the only place where those needs can be articulated and discussed is theatre.

Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*¹⁷ writes about the idea of public theatre. The beginnings of such a model of theatre are seen in the ancient agon held in the heart of the Greek polis, the agora. According to the philosopher, human individuals attain their subjectivity in the act of speaking among others, and the very possibility of speaking for oneself and on one's own behalf amongst others, in this case the audience and

17 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, trans. Anna Łagocka (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Aletheia 2010).

citizens, constitutes for Arendt the basis of democracy. The tight-fitting corset of life opportunities tailored for people with mental disabilities literally deprives them of their voice and air. Theatre for this brief moment of being amongst others restores this breath, opens a space of articulation, solves the knot of speech. This can be seen perfectly in the radically different energy levels of Teatr 21 performers during rehearsals and performances. Rehearsals constitute teamwork on concentration, opening a space for improvisation and thoughts, but they lack the presence of the viewer, which gives the performers a sense of agency and fills them with a desire to be with the audience. It is for that reason the struggle of artists for their own place on the map, for a sign of presence, becomes the engine driving the show *Upadki*. An obstacle to the realization of this dream is of course the lack of financial resources. Although the performers by now earn their own money in the theatre, as it became for them as well a source of income (which in many such groups is still a rarity), those earnings are so small that they cannot provide any guarantee for the bank institution, the keeper of dreamt-of loan. Besides, no one in a bank would take them seriously. 'If we come without a guardian, the bank will take us for madmen', says Barbara Lityńska. The only possibility of equal treatment is to hide their disability, which for the performers means, first of all, covering the face. Referring to the best Chaplin-style gags, the actors turn their backs on the audience and put on shades decorated with a golden dollar sign. 'Would you give us a loan for our theatre?' they ask, 'but seriously'. Laughter is heard in the audience, some hands rise up in the air. 'For years we've been wandering between Warsaw theatres', Daniel Krajewski tells the viewers. On a screen at the back of the stage there appear pictures of Warsaw institutions, which made their spaces available to the company: the Dramatyczny Theatre, the Studio Theatre, the Powszechny Theatre, the Ochota Theatre, the Soho Theatre, the Baj Theatre, the Theatre Institute, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Above the banner of each of them appears the golden lettering of Teatr 21, a sign of presence lacking space, a sliding trail of nomads.

'There's this Doctor, his name is Szczyt. People dissatisfied with their body come to him', Grzegorz Brand interrupts his colleagues. 'At his study you can get rid of your Down syndrome', he continues. The creator and director of Teatr 21, present on stage, Justyna Sobczak, turns to the other side the tacky golden theatrical flats standing on the sides of the stage, so that they create now a white, hospital landscape. The Mongolian all-inclusive hotel, dripping with fake theatrical gold, gives way to a medical space, or rather medicalized space. On the screen a slow motion projection appears, showing the removal of facial features betraying the signs of Down syndrome from Grzegorz Brand's face. 'Do you really want to see Doctor Szczyt?', the director asks the actor during one of the performances. Grzegorz is determined. When asked why he decided to do so, he replies that he wants to be like James Bond, that is, to take care of other people. Justyna Sobczak asks further, if one can't be a superhero with Down syndrome. No, replies the actor.

The actor intends to remove from his face signs of Down syndrome and become one of the 'normals'. On the screen we see how his face freezes into a mask, subjected to 'normalizing' transformations, such as the extension of the skull, raising the corners of his eyes, nose extension, lips enlargement, neck extension – all obtained by using Photoshop.

Before us lies the impossible image. Thanks to the looped projection we see how the mask devours the image of the person. At the same time we stop seeing the real face of the actor, as he faces the screen. Finally he turns back to the audience, looks at them, and they at him. Seeing becomes here an act of responsibility, it ceases to be a transparent and naive activity. 'My name is Grzegorz Brand. I am 27 years old. I've performed in Teatr 21 for ten years', he says, and goes to the side of the stage. The remaining company members look on the scene, seated on either side of the screen, with their backs to the audience. They too became witnesses of the impossible. Their emotions, and how they react to the image, will remain a mystery; the audience does not have access to this experience. When Grzegorz retires to the side, the others stand up one by one and take up the space just vacated by their company mate, right by the screen, facing the audience. They introduce themselves with their first and last name, they say how old they are, how long they have been working for Teatr 21. Each and every face becomes memorable, if members of the company were establishing their personhood in front of the audience, and among them. Will anyone want to watch us at all? Will there be people willing to watch a series of theatre shows with a cast made up of people with Down syndrome? These questions posed in the last scenes of the first episode of the series ...*i my wszyscy* return now in memory. Can the actors with trisomy of chromosome 21 and with autism be superheroes? Can they offer their audiences something special? That's after all what being a superhero seems to be about...

In the Tisha B'Av event for the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the company once again takes up the theme of the social mechanism of degradation. The event refers to the Jewish holiday celebrated on the ninth day of the AW month, falling in June or July. It is the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, the day of tragedy, mourning and memory. It is a religious holiday, established by the rabbis in the second century AD, during which the destruction of the two Temples of Jerusalem and the expulsion of Jews from the Land of Israel is commemorated. For many religious Jewish groups, Tisha B'Av is first and foremost a day of mourning the six million Jews who perished during the Holocaust.

The creators of Teatr 21 found their own genealogy in the tradition of this holiday. It was the T4 programme, called by the Nazis the euthanasia decree, marking the beginning of the first mass murder of closely specified population of the Third Reich, during which the technique of mass killing was developed. It covered people suffering from schizophrenia, epilepsy, dementia, Huntington's disease, people with certain congenital developmental disorders, as well as persons living in care for over five years, selected by the physicians as highly unlikely to improve or recover. The program of elimination of life unworthy of living lasted from 1 September 1939 to the end of 1941. But even in November 1942 some hospitals were issued a warrant to starve patients.

Before entering the game space, the audience members get radios with headphones. During the entire period of performance they will, while sitting on the floor, be listening through headphones to stories about the first moments and days of women who gave birth to children with Down syndrome. Those are the stories told by the mothers of the performers, who meanwhile are working in the ascetic, narrow space of the museum's G9 Hall (located next to the Holocaust gallery), making sure not to go

beyond the strictly defined black-and-white area marked out like a school playground. Straying beyond this area means elimination. On the pitch a series of competitions takes place, preceded by body training, as in the well-known scenario much more radicalized here, of school physical-education classes. The event finishes with a game of dodge ball: you're hit and you disappear: a simple and fast mode of selecting the weakest and most persistent... an innocent childhood game. As Piotr Morawski wrote, 'Two teams and a ball - the idea is to hit the player on the opposing team. However, the command «you're out», uttered whenever someone's hit, no longer has anything to do with fun. For here being out is irrevocable and final: the loser is lead out of the room. A trivial game of stigmatizing imperceptibly turns into extermination'.¹⁸ What changes when you exchange the term 'disabled person' with the definition 'a person with a disability'? Does the language to at least to some extent cease to harm the person? Is the term 'with disability', reminiscent of Roman nicknames, and therefore genealogy understood as a certain value? The last episode of the ...*i my wszyscy* series, *Klauni, czyli o rodzinie* is an attempt to create such a possibility. To open the space for it, the company must return in a critical way to the culture of showing people with disabilities inscribed into the Western tradition.

It is a question that refers to the extremely important context, often deliberately or inadvertently referenced in connection with theatre created by people with disabilities. It is the shameful entertainment tradition from the perspective of contemporary standards of Western culture determined by the ethics of care, namely that of freak shows, which were at the height of their popularity at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To fully understand the attraction of these events, involving the display of human oddities, as well as the conditions of their opportunities, it is worth recalling here the key shift that has taken place in the understanding of the body. As synthetically recognized by Agata Dziuban:

Knowledge and medical practice, the vital development of which occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exerted a strong influence on the perception and treatment of the body within the space of the civilizing modern Western society. As an object of medical and scientific inquiry, [...] the body became freed from the bonds imposed on it by religious belief.

Most of the regulatory and corrective functions of religion was taken over by medicine and its related sciences, and harnessed into the mechanisms operating the capitalist society. The purpose of medicine, therefore, became to create a model human, having an efficient, functional body with clearly defined boundaries.¹⁹

This process, as indicated earlier, led to the removal of 'other bodies' from the public realm into the private, or into the space of corrective institutions treating physical or mental differences in terms of pathology. In space ordered in such a way the social norm defined by the notions of

¹⁸ Piotr Morawski, 'You Will Smell of Rotten Eggs', www.dwutygodnik.com, 164/07/2015.

¹⁹ Agata Dziuban, 'Sociology and the Question of Corporeal Condition', in *Embodiments: Body in the Mirror of Modern Humanities*, eds. Anna Wieczorkiewicz, Joanna Bator (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2007), pp. 54–55.

efficiency and effectiveness and strengthened in the context of developing medical discourse and the capitalist economy, the only place where the eliminated otherness manifested itself with a vengeance was the freak show stage, or the circus arena.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson summarizes this historically and culturally variable approach to physical otherness, highlighting three key figures of 'the freak': 'the miraculous monsters of antiquity, which became fascinating freaks in the nineteenth century, have been converted into the disabled in the twentieth century'.²⁰ The unusual body became pathological, sick flesh. As the author notes, freak shows designating space for the presence of the central here figure of freak is from today's perspective – as a spectacle displaying for profit the bodies of those whom today we call the disabled – both anachronistic and abhorrent. However, it is still currently still very much in the still living cultural memory.²¹

Freak show, in the strict sense of the term, means a specific, already historical type of event and the strategies of (re)presentation of physical differences written into it. It was created and developed most fully within a particular culture – the American one (although it is important to emphasize that it reached Europe as well, or developed in spaces analogous to the freak show, such as the space of circus or fair). However, thanks to a still-living cultural memory, the spread and recording of performances (in the nineteenth century through photographs, in the twentieth century mainly on film and television), this type of show can become a context for contemporary productions with the participation of or formed by people with disabilities. As such, it will have primarily a negative character – it may appear as an uncomfortable and unwanted association of the viewer, causing their embarrassment. This context can be deliberately used by the creators to certain political purposes. Their stakes here is the play on perceptual habits and stereotypes and their redefinition, a play with the viewer's gaze, which is a metonymy for the eyes of society. One of the possible artistic strategies causing this association is the use of irony, as well as bracketing certain (re)presentation conventions in order to disarm them. A particular form of this type of game is queering – using certain disparaging framework of representation and discourse elements such as to change their devaluating character into a set of tools serving a new definition of identity. With regard to persons with disabilities the English term queer might be replaced, as proposed by Robert McRuer, by the word *crip*, meaning a cripple.²²

To better understand what the artistic play with a field of associations triggered by referring to the freak show might consist in, it's worth taking even a brief look at the strategies of (re)presentation of otherness developed and perpetuated by this type of spectacle, the product of which was the figure of a freak. As synthetically recognized by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'freak show defined and exhibited what is abnormal'.²³ But the other side, or perhaps, as suggested by the author, one

20 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 58.

21 Ibid.

22 Cf. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

23 Garland Thomson, p. 58.

of the most important although implicit effects of freak show, was the definition of what was socially considered normal, and what at that time found its fullest expression in the idea of the common man, an ordinary, average human being. The otherness of freaks emphasized the 'ordinariness' of those who according to Goffman could be called the normals. On the other hand, when one notes the strategies of production and representation of that otherness within the show, the constructed character of the said 'normality' becomes exposed at the same time. A closer analysis of the cultural conditions of that normality regarded at that time as 'natural' shows how small a part of the population was included in this category. Meanwhile in many aspects its repercussions are felt to this day. Thus, as Goffman puts it, followed by Garland Thomson, the Western culture traditionally defines as a 'normal' individual a young, white, educated, heterosexual, efficient, employed (economically self-sufficient) man.²⁴ In regard to the norm defined in such a way, one can become a freak not due to some special quality of the body, but by being branded with the stigma of social discredit. This explains why in freak shows physical and ethnical aberrations could appear next to each other, by virtue of analogous strategies transformed into curiosities and displayed as non-human oddities.

Generally speaking, presentation strategies mentioned here were objectifying strategies, thus depriving of subjectivity those who stood on stage in the limelight. One of the basic strategies of de-subjectification was to deprive the 'freaks' of possibilities of expression and building their own narration. Another consisted in reducing entire beings to one distinguishing feature, to a peculiarity of the body, which obscured their 'humanity'. The exhibited body, perceived due to its emphasized diversity, which today we call 'disability' or 'ethnicity', became a text read according to the needs and desires of the viewers, whose gaze was directed both by fascination, as well as by revulsion caused by fears and uncertainty about their own identity.

In the last episode of *Klauni, czyli o rodzinie* the most important is the figure of the clown, representing sad laughter, playful pain. The show remains true to the style of slapstick comedy, even more consistently than in case of *Upadki* referring to the burlesque movie genre and its patron, Charlie Chaplin. The show is governed by the dramaturgy of excess and exaggeration. The actors take on the roles of people with disabilities applying for participation in a project, the aim of which is to learn independent living. Ironically, in their independence coaching they are constantly accompanied by a coach, and the apartment can accommodate up to six people at the same time. There is of course no chance here for true independence. The coaching apartment becomes a field of a short-term experiment rather than a serious step into adulthood, and the number of people willing to participate in the venture exceeds the limit of free places.

The show reveals the contemporary project mechanism, in which ways of introducing people with disabilities in the bloodstream of society are considered. This proves ineffective, and does not bring any real change. Coaching in such apartments lasts from two weeks to three months. A stay there is often described in terms of a summer camp stay, as if forgetting that independent living for people with disabilities, and especially

24 Ibid, p. 8.

for people with mental disabilities, means fulfilling the greatest existential need. Similar actions often referred to as 'equal opportunity', and supported by EU funds, appear like mushrooms after the rain and disappear just as quickly – when their external financing runs dry. However, this does prevent the creation of a sense of social success and self-satisfaction particularly evident in the media coverage of similar initiatives. In this way people with disabilities often become heroes of a media show, which is governed by the ideology of compassion and the politics of social correctness bursting at the seams. A sense of the grotesque arises. This is the ground onto which the creators of *Teatr 21* enter in the show ending their theatrical series, in order to deal with not only the short-sighted and ridiculous form of Polish social politics, but first and foremost with their own dreams and aspirations... It is by no accident that the ending show is a critical return to the nineteenth-century formula of the freak show, a formula of the presence of people with disabilities in the public space. The figure of impresario is today replaced by the guardian, the coach, finally the author of the next integration project calculated for temporary effect. Also the language of the story has changed. People with disabilities are no longer strangers from distant and exotic, wild lands inaccessible for Westerners – they are people who are integrated into the community using terms like inclusion, participation, marginalization, equal opportunity. It is a strange, artificial and false-sounding language in the ears of the people it refers to and who it describes. This is shown in one of the opening scenes of production. Barbara Lityńska as the mayor of a large European city is opening its first coaching house. Ribbon cutting is accompanied by an official speech:

I, the mayor of the city, appeal to you! Let's be open-minded and modern! Our vocabulary must include new words: social inclusion, integration, marginalization, participation, equal opportunities, combating disadvantage and social exclusion. Our duty is to teach people with disabilities self-reliance, teaching foreigners the Polish language, and we will learn to write good projects. A project can change the reality. Briefly – of course – but still! Without a project there is no change, no motivation.

Each word spoken by the actress prompted by her assistant, who is standing right behind her. The actress's own tongue resists her, the modern words from the project dictionary sound lopsided, catch in her throat, change their meaning. On the screen in real time a transcription of the speech made by the actress takes place, corresponding to what comes out of her mouth, veering from the content of the words spoken by her assistant in a stage whisper. Both sides of the stage erupt in cleansing laughter.

Helmuth Plessner wrote:

Laughter and crying in comparison with the language, gestures and mimic expressive movements prove far-reaching emancipation of bodily processes from a person. [...] Speaking and action show man in his mastery at the level granted to him of the free disposal of oneself thanks to the power of reason. [...] However, in the case of laughter and crying the human admittedly loses control, but still remains a person, because the body in a certain sense takes

over the reaction. This reveals the possibility of interaction between a person and their body, a possibility, which usually remains hidden, because we rarely refer to it.²⁵

This kind of experience connects actors and spectators in a sense of community of people enjoying their full rights. Laughter increases, but it is sad laughter, playful pain, opening the gaps of freedom. Chaplin, in analysing the relationship between comedy and tragedy, and seeking his own formula of expression, wrote:

There is little difference between comedy and tragedy: Comedy twists the dimensions of life in a grotesque fashion and tragedy twists them in an opposite direction – but both are twisted. [...] Both comedy and tragedy are fundamentally based on one preoccupation, that is: playful pain. Its essence is «predicament», plight, danger and fear. Trouble is the subject of comedy. The object and predicate are getting out of it.

‘The series was a hit with me’, said Piotr Swend in the first episode of the series ...*i my wszyscy*..., although members of the company would probably respond firmly that the theatre was a hit with them. The theatre they create twists the dimension of life, just as their patron Chaplin wrote, because it allows for shared tears and laughter. ‘We laugh and cry only in situations, to which there is no other answer’.²⁶

Translated by Karolina Sofulak

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25 Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behaviour*, trans. and ed. Agata Zwolińska, Zbigniew Nerczuk (Kęty: Antyk: 2004), pp. 33–34.

26 Ibid, p. 145.

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