

The Childish Unga Klara: Contemporary Swedish Children's Theatre and Its Experimental Aesthetics

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to briefly describe the artistic development and aesthetic roots of contemporary Swedish professional theatre for children and youth since the 1970s, as presented by the activities and productions of Unga Klara, the experimental theatre stage for children and youth, founded in 1975 in Stockholm. The article is mainly focused on the written work and theatre activities of Suzanne Osten, the founder and long-standing artistic director of Unga Klara. It presents a brief outlook of the cultural context and conditions of the stage's formation and summarizes its development since, especially in regard to its specific creative practices and approach to purposes and the function of children culture, as well to its significance for later development of Swedish professional experimental theatre institutions for children and youth.

Keywords

theatre for children and youth, children's theatre, children's aesthetics, children's perspective, the aesthetics of play, Unga Klara, Suzanne Osten

In *Tvořivá dramatika* 2/2011, the Czech magazine covering topics on children's literature, children's theatre, and dramatic education, the Slovak theatre theorist Eva Kyselová discusses in the article "Vlna. A po nej čo?" the right attributes the professional theatre intended for children and youth should have. As Kyselová points out, especially in the context of contemporary Czech and Slovak theatre conditions, this seems to be an unsolved issue. (KYSELOVÁ 2011: 52) Therefore, the aim of this article is to offer a brief outlook of the development and aesthetic form of contemporary Swedish professional theatre intended for the age groups in focus, as presented by the activities and productions of Unga Klara, the experimental stage exclusively for children and youth, founded in 1975 in Stockholm. The reason why I will focus on the stage particularly is its significance for further development of Swedish professional experimental theatre for children and youth – as Malin Axelsson describes it, the foundation and activities of Unga Klara have become a ground-breaking point in the theatrical landscape's development (AXELSSON 2013: 21), leading to the field's artistic rise and eventual foundation of other similar experimental stages across the country, e.g. Backa Teater and Folkteatern in Gothenburg, Unga Dramaten or Stockholms stadstater Skärholmen in Stockholm, Ung scen/öst in Norrköping and Linköping, etc. The extent of this article is, however, limited, therefore I will focus on the most crucial points in regard to the fact that Unga Klara was founded as the first of such stages in Sweden. I will summarise the contextual background of Unga Klara's development, as well as the artistic approach to children's theatre of its founder and long-standing artistic director, Suzanne Osten. Though not entirely correctly, I will use the terms "theatre for children and youth" and "children's theatre" interchangeably in this article.

The 50s and 60s before Unga Klara

A radical re-thinking and evolution of Swedish theatre for children and youth up to its current form began in relation to the era of the independent theatre groups acting in the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s. (ENGEL 2013: 3; HELANDER 2000: 23–32) A change of the social attitude toward children culture, its purposes and desired form or content, was partially conditioned on Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*, which burst also onto the stage only a year after its book publication, thus in 1946. Until then, the repertoire of various professional theatre companies or institutions providing productions for schools had consisted, for instance in the case of the age group from 11 up to 14 years, primarily of popular adventure classics for boys, such as stage adaptations of *Robin Hood*, *David Copperfield*, *Tom Sawyer* etc., or various pirate adventures, Native American struggles, child detectives etc. (HELANDER 2000: 16–22) In the 50s, however, according to the Swedish theatre scholar Karin Helander, a few attempts to bring on the children's stage newly written plays emerged. Helander mentions especially the work of Else Fischer, who wrote i.a. the play *Clownen Beppo* (*Beppo the Clown*), which was mainly based on movement and circus features instead of orations. The play was stage-managed in Stockholm as well as in other bigger Swedish cities, i.a. Gothenburg, Malmö, Uppsala, Helsingborg, and Borås.

Helander also points out that during the 40s and 50s the general interest in children's own creativity distinctively grew among pedagogues, which led i.a. to increased involvement of improvisation plays and drama in school education. (HELANDER 1998: 77–80; HELANDER 2000: 22–23) Later then, at the end of the 60s, when left-wing oriented public discussions started to turn over a lot of cultural and social aspects of Swedish society, the previous mentioned eventually began to serve as a part of the foundation of the forthcoming artistic transformation of Swedish professional theatre for children and youth.

The 70s and Unga Klara's beginnings

Suzanne Osten, born 1944 in Stockholm, turned after studies in art, literature and history at Lund University back to life in the capital and quickly build up her reputation as an active feminist and one of the leaders of in those days very fluid Stockholm's theatrical landscape. (ROSENBERG 2004; SPARBY 1986: 180) The 60s and 70s, in Sweden ongoing similarly as in the rest of Western countries, were periods of student and feminist movements, public discussions, new programs, and inner transformation of the cultural climate. On the stage, those decades were represented mainly by a boom and sudden development of free theatre groups, independent of large institutions and seeking for new topics and forms. (ÖSTBERG 2013: 190–192) Niklas Brunius partially describes the atmosphere of the period in his article in the book *Swedish Theatre*:

“The Swedish theatre in the 1960s is in a period of transformation: it has tired of the grand, realistic tradition that prevailed unchallenged for several decades. [...] To give full reign to playfulness, to avoid fixing the moves too early, to improvise on the given text – these ideas have proved highly successful not only in Gothenburg [...]. Group theatre activities have been even livelier in 1966-67. The National Touring Theatre took over Bertil Lundén's “Free Theatre”, a semi-professional group that had previously been working without financial support. In Gothenburg, a team under Kent Andersson and Lennart Hjulström created its own play, and its own picture of Sweden, *The Raft*, a production reflecting a new and interesting line of development at the Gothenburg City Theatre. [...] But the Royal Dramatic Theatre too has been deeply engaged in group work. The “Young Dramatic Theatre”, originally a summer group [...], has developed into a number of experimental groups that in their free afternoons devote themselves to new forms of theatre. [...]” (BRUNIUS, 1967: 42–43)

These experimental theatre groups were longing and searching for new audience in such places as factories or department stores – and they headed also for schools, delivering a social realistic, radical form of theatre with educational purposes, where contact between audience and actors became a more important principle than ever. (LINDVÅG 1995: 21–26) One of such groups was Fickteatern (The Pocket Theatre), founded in 1967 by Suzanne Osten, Leif Sundberg, Lottie Ejebrant and Gunnar Edander. It represented a left-wing theatre based on Dario Fo's aesthetics and thoughts. In Osten's anthology of essays and articles *Mina meningar*, the director admits that cooperation with Leif Sundberg

in Fickteatern and Fo's concept of political theatre had been one of the most important influences, which could be, too, easily observed in her later projects. (OSTEN 2002: 17–21) Osten emphasizes especially Fo's practice to proceed from the improvisational tradition of *comedia dell'arte*, his stress on the need of exploration of audience and his tendencies to later bring up controversial and often deeply painful personal subjects:

“Fo wants to ‘trigger a rage.’ He works with subject and form so that they arouse anger and an action. The performances often directly proceed into political meetings. There are always discussions after the performances.”¹ (OSTEN 2002: 19)

Fickteatern's history was nevertheless closed in 1971 when the theatre group broke up. Three years later, however, Osten's key breakthrough came with the play *Jösses flickor - Befrielsen är nära!* (*Jaysus Girls, Liberation's Coming Soon*) about the feminist movement, written together with Margareta Garpe and finally presenting Osten both as a playwright and director on the Stockholm City Theatre (Stockholms stadsteater). Only a year after, in 1975, Osten was appointed artistic director of the newly established Unga Klara, Stockholm City Theatre's new division for children's theatre. (ROSENBERG 2004: 29, 105–114)

The concept of Unga Klara was economically self-evident: an independent small theatre, financially supported by the state in the first place, intended for close audience, with the aim to bring up socially burning or problematic topics. The target audience was all children without exceptions, of all social classes and all ethnic groups. The key idea was “child's perspective”, a child seen mainly as a powerless individual living in adult's society. (OSTEN 2002: 22–48) In *Mina meningar*, Osten answers her question “What kind of theatre does a child want to have?” in this way:

“While we are playing, unflagging examination gives us some definite answers. If we draw a critical informative theatre wanting to break down certain patterns and authoritarian models, (child) audience does like it, but also requires both fullness of imagination and an understandable language together with images corresponding with its frames of reference. [...] It may seem strange to return in 1975 to Aristotle's concept of catharsis and do a survey of tragedies for children. But the basis here is that our own understanding of the childhood's concept has changed. We believe that childhood should be seen as a historical and socially determined category, not only as a biological one.”

“Children, trapped in a modern childhood world, separated from the adult's society, [...] have become [simply] children and gained no productive role in a modern society like ours. Telling children about children's destiny is to a certain degree like to describe a man versus the capricious gods of the Greek tragedy. Taking children's experience seriously means to give them a ‘destiny drama’ about their own limited possibilities of action in the adult's world: a children's tragedy!”² (OSTEN 2002: 29–30)

1 “Fo vill ‘utlösa en vrede’. Han arbetar därför med ämnen och form så att de i stället för att söva, väcker ilska och handling. Föreställningarna övergår ofta i direkt politiska möten. Man diskuterar alltid efter föreställningarna.” (OSTEN 2002: 19)

2 “En trägen undersökning medan man spelar ger bestämda svar. Om vi skisserar en kritisk informerande

Unga Klara's artistic approach and development

Together with the dramatist Per Lysander, Osten wrote *Medeas barn* (*Medea's Children*, as translated into English by Christer Dahl), a version of *Medea* from a child's point of view about an unknown, unfamiliar topic called "divorce", which is obviously about to happen between the parents in the play. The play became a turning point in Swedish children's theatre, starting a debate about what could be – and what should be – presented for a child on the stage. (HELANDER 2000: 33–36) Interestingly, despite the fact that the play has been over the years stage-managed by numerous theatres in Sweden, after its presentation in Edinburgh within the theatre festival Fringe 2011, it was commented by Suzanne Black on the website *The List* that "the play is about children but not really for them". (BLACK 2011) Nevertheless, Black points out a characteristic feature of Osten's life-long work. Although Osten herself proclaims her theatre activities as creating theatre for children and youth, the performances are, as Gunilla Lindqvist claims, similar to such ambivalent literary pieces as *Alice in Wonderland* or Tove Jansson's Moomin books (LINDQVIST 1995: 204) – they are usually rather multi-layered, with a form deriving from children's own aesthetics.

Unga Klara has been continuously rushing over the following years towards the chief aim to batter down, or at least shift the ingrained taboos of communication with a child, its determined position within the society, or our picture of a child's perspective. (OSTEN 2002: 195–218) Although the stage turned the main polarisation of topics promptly after its beginning towards children's psychological perspective, the inheritance of the 60s and 70s, namely the need of children culture also presenting questions and social issues – even to child audience – has become a required matter of fact. (HELANDER 2000: 33–42) To present at this point, however, more than four decades of dramaturgical plans of the institution is not possible here; let me therefore illustrate the variety of topics with a quick glance throughout the repertoire.

During the 1970s, plays as *Barnkamaré* (*A Nursery*) by Gunnar Harding, Börje Lindström and Niklas Rådström, or the symbolist *Snarkjakten* (*Hunting the Snark*) by Per Lysander and Suzanne Osten, setting out five children for boat trip on Thames with Lewis Carroll as captain to hunt down the Snark, were inspired by children's imagination in the first place. After *Medeas barn*, other historic plays with children in the centre of the action arose, for example *Häxorna – bränn dem!* (*The Witches – Burn Them!*) by Margareta Garpe, or *Lazarillo* by Melchior Schedler. Unga Klara's variations on social drama

teater som vill bryta ner bestämda mönster och auktoritära modeller kommer (barn)publiken vilja ha detta, men också ställa krav på fantasifylldhet, på ett språk som förstås och bilder som svarar mot deras referensramar. [...] Att i 1975 återvända till Aristoteles' poetik med katarsisbegrepp och göra en undersökning av tragedier för barn kan tyckas besynnerligt. Men det har sin grund i att vår analys av själva barndomsbegreppet har genomgått en förändring. Vi menar att barndomen bör ses som en historisk och socialt bestämd kategori, inte endast som en biologisk. Barnen, instängda i en modern barndomsvärld, avskilda från de vuxnas samhälle, har fått sin historiska roll helt förändrad. Det har blivit barn och har ingen produktiv uppgift i ett modernt samhälle som vårt. Att berätta för barn om barns öde är att i viss mån beskriva människan och de nyckfulla gudarna i den grekiska tragedien. Att ta barnens upplevelser på allvar är att ge dem "ödesdramer" om deras begränsade handlingsmöjligheter i vuxenvärlden: barntragedin!" (OSTEN 2002: 29–30)

were presented e.g. with *Petra von Kants bittra tårar* (The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *En man gjuten i ett stycke* (A Man Casted in One Piece) by Anders Ahlbom Rosendahl, Tomas Forser and Staffan Seeberg, or *Emilia, Emilia* by Reidar Jönsson and Ove Wall. In 1978, the play *Sprit* (Booze) by Börje Lindström opened another Unga Klara's topic, alcoholism, followed in 1981 by Shelagh Delaney's play *En doft av honung* (A Taste of Honey), which portrayed a teenage girl living with a mother dependent on alcohol. Further during the 1980s, besides Lars Norén's *Underjordens leende* (The Underground's Smile), such plays as *Hitlers barndom* (Hitler's childhood) by Niklas Rådström or *En ren flicka* (A Pure Girl) by Lottie Möller, discussing anorexia, also attracted attention. Gender stereotypes were dealt with in a play with the title *I Lusthuset* (In the Summerhouse) by Jane Bowles. In 1994, Osten rocked the boat again with a play called *Förberedelse till självmord* (Suicide Preparation) by Etienne Glaser based on parts of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, or later with her own, partly biographical, play *Flickan, mamman och soporna* (*The Girl, the Mother and the Trash*) about growing up with a psychotic parent. (SPARBY 1986; UNGA KLARA 2016)

One of the Osten's last directorial projects in Unga Klara was *Babydrama*, written by Ann-Sofie Bárány and premiered in 2006. The performance, proclaimed as the world's first theatre performance intended for 6- to 12-month old children, led to a book publication of a survey behind the whole performance. (BÁRÁNY 2008; UNGA KLARA 2016)

The radical aesthetics of children

When Osten started as the artistic director of Unga Klara, she was well aware of the fact that together with new plays an experimental approach to creating a performance was needed. As a result of her previous artistic experiences, together with her colleagues, she chose to go through a dramatic survey and series of improvisations with children to attest stage methods suitable for children's theatre. In a conference contribution from 2014, Karin Helander describes e.g. the creative process behind the aforementioned play *Snarkjakten* – she mentions that the ensemble would visit nurseries and narrate the play, both in prose and verse to children, or play selected parts in English to reinforce the body language (due to the language barrier) and later discuss the play and their understanding of it with the children. On other visits, they would perform the play and allow the children to improvise and re-play the performance by themselves, or as well to perform with the actors. (HELANDER 2014: 7) Though group improvisations had been a part of Osten's experimental approach, about the group work together with a child collective, she stated that they learned [themselves] that “the radical aesthetics of children [was] the fastest way to illustrate something”.³ (OSTEN 2002: 44)

The most important part of this statement seems to be “to illustrate something”. For children's theatre, with the aim to explain and elucidate, the key to success is to know how to hold children's attention and, at the same time, be quickly and effectively enlight-

3 “Vi lärde oss *radikal estetik* av barnen: Snabbaste sättet att illustrera något.” (OSTEN 2002: 44)

ening in a way that is apprehensible for children in the first place. These requirements became a natural pedestal of Unga Klara's performances, radically shaping their form right from the beginnings.

Language

In *Mina meningar*, Osten points out a few children's reactions to listening to Euripides' verses – it was “like a catalogue”, “like at home when they quarrel over bills”.⁴ (OSTEN 2002: 39) Osten realized that there was a large need for dealing with incomprehensibility; that child's understanding of the world was not primarily based on language. Linn Köpsel comments further on the subject in her master thesis *Magiska rum*, devoted to the performance *Den magiska cirkeln* by Ung scen/öst:

“Within the field of performing arts for children, there are common objections that the children do not understand, for the language or the narrative is too advanced. Suzanne Osten suggests that there is however a kind of ‘child-racism’ in the society and connects language in particular with this attitude. We can surely give the truth to adult critics that children do not understand, if the definition of ‘understanding’ lies in measuring of children's ability to retell the plot. Instead of that, Osten wants to have a broader definition of what it means ‘to understand’ and adds that the sensual experience of words together with gestures and feelings form an entirety, which may be the same as understanding (Bárány 2008, p. 12). ‘To understand’ does not need to mean to be able to retell the plot with words, or even explain the experience. It might as well lie in the sensual and bodily experience.”⁵ (KÖPSEL 2014: 34)

This perspective seems to be partially confirmed also by Gunnila Lindqvist in her dissertation *The Aesthetics of Play: A Didactic Study of Play and Culture in Preschools* from 1995. After having done a research on children's perception of a presented drama piece in a day-care centre in Karlstad, she adds that “even the youngest children [...] had the ability to interpret the context on the basis of the general atmosphere” and that “their interpretations did not depend so much on individual objects as on the situation as a whole”. (LINDQVIST 1995: 210)

This realization became one of the main means of fast proceeding liberalization of Swedish children's theatre. The used language, suddenly not playing the chief role, has

4 “Barnen förstår knappast ett ord av översättning av Euripides text: ‘Som telefonkatalogen’, ‘Som när dom hemma grälar om räkningar’, var liknelser vi fick på versen.” (OSTEN 2002: 39)

5 “Inom den konstnärliga scenkonsten för barn är det vanligt med invändningar om att barn inte förstår för att språket eller det berättade är för avancerat. Suzanne Osten menar att det i samhället råder en ”barnrasism” och att inställningen ofta har med just språket att göra. De vuxna kritikerna kan få rätt i att barnen inte förstår om definitionen av ‘förståelse’ vilar i att mäta barnens förmåga att återberätta handlingen. Osten vill istället ha ett vidgat begrepp av ordet förståelse och tillägger att den sinnliga erfarenheten av orden, gesten och känslan bildar en helhet, vilket kan vara detsamma som förståelse (Bárány 2008, s. 12). Att förstå behöver således inte vara samma sak som att med ord kunna återberätta eller ens förklara upplevelsen. Det kan lika gärna ligga i sinnliga och kroppsliga erfarenheter.” (KÖPSEL 2014: 34)

often been reduced to an overuse of word parasites, frequently in form of rhythmical word plays with nonsense, or confused babble. Word repetitions quickly started to play an important role of the used language. See two illustrative examples below, an extract from the play *Prins Sorgfri* by Suzanne Osten and Per Lysander, premiered in 1977 and translated into English as *Prince Free of Sorrows* by Anne-Charlotte Hanes-Harvey, and another extract from the play *K+M+R+L* by Mattias Anderson, published in 2000 as a part of the anthology *Fem pjäser* (both extracts below are presented in their original versions and in my own translation into English made only for the purposes of this article).

Extract n.1. (OSTEN & LYSANDER, 2009: 24–25):

”/Natt. Sorgfri sover. Vakterna står på sina vaktplattor – gungar fram och tillbaka och spanar ut över natten. Plötsligt hörs en stilla snyftning. Nattmusiken slut./

KUNGEN /*uppifrån sitt torn/* Ta fast sorgen!

VAKT 3 Ta fast den! Var är den?

VAKT 5 Jag hörde den här borta.

VAKT 4 Sorgen är lös! Mitt ibland oss!

KUNGEN Ta fast sorgen!

VAKT 3 Ta fast den! Var är den?

VAKT 5 Jag hörde den här borta.

KUNGEN Ta fast sorgen!

VAKT 3 Ta fast den! Var är den?

VAKT 5 Jag hörde den här borta.

VAKT 4 Sorgen är lös! Mitt ibland oss!”

”/At night. The prince sleeps. The guards at their places, rocking back and forth, on the look-out. Suddenly, we hear a gentle sob. The night theme ends./
THE KING /*from the top of his tower/* Catch the sorrow!

GUARD 3 Catch it! Where is it?

GUARD 5 I heard it over there.

GUARD 4 The sorrow is on the loose! In our midst!

THE KING Catch the sorrow!

GUARD 3 Catch it! Where is it?

GUARD 5 I heard it over there.

THE KING Catch the sorrow!

GUARD 3 Catch it! Where is it?

GUARD 5 I heard it over there.

GUARD 4 The sorrow is on the loose! In our midst!

Extract n.2. (ANDERSSON, 2009: 191):

“KAJ Skulle vi ta en sväng in till stan, eller?

ROGER Nej, fan. Du vet, liksom. Nej.

KAJ Kom igen nu!

ROGER Nej, fan. Du vet, liksom. Nej.

KAJ Du lovade ju!

ROGER Nej, fan. Du vet, liksom. Nej.

KAJ Ring och säg till då!

ROGER Nej, fan. Lite jobbigt så. Hon liksom.

Nej, du vet. Liksom.

KAJ Okej då.”

“KAJ What about a trip into the town?

ROGER No, shit. You know, I mean. No.

KAJ Come on now!

ROGER No, shit. You know, I mean. No.

KAJ You've promised!

ROGER No, shit. You know, I mean. No.

KAJ Call her and tell her then!

ROGER No, shit. This' exhausting. She, I mean.

No, I mean. You know.

KAJ Okay, then.”

Motion, expression of emotions and borders between actors and audience

As in clown shows, an action, a movement, a facial expression or the tone of voice are often the real conveyers of meaning in contemporary Swedish productions for children or youth. The importance of movement in general in the performances is illustrated e.g. by Ellinor Lidén in her study *Rörlighet och rörelser i en barnteater*, focused entirely on the vast role of movement in selected performances of Stockholm stadsteater Skärholmen, the Stockholm's City Theatre's division in Skärholmen. (LIDÉN 2013) Interpretation of spoken word through movement as well as expressive portrayals of emotions have been the ground and pillar of the field's aesthetics, often herding the productions into expressionism. For example, to avoid children's total identification Osten suggests that:

“[w]e got some key lessons: ‘weak’ emotions (crying) must be performed theatrical on stage. The kids laugh at adult's crying. [Otherwise t]hey always sink into identification.”⁶ (OSTEN 2002: 39)

As another auxiliary element to repel children's identification, actors often cross and mingle the border between audience and the stage. (AXELSSON 2013: 21–23) The gender scientist Anna Lundberg states that “theatre performances built on interaction between actors and audience have become a growing trend in the Swedish theatre for children and youth”⁷ (LUNDBERG 2013: 82), whilst the director and playwright Malin Axelsson referring to the field as “the childish theatre”, comments especially on the extent of communication with the audience in the *News from Swedish Theatre: Young Audience 2013*:

“The ‘childish theatre’ addresses its audience and engages each member, moving among them like the players in a carnival. In Unga Klara's performances, actors often greet the audience already as the audience enter the theatre. The actors and the narrative press in, they ask questions, they come close. [...] Everyone entering the performance space is part of the game. There is no protective fourth wall, and those who dare to enter must also dare to play the game. This doesn't necessarily mean the audience will be actually pulled up on stage, but it does happen. Play is a reciprocal activity and demands response and exchange.” (AXELSSON 2013: 23)

As the German drama teacher Christel Hoffmann (MECOVÁ 2011: 17), Swedish playwrights and directors of children's theatre proceed from elemental principles of Brecht's

6 “Vi gjorde några viktiga erfarenheter: Svaga känslor (gråt) måste göras teatralt på scenen. Barnen skrattar åt vuxnas gråt. Identifikation ligger alltid på barnen när de är med.” (OSTEN 2002: 39)

7 “Teaterföreställningar byggda på interaktivitet mellan skådespelare och publik har under de senaste åren blivit något av en växande trend inom svensk scenkonst för. Det gäller inte minst scenkonst riktad till barn och ungdomar i Sverige. [...] I det scenkonstnärliga sammanhanget innebär det konstnärliga greppet interaktivitet att traditionell uppdelning mellan scen och salong sätts i rörelse, så även den skapande processen och ensembles förhållningssätt till såväl gruppen som enskilda teaterbesökare.” (LUNDBERG 2013: 82)

epic theatre, too. Various estrangement effects, a narrator accompanying audience throughout a chaotic, non-linear plot, cross-gender acting or a large number of characters and associated frequent and fast changing of roles, are distinctively popular elements. (AXELSSON 2016)

The world upside-down

When referring to the artistic roots of contemporary Swedish children's theatre, Karin Helander and Margareta Sörenson tend to use the overarching term "modernism", rather than to offer a more specified concept. (HELANDER 2014: 7; SÖRENSON 2000: 115–121) Malin Axelsson, the artistic director of the theatre Ung scen/öst, elucidates the artistic roots more closely in her article "The Childish Avant-garde: The Aesthetics of Play and Contempt for the Infantile", where she mentions the avant-garde currents of the 1920s in the context of Swedish theatrical development. She points out that unlike in Berlin, Paris, Zürich or New York, the Swedish theatrical landscape did not become very influenced by Surrealism and Dadaism – that also derived from children's imagination – right in the 20s, but rather during a Swedish period of Neo-Dada in the 60s. (AXELSSON 2016) Axelsson adds:

"The 'childish theatre' is often expressed in its mixing of genres, of being neither comedy through and through, or tragedy. It can also be defined in the permeability of the border between audience and actor. It is a theatre that approaches semiotics theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin's description of 'the carnivalesque'." (AXELSSON 2013: 22)

The essential idea of Bakhtin's perception of "the carnivalesque" in François Rabelais' work is "the world upside-down" – mingling of genres and turning of the opposites inside out. The high culture is playfully lowered; a grotesque image of the world arises from usage of chaos, travesty, foolishness, and parody, together with humour and eccentric behaviour. The most fundamental principle here is the grotesque body – representation of the abstract through various deformation of the body. (BACHTIN 2007: 17, 89, 161) A notion that there could be a connection between Bakhtin's concept of the comic in the medieval carnival and children's humour in general seems to be supported by Roderick McGillis, who in *Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* discusses a connection between the body and children's humour, pinpointing such examples as nonsenses associated with the body in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* – "long noses, wild hair, collapsed bodies and so on" or verbal humour deriving from the body – "sticks and bones will break my bones, but names [or words] can never hurt me". (MCGILLIS 2012: 258)

Axelsson demonstrates a few other similarities between Bakhtin's perception of Rabelais' carnival and Swedish children's theatre; she particularly stresses usage of "high" elements, classical terms, extracts and motives of ingrained and acclaimed drama pieces or the canon, and blending them with "low" genres that were historically connected with the lower social classes, the comic, and folk culture. As McGillis, who further associates

children's humour with slapstick, caricature, parody, and the overall ridicule, the particular folk genres that Axelsson brings together with contemporary Swedish children's theatre are e.g. commedia dell'arte, freak show, stand-up comedy, musical, melodrama, cabaret, circus, slapstick or slam poetry; among dance styles she highlights disco-dance. (AXELSSON 2016)

The aesthetics of play

Axelsson finishes her argumentation with a statement that the fundamental principal of the specific aesthetics of contemporary Swedish children's theatre, as a basis for all above described, is "the aesthetics of [a children's] play". She describes it further in these terms:

"We might describe the young proponents of the 'childish theatre' as being part of the 'play competent' generation, a generation that through society's investment in day care centres and children's culture has been encouraged to play. [...] The 'childish theatre' plays forbidden games. It parodies absurd reality. It goes even further by, through play, questioning what 'reality' is by manipulating the border between reality and fiction. One characteristic of play is that it is non-linear. Play is often chaotic, moving forward in one instant then suddenly veering off in another direction, getting caught up in a multitude of repetitions and then once again lurching forward, fastening in a new discovery or exploring new side-tracks. There is no steady forward progress." (AXELSSON 2013: 23–24)

Axelsson may have proceeded from the work of aforementioned Gunilla Lindqvist, who introduced the term "aesthetics of play" in her doctoral thesis in 1995, later described also in her Swedish article "Drama som lek – lekens estetik". Lindqvist uses this term in a drama pedagogical context, attempting to describe specific aesthetical aspects of improvisational play activities created by a children's collective. To a certain degree, Lindqvist's observations correspond with Axelsson's picture of contemporary Swedish children's theatre as well as with Osten's insights; after having read the work of Jon Roar Bjørkvold, Brian Sutton-Smith and Korney Chukovsky as well as finishing her own survey of children's collective activities, she summarizes a few aesthetical patterns of children's plays. She states that "the aesthetics of play" is characterized by its distinctive dynamics, where movement, music, rhythm, and language are as performative components put at the same level, producing a whole. She emphasizes the significance of improvisation as well as children's poetic and associative approach to language, understood here as a symbolist toy. She compares the aesthetics with e.g. jazz improvisations, where all the instruments can play various tunes or in various rhythms, creating rather a polyphony than a unified melody. (LINDQVIST 2000: 28–32)

Karin Helander states that "it is obvious that Swedish children's theatre is very influenced by aesthetic and ideological changes within the theatre for adult audience". (HELANDER 1998: 269) In 2013, Malin Axelsson goes even further and in her

aforementioned article doubts the very need of categorization of contemporary Swedish “children’s” and “adult’s” theatre. (AXELSSON 2013: 21–22) Both Helander and Axelsson stress the need of treating children’s theatre in the same way as we do with the adult’s – because as Helander adds, though “it is fairly certain that the child’s reactions will differ from your own”, this “does not prevent the child and the adult from meeting in common experiences and feelings”. (HELANDER 1998: 270)

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